

The Latino Question

The Latino Question

Politics, Labouring Classes
and the Next Left

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Foreword by
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Contents

<i>Figures and Tables</i>	viii
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	ix
<i>Foreword</i>	xii
Introduction	1
Background	2
The Latino Question in Latino Politics	5
'Latinisation', Classes, and Inequality	10
Book Organisation	13
1 Mexican Mass Labour Migration in a Not-So-Changing Political Economy	16
Popular Immigration Theories	17
Neoclassical Economic Theory	17
Social Capital Theory	18
Empire Theory of Migration: An Alternative Theory	19
The Political Economy of Mexican Migration to the United States	23
Roots of Contemporary Mass Labour Migration	25
The Mexican Miracle	27
NAFTA and the Neoliberalisation of Mexico's Economy	28
NAFTA's Impact on the Agricultural Sector	31
Promise Unfulfilled	32
The People Push Back	34
Conclusions	36
2 Hegemony, War of Position and Workplace Democracy	38
Background	38
The Changing Nature of Labour: Capitalism and Workplace Democracy	42
Capitalist Hegemony and a War of Position: Human Nature, Culture, and Ideology	43
Capital, Labouring Classes, Labour Unions, and the War of Position	51
An Opportunity to Change the Nature of Labour	56

3 Poverty in the Valley of Plenty: Mexican Families and Migrant Work in California	59
Introduction	59
Into the Valley	59
The Labour Camps	60
La Jornada	62
Migration and Destination	65
Post-Bracero Generations	66
The IRCA Migrant Workers	68
The NAFTA Generation	70
The Journey—Migrating on the Season	72
With the Orozcos	75
Political Socialisation and Identity	78
4 Racism, Capitalist Inequality, and the Cooperative Mode of Production	84
Introduction	84
Identity Challenges within Cooperatives	85
Paternalism in a Cooperative Environment	91
Moving Beyond a Politics of Difference	97
Racism and the Macropolitics of Cooperatives	102
Cooperatives and a Better Quality of Life	108
Cooperatives, a Cultural War of Position, and the Formation of the Next Left Historical Bloc	112
Neoliberal Crises and Space for Counterhegemony	115
Moving from an Anti-Agenda towards a Cooperative Mode of Production	120
5 Working but Poor in the City of Milwaukee: Life Stories	128
Background	128
Introduction	129
Population Descriptive	131
Employment	132
Donald	132
Tracy	133
Neighbourhoods	134
Low-Wage Immigrant Workers	136
Survival Strategies	139
Hope-Action-Change	141

6 Latina/o Labour in Multicultural Los Angeles	142
Globalisation and the Cultural Capital of Multicultural Cuisine	142
Labour in the Nouvelle Restaurant	144
Constructing the 'Hispanic' Fantasy	147
California Cuisine	150
Unions as Cultural Institutions	153
Conclusion	154
7 Latino Futures? Cultural Political Economy and Alternative Futures	156
The City as Narrative Observatory	160
Answering the Call to Action	163
Conclusion	175
Working-Class Latinos	175
The Election of Trump	177
The Next Left: Movement-Building for the Future	179
<i>Notes</i>	185
<i>Index</i>	212

Introduction

I try to stay away from terms that rely on ethnicity. I use terms that represent what people do for a living—*occupation* is a more meaningful term.

—Ernesto Galarza, 1982¹

This remarkable quotation locates two central overlapping themes we address in this book: to highlight the ‘race and ethnic relations’ problematic² and to assert the analytical utility of production and class relations as central to our explanatory task in the interrogation of Latino cultural political economy.³ Our book articulates an alternative Latino politics (see endnote for a discussion of this label⁴)—that is, a critique of political economy embedded in voices of Mexican American men and women and their children, their practices, and their actions.

Over the past five decades, Latinos in the United States have emerged as strategic actors in the processes of socioeconomic and spatial transformation. This so-called Latinisation of the United States comes at a time of increasing social polarisation and class inequalities with wide and deep divisions. These forces assert themselves economically, demographically, and politically, in schools, workplaces, and the everyday life of Latino/a populations. Yet, when we scratch the surface of urban centres like Los Angeles, San Francisco, Chicago, New York, and Atlanta—cities portrayed as having a rich mosaic of multinational cultures—a grittier truth emerges. Behind the huge, shimmering urban economy, we discover a hidden economic trap that limits the genuine social progress of poor, working-class, and the fragile first generation of middle-class Mexican Americans.

Considering this reality, *The Latino Question* offers a critical assessment of political and economic trends of Latino populations in the United States, as exemplified by the conditions faced by Mexican Americans, who constitute over 60 percent of the Latino population in this country. Moreover, weaving together categories of radical political economy devised by Karl Marx and Antonio F. Gramsci, along with poignant personal stories and vignettes of Latino workers, will speak

to what Mike Davis so rightly calls ‘magical urbanism’ to refer to how Latinos are reinventing the US cultural political economy.⁵ The book also seeks to show how Latino labouring classes (including the fragile middle class) struggle to go beyond the limits imposed on them by the logic of capitalism.

We also intend to demonstrate that the ‘Latino question’ can only be fully understood within the context of the US political economy and the new international division of labour. By deciphering both the historical and contemporary Latino question under capitalism, we can advance a more critical and long-term dialogue on concepts, agendas, and theoretical challenges in understanding Latino politics in the United States. Without question, the United States is the wealthiest country in the world, yet it is the nation-state with the greatest economic inequality between the rich and the poor, and with the most disproportionate wealth distribution of all the ‘developed’ nations of the world. To overlook this economic reality in the analysis of Latina/o populations is to ignore the most compelling social phenomenon in US society today: the increasing income gap between rich and poor.

BACKGROUND

The current Latino/a population is a result of the dynamics of the political economy of the contemporary neoliberal capitalist state.⁶ Today, Latinos number nearly 57 million and comprise 17.3 percent of the total US population, up from 3.5 percent in 1960. If these trends continue, it is projected that, by 2060, the ‘Hispanic’ share of the US population will reach 28.6 percent and number approximately 120 million. Again, the demographic group that self-identifies as being of Mexican origin now holds the dubious distinction of being the largest ‘ethnic’ minority group in the United States⁷—leading to the so-called ‘browning of America’.

California has the largest share of US Latinos. The *Los Angeles Times* reported that ‘as of July 1, 2014, about 14.99 million Latinos live in California, edging out the 14.92 million whites’, making it the first state in the nation to have a minority as a majority in its demographic composition.⁸ This shift has caused the onset of one of the most dramatic cultural and demographic transformations in the state’s recent history. Conflicts have intensified between social and economic justice movement organisations and the state, and those who directly and indirectly benefit from the status quo, as a direct result of this demographic shift. The issues at

the epicentre of these conflicts are rooted in the age-old questions of ‘American’ identity, racialised working communities, class, citizenship, and inclusion.⁹

Anthropologist Leo R. Chávez describes this fixation on ‘browning’ as the perceived ‘Latino Threat’ narrative to the future of white America: ‘Although race continues in importance, the crisis over citizenship in today’s world has moved to a different register, one complicated by globalisation—a term that refers to how the world and its people are increasingly becoming integrated into one giant capitalist system.’¹⁰

While Chávez argues that the ideological roots of this perceived threat lie in the cultural and political processes of racialisation within the slippery soil of contemporary globalisation, which he describes as ‘one giant capitalist system’, we are considerably more explicit in our argument that this ‘threat narrative’ is a purposeful product of capitalism (production relations) that services capitalist class interests. This narrative is diffused through legal structures and culturally accepted norms of ethnic and racial discrimination and perpetuated by the neoliberal state through oppressive structures that employ different forms of violence. *The Latino Question* furthers this articulation by offering a thorough political economy critique of migration, power, and social relations that is informed by the academic literature on the subject and—as important—by workers’ voices.

The ‘browning’ of California is not unique; this demographic transformation is occurring not only in the traditional Southwest, but also in the Midwest, South, and Northeast.¹¹ In fact, this shift, along with the conflict it has brought, is occurring across the country, in urban and rural areas whose local populations once believed they were immune to internal and international Latino migration and settlement.¹² States such as Wisconsin are now witnessing similar transformations as the Southwest did decades ago. In June 2014, a *Wisconsin Journal-Sentinel* headline proclaimed, ‘Hispanics Now Make Up Wisconsin’s Largest Minority Group,’ signalling that Latinos had surpassed African Americans as the largest minority group in less than twenty years.¹³

Chapters 3 through 6 are informed by interviews with Latino/a workers and offers four case studies that use ‘grounded theory’¹⁴ to offer ‘thick descriptions’¹⁵ of the lives of this working-class subgroup within the current neoliberal capitalist context. Here we are informed by the work of Marxist political theorist Alex Callinicos, who has said, ‘Any study of politics which detaches the apparatuses of state power from

“real foundations” in the forces and relations of production’ is analytically limited.¹⁶

One of our research sites is Wisconsin, where the bulk of ‘browning’ is rooted in Mexican labour migration and settlement patterns within the context of US foreign policy toward Mexico and other Latin American countries.¹⁷ The contemporary Mexican pioneers follow employment trails to urban and rural areas, where they work in agriculture and the service and manufacturing industries. They have settled in cities like Milwaukee, Green Bay, and Racine and rural towns like Fond du Lac and Gibraltar, where they have established coethnic barrios that are becoming vibrant working-class communities that grow daily with new arrivals. It is a story not so different than that of the German, Polish, and Italian working-class labour migrants who faced similar racial and cultural barriers rooted in xenophobic attitudes and policies at the turn of the twentieth century. The societal challenges these workers faced were addressed—though not solved—by a militant working class rooted in social-movement unionism.¹⁸

Social scientists agree that this shift is being shaped by two demographic variables. The first is the steady flow of immigration from Latin America (primarily Mexican labour migrants and their families). The second is the high fertility rate within that community. Latinas have the highest fertility rates of all major ethnic and racial groups counted by the US Census. Between 2000 and 2010, 4.2 million immigrants came from Mexico to the United States, while an additional 7.2 million Mexican American babies were born in the country.¹⁹ This is why demographers point out that even if immigration from Latin America were to cease today, a demographic shift would make Latinos the second-largest group in the United States by 2050.²⁰ That shift, we argue, is nothing more than capitalism replenishing the ranks of the working poor.

There is little doubt that the primer to this demographic shift is the economic restructuring that has occurred in the last century and has transformed the social and economic landscape. Newcomers, US-born Latinos, and Mexican Americans of several generations are closely intertwined with the very forces that are causing the ongoing economic restructuring and reshaping of once-familiar local, regional, national, and global socioeconomic arrangements. For nearly a century, these changes have created the conditions for mass labour migration and skyrocketing inequality, and this increase is not going away any time soon.²¹

More important than the sheer numbers is the fact that Latina/o families are a growing sector of the US working class. Equally significant, they are increasingly concentrated in the very industries that have been most influenced by the economic restructuring of the United States. Latino/as are trapped in low-wage jobs in an economy that is producing far too few of the living-wage jobs needed for the increasing number of workers entering the labour market to sustain a robust and democratic economy.

THE LATINO QUESTION IN LATINO POLITICS

During the presidential election of 2016, Democratic and Republican strategists talked about ‘Latinos’ and their potential political power in terms of the so-called ‘sleeping giant’ myth.²² This tired metaphor is used by political pundits, news media outlets, and scholars to describe a mythical and monolithic voting bloc with the power to swing and the potential to determine a national election outcome. The public context for the ‘sleeping giant’ narrative is akin to a horse race in which the announcer gets louder and louder about the long-shot runner prior to and during the race, only to lament its loss and applaud its valiant effort. What is seriously missing in the description of this population(s) is not only its ethnic diversity, but its class dimensions and divisions. The most salient aspect of the ‘Latino’ population is the growing class divisions within it. Thus, it’s becoming more difficult in these changing political and economic times to speak of ‘Latinos’ as a block or as a singular class formation.

Well-intentioned academics and pundits willingly participate in a social process that essentially racialises diverse and distinct communities into a predefined, homogenised ‘Latino’ population category. They usually report on basic demographic characteristics and civic and economic participation. What is not thoroughly discussed is that Latinos are a vastly heterogeneous population with divergent economic histories, diverse cultures and languages, multiple ethnicities, and numerous nationalities; more important to our analysis, Latinos disproportionately represent the working-but-poor class. These analysts also tacitly fail to mention that the category itself is predominantly made up of Mexicans, who make up more than two-thirds of ‘Latinos’. Puerto Ricans are the second-largest subgroup making up around 9 percent, followed by Cubans, Salvadorans, Guatemalans, and other Central and South

Americans.²³ The homogenisation of these different groups into 'Latino' is packaged tightly into a marketable discourse about a 'sleeping giant' to simplify their experiences into a narrative that fits neatly into the way media cover political contests.

As obscure and vague as this identifier is, it does have a crystallising effect on this population, placing the 'Latino' into the ranked US racial and ethnic taxonomy produced by the political economy of our neoliberal democracy.²⁴ Galarza describes how this process manifested itself in the Mexican and Mexican American community in a speech he gave to the California Council for Social Studies Annual Conference in 1969 entitled 'Minorities: The Mirror of Society.' Galarza argued that the Mexican American position is that of a racialised minority where the majority has created a myth of difference and value between minority ethnic and racial groups and the majority white population. The perceived differences are used by the economic and political elite (owners of capital, who are predominantly white and male) to determine access to public and private decision-making processes that ultimately determine a minority group's ability (power) to access resources that determine long-term cultural, political, and economic mobility and vitality:²⁵

Mexican Americans are members of more than one minority. As members of industrial and service economic organizations they belong to the trade-unionist minority. Mexican Americans are mostly Roman Catholics, which makes them members of a religious minority. Overwhelmingly they are poor and thus are bracketed with 20,000,000 or more blacks and some 30,000,000 so called 'Anglos' who are also poor. And if we try to put the best face on the matter we can say that in the last presidential election much of the Mexican Americans voted for Democratic candidates. For this presidential term, they will be a minority in national politics.

To describe such a human grouping as a compact, homogenised minority is to use a convenient but loose term. The common characteristics of a skin colour and language are obvious enough. But beneath them lie the deep needs of personal productiveness and of family nourishment. If the word *minority*, then, is to help rather than hinder our discourse, it must mean a group classified arbitrarily by colour or by selected cultural traits whose members suffer acute and chronic denial of opportunities for personal growth and social identification.

Poverty is the result of such denial. It too becomes an inherited trait, like skin colour and speech. Add to this odd combination of poverty, colour, and racialised stereotypes—Tonto, a man's body with a child's mind, siestas by the cactus—and you have the package. By this process the individual and the family—the vital, human elements of the minority—are framed in the popular mainstream cultural narrative.

Thus, framing Latinos as a 'sleeping giant,' political or otherwise, and speaking of 'the Latino vote' as a monolithic political interest lends itself to false assumptions similar to those bound up with the Latino label itself and is plagued by the problem of powerlessness described by Galarza. This is the primary reason we explicitly question the analytical utility of the term *Latino* that is used by the academy and public policy officials to categorise diverse populations into a homogenised minority group. We agree with Oboler's statement that a label such as Latino and or Hispanic 'obscures rather than clarifies the varied social and political experiences in US society of more than 23 million [in 1995; 55 to 57 million in 2017] citizens, residents, refugees, and immigrants.'²⁶

People's lived realities are shaped by the material conditions produced within the spaces they occupy. Forcing a label and presumed behaviour onto a working population based on assumptions derived under the false pretences that there are a universal hemispheric language, culture, and history and specific political and economic ideologies is inaccurate and factually wrong.

The same is hardly ever done with a white voting demographic. Few discussions arise of the 'white vote'; instead it is broken down and critically analysed between distinctions such as rural/urban, gender, age, class, etc. But nonetheless, during the election, we found ourselves here, discussing the 'Latino vote' as an analytical frame to try and understand if it was going to sway Republican or Democrat. Candidates from both parties even hired political consultants to try to capture the mythical Latino Voting Giant. Hillary Clinton hired the gold standard, the closest thing she could get to a Latino Nate Silver, the polling firm Latino Decisions, whose tagline is 'Everything Latino Politics.' This polling firm was to be the smoking gun for Clinton in her attempt to capture the Latino Voting Giant or, as Clinton staffers referred to it in emails, the 'Taco Bowl engagement'.

We now know that their polling was terribly off. Trump's surprise victory in the Electoral College despite losing the popular vote to Hillary Clinton by nearly 3 million (notwithstanding Trump's ridiculous and

unfounded claim of voter fraud) stunned the pollsters and the Clinton campaign. How did they get it so wrong? And how did they fail to assess voter support for Bernie Sanders? Approximately 30 percent of ‘Latinos’ voted for Trump; that is, one-third of the supposed Giant. More importantly, the ‘Latino’ vote in Florida helped carry and ensure a Trump presidential victory. This reality was captured in a post-election *New York Times* article ‘We’re Looking at a New Divide Within the Hispanic Community’: The Latino vote in Florida upended the Clinton campaign’s strategy, and what we thought we knew about where politics is headed.²⁷ We argue that this is not a new phenomenon but a long-running and predictable one.

How can we continue to speak about the ‘Latino vote’ as if ‘Latino’ is one unifying category? The reality is we can’t and shouldn’t; it is just poor social science. More importantly focusing on this very conversation obscures more pressing questions about what types of experiences unify or differentiate groups of people meaningfully. As we state above, social class divisions amongst Latinos themselves vary, and they inform the political interests of working-class Latinos. This political behaviour revealed itself as far back as the presidential primaries.

During the middle of the 2016 presidential primary season, former labour leader Dolores Huerta went on National Public Radio to debate Cornel West, a noted and highly respected African American scholar. Leading up to the Democratic National Convention, Huerta had been championing Hilary Clinton and using her historic position within the Chicana/o and Latina/o community to argue that Clinton is a better spokesperson whose policies more accurately reflect Latinos’ needs. At the same time, Rosario Dawson, a prominent Latina Hollywood actor with progressive activist credentials, argued that Bernie Sanders’ policies better represented and spoke to the needs of working-class and middle-class Latinos and their families within the wider context of structural inequalities and economic injustice. There you have it: a microcosm of a much larger debate about the Latino position by two prominent Latinas, pulling for two very different candidates who represented different visions for a democratic future. Hillary Clinton called for advancing a neoliberal platform, albeit with a human face, while Bernie Sanders, a self-identified democratic socialist, advanced a European style of social democracy with an agenda that included, but was not limited to, weakening the power of corporations and increasing that of working people.

Huerta campaigned for Clinton by questioning Sanders's ability to represent Latino interests. She specifically argued and attacked him, while he was still exploring a presidential run, for voting against the immigration reform bill in 2014. This critique serves as an example of the convoluted facade called 'Latino politics'. Huerta's argument—that because Sanders voted against the reform bill he is against immigration reform—oversimplifies an issue that affects immigration, immigrants, and working communities, not solely 'Latinos'. What Huerta failed to acknowledge was that Sanders' no vote was because that specific bill included a guest-worker programme that would have essentially been a Bracero Program 2.0 (see chapter 1). It would have established a legal permanent second tier in an already vulnerable and exploitable cheap-labour workforce in agriculture and other industries that could demonstrate worker shortages. A vote for this bill would have been an endorsement of institutionalising the mechanisms for a programme that the Southern Poverty Law Center recently described as 'close to slavery'.²⁸

The irony, of course, is that Dolores Huerta made her mark as a labour leader and organiser of Mexican and Mexican American farmworkers, an extremely difficult feat which the United Farm Workers of America (UFW) accomplished. But the UFW, under the leadership of Huerta and Cesar E. Chavez, were successful in doing so only after the National Agriculture Workers Union, led by Ernesto Galarza, led a successful ten-year campaign to bring an end to the Bracero Program.²⁹ Ending the Bracero Program had been key in working toward organising farmworkers, yet Huerta now argued for immigration reform that would recreate it.

All of this is to say that 'Latino politics' is vastly undertheorised and requires much more nuance and complexity. The term *Latino*, which is meant to simplify, does so at the expense of obscuring rather than clarifying politics of specific ethnic or racial communities with growing class divisions. The nuance and complexity that we aim to discuss in this book is not tied to any of the media spectacles that occur during horse-race campaigns. In fact, it is an attempt to theorise the experience of these ethnic/racial categories when the cameras and the pollsters aren't paying attention: to make sense of the experience of labouring classes and how they seek to build political and economic power for themselves and their communities within the context of neoliberal capitalism, irrespective of political parties.³⁰

'LATINISATION', CLASSES, AND INEQUALITY

This so-called Latinisation (or 'browning') of the United States comes at a time of increasing inequality of income and wealth. These macro-level political and economic forces have also been asserted within Latino communities themselves, producing internal class divisions with income growth at the top while those at the bottom have lost ground. Nevertheless, the Latino population continues to occupy an unequal position in the wider political economy.

New immigrants are entering a society that is vastly different from that entered by their predecessors. For one, the high-wage manufacturing jobs that were once the basis of a largely middle-class society have been exported overseas, having been supplanted by skilled professions in the information economy that require specialised training through years of increasingly costly education at the postsecondary level. At the lower end of the service and information economy are masses of Asian and Latina/o labourers who hold ethnically typed low-wage jobs preparing and harvesting plants and animals for consumption, cleaning, and clothing, serving, feeding, and attending to the needs of those on the other side of the widening class divide. The janitorial, clothing, agriculture, and construction industries are the principal employers of immigrant workers. In extreme instances, immigrants work under conditions comparable to slavery.³¹

Latina/os remain an important segment of the immigrant population, one whose growing presence and conditions are closely intertwined with the very forces causing the ongoing economic restructuring and reshaping of once-familiar international, national, regional, and local landscapes. For nearly a century, these global political and economic changes have continued to sustain Mexican migration to the United States.

Los Angeles's overall economic profile worsened in the 1990s. The effects of economic recession and restructuring in Southern California in the early to mid-1990s are revealed in Los Angeles's Census 2000 economic profile. The 2008 'Great Recession' severely impacted Los Angeles's overall economic profile; it was only recently (2015) that Los Angeles County recovered all the jobs it lost during the recession.

According to an analysis undertaken by the *Los Angeles Times* in 1999, nearly all job growth in the 1990s in Los Angeles County since the low point of the recession in winter 1993 was in low-income jobs.³²