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Response to article, February 25, 2010

*Landscape of Enclaves: Race Relations in the West, 1865-1990*, Sarah Deutsch

At best, ethnic enclaves indulge the fetishist curiosities of The Majority (see “South of the Border” in South Carolina), and at worst serve as ATM machines for rent-seeking governments and predatory entrepreneurs. This pattern perpetuates today in Richmond, California, which serves both equally well. Sub-prime lenders, in an ersatz “redlining,” targeted minority households for their weapons of financial destruction, but the city also remains a fetishist obsession among seemingly altruistic whites and their well-meaning community (re)development initiatives. Deutsch cites the fascination with Custer’s Last Stand as evidence of a national memory and awareness of tense race relations throughout history. However, these tensions include all immigrant groups, in addition to Native Americans. Railroad development was the most important event symbolizing the national Majority’s hegemony over locally governed enclaves and societies, and had implications for the cultural, structural economic and social revolution of the West. By providing access to the hinterlands, the railroad was a conduit of ideologies and prejudices that were imported from an Eastern United States that had made little social progress to begin with. The massive relocation of Eastern worker-opportunists was a higher priority than the maintenance of autonomous minority enclaves, creating a landscape of institutionalized oppression and God-sanctioned economic exploitation that continues to dominate the United States’ illegally held territories west of the Mississippi. Further west, newly-arrived Asians were deemed by European immigrants as illegitimate holders of jobs and opportunities to which White Americans had a supposedly cultural and racial claim to exclusive ownership. On a micro scale, movements within minority communities to achieve autonomy were halted by governmental barriers (gerrymandering) and political disenfranchisement (lack of suffrage rights). The battle front not only included divisions of race, but also gender. Often the enclaves fought to counteract gender inequalities, and were agents of political and economic opportunity for people who could not enjoy such in Anglo society. Despite the White proprietary claim to the West, societies continued to function where they were not obstructed by federal law or capitalist aggression. WWII saw similar patterns of discrimination against, and internment of, of Japanese Americans. More recently, minorities have gained political leadership of many Western cities, as demographic trends shift away from an Anglo-dominated society. However, White economic elitism countervails some of this progress, and urban enclaves of economic stagnation persist.