

Oppressive Systems in an Institution and Social Behavior in California History

Posted on September 15, 2018

Introduction

Oppression is not only an individual act of prejudice. It can be embedded in law, property, policing, education, labor, religion, housing, and cultural narratives that distribute power unequally over time. California history offers a particularly clear example because the state was built through successive Indigenous, Spanish, Mexican, U.S., and global migrations rather than through one peaceful society disrupted after 1492. The original essay correctly identifies race, class, and gender as interacting systems and recognizes that oppressed groups develop resistance. It contains major historical errors: European colonization of California began centuries after 1492; Native nations were diverse rather than one harmonious population; discrimination was often explicitly legalized; and oppression did not simply decline in a steady path toward equality. A stronger analysis traces Spanish missions, Mexican secularization, U.S. conquest, Native dispossession, racialized labor, exclusion, segregation, gender hierarchy, and the movements that challenged them (Almaguer, 1994; Madley, 2016).

Oppression as a System

An oppressive system assigns advantages and disadvantages through institutions as well as attitudes. A discriminatory law is obvious, but a formally neutral rule can also reproduce inequality when it rests on earlier land theft, segregated neighborhoods, unequal schools, or exclusion from citizenship. Systems persist because organizations coordinate with one another: property rules affect wealth, wealth affects political power, and political power affects schools and policing (Almaguer, 1994).

Individuals can participate in a system without controlling it, and members of a privileged group do not all receive the same benefit. Class, gender, disability, citizenship, and location shape experience within racial categories.

California Before European Colonization

Before Spanish colonization, California contained many sovereign Indigenous nations with distinct languages, economies, spiritual traditions, political relationships, and territories. Communities managed fisheries, forests, grasslands, acorns, trade, and fire according to local knowledge. Conflict existed, as it does in human societies, but describing the region as either perfectly peaceful or uncivilized imposes a false contrast (Madley, 2016; California State Library, n.d.).

Indigenous history did not begin with Europeans. This point changes the narrative from settlement of empty land to colonization of inhabited homelands.

The Spanish Mission System

Spain established missions, presidios, and pueblos in Alta California beginning in 1769. Missions sought conversion, labor, agricultural production, and territorial control. Native people were baptized and often prevented from leaving freely; punishment, forced labor, disease, disrupted food systems, and separation from homelands caused severe population loss and cultural damage (Madley, 2016; California State Library, n.d.).

Mission records are valuable but were created by colonial institutions. Contemporary historical interpretation must include Native oral history, archaeology, and descendant communities rather than repeat a romantic image of benevolent civilization.

Mexican Rule and Secularization

After Mexican independence, California became a Mexican province. Secularization in the 1830s formally ended mission control and promised land to Native people, but much mission property passed into large ranchos held by politically connected Californios. Indigenous workers remained vulnerable to coercion, debt, and displacement (Almaguer, 1994; California State Library, n.d.).

Mexican California also contained a complex racial and class order. Californios were later racialized differently after U.S. conquest, showing that categories of whiteness and citizenship changed with political power.

U.S. Conquest and Statehood

The United States acquired California after the Mexican–American War, and the discovery of gold accelerated migration and state formation. The [Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo](#) promised rights and property protection to former Mexican citizens, but land litigation, taxes, fraud, and violence dispossessed many Californio families. California entered the Union in 1850 as a free state, yet freedom in formal status did not eliminate slavery-like labor, racial violence, or exclusion (Almaguer, 1994).

Statehood expanded courts, policing, and property systems that privileged incoming settlers while weakening Indigenous and Mexican claims.

Native Dispossession and Genocide

During the Gold Rush and subsequent decades, Native Californians experienced massacres, forced removal, starvation, disease, kidnapping, and coerced labor. The 1850 Act for the Government and Protection of Indians enabled white people to control Native labor and facilitated child indenture. Federal treaties negotiated with California tribes were not ratified, leaving communities without the promised land base (Madley, 2016).

Scholars and the state government have recognized this period as genocidal. The violence was not merely spontaneous conflict between cultures; state funding, militia campaigns, law, and settler demand for land helped organize it (Madley, 2016).

African Americans and the Free-State Contradiction

Although California prohibited slavery in its constitution, enslaved people were brought into the state, and courts sometimes returned freedom seekers to claimants. Black Californians faced testimony restrictions, segregated schools, employment discrimination, housing exclusion, and racial violence. They also built churches, newspapers, conventions, businesses, and legal campaigns (California State Library, n.d.).

The struggle shows that a free-state label did not guarantee equal citizenship. Rights were produced through organizing and litigation rather than given automatically by admission to the Union.

Chinese Migration and Exclusion

Chinese migrants contributed substantially to mining, agriculture, railroads, fishing, manufacturing, and urban economies. They faced special taxes, mob violence, expulsions, segregated schooling, restrictions on testimony, and federal exclusion. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 turned racial hostility into national immigration policy (Takaki, 1989).

Anti-Chinese politics often joined race and class. Employers recruited Chinese labor and used racial divisions to weaken solidarity, while politicians blamed workers for economic insecurity created by broader market forces.

Mexican and Mexican American Labor

Mexican workers were central to agriculture, railroads, mining, construction, and urban growth. They experienced land loss, segregated schools and public facilities, labor exploitation, deportation

campaigns, and racialized policing. During the Great Depression, government-supported repatriation removed large numbers of people of Mexican descent, including U.S. citizens (McWilliams, 1939; Almaguer, 1994).

Later programs such as the Bracero Program supplied essential labor while limiting bargaining power and family stability. The category of temporary labor made workers economically necessary but politically disposable.

Japanese American Incarceration

After the attack on Pearl Harbor, the U.S. government forcibly removed and incarcerated more than 120,000 people of Japanese ancestry from the West Coast, most of them U.S. citizens. California farms, businesses, homes, and community institutions were lost or transferred. The policy was based on racialized suspicion rather than individualized evidence of disloyalty (Takaki, 1989).

Japanese Americans resisted through court cases, military service, protest, and later redress activism. The 1988 Civil Liberties Act acknowledged the injustice and provided an apology and compensation to surviving detainees.

Housing and Segregation

Racial covenants, redlining, exclusionary zoning, lending discrimination, urban renewal, and unequal access to suburban development shaped California cities. Even after courts and civil-rights laws prohibited explicit discrimination, accumulated wealth and neighborhood resources remained unequal. Freeways and redevelopment displaced Black, Mexican American, Asian American, and working-class communities (Almaguer, 1994; Takaki, 1989).

Modern housing inequality cannot be understood solely as individual preference because public policy helped determine who could buy, borrow, inherit, and remain in valuable locations.

Class and Labor Systems

California's economy has repeatedly depended on workers whose bargaining power was limited: Indigenous laborers, miners, railroad crews, farmworkers, domestic workers, garment workers, service employees, and migrants. Class oppression appears through unsafe work, wage theft, temporary status, company housing, and exclusion from labor protection (McWilliams, 1939).

Race and class reinforce one another, but they are not identical. Wealthy people of a marginalized race can face discrimination, while poor white workers can face exploitation without experiencing the same racial barriers.

Gender and Patriarchy

Women's legal and economic status varied across Indigenous, Spanish, Mexican, and U.S. systems. Under coverture and patriarchal customs, many married women lacked independent control of property or earnings. Women also faced exclusion from voting, professions, education, and political office. Indigenous, Black, Asian, and Mexican American women experienced additional labor exploitation, sexual violence, and stereotypes (Almaguer, 1994; Takaki, 1989).

Gender oppression also affects men and gender-diverse people through expectations of violence, breadwinning, heterosexuality, and emotional control. A complete history includes LGBTQ+ communities and the policing of sexuality.

Education as a Site of Oppression and Resistance

Schools have been used to assimilate Native children, segregate racial groups, suppress languages, and distribute resources unequally. California also became a major site of desegregation struggles. The Mendez v. Westminster case challenged segregation of Mexican American children before *Brown v. Board of Education* (California State Library, n.d.).

Student walkouts, bilingual education campaigns, ethnic studies, disability-rights organizing, and community schools show education as a site where institutions can be transformed.

Policing and Criminalization

Vagrancy, anti-miscegenation, immigration, gang, drug, and public-order laws have often been enforced unevenly. Policing protected property during land seizure and labor conflict and sometimes criminalized cultural difference. At the same time, marginalized communities have also demanded protection from violence and exploitation (Almaguer, 1994; McWilliams, 1939).

Analysis should avoid treating every officer or law as identical. Institutional critique asks how rules, discretion, data, and accountability distribute safety and punishment.

Resistance and Coalition

Oppressed groups were never passive. Native nations preserved culture and pursued land and sovereignty claims. Chinese immigrants challenged exclusion in court. Black Californians organized conventions and civil-rights campaigns. Mexican American farmworkers built unions and boycotts. Women fought for suffrage, labor rights, reproductive autonomy, and protection from violence. LGBTQ+ communities organized against criminalization and discrimination (Takaki, 1989; McWilliams,

1939).

Coalitions can be powerful but are not automatic. Groups sometimes compete or reproduce prejudice against one another. Sustainable solidarity requires recognizing distinct histories while identifying shared institutional targets.

Change Without a Simple Progress Story

California has adopted civil-rights, labor, environmental, education, and voting protections that would have been impossible under earlier systems. These reforms matter. Yet inequality can persist through wealth, geography, enforcement, and political access after explicit barriers are removed.

Historical progress is therefore neither illusion nor guarantee. Rights survive through institutions, budgets, enforcement, public memory, and continued participation.

Conclusion

California history demonstrates how oppression is built through conquest, law, labor, property, race, gender, class, and culture. Spanish missions disrupted Native sovereignty; Mexican and U.S. land systems redistributed territory; Gold Rush government enabled genocidal violence; exclusion and segregation targeted Chinese, Black, Mexican, Japanese, and other communities; and labor markets depended on people denied equal power. These systems were challenged by Native survival, court cases, unions, civil-rights movements, student activism, women's organizing, and demands for redress. Understanding oppression does not require describing every member of one group as an oppressor or every historical conflict as the same. It requires tracing how institutions make inequality durable and how collective action changes those institutions (Madley, 2016; Almaguer, 1994; Takaki, 1989).

Bibliography

Madley, Benjamin. *An American Genocide: The United States and the California Indian Catastrophe*. Yale University Press, 2016.

Almaguer, Tomás. *Racial Fault Lines*. University of California Press, 1994.

McWilliams, Carey. *Factories in the Field*. University of California Press, 1939.

Takaki, Ronald. *Strangers from a Different Shore*. Little, Brown, 1989.

California State Library. *California History Resources*.