A Social and Political Time Bomb

Book Review by B. Meredith Burke

> *We want to become a multiracial, multiethnic society … without a dominant European culture.*
>
> — William Jefferson Clinton

Most readers of THE SOCIAL CONTRACT are aware that California has been a harbinger of the demographic transformation of the United States. Nearly eighty percent white in 1970 (with 90 percent of births occurring to native-born mothers), by 1996 the California population was officially 52 percent white. (Were all minorities and illegal residents counted, the author correctly notes, this percentage would fall below 50.) Births to white mothers (which, by 1990, had reattained their pre-1970 Baby Bust numbers before declining 20 percent in five years) were now only 36 percent of all births; births to Hispanic women were 45 percent. Nearly one out of two births was to a foreign-born woman, signifying that immigration was responsible for doubling the infant and ultimately the child (and student) population of the state. Demographically, as older cohorts die off, the state will increasingly reflect the racial and ethnic composition of today's births.

The Coming White Minority: California's Eruptions and the Nation's Future
by Dale Maharidge
New York: Times Books
320 pages, $25

Dale Maharidge rightly stresses that the political transition will lag several decades behind as those groups that underlie population growth tend to be ones with low proportions of citizens among adults and/or low turnout by members eligible to vote. He focuses upon the period 1992-1996, an interval when many of the white electorate became fully aware that demographically and socially they had lost control over their society's future. In his view the writing and passage of the ballot initiatives 187 (banning illegal entrants from most public services) and 209 (banning positive or negative discrimination towards any group) reflect the resistance of the white electorate and taxpayers to this changed reality.

For each of whites, Latinos (sic), blacks , and Asians, Maharidge presents both background history (state and local; of that group's first entry to California and its 1990s' situation) and a detailed portrayal of one individual. He follows the thoughts and deeds of a white moderate in southern Orange County (who arrived in California at age 17 when his parents moved from Pennsylvania); a Hispanic assemblywoman from a Los Angeles suburb (daughter of a Mexican father who arrived illegally as a child and granddaughter of a bracero farm worker brought here in the 1940s); a black police officer in Sacramento (a native of Arkansas who moved to California in the mid-1980s in hopes of a pro-football career, dashed when he suffered a physical injury); and a woman undergraduate at UCBerkeley (brought here at age six when her Chinese parents arrived from Vietnam in 1980). The families of none of these main personae reached California until after World War II, indeed three of the four arrived only after 1965 with its sea change in U.S. immigration policy and flow.

In the second section of this book the author describes some of the tension-exacerbating acts that frightened and alienated the still-white majority: not just the Rodney King beating, but the perceived increase in crime in general, associated with the newcomers. The education sector (supported by

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taxes from private business and affluent mainly-white families) displayed sit-ins and hunger strikes by (he stresses several times) a small minority of Hispanic students at UCLA and UCBerkeley who demanded a Chicano Studies department — even as the UC system was experiencing sharp budget cuts, and UCB a loss of 9 percent of its faculty positions. The eclipse of white enrollment at elite public schools (Lowell High in San Francisco and UC Berkeley) by Asians has not (yet) occasioned a strong reaction by whites, possibly because the whites feel the Asians have worked hard in school — frequently at the expense of non-academic activities whites value.

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The proximity of Mexico to the United States as well as the on-going Mexican population explosion (even if fertility fell to replacement level immediately, the youthful age structure guarantees the Mexican population would more than triple before stabilizing — and current fertility is at least 50 percent above that — if not more, especially if births occurring in the U.S. to Mexican-born women were added back in) have engendered more serious fears of cultural and demographic displacement. The Aztlan political movement calling for a taking back of "Mexican territory"; the waving of Mexican flags at an anti-Proposition 187 rally; and the cultural clashes between the Anglo lifestyle and use of public space (my words, not his) and the very different ones of Mexico have aroused the white community.

The third and briefest section of the book considers the implications of the passage of the two propositions and the likelihood of attaining a successful polyethnic society.

Dale Maharidge is a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist who has written an extremely readable book. He has undertaken impressive amounts of both library research and the qualitative interviewing which is a necessary though not sufficient element in correctly interpreting factual data. He warns against demonizing members of the white population who have seen a racial transformation of their society unprecedented in modern peacetime history. He chides the media for their evading "the nuances of race" and of toning down news articles to avoid giving offense to any group, rather than honestly exploring what kinds of experiences and perceptions lead to the views being voiced.

Yet, sadly, he has committed much of what he warned against. His selection of material precludes his depicting a full (or fuller) picture of a society whose elected leaders adopted policies that the electorate repeatedly rejected in polls. His personal ideological stances reflect (as he says in his acknowledgments) "the voice of social justice from Sister Ruthmary Powers, a nun from grade school whose influence has been felt ever since."

Even as he depicts increasing polarization and segregation among the four major ethnic/racial groups in the California of the 1990s, he views with optimism the evolution of a multicultural society. He ignores some of his own insights as well as quotes from informants when they will not support his pre-ordained interpretations. He is almost willfully oblivious, therefore, to numerous inconsistencies in his own text and his own thinking.

1. He uncritically accepts that whites and native-born nonwhites will not perform farm work nor low-skilled service jobs, and that the U.S. must keep tapping sources of low-paid labor. Yet he notes that his white informant returned from a visit to Wisconsin marveling that the entire gamut of jobs was filled by white workers, including teenagers. He never asks whether teenage, especially black teenage unemployment rates would be as high as they are, if there were no pool of low-skilled, English-deficient immigrants to exploit. He ignores the displacement in Los Angeles of unionized black janitors by mainly illegal Hispanics. He claims that without cheap (largely illegal) immigrant labor we would be paying $2 for a tomato, $5 for a pound of sugar. He never discusses demographic factors that have undone all of Caesar Chavez's work in trying to unionize farm workers to demand better wages and conditions. Maharidge is unaware of UCDavis agricultural economist Philip Martin's calculations that paying farm workers living wages

would add under five percent to a family's grocery bill.

2. Hence he has bought into what I have called elsewhere "the perpetual motion model of population." Maharidge never considers that a labor shortage will compel improved wages and work conditions and a more productive use of labor, and mitigate the growing income inequality in this country. Moreover, the distribution of intelligence among our species guarantees that there will always be people who cannot become white-collar workers. In the author's model, within a generation of living in post-industrial America, all families and individuals will aspire to be college-educated and, therefore, we will need a steady stream of entrants from less developed economies. Within a generation, of course, these persons will no longer deign to perform those jobs, and we must import more.

3. The writer of this review suggested to Maharidge while he was researching this book that we meet so I could show him some of the data I was analyzing. He never called back. I might have saved him from the more common errors in demographic analysis, such as comparing the annual intake of newcomers with the base population instead of as a proportion of population increase, and ignoring their births altogether. I would have pointed out that both the world and America's population base and absolute increases are very different than they were 100 years earlier. I might have sensitized him to environ-mental and resource concerns (he does not mention these once), or what urban life will be like as the major ports of entry approach and exceed 20, then 30 million people under current demographic trends. I might also have pointed out to him how increasingly vulnerable we will be to major natural catastrophes, including the inevitable magnitude 8 or 8+ quake. I would also have instructed him on the significance of the 20th century industrial trans-formation in this country and how the educational and occupation dissimilarities between sending and receiving nations have escalated.

4. Perhaps to reassure his audience, Maharidge several times states that "of course" there has to be some immigration policy and that the U.S. has the right to limit its intake of newcomers. Yet he never discusses what factors should shape such a policy, nor what opinion polls have shown the American public desires in this arena. He does make many references to the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and to the "Gentleman's Agreement" of the same era between the U.S. and Japan by which Japan agreed to curtail emigration of its citizens. In his mind a United States that no longer has a frontier is morally obliged to take in newcomers from those countries that were excluded a century ago — countries that at the Rio Environmental Summit assailed the U.S. for its disproportionate resource consumption. He never acknowledges birthright Americans' fears of environmental degradation from population growth (fears the President's Commission on Population Growth and the American Future found totally justified in its 1972 report). He never once seeks an explanation for the voter propositions he so disparages in the fact that this was the one avenue Californians had to try to hand back to Washington the costs imposed upon the state by the actions of the federal government (immigration policy is a federal responsibility). Maharidge, like the media colleagues he disparages, has to attribute opposition to present-day immigration solely to racism and a fear of loss of cultural hegemony.

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5. Maharidge writes: "Over the course of American history, many writers, historians, and others have pointed out that the United States has never really established its identity (pp.295-296)." I was sharply taken aback by this assertion. As a child of the immediate post-World War II era, I thought there was a fair societal consensus on what an

"American" was — and that films like "Home of the Brave," the 1950's renewed civil rights drive and the 1960's revived feminism emanated from a desire for perfectibility: to make the real day-to-day society more closely resemble that of our ideals of equality under the law. Civic betterment in fact has a long history in this country. It was also a given that we were an overseas extension of Western European society and the Western philosophical tradition. What proved to be forty-five years of low immigration enabled Polish, Italian, and Irish Catholics; Western and Eastern European Jews; and the English, German, and Scandinavian Protestants to meld first with themselves, then beginning around 1970 with each other. Intermarriage rates shot up sharply at that time. Sociologically this signifies that group members perceive a commonality of values and social behavior.

If Maharidge thinks that post-World War II Americans were ill-defined, how can he explain the fact that Canadians of that era contrasted their own lack of strong national identity with the strong one they perceived in their southern neighbor?

I readily concede that the shifts precipitated by demographically-naive legislators are even now evoking calls for an altered American identity. I do not foresee the crafting of a panethnic identity. "The tipping phenomenon" Maharidge cites (the amount of heterogeneity a group will tolerate in a community before its members feel uncomfortable) is already evident in patterns of white internal migration. The disintegration of the former Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia, and Soviet Union along ethnic lines (leaving aside African and Asian examples) leaves me dubious that the forty-eight contiguous states will remain one polity. Twenty years ago I would have branded as insane, or as a sci-fi writer, anyone who might have imagined such a disintegration.

Despite the book's dust jacket claim that the contents voice the "middle ground" in the multi-cultural society debate, I cannot see it finding an audience among any of the groups working to restrict immigration. Its likely audience should be the "one world" or "open gates" readers who, like its author, will deny a polity has a legitimate right to demographic self-determination. Reading uncritically, such an audience is unlikely to note the population/environment clashes, or to ask if political history affords (m)any examples of a peaceable shift of power and basic culture? Maharidge himself would benefit the most from a critical reading of his book. If he could become sensitized to his own inconsistencies I would feel a bit more optimistic about the country's future. **TSC**