

The Fourth American Republic

A Book Review by William W. Chip

The chief concern of *The Next American Nation* is the "Brazilianization" of American society, defined by author Michael Lind as the growing income disparity between an inbred white "overclass" and a disproportionately colored working class. Lind, currently editor of *The New Republic*, introduces into the national debate on our widening economic and racial divisions a novel interpretation of American political history, from which the roots of Brazilianization and a means of reversing the process can both be discerned.

Most books reviewed in *The Social Contract* aren't really about social contracts, but this book is. Lind sees American political history as a series of grand compromises within the American polity that served to maintain national unity and social order. Each of these grand compromises became the framework for all other important political, economic, and social relationships. Each was revolutionary enough to constitute a new American Republic.

The first grand compromise was between the business elites of the North and the slave-owning aristocracy of the South. The North's toleration of slavery where it already existed held together the First American Republic from the Revolution until the Civil War. However, the grand compromise was repudiated and the Republic was dissolved when Northern electoral votes swept Lincoln, the antislavery Republican, into the White House.

After the Civil War had leveled the southern aristocracy, the northern business elites found themselves allied with a white working class that had done most of the fighting and consisted disproportionately of Irish and German immigrants. According to Lind, the irreducible demand of the postbellum white working class was protection from nonwhite labor competition, which was achieved under the Second American Republic by excluding Asian immigrants and segregating black Americans.

The grand compromises that constituted the First and Second American Republics both took for granted the existence of an American nation defined by race. In naming the First Republic "Anglo-America," Lind cites Thomas Jefferson's vision of the American nation as that branch of the Anglo-Saxon race that had liberated itself from the absolutist church and state that he associated with Continental Catholicism.

Under the Second Republic, which had to accom-

modate a growing population of non-British immigrants, the American nation was redefined as "Euro-America" — a new branch of the white race formed in a melting pot of European immigrants. While Lind detests the racist underpinnings of the Second Republic, he credits its century-long inclusion of working class whites and their unions in the political order for moving the country in a more egalitarian direction, culminating in a high-wage economy and the welfare state.

The service of black soldiers during World War II and the Cold War imperative of winning influence with a nonwhite Third World undermined the racial assumptions of the Second Republic. While the ensuing civil rights revolution might have led to a more inclusive definition of American nationality, it instead gave birth to a Third American Republic, "Multi-Cultural

America," which has rejected the very notion of a single American nationality. In the Third Republic each of us is assigned to one of five race-based nationalities — white, black, Hispanic, Asian, or American Indian — conceived by a federal bureaucrat.

The grand compromise that sustains the Third Republic is between, on the one side, an increasingly inbred and insulated "white overclass" of wealthy, academically credentialed professionals and property owners and, on the other side, ambitious nonwhite Americans who might be challenging the social order if given no reason to support the status quo. Support for the status quo is purchased with affirmative action and other programs that shield middle class minorities from competition with the white majority, much as the white working class was shielded from black and immigrant labor competition in the Second Republic. So long as they do not challenge the prerogatives of the white overclass, ambitious people of color can aspire in the Third Republic to join the overclass of their own nationality.

The practices engendered in the academy and elsewhere by affirmative action and multiculturalism beg to be ridiculed, and Lind is unsparing on that score. He notes, for example, that new immigrants, while no longer expected to assimilate into a common American nationality, are nevertheless pressured by educators and social workers to assimilate into one of the five official races. Thus, Mexican immigrants are not encouraged to become Americans, or Mexicans in America, but

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"Hispanics."

Lind regrets the grand compromise that produced and sustains the Third Republic because, in his opinion, it has allowed the white overclass to reverse much of the social progress achieved under the Second Republic. While the middle and lower classes do battle in the zero-sum game of racial preference, politicians of both parties collaborate to dismantle the union movement, trade and immigration restrictions, and the progressive income tax.

Citing data familiar to readers of *The Social Contract*, Lind singles out mass admission of unskilled immigrants as symptomatic of Third Republic policies that deliberately depress wages and otherwise benefit wealthy whites at the expense of everyone else. (Lind overlooks the extent to which much of the nonwhite political elite regard these immigration policies as an integral part of the grand compromise.) This analysis of immigration, if nothing else, makes *The Next American Nation* an important book. Almost the only contemporary books that deal seriously with immigration are those that deal with nothing else. They are laundry lists of what's good or bad about immigration by authors who favor or oppose current policies. Consequently, even the best of them can appear polemic or pedantic, putting off or putting to sleep readers not already converted to the author's cause. Because Lind's concerns with immigration are manifestly secondary to his concern about growing inequality, his arguments for a reduction of immigration may have the ring of truth to many otherwise deaf ears.

Lind believes that the Third Republic is inherently unstable because whites who are threatened by affirmative action and mass immigration are too large a part of society to be counted out. Also, most U.S. citizens, white and nonwhite, sense that they possess an American nationality that is not confined to their own race and has more to it than an abstract commitment to the Constitution. While the multiculturalists have succeeded in muffling popular articulation of this common American nationality, they have failed to sell their own multinational paradigm to anyone except those who make a living from it.

Perhaps the principal message of *The Next American Nation* is that Eurocentrism is dead, multiculturalism is dying, and whoever succeeds in filling the void will shape the American political, economic, and social orders for much of the 21st century. Lind cautions secular liberals that the Christian right has something to offer that they do not — a definition of American nationality that has authentic American roots and can transcend both citizenship and race. He encourages those who oppose a nationality based on shared religious convictions to promote a different successor to Multi-Cultural America — "Trans-America."

According to Lind, a Trans-American Fourth Republic would celebrate the language, music, sports,

customs, and other cultural traits that are shared by Americans of all races and religions and that mark us in the eyes of the world as a distinct people. The Fourth Republic would tolerate but would refuse to subsidize or authenticate idiosyncratic expressions of religious or racial identity.

The Next American Nation argues that public awareness of a common Trans-American nationality is the *sine qua non* of the reforms that Lind holds are necessary to reverse the process of Brazilianization in the United States. However, the reforms that he proposes are so dramatic (national election of Senators), so unconventional (imposing a "social tariff" on imported goods from low-wage countries), or so fanciful (appointing new Founding Fathers) that many of Lind's penetrating insights into the past and the present may get lost in the laughter over his prognostications. That would be unfortunate because, whatever its shortcomings, *The Next American Nation* grapples with issues of race and wealth in American society that few political commentators have dared confront.