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A DIFFERENT WAVE OF IMMIGRANTS

A Book Review

LOS ANGELES: CAPITAL OF THE THIRD WORLD By David Rieff

Los Angeles is surely the most insulted and least understood city in the country. David Rieff, in his sometimes illuminating, often maddening book says, "To most of the country, but particularly New York, Los Angeles [is] a fantasy, a place that exists everywhere except in real space . . . populated with myths rather than citizens."

But as Mr. Rieff himself shows in *Los Angeles: Capital of the Third World* (Simon and Schuster, 259 pages, \$20), the city is changing at such an astonishing rate that assumptions of that sort are outdated. Los Angeles is no longer "Iowa by the sea." Nor is it anymore a place so achingly beautiful that Americans once flocked there to find earthly paradise. If it's anything, these days, it's Central America North or Asia East. That change, and what it holds for the future, is the subject of this book. The reasons for the change, like the old joke about the three rules of real estate, are: immigration, immigration, and immigration. Mr. Rieff knows that the water shortage, the traffic problems, the overbuilding, the near-collapse of the Unified School District, and perhaps even the troubles the Dodgers are having, grow from that issue.

Mr. Rieff is a New Yorker who spent part of his childhood in Los Angeles. He returned for several months in 1989 to gather information for this book. He has read widely and applied his interesting mind to the large problems and questions that confront the nation's second largest city.

Los Angeles is rapidly on its way to becoming a city with a Latino and Asian majority. Since Southern California was once part of Mexico, maybe that's fitting. The old uneasy coalition of Anglo- and Afro-American citizens may soon be irrelevant. Further, Los Angeles may already be a place in which more people don't pay taxes than do. Of course, everyone uses public services.

To live here is to know that Los Angeles is becoming a vast sea of the undocumented and the illegal. Many of them work hard; some even spend their money here. Many try to send it out of the country, mostly to Mexico and Latin America. Perhaps to underscore the contrast between the poor and the well-to-do, or to express his solidarity with the underclass, Mr. Rieff is tough on the gentry. His view might be characterized as neo-Marxist. It feeds off the idea that L.A., like capitalism itself, has

always been based on the notion of expansion and development. But that belief, so central to our national history, may well have gone as far as it can here.

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Mr. Rieff points out that this wave of immigrants is different from the Europeans who came to New York around 1900. That group, my grandparents among them, were determined to assimilate. That is different from the situation in Southern California today. For many reasons, not the least of which is that immigrants from Mexico can go home for the holidays, assimilation is not so much a goal as something to be wary of. In parts of East Los Angeles, it is said, there are third-generation residents — citizens of this country by birth — who speak only Spanish.

Mr. Rieff's achievement is tracing and illuminating this situation. He is neither an anthropologist nor an historian. Rather, he is an observer and analyst of what is around him. He is, not surprisingly, critical of Los Angeles' West Side — the high-rent district and home of the inflated real estate market, where politicians from all over the country come to raise money. Mr. Rieff calls this part of town the pleasure dome. He believes that the cushy life he perceives there is run on the backs of illegal immigrants who are all but ignored by their masters — who are busy discussing German reunification.

L.A.'s West Side is certainly open to criticism and satire, but Mr. Rieff's picture seems neither fair nor revealing. Breezy references to Coleridge notwithstanding, his characterization of West Siders at home is drawn with a heavy hand. It is a commonplace, easily observed, that those West Siders are involved in the lives of their employees — helping them with their papers, finding computers for their school-age kids, guiding them through bureaucratic

thickets. This might be *noblesse oblige*, but it is necessary and it is done without much comment. My evidence is anecdotal, but that is also Mr. Rieff's approach.

The book is marred by a number of minor historical inaccuracies and odd characterizations. Mr. Rieff seems to think that what I take to be Santa Monica Canyon is called "Croissant Canyon." Nobody I know has ever heard that phrase. He also believes that when locals avoid the freeways, they call that "going surface."

But his large conclusion — that Los Angeles is a divided city and that so long as heads stay in the sand about the particular modern nature of immigration, no good will come of all our hopes for the future, is clearly set forth. The further point, implicit in his argument, is that Los Angeles, long the point city for trends and change, is likely to be a harbinger for this sort of urban population shift. Like the international currencies that in time of trouble rush to the dollar for shelter, Third World refugees run to the US. Los Angeles is not the only city they will call home. ■