Requiem for California

You just can't trust those voters

Book Review by Kevin Jenks

Few American states exhibit the stresses and strains stemming from the nation's misguided post-1965 immigration policy as does California. Attractive in climate and particularly accessible to Mexicans and East Asians, America's most populous state now teems with millions of these immigrants, legal and illegal, and many more from Central America and Southeast Asia. The "white non-Latinos" (in U.S. Census Bureau jargon) who created the Golden State have recently diminished to an uneasy minority there. Meanwhile, many of the new immigrants, possessing few skills, little education, and less civic tradition, have had difficulty embracing the "American dream," but have nonetheless been able to lay tenacious hold on California neighborhoods, towns, and inner cities.

> **Paradise Lost: California's Experience, America's Future**
> *by Peter Schrag*
> New York: The New Press
> 344 pages, #25

Today, California's earlier promise is increasingly evanescent for the state's dwindling "Anglos" (in *Los Angeles Times* jargon). One result, as journalist and academic Peter Schrag shows in his spottily informative *Paradise Lost*, has been an evolving white strategy of withdrawal from the newly alien environs, either to remote parts of California or out of state. The second consequence has been California's older and whiter electoral majority's recourse to popular plebiscite to reduce and localize taxation and to stanch the flow of their money to illegal entrants and other abusers of public largesse.

Schrag finds this largely passive and thoroughly peaceable response to what even he seems to regard as a civic and demographic crisis nonetheless unacceptable. Himself an immigrant (he arrived as a refugee from Germany in 1941) who in 1972 authored a celebratory book titled *The Decline of the Wasp*, Schrag unsurprisingly makes California's refractory "non-Hispanic whites" the villains of the piece, and their "hyperpopulist" embrace of initiative, referendum, and recall the chief crime against "good government" in contemporary California.

Schrag was for nineteen years editorial page editor of the *Sacramento Bee,* has taught at Amherst and the University of Massachusetts, and currently hangs his hat at the Institute of Governmental Studies at the University of California, Berkeley. As might be expected, in *Paradise Lost* he leans heavily on journalistic tropes and rhetoric, exudes mistrust of plebiscitary democracy, and seems to regard white Californians chiefly as cash cows to provide more "revenues" for immigrants and their progeny .

As Schrag recognizes, California has long been the focus of both hope and foreboding, for its inhabitants as well as for the nation as a whole. Unfortunately, his musings on California's image and meaning for Americans in the 1940s, '50s and '60s add little to what has long been in print on the subject. Rather than dither on about the allure of surfing and Hollywood, he would have been better advised to point out what a strategic and economic prize California has been, from the time the U.S. seized it from Mexico under the jealous eyes of England and Russia, to the present. Schrag, however, chooses to downplay the racial and ethnic strife that has been a constant in California's history. For instance, he fails to mention the successful campaign to stop Chinese immigration, in which California played the leading role in the 1880s, despite his occasional excursions into the state's nineteenth-century past. The judicious reader may be tempted to see in this particular omission the author's desire to magnify the iniquity of today's Caucasian Californios.

The heart of *Paradise Lost* is in its treatment of

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California's recent resuscitation of the electoral initiative, whereby voters ballot directly on a proposed measure. Added to the state's constitution in the populist and Progressive fervor of the early twentieth century, initiative, referendum (to nullify an existing law by popular vote), and recall (to remove an elected official by popular vote) tend, of course, to circumvent the normal workings of representative government — which is after all their purpose. (Schrag's dismay at how quickly legislators will leap to get aboard the rolling bandwagon makes for some wry reading.)

Paradise Lost provides a readable, though skewed, account of the renaissance of the initiative with Harold Jarvis and Paul Gann's property tax-slashing Proposition 13 in 1978 and its subsequent emergence as a vehicle for everything from regulating lawyers and insurance companies to withdrawing public services from illegal aliens (Proposition 187). Predictably, Schrag makes a few good points as to the role of self-interested political professionals in promoting plebiscites that they profit from, and on the bizarre jousts between attorneys, insurance companies, and like groups, in which misleadingly written and advertised propositions proliferate until four or five different propositions —each the creature of a separate interest group — may vie in a single election to "reform" a given industry or circumstance.

Schrag is much weaker on considering just where the impetus for plebiscitary reform, and in particular, reform of California's immigration mess is coming from. While he likens the efforts of today's Californians to reduce public spending on immigrants to the attempts of WASP elites to preserve citadels such as New York and Boston from encroaching immigrant "ethnics" through political "reforms" designed to minimize the newcomers electoral clout (pp. 262-263), he has to acknowledge that very low percentages of Hispanic citizens bother to vote in California. His analogy thus fails, and fails doubly. The indolence of California's new citizens to vote themselves the self-same "benefits" that the older and paler voters are desperately defending already differentiates them in several unfavorable ways from the European immigrants of a hundred years ago. Nor can the mass of white

Californian voters be easily equated with the "good government" silk stockings and blue stockings of a hundred years ago.

Schrag himself clearly belongs to a media-academic-foundation class of educator-pundits that did mightily well from the expansive government of an earlier era. He evokes economist John Kenneth Galbraith's long-forgotten trumpeting against "private affluence and public squalor." He looks back with unconcealed nostalgia to the days of Pat Brown, California's liberal Democrat governor who greatly expanded the University of California system and the state's freeways in the latter '50s and early '60s. What a sad contrast to today's crumbling California, of which Schrag can write, of Orange County's 50 percent foreign-born, 70 percent Hispanic Santa Ana:

> *It's hard to imagine that the people who pulled up the orange trees after the war ever dreamed that within two generations their century-old community's shopping streets would be wall-to-wall with abogados advertising divorcios; viajes a México; seguros de auto; fótos y cópias; clínicas médicas; para la mujer de hoy; and places where "PARA MAMA, envio dinero hoy y la recibe mañana" — or that one of its main streets would one day boast a Salvadoran consulate.*

In the end, Schrag offers no explicit remedy for California's immigration problem, about which he is clearly uncomfortable, merely the wan hope that California's older, whiter voters will swiftly (before they die off or move away) vote to enable the wisemen and wisewomen of Sacramento to award enough "services" to transform the new populace into serviceable (but more public-spirited!) replicas of themselves. His pessimism at this prospect runs through *Paradise Lost* like a black thread, and while there's not enough of value here for proponents of immigration reform, the implicit thesis of this book — that without massive infusions of tax money, California's cities will become and remain slightly upscale versions of Tijuana — can't be very comforting for Ben Wattenberg and his school.   •