

*Face the Nation: Race, Immigration, and the Rise of Nativism in Late Twentieth Century America*¹

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This article examines the rise of nativism directed at Asian and Latino immigrants to the United States in contemporary American society. By focusing on the Los Angeles riots and other evidence of the rise of anti-immigrant feelings among the population, this study reveals that a racial nativism has arisen which intertwines a new American racism with traditional hostility towards new immigrants in a variety of ways. Both recent scholarship on race and John Higham's classic work on nativism are utilized to provide a conceptual framework for understanding our multiracial contemporary setting. Tellingly, this new racial nativism emerges from both sides of the political spectrum, and is evident in attempts to keep discussions of race focused on solely white/black national construction. Finally, the study explores how immigrants themselves have responded to these attacks by increasing naturalization rates and political activity, forming a newfound ambivalent Americanism.

On April 30, 1992, Americans across the nation sat transfixed by a television event that grew to symbolize the sorry state of race relations in late twentieth century urban America. The image of Reginald Denny, a white truck driver, being pulled from his cab at the corner of Florence and Normandie Avenues in South Central Los Angeles, beaten and spat upon by a group of young African-American males, quickly became a counterimage of the inhumane beating of black motorist Rodney King a year earlier. These two events of racial conflict, both captured on videotape, dominated representations of the Los Angeles riots in a city haunted by poverty, racism and police brutality. So focused have all Americans become of a bipolar racial dynamic in this country, usually framed in white/black terms, that we lost an opportunity to dissect one of the most important and complex events of our time. As the perceptive playwright and artist Anna Deveare Smith (1994:xxi) has observed, "We tend to think of race as us and them – us or them being black or white depending on one's own color." Indeed, the Los Angeles riots provides stark, critical evidence of the rise of a racialized nativism directed at recent immi-

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grants and the American born who racially represent those newcomers, one of the most important social movements of our era.

A closer look at the victims of violence at the corner of Florence and Normandie reveals the way in which the Los Angeles Riots were fundamentally an anti-immigrant spectacle at its very beginning. Most people outside of Los Angeles are surprised to hear that Reginald Denny was not the only person injured on that corner. Mesmerized by video images of a single beating of one white man, it is difficult to imagine that at least 30 other individuals were beaten at that same spot, most pulled from their cars, some requiring extensive hospitalization. Most importantly for my purposes, only one other victim of the violence at that corner besides Denny was white – and he was, like Denny, a truckdriver passing through the region. All others were people of color, including a Mexican couple and their one-year-old child, hit with rocks and bottles; a Japanese-American man, stripped, beaten and kicked after being mistaken for Korean; a Vietnamese manicurist, left stunned and bloodied after being robbed; and a Latino family with five-year-old twin girls, who each suffered shattered glass wounds in the face and upper body. All of these acts of violence occurred before Reginald Denny appeared (*see U.S. News and World Report*, 1993).

Indeed, the first victims at Florence and Normandie were Latino residents who lived in the neighborhood. Marisa Bejar was driving her car through the intersection at 5:45 pm when a metal-covered phone book sailed through her car window, opening up a wound that took thirteen stitches to close. Her husband, Francisco Aragon, was hit on the forehead with a piece of wood, while their seven-month-old infant suffered minor scratches when a large metal sign was hurled through the rear window. Minutes later, when Manuel Vaca drove his 1973 Buick into the intersection, Antonine Miller and Damian Williams threw rocks through the windshield, causing Vaca to stop the car. Six men pulled Vaca, his wife and his brother from their car, then beat and robbed them. As Anthony Brown remembered, he kicked at Vaca “because he was Mexican and everybody else was doin’ it.” Sylvia Castro, a fourth generation Mexican American and prominent activist in South Central, was shocked when bricks and bottles shattered her car window. Having worked closely with gang members in the area, she was able to escape with only a bloodied nose by speeding away (*U.S. News and World Report*, 1993).

Later, after Denny’s assault was recorded and broadcast worldwide, several shocked black residents of the area risked their lives to save other victims. James Henry left his porch to pull Raul Aguilar, an immigrant from Belize, to safety after he had been beaten into a coma and a car had run over his legs. Donald Jones, an off-duty fireman, protected Sai-Choi Choi after several men beat and robbed him. Gregory Alan-Williams pulled a badly wounded Takao Hirata from the bloody intersection. Another savior at that corner was

59-year-old Reverend Bennie Newton, pastor of the Light of Love Church. He rescued the life of Fidel Lopez, a twenty-year resident of Los Angeles from Guatemala. Lopez, driving to his home one block from the intersection, was pulled from his car and later required 29 stitches in his forehead for a wound received by a blow with an auto stereo, 17 stitches to his ear, which someone had tried to slice off, and 12 stitches under his chin. Laying unconscious in the street from the beating, Lopez had motor oil poured down his throat and his face and genitals spraypainted blue. His life was saved when Newton began praying over his prostrate body with a bible in the air (*Los Angeles Times*, May 8, 1992:B1-4; *U.S. News and World Report*, 1993:55-57).

Over the four days of the Los Angeles riots, the dynamics of racial and class tensions, rage against the police, and antiforeign sentiment came together in violent, unpredictable fashion. From that corner of Florence and Normandie, the mayhem spread to engulf the city, creating the worst modern race riot in American history. Fifty-two lives were lost and 2,383 people were injured. About \$1 billion of damage was done to residences and businesses, and over 14,000 arrests were made. In the first three days of rioting, over 4,000 fires were set and 1,800 people were treated for gunshot wounds. The destruction occurred throughout the Los Angeles basin, and the participants and victims were indeed multiethnic (Oliver *et al.*, 1993:118). But at its core, the Los Angeles riots provide stark evidence of the way in which immigrants provided the perfect scapegoat for American populations frustrated with developments in their society.

The decisions made by angry, young African Americans at that corner as they chose whom to hurt speak volumes to anyone interested in the intertwining of issues of race and immigration in late twentieth century America. For some, the decision was not about who was white, but about who was not black. For others it centered around how Latinos and Asians had "invaded the territory" of South Central, one which they claimed as their own turf, despite the fact that South Central Los Angeles had a majority Latino population in 1992. Others shouted (as heard on various videotapes) to "let the Mexicans go," but "show the Koreans who rules." Although the violence began as a response to a verdict passed by an almost all-white jury against an almost all-white set of police officers, quickly other people of color – those deemed foreign or foreign looking – were engaged in the deadly exchange. The meaning of racial and national identities were consistently at issue at the corner of Florence and Normandie, with serious and sometimes bloody outcomes for all participants.

Since May 1992, more clearly visible evidence has appeared which allows most social commentators to identify our current historical moment as one experiencing a particularly sharp rise in American nativism. Two years after the Los Angeles riots, California voters would resurrect their longstanding history as leaders in anti-immigrant efforts since the days of Chinese

Exclusion by passing Proposition 187, a state initiative intended to punish illegal immigrants by restricting their access to schools, medical care, and other social services. (See Saxton, 1971 for an account of anti-Chinese sentiment in California leading to the national exclusion act of 1882.) This would be accomplished by deputizing social service providers as immigration inspectors, including teachers, social workers and doctors, and forcing them to identify to local law enforcement officials students and clients who had entered the country illegally. Here was legislation that tied issues of crime and immigration into a tidy package and allowed voters to voice nativist fears in the anonymous sanctity of the voting booth, a populist solution long well-known in California. Polls showed that this piece of legislation won widespread approval across a range of ethnic groups, including 67 percent of whites (who formed 80% of the total electorate) and 50 percent of both Asian Americans and African Americans, with only 23 percent of Latinos voting in favor (McDonell, 1994:A3).

One feature of the campaign in favor of Proposition 187 was the prominent role played by California Governor Pete Wilson, a "moderate" Republican that had lost favor with the California electorate when his term coincided with the worst economic performance in the state since the Great Depression. His support of anti-immigrant positions was a centerpiece of his political comeback in California, where he won reelection from rival Kathleen Brown in November 1994 after coming from as much as 20 percentage points behind. This was not, of course, the first time politicians had found nonvoting immigrants to be the perfect scapegoat for an attempt at political resurrection. Indeed, at the height of the Great Depression in 1930, Herbert Hoover's Labor Secretary, William Doak, had promised to rid the country of "four hundred thousand illegal aliens" who he believed were taking jobs away from American citizens, thereby causing the great economic calamity of the period (Hoffman, 1974:36-37).

Indeed, Pete Wilson and Herbert Hoover have more in common than their tortured political paths through economic downturns. Both had previously been ardent supporters of the easing of immigration restrictions before the convenience of immigrant scapegoating in the political process became evident. During World War I, when Hoover had been Food Administrator for the U.S. government, he had personally encouraged President Woodrow Wilson to exempt Mexican immigrants from the provisions of the 1917 Immigration Act in order to allow them to engage in much needed agricultural labor and wartime production. In 1985, during the height of the Congressional debates over the Immigration Reform and Control Act, then-Senator Pete Wilson was the key player in securing an exemption for California agricultural growers, enabling them to continue using undocumented workers long after more stringent enforcement was already in place

in urban areas. Pete Wilson's ill-fated presidential campaign in 1995–96 cannot obscure the fact that his career remains the epitome of opportunistic politics, taking full advantage of America's longstanding fears of immigrants and foreigners when such a strategy can bring success at the polls.

During the past year, we also have witnessed the publication and media hype of a book which can easily be characterized as our era's equivalent to *The Passing of a Great Race*, the 1916 classic by Madison Grant, the man John Higham has called "intellectually the most important nativist in recent American history" (1963:155). Grant's contemporary counterpart is Peter Brimelow, senior editor at *Forbes* and *National Review*. His *Alien Nation: Common Sense About America's Immigration Disaster* (1995) unabashedly claims that recent immigration is likely "to transform – and ultimately, perhaps, even to destroy. . .the American nation" (p. xv). Within the first ten pages of the book, recent immigrants are blamed for rising crime rates, the health care crisis, lowering overall educational standards, and causing Americans to feel alienated from each other. Unlike other nativists, Brimelow wants to be clear to offer an overtly racial argument: "Race and ethnicity are destiny in American politics" (p. xvii) declares Brimelow repeatedly, so all Americans should be concerned about restricting immigration of people who are colored differently than they.

Signs, therefore, point to a resurgence of a nativism unparalleled in this country since the 1920s. From attacks on immigrants in urban unrest to legislative action attacking immigration policies to academic and media discussions resonating the familiar intellectualized examinations of racialized dissonance of the past, today's nativism is as virulent as any that has gone before. Yet this era's nativism, like this era's immigration, has unique characteristics which differentiate it from that which appeared in the early twentieth century at the height of European immigration to the United States. Traditional hostility towards new immigrants has taken on a new meaning when those immigrants are racially identifiable and fit established racial categories in the American psyche. With the increase of immigration from Asia and Latin America, a new American racism has emerged which has no political boundaries or ethnic categorizations. From the left and right of the political spectrum, and from both white and black individuals, this new racism continually threatens to explode in contemporary American society.

One point worth making is that while nativist discourse is often decidedly linked to racial discourse, they are not one and the same, and they often lead in different directions. Part of the problem in separating racism from nativism is the fact that our collective understanding of what constitutes racism has become murkier since the 1960s. Having long abandoned biological categories of race and definitions of racism which rely fundamentally on individual prejudice, most academic discourse on racism in the social sciences remains

unclear and underdeveloped. This lack of clarity has sometimes allowed for the most egregious dismissal of any operative definition of racism. Peter Brimelow (1995), for example, condescendingly defines a racist as "anyone who is winning an argument against a liberal," and then, somewhat more soberly, equates racism with misinformed prejudice or "the sense of committing and stubbornly persisting in error about people, regardless of evidence" (p. 11). This definition, of course, frees him to develop a racially-based argument against current immigration patterns on the grounds that he is "not prejudiced" and "also not blind."

One shining exception to the academic murkiness I have been describing is the work of sociologists Michael Omi and Howard Winant (1986:71), who define racism as a historically situated project which "creates or reproduces structures of domination based on essentialist categories of race." Not only would this definition allow us to convincingly label Brimelow's project racist but, for the purposes of this exploration, it would allow us to differentiate and complicate our present notions of nativism. To be able to do this is critical because historically there have always been proponents of open immigration who can be characterized as racist. For example, many of the employers of Mexican migrant labor during the 1920s voraciously fought against immigration restriction on the basis that Mexicans were biologically suited for stoop labor. W. H. Knox of the Arizona Cotton Growers' Association belittled nativists' fears of a Mexican takeover of the United States in 1926 by invoking racist constructions of Mexicans to the House of Representatives (*see also* Sánchez, 1993, for a fuller explanation of this position).

Have you ever heard, in the history of the United States, or in the history of the human race, of the white race being overrun by a class of people of the mentality of the Mexicans? I never have. We took this country from Mexico. Mexico did not take it from us. To assume that there is any danger of any likelihood of the Mexican coming in here and colonizing this country and taking it away from us, to my mind, is absurd. (U.S. Congress, 1926:191)

It is not difficult to find other instances, including in the contemporary period, of antirestrictionists espousing racist views of those immigrants they want to entice to come into the country.

Moreover, it should be clearly stated that not all restrictionist positions are fundamentally based on racial assumptions. The late Barbara Jordan, Chair of the United States Commission on Immigration Reform and former Congresswoman from Texas, while presiding over two reports which emphatically favor reduced entry of legal immigrants and the toughening of measures to curb illegal immigration, nevertheless offers a picture of immigration restriction which simultaneously evokes a renewed faith in American diversity. Jordan wrote:

Legitimate concern about weaknesses in our immigration policy should not, however, obfuscate what remains the essential point: the United States has been and should continue to be a nation of immigrants. . . . The United States has united immigrants and their descendants around a commitment to democratic ideals and constitutional principles. People from an extraordinary range of ethnic and religious backgrounds have embraced these ideals. . . . We are more than a melting pot; we are a kaleidoscope, where every turn of history refracts new light on the old promise. (1995:A11)

Indeed, the active role of black public figures in contemporary discussions of immigration policy suggest that African Americans will play an increased role in contributing to a more exclusionary definition of American citizenship than has hitherto prevailed. Barbara Jordan was chosen by President Clinton as head of a federal advisory commission charged with proposing new measures to curtail illegal immigration, not just because of her expertise as a former member of the House, but also because of her race. Jordan's very presence on such a commission allowed her blackness to deflect potential charges of racism directed at the stringent provisions of the policy recommendations. In this new climate, it is obvious that all Americans can get caught in the white-black paradigm of race relations, a model that relies on opposites, opposites which too often substitute for the complexity and diversity of social and ethnic relations in the late twentieth century United States.

To understand the vexing dilemma of these issues, we must remember that two seemingly contradictory directions mark recent scholarship on race in the United States. On one hand, social scientists throughout the twentieth century have worked hard to challenge the biologicistic paradigm which explained racial inferiority as part of a natural order. Despite recent exceptions like *The Bell Curve*, most scientific studies reject the notion that race should be equated with particular hereditary characteristics (e.g., Omi and Winant, 1986:14–15). Instead, social scientists have increasingly explored how race is a social construction, shaped by particular social conditions and historical moments to reflect notions of difference among human groups. Many academics have subsumed race under other categories deemed more critical to understanding social stratification, such as class or ethnicity. Yet racial theorists increasingly point out that race has its own particular role in modern society that cannot simply be buried as a byproduct of other social phenomena (see Almaguer, 1994; Fredrickson, 1988). Omi and Winant (1986:55) offer a definition of race which takes into account the instability of a social construction, yet does not see race as merely an illusion: "race is a concept which signifies and symbolizes social conflicts and interests by referring to different types of human bodies."

Indeed, the other major development in academic discussions is that "race matters" in understanding all forms of social conflicts in the modern world,

including those which do not, on the surface, appear to be racially inspired (*see* West, 1993; Rogin, 1996; Hacker, 1992). Indeed, the eruption of ethnic tensions in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union has forced non-American scholars to reassess their previous dismissal of these conflicts as holdovers from a premodern age, likely to disappear in our new postmodern world. In the United States, while this work has shaped a critical reconsideration of the drift toward discounting racial tension as simply a byproduct of class antagonism or cultural conflict, it also has largely remained limited to a discussion of the problematic relationship between African Americans and the majority white population. Even when other racial minorities are discussed, a binary relationship with the Anglo majority remains the central focus of these academic studies (*see* Sánchez, 1993:5–8). The academic discussions of multiculturalism, in other words, have yet to produce a wide array of scholarship which effectively theorizes the fundamental multiracial character of either contemporary or historical U.S. society.

Although many philosophers and theorists have stressed that “race matters” in understanding American society, race in the national imagination has usually been reserved to describe boundaries between whites and blacks (*see* Cho, 1993). (For a recent exploration of “race” in the United States, that focuses exclusively on white/black dynamics, *see also* West, 1993.) Indeed, the 1990s has produced many important works by noted social commentators that continue to utilize a strict white/black racial dichotomy. Andrew Hacker (1992), author of *Two Nations: Black and White, Separate, Hostile, Unequal*, justifies his title and emphasis by claiming that Asians and Hispanics “find themselves sitting as spectators, while the two prominent players (Blacks and Whites) try to work out how or whether they can coexist with one another” (p. xii). While including voices of Asian Americans and Latinos in his collection of oral histories about “race,” Studs Terkel subtitles his 1992 book, *How Blacks and Whites Think and Feel about the American Obsession*.

Asian Americans and Latinos, despite their active presence in American society in the mid-nineteenth century, are depicted as only the latest of immigrant groups to America, and they are described as engaging in patterns which more clearly represent early twentieth-century European immigrant groups than separate racial populations. Hacker (1992:16), for example, rather than using the actual history of Asian groups or Latinos in the United States, argues that “second and subsequent generations of Hispanics and Asians are merging into the “white” category, partly through intermarriage and also by personal achievement and adaptation. No more important figure than Nobel Prize winner Toni Morrison has made this claim recently in the newsmagazine, *Time*. In a special issue dedicated to immigration, Morrison writes:

All immigrants fight for jobs and space, and who is there to fight but those who have both? As in the fishing ground struggle between Texas and Vietnamese shrimpers, they displace what and whom they can. Although U.S. history is awash in labor battles, political fights and property wars among all religious and ethnic groups, their struggles are persistently framed as struggles between recent arrivals and blacks. In race talk the move into mainstream America always means buying into the notion of American blacks as the real aliens. Whatever the ethnicity or nationality of the immigrant, his nemesis is understood to be African American. (1993:57)

This perspective, for all its insight into the crucial place of African Americans in American history, ignores the long history of racial discrimination aimed specifically at Asian Americans and Latinos in the United States. National scholars have a responsibility to study the whole nation and its history, but too often East Coast social commentators present a very thin knowledge of U.S. history more than a few miles away from the eastern seaboard. Both "Asians" and "Latinos" have been decidedly constructed as races in American history, long before the decade of the 1960s, and today both these subgroups have become lightning rods for discussions of race, equality, and the meaning of citizenship in contemporary America.

Even more importantly, a new perspective is needed in order to encourage us to rethink the meaning of multiracial communities in American history. Rather than simply being "communities in transition" to neighborhoods of racial exclusivity, these areas of cultural exchange and conflict can come to represent the norm in American racial and ethnic life, at least in the western half of the nation, not the exception. Indeed, refocusing on the persistence of these mixed communities allow urban scholars to compare the diversity of ethnic communities in the late twentieth century to the seemingly transitional ethnic communities of the early twentieth century. For Los Angeles and other large metropolitan areas, this perspective is crucial. Watts, for example, in the heart of South Central Los Angeles, had a majority Mexican population until the late 1920s, when African Americans from the American south began to migrate in large numbers to the city. Likewise, Boyle Heights in east Los Angeles was the center of the L.A. Jewish community in the 1920s, as well as home to a large Japanese American population stretching east from Little Tokyo and a sizable Mexican American group.

More recently, post-World War II racially restrictive policies of segregation have been replaced by a return to class-based zoning. This change, coupled with extensive post-1965 immigration, has created new communities of racial interaction in most urban centers in the United States. Most of these, however, include few white Americans. Yet, multiracial communities as diverse as Uptown and Edgewater in Chicago, Mt. Pleasant in Washington, DC, and Sunset Park and Jackson Heights in New York City have begun to focus attention on this seemingly new phenomenon. This interesting constellation

of multicultural enclaves has produced some rather noteworthy, but not altogether new, racial dynamics. Much residential community interaction between blacks, Latinos and Asian Americans has occurred in urban centers in the American West over the past one hundred years, but never before in such a visible – *i.e.*, national – fashion. The histories of these past multiracial communities in the West, therefore, is as important a model for ethnic community as the homogeneous *barrio* depicted in so many works of Chicano history, or the standard portrait of a completely African American ghetto.

One result of homogeneous depictions of ethnic communities can be seen in the immediate media coverage of “communities” involved in the L.A. uprising. The erasure of Latino participation in the Los Angeles riots as both full-fledged victims and victimizers is troubling to those concerned about contemporary discussions of race in American life. In the 1980s, Los Angeles County added 1.4 million residents, and nearly 1.3 million – or 93 percent – were Latino (*Los Angeles Times*, 1992:26). Even though Latinos made up the majority of residents in South Central Los Angeles and 45 percent of the residential population of Koreatown by 1990, both communities were defined in such a way that Latinos were considered “outsiders” in community politics and media formulations. Latinos were the single largest ethnic group arrested during the period of the riots, not only for curfew violations and undocumented status, but also as looters of their local Korean merchants (Postrel, 1992; Kwong, 1992). Estimates also indicate that between 30 to 40 percent of stores that were lost were Chicano or Latino owned (Cho, 1993:205). Moreover, during the three days of rioting, the Immigration and Naturalization Service took advantage of those arrested for curfew violations to deport over 2,000 Latino aliens. Yet the wider media and most academic accounts of the events of 1992 in Los Angeles have largely ignored the Latino role because it disturbs strongly held beliefs in notions of community, belonging, and race in this country.² It is the constant depiction of Latinos as “new-comers” and “foreigners” that provides insight into the particular form of racialization which surrounds this group in American society.

There are a variety of scholarly works that can help us better understand the unique way in which fear of “foreignness” operates to uniquely inform racial discourse in contemporary America. In particular, the intellectual distinction of nativism from racism has been an enduringly helpful legacy of previous work on immigration restriction. John Higham, in his now classic study *Strangers in the Land*, was careful to separate the two. “Nativism,” he wrote,

²One notable exception has been the polling and demographic work of Melvin L. Oliver, James H. Johnson, Jr., and Walter C. Farrell, Jr. (1993) which calls for a recognition of the underlying tension between Latino residents of Koreatown and their Korean employers, landlords, and retailers.

should be defined as intense opposition to an internal minority on the ground of its foreign (i.e., "un-American") connections. Specific nativistic antagonisms may, and do, vary widely in response to the changing character of minority irritants and the shifting conditions of the day; but through each separate hostility runs the connecting, energizing force of modern nationalism. While drawing on much broader cultural antipathies and ethnocentric judgments, nativism translates them into a zeal to destroy the enemies of a distinctively American way of life. (1974:4)

Higham was clear to locate modern nationalism at the core of American nativism, particularly a nationalism which was "defensive in spirit" and fearful of the changes in American society that could be wrought by the newcomer. As Higham (1974:24) reminds us, "unfavorable reactions to the personal and cultural traits" of others were not necessarily nativist, although most probably racist. "They become so only when integrated with a hostile and fearful nationalism."

Much can be learned from John Higham's own intellectual path in writing *Strangers*. Higham started his study as one of popular attitudes towards immigration restriction, but found that he could not contain the study within a focus limited to a legislative program. It grew, therefore, into "a general history of the anti-foreign spirit . . . defined as nativism" (p. ix). Higham (1974, p. x) explains that he explores "nativism as a habit of mind" which "illuminates darkly some of the large contours of the American past; it has mirrored our national anxieties and marked out the bounds of our tolerance" (p. x). Therefore, a comparison of the contours of our own time of intolerance with that of the past is in order.

Higham (chapter 1) identified three major anteforeign traditions which came together to shape American nativism at the end of the nineteenth century. The first was anti-Catholicism, nurtured in Protestant evangelical activism, which deemed Catholics as incapable of the independent thought characterized as critical to American citizenship. The second major tradition was virulent antiradicalism, which depicted the foreigner as prone to political revolution and the overthrow of stable institutions. The third and most important tradition was racial nativism, which was borne out of a confident belief in the Anglo-Saxon origins of the American nation. This form of romantic nationalism would be transformed in the early twentieth century "into a generalized, ideological structure," (p. 133) most emphatically emerging from the new scientific racism and the eugenics movement. Indeed, what Higham described was "the extension to European nationalities of that sense of absolute difference which already divided white Americans from people of other colors" (p. 132).

It is time to consider what factors are at work during our current age which inform and promote our own brand of American nativism. Let me suggest three different anteforeign sentiments which mark the racialized nativism of

the end of the twentieth century. The first is an extreme antipathy towards non-English languages and a fear of that linguistic difference will undermine the American nation. Despite the fact that English has become the premier international language of commerce and communication, fueled by forces as widespread as multinational corporations, the Internet, popular culture and returning migrants, Americans themselves consistently worry that immigrants refuse to learn English and intend to undermine the preeminence of that language within American borders. Captured by statewide "English Only" proposals, which began in California but spread quickly across the nation, this fear seems to emanate from Americans' own linguistic shortcomings and their feeling of alienation from the discourse – be it personal, on the job, or on the radio – that monolingualism creates.

A second fear is one directly tied into issues of multiculturalism and affirmative action. Like papist conspiracy theories, this fear involves the uneasy belief that racialized immigrants take advantage of, in the words of Michael Lind (1995:133), "a country in which racial preference entitlements and multicultural ideology encourage them to retain their distinct racial and ethnic identities." Going beyond the denial of white privilege in contemporary U.S. society, this sentiment directly believes that contrived, misguided, and sometimes secretive government policies have tilted against white people in the 1990s. Though tied to a general antipathy towards people of color, the place of immigrants and those perceived as racially connected to Latino and Asian immigrants heighten the nature of some of these fears. Even some pro-affirmative action activists bemoan the extension of programs to nonblacks, having equated the history of U.S. racism as that directed against only one racial group incorrectly defined as wholly nonimmigrant. These programs, then, are deemed to be un-American, not only because they contradict America's supposed commitment to equality of opportunity, but also because they are literally favoring "non-Americans" in their results. While invoking the name of the CORE national director in the early 1960s, Lind writes:

One wonders what James Farmer, the patron saint of quotas, would have said, if he had been told, in 1960, that by boycotting Northern corporations until they hired fixed numbers of black Americans, he was inspiring a system whose major beneficiaries would ultimately be, not only well-to-do white women, but immigrants and the descendants of immigrants who, at the time of his struggles, were living in Mexico, Cuba, Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala. (1995:135)

A third antiforeign sentiment has emerged in the 1990s, embodied in California's Proposition 187, which is quite unique and has not been seen since the Great Depression. Current anti-immigrant rhetoric focuses on the drain of public resources by immigrants, both legal and illegal, particularly their utilization of welfare, education and health care services. Unlike nativist

calls which center around immigrants taking jobs from citizens, this sentiment feeds into stereotypes of nonworking loafers, particularly targeting women who supposedly come to the United States to give birth and sustain their families from the "generous" welfare state (*see* Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1995, for an in-depth analysis of this new trend). Even when presented with evidence that immigrants are less likely to seek out government assistance than citizens, today's nativists scoff at the data and the researchers, like 187 proponent Harold Ezell who retorted to one study showing immigrant underutilization of government-sponsored medical programs by saying, "He's obviously never been to any of the emergency rooms in Orange County to see who's using them – it's non-English speaking young people with babies" (Bailey, 1996:B1). (For studies that confirm widespread underutilization of social services by immigrants, *see also* Blau, 1984:222–239; Tienda and Jensen, 1985:372–400; Jensen, 1988:51–83.) The notion that immigrants are now coming to the United States to take advantage of welfare, health and education benefits has led directly to federal legislation which allows states to ban such assistance to even legal immigrants, and this has enabled Governor Wilson to mandate such cut-offs in California.

Although cultural antipathies are often at work in producing fear of newcomers, more often than not economic fears of competition have also played a critical role. Nativism has always cut across political lines, finding adherents on both the right and left. In the 1920s, the American Federation of Labor played a critical role in encouraging immigration restriction by raising the spectre of newcomers' threat to the economic security of the American workingman. Samuel Gompers, president of the AFL, who supported voluntary and relatively unencumbered immigration as late as 1892, became a virulent nativist by the 1920s (Higham, 1974:49, 71, 321–322). Today's nativists similarly stretch across the political spectrum, from rightwingers like Pat Buchanan, to political "moderates" like Pete Wilson, to self-proclaimed liberals like Michael Lind.

What binds these individuals together is a profound sense of the decline of the American nation. With the rise of nativism since 1965, we are once again witnessing a defensive nationalism in the wake of profound economic restructuring. In place of a period of modernization which pushed the U.S. agricultural economy towards widespread industrial production, we are now witnessing rapid deindustrialization, the rise of a service and high tech economy, and the worldwide movement of capital which undercuts the ability of American unions to protect U.S. jobs. This economic transformation, coupled with antagonistic government policies, has certainly undermined central cities in the United States and made for fertile ground for nativist sentiments.

Indeed, underlying much of the frustration of the Los Angeles riot participants was the collapse of the inner-city economy, the negative flipside of the

new "Pacific Rim" global economy. Los Angeles had lost 150,000 manufacturing jobs in the previous three years, and each of these jobs were estimated to take another three associated jobs with them. The new jobs which were created were disproportionately low-wage and dead-end forms of employment; in fact, 40 percent of all jobs created in Los Angeles from 1979 to 1989 paid less than \$15,000 a year. Most of these jobs were taken by recent immigrants to the area, leaving African Americans few viable options for secure employment. The average earnings of employed black men fell 24 percent from 1973 to 1989, and unemployment swelled to record levels in the innercity. Middle-income Los Angeles was rapidly disappearing, leaving little opportunity for anyone to move up the economic ladder. This inequality was also highly racialized; the median household net worth for Anglos in the city in 1991 was \$31,904, while only \$1,353 for non-Anglos.

Clearly, one obvious target for the frustration in the were the Korean merchants in South Central, who had replaced the Jews who left in large numbers after the 1965 Watts Riots. In 1990, 145,000 Koreans lived in Los Angeles County, a 142 percent increase over the previous decade and a phenomenal growth from only 9,000 in 1970. Unable to transfer their education and skills to the U.S. labor market, many Korean immigrants had pooled their funds to start small businesses in ethnic communities throughout the city. Koreans now saw their businesses burn to the ground and suffer widespread looting. These small merchants had filled a vacuum created by discrimination against African-American entrepreneurs and the abandonment of the by large retail businesses.

Yet much of the damage to Korean businesses occurred in Koreatown itself, where one third of that community's businesses were located. This community was unique in that it did not represent an area of ethnic succession, well known in the East, where one identifiable ethnic group was slowly being replaced by another, with the resulting tensions that succession produces. Here two recent immigrant populations met in unequal fashion, both reflecting cultures which had long been part of the L.A. racial makeup, but neither with particular historical roots to this area before 1965. Unlike other Asian enclaves in southern California, the residential population of Koreatown was overwhelming Latino, and it was this ethnic group which was primarily engaged in the looting of these stores (Ong and Hee, 1993:7-8). In fact, 43 percent of those arrested during the riots were Latino, while only 34 percent were African Americans, contradicting the notion that the Los Angeles Riots was a simple black-Korean conflict. Economic frustrations fueled this looting and mayhem of the Los Angeles Riots, even though a different racialized nativism set the events of late April 1992 in motion.

It is clear that we are in a period of economic transformation which can and should be compared to the period of industrialization that occurred a

century ago and that has provided the social context for the rise of nativism in the United States that occurred in both periods. Yet today's economic transformation is intimately tied to an economic globalization propelled by multinational corporations and an age where capital and information flows relatively freely across national borders. From 1890 to the 1920s, the industrial transformation which changed the American economy and fueled international migration led to a breaking down of local community control towards a national interdependency which propelled Americans to "search for order" in new and varied ways (Wiebe, 1967). Not only did bureaucracy and science rise to provide this national order, but so did immigration restriction and scientific racism emerge to provide ideological comfort to Americans in search of a glue to keep together a nation undergoing fundamental social and economic change.

Many Americans have been shielded since World War II from the convulsions of the international economic order by the enormous strength of the U.S. economy, and liberal policies of inclusion have been crafted which assume the continuation of this extraordinary growth. Most important in coming to terms with the complexities of race, immigration and nativism in the late twentieth century is a perspective which can deal with the multiple meanings of race and equality in American society in an age of liberal political retrenchment and widespread economic restructuring. During the Reagan/Bush administrations and the current era of Republican ascendancy in Congress, hard-fought victories in racial and economic policy were and are continually threatened with extinction. In addition, supposedly "race-neutral" policies, such as tax reform and subsidies to the private sector, have disproportionately and adversely affected racial minorities (Lipsitz, 1995:371-377).

Yet increasingly we must account for the fact that at least the Reagan/Bush era did not see a reversal of government spending despite all the rhetoric, but instead witnessed its redirection towards wealthy and corporate interests and away from long-term investment in education, infrastructure and safety nets for the poor. This "trickle-down" theory of social advancement has become the biggest failure of the 1980s, and it has left in its wake a sizable, disgruntled white electorate, one disaffected with politics that clamors for "change" at every turn. This group helped give the White House to the Democrats in 1992, handed large numbers of votes to Ross Perot, and offered the Republican Party a majority in both houses of Congress for the first time in thirty years in 1994. In this setting, one in which expectations of newfound prosperity grow with every change of political power, a scapegoat must be found amidst the citizenry that can be blamed for delaying the promised economic security. For many Americans in our era, the poor, especially the black poor, have served this role of scapegoat; increasingly, however, that role is being transferred to or combined with the blaming of the immigrant.

While the industrial economy was being sent through convulsions over the past thirty years, Americans produced largely cultural explanations for structural social problems. The demonization of black families, for example, served for white Americans as a plausible justification for the economic backwardness of African Americans, despite affirmative action and civil rights. Instead of focusing on the ravages of deindustrialization in both black and white communities, white Americans increasingly revived traditional stereotypes of black laziness. While these racialized beliefs were no longer acceptable public discourse in the post-civil rights era, researchers who take anonymous polls can still ferret out extensive negative race stereotyping rampant in the white community. (Lipsitz, 1995: 379–382).

Indeed, it seems to me that cultural beliefs in innate difference have worked together with structural forces of inequality to frame (and hide) discussions of white privilege. Literary scholar Eric Lott (1993:474–495) has argued that attitudes towards blackness are shaped by white self-examination and insecurity, rather than by the realities of African-American life. Indeed, contemporary white perceptions of blacks probably tell us more about the dangers of being “white” in this era than about strongly held beliefs regarding black inferiority. In fact, it is the language of liberal individualism that keeps many whites from seeking structural explanations for racial inequality. However, liberalism has always been a two-edged sword. When economic conditions become tenuous for whites, meritocratic rhetoric about the rewards of hard work and self-reliance also generates individual anxiety and a fear of personal victimization. Whites who are faced with economic failure or insecurity in spite of their racial privilege become a sure breeding ground for the scapegoating of racial others. This classic projection further obscures the need to acknowledge or understand the structural and economic sources of one’s own oppression.

Closer analysis of the workings of liberal language deepens our understanding of the relationship between liberal racial attitudes and the structural causes of inequality. For example, liberal individualism, as a dominant value in American society, has an impact on the actions of individuals of all races. Indeed, a look at liberalism’s impact on blacks and other racial minorities, including recent immigrants to the United States, would reveal that routine, systematic and unyielding discrimination does not necessarily lead to collective protest. More often than not, it produces a sense of individual victimization and anger. The Los Angeles riots demonstrated that injustice can provoke African-American rage, not only against white authority, but against “racialized others,” most notably Asians and Latinos living among blacks in newly “reintegrated” communities.

Today, the United States finds itself increasingly having to compete economically with nations from all over the world, including Third World nations trying to gain a stronger foothold in the international exchange of

goods and services. At the same time, American corporations seem to have themselves become internationalized, more interested in gaining profit than in maintaining an economic nationalism rooted in American hegemony (*see* Hollinger, 1995 for an analysis of this development). It is not difficult to understand how immigrants from these developing nations can be seen as both drains on our national economy and symbols of countries who threaten American economic hegemony and the dream of a multicultural future in the post-Cold War era. These conditions have produced increasing calls for a "liberal nationalism" in the United States from the left side of the political spectrum, which often has gone hand-in-hand with calls for severe restrictions on immigration to the United States. In an analysis intended to aid working class Americans, particularly American blacks, Michael Lind (1995:319–320) writes, "The most promising way to quickly raise wages at the bottom of the income ladder in the United States is to restrict immigration."³ Though always claiming that these efforts should not be characterized as nativist, the defensiveness of these renewed calls for nationalism and protectionism on the backs of recent and future immigrants point towards the eruption of a "liberal nativism" in American political discourse.

Interestingly, Americans have been better able to identify this new nativism when it emerges in other nations. The resurgence of neo-Nazi hatred towards foreigners in Germany is regularly reported as racial nativism and connected to the German history in the Hitler era. When Japanese officials deride American workers while maintaining stringent restrictions on immigration, Americans are quick to identify this as racial nativism. But in the United States, the history of white on black racism blinds Americans from recognizing any other forms of interracial tensions. Racism against Asians and Latin Americans is dismissed as either "natural byproducts" of immigrant assimilation or as extensions of the white-black dichotomy. Moreover, when African Americans perform acts of racism, they are quickly ignored or recast except as a threat to a white-dominated society.

As the participants in the violence at Florence and Normandie indicate, interracial understanding and an inclusive sense of "community" is not simply formed by living in close proximity to those from other racial/ethnic groups. Rather, what is disturbing about the Los Angeles riots is the insistence that "community" reflects a single racial group. The irony of black protesters stopping construction projects in South Central Los Angeles on the basis that no one from the "community" was employed, even when Latino workers were their neighbors, seemed to be lost on everyone concerned. Moreover, these strategies of protest usually encouraged African American entrepreneurs who

³While these calls are rising in volume and quantity, social science literature on this question is much more split as to the effect of immigration restriction on the wage levels of American citizens.

had left the residential neighborhood to return to invest and to hire (but not to live), with the untested assumption that they would be more likely to hire other blacks.

Indeed, to equate "community" with a particular racialized "identity" seems more to naturalize a recent geography of local communities which can easily forget the multiracial histories of the past. In Los Angeles, commentators rarely discuss the longstanding Asian and Latino communities which have been part of the region's history since the city's founding, relying instead on depictions of these racial groups as almost wholly recent immigrants. Ironically, African Americans become the perfect choice to project this historical amnesia and defend the sanctity of national boundaries, since their presence alone deflects any charge that anti-immigrant policies are racist. Since race in this nation has been constructed as a white/black affair, the continuation of this bipolar approach becomes critical to the ideology of an ordered American nation. In the United States, no less than in Germany or Japan, the power embedded in certain notions of territory must be critiqued and analyzed for the grounds upon which certain peoples and histories are privileged. Indeed, racialized immigrants have become the stepping stools for claims of American citizenship in the late twentieth century.

How have the immigrants themselves responded to these recent attacks? One response has been a marked increase in political involvement among all immigrants in U.S. politics, on the local and national levels (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1996:101). Within communities of immigrants from various nations in Asia, political involvement has usually emerged within racialized organizations, increasingly "pan-ethnic" in orientation (Espiritu, 1992). Although immigrants from Latin America have seemed to lag in their commitment to a pan-Latino consciousness, recent anti-immigrant efforts in California seem to have produced a decided turn towards political strategies and identities which go beyond national origins (*see* Oboler, 1995 for a discussion of the hesitancy of Latino immigrants in New York to give up identities based strictly on national origin; *see* Rodriguez, 1996 for contrary developments in California). Immigrant citizens and American-born ethnics in these communities have also heightened their own political involvement to fight for the rights of immigrants with the acknowledgement that their own racial construction often hangs in the balance. Surprisingly, this acknowledgement of common ties has even stretched beyond party affiliation. In California, Republican Bill Davila, the high-profile spokesperson and former CEO of Vons supermarkets, took out a full-page advertisement in 1994 asking voters to reject Proposition 187, even though he supported Pete Wilson's re-election campaign, calling the measure a "divisive, unproductive, initiative . . . turning neighbor against neighbor" (Rodriguez, 1996:27).

Ironically, one of the most concrete expressions of this new political consciousness is the upsurge in the rates of naturalization among legal immigrants across the nation. The INS office in Los Angeles began receiving as many as 2,000 applications a day for naturalization after passage of Proposition 187, and offices around the country experienced similar increases. An all-time high was reached in 1995, with over 1 million immigrants becoming new American citizens (McDonnell, 1995; Ramos, 1995; Pachon, 1995). With the legalization of previously undocumented immigrants by the 1986 IRCA law, more long-term immigrant residents of the United States see the protection of citizenship in this time of immigrant-bashing and reduced benefits as a way to protect themselves and their families. At least one leading political scientist who has studied the issue extensively warns of new challenges by the anti-immigrant forces to the very process of naturalization (Pachon, 1996). And the historian cannot stop from asking whether we will see a return to deportations of naturalized Americans, as was practiced in the McCarthy era to rid communities of labor leaders and civic activists who were considered threats by virtue of the 1952 McCarran-Walter Immigration Act.

While on the surface these developments of political incorporation seem to reflect patterns of Americanization among earlier European immigrant groups to the United States, this is a decidedly ambivalent Americanism borne of racial tension and antiforeign sentiment. One 1994 statewide poll in California found that 25 percent of immigrants in the state personally feared discrimination and violence directed at them by virtue of looking foreign (Pachon, 1995). As sociologist Rubén Rumbaut has put it, "the moral of the story is we reap what we sow. When you welcome people to a community, you encourage them to feel they matter and that they have a stake here. But if you sow hate, you'll reap the products of hate" (Bailey, 1996). It is certainly time for all Americans to ask themselves what sort of future we are sowing when we attack those who look to come to contribute to American society. For Americans who can hardly escape their own racial backgrounds, the legacy of this new nativism is likely to be reflected in American politics and society for quite some time to come.

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