

UC Berkeley

CRWS Working Papers

Title

Remarks presented by Joseph Lowndes on the Opening Keynote Panel of the Inaugural Conference on Right-Wing Studies, UC Berkeley

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6pq3q678>

Author

Lowndes, Joseph

Publication Date

2019-04-25

Berkeley Center for Right-Wing Studies Working Paper Series

**Remarks presented as part of the Opening Keynote Panel:
“Perspectives on the Far-Right Insurgency: Latin
America, Europe, and the U.S.”**

**by Joseph Lowndes
University of Oregon**

**Presented at the Inaugural Conference on Right-Wing Studies
April 25-27, 2019**



**Institute for the
Study of
Societal Issues**

Talk for Inaugural Conference of the Center for Right-Wing Studies
Joe Lowndes
April 2019

I was asked to place the current situation in the USA in the context of the history of US right-wing extremism--suggesting both the continuity and the novelty of where we are today.

The risk of talking about right-wing extremism solely in terms of the United States of course is that it makes invisible the ways that we are facing a global moment in the rise of the extreme right.

In the case of Europe, and of European settler nations around the world, racial identity has come to the fore – rendered as biology, culture, religion (or all three) – to be self-consciously defended at the ballot box, in the streets, on the internet, and episodically in acts of gruesome terror.

The far right in the United States is of a piece with this white international – indeed increasingly so through channels and exchanges through which far right ideas, fantasies, and conspiracies are traded.

But it also is a product of its own distinct histories.

Let's begin with the obvious: the history of our present in the US is grounded in settler colonialism, black slavery, Christian supremacy, imperial expansion, and hetero-patriarchy.

It is also grounded in long-standing American ideals of freedom, democracy and self-rule.

All of these are resources for right-wing extremists, and always have been, as they envision the worlds they want to make.

I think in recent years we have seen the extreme right in the US go in two directions simultaneously: both to the margins and to the center of US political life.

First the margins: as Kathleen Belew and others have shown, many white supremacists groups began taking a revolutionary, anti-statist path in the 1970s and 80s. Inspired by William Pierce's *The Turner Diaries* and shaped by military experience in Vietnam, elements of the extreme right abandoned the project of the American nation for a separatist white nation.

This is the story of Aryan Nations, The Order, Christian Identity, and associated armed separatist groups, and most of Timothy Mc Veigh's Oklahoma City bombing.

The dream of a separate white nation took root more broadly among other far right klan and neo-nazi activists and writers, and increasingly online. The belief that the US would inevitably become a majority/minority nation particularly because of nonwhite immigration drove the idea that the white race would have to seek refuge in a separate homeland. One of the most active areas targeted for an exclusionary white homeland is in the Pacific Northwest, where I live and work.

This vision continues to flourish and inform far right activity and exchange in both the US and around the world among increasingly interconnected and increasingly dangerous far right organizations and individuals.

Another vision of the far right, however, moved increasingly toward the center of US politics in the 1990s, in a way that was ultimately decisive for our present moment.

The idea was that the US political system still offered the best avenue for far right goals, as remote as that possibility seemed to those who thought that the US had fully succumbed to leftist multiculturalism.

This position was put forward perhaps most succinctly by Sam Francis, the diehard racist, paleoconservative intellectual, and informal political advisor to Pat Buchanan's presidential campaigns. Francis described himself as a populist defender of Middle America, and thought that the white majority could yet be rallied against corporate and state elites above and black dependents and criminals below, and non-white

immigrants from outside through electoral and constitutional means. As he put it in an article in the “race realist” American Renaissance journal in 1995,

“By embracing a strategy that involved breaking up the United States, not only would whites be abandoning their own country, but they would also be forced to give up their appeals to its history, its traditions, and its interests as a nation. We could no longer cite the words of Jefferson and Lincoln (and other American statesmen) on racial matters; we could no longer invoke the US Constitution as an authority; we could no longer argue that immigration threatens our national interests because there would be no nation to have interests; we could no longer mention the settlement and conquest of North America by whites, if only because we would have confessed that settlement and conquest have been failures from which we were now running as fast as we could.”

Francis had a point. As an historically white supremacist nation, there were and are rich traditions of white supremacy on which to draw from across the political spectrum.

Right-wing populist insurgencies have episodically challenged Republican orthodoxy over the last half century. It was George Wallace and then Richard Nixon’s ability to portray a majority of white working and middle-class Americans as squeezed by elites above and by black protesters, criminals and welfare cheats below that drew significant numbers of voters out of the Democratic party. This antiblackness helped Republican candidates win elections over the next two decades.

But right-wing populism had limited appeal for in the electorate at the time, as antiblack politics had long become the property of mainstream Republicans, and with Bill Clinton, increasingly the Democrats too. Anti-immigrant racism became the key vehicle for the far right’s move to the center of US politics, I think, but it would take time, organization, and ideological development.

It was not until Pat Buchanan’s run in the Republican presidential primaries of 1992 that nativism was injected powerfully into GOP politics at the national level. Anti-immigrant politics had, across the 1980s, had bubbled up on the far right, but it was Buchanan’s campaign

that framed in populist language in a way that would allow it to cross back and forth between the white supremacist right (to whom he was connected) and the Republican Party (to whom he was also deeply connected).

To be sure, nativist populism depended on what Natalia Molina has called “racial scripts” that transfers the perceived characteristics of one racialized subaltern group to others, but there were new elements as well. Specifically, Buchanan and those around him introduced nativism into the extant logic right-wing populism in three ways.

The first was the idea that immigrants were a direct threat to jobs and wages, allowing racist populists to talk about the rights of American workers. The idea of immigrants stealing jobs reinforced the producerist idea, going back to anti-Chinese campaigns by white labor in the late 19th century, that elites used poor immigrants against the native working class. In the 1980s and 1990s this was a credible position insofar as much of the US economic elite had a strong open borders position, expressed from the campaign speeches of both Reagan and Bush to the editorial page of the Wall Street Journal. In the 1990s it became yoked to a critique of “globalism” of proposed free trade agreements such as NAFTA more generally.

Second was the emergent idea that the US would become a “majority minority” nation by 2050. This became a significant story in the news in the early 1990s, and one that the far right would use to talk about the end of white racial dominance in the US. This differed in distinct ways from antiblack populism, which figured African Americans as a parasitic class but not one which would dominate American society in terms of numbers. Yet like antiblackness, it demonized women in particular as dependent, invasive, and dangerously fertile.

Third, where black Americans were understood by in some sense to be part of American national identity historically (even though within a hierarchical order), immigrants were depicted as outside invaders assaulting American culture, language, and institutions. As such nativism brought the issue of nationalism to the center of right-wing populism in a way that had not been present before. Domestically, it meant that the American nation had to defend itself and its borders

from nonwhite others who would destroy it. Internationally, it meant isolationism and an embrace of nationalisms elsewhere.

Eventually, nativism became a more effective discourse for right-wing populism as antiblack populism lost some of its political traction for Republicans. The dismantling of welfare and the advent of mass incarceration – both accomplished in the 1990s by a Democratic president – diminished the power of two accusations that had been key in the elections of Nixon, Reagan and George H.W. Bush: that black welfare parasitism and crime threatened the nation. In some sense, just as nativism gained traction through its embedding in populist discourse, populism would require nativism to impact both the GOP and national politics.

Through a route that included:

- the ideological intersection of racist right, paleoconservative, and eventually what came to be a post-paleo alt right;
- the simultaneous development of a harsh populist anti-immigrant movement that moved over two decades from California's Prop 187 to Arizona's SB1070;
- and also the parallel rise of the Tea Party movement following the twin events of the economic crash of 2008 and Obama's election that year, the pieces were in place for a bright orange meteor to hit US presidential election in 2016.

Two other interrelated parts the story over the last two decades are also central:

The first was economic: the rise of the second Gilded Age - the greatest division of wealth between the very richest and everyone else, which did three things

1. gutted the very basis of public provisions, services, and guarantees built up over the middle decades of the 20th century
2. Among other things this allowed whites to fall off the bottom in significant numbers. Whites were, in some sense, no longer indemnified by their whiteness as they had been since the New Deal, and thus open to new identifications.
3. The massive wealth gap produced new instabilities into the political system, particularly the party system.

The second part of the story, directly related to the first, is the steady erosion of the effectiveness and accountability of US political institutions, including the presidency, Congress and the Courts.

In 2016 Donald Trump staked his presidential campaign first and foremost on a pungent racist nativism. The virulence of this language was as shocking as his electoral success to many scholars, journalists, and even elites in his own party. He portrayed Mexican immigrants as drug smugglers and rapists, called for mass deportations, promised a wall along the southern border, and proposed a ban on Muslim immigration.

I don't need to rehearse the far right elements of Trump's presidency: the cast of racist and authoritarian figures in the white house, Trump's own egregious corruption and Caesarism (now taken for granted by the public), the publicly staged sadism at the southern border, the increased militarization of ICE...I could go on, (so could all of you.)

Perhaps most consequential has been what looks like the complete capture of one of the two major political parties by the far right. The GOP has now committed itself fully to Trump's agenda.

Party leaders who once opposed Trump have long since decided it isn't wise to do so given the national electoral portrait of the party, as long as Trump continues to deliver on the upward transfer of wealth as he did with last year's tax reform.

Republican fortunes will now rely on doubling down on voter suppression of people of color, treating undocumented people and asylum-seekers as sacrificial lambs, and appealing directly to white political identity.

This electoral path will be greatly eased if the Supreme Court decides to let the Trump administration ask about citizenship on the next census, ensuring severe undercounts in high-immigrant areas, which in turn will decide state and national vote apportionments.

In short the far right has, and will likely continue to shape the general contours of US politics in ways that will have grave consequences.

It appears that Sam Francis was right after all. The far right's most effective strategy, over time, would be to go straight up the middle.

But this inside strategy has also continually depended on far right groups outside the system, if parallel to it (think for instance of the border militias holding migrants at gunpoint last week).

In a perhaps even more striking development, in Dan HoSang's and my new book (and as you'll hear about from Cloee Cooper on Saturday), we analyze some the ways in which right-wing formations have tried to extend their reach by recruiting people of color and selectively incorporating themes of multiculturalism and emphasizing violent masculinity.

In any case, we should be prepared to be dealing with a powerful far right in many forms for years to come.