



# The Ethno-economy: Peter Brimelow and the Capitalism of the Far Right

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Recent research on the far right has remained surprisingly silent on the question of capitalism. This article takes another approach. It suggests that we must understand the far right emerging out of the economic: out of the dynamics of capitalism itself. It does so through an intellectual portrait of the financial journalist Peter Brimelow, one of the most influential proponents of far-right nativist politics and a self-described “godfather of the Alt Right.” It follows his passage from financial journalist to anti-immigrant firebrand through his encounters with neoliberal luminaries Peter Bauer, Julian Simon, and Milton Friedman. Rather than for an ethnostate, I argue Brimelow is best seen as making the case for an “ethno-economy,” with immigration determined by a racialized hierarchy of human capital.

Where does the resurgence of the far right in the United States come from? Scholars attempting to explain how apparently fringe political ideologies have moved to center stage since the election of Donald Trump have split into two camps. The first locates the origins of the far right in culture: racism, chauvinism, xenophobia, the “tribalism” of “white identity politics,” or a longing for “eternity.”<sup>1</sup> As a group, they seem to ignore the admonition from Frankfurt school sociologist Max Horkheimer repeated so often that it threatens to become a cliché that “whoever is not willing to talk about

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<sup>1</sup> Ashley Jardina, *White Identity Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019). Timothy Snyder, *The Road to Unfreedom: Russia, Europe, America* (New York: Tim Duggan Books, 2018). Benjamin R. Teitelbaum, *War for Eternity: Inside Bannon's Far-Right Circle of Global Power Brokers* (New York: Dey Street Books, 2020).

capitalism should also keep quiet about fascism.”<sup>2</sup> Capitalism can be hard to find in this literature. A recent book on “the far right today” does not mention the term once.<sup>3</sup> Four other books on the alt-right and White Power movements barely mention it, the fourth only to say that the alt-right is “skeptical of global capitalism.”<sup>4</sup> References to “identity” outnumber “capitalism” at a ratio of several dozen to one. The assumption seems to be that far-right ideology is either post- or pre-material: it inhabits a space of culture detached from issues of production and distribution. This is startling given the fact that the radical right’s central issue is nonwhite immigration: an eminently economic issue with a vast specialized literature.

By contrast, the second school of interpretation finds the origins of the US far right in the spirit of capitalism itself. Rather than a rejection of neoliberalism, they see the far right as a mutant form of it, shedding certain features – like a commitment to multilateral trade governance or the virtues of outsourcing – while doubling down on social Darwinist principles of struggle in the market translated through hierarchical categories of race, nationality, and gender.<sup>5</sup> The

<sup>2</sup> Jonathon Catlin, “The Authoritarian Personality and Its Discontents,” *Journal of History of Ideas Blog*, 10 Jan. 2018, at <https://jhiblog.org/2018/01/10/the-authoritarian-personality-and-its-discontents>.

<sup>3</sup> Cas Mudde, *The Far Right Today* (Cambridge: Polity, 2019).

<sup>4</sup> One mention in Kathleen Belew, *Bring the War Home: The White Power Movement and Paramilitary America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018). One mention in a quote in David Neiwert, *Alt-America: The Rise of the Radical Right in the Age of Trump* (New York: Verso, 2017). Two mentions in Mike Wendling, *Alt-Right: From 4chan to the White House* (London: Pluto, 2018). Three mentions in Alexander Minna Stern, *Proud Boys and the White Ethnostate: How the Alt-Right Is Warping the American Imagination* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2019). For the last see George Hawley, *Making Sense of the Alt-Right* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 113.

<sup>5</sup> William Callison and Zachary Manfredi, “Introduction: Theorizing Mutant Neoliberalism,” in Callison and Manfredi, eds., *Mutant Neoliberalism: Market Rule and Political Ruptures* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019), 1–38. See Wendy Brown, *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), 707–24; Melinda Cooper, “The Alt-Right: Neoliberalism, Libertarianism and the Fascist Temptation,” *Theory, Culture & Society*, 38, 6 (2021), 29–50; Neil Davidson and Richard Saull, “Neoliberalism and the Far-Right: A Contradictory Embrace,” *Critical Sociology*, 43, 4–5 (2017), 707–24; Henry A. Giroux, “Neoliberal Fascism as the Endpoint of Casino Capitalism,” *Fast Capitalism*, 16, 1 (2019), 7–23; Daniel Martinez HoSang and Joseph E. Lowndes, *Producers, Parasites, Patriots: Race and the New Right-Wing Politics of Precarity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019); Ray Kiely, “Assessing Conservative Populism: A New Double Movement or Neoliberal Populism?,” *Development and Change*, 51, 2 (2020), 398–417; Jo Littler, “Normcore Plutocrats in Gold Elevators,” *Cultural Politics*, 15, 1 (2019), 15–28; Richard Saull, “Racism and Far Right Imaginaries within Neo-liberal Political Economy,” *New Political Economy*, 23, 5 (2018), 588–608; Quinn Slobodian, “Anti-68ers and the Racist-Libertarian Alliance: How a Schism among Austrian School Neoliberals Helped Spawn the Alt Right,” *Cultural Politics*, 15, 3 (2019), 372–86; Moira Weigel, “The Authoritarian Personality 2.0,” *Polity*, 54, 1 (2021), 146–80.

following article contributes to this body of literature through an intellectual portrait of the financial journalist Peter Brimelow, one of the most influential proponents of far right nativist politics in the US and a self-described “godfather of the Alt Right.”<sup>6</sup> I show how Brimelow’s strain of “rogue neo-liberalism” defended ethnically selective immigration restrictionism through a doctrine fusing economic logic with cultural essentialism. His work helps us see how the nation is understood as both a racial and an economic asset to the far right.

A naturalized US citizen born in England in 1947, Brimelow’s primary book, *Alien Nation*, published by Random House in 1995, was a watershed for the discussion of immigration on the far right.<sup>7</sup> Historian Aristide Zolberg writes that it “marked the ascent to respectability of an explicitly white supremacist position ... that had hitherto been confined in the United States to shadowy groups.”<sup>8</sup> In 1999, he founded the website VDare.com, named after the first child born to white settlers in North America, Virginia Dare. Serving as what the *Washington Post* called a “platform for white nationalism,” the website has hosted prominent advocates of scientific racism like Jared Taylor, J. Philippe Rushton and Steve Sailer, as well as alt-right activists Richard Spencer and Jason Kessler.<sup>9</sup> An amplifier for themes and tropes of the far right, a search of the website yields over 20,000 posts with the term “white genocide,” over 13,000 with “race realism,” and 6,000 with “great replacement.”<sup>10</sup> Brimelow is also proximate to more mainstream figures in the US. He was hosted at the home of Trump’s economic adviser Larry Kudlow in 2018 and held a role at the same time at Fox, reporting directly to Rupert Murdoch.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Thomas J. Main, *The Rise of the Alt-Right* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2018), 6; Mitchell Dean, “Rogue Neoliberalism, Liturgical Power, and the Search for a Left Governmentality,” *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 118, 2 (April 2019), 325–42.

<sup>7</sup> Peter Brimelow, *Alien Nation: Common Sense about America’s Immigration Disaster* (New York: Random House, 1995). The book was an expanded version of his earlier article: Brimelow, “Time to Rethink Immigration?,” *National Review*, 22 June 1992, 30–46.

<sup>8</sup> Aristide R. Zolberg, *A Nation by Design: Immigration Policy in the Fashioning of America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 396.

<sup>9</sup> Robert Costa, “At Birthday Party, Kudlow Hosted a Publisher of White Nationalists,” *Washington Post*, 22 Aug. 2018, at <https://vdare.com/writers> (accessed 14 March 2024).

<sup>10</sup> See <https://vdare.com/search> (accessed 14 March 2024). See also Jeff Tischauser and Kevin Musgrave, “Far-Right Media as Imitated Counterpublicity: A Discourse Analysis on Racial Meaning and Identity on Vdare.com,” *Howard Journal of Communications*, 31, 3 (2020), 282–96.

<sup>11</sup> Nicholas Confessore, “How Tucker Carlson Reshaped Fox News – and Became Trump’s Heir,” *New York Times*, 30 April 2022, at [www.nytimes.com/2022/04/30/us/tucker-carlson-fox-news.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/30/us/tucker-carlson-fox-news.html).

In books and articles, Brimelow is described variously as an “academic racist,” white nationalist, restrictionist, “critic of multiculturalism and immigration,” “vocal immigration opponent,” or “Alt Right figurehead.”<sup>12</sup> Yet he is almost never described the way he described himself: as a libertarian conservative or even a “libertarian ideologue.”<sup>13</sup> It is rarely, if ever, noted that Brimelow was a fixture in the standard networks of neoliberal intellectuals seeking to rebuild the foundations of postwar capitalism.<sup>14</sup> He spoke at a Mont Pèlerin Society (MPS) regional meeting in Vancouver in 1983 alongside Margaret Thatcher’s speechwriter and later *National Review* editor John O’Sullivan.<sup>15</sup> Brimelow’s interviews and lengthier features in *Forbes* in the late 1980s and the 1990s drew almost exclusively from the MPS roster. This included profiles and interviews with Thomas Sowell (twice), Peter Bauer, Milton Friedman (twice for *Forbes* and twice for *Fortune*), and Murray Rothbard.<sup>16</sup> His longer features were built around the research of Gordon Tullock, Hayek, Friedman, and MPS member Lawrence White.<sup>17</sup> He wrote a glowing review of Milton and Rose Friedman’s memoirs, recounting

<sup>12</sup> Zolberg, 6; Main; Patrik Hermansson, David Lawrence, Joe Mulhall, and Simon Murdoch, *The International Alt-Right: Fascism for the 21st Century?* (New York: Routledge, 2020); Daniel Denvir, *All-American Nativism* (New York: Verso, 2020), 160; George Hawley, *Right-Wing Critics of American Conservatism* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2016), 188; Wendling; Hawley, *Making Sense of the Alt-Right*, 39.

<sup>13</sup> Peter Brimelow, “Immigration Is the Viagra of the State”: A Libertarian Case against Immigration,” *VDare*, 4 June 2008, at <https://vdare.com/articles/immigration-is-the-viagra-of-the-state-a-libertarian-case-against-immigration>. For the latter see Peter Brimelow, “Julian Simon and Me,” *Forbes*, 20 April 1998, at [www.forbes.com/forbes/1998/0420/6108116a.html#24e65ea3d8of](http://www.forbes.com/forbes/1998/0420/6108116a.html#24e65ea3d8of).

<sup>14</sup> On said networks see Philip Mirowski and Dieter Plehwe, eds., *The Road from Mont Pèlerin: The Making of the Neoliberal Thought Collective* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).

<sup>15</sup> List of participants, MPS regional meeting, Vancouver 1983. The Howard Center for Family Religion and Society, Rockford Illinois Records in the Regional History Center (hereafter Rockford Records), Northern Illinois University, John Howard Papers, Box 94, Folder 3.

<sup>16</sup> Peter Brimelow and Thomas Sowell, “Human Capital,” *Forbes*, 6 July 1988 at [www.forbes.com/forbes/98/0706/6201052a.htm](http://www.forbes.com/forbes/98/0706/6201052a.htm); Peter Brimelow, “A man alone,” *Forbes*, 24 Aug 1987, 40–46; Peter Brimelow and Peter Bauer, “Let Them Work Out Their Own Problems,” *Forbes*, 22 Feb. 1988, at [www.forbes.com/2007/09/20/cz\\_pb\\_0920thirdworld.html#567c169b4033](http://www.forbes.com/2007/09/20/cz_pb_0920thirdworld.html#567c169b4033); Peter Brimelow and Milton Friedman, “Milton Friedman at 85,” *Forbes*, 29 Dec. 1997, at [www.forbes.com/forbes/1997/1229/6014052a.html#51f6b9e775d8](http://www.forbes.com/forbes/1997/1229/6014052a.html#51f6b9e775d8); Brimelow and Friedman, “Beware the Funny Money,” *Forbes* (3 May 1999), at [www.forbes.com/forbes/1999/0503/6309138a.html#275e117e2640](http://www.forbes.com/forbes/1999/0503/6309138a.html#275e117e2640); Peter Brimelow, “‘No Water’ Economics,” *Forbes*, 6 March 1989, 86, 91.

<sup>17</sup> Peter Brimelow, “Privilege-Seeking?,” *Forbes*, 22 Sept. 1997, at [www.forbes.com/forbes/1997/0922/6006073a.html#4b06d49f152a](http://www.forbes.com/forbes/1997/0922/6006073a.html#4b06d49f152a); Peter Brimelow and Edwin S. Rubenstein, “L Is for Layoffs,” *Forbes*, 20 Aug. 2001, [www.forbes.com/forbes/2001/0820/060.html#e822b02148d6](http://www.forbes.com/forbes/2001/0820/060.html#e822b02148d6). Peter Brimelow, “Do You Want to Be Paid in Rockefellers? In Wristons? Or How about a Hayek?,” *Forbes*, 30 May 1988, 243–50.

Milton's first trip overseas to the inaugural MPS meeting, and praised the couple's contributions to "the free-market revolution in economics that has overthrown the statist–Keynesian–socialist consensus."<sup>18</sup>

To describe Brimelow as nativist, racist, and nationalist may be correct but it threatens to banish his concerns from the domain of the rational and the economic. In fact, he was a typical member of a transnational milieu linking Thatcherite intellectuals taking their own version of a cultural turn around the Institute of Economic Affairs' Social Affairs Unit with social scientists like Charles Murray and Richard J. Herrnstein concocting theories linking race, intelligence, and economic capacity as well as neoconservatives from the US to Singapore to Japan rediscovering the relevance of "Asian values" for capitalist success.<sup>19</sup> For the free-market right, the economic was not a pristine space quarantined from matters of biology, culture, tradition, and race. Rather, these thought worlds overlapped and melded with one another. We see below how Brimelow's nativism cross-fertilized with the discourse of competitiveness in the 1980s and 1990s. He turned to theories of genetic racial hierarchy even as he promoted the publication of the Economic Freedom of the World index in 1997, suggesting that high-ranking countries might be "good places to put some money," and that "freedom pays."<sup>20</sup> For Brimelow, the nation was an economic boon because it decreased transaction costs within its borders, especially in an information economy where there was a consensus about the centrality of human capital and an emergent discourse about the challenges of building "social capital" in diverse polities.<sup>21</sup> One can also see how the ordinal ranking of nations according to creditworthiness and risk in global markets deepens a doubled sense of nation as both economic and cultural entity.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Peter Brimelow, "The Lively Lives of Two Famous Devotees of the 'Dismal Science'," *Washington Times*, 14 June 1998.

<sup>19</sup> Jennifer M. Miller, "Neoconservatives and Neo-Confucians: East Asian Growth and the Celebration of Tradition," *Modern Intellectual History*, 18, 3 (Sept. 2021), 29–52; Quinn Slobodian, "The Unequal Mind: How Charles Murray and Neoliberal Think Tanks Revived IQ," *Capitalism: A Journal of History and Economics*, 4, 1 (Winter 2023), 73–108; Andrew S. Winston, "Neoliberalism and IQ: Naturalizing Economic and Racial Inequality," *Theory & Psychology*, 28, 5 (2018), 600–18; Reto Hoffman, "Japan and Neoliberal Culturalism," in Quinn Slobodian and Dieter Plehwe, eds., *Market Civilizations: Neoliberals East and South* (New York: Zone Books, 2022), 29–52. This latter was also boosted by the insights of New Institutional Economics, especially Douglass T. North, who won the Nobel Memorial Prize in Economics in 1993.

<sup>20</sup> Peter Brimelow, "Freedom Pays," *Forbes*, 16 June 1997, at [www.forbes.com/forbes/1997/0616/5912142a.html#311701e42522](http://www.forbes.com/forbes/1997/0616/5912142a.html#311701e42522).

<sup>21</sup> See e.g. Francis Fukuyama, *Trust: The Social Virtues and the Creation of Prosperity* (New York: Free Press, 1995), 16–33; Robert D. Putnam, "Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital," *Journal of Democracy*, 6, 1 (1995), 65–78.

<sup>22</sup> See Zsófia Barta and Alison Johnston, *Rating Politics: Sovereign Credit Ratings and Democratic Choice in Prosperous Developed Countries* (Oxford: Oxford University Press,

This article places Brimelow in the context out of which he came: the financial press of the 1980s, the decade of smash-and-grab capitalism, mergers-and-acquisitions and hostile takeovers after which “one-third of the largest corporations in the US had disappeared as independent entities.”<sup>23</sup> His first book was not about politics or race. It was called *The Wall Street Gurus: How You Can Profit from Investment Newsletters*, marketed alongside books like *The Warning: The Coming Great Crash in the Stock Market* and *Wall Street Insiders: How You Can Watch Them and Profit*.<sup>24</sup> Like the authors of those newsletters, investment was simultaneously a strategy of money-making and leveraging symbolism and accruing influence. We can understand his turn to whiteness as the outcome of a portfolio analysis. The nation was a safe asset. The pro-white play looked like a payday. Brimelow’s xenophobic libertarianism was less blood and soil than human capital and economic freedom.

Seeing Brimelow more clearly helps us see the US far right more clearly too. The milieu of 1980s deregulated capitalism out of which he emerged was also the context for the coalescence of the mutant form of neoliberalism found on VDare.com and other platforms of the alt-right today. His emphasis on a “metamarket” contained in specific populations between borders helps illuminate the far right’s “reactionary internationalism.”<sup>25</sup> While the call to seal national borders seems to bear no resemblance to the putatively neoliberal call for “open borders,” this article shows how Brimelow’s position on immigration came out of a quarrel *within* the neoliberal right, or what he called the

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2023); Tore Fougner, “Neoliberal Governance of States: The Role of Competitiveness Indexing and Country Benchmarking,” *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 37, 2 (2008): 303–26; Quinn Slobodian, “World Maps for the Debt Paradigm: Risk Ranking the Poorer Nations in the 1970s,” *Critical Historical Studies*, 8, 1 (Spring 2021), 1–22.

<sup>23</sup> Gerald F. Davis, *Managed by the Markets: How Finance Reshaped America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 85.

<sup>24</sup> Peter Brimelow, *The Wall Street Gurus: How You Can Profit from Investment Newsletters* (New York: Random House, 1986); Joseph Granville, *The Warning: The Coming Great Crash in the Stock Market* (New York: Freundlich Press, 1985); John C. Boland, *Wall Street Insiders: How You Can Watch Them and Profit* (New York: William Morrow Publishers, 1985).

<sup>25</sup> See Rita Abrahamsen, Jean-François Drolet, Alexandra Gheciu, Karin Narita, Srdjan Vucetic, and Michael Williams, “Confronting the International Political Sociology of the New Right,” *International Political Sociology*, 14, 1 (2020), 94–107; Jean-François Drolet and Michael C. Williams, “Radical Conservatism and Global Order: International Theory and the New Right,” *International Theory*, 10, 3 (2018), 285–313; Christopher Vials, “Empire after Liberalism: The Transatlantic Right and Identitarian War,” *Journal of American Studies*, 56, 1 (2022), 87–112; Rodrigo Duque Estrada Campos, “The International Turn in Far-Right Studies: A Critical Assessment,” *Millennium*, 51, 3 (2023), 892–919; Pablo de Orellana and Nicholas Michelsen, “Reactionary Internationalism: The Philosophy of the New Right,” *Review of International Studies*, 45, 5 (2019), 748–67.



“small, embattled minority” that shared a “fascination with free markets” – a minority in which he placed himself.<sup>26</sup> Some noticed this at the time. In 1995, the *New York Times* observed that “in the libertarian wing of the conservative mansion can be found the only people anywhere in our political debate who favor completely open borders . . . But the most intense opposition to immigration is also located in the conservative movement.”<sup>27</sup> What was clear at the time has become obscured since: that an influential strand of the US far right came out of a neoliberal civil war. The turn to restriction was itself underwritten by an economic rationality. In 1993, the notorious white nationalist Wilmot Robertson wrote a book calling for *The Ethnostate*.<sup>28</sup> Delving into the case of Brimelow, we find a related but different demand that foregrounds the importance of capitalism in the far right imaginary: the idea of an ethno-economy.

### AN EARNEST PROVOCATEUR

Peter Brimelow was an immigrant twice over. After reading economics and history at the University of Sussex, completing an MBA at Stanford, and working as a financial analyst at Richardson Securities in Winnipeg, he joined the masthead of Toronto’s *Financial Post* in the investments section in 1973.<sup>29</sup> He wrote regular pieces on business and oil stocks alongside reviews on varied topics from the collected letters of a family in Georgia in the Civil War to *The Gospel According to Harvard Business School*.<sup>30</sup> One column would ask if you could “beat the market” (“some say yes, some say no”) while others explained “Why the blacks have declared war on Jews.”<sup>31</sup> Brimelow’s writing appeared in the “fusionist” publications of the time, including *Human Events*, where he published a positive piece about white minority-led Rhodesia and another advocating a flat-rate income tax.<sup>32</sup>

Brimelow presented as a clubbable British import from the UK, growing a confection of hair under which he would peek, smiling wryly. He was on the masthead of the *Financial Post* until the end of 1980, when he moved to

<sup>26</sup> Brimelow, *Alien Nation*, 34.

<sup>27</sup> Nicholas Lemann, “Too Many Foreigners,” *New York Times*, 16 April 1995.

<sup>28</sup> Wilmot Robertson, *The Ethnostate* (Cape Canaveral, FL: Howard Allen, 1993).

<sup>29</sup> N.a. “Welcome Back, Peter.” *Financial Post*, 11 March 1978.

<sup>30</sup> Peter Brimelow, “Letters from the South: ‘God Won’t Abandon Us,’” *Financial Post*, 1 Dec. 1973; Brimelow, “Business Schools: Inside View,” *Financial Post*, 25 May 1974.

<sup>31</sup> Peter Brimelow, “Can You Beat Market? Some Say Yes, Some No,” *Financial Post*, 5 July 1975; Brimelow, “Why the Blacks Have Declared War on Jews,” *Financial Post*, 6 Oct. 1979.

<sup>32</sup> Peter Brimelow, “Ian Smith’s Rhodesia Is Worth Remembering,” *Human Events*, 26 May 1979, 8–9; Brimelow, “Support Grows for Flat-Rate Income Tax Levy,” *Human Events*, 17 Oct. 1981, 12, 20. On fusionism see George H. Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America since 1945* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2006).

*Barron's*, but returned at the beginning of 1988 to contribute a weekly column after his book on the chances of territorial crack-up in Canada, *The Patriot Game*, was published by Hoover Institution Press (where he remained a Media Fellow into the late 1990s).<sup>33</sup> Brimelow explored the problems of multilingualism and division he had written about in Canada anew in the United States. Demographic balance had shifted after the 1965 Immigration Act, he wrote in 1988, which had “effectively choked off European immigration and favored the Third World.”<sup>34</sup> Politically, “the majority, the overwhelmingly European and Christian descendants of pre-20th century immigration” was pitted “against the minorities, blacks and more recent arrivals.” He quoted the opinion of a character in Tom Wolfe’s best-selling *The Bonfire of the Vanities* (1987) that “the melting pot has never created any alloys as far as I can tell, or very few.” Brimelow agreed: “the US today is in many ways a heterogeneous empire, not a nation-state.”<sup>35</sup>

Brimelow was credited with a kind of contrarian wit by some of his supporters, who either naively missed or cynically misread the earnestness of his ideological project. In a remarkable piece from 1989, his *Financial Post* editor glossed a recent column in which “Brimelow offered a deliciously provocative idea: perhaps it’s time to close the gates of North American immigration to people who are not WASP.” We would be dupes to take him at his word, the editor enlightened the reader: “Brimelow wrote the column as if he was serious but he is a polemicist.” He was actually “doing a magnificent job satirizing those despicable people who judge everybody by their race.” Brimelow had been doing this earlier, we are told, when he “sort of embraced the view ... that blacks are intellectually inferior to whites, who are inferior to Orientals.” In pretzel-like logic, the editor declared that

when Brimelow says WASPs built North America he is using antithesis (or if you like extended oxymoron) to force us to recall the numbing hopelessness of the black slaves on which the Southern cotton economy was built; to remember the hard labor of low-paid and now-forgotten Chinese coolies who laid the Western railroads; and perhaps recognize the tenacity of the Scottish communities of Cape Breton.<sup>36</sup>

“Let’s have fun, playing Brimelow’s game,” the editor wrote. It was a game but he was the one being played. In fact, the newspaper’s platform was leveraged to broadcast radical views under the cover of provocation. Brimelow

<sup>33</sup> Peter Brimelow, *The Patriot Game: Canada and the Canadian Question Revisited* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 1987). See e.g. Brimelow, “The Case against Immigration as We Know It,” *Hoover Digest*, 2 (1998), at [www.hoover.org/research/case-against-immigration-we-know-it](http://www.hoover.org/research/case-against-immigration-we-know-it).

<sup>34</sup> Peter Brimelow, “Immigration Shifts Political Loyalties,” *Financial Post*, 5 April 1988.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> Philip Mathias, “Just What Is an Anglo-Saxon?,” *Financial Post*, 11 May 1989.



used his perch at the *Financial Post*, *Forbes*, and *Fortune* to mainstream the view that the immigration and reproduction of brown and black people was the new all-encompassing threat that North America faced after the end of the Cold War. In column after column, Brimelow built a theory of nativism on market logic, a mutation of conservative and libertarian thought we've come to call the alt-right: the dream of a zone in white skin.

### HARD BORDERS, HUMAN CAPITAL

At the turn of the 1990s, Brimelow's pieces hit the same notes as his fellow neoliberal public intellectuals. On the one hand, the death of the Soviet Union was unsurprising. He saw it as a clear vindication of the Austrian economist Ludwig von Mises's predictions in the interwar debates about the possibility of socialism.<sup>37</sup> On the other hand, it was not clear that capitalism had actually won. "At first glance, the spectacle of joyful Germans waltzing through the Berlin Wall seems conclusive proof that Soviet-style socialism has failed," Brimelow wrote in December 1989. However, "If socialism is dead, then why isn't it lying down?" He declared that "Fukuyama is wrong. History is not over in the sense he meant it. One of the antagonists has simply mutated."<sup>38</sup> He predicted "a green face instead of a red face" for socialism as "popular scares such as acid rain and global warming" served to justify ever more "government control."<sup>39</sup> "Alienism," in the term he borrowed from *National Review* journalist Joe Sobran to describe those who were open to nonwhite immigration, became for Brimelow the prime example of mutant socialism in action.

Brimelow described his conversion to racial restrictionism through formative encounters with three leading neoliberal intellectuals. He drew the same lesson in all cases: of the importance of the human factor and the endowments of culture in economic success. The first meeting was with Peter Bauer, the British Hungarian Oxford economist known as the longest-standing critic of development aid, whom Brimelow interviewed for *Forbes* in 1988.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>37</sup> Peter Brimelow, "We're Consistently Wrong on the Soviet Union," *Financial Post*, 5 Dec. 1989.

<sup>38</sup> Peter Brimelow, "A Green Face Instead of a Red Face?," *Forbes*, 11 Dec. 1989, at [www.forbes.com/2009/10/30/forbes-magazine-archives-socialism-opinions-berlin-wall-09-red-face.html](http://www.forbes.com/2009/10/30/forbes-magazine-archives-socialism-opinions-berlin-wall-09-red-face.html).<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Brimelow and Bauer, "Let Them Work Out Their Own Problems." On Bauer see Daniel Coleman, "Neoliberalism and the Problem of Poverty, 1929–73," PhD dissertation, Oxford, chapter 3; Lars Cornelissen, "Neoliberal Imperialism," *Politics*, 2023, 1–17; Dieter Plehwe, "The Origins of the Neoliberal Economic Development Discourse," in Philip Mirowski and Dieter Plehwe, eds., *The Road from Mont Pèlerin: The Making of the Neoliberal Thought Collective* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 259–69; Quinn Slobodian, "Neoliberal Economics and the Double Disfigurement of the Third World," in Anselm

Bauer opposed the categories of the high age of modernization, arguing, for example, that “the Third World” had no coherence beyond denoting the common status of the world’s poorer nations as recipients of foreign aid. Bauer believed that crude economic measurement of aggregates such as GDP made unities out of a heterogeneous medley of the world’s populations. He also disputed the very category of “country.” “The habitual reference to countries,” he wrote in 1969, “is apt to obscure the fact that our concern is appropriately with groups of people not with geographical entities.”<sup>41</sup>

Economic inequality was a consequence of cultural and group differences and the stubborn persistence of these differences proved the folly of egalitarianism, Bauer argued. Much of the world was simply born poor – in both money and culture – and poor they would remain. Speaking at the Institute of Humane Studies-sponsored Second Symposium on Human Differentiation in Gstaad, Bauer cited the “differences in economic aptitudes and attitudes,” especially between people of different cultures, as the biggest obstacle to economic development.<sup>42</sup> “What holds back many poor countries,” he put it bluntly, “is the people who live there.”<sup>43</sup> The cover graphic of Bauer’s most famous book, *Dissent on Development*, expressed his pessimism, depicting a rainbow in shards.<sup>44</sup>

“Most problems besetting the poorer countries are of their own making” is how Brimelow summed up Bauer’s thesis for *Forbes*.<sup>45</sup> There was no need to feel any sense of moral obligation, nor did poorer countries hold out any prospect of economic salvation. Recalling his conversation with Bauer, Brimelow said that the economist’s focus on people made him realize that “you can’t reason from population growth to economic growth necessarily” and “you don’t actually need immigration to smooth out any demographic imbalances: the greying of the baby boomers, the social security problem, as long as you have technical innovation.” The consequences were large: “what this means is that massive immigration is not necessary for economic reasons.”<sup>46</sup>

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Franke, Nida Ghouse, Paz Guevara and Antonia Majaca, eds., *Parapolitics: Cultural Freedom and the Cold War* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2021), 397–403.

<sup>41</sup> Peter T. Bauer, “Development Economics: The Spurious Consensus and Its Background,” in Erich W. Streissler, ed., *Roads to Freedom: Essays in Honour of Friedrich A. von Hayek* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969), 5–46, 10.

<sup>42</sup> P. T. Bauer, “Economic Differences and Inequalities,” *Modern Age*, 19, 3 (Summer 1975), 295–306, 300.

<sup>43</sup> P. T. Bauer, “Foreign Aid, Forever?,” *Encounter*, March 1974, 17.

<sup>44</sup> P. T. Bauer, *Dissent on Development* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976). For the first publication see P. T. Bauer, *Dissent on Development* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1971).

<sup>45</sup> Brimelow and Bauer, “Let Them Work Out Their Own Problems.”

<sup>46</sup> Peter Brimelow, “Peter Bauer and the Emperor,” luncheon keynote at How Does Development Happen? A Tribute to Peter Bauer, Princeton University, 6 May 2004,

Brimelow folded arguments about a racialized hierarchy of ability into his opposition to immigration. He believed that Richard Herrnstein and Charles Murray's 1994 book *The Bell Curve* showed that intelligence "is largely hereditary, and differs, on average, between races," meaning that the change in racial composition of immigrants since the 1965 Immigration Act had led to a "a sharp deterioration in immigrant quality" with "disastrous" consequences.<sup>47</sup> He parted ways here with others on the right who spoke of culture rather than race as a way to both mainstream their positions and make it more palatable to nonwhite populations. Signature here were Dinesh D'Souza and his breakthrough book *The End of Racism*.<sup>48</sup> Brimelow praised D'Souza for arguing that high levels of crime and single parenthood in African American communities "must be largely attributed to their own dysfunctional culture," but lamented that he "flinched" at the identification of such traits as hereditary. In a startling opening, Brimelow rejected D'Souza's claim that his infant child – born to a man of Goan extraction and his wife of "English, Scotch Irish, German, and American Indian" background – was "beyond racial classification." Brimelow countered that "Danielle D'Souza is not at all beyond racial classification." She was "Euro-Asian." He accused the author of "truckling to the many American intellectuals who cannot or will not think rationally about race and its role in society," and reiterated Murray and Herrnstein's argument that "for genetic reasons, blacks may have systematically lower average intelligence than whites."<sup>49</sup>

Brimelow's skepticism about immigration and open embrace of race ran contrary to the mainstream conservative position of the late Cold War. Most pertinent was the editorial page of the *Wall Street Journal*. While the political demand of "open borders" is often invoked with imprecision, this is literally what the *Journal* called for in the issue of their paper that went out on 4 July 1984. Against "the 'nativist' Americans who still dominate mountain states politics and the 'Club of Rome' elitists of the Boston–Washington corridor," they wrote, "we propose a five-word constitutional amendment: There shall be open borders."<sup>50</sup> Two years later, in the shadow of debates over the Simpson-Mazzoli Act, which tightened penalties on employing undocumented workers, the *Journal* ran the demand again with

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at [https://mediacentral.princeton.edu/media/How+Does+Development+HappenF+A+Tribute+to+Peter+Bauer+++Peter+Bauer+and+The+Emperor/1\\_1ekvb7fq](https://mediacentral.princeton.edu/media/How+Does+Development+HappenF+A+Tribute+to+Peter+Bauer+++Peter+Bauer+and+The+Emperor/1_1ekvb7fq) (accessed 12 Aug. 2020).

<sup>47</sup> Brimelow, *Alien Nation*, 56.

<sup>48</sup> Dinesh D'Souza, *The End of Racism: Principles for a Multiracial Society* (New York: Free Press, 1996).

<sup>49</sup> Peter Brimelow, "He Flinched," *National Review*, 27 Nov. 1995, 62.

<sup>50</sup> "In Praise of Huddled Masses," *Wall Street Journal*, 3 July 1984.

added barbs for the militarization of the southern border with their “Darth Vaders ... in helmets equipped with infrared telescopes to better track today’s tired and poor.”<sup>51</sup> As befitting a financial publication, the *Wall Street Journal* felt no scruples about defending their position in economic rather than humanitarian terms. The end of the Cold War had ushered in “a world in which human capital is increasingly the coin of international ‘competitiveness,’” they wrote in 1990.<sup>52</sup> They ridiculed the cultural arguments made by nativists and the blinkered economic reasoning of the “Limits-to-growth types.”<sup>53</sup> Their position was a refutation of the “trembling no-growthers” concerned with overpopulation and limited resources.<sup>54</sup>

The economist who came closest to the *Journal’s* position was Brimelow’s most important antagonist and someone whose importance in the development of neoliberal thought is only slowly being acknowledged: University of Maryland economist Julian Simon.<sup>55</sup> In 1989, Simon published a book on *The Economic Consequences of Immigration*. Like Bauer, he turned to the human factor – but drew different consequences. “Natural resources are increasingly less important with each passing decade,” Simon wrote. “The crucial capital nowadays is ‘human capital’ – people’s skills plus the stock of knowledge.”<sup>56</sup> A review in the *WSJ* said that the book exploded “virtually every popular dogma of the seal-the-borders brigade.”<sup>57</sup> Simon’s position on immigration followed from his position on population and environmentalism. Humans were “the ultimate resource,” as the title of his most famous book read.<sup>58</sup> He believed that the solution to ecological problems was more, not less, population growth, as it would be humans that would find a technological fix for environmental challenges.

“It was as a fellow libertarian ideologue that I first met Simon,” Brimelow wrote, “at a 1990 Manhattan Institute seminar for his new book [*The Economic Consequences of Immigration*].”<sup>59</sup> Published a few years later, *Alien Nation* was, in effect, Brimelow’s 350-page argument with Simon, the

<sup>51</sup> “The Rekindled Flame,” *Wall Street Journal*, 3 July 1986. It ran again the next year. “Simpson-Volstead-Mazzoli,” *Wall Street Journal*, 3 July 1987.

<sup>52</sup> “The Simpson Curtain,” *Wall Street Journal*, 1 Feb. 1990.

<sup>53</sup> “The Rekindled Flame.” <sup>54</sup> “In Praise of Huddled Masses.”

<sup>55</sup> Simon is mostly identified with his critique of neo-Malthusianism. See Troy Vettese, “Hayek against Malthus: Julian Simon’s Neoliberal Critique of Environmentalism,” *Critical Historical Studies*, 10, 2 (Fall 2023), 283–311.

<sup>56</sup> Julian Simon, “The Economic Consequences of Immigration” (1989), unpaginated version available at [www.juliansimon.com/writings/Immigration](http://www.juliansimon.com/writings/Immigration).

<sup>57</sup> William McGurn, “Let ’Em In: The Argument for Immigrants,” *Wall Street Journal*, 10 Nov. 1989.

<sup>58</sup> Julian Simon, *The Ultimate Resource* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981).

<sup>59</sup> Brimelow, “Julian Simon and Me.”

person mentioned most frequently. Brimelow's targets of persuasion were people like himself: right-of-center habitués of the space between business, journalism, and public policy, attendees of think tank lunchtime events and evening galas like the Manhattan Institute lecture in November 1988 named after the head of Citibank Walter Wriston, where resident fellow Charles Murray introduced a talk by Tom Wolfe. Wolfe titillated his audience with an account of "the penetration of the money fever to every level of society" down to the beepers, Mercedes Benz medallions, and imitation gold chains of the "wolf packs of young men from Brooklyn."<sup>60</sup> Brimelow wrote that "one of the joys of New York life" was attending events where people like CUNY professor Michael Levin "say the unsayable, loudly," like suggesting "to a black intellectual that his race's problems might be caused by an hereditary IQ deficiency."<sup>61</sup>

Amid the prevailing mood of taboo-prodding on the right, Brimelow took it as his task to untangle the principles of free trade and the free movement of people. Confronting Simon's idea that you "have to accept the free movement of people if you believe in free trade/free markets," he asked, "You do? It's a more radical proposition than appears at first sight."<sup>62</sup> "The fact is that a belief in free markets does not commit you to free immigration," Brimelow said. "In fact, on a practical level, free trade tends to operate not as a complement for immigration but as a substitute. If you have free trade, you don't need immigration." Brimelow looked globally and historically for support: "the Japanese have factories in the Philippines rather than Filipinos in Japan. Victorian Britain, with its foreign policy of 'splendid isolation' from the quarrels of Europe, combined total free trade with almost no immigration, a policy that satisfied Liberal 'Little Englander' isolationists and Tory Imperialist global interventionists alike."<sup>63</sup> The vision of free trade as substitute for free migration had an intellectual pedigree. Neoliberals had made this argument since the 1930s, when the position was first outlined by the Austrian trade economist and later Harvard economics professor Gottfried Haberler.<sup>64</sup> The core argument was accepted by many neoliberals thereafter.<sup>65</sup>

<sup>60</sup> "1988 Wriston Lecture: Fact and Fiction in the New York of the Eighties," at [www.manhattan-institute.org/html/1988-wriston-lecture-fact-and-fiction-new-york-eighties-6392.html](http://www.manhattan-institute.org/html/1988-wriston-lecture-fact-and-fiction-new-york-eighties-6392.html).

<sup>61</sup> Peter Brimelow, "Politics in Command of Learning," *Financial Post*, 28 June 1988.

<sup>62</sup> Brimelow, *Alien Nation*, 139.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 140.

<sup>64</sup> Quinn Slobodian, *Globalists: The End of Empire and the Birth of Neoliberalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018), 50.

<sup>65</sup> See Quinn Slobodian, "Perfect Capitalism, Imperfect Humans: Race, Migration, and the Limits of Ludwig von Mises's Globalism," *Contemporary European History*, 28, 2 (2019), 143–55.

Brimelow saw correctly that the 1990s were a time of combining more freedom of movement for goods with less freedom of movement for people. He observed that one of the arguments for NAFTA was “that it would help reduce the current immigrant flood by providing alternative employment south of the border.”<sup>66</sup> This allowed for an ideologically consistent restrictionist libertarianism: “this is a crucial theoretical concession. It means that there is a point at which intervention to stop immigration is justifiable on economic grounds – not just because there’s a backlash from the dreaded nativists.”<sup>67</sup> One could allow for nativism and still be in line with free-market principles. Brimelow’s trick was to accept Simon’s premise and turn it around. If Simon allowed for the centrality of human capital then he must allow for the centrality of the differing quality of human capital from immigrant to immigrant. He argued that the 1965 Immigration Act had “accidentally instituted a perverse selection process. It effectively favored lower-skilled immigrants.” He said that Simon “simply ignored this.”<sup>68</sup> Working from Simon’s premises, Brimelow demonstrated that he could come to a very different conclusion. It is notable that Simon conceded the point himself. A close reading of his 1989 book shows that he too saw that low-skill immigrants represented “lower-quality human capital for American workers to cooperate with” and would actually reduce productivity. “If one asks only whether additional immigrants today will help us economically tomorrow or next month,” Simon admitted, “the answer probably is ‘no,’” but, he said, this was “just as a baby is a burden at first.”<sup>69</sup>

Immigrants were investments, Simon argued. He did not actually endorse the maximal Fourth of July call for open borders by the *Wall Street Journal*. At a 1988 meeting of the Mont Pèlerin Society, which Simon joined in the early 1990s, he proposed an alternative: sell immigrant visas.<sup>70</sup> In the Japanese academic and Mont Pèlerin Society member Sayo Kaji’s response to the paper, he observed that “[f]ree immigration, meaning the movement of people over international borders in response to market signals, is an ideal against which no Mont Pèlerinians would go in principle. Difference of views develops from how one perceives the real world.”<sup>71</sup> The concession to “the real world” was the space of the debate between Brimelow and Simon. The alleged advocate of open borders and the firebrand restrictionist both held people to the yardstick of economics.

<sup>66</sup> Brimelow, *Alien Nation*, 140.    <sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 141.    <sup>68</sup> Brimelow, “Julian Simon and Me.”

<sup>69</sup> Simon, “The Economic Consequences of Immigration.”

<sup>70</sup> Julian Simon, “Auctioning Immigration Visas: Doing Well while Doing Good,” MPS Meeting, 1986, St. Vincent, Italy, Stanford University, Hoover Institution Archives, Mont Pèlerin Society Papers (hereafter MPS Papers), Box 26.

<sup>71</sup> Sayo Kaji, A Comment on ‘Auctioning Immigrant Visas’,” MPS Meeting, 1986, St. Vincent, Italy, MPS Papers, Box 26.



## MILTON FRIEDMAN AND THE METAMARKET

Peter Brimelow's *Alien Nation* laid out a free-market defense of immigration restrictionism: a closed-borders libertarianism that rested on what he called "the metamarkeet." "A commitment to free trade and free markets does not mean that you would sell your mother if the price were right," he wrote.

The free market necessarily exists within a societal framework. And it can function only if the institutions in that framework are appropriate. For example, a defined system of private property rights is now widely agreed to be one essential precondition. Economists have a word for these preconditions: the "metamarkeet." Some degree of ethnic and cultural coherence may be among these preconditions. Thus immigration may be a metamarkeet issue.<sup>72</sup>

"We are all free marketeers now," he wrote in *Forbes*, "But the free market is not all things. It must function in a framework of institutions and values. That framework needs attention, too."<sup>73</sup> Brimelow first invoked the idea of the "metamarkeet" (which was not in fact a common term in economics beyond Mont Pèlerin circles) in response to his third encounter with a prominent neo-liberal, this time none other than Milton Friedman.<sup>74</sup>

In 1988, Brimelow conducted his first of three interviews with Friedman.<sup>75</sup> In a *Financial Post* column summarizing the interview in 1989, Brimelow reflected that the "metamarkeet" was composed of property rights but that "there may be cultural prerequisites as well as institutional prerequisites for free markets." "It may be just a matter of homogeneity, which reduces frictions," he wrote, "Or it may be more specifically that some cultures can handle the marketplace's atomism and impersonality better." He mentions bringing this up with Friedman, who to his surprise "agreed instantly."<sup>76</sup> Friedman remarked to Brimelow, "It's a curious fact that capitalism has developed and really only come to fruition in the English-speaking world ... I don't know why this is so, but the fact has to be admitted ... Beyond a certain point [capitalism] may not be [exportable]." The one positive example Friedman raised was Hong Kong, but "there the limited-government framework was provided by the British ... Whether the Chinese themselves can generate that framework is very much an open question."<sup>77</sup> Brimelow used

<sup>72</sup> Brimelow, *Alien Nation*, 175.

<sup>73</sup> Brimelow, "Julian Simon and Me."

<sup>74</sup> See e.g. MPS member since 1978 (and later president) Pedro Schwartz, "The Market and the Metamarkeet: A Review of the Contributions of the Economic Theory of Property Rights," in Svetozar Pejovich, ed., *Socialism: Institutional, Philosophical and Economic Issues* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic, 1987), 11–32.

<sup>75</sup> Peter Brimelow, "Why Liberalism Is Now Obsolete: An Interview with Nobel Laureate Milton Friedman," *Forbes*, 12 Dec. 1988.

<sup>76</sup> Peter Brimelow, "Free Markets May Need Cultural Prerequisites," *Financial Post*, 21 Feb. 1989.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

Friedman's response to buttress his own case, arguing in economic terms that "immigration may not be a simple matter of augmenting the factors of production. It may make the climate for the use of those factors less favorable."<sup>78</sup> Completing the clean sweep of neoliberal heavyweights, Brimelow also appealed to Hayek in *Alien Nation*. "Hayek used to advance a sort of sociobiological argument for the apparently immortal appeal of socialism," Brimelow wrote. "Cities and civilization have come very late in human history, he pointed out. Almost all mankind's experience has been in small hunter-gatherer bands. Face-to-face relationships are still much more comprehensible to us than impersonal ones."<sup>79</sup>

Brimelow suggested that ethnic diversity triggered the caveperson within. "To extend Hayek's argument," he wrote, "it is obviously easier to demonize a landlord if his features – language, religion – appear alien."<sup>80</sup> Homogeneity smoothed economic transactions by tipping its hat to primordial instinct. We would compete better if we felt somehow that we were all on the same team. Within the terms of Brimelow's argument, the nation was not valuable for its own sake. Its utility was its instrumentalization toward economic ends. In the final reckoning, the nation was only the most enduringly successful version of the corporation. As he wrote, "the emergence of the nation-state on the world scene is very much like the simultaneous emergence of the firm in developing capitalist economies. Both can be traced to lower transaction costs, efficiencies in the transmission of information and the superior economies of specialization."<sup>81</sup> Ethnic homogeneity had a material payoff: "the nation-state, where everyone understands one another, is an efficient way of organizing human beings. In economists' jargon, they have lower transaction costs." This is the main theme of Brimelow's race-centric libertarianism: xenophobia was not just required for social cohesion. More importantly, as the financial journalist assured his audience, it made good business sense.

*Alien Nation* received positive reviews in the conservative and libertarian press. "No reformer can avoid grappling with this formidable work," wrote Brimelow's former colleague at *Forbes* and later speechwriter for George W. Bush, David Frum.<sup>82</sup> A contemporary review described it as a "non-fiction horror story of a nation that is willfully but blindly pursuing a course of suicide."<sup>83</sup> Gregory Pavlik, assistant editor of *The Freeman*, director

<sup>78</sup> Peter Brimelow, "Words of Wisdom from the Cutting Room Floor," *Financial Post*, 1 Aug. 1989. <sup>79</sup> Brimelow, *Alien Nation*, 176. <sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 176.

<sup>81</sup> Peter Brimelow, "Does the Nation-State Exist?," *Social Contract*, Summer 1993, 229–34, 232.

<sup>82</sup> David Frum, "Immigration Needs Reform, Not Abolition," *Financial Post*, 22 April 1995.

<sup>83</sup> Jesse E. Todd Jr., "The Horror of Immigration," *Daily Press (Newport News, VA)*, 9 July 1995.

of the Op Ed program of the Foundation for Economic Education, gave Brimelow a rave review. He agreed that immigration regulations were a project of “domestic social engineering efforts that aim at a radical transformation of American society from its European mores, folkways, and culture.” “Along with the elevation of Third World lifestyles under the leftist rubric of ‘multiculturalism,’” he wrote, “current supporters of U.S. immigration laws and so-called open borders, are buttressing anti-Western trends by importing masses of largely unassimilable minorities.” Pavlik felt that Brimelow validated the charge of “contemporary libertarian critics of open borders [who] contend that immigration serves to bolster the cost and size of the welfare state.” It was not the fact of the immigration but its kind: “the current shape of immigration is politically determined,” he wrote; “it actively limits the immigration of skilled Europeans who are more likely to assimilate – as well as add to the economy.” It was, in literal terms, a conspiracy to undermine the country and add support to the socialist elites. Pavlik noted that Brimelow was not making a case for protectionism. In fact, he was arguing “that free trade can replace immigration in public policy, allowing us to enjoy the benefits of the international division of labor without the social dislocations and destructiveness of mass immigration.” He compared this to Victorian Britain, where there was “unlimited free trade and virtually no immigration.” This gave evidence that “the international division of labor and the mobility of capital tends to eliminate the need for large-scale immigration.”<sup>84</sup> Pavlik saw clearly Brimelow’s vision for the alternative globalization of the libertarian right: free movement for goods and capital but not for people.

### ENEMIES OF THE ETHNO-ECONOMY

Peter Brimelow’s core argument was that restricting non-European immigration was economically rational. If this were so, why would anyone advocate a liberal policy? Why assail the metamarket? In response, Brimelow contended that the motivations of the “alienists” were both deranged and pecuniary, both suicidal and self-interested. In their drive to accumulate private profit, they were setting about destroying the framework that supported overall prosperity. In a polemical and cryptic charge in the first line of *Alien Nation*, Brimelow dubbed the 1965 Immigration Act “Adolf Hitler’s posthumous revenge on America.” In an attempt to combat racism, he wrote, the US “triggered a renewed mass immigration” that would “transform ... and ultimately, perhaps, even ... destroy” the victor of the Second World War itself. Citing

<sup>84</sup> Gregory P. Pavlik, “Review of Peter Brimelow, *Alien Nation*,” *The Freeman*, Dec. 1995, 794.

and transforming Brecht, as he had since the late 1970s, Brimelow wrote that “U.S. government policy is literally dissolving the people and electing a new one.”<sup>85</sup> Immigration policy was turning the US into what he called “a freak among the world’s nations because of the unprecedented demographic mutation it is inflicting on itself.”<sup>86</sup>

On the one hand, Brimelow saw the demand for liberal immigration policy as an irrational expression of neurosis: “a reflexive, masochistic submission, at a deep psychological level, to the demands of others.”<sup>87</sup> He contended that some “alienists” believed that “American whites must be swamped by immigration to make it impossible for them to act on their racist impulses.”<sup>88</sup> White guilt triggered self-paralysis, a kind of willing surrender to the depredation at the hands of those they had oppressed themselves. But, on the other hand, would whites promote a system biased only against whites out of collective masochism? Here Brimelow said no, and brought class back in by the back door. He ultimately relied on the idea of a “new class” ascendant after the Second World War, associated with James Burnham, Milovan Delis, and others.<sup>89</sup> In Brimelow’s case he cited Irving Kristol, on the rise of a new class of managers: “the government bureaucracy; media educational establishment; the elite.” It was this class supposedly that was leading “the contemporary campaign against the nation-state.” Brimelow suggested that this was true because of the innate sense of superiority and desire of the elites to distance themselves from the “peasants” who felt patriotic, but also because, as rent seekers, they valued their own positions at the controls. In Brimelow’s argument, “the New Class disliked the nation-state for exactly the same reason it disliked the free market: both were machines that run of themselves with no need for New-Class-directed government intervention.”<sup>90</sup>

Thus immigration was a deliberate project of what Brimelow called “deconstructionism” dissolving the homogeneous population to eliminate the elites’ last rival and ensure the continuity of their own power while garnishing the tactical checkmate with moral superiority.<sup>91</sup> Meanwhile, there was an added bonus: it made them rich. Wealthy employers wanted cheap workers. In this reading, the white elite support for immigration was actually not based on humane principles but on cynical ones: “the American elite’s support for immigration may not be idealistic at all, but self-interested – as a way to prey on their fellow Americans.”<sup>92</sup>

<sup>85</sup> Brimelow, *Alien Nation*, xvii. See e.g. Peter Brimelow, “Refugees Stir Emotion – but Are Cause and Effect Yet Understood?”, *Financial Post*, 25 Aug. 1979.

<sup>86</sup> Brimelow, *Alien Nation*, xxi.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 237.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

<sup>89</sup> See Joseph E. Lowndes, “From New Class Critique to White Nationalism: Telos, the Alt Right, and the Origins of Trumpism,” *Konturen*, 9 (2017), 8–12.

<sup>90</sup> Brimelow, *Alien Nation*, 230.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 219.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 161.

Brimelow argued that the exchange of collective prosperity for the enrichment of a narrow stratum of the wealthy was accomplished by a sleight of hand that deflected attention from material redistribution toward what was called, in a famous essay published just three years earlier by the political philosopher Charles Taylor, “the politics of recognition.”<sup>93</sup> Socialism had shifted from a focus on economic equality to racial diversity, Brimelow contended. By shifting from the claim to be a more productive social system to one that promised to deliver “ethnic equity,” socialism was now “justified in the name of extirpating ‘discrimination.’”<sup>94</sup> “It’s a sort of bureaucratically regulated racial spoils system,” Brimelow wrote, premised on evenness of representation via quotas and affirmative action, which amounted to “government-mandated discrimination against white Americans.”<sup>95</sup> This was a post-materialist or non-materialist ideology that he described as a mutant socialism. It traded in chromatic signs and skin tones: a socialism of pigmentation but not material distribution.

Brimelow’s portrait was far-fetched in many ways. The free market was clearly not a “machine” that ran of itself. The capitalism of the 1980s and 1990s was producing a new class of the financial elite that reproduced preexisting economic gaps between demographic groups in ever more dramatic ways. It was not any supposed turn to the “mutant socialism” of racial harmonization but the tax cuts for top earners praised by Brimelow for decades that had produced gross economic inequality and the emergence of a hyper-wealthy class. In 1995, the median wealth of an African American household was 17 percent of that of a white household. If this was mutant socialism in full swing, it was laughably ineffective. That Brimelow’s depiction was fantasy is obvious, but it was also internally consistent. Decades later, many others would return to similar arguments about a so-called “progressive neoliberalism” which traded token versions of “diversity” for tangible redistributive equality.<sup>96</sup> Manifest already was that Brimelow’s nativist appeals mixed the language of blood and soil with that of dollars and cents.

## CONCLUSION

What world was coming from the attacks on the metamarket? Brimelow’s geographic imagination was quite labile. Borders were seen as provisional and at least potentially open to revision. His references were contemporary.

<sup>93</sup> Charles Taylor, “The Politics of Recognition,” in Amy Gutmann, ed., *Multiculturalism and the Politics of Recognition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 25–74.

<sup>94</sup> Brimelow, *Alien Nation*, 217.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 219.

<sup>96</sup> See, e.g. Nancy Fraser, *The Old Is Dying and the New Cannot Be Born: From Progressive Neoliberalism to Trump and Beyond* (New York: Verso, 2019).

*Alien Nation* cited Eritrea, Czechoslovakia, the Soviet Union, the Lebanese Civil War, Cyprus, Kashmiris in India, Tamils in Sri Lanka, Kurds in the Middle East, separatism in Sudan and Chad, Biafran secessions in Nigeria, Northern Ireland, the Flemish and the Walloons in Belgium, the French in Canada, and, in Brazil, “a movement in the predominantly white southern states Rio Grande do Sul, Santa Catarina and Paraná to separate from the mixed-race north.”<sup>97</sup> He described the Balkan War as “a Horrid Warning [*sic*] about current U.S. immigration policy.”<sup>98</sup> If “minor differences were still enough to tear [Yugoslavia] apart,” imagine what would happen in the USA. “There has been a lot of seductive murmuring about internationalism, united nations [*sic*], new world orders, and so on. But, meanwhile, the role of ethnicity has proved to be elemental – absolute – fundamental.”<sup>99</sup> Because the problem was geographic, the solution would have to be as well. “Immigrants do not spread all across the United States in a thin, tactful layer,” he wrote, but cluster in “enclaves, turning America into a sort of Swiss cheese.” Different racially dominated areas “verge on being separate nations.” He brought up the old question of distributive federalism: why should such distinct enclaves see fit to subsidize one another through taxation? He predicted secessions: Staten Island leaving New York City, northern California breaking away, the Pacific Northwest joining western Canada.<sup>100</sup>

In the 1990s, some libertarians – including anarcho-capitalists like Murray Rothbard and Lew Rockwell who were part of the John Randolph Club with Brimelow – embraced the prospect of crack-up as a potential opening to smaller, more voluntary contractual polities.<sup>101</sup> Other neoliberals embraced varieties of sub- or nonnational zones on the model of Hong Kong.<sup>102</sup> But when Brimelow gave the title “American Balkanization” to his keynote talk for the John Randolph Club, he did not mean this as a good thing.<sup>103</sup> Nor did a reviewer of *Alien Nation* who saw the possibility that “the United States could end up like, say, Yugoslavia.”<sup>104</sup> Indeed, one of the interesting things about Brimelow’s political geography was its rejection of both globalism and the zone in its investment in the category of the nation.

<sup>97</sup> Brimelow, *Alien Nation*, 126.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

<sup>101</sup> Quinn Slobodian, *Crack-Up Capitalism: Market Radicals and the Dream of a World Without Democracy* (New York: Metropolitan, 2023), chapter 5.

<sup>102</sup> Nina Ebner and Jamie Peck, “Fantasy Island: Paul Romer and the Multiplication of Hong Kong,” *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 46, 1 (Jan 2022), 26–49; Jamie Peck, “Milton’s Paradise: Situating Hong Kong in Neoliberal Lore,” *Journal of Law and Political Economy*, 1, 1 (2021), 189–211.

<sup>103</sup> “The American Identity: Exploring the Cultural Basis of a Free Society,” JRC Meeting, 21–23 Oct. 1994, Rockford Records, Carlson Papers, Box 196, Folder 13.

<sup>104</sup> Todd, “The Horror of Immigration.”



We can see the challenges of commitment to the nation in a time of globalization and mass migration through a detour into literary texts. Published three years before *Alien Nation*, the science fiction author Neal Stephenson's novel *Snow Crash* offered a vision of fragmentation that echoed many of Brimelow's primary themes. In the book, the territory formerly known as the US has been shattered into franchise nations, apartheid burbclaves, and franchulets. The threat in the plotline is the Raft, a maritime assemblage several miles across: a decommissioned aircraft carrier lashed to an oil tanker and countless container ships, freight carriers, "pleasure craft, sampans, junks, dhows, dinghys, life rafts, houseboats, makeshift structures built on air-filled oil drums and slabs of styrofoam." The Raft "orbits the Pacific clockwise" bearing a cargo of "Refus" or refugees, welcomed aboard by an entrepreneurial tech evangelist who has just cornered the global fiber optic grid and has schemes to subjugate the population through a computer virus administered as a bitmap narcotic. The Raft's passengers are dehumanized and anonymized: a mass of insects "dipping its myriad oars into the Pacific, like ant legs," at whose arrival the coastal residents of California live in terror, subscribing to a "twenty-four hour Raft Report" to know when the "latest contingent of twenty-five thousand starving Eurasians has cut itself loose" to swim ashore. Stephenson's descriptions are stomach-turning, indulging in a grotesque racist imagery of nonwhite danger. The Raft was the fodder for, as he wrote, "a hundred Hong Kong B-movies and blood-soaked Nipponese comic books."<sup>105</sup>

As the former *National Review* journalist Steve Sailer noted, the Raft had an obvious antecedent: the "Last Chance Armada" of Jean Raspail's 1973 novel *The Camp of the Saints*, a book that linked even more directly to Brimelow's vision.<sup>106</sup> In that novel, a disabled messianic leader from the Calcutta slums boards millions of indigent Indians on a lashed-together fleet of old ships to travel west instead of east "in a welter of dung and debauch." The novel revels in what one scholar calls "pornographic prose" in its depiction of coprophagy, incest, and pedophilia aboard the armada.<sup>107</sup> The plot ends in an orgy of violence after what the author sees as the suicidal embrace of the armada by the liberal French population.

The first English translation of *The Camp of the Saints* was published by Scribner in 1975 to many positive reviews. The cover image showed a single Caucasian hand holding up a globe from grasping brown hands with a

<sup>105</sup> Neal Stephenson, *Snow Crash* (New York: Del Rey, 1992).

<sup>106</sup> Steve Sailer, "Snow Crash and The Camp of the Saints," *iSteve* (27 May 2006), at <https://isteve.blogspot.com/2006/05/snow-crash-and-camp-of-saints.html>.

<sup>107</sup> Sara Diamond, "Right-Wing Politics and the Anti-immigration Cause," *Social Justice*, 23, 3 (Fall 1996), 154–68, 158.

catch line reading, “a chilling novel about the end of the white world.”<sup>108</sup> Brimelow reviewed it for the *Financial Post*, previewing many of the points he would make later in *Alien Nation*. He summarized the book’s plot as “an effete West unable to prevent itself being overwhelmed by an unarmed invasion of third world immigrants.” Shifting the plot across the Atlantic, he wrote that

in a low key, this scenario is underway in the US now. Quite apart from the 1965 Immigration Act, which discriminates against northern Europe, one million Mexicans alone arrive illegally in the US each year. Lately hundreds of Haitians have been showing up in open boats and demanding political asylum.<sup>109</sup>

Raspail’s novel returned to public discussion during Trump’s first presidency as a reported inspiration for his advisers Steven Bannon and Stephen Miller, but it was also a common touchstone in the 1990s.<sup>110</sup> The novel was reissued in 1986 by the white supremacist Noontide Press and in 1987 by the American Immigration Control Foundation (AICF), which, along with the Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR), helped mainstream anti-immigrant arguments in part by piggy-backing on the mailing lists of right-wing magazines to help seed a national movement. In 1991, the wildly influential conservative columnist Sam Francis, whose embrace of racial themes helped pave the path to the alt-right, described the book as “a kind of science fiction novel” that had become American reality. “The future is now,” he wrote.<sup>111</sup>

The vision of the maritime refugee indexed with the evening news. There were over 30,000 interceptions of Haitians at sea in 1992 and nearly 40,000 Cubans in 1994; the same year, the *Golden Venture* ran aground in Rockaway Beach, carrying three hundred Chinese would-be migrants.<sup>112</sup> Raspail’s novel “forecasts the recent landing of the *Golden Venture*,” as one letter to the *Washington Times* put it in 1993.<sup>113</sup> The Social Contract Press

<sup>108</sup> Jean Raspail, *The Camp of the Saints* (New York: Scribner, 1975).

<sup>109</sup> Peter Brimelow, “Summer in the Big Apple Far from Rosy,” *Financial Post*, 19 Aug. 1978.

<sup>110</sup> Elian Peltier and Nicholas Kulish, “A Racist Book’s Malign and Lingering Influence,” *New York Times*, 22 Nov. 2019, at [www.nytimes.com/2019/11/22/books/stephen-miller-camp-saints.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/22/books/stephen-miller-camp-saints.html); Cécile Alduy, “What a 1973 French Novel Tells Us about Marine Le Pen, Steve Bannon and the Rise of the Populist Right,” *Politico*, 23 April 2017, at [www.politico.com/magazine/story/2017/04/23/what-a-1973-french-novel-tells-us-about-marine-le-pen-steve-bannon-and-the-rise-of-the-populist-right-215064](http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2017/04/23/what-a-1973-french-novel-tells-us-about-marine-le-pen-steve-bannon-and-the-rise-of-the-populist-right-215064).

<sup>111</sup> Samuel Francis, “Illegal Immigration Pressure,” *Washington Times*, 31 Dec. 1991. On Francis see D. J. Mulloy, “Continuity and Disruption: American White Nationalism, the Alt-Right, and the Politics of Displacement at the Beginning of the Twenty-First Century,” in José Pedro Zúquete and Riccardo Marchi, eds., *Global Identitarianism* (New York: Routledge, 2023), 127–41, 131.

<sup>112</sup> Zolberg, *A Nation by Design*, 384–85.

<sup>113</sup> C. K. Tyler, “‘Disadvantaged’ May Pay New Tax,” *Washington Times*, 18 July 1993.

reissue of the novel featured a photograph of Chinese men wrapped in blankets after disembarking from the *Golden Venture* in the background.<sup>114</sup> Introducing the novel, the nativist ideological entrepreneur and FAIR director John Tanton wrote that “the future has arrived,” citing the *Golden Venture* and other instances of maritime flight that had taken Raspail’s plot “out of a theorist’s realm and transposed it into real life.”<sup>115</sup> “Fiction can be more powerful than fact,” wrote American Renaissance founder Jared Taylor in a review of *Camp of the Saints*. “The novel,” he wrote, “is a call to all whites to rekindle their sense of race, love of culture, and pride in history – for he knows that without them we will disappear.”<sup>116</sup>

Upon its original release, Raspail’s Raft crystallized the French right’s fears of 1960s internationalist solidarity, demographic crisis, and the ennui of the end of empire.<sup>117</sup> In the 1990s US, it stood for something else: the West disoriented at the very moment of apparent victory. The Raft was the specter of a question: what kind of nation? But behind that was another: what kind of capitalism?<sup>118</sup> In 1974, Garrett Hardin wrote a famous essay on what he called “lifeboat ethics,” subtitled “the case against helping the poor.”<sup>119</sup> In *Alien Nation*, Brimelow adopted Hardin to cast the North American continent not as *terra firma* but as a maritime vessel. “The United States is not a pile of wealth but a fragile system – a lifeboat,” he wrote.<sup>120</sup> The US was a particular lifeboat, it was “towing the economy of the entire world.”<sup>121</sup> “And lifeboats can get overcrowded and sink.”<sup>122</sup>

This vision of decline allowed for dependence and interaction – but at arm’s length. “Lifeboats can tow large numbers of survivors along in their wake,” he wrote. “The lifeline everyone can hang on to, in this case, is trade.” But trade did not mean that it was “at all necessary for Chinese peasants to come in person to America in order for the American system to ‘minister’ to them effectively. In fact, it may be easier if they don’t.”<sup>123</sup> The comedown after the end of the Cold War was an intense one: the West itself had become a Raft. For right-wing libertarians like Brimelow, there was a feeling of paradise betrayed: a moment of radical change transformed

<sup>114</sup> Jean Raspail, *The Camp of the Saints* (Petosky, MI: Social Contract Press, 1994).

<sup>115</sup> John Tanton, “The Camp of the Saints Revisited,” *Social Contract*, Winter 1994–95, 83.

<sup>116</sup> Jared Taylor, “Fairest Things Have Fleetest Endings,” *American Renaissance*, June 1995.

<sup>117</sup> Christy Wampole, *Degenerative Realism: Novel and Nation in Twenty-First-Century France* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020), chapter 3.

<sup>118</sup> For a contemporary mainstream reflection on the meaning of the novel see Matthew Connelly and Paul Kennedy, “Must It Be the Rest against the West?,” *Atlantic Monthly*, Dec. 1994.

<sup>119</sup> Garrett Hardin, “Lifeboat Ethics: The Case against Helping the Poor,” *Psychology Today*, Sept. 1974, 800–12. <sup>120</sup> Brimelow, *Alien Nation*, 245. <sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, 249. <sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, 245.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, 245.

into a new host of threats. One could see this in the events of the neoliberal think tanks. At a meeting of the Cato Institute in Moscow in 1990, ice sculptures of hammers and sickles dissolved into puddles as Paul Craig Roberts, the author of a book on the end of communism called *Meltdown*, beamed for the camera.<sup>124</sup> Just a few years later, Roberts warned of an “alien future” in which “whites are turning over their country to Third World immigrants” and will soon have to worry about being targets of “ethnic genocide.”<sup>125</sup>

Brimelow channeled the shift of mood in the neoliberal imagination from triumph to danger and demanded an ethno-economy. Human capital in his model was tied to a biologized endowment which was the core input for material productivity and prosperity. Immigration policy needed to bend to the law of the market. In a review of *Alien Nation*, Francis summarized the argument when he said that Brimelow proved that Americans “do not ‘need’ immigrants, at least for economic purposes. And if immigration isn’t necessary for the economy, we have to wonder what it’s good for at all.”<sup>126</sup> Cultural claims were not required if one could make the point on the foundation of economic reason. Counterposing a culturalist nativist demand for closed borders, as is often done, against a cosmopolitan market-justified demand for a (partially) open door misses the fact that both were rooted in specific understandings of the economic. Future studies of the far right must be sure, as Horkheimer suggested almost a century ago, not to remain quiet about capitalism.

## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

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<sup>124</sup> Paul Craig Roberts, “Transition to Freedom: The New Soviet Challenge,” *Cato Policy Report*, 1 (Jan.–Feb. 1991), 1.

<sup>125</sup> Paul Craig Roberts, “Alien Future,” *Chronicles*, July 1995, 27–28.

<sup>126</sup> Samuel Francis, “The Democrats Take the Lead on Stopping Immigration,” *Washington Times*, 9 June 1995.