

American Apocalypse

Richard Delgado

The waiter arrived with our plates. "That looks good," I said, scrutinizing my vegetables. Then Kowalsky leaned forward in his chair. "As you know, I'm an equal opportunity critic. I do have a theory, although I'd like the two of you to agree not to represent it as anything more than that. I don't want to seem too hard on some of my fellow conservatives."

Both Rodrigo and I nodded. "We'll take it in that spirit," I promised.

Kowalsky's Theory: The Upcoming Race War

Assured of our promises, Kowalsky began: "Have you ever wondered why my fellow conservatives seem bent on eliminating affirmative action? I mean, not simply cutting it back but eliminating it root and branch?"

Rodrigo and I looked at each other. "I assume out of principle," I said with a shrug.

"And to cater to their constituencies," Rodrigo added.

"I'm not so sure," Kowalsky replied. "Especially as to the latter. Many corporations that initially opposed affirmative action now support it. They find it's not so bad for business. The new workers fit right in, and the firm gains credibility in new sectors of the population. As for the principled reasons, we all know what arguments conservative theorists give for opposing it. I subscribe to some of them, as you know, although in my opinion they call for restructuring, not eliminating the program."

Rodrigo interjected: "So if it's not because of corporate pressure or killer reasons of principle, why do conservatives want to put an end to affirmative action?"

"I was thinking about this recently. In a way, affirmative action is the perfect issue for my side. It never goes away. It reliably delivers votes. And it enables people like me to point out how unprincipled you liberals are and how we are morally superior. It's easy to attack it in a thirty-second sound bite. But defending it takes forty-five

From "RODRIGO'S FOURTEENTH CHRONICLE: AMERICAN APOCALYPSE." 32 HARV. C.R.—C.L. L. REV. 275 (1997). Originally published in the *Harvard Civil Rights—Civil Liberties Law Review*. Reprinted by permission.

minutes, while the public's eyes glaze over. It has been the perfect vote getter year after year. Yet, my fellow conservatives at think tanks, leadership institutes, and other elite circles across the land are trying to get rid of it decisively and forever. Initiatives in California and elsewhere, bills in Congress."

"And those three recent Supreme Court decisions," Rodrigo interjected.

"Right," Kowalsky replied. "Making it harder for states to redraw voting districts to increase minority representation, making it easier for school districts to end desegregation plans, and applying the higher, constitutional standard of compelling state interest to federal affirmative action programs—not to mention the Fifth Circuit decision in *Hopwood*, which bars any consideration of race in higher education admissions. All these give evidence of the same thing: the political right is prepared to destroy affirmative action once and for all."

"And you think this is more than just muscle flexing?" I asked. I was curious where the young conservative wunderkind was going.

"I do," Kowalsky continued. "Otherwise the right would opt for a series of gradual cutbacks, and not sweeping measures like California's Civil Rights Initiative. Affirmative action enables my side to argue that we are the defenders of the just and the true. It reliably inflames working class and ethnic whites, who are led to believe that blacks are getting away with something."

"Even though the levels of school drop-outs, unemployment, suicide, poverty and infant mortality for minority communities are the highest in the country and approaching those of the Third World," Rodrigo added.

"And your people still lag in undergraduate and graduate enrollment," Kowalsky went on, "as well as in middle and upper management jobs and virtually every circle that matters—except sports and entertainment. As I said, it's a perfect issue. It enables people like me to rally the troops and depict liberals as the source of unhappiness and job insecurity for blue collar whites like my family."

"And I suppose you have a theory for why your co-religionists are doing this?" I coaxed.

"I think they are gearing up for a race war," Kowalsky said quietly. "It's not a conspiracy, exactly. Rather, it's the product of a general sense that it's time to pick a fight. Caucasians will cease being a majority in this country about midway through the next century. At that point, political and voting power should logically shift to groups of color: African Americans, Asians, and Latinos. White opinionmakers don't want this to happen. So, they're gearing up for a fight. It's one of the oldest tricks in the world: provoke your enemy until he responds, then slap him down decisively. You get to impose your regime and sleep well at night too because you can maintain that it was all his fault."

"So, right-wingers are trying to increase minority misery to the point where we react, to the point where violence breaks out?" I asked incredulously.

"Yes, like the sixties. Only this time, it will be different. The rebellion will be put down just as before. But this time, instead of enacting sympathetic measures, like the Civil Rights Act of 1964, to ameliorate poverty and redress racial injustice, society will put in place repressive acts increasing police surveillance, criminalizing sedition, and establishing martial law. We will then sail into the next century secure. White po-

political and economic power will be assured by a host of new laws and executive orders resembling those of South Africa under the apartheid regime. The new redistricting decision is just the first of many such rulings that will prevent blacks and Latinos from ever obtaining political power. And gatherings, organizing, and street marches will be ruthlessly suppressed. The U.S. will have a system of apartheid, in effect, with whites wielding power over a large but increasingly powerless black and brown population of laborers and domestics."

"And the idea is to provoke this confrontation before it is too late?" Rodrigo leaned forward, his expression serious.

"Yes, it would need to be done fairly soon, before power passes peacefully," Kowalsky replied. "That's why you see everything we were talking about earlier: welfare cutbacks calculated to increase misery in communities of color, voting rights retrenchment, and withdrawal of scholarships that enable future leaders of color to get a college education. We also see attacks on 'big government,' which is seen as an employer and defender of minorities, denials that the recent wave of black church burning means anything, and most of all, the elimination of affirmative action."

"I thought you didn't like big government," Rodrigo interjected.

"I don't," Kowalsky replied. "But good and bad reasons argue against it. Some of my friends on the right oppose it because they see the federal government as having a black face. That's despicable and wrong."

We were silent for a moment. Then Rodrigo said, "I used to think all we had to do was wait, that demography would produce a peaceful change of power sooner or later. You've given me pause."

"A great convulsion, in which whites decisively put down a black and brown insurrection, would be exactly what's needed," Kowalsky said. "And one doesn't need conspiracy theories to understand the host of anti-minority and anti-poor measures that are coming into play right now. Whites have simply decided enough is enough: it's time to take a stand. If millions across the country, as well as conservative elites at dozens of think tanks and institutes, have the same sense—that it's our turn—it produces the same result: everyone agrees tacitly that something must be done. And so the product is a coordinated campaign. It may already have started in California, our most ethnically diverse state."

"Laz," I burst out. "I used to think leftists were paranoid, always afraid the government was spying on their meetings, compiling dossiers on them, and so on. Of course, some of that turned out to be true. But this idea of yours goes further than anything I've heard. For one thing, our legal system and Constitution would never stand for it. We have the Bill of Rights, the Fourteenth Amendment."

"All of which can be overridden by a compelling state interest, as you well know, Professor," Laz replied levelly. "Do you have any doubt the current Supreme Court would find one if civil unrest broke out in every major city across the nation?"

"*Korematsu* could serve as a precedent," Rodrigo pointed out. "The Court could hold that emergency measures like curfews, surveillance, wiretaps, sweeps, and even preventive detention of leaders of color are justified. We baited the Indians at Wounded Knee until they responded. Then we wiped them out. Unfortunately, more historical precedent supports Laz's grim scenario than any of us would like."

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"Our Latino friends could cite the zoot suit riots in the 1940s, when America went through a wave of anti-immigrant, nativist sentiment," Laz added. "Roving gangs of Anglo sailors started the riots. When Latinos responded, we threw them into jail, charging them with breaching the peace and provoking civil disorder. Congress instituted Operation Wetback, in which tens of thousands of Mexican Americans, many of them legal immigrants or even citizens, were rounded up and deported to Mexico."

"For the first time, a religious theory is being put forward for white supremacy," Rodrigo interjected. "It combines with the pseudoscientific one espoused by books like *The Bell Curve* to produce a mentality among whites that they are entitled to remain on top no matter what the population statistics show. Consider all the interest in our own Civil War, for example. PBS recently pioneered a series on the subject. New books are coming out, including some excellent ones by Shelby Foote. Why else such a revival of interest if people were not starting to think, at least on an unconscious level, that a new war is coming up?"

"Recent books about the civil rights revolution do the same thing," Rodrigo replied. "Jack Greenberg's otherwise fine book, for example, emphasizes the role of whites in charting the course of the desegregation campaign. 'Look how much whites have sacrificed for blacks,' these books seem to say. This way of presenting history legitimizes white anger now. Blacks are depicted as ingrates who don't appreciate all that good white liberals have done for them. This enables them, as well as the Democratic Party, to look the other way, or even join in the opposition to minority gains. During the period just before the Civil War broke out, the South drafted local boys and armed them. That's how they got an army. The near future could witness much the same thing."

Kowalsky added, "We are seeing the beginnings of that now in the militia movement. Private groups are buying high-tech weapons, training in the woods, developing their own ideology and leadership structure. They keep in touch by e-mail, newsletters, and conventions. They interpret every move by the civil rights community as an attack on them and their values. That's the advantage of an ideology that demonizes the other side. If you decide at the outset that X is an enemy, you begin to interpret X's every action as justifying your visiting violence on him. That's the lesson of Chief Sitting Bull and Wounded Knee. It's also that of the Japanese internment cases, which held, based on the slenderest evidence, that the mere existence of Japanese citizens living peaceably on the West Coast threatened national security. You try your best to provoke the other side into responding. When they don't, you simply declare that milder and milder actions on their part are provocations. Eventually their mere existence is an outrage that cannot be ignored, as with the Japanese."

"That may have been true historically," I conceded. "But do you really think it could happen today? Your theory, Laz, may be a useful interpretive approach to understanding what is going on—all the goading and stiffening of the spine. Many whites are uneasy and spoiling for a fight. As a psychological hypothesis to explain all the muscle-flexing and general ugliness, what you say makes much sense. Threatened people do often look to pick a fight, to re-establish who's boss. But surely you can't think we are preparing literally for a race war, can you?"

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"Only time will tell," Laz replied. "Consider what happened in the Ruby Ridge standoff in Idaho. Federal officials provoked the family until they reacted, and then they shot Randy Weaver's wife. Of course, in that case the shoe was on the other foot. But conservatives learned their lesson all too well. As your Huey Newton once said, 'It's not paranoia if they really are out to get you.' Hate crimes are increasing, as are incidents of campus racism and hate speech. Every major city reports Rodney King type incidents in which white police beat men of color to death. African-American columnist Carl Rowan recently described how white racism operates inside many political departments, including the elite federal Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms agency, which recently held a 'Good Ol' Boys Roundup' in the Tennessee mountains, featuring T-shirts with Dr. Martin Luther King's face behind a target and O. J. Simpson in a noose.¹ Another showed white cops arresting a black, sprawled across a police car, under the heading 'Boys on the Hood.' A lawsuit featured evidence that ATF agents frequently used the word 'nigger' and placed Ku Klux Klan cards and other paraphernalia prominently in the offices of black agents.² Recent stories even suggest that the CIA may have played a role in starting the crack epidemic that has devastated black neighborhoods. I'm afraid that my theory may literally come true, at a broad national level. You mentioned earlier, Professor, that our institutions, the law and the police, might serve as a bulwark against white supremacist repression. I'm afraid they may prove to be among the most enthusiastic supporters."

Rodrigo interjected: "To summarize your point then, Laz, it's not just wild-eyed patriots and supremacists who are talking about holding the line, preserving America as a white society, and resisting the changes that would otherwise set in when the numbers of browns and blacks exceed those of whites. The cruder elements are arming, while conservative churches are preaching a return to early values with thinly veiled references to race. Thus, they are laying the theological basis for a race war. Conservatives across the board are taunting blacks and liberals, calling us balkanizers, tribalists, and barbarians. They are dismantling affirmative action and ethnic studies departments, while cutting programs of critical importance to the inner city poor. It does look like a coordinated effort to prod blacks, to provoke us into lashing back so that society can respond with armed force."

"Don't forget that legal and constitutional change will accompany the armed suppression," Laz added. "Constitutional amendments and new laws will assure that there cannot be a second uprising, ever. We may have already seen the beginning of this in bills authorizing new prisons and expanding the number of new police officers, reviving the death penalty, and providing mandatory sentences for crimes associated with the underclass of color. I hate crime, as you know, and think these measures are not a bad idea. But they're aimed just at blacks, something any self-respecting conservative should detest. English-only laws and ruthless immigration measures make things hard for Latinos and Asians. Congress is even considering abolishing citizenship for the children of undocumented immigrants. The thinly veiled purpose of the amendment is to keep America white."

After a pause, Laz continued: "You see, I said I was an equal opportunity critic. I support much of what my fellow conservatives say and do, but not this. I felt an obligation to tell the two of you. I still believe in neutral principles, in rewarding hard

work and treating all persons with similar respect. Everyone deserves the right to be treated as an individual and to have his or her fundamental humanity respected. But I'm alarmed at some of the steps my fellow conservatives are taking. There are better ways to return America to its individualist roots than to goad already suffering populations, until recently mired in segregation and Jim Crow laws, into what will prove to be a bloody and decisive defeat."

All three of us sat silently for a moment in the now nearly deserted restaurant. Then I asked a question that had been on my mind for some time: "And what about Latinos, Laz? If you don't mind my saying so, you've been speaking in generalizations so far. I may agree with your basic premise that something frightening is in store and that this is the reason for all the pushing and shoving and goading going on right now. But you have been speaking in terms of 'people of color,' 'minorities,' and 'the poor community' as though they were all one. Somehow, I feel that Latinos are different. Don't you?"

In Which Laz Refines His Thesis and Rodrigo Explains the Role Latinos May Play in the Conservative Backlash to Come

"I'm not sure," Laz replied. "I haven't known many Latinos, except for Rodrigo, who I gather is half one. I grew up in an eastern city in a tenement district full of Poles and Croatians. Rodrigo, what do you think?"

Rodrigo smiled. "The Professor asks a good question. It reminds us we must always guard against the danger of essentialism and assuming that all minorities are the same. I'm part Latin, as you know, so ever since I returned here I've been following the fortunes of Chicanos, Puerto Ricans, Central Americans, and other Latino groups. Their relationship to the broader civil rights struggle, and to blacks, is complex."

"It certainly is," I agreed. "Sometimes Latinos and blacks are at each other's throats. Other times they work together to challenge oppressive measures that threaten them both, such as the backlash against affirmative action. How do you think all this bears on the racial troubles Laz thinks elite groups are trying to stir up?"

Rodrigo glanced at his friend. "I asked Laz the other day where he stood on the right-wing positions on immigration, bilingual teaching, and English-only. He said he disagreed vehemently with his fellow conservatives on immigration—you know his family immigrated from an East European country with little money—and did not feel strongly on the other two. He said it's certainly in the interest of new immigrants to learn English as quickly as possible, but he didn't think forcing them to do so made sense. Instead we should be offering them help to do something most of them are highly motivated to do anyway. And he disagreed vehemently with California governor Pete Wilson's suggestion during the Proposition 187 campaign that all Californians be required to carry identity cards and to produce them on official demand, particularly when they are seeking a job, entering school, or requesting non-emergency health care. I'm not putting words in your mouth, Laz, I hope?"

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"Rodrigo's got it right," Laz said. "I'm certainly not an expert on Latinos, but there is something peculiar about the conservative position regarding them. It's similar to the one they are taking with respect to blacks—increasing their misery, hounding them, taking away things they hold dear. But there's also a different note, a sort of background noise emanating from right wing think tanks and leadership groups. It's an interference almost, and it's different. Latinos in some respects remind me of the 'coloreds' in South Africa. Not a very exalted position, I concede, but let me throw the idea out for discussion."

We were silent for a moment, absorbing what Laz had said.

"It's a devastating metaphor," I said. "My heart sank when you said it. As you know, in the old South African regime, the 'coloreds'—Indian and Chinese immigrants and other non-black national origin groups—served as overseers and clerks in the oppressive regime of apartheid. They were treated a little better than blacks but not afforded the full status of whites. Do you think this is what's in store for our Latino friends in the bleak racial future you foresee?"

"It could be," Rodrigo said. "For one thing, it would account for the recent phenomenon of right-wing Chicanos and Latinos we're seeing."

"I assume you mean people like Linda Chavez, Richard Rodriguez, and Kevin Tebedo."

"Them and many others," Rodrigo replied. "It would explain why certain issues are coming to the forefront right now, why it seems that Latinos are going to be next on the hot seat. We're next because our high birth rate and the relative ease of illegal immigration mean that our numbers will begin to exceed those of blacks by early in the next century. If the political right can split Latinos off from blacks, this will be a big coup. Otherwise, the combined numbers of people of color would soon make a formidable force."

"Please don't take this the wrong way, Rodrigo," I said. "I know you identify with your Latin roots. But why would society have anything to fear from Latinos? By and large your people have been a quiet, hardworking, peaceable group. Chicano activism, for example, has taken mainly the form of an occasional high school walkout or a gathering of farm workers standing outside supermarkets urging shoppers not to buy grapes. Hardly at the level of the Black Panthers, Louis Farrakhan, and urban riots—things that strike fear at the heart of white power elites."

"It's true, Professor," Rodrigo conceded. "We've not seen the same level of militancy you've seen with blacks. But the potential is always there. Latinos have become increasingly restless and willing to fight back. There are more Latino leaders, professors, and lawyers—intellectuals who could lead an upsurge of activism in concert with blacks. In our own field, Professor, a new organization, the 'Lat-Crits,' has recently sprung up, applying the powerful insights of Critical Race Theory to the situation and problems of Latinos. They are analyzing structures such as the black-white binary, the civil polity model of immigration law, and the legal bases for challenging English-only and English preference rules. They are urging solidarity and even nationalism within and among the various Latino communities. If a race war comes and Latinos stand shoulder to shoulder with blacks, the whole thing could take longer and be bloodier than if only blacks and a few sympathizers had to be put

down. If Latinos can be cowed into submission or better yet, bought off beforehand, so much the better for whites."

"That all seems plausible. But do you really think that conservatives are reacting merely to the potential for Latino resistance?"

"Well, there could be another reason. Have you read about the conservative fixation, bordering on obsession, with Latin America?"

I must have looked blank, for Rodrigo continued: "In the mid-1980s a number of young conservatives did tours of duty in Latin America. Many of them came away convinced that the region had a frightening potential for social unrest."

"Funniest thing," I said ironically. "Many of those countries are controlled by vicious military regimes in concert with a few immensely wealthy families. The gap between the wealthy and the poor is even greater than it is here."

"Some conservatives warned that unrest and disruption could break out in that region, causing hordes of brown-skinned refugees to pour across our borders. They feared that socialist regimes like Cuba might emerge throughout that region and that local Chicanos and Central Americans might join forces with their south-of-the-border compatriots, opening a sort of second front here. In his Witan memo, John Tander also warned of our rapid breeding rate. 'Perhaps this is the first time,' he queries, 'in which those with their pants up are going to get caught by those with their pants down?'"

"Distasteful," Laz said with a grimace. "No wonder he was drummed out of certain mainline conservative organizations."

"Others, however, welcomed him back," Rodrigo pointed out. "It could be this fear of Latin America that drives part of the current crackdown on an otherwise peaceful group."

"The carrot and the stick," I said. "Another old strategy."

"Exactly," Rodrigo said. "English-only laws and referenda like California's Proposition 187 tell Latinos that they must not make trouble, that their role is to blend in as soon as possible."

"To assimilate, in other words," I said.

"Right. To learn English, live in white neighborhoods, join the consumerist culture. And, in contrast to blacks, assimilation is an option with many Latinos. Compared to blacks, we have a high rate of intermarriage. And many of us look white."

"Or at least not black," I said.

"Something in between. The idea is to coerce Latinos to go the one way and not the other, to identify with the white overlords and not the black resistance. Many of us are that way already; we try to be suave and ingratiating, like Ricardo Montalban."

"Now I see the parallel Laz was drawing to the class system in South Africa. The idea is to punish Latinos for not fitting in and reward them when they go along with the dominant group. They then can be allowed to hold certain jobs and serve as buffers between the white overlords and the black underclass."

"Do you suppose this accounts for the many conservatives in prominent positions who are adopting Hispanic children?" Rodrigo asked.

"It could," I replied. "They may be modeling, consciously or not, assimilationist behavior. They are saying, if you behave, I'll take you in. They would never adopt a black kid. But they desperately don't want Latinos opening a second front right now, at least not until they've taken care of business with the blacks."

"Tension is running high right now between Latinos and blacks," Rodrigo mused. "A recent colloquy in a national magazine featured leading Latino theorist Jorge Klor de Alva discussing black-brown tensions with African American studies professor Cornel West.⁴ Could it be that on some level the two groups realize the roles elite groups have in mind for them?"

"Maybe that's what Laz called 'background noise,'" I ventured, "something that goes on just outside consciousness, an unstated realization of trouble brewing ahead."

Later, my mind kept returning to my lunchtime conversation and my companions' interpretations of a wide spectrum of events, actors, organizations, and writers on the right. What role would Latinos, the other major group of color, play in the years ahead? Would they opt for the demeaning status of functionaries and white wannabes that Rodrigo had warned might be in store for them? I sincerely hoped not: a people with a great tradition deserved better. Perhaps the cultural distaste for the *pocho*⁵ and the ingrained pride and attachment many Latinos feel for their culture would protect against the fate that Rodrigo had warned against. I recalled how even liberal social workers attempted to create Mexicans as a "problem" group requiring help after the United States closed its doors to immigrants, threatening unemployment in the Americanization industry. The number of master's theses proliferated, and social workers began specializing in this new problem group in an effort to teach them American ways of speaking, cooking, and dressing, when they had perfectly good recipes and family structure of their own. Then, Latinos had resisted pressures to acculturate. Would they do so again?

NOTES

1. See Carl Rowan, *Law Enforcement Needs to Clean Up Its Act*, DENV. POST, July 18, 1995, at B7; *Senate Panel to Investigate ATF Picnic*, WASH. POST, July 15, 1995, at A13.

2. *Id.*

3. Jean Stefancic and Richard Delgado, *NO MERCY: HOW CONSERVATIVE THINK TANKS AND FOUNDATIONS CHANGED AMERICA'S SOCIAL AGENDA* 11 (1996).

4. See *Our Next Race Question: The Uneasiness between Blacks and Latinos*, HARPERS, Apr. 1996, at 55.

5. *Pocho* is a slang term for an individual of Mexican extraction who does not speak Spanish and has lost touch with his or her roots.

