

The Conscience of an Immigrant American Conservative

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Reihan Salam, *Melting Pot or Civil War? A Son of Immigrants Makes the Case against Open Borders*. Sentinel, 224pp., \$27 cloth

The poor and politically oppressed peoples of the global South are on the move, largely unwanted by the developed societies of the global North that are their destination.

They are refugees from war and from ethnic and religious persecution, and they are voluntary economic migrants in search of the opportunity to live the kind of lives that Western Europeans and Americans, even Americans who struggle to make a living, have long taken for granted. The material situation of many is desperate enough to sharply qualify the term “voluntary.” While the numbers involved may not be unprecedented in the history of international mass migration (think of the great waves, which totaled 55 million people, who went from Europe to the United States in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries), the broad front of population

movements—simultaneously from Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and the Hispanic Americas—certainly conjures up unprecedented visions of a massive, global tide of people. They challenge the integrity of national borders, impose cultural and racial heterogeneity on societies in which large numbers of citizens resist it, and strain social services where they come to reside. The issues they bring with them contribute significantly to the polarization of politics. Those issues are tearing apart the European Union and imperiling the survival of elected, moderate governments in Europe. Immigration helped greatly to put in office Donald Trump, whose successful campaign and much of his presidency only make sense in the context of the bitter divisions and nagging anxieties prompted by contemporary international migrations and the complex cultural diversities they create. Trump’s candidacy attained its remarkable, frightening traction running against immigrants, especially unauthorized ones, whom he managed, contrary to evidence, to tag as criminals.

Reihan Salam, the executive editor of *National Review*, a longtime bastion of American conservative opinion, has written a book that has enjoyed brisk sales, and is worthy of the attention of everyone, right, left, and center, who is concerned about immigration, whether legal or unauthorized. He doesn't succeed in making the case for the stark choice his eye-catching title lays before us: if we face the prospect of a civil war prompted by immigration, you don't finish this book imagining its imminence. There is ample reason, however, to create a new national approach to international migration to the United States. Immigration reform has been evaded for decades by one shamefully irresponsible Congress and Chief Executive after another, with both branches of the federal government ultimately content to let American business profit off authorized and unauthorized streams of low-wage immigrant labor, which has been mowing our lawns, caring for our aging parents and our babies, sowing our garments, cleaning our office buildings, packing our meat products, picking our fruit, and doing just about every sort of low-wage service or industrial job that makes our lives comfortable and many of our products and services cheap. The same folk pay state and local sales taxes that help support the social services that unauthorized immigrants themselves cannot access.

At election time, liberals and the left have been trading on sympathy for intimate narratives of desperate individuals seeking relief from persecution and poverty, and of worthy young people like the "Dreamers." Those toward the left of the political spectrum have evoked hopeful appeals to the "real America," which supposedly is tolerant, courts multicultural diversity, and is guided by the ideal of *E pluribus unum*. That appeal takes a great deal of American history for granted, as Trump's political

career has reminded us. The "real America" has hardly ever achieved a consensus on the benefits of immigration. From the Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798, through the Know Nothing movement of the 1850s, the Chinese (and subsequently other Asian peoples') exclusion movements, and the movement for the imposition of quotas on eastern, central, and southern European peoples to Donald Trump himself and wide sectors of the contemporary Republican party, there has been a substantial hostility to and fear of immigration, however much it has been allowed to continue to take place in the quest for cheap labor.

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To be sure, over time what came to exist as a result of economic calculation also came to be thought of as an object of pride. Those who have stood against the continuance of large-scale immigration might argue that, even if it no longer is beneficial, nevertheless it had once been, and still represents a proud history, worthy of respect if no longer of emulation. The ranks of critics, of course, have included large numbers of the children and grandchildren of immigrants who see their own ancestors as worthy, but current immigrants as poor neighbors and poor material for American citizenship. During the 1920s in Northern cities, the Ku Klux Klan had ample numbers of northern and western European Protestant ethnic members, who also conceived of themselves as the "real Americans," unlike Catholic,

Orthodox, and Jewish newcomers from eastern and southern Europe. In contrast to the eclectic, cosmopolitan civic nationalism advanced by those such as Barack Obama and Joe Biden, there remains a racial nationalism of the contemporary right, exclusivist and distrustful of difference, that ties blood and the deepest recesses of culture to being American. Both nationalisms have a long history in the United States.¹

avored the non-European world proved the most influential, and indeed has worked to produce the massive waves of legal entry, especially from but hardly limited to Asia, that we have been experiencing since the 1970s. The reform act did for the first time set maxima for immigration from the Western Hemisphere, and in doing so probably created one basis for the development of contemporary unauthorized immigration. Those now

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The outstanding exception in our history to this profound ambivalence was the 1965 Immigration Reform Act, which ended the quotas on European peoples and relaxed some of the strictures on the entrance of non-Europeans. Guided by the peculiar combination of postwar optimism and prosperity and Cold War-inspired anxieties about America's international image in Europe and Asia especially, the 1965 act was mostly conceived to be reopening the gates to those Europeans—racialized peoples of that time such as southern Italians, Poles and Jews—who the quota system of the 1920s had largely shut out. By the mid-1960s, however, Europe was in recovery from the destruction caused by the World War, or its peoples were locked behind borders frozen by the Soviet Union and its Warsaw Pact allies. Europe—let alone prosperous, tolerant and social democratic Norway!—has needed no North American safety valve for its peoples in the last half-century, Trump's recent longing for Norwegian immigrants to the contrary. Instead, the balance of the reform act that

legal waves and the entry of unauthorized migrants across the southern border in response to the economic crisis of rural and small-town Mexico have been playthings in the hands of the emerging and aggressive political nationalist right, which has conjured up images hostile to the state of mind liberals and the left continue to claim is the “real America.”

Salam's book should be welcomed. Agree or disagree, it is a basis for disciplined discussion. It is a thoughtful effort to approach immigration reform through integrated and multilevel policies that are concerned simultaneously with the welfare not only of Americans, but also the countries of the world that are hemorrhaging their people, and hence the possibilities for their national futures. It is doubtful that the political will now exists in the United States, not to mention internationally, to address the myriad problems international migrations are presenting, but it will never exist without a foundation in serious discussion, pushed by serious people.

Salam proposes a three-part framework for immigration reform: an amnesty for unauthorized immigrants combined with the creation of a strong enforcement regime against border jumping in the future;

¹ See Gary Gerstle, *American Crucible: Race and Nation in the Twentieth Century*, second edition (Princeton University Press, 2017).

a largely but not exclusively skills-based entrance standard for immigration; and efforts to combat passing on poverty to the next generation, especially among international migrants and their children and grandchildren. Toward these ends, he also favors abolishing birthright citizenship, which is deeply embedded in the Constitution through the Fourteenth Amendment, in the name of discouraging unauthorized immigrants from planting their American-born children in a position to share in American social benefits, and sharing in their parents' poverty. He would also revive the type of guest worker program that constituted the Bracero Program of the mid-twentieth century to provide access to those, especially lower skill workers, who wish to work in the United States, but who would not be eligible for social benefits.

It is noteworthy to remark that although he edits *National Review*, Salam is no traditional American conservative of the type that William F. Buckley had in mind when he began that magazine in 1955 to encourage the nascent postwar conservative movement to peel back the expanding New Deal-Fair Deal welfare state, to defend white Western Christianity, and to arm ourselves to the teeth to fight Communism across the globe, while exercising vigilance over its small number of domestic sympathizers. Indeed I would go out on a limb to predict that if Buckley were aware of the expanded, proactive social role for the state, and the social engineering, that Salam proposes in order to break our impasse on immigration and to combat childhood poverty, he would turn over in his grave.

Salam's vision of the state seems more reminiscent of the American Progressives of the turn of the last century and the social theorists who inspired some of Franklin Roosevelt's most innovative programs, such as the Works Progress Administration, for combating the effects of the Great

Depression. Nor is Salam a Trumpian nationalist of the type who is alternately fearful of, or condescending toward, or aggressively hostile to the world. The son of Muslim immigrant professionals from Bangladesh, Salam was born in Brooklyn, and grew up in New York City's multicultural neighborhoods in the 1980s and 1990s. He attended New York's accelerated academic program at Stuyvesant High school, before attending Cornell and Harvard. He seems completely at home with American diversity, and takes no cheap shots at the poor or at immigrants, with whom his book reveals great sympathy, if not necessarily great familiarity.

Salam is most at home with the pro-opportunity conservatism of the late Jack Kemp, who shared with postwar Republicans such as Nelson Rockefeller and Jacob Javits of the now defunct, liberal eastern wing of their party a vision of innovative government programs to encourage entrepreneurship and social mobility among the inner city poor and working classes. Kemp was a nine-term congressman, and then Secretary of Housing and Urban Development under President George H.W. Bush, before running for Vice President in 1996. He was a strong advocate of immigration, and while self-described as a "conservative," supported affirmative action, sought ways to encourage home ownership among public housing residents, and plausibly argued for generous, incentive-based social programs rather than traditional handouts. In this Kempian vein, with Ross Douthat, a *New York Times* columnist, Salam coauthored *Grand New Party: How Republicans Can Win the Working Class and Save the American Dream* (2008), which advanced the vision of a reinvigorated Republican Party, deeply rooted in the ethnically and racially diverse working classes, possessed of social vision, and espousing of all things a big, active, and

innovative state geared to meeting the needs of the traditional two-parent family, the traditional conservative's bedrock of social order. His new book is based on similar principles.

Salam did not invent either the logic or substance of the proposals he now advances, though he has fitted them to an American context. There are precedents all over the immigrant-receiving world for such measures. Canada and Australia have immigration systems partly but significantly based on skills. Australia, the United Kingdom, France, New Zealand, and tentatively Ireland have ended birthright citizenship to protect social welfare systems. The United States has a guest worker program of limited work visas, but tends to lose track of people who outstay their visas, and thus come to have illegal status, and who subsequently may also embed their own nuclear families in the United States. He spells out policy priorities in accessible, plainspoken detail with a vision that is at once American and global in its moral, as well as political and economic concerns. His is no fortress-America nationalist conception of the American future, longing for the world of the twentieth century in which the United States was secure within its ocean borders and dictated the terms of its global engagement from a position of unchallenged economic and eventually military might. He accepts the inevitability of globalization, and understands that retreating from engagement with the world may offer a temporary sense of security and various emotional satisfactions, but that humanity is destined increasingly for global interdependence and interaction. Mass misery in one corner of the world, say Syria or Libya or Central America, finds ways to quickly spread to the beaches and national frontiers of the Balkans and southern Italy or the border towns of the American Southwest.

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While the shift in immigration policy he advances—toward more high-skilled technical workers and professionals—is hardly without precedent in the developed world, in contrast American immigration policy has been framed historically by prioritizing low-skill, low-wage labor. The classic American immigration narrative is that of the European peasant, whose rapid transition from the plow in some backward part of the Old World to the assembly line at the Carnegie Steel Works in Pittsburgh, or the Ford Motor Company in Dearborn, made possible the American mass production industrial revolution of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. There simply were not sufficient numbers of native stock Anglo-Americans to create the population of workers that produced the mighty engine of production that the American economy became in the twentieth century, and which was as responsible as the American military for the country prevailing in World War II, in which its survival was at stake. That immigration policy was itself always linked, in the case of European immigrants, to family and community reunification—in other words, to the chain migration which has been lately vilified by the Trump administration. One of the only questions these peasants were asked at Ellis Island was, “Where are you going?” The right answer was “To my sister and her family,” or to some other familiar connection, where the immigrant

was likely to be taken in, temporarily provided for, and soon shown the way to the hiring office of the factory or the mine or the construction site where his relatives and former Old World neighbors worked. Then (in this narrative), he would send for his wife and children in Europe, and the children eventually would embark on the same employment path as their immigrant father. Family reunification, the creation of chains linking points of embarkation of points of destination, has been governed by a bottom-line logic. It has been the moral equivalent of social work: while we make use of their hard-work, we let the newcomers take care of each other, and not be a burden on the rest of us. Both before the construction of the American welfare state and afterward, too, that logic has largely prevailed throughout our history. Now and in the past, immigrants have largely taken care of themselves and one another, and they have built ethnic communities that have offered them emotional and material support.

The year 1965, when our immigration laws were last broadly revised, was probably the last moment in our history when it was still possible to believe in the relevance of this classic narrative. The last half-century has seen another, high-tech industrial revolution in the developed world, as well as the globalization and automation of industrial production and an unprecedented integration of world markets. The way of life characterized by high-paying, union-protected assembly-line work is largely dead, as are the prosperous, supportive ethnic communities for the workers doing it—both victims of assimilation and suburbanization, as well as of the material decimation of the class of people who once did that work.

We all know this, but our immigration policy doesn't reflect it. We do have the H-1B visa program, which favors migrants with skills and knowledge that fit them for employment in Silicon Valley and other

high-tech corridors, but for decades, we have remained willing to appease employers' desire for low-wage and low-skill service workers, and for the factory labor that remains in settings such as meat-packing plants, carpet factories, and clothing industry sweatshops. Like the immigrants of an earlier era, international migrants continue to come in search of what is often badly degraded employment, because opportunities here are better than what they can expect for themselves and their children in contemporary Honduras and Guatemala, where life is not only threadbare for the majority, but dangerous because of the criminal gangs that have their own visions (e.g. drug trafficking and protection rackets) of how to create opportunity where it is otherwise largely absent for ordinary people.

It is not contemporary immigrants themselves, for whom Salam manifests sympathy, that cause his resistance to current immigration policy. It is, rather, what he fears is likely to become of their children that animates his proposals for immigration reform. Picking up an argument that some sociologists have been making for several decades now, he describes the social problems faced by the second and third generations of immigrant families. By the nature of the lives they embark upon, immigrants expect difficulties, possess a strong work ethic, and are conscious of the improvement that even a marginal life in America constitutes over what their possibilities were where they came from. Their children, by contrast, become American in their expectations. Salam expects a large proportion of them to experience what sociologists have called *segmented assimilation*. The victims of poverty, crime ridden neighborhoods, and inferior schools, they are inevitably unprepared for twenty-first century job markets. They are not white, in what

remains a race-conscious society. They will assimilate, not into the middle-class mainstream that Salam and Douthat want to strengthen, but into the inner-city minority poor. This condition is exacerbated by the parents' unauthorized status, which makes it that much more difficult for the children to access social services and opportunities that might ameliorate the social pathologies associated with inner-city poverty. These second and third generations, including the American-born children of unauthorized immigrants, are American citizens. Like the Dreamers (also brought here by unauthorized parents as young children), they are American in what they wish to become. The wealth of the country, the endless blandishments of the consumer economy, and the ideals of the "real America" routinely expressed by its political leaders alternately inspire and frustrate them in this rendering of the immigrant story.

This is a good part of the recipe for the civil war that Salam fears, but that apocalypse also depends on the pushback from the nativist political right, which seeks to mobilize the struggling white working class behind its visions of racial, ethnic, and religious homogeneity and to stick immigrants with the blame for the death of the old industrial working class, all evidence to the contrary. Automation and offshore investments have had much more to do with the loss of opportunities, depression of wages, and the disappearance of job benefits than has immigrant competition, which has had minor effects on the wages and opportunities of native-born Americans. Offshore production and automation, however, have laid waste to towns and neighborhoods, intimate communities and ways of life across the country, and hence have helped breed their own social pathologies, such as massive drug problems. The only growth industry in the old mill towns of central Pennsylvania, a former

student of mine who is a union organizer told me, is assisted living for the now-old people who never had the chance to leave. Then there is the underground economy in drugs that have helped to cause the psychological unraveling of individuals and their families. This crisis has largely gone unaddressed for decades, not the least by Hillary Clinton in 2016 when she neglected campaigning on the old industrial heartland.

There is indeed a lot of bitterness out there, not the least of it among those who feel that there is more sympathy shown by opinion leaders and liberal politicians for immigrants who got here illegally, while the rest of us are asked to obey the law, than for American workers who are without work or suffer badly degraded employment. The need for large-scale job retraining programs and massive public investment in distressed localities has been evident since the enormous layoffs that accompanied plant closings in the 1970s and 1980s. Instead, under the ideological promises of neoliberalism, under Reagan, Clinton, and both Bushes, our politics shifted toward believing that the "magic of the market" would resolve the problems that accompanied the death of American mass production industry. It didn't. Before voting for Trump, a number of those distressed communities showed healthy tallies for Bernie Sanders in primary elections. Both Sanders and Trump spoke to the split personality of much of the working class electorate: a social democratic heritage and a lot of present-day resentments. Will the vacuum be filled by neo-Nazis and the Ku Klux Klan, committing vile acts of terrorism like the October 2018 assault on worshippers at a Pittsburgh synagogue in the name of the survival of the white race? Or are such people, as it now seems, mostly a law enforcement problem, destined to vex us and occasionally spill innocent blood without coming close to winning the future?

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On paper, we have a recipe for social conflict, well beyond the moral equivalent of communal violence we see in our highly polarized political opinion, our increasingly ideological and less pragmatic politics, and our hard-fought, narrowly won and contested elections. But the case is not made by Salam, neither from the American right nor from the alienated children and grandchildren of immigrants. We may want to change the nature of our priorities away from low-skilled international migrants toward those with advanced educations and skills in new technologies, because it is beneficial to the American economy in global competition and in building a strong and stable middle class, Salam's larger policy interest. But the scare-subtitle of this book doesn't gain credibility in his analysis.

A peculiar aspect of *Melting Pot or Civil War* is how seldom real people, daily making both pragmatic or momentous choices over how they will live, such as whether to enroll in community college or join a drug gang, come to life. In a book rhetorically sympathetic to contemporary immigrants, there are almost no immigrant lives present in the analysis. Nor do the ethnic groups to which they belong come alive or are the vast differences among them sufficiently analyzed.

The immigrants are almost always refracted through the lens of the analytical work of academic economists and sociologists using mass data. In fact, the only real immigrant or second-generation lives to which Salam pays attention are, on the one hand, he himself and his parents,

who represent the experience of intelligent adaptation to America by people with skills and education, and, on the other hand, Akayed Ullah, an immigrant electrician from Bangladesh sympathetic to the Islamic State who, proclaiming hatred for the United States and the Trump presidency, tried to set off a bomb in New York's crowded Port Authority Bus Terminal in December 2017. Ullah sustained serious burns from the poorly constructed bomb he strapped to his body, and a few bystanders walked away with minor injuries. He was convicted within months on five counts of terrorist activity. He does not seem to be in line to win our future either, and he, too, represents a law enforcement problem, not a threat to American democracy.

Thoughtful readers observing the immigrant and refugee world around them at present know from practical experience that these are hardly the only immigrant lives around us. There are also, for example, the small family enterprises—storefront businesses, corner stores, gas stations, office cleaning services, and home repair contractors—begun by immigrants, with the help of local banks, private social service agencies, and informal communal and family credit arrangements, and which utilize the labor of their children and grandchildren. There are, too, the children of immigrants getting low-tuition community college educations geared to workforce participation at costs that don't impose a lifetime of debt. Nor does race necessarily continue to create bright-line divisions in America, as if this were the

world of six decades ago. American apartheid has been unwinding, on the communal level as well as the legal, for generations.

The dubious case in this analysis for a polarized view of the future is further deepened by some conceptual confusion. The physical social separation in poorer neighborhoods, caused by low incomes and the desirable residential proximity of intimate communal networks, is conflated with forced segregation and loss of opportunity. The place of contemporary immigrants and refugees in redeeming distressed neighborhoods as well as urban central business districts, which has been recorded in rustbelt cities, is not noted. Nor is the sustaining role of ethnic identity and community, which Salam sees instead as provoking suspicion and apprehension by the majority population. There is also evidence among Americans of an appreciation of the role of the new ethnicities in adding to the quality of urban life and redeeming urban space. Multicultural diversity really is not a problem for many Americans, and for significant numbers of others, it is something they grudgingly get used to.

It is difficult in the United States today to take on the role of one who says, "Hey! Things aren't really that bad." There is little room in critical social analysis for the role of Pollyanna, and indeed, the United States has many serious problems. But the case for the imminence of civil war is not made here, and is rhetorically overdetermined, perhaps to scare the hell out of the reading public.

In contrast, the international social engineering proposed is visionary, though the prospect of realizing it in an age of growing nationalism and reactionary populism presents myriad political complications. Salam presents a sort of global Marshall Plan that is a gesture in the direction of caring about the fate not simply of contemporary migrants, but of the

long-term fate of the nations, threatened with depopulation and hence with the loss of development potential, from which they embark. It is right for developed nations to bear a moral responsibility for poorer nations, not simply a practical one dictated by the inconveniences mass migrations may be causing them. The five million Syrians in exile are victims of a civil war and the brutal Assad regime, but would that civil war have lasted as long as it has, with such lethal levels of violence, without foreign (and especially Russian) intervention? Would conditions in Central America that contributed to the rising of the caravan that walked through Mexico to the border of the United States have reached the calamitous situation of the present without large-scale American interference in the region in the name of anti-Communism during the 1980s? Are problems of nation-building in north and in sub-Saharan Africa not a consequence in the final analysis of legacies of European colonialism?

It is certainly not merely wishful thinking to believe that, faced with the choice between staying in your home or at least near it, or leaving to traverse great distance at significant danger for a future at best unpredictable and at worst a disaster, many contemporary refugees and voluntary migrants would elect the former. How then to offer potential migrants the opportunity to stay put, without such doubtful exercises of state power as the militarization of borders or political interference in the internal affairs of weaker, distressed, or in some cases failing states? One proposal, which the German foreign minister Günter Nooke recently suggested for Africa, is to create demonstration cities in sending societies that serve as alternative magnets to attract people whose lives cannot be sustained in the places in which they live. Such schemes, as distinct from creating refugee or detention camps that are

supposed to go away (but hardly ever do), would seek to bring together the United Nations, the World Bank, wealthy developed societies, and the states of the global South in a partnership to guarantee both opportunity and security, with the developed world paying the bills.

Salam doesn't use the term "voluntary colonialism" that the BBC employs, preferring instead the Chinese usage "special economic zone (SEZ)," but the former term suggests only one of the many political and economic difficulties present in such proposals, however much good will crafts the idea. Confidence in investment in creating such places could only be possible if they were not run by the states in which they resided. People in places like Honduras might well logically conclude that either foreign rich people or domestic ones will prosper off their labor in such places. As a model, Salam himself uses the Chinese city of Shenzhen, a former fishing port in south China that developed within the span of 40 years from 30,000 to ten million people, mostly employed in low-skilled assembly line work. Knowing what the world knows about the conditions of life and work in the SEZs, not to mention the reeducation and retraining centers for almost a million Uighur Muslims, in the People's Republic, which has perfected the arts of manipulative social engineering, it is difficult to have confidence in that model.

Perhaps even less confidence can exist, because of the possibilities of coercion on both ends of the exchange, in Salam's proposal to export America's service work to the global South. Migrants, the large

majority of whom are women, from throughout the Western Hemisphere, the argument runs, are currently taking care of elderly Americans in their homes and in nursing, rehabilitation, and assisted living facilities all over the United States, just as in Western Europe the elderly are cared for by the women from Africa, the Middle East, and the poorer post-Soviet, post-Warsaw Pact states of Eastern Europe, such as Moldova. Salam proposes that we save the caregivers the travail of migration by facilitating through tax and portable health insurance policies the voluntary removal of the American elderly to the warm climes of tropical South. Having joined the septuagenarian posse in recent years and possessing some sensitivity to the vulnerability of the aging, the author of this essay wonders exactly how this might work, and sees a lot of potential for coercion and abuse on the horizon. There are numerous American retirees residing by choice in Mexico and the famously benign environs of Costa Rica; they are people with the means and desire to do so. Without the means and desire, however, who might these resettled folk end up being?

Maybe such proposals do not inspire confidence, but we need people like Salam to quicken our thinking about alternatives to the endless playing out of the tragedies that all too frequently accompany contemporary refugee and voluntary immigration. Argue or agree with him as you may be directed to do, this articulate book is a useful contribution to finding answers to the most vexing human dilemma of the twenty-first century. **A**