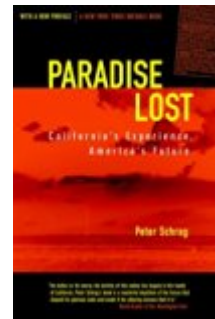


Peter Schrag. *Paradise Lost: California's Experience, America's Future.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004. 370 pp. \$18.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-520-24387-3.



Reviewed by John Connelly

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Author Peter Schrag resurrects Joan Didion's assertion that things must "work in California because it is there that we run out of continent" to illustrate the imperatives created by the State's critical fiscal, moral, economic, and political condition (p.23). Schrag, a long time columnist and editorial writer for the *Sacramento Bee*, describes his work as "that first rough cut of history that journalism modestly claims for itself." It is indeed.

Schrag's thesis question is: How did California move from exuding positivism, enthusiasm for growth, and confidence in the 1950s and 1960s, to fiscal chaos, often randomly enacted and contradictory public policies, and the deep political and social divisions seen today? In response, he suggests that the systems in place earlier no longer provide a framework relevant to today's challenges. Schrag is clearly on to something.

Preponderantly white, middle class, healthy, and well-educated, the comfortable Californians of the earlier period are now a minority, or soon will be. In their place, Hispanics, Blacks, and Asians, among others, struggle to find a place in California's vaunted sun. Absent good will, adult

leadership, and clarity of purpose or objectives, California appears doomed to continue on a downward spiral.

Schrag has provided an annotated list of virtually every political disaster visited on California since Pat Brown walked off stage following Ronald Reagan's surprise victory in the gubernatorial election of 1966. There have been plenty of disasters, each ably documented, analyzed, and dissected in this compendium of political folly that retells California's riotous descent from atop the shining city-on-the-hill of the mid-1960s to the present debacle, wherein the state suffers from a multi-billion dollar deficit, a dysfunctional legislature, a disconnected and hate-filled electorate presided over by an Austrian ex-weight lifter whose rise to power illustrates the lubricating qualities of contemporary special-interest campaign funding.

California was never the lotus land of *Look* magazine's description of California in the 1960s: "the most fertile soil for new ideas ... millions who vote with their wheels ... the the lure of opportunity" (p. 28), nor was Disneyland ever anything

but a hereditary amusement park with ersatz mountains furnishing childish escapism, despite expansion plans totaling \$1.4 billion in 1996 alone. The California girls with blond hair and long sun-tanned legs were probably from Iowa, and the detached bungalow with a fenced yard was never a reality for most. But Californians apparently once thought it was all true, embracing that illusion and basking in the dubious distinction of having passed New York State in population in 1962. Bragging of the arrival of 1,000 to 1,500 new residents each day, California gave little thought to the implications of the influx. Sitting lightly in the saddle as they always have, California's electorate scurried from whim to fad, embracing each cockamamie scheme in turn. Schrag illustrates how the electorate, told that they distrusted government, unholstered their dual six-shooters to repeatedly shoot themselves in alternating feet with ill-conceived and often conflicting ballot initiatives. Convinced of the incompetence of elected officials by repeated assertions to that effect by racists, conservationists, teachers, the Christian right, and politically isolated minorities, Californians adopted constitutional changes that continue to deprive state and local government of the budgetary and policy flexibility needed to govern.

Because a constitutional provision adopted by the voters cannot be overturned *except* by the voters, amendments arising from the initiative process arrive ironclad in that, as Schrag notes, they represent both the will of the people--however whimsically devolved--and tend to acquire the characteristics of a third rail and thus become very dangerous for politicians to dispute.

Beginning in 1978, California adopted by initiative constitutional provisions that limit property tax rates, curtail budgetary authority of the governor and the legislature, mandate appropriation of vast sums of money off-budget, and create enormous cost centers that lock in funds irrespective of fluctuating financial conditions in Califor-

nia. As Schrag illustrates, the electorate's short memory and hostility toward government repeatedly fixes special interest provisions in statute and in the state's Constitution. Initiative, referendum, and recall provisions, devised by progressive elements early in the twentieth century to ensure public access to their government, have become the weapon of choice for those with special needs and for those with the cash needed to gather the required signatures for inclusion on the ballot. Some initiatives, like Proposition 13 of 1978, limited property tax increases but also fixed in stone the assessed valuation of homes and businesses at 1978 levels. The result is that identical homes in the same neighborhood can have widely differing tax bills. While this may protect the elderly homeowner, it also gives the older, long-established businesses a substantial operating advantage over newer firms. A split tax roll might cure this disparity, but Californians won't hear of it.

Proposition 98, approved by voters in 1988, establishes minimum school expenditures with the result that other, often desperate, societal needs go begging. The Legislature, whose constitutional duty it is to control spending, is denied the ability to establish funding priorities.

It was with Proposition 140 of 1990 that Californians dealt themselves perhaps the most serious injury to representative government. Proposition 140 established term limits for legislators, the governor, and other elected state officers. The intent was to remove perceived deadwood and embedded corruption, and limit its reestablishment. The reality was the loss of institutional knowledge, the decimation of professional staff, invitation to short term adventurers into public office, and the handing over of much of the legislative power to the "third house"--the six to eight hundred lobbyists registered with the Secretary of State and their long-term professional staff of many hundreds more. With the Assembly limited to three, two-year terms and the Senate to two,

four-year terms, few members are around long enough to acquire policy insights, leaving them easy prey to the third house.

The present main power source, the lobbyists, arises in two main varieties: institutional lobbyists, and "hired gun", or contract, lobbyists. The institutional lobbyists speak for discrete businesses or governmental entities; the hired guns advocate any issue for a fee. Together, they write many of the bills, kill measures opposed by the lobbyists' principals, attend fund raisers, nurture the newly elected members, and provide the institutional continuity lost in the rapid turnover of both houses. They have replaced the long serving professional staff as the principle source of policy information. The electorate thought it was opening the process to citizen-legislators, but got instead carpetbaggers and retail salesmen, who upon arrival in Sacramento begin immediately to seek their next office. Proposition 140 did not, as Schrag points out, "remove the grip that vested interests have over the legislature [and] put an end to the Sacramento web of special favors and patronage" (p. 244)!

Schrag takes the reader on a forty-year downhill romp through a fractured political landscape, created largely through the initiative process. Initiative actions often mislead the electorate by isolating and apparently resolving single issues, while causing collateral damage to major systems. From a rapidly receding and perhaps largely mythical period when California built water projects, universities, and a world class highway system, Schrag guides us through a descent into mediocrity inspired by parsimoniousness, misinformation, and an unsupported conviction that Californians are overtaxed as a state. His book is a brilliantly annotated outline of California's ride on a banana peel, from heroic heights to an unmitigated shambles of debt overlaying a decaying technological, academic, social, and political reality that absolutely no one wishes to acknowledge. It is a tale of deceit, self-delusion, greed, intemper-

ance, and stupidity that would require the talents of a great comic to adequately relate. Unfortunately, Peter Schrag is not very funny.

He is, however, a veritable warehouse of information for the historian. His book leads the reader year-by-year and debacle-by-debacle with names, pertinent dates, and thumbnail descriptions of various public follies, all connected by a well-documented public conviction that the solution to each gathering cataclysm is almost certain to be contained in the next initiative measure.

California is probably very badly governed and the legislature has certainly committed itself to a succession of foolish actions, often exacerbating equally foolish actions of the past. Raising buck-passing to a high art form, the legislature has repeatedly sent bills to the Governor embodying both sides of the issue, leaving ultimate authority to the governor, while they continually surrender theirs. But governments are not mail-order items; they come out of the electorate, and, as is the case in California, represent almost exactly the moral, ethical, and intellectual make-up of the electorate. Perhaps that is why they are so frequently hated, reviled, ridiculed, and dismissed by that same electorate. Perhaps we all suffer from a form of self hate, feelings of inadequacy, and powerlessness.

Schrag wishes that California could return to those happier, more fulfilling times, replete with at least a fleeting image of the shining city. He deplores the passing of a society that honored brilliance, competence, morality, and integrity in public affairs—a time when greed and the need for immediate gratification did not pervade the commonwealth. Unfortunately, that time probably never existed, surely not in the 1960s, and perhaps never. But there was, clearly, a time when righteous and highly partisan zealotry did not prevail, the highways and schools were in better shape, and California did not live precariously with shuddering debt, mortgaged to the hilt while

energetically soliciting yet another platinum card salvation to see us through to the end of the year.

What Schrag does not offer is the solution, obvious to all long term participants in California's legislative process, of expanding public participation in representative government. California has one hundred and twenty legislators: eighty assembly members, and forty senators. California's population is about thirty-five and a half million. Each senator thus represents more than 887,000 constituents, and each assembly member speaks for 444,000. The result is nearly total anonymity and the effective absence of accountability. Moving the capitol to California's epicenter at Los Angeles, conducting multi-day elections including Sundays, and doubling the number of legislators might well reintroduce Californians to their government. Measures such as these coupled with some means of stemming the flood of campaign money conceivably might help alter the course.

Something needs to be done. As Schrag observes, "If California seemed to be a national model of high civic investment ... in the 1950s and 1960s, so it has become the lodestar of tax reduction and public disinvestments of the 1980s and 1990s" (p. 275). Greatness does not lay in that direction.

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