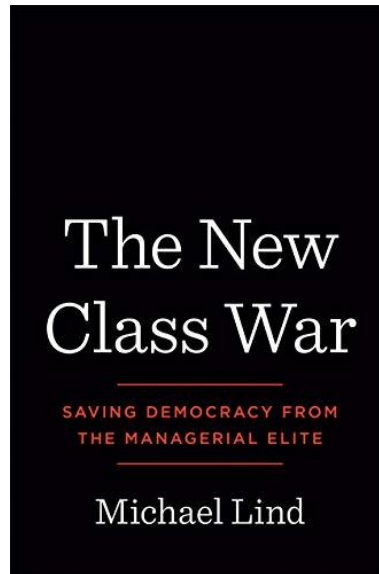


**Democratic Pluralism Requires an Institutional Balance of Power**  
a review of

# **The New Class War:** **Saving Democracy from the Managerial Elite**

By Michael Lind (2021)



In this outstanding and very readable little book, Lind shows how to regain our lost democracy by restoring the balance of power among key institutions, such as “guilds” (= labor), “wards” (= local jurisdictions), and “congregations” (= local cultural institutions). Or, as he says, “Social power exists in three realms – economy, government, and culture”.

But the spectacular success of the post WWII era of egalitarian economic growth was dismantled by a “revolution from above” by the managerial elites as the Cold War waned. The result, across the US and Europe, has been “a populist backlash from below ... by the disempowered native working class” (p xiii). This backlash has targeted the neoliberal establishment in all three realms, but in rather crude and unsustainable ways.

That is, “Demagogic populism is a symptom. Technocratic neoliberalism is the disease. Democratic pluralism is the cure” (p xv). He concludes that this “is likely to be in the context of renewed great power competition” (p 167). Otherwise, we’re likely to end up either as “a high-tech caste society” or “a stagnant and corrupt” demagogic populism. However, Lind does not discuss how all this might play out in the developing geopolitics of war and peace, fossil fuels, and climate catastrophes.

Lind explains that the government “should reign, not rule”. That is, “legislatures can cede large areas of policy making to those with higher stakes and expertise”. This is because working class people “can affect politics only through disciplined mass organizations answerable to them” (p 134). The idea is that “interclass tensions can be dissipated in thousands of small-scale negotiations, instead of accumulating until there is one huge explosion” (p 135).

Lind points to the “sectorial negotiations” between business and labor” in some countries, not cite-based collective bargaining. And there could be “national revenue sharing schemes” for local jurisdictions, with legislatures regaining “some of the power that they have lost to executives and judges”. Instead “the power of the working class can be increased by assigning decision-making to independent ... commissions” which empower representatives of the working class (p 140).

In addition, there must be a “value pluralism”, not impositions from a “new ‘woke’ corporate elite” (p 142). That is, a key tactic of populist politicians is “their willingness to mock the pieties and flout the etiquette that the aggressive managerial overclass seeks to impose” (p 143). Media and education policy must “ensure that the values of all major subcultures in the nation are acknowledged and given deference” (p. 144).

Lind makes it clear that immigration and trade policy must be redone to strengthen of the working class. No more “guest worker” programs (= “indentured servants”). A permanent crackdown on employers hiring undocumented immigrants is needed, combined with speedy citizenship for legal immigrants. Penalties, not incentives, for offshoring jobs or using tax havens or shelters.

In summary, the affluent class benefits from the cheap labor of immigrants and workers abroad, while the working class pays the price in lower wages and benefits. This is a true class war that is camouflaged by most media. And for Lind this not a Left/Right political thing: “Neoliberalism is a synthesis of the free market economic liberalism the libertarian right and the cultural liberalism of the bohemian/academic left. Its economic model, based on global tax, regulatory, and labor arbitrage, weakens both democratic nation states and national working-class majorities” (p. 48). Here the word “arbitrage” means to move actual or virtual facilities to profit from differences in tax or labor rates or in regulations in different nations or states.

Instead of true “countervailing power”, like that once provided by powerful unions, even human rights and social justice work has been corrupted by a “nonprofit sector that frequently depends not on mobilizing ordinary citizens but on getting grants from the program officers of a small number of billionaire-endowed foundations in a few big cities” (p 64).

The result is that “liberal” political parties now tend to represent the socially liberal “managerial elite allied with racial and ethnic minorities and immigrants” (p 74) while the “conservative” parties tend to represent the socially conservative elites allied with native workers. Thus both parties represent the economic interests of the elites, while exploiting the cultural differences of their allies, leaving the field wide open to demagogues.

Demagogues find a big audience despite the increasing shrill left/right rhetoric: “Equating most populist voters with far-right extremists is absurd as efforts by right wingers to lump center-left neoliberals and social democrats together with communists” (p 80). Their downfall is that they are reactionary – without coherent, positive programs – “good at channeling popular grievances and bad at redressing them” (p 83). That is, “populism is a symptom of a sick body politic, not a cure” (p 87).

Instead “most populist waves break and disperse on the concrete wall of elite privilege” (p 86). Meanwhile “pluralists see themselves as antibodies protecting the culture of democracy from infection” (p 85) by the conspiracy theories of the cultural and political wars. These, in turn, are “a kind of convulsive autoimmune response by the body politic to the chronic degenerative disease of oligarchy” (p 114).