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ON THE CONCEPT "MERITOCRATIC ELITE"
IN MAKING SOCIAL POLICY

By

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INTRODUCTION

In reading about the concept of meritocracy, beginning with the work by Christopher Lasch on The Revolt of the Elites and The Betrayal of Democracy (1992) and continuing into the debate about the extent of elite social responsibility, I consider a number of questions and then go beyond them to here formulate my own view of the matter in historical perspective.

THE QUESTIONS

Lasch raises questions about how to define the concept "elite" everywhere, whether not to divide American society as he does into two classes, and the extent to which a meritocratic elite is compromising democracy, especially in the United States. Throughout the fourteen chapters of the book Lasch makes statements that also raise in my mind the following questions for discussion here:

Is there really a meritocratic elite (especially in the USA)?

Does the old importance of heredities still play an
important role in creating an aristocracy of talent?

Does the new elite immorally ignore the democratic and
volunteer values of Western Civilization?

Where Ortega y Gasset in The Revolt of the Masses (1930) argued that the danger to Western Civilization is the "political

empire" of the masses, Lasch argues that such a danger has 'evaporated.' For Lasch the real danger is the "rebellion of the meritocratic elite."

To answer the above questions raised by Lasch, I here test his ideas by analyzing the following writers:

Robert N. Bellah (1985),
Leslie Helms, (1995)
Robert D. Putnam (1995),
Robert Reich (1995),
David Rieff (1994)
Michael Young(1958).

I then go beyond Lasch and these authors to suggest the rise of a new international meritocratic elite which is oriented toward communities of interest that transcend national borders.

LASCH'S VIEW

The chief threat to Western culture, according to Lasch, seems to come from those at the top of the social hierarchy, not the bottom. For Lasch the chasm that divides the privileged and the rest of the nation is caused by the conformity of "spokespersons" who claim to speak in the name of minorities. The resulting culture wars that have convulsed America since the sixties are best understood as a form of class warfare. Thus Lasch argues that the new class war is one "in which the enlightened elite (as it thinks of itself) seeks not so much to impose its values on the majority, much less to persuade the majority by means of rational public debate, as to create parallel or

'alternative' institutions in which it will no longer be necessary to confront the unenlightened at all."¹

Lasch in his "Introduction" (p. 4) builds upon his major point of agreement with Ortega y Gasset to argue the importance of what we may call here "aristocracy of talent":

There has always been a privileged class, even in America, but it has never been so dangerously isolated from its surroundings. In the nineteenth century wealthy families were typically settled, often for several generations, in a given locale. In a nation of wanderers their stability of residence provided a certain continuity. Old families were recognizable as such, especially in the older seaboard cities, only because, resisting the migratory habit, they put down roots. Their insistence on the sanctity of property rights were neither absolute, nor unconditional. Wealth was understood to carry civic obligations. Libraries, museums, parks, orchestras, universities, hospitals, and other civic amenities stood as so many monuments to upper-class munificence.

No doubt this generosity had a selfish side: It advertised the baronial status of the rich, attracted new industries, and helped to promote the home city against its rivals. Civic boosterism amounted to good business in an age of intense competition among cities, each aspiring to preeminence. What mattered, however, was that

¹ Christopher Lasch, The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy (New York: W. W. Norton, 1992).

philanthropy implicated elites in the lives of their neighbors and in those of generations to come. The temptation to withdraw into an exclusive world of their own was countered by a lingering awareness, which in some circles survived even the riotous self-indulgence of the Gilded Age, that 'all have derived benefits from their ancestors,' as Horace Mann put it in 1846, and that therefore, 'all are bound, as by an oath, to transmit those benefits, even in an improved condition, to posterity.'

In Part I, Lasch argues that the chief threat to democracy seems to come from elites who control the international flow of money and information, who preside over the NPPOs² and the universities, and "last but not least" establish the terms of the public debate. These are all changes that have been taking place since Ortega y Gasset's analysis of society over sixty years ago.

Ironically, all the mindsets of revolt that Ortega attributed to the masses are today more characteristic of the upper class than to the middle and lower class. Today's masses have lost interest in revolution. Their political institutions being more conservative than those of its "spokespersons" and would-be liberators. Lasch notes that no matter what it is said, it is the middle and lower classes who support limits on abortions, cling to the two-parent family as a source of stability in a turbulent world, oppose experiments with

²NPPOs are "Not-for-Private-Profit Organizations," often called "Foundations."

"alternative life styles" and harbor deep reservations about affirmative action and other actions in large-scale social engineering.

Lasch argues that the members of the working and lower-middle classes have a more highly developed sense of limits than their "betters," because they tend to believe that there are inherent limits to the human ability to control the course of the social development, natural forces and the course of history.

While young professionals submit to arduous programs of physical exercises and diet control to distance themselves from death, says Lasch, ordinary people, on the other hand, accept the wearing away of the body as if it is something futile for which to fight.

It is upper-middle-class liberals who have mounted organized a crusade to hygienize American society, for example to create an environment "free of smoke." Some even have developed a new form of censorship in sexual relations by pushing political correctness.

When elites detect any resistance to these initiatives, they cannot accept that its sanitized conceptualization of life does not generate universal enthusiasm, claims Lasch. In the United States, the term "Middle America"- -which has geographical as well as social implications--has come to symbolize everything that obstructs the pace of progress: "family values, " mindless patriotism, religious fundamentalism, racism, homophobia, retrograde views of woman. The "Middle American" appear in the eyes of the elite opinion-makers to be incurably provincial and out of step with the tune.

For Lasch, the elites are absurd and vaguely menacing, not because they try to throw down the old order but precisely because they defend themselves in an irrational manner. Irrationalism is expressed, in the most crucial moments by religious fanaticism, repressed sexuality (which occasionally manifests itself through violence against the women and homosexuals), patriotism that supports imperialistic wars, and an ethic of aggressive masculinity. Arrogant and insecure at the same time, the new elites contemplate the masses with a mixture of scorn and despite, says Lasch.

The highly paid professional and managerial class or "meritocracy" as defined by Christopher Lasch is made up of the brightest individuals, who are selfish. Lasch suggests that the old moral standards such as national responsibility or local traditions are giving way to a new selfish economic motivation for the elite, who are fascinated with capitalizing on low wages paid to maquila workers in poor countries, to earn high profits for themselves (p. 34).

Thus Lasch attacks meritocracy for not having any national moral standards and caring for making money internationally at the expense of national development everywhere. What does this mean for the USA or for other countries?

Lasch argues that there is an acute crisis of the middle class and that the general course of history runs more and more in the direction of a two class society: on one hand, the mass "routine producers" and, on the other hand, a "new intellectual meritocratic elite." The author makes a contrast between the life of the "mass man" and the emerging new intellectuals and entrepreneurial elite.

Lasch's meritocratic professional and entrepreneurial elite try to find comfort in life rather than to work for the greater good of humanity. Because it is an open elite which recruits the best people from the lower class to move up into the meritocracy, it deprives the masses of their leadership. Thus Lasch's major objection to meritocracy is that the masses are left leaderless. The contradiction in Lasch is that the masses' own leaders should supposedly be "imprisoned" as part of the masses.

Lasch notes, almost humorously that "the new elites are at home only in transit, en route to a high-level conference, to the grand opening of a new franchise, to an international film festival, or to an undiscovered resort." (P. 6.)

Many members of the elites stopped thinking of themselves as involved Americans, says Lasch, because they have stopped volunteering their talents to collective development of the nation, the very factor that Toqueville saw as the basis of the "American genius." The elite connection to the international culture of labor and money--especially commerce, entertainment, and information--makes them profoundly indifferent at the perspective of a national decline.

The market in which the new elite operates is an international market. Its wealth are linked to enterprises that function over the borders. They are more preoccupied by the harmonious functioning of the system as a whole, rather than by the functioning of any of the parts of the system. Its loyalties--if this term is not anachronistic in this context-- are more international than regional or local. They have more in common with their counterparts in Brussels or Hong

Kong than with the American masses which are not yet connected to the world communications network.

Lasch, therefore, is highly critical of the contemporary elite who he compares to the "best and the brightest,"³ and he is critical of their arrogance of power, which, ironically, has to maintain the fiction that its power rests on intelligence alone.

According to Lasch, the lack of an awareness of intergenerational obligation and disinterest in leadership generates an obsessive concern with "self-esteem," the new elite rebelling against the values of Western Civilization through obsessive preoccupation with self-importance. The new elites sneer at patriotism, their "network of contacts" have little resemblance to traditional communities.⁴

Because the views of Lasch merits examination, especially in the light of concerns in Europe that the new European Union bureaucratic elite which seems to impose its will in Kafkaesque ways. Let me answer the questions raised at the outset.

THE QUESTIONS CONSIDERED

Let us now, question-by-question, consider the extent to which other writers agree or disagree with Lasch.

Is there really a new American meritocratic elite?

Robert Bellah implicitly recognized the existence of the "modern cosmopolitans" and their therapeutic ethos as early as

³ David Halberstam, The Best and the Brightest (New York: Random House, 1972), p. 664.

⁴ David L. Bender, American Values (San Diego: Greenhaven Press, 1989), p. 231.

1985. His thesis is in his title: Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985). Focusing on wide conversations, Tocquevillean-type interviews with Americans (following the model of Democracy in America, published in two parts, in 1835 and 1840), Bellah also warned (p. 22) that some aspects of the nature of U.S. character--what Tocqueville was one of the first to call "individualism"--might eventually isolate Americans and thereby undermine the conditions of freedom and democracy. In an era of specialization, "instead of directing cultural and individual energies toward relating the self to its larger context, the culture of manager and therapist urges a strenuous effort to make of our particular segment of life a small world of its own," says Bellah (p. 50). He also underlines the destructive consequences of the pursuit of economic success, of the American definition of success (p. 198):

One is a success to the extent that one personally comes out ahead in a fair competition with other individuals. Most of those we talked to emphasized that they attained their present status in life through their own work, seldom mentioning the part played by their family, schooling, or the advantages that came to them from being middle class to start with. It is not that they would deny the contributions others have made to their success in life; what they deny is *the moral relevance of those contributions*. It is only insofar as they can claim that they have succeeded *through their own efforts* that they can feel they have deserved that achievement.

Robert Reich, writing more recently, agrees that a meritocratic elite exists, but instead of attacking the elite, he praises it. Indeed, the distinction between the routine producer and the meritocratic elite has been underlined also by Robert Reich in The Work of Nations (1992). Reich argues that the new "brain workers" acquire advanced degrees at the best universities in the world, become problem solvers, and produce high-quality "insights" to a variety of fields "ranging from marketing and finance to art and entertainment developed through teams". Brain workers have the ability to see problems in their totality due to their "system thinking" and they settle in "specialized geographical pockets" which are populated by people like themselves.⁵

Reich notes that as more and more companies are connected to the Internet and as better software becomes available, it will become easier for the brain workers to join into teams. The global "symbolic analyst", the cosmopolitan with a global perspective lack any sense of responsibility toward a particular nation and its citizens thus may never develop the habits and attitudes of social responsibility.

Agreeing implicitly with Reich is Leslie Helms. In "Workers Brave A New World" (Los Angeles Times, December 10, 1995), Helms argues that the range of business activities that can be handled by free-form organizations will increase as new technology makes it easier for experts to communicate over distances and the worker's value is in his brainpower. Helms, then, advances beyond

⁵ Robert Reich The Work of Nations (New York, First Vintage Books, 1992), p.198.

Reich by identifying the concept of "virtual company," which does not need to have the same workers in one place, but can draw upon different consultants who form task-forces which can be assembled or disassembled according to the expertise needed. These new workers can be independent consultants hired on merit, not employees who are "time-servers," and they communicate via E-Mail, fax, telephone, and video phone.

Robert D. Putnam sees matters from a different angle.⁶ He views (p. 71) dense networks of interaction as tying together common symbols, common leaders, and perhaps common ideals, but not individuals to one another. Rather than seeing a rise in social interconnections, Putnam sees a new mass membership in "tertiary associations," i.e. associations which advocate support of policy without even the need to organize meetings.

Does the old importance of heredities still play an important role in creating an aristocracy of talent?

For Michael Young writing in 1958,⁷ the kind of aristocracy of talent valued by Ortega y Gasset and Lasch never did exist. Rather what did exist was a "gerontocracy" of second-rate leaders, unable to shape the changes needed to modernize society and economy. Young foresaw, coincidentally, that modernization of leadership would have to wait until 1989 for the "leap of the century," when educational

⁶ Putnam, Robert D., "Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital," Journal of Democracy 6:1 (Jan 1995), pp. 65-78; summarized in Current, June 1995, pp. 3-9.

⁷ Michael Young, The Rise of the Meritocracy 1870-2033, Baltimore, Maryland: Penguin Books, 1967, p. 15.

selection and recognition of merit in industry and professions could be possible. Little did he know that his prophecy would come true for Communism's bureaucratic gerontocracy, whose aristocracy of power had been built on the "ideology" of political favoritism rather than merit. In the end, Communism was challenged by the free movement of people in fall of the Berlin Wall and the fax revolution in China.

None of the other authors considered here address the idea of old heredities but they probably would agree with Young's "attack" on the idea of an "aristocracy of talent," otherwise there would be no need to favor meritocracy.

Does the new elite immorally ignore the values of democracy and volunteer values of Western Civilization?

Reich implicitly agrees with Lasch that the meritocracy does ignore the values of democracy. It sends its children to private schools, insures itself against medical emergencies, and leaves the masses in their own country to rot. Their ties to an international culture of work and leisure, "multiculturalism"--make many of them deeply indifferent to the prospect of American decline. Armed with the cleverest symbolic-analytic tax specialists that money can buy, wealthy elites have discovered ever more decorous ways of sheltering their money. As the trend toward income inequality and the crisis of the middle class Americans is deepening, so will the gap between the poor and the rich be widening, says Reich (p. 198).

Robert D. Putnam suggests that the danger to civil society is greater than even Lasch envisions. Whereas Lasch sees a physical segregation of the minorities into "self-enclosed," racially

homogenous enclaves as a major cause of the balkanization of U.S. public opinion, Putnam sees the problem as having deeper roots. In his prize-winning article entitled "Bowling Alone: American's Declining Social Capital," he has investigated what appears to be a growing phenomenon of civic disengagement - the decline in people's connections with the social and political life of their communities. "Social capital" in Putnam's own words refers to features of social organization such as "networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit." (Putnam p. 67)

Putnam examines public opinion surveys to determine why, in just a generation, the time Americans spend on informal socializing and visiting declined by about one quarter and the time devoted to most clubs and organizations shrunk by about half. (Putnam p. 70.) He rules out the usual suspects: time pressures, material wealth or lack of it, the influx of women into the work force, disillusionment in the 1960s, the exodus to the suburbs and the family breakdown, although he identifies marriage as a possible accessory to what he calls "the strange disappearance of civic America." (Putnam p. 75.) Rather he hypothesizes that the erosion of conventional civic organizations is due to geographic mobility and the technological transformation of leisure, namely watching television and movies at home on the VCR.

Putnam's findings are shown in his statistical presentation, which is summed up here in Graph 1, where Putnam show us that in 1950, fewer than 1 in 10 American homes had television sets. By the end of the decade, 9 in 10 did. And Americans are spending more and more time watching TV, with an estimated three hours a day

absorbing about 40 percent of the Americans' free time; this figure represents an increase of about one-third since 1965. Television, Professor Putnam writes (p. 75), has "privatized" or "individualized" leisure time, thus disrupting social activity, especially social gatherings that would create "many opportunities for social-capital formation"

For Putnam, the technology seems to be driving a wedge between individual and our collective interests, reducing social connectedness. Considering Putnam's approach to the dark side of cosmopolitanism, let me speculate that culture has declined into a brave new world of candified, soft-centered, massified, and mushy narcissism. Putnam puts the problem in different words: Americans are more not only "bowling alone," but as they conduct a monologue with themselves over which "lesser of evils" politician to support, they opt out of society and politics. The retreat to the passivity of their own home. Putnam suspects (p. 77) that such retreat from politics has led to the current democratic disarray, which may be linked to "a broad and continuing erosion of civic engagement that began a quarter-century ago."

The Putnam argument that television is the major factor in eroding social-capital formation is clearly shown in Graph 1. As the average TV watching went from 4 to 6.5 hours daily between the mid-1950s and the mid-1980s, the five-year average number of current memberships in organizations such as the PTA, labor unions, Elks Club, the League of Women Voters, and the Red Cross has declined, steadily since 1965.⁸

Although the Bellah view in the 1980s downplayed the rise of "devolunteering" and emphasized the role of civil society as being run by volunteers,⁹ by the 1990s Bellah's influential work was no longer so widely accepted. Indeed authors such as Christopher Hitchens would not take Bellah into account at all. Rather Hitchens (quoted by Putnam, p. 70) would see the elite as entering into an age of selfishness only interested in "self-regard and self-preservation," reluctant to get involved in many major civic organizations.

⁸ Putnam quoted in Sam Robert, "Alone in the Waste Land," New York Times, December 24, 1995.

⁹ According to Robert, N. Bellah writing in 1985, for two hundred years the U.S. elite had been involved in local voluntary civic associations and would continue to provide the moral imagination of Americans. (P. 167.)

BEYOND NATIONAL BORDERS AND THE RISE OF NEW QUESTIONS

In my view, world events already have transcended the views of Bellah, Lasch, and most other writers because they do not fathom the fact that new international blocs of nations are creating networks of internationally responsible leaders who look to larger international communities rather than to one bound by national borders. Although Bellah captured the idea that U.S. citizens would volunteer to help the world, he did not envision them as looking to the international communities of interest rather than to the U.S. "national interest."

Lasch, too, was trapped in his own time. The contradiction in his otherwise insightful work is that leaders and potential leaders of the masses should be imprisoned forever as part of the masses. That the elites cannot be so imprisoned was made obvious in 1958 by Michael Young, when in coining the term "meritocracy," he wrote (p. 15) that "the rate of progress depends upon the creative minority, the innovator who with one stroke can save the labor of 10,000, the brilliant few who cannot look without wonder, the restless élite who have made mutation a social, as well as a biological fact."

Putnam also misses the trend that is taking the meritocratic elite beyond border. Thus Putnam laments that the laissez-faire cosmopolitanism of this generation of the mid-1990s points to the deterioration in American social capital and suggests that "another quarter-century of change at the same rate would bring to the United States, to the midpoint among all these countries, roughly equivalent to South Korea, Belgium, or Estonia today." (Putnam p. 74)

Two writers who do partially understand the dimensions of changing loyalty from "national communities" to "international communities of interest" are Alvin Toffler and Leslie Helms. As Helms writes, agreeing with Toffler's prediction, the global economy is creating "knowledge workers" who are part-time employees of "virtual" corporations which have no geographical identity or permanent work force.¹⁰

Another contradiction or countertrend to Lasch's skepticism is the growing number of NPPOs (Not-for-Private-Profit-Organizations), phenomenon only noticed by Professor Putnam.¹¹ There is an international community taking the place of the "idealized community in which individual initiatives interrelate to improve the life of all."¹²

The technology-based challenge to the old picture of traditional community is the information revolution which is shaping new 'mental habits.' People in different countries now have the means to know far more about each other than ever before because technology brings us closer.

Technology is even changing warfare away from violence. Until about 60 years ago, the only way in which one country could successfully impose its will was to defeat through the use of military

¹⁰ Leslie Helms "Workers Brave a New World" Los Angeles Times, December 10, 1995.

¹¹ Putnam, p. 71.

¹² Bellah, p. 199.

force. But nowadays, economic "warfare" involves use of trade to win influence, as the Japanese and Germans have discovered. Ironically, the erosion of ex-Yugoslavia is the last gasp of tribal violence.

With the rise of telephone communication (including E-mail, fax and video conferencing,) the link of elites worldwide is engendering new networks of leadership that works for communities which transcend national boundaries.

Let me give as exemple the Global Web of Soros Foundation, a Not-For-Private-Profit organization for open civil societies all around the world.

If any one item of technology can limit human-rights abuses, it is the portable telephone.

Telephones not only increase the diversity and reach of who can be in contact (e.g. would-be victims can call for help), but have the potential to again make the home important to workers as well as elites. With E-mail, fax, and phone contact, one need not go to the "office" in order to be in the "loop" of company functions; and the home becomes for many a base for national and international activity. The two- (and even three-) telephone household is fresh evidence that personal computers and digital technology are making the home the focus of many families' leisure and work activities."¹³

Although Putnam could argue that two-telephone household means that more phone lines can result in greater isolation (e.g. in the case, say, of a parent browsing the World Wide Web in one room

¹³ Mark Landler, "Multiple Family Phone Lines, A Postwar U.S. Trend," New York Times, December 26, 1995.

while his/her child is playing an online video game in another, thus increasing nonspoken communication through the sending and receiving of digitized computer messages), the potential for immediate voice and visual communication across long distances retains the personal dimension that outweighs such concerns.

Lasch's idea that one has to belong to a national community is outdated, just like the idea that one has to belong to a traditional family. The idea that young executives are "go international" does not mean that they are avoiding civic responsibility but enlarging it. In my view, many U.S. elites are not rebelling against the masses but peacefully forging new international communities of interest.

FUTURE STUDY NEEDED

In a following paper I propose to analyze the ways in which U.S. executives have assumed and are continuing to assume great social responsibility in the international arena. They are often taking this leadership to help formerly Communist countries break statist power by creating new bases for civil society in places ranging from Mexico to Romania and from China to Egypt.

My future study will focus, for example, on the experience of organizations, such as the Young Presidents' Organization, which meld the profit motive with the motive to develop locally responsible civil society through international networks of business communication. Let us not forget that it was profit making that led to the creation of major U.S. foundations, so much money having been dubiously accumulated by capital barons, that to be "saved" in the family name it had to be donated to autonomous organizations such as the Rockefeller Foundation. Today, it is organizations such as the Citibank and the U.S. National Society of Fund Raising Executives (which to reflect reality now needs to change its name to "International Society") that cross-employ executives who move from the NPPO sector to the business sector, assuring a new source of donations.

Beyond business, academic organizations such as PROFMEX (The Consortium for Research on Mexico) illustrates how professors who formerly operated nationally have created an international "community" of 80 universities worldwide to interpret for Eastern Europe, Asia, and the Middle East, which seek to end statism, the lessons learned from Mexico's leading-edge position in anti-state activity. PROFMEX scholars are setting up networks of policymaking

elites who can develop U.S.-type foundation law throughout the world in order to create a tax-deductible basis for establishing community based foundations that are able to make the thousands of decentralized decisions no central government can efficiently make.¹⁴

Further, analysis of the experiences of (1) the Inter-American Foundation and U.S. AID (which have worked for the last 30 years to establish civic organizations at the local level in Latin America and the developing world, and (2) the El Paso Community Foundation (which has developed cross border ties with Mexico and Canada) will help observers to understand the rise of new communities of interests led by leaders who do indeed represent a new, socially responsible meritocratic elite.

¹⁴ Olga Lazín, Report from the Executive Committee, PROFMEX LETTER, San Diego State University, No. 1, November 1994, p.2

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