

THE REVOLT OF THE ELITES

Have they canceled
their allegiance to America?

By *Christopher Lasch*

When José Ortega y Gasset published *The Revolt of the Masses* in 1930, he could not have foreseen a time when it would be more appropriate to speak of a revolt of the elites. Writing in the era of the Bolshevik revolution and the rise of fascism, in the aftermath of a cataclysmic war that had torn Europe apart, Ortega attributed the crisis of Western culture to the “political domination of the masses.” In our time, however, the chief threat seems to come not from the masses but from those at the top of the social hierarchy, the elites who control the international flow of money and information, preside over philanthropic foundations and institutions of higher learning, manage the instruments of cultural production, and thus set the terms of public debate. Members of the elite have lost faith in the values, or what remains of them, of the West. For many people, the very term “Western civilization” now calls to mind an organized system of domination designed to enforce conformity to bourgeois values and to keep the victims of patriarchal oppression—women, children, homosexuals, people of color—in a permanent state of subjection. In a remarkable turn of events that confounds our expectations about the course of history, something that Ortega never dreamed of has occurred—the revolt of the elites.

From Ortega’s point of view, one that was widely shared at the time, the value of cultural elites lay in their willingness to assume responsibility for the exacting standards without which civilization is impossible. They lived in the service of demanding ideals. “Nobility,” Ortega wrote, “is defined by the demands it makes on us—by obligations, not by rights.” The mass man, on the other hand, had no use for obligations and no understanding of what they implied, “no feeling for [the] great historical duties.” Instead, he asserted the “rights of the commonplace.” At once resentful and self-satisfied, he rejected “everything that is excellent, individual, qualified, and select.” Lacking any comprehension of the fragility of civilization or the tragic character of history, he was concerned only with his own well-being and looked forward to a future

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TODAY, IT IS THE MASSES,
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IN HUMAN LIFE AND HISTORY

of "limitless possibilities" and "complete freedom." His many failings included a "lack of romance in his dealings with women." Erotic love, a demanding ideal in its own right, had no attraction for him. His attitude toward the body was severely practical: he made a cult of physical fitness and submitted to hygienic regimens that promised to keep it in good repair and to extend its longevity. Above all, however, it was the "deadly hatred of all that is not itself" that characterized the mass mind, as Ortega described it. Incapable of wonder or respect, the mass man was the "spoiled child of human history." The mass man, according to Ortega, took for granted the benefits conferred by civilization and demanded them "peremptorily, as if they were natural rights." Though he enjoyed advantages brought about by the general "rise of the historic level," he felt no obligation either to his progenitors or to his progeny. His "incredible ignorance of history" made it possible for him to think of the present moment as far superior to the civilizations of the past and to forget, moreover, that contemporary civilization was itself the product of centuries of historical development, not the unique achievement of an age that had discovered the secret of progress by turning its back on the past.

All the habits of mind that Ortega attributed to the masses are now, I submit, more characteristic of the upper levels of society than of the lower or middle levels. It can hardly be said that ordinary people today look forward to a world of "limitless possibility." Any sense that the masses are riding the wave of history has long since departed. The radical movements that disturbed the peace of the twentieth century have failed one by one, and no successors have appeared on the horizon. The industrial working class, once the mainstay of the socialist movement, has become a pitiful remnant of itself. The hope that "new social movements" would take its place in the struggle against capitalism, which briefly sustained the left in the late Seventies and early Eighties, has come to nothing. Not only do the new social movements—feminism, gay rights, welfare rights, agitation against racial discrimination—have nothing in common; their only coherent demand aims at inclusion in the dominant structures rather than at a revolutionary transformation of social relations.

The masses today have lost interest in revolution. Indeed, their political instincts are demonstrably more conservative than those of their self-appointed spokesmen and would-be liberators. It is the working and lower middle classes, after all, who favor limits on abortion, cling to the two-parent family as a source of stability in a turbulent world, resist experiments with "alternative lifestyles," and harbor deep reservations about affirmative action and other ventures in large-scale social engineering. Today, it is the masses, not the elites, who possess the highly developed sense of limits that Ortega identified with civilization. Members of the working and lower middle classes understand, as their betters do not, that there are inherent limits on human control over the course of social development, over nature and the body, over the tragic elements in human life and history. While young professionals subject themselves to an arduous schedule of physical exercise and dietary controls designed to keep death at bay—to maintain themselves in a state of permanent youthfulness, eternally attractive and remarriageable—ordinary people, on the other hand, accept the body's decay as something against which it is more or less useless to struggle. Upper-middle-class liberals have mounted a crusade to sanitize American society—to create a "smoke-free environment," to censor everything from pornography to "hate speech," and at the same time, incongruously, to extend the range of personal choice in matters where most people feel the need for solid moral guidelines.

When confronted with resistance to these initiatives, members of today's elite betray the venomous hatred that lies not far beneath the smiling face of upper-middle-class benevolence. They find it hard to understand why their hygienic conception of life fails to command universal enthusiasm. In the United States, "Middle America"—a term that has both geographical and social implications—has come to symbolize everything that stands in the way of progress: "family values," mindless patriotism, religious fundamentalism, racism, homophobia, retrograde views of women. Middle Americans, as they

appear to the makers of educated opinion, are hopelessly dowdy, unfashionable, and provincial. They are at once absurd and vaguely menacing—not because they wish to overthrow the old order but precisely because their defense of it appears so deeply irrational that it expresses itself, at the higher reaches of its intensity, in fanatical religiosity, in a repressive sexuality that occasionally erupts into violence against women and gays, and in a patriotism that supports imperialist wars and a national ethic of aggressive masculinity. Simultaneously arrogant and insecure, the new elites regard the masses with mingled scorn and apprehension.

The revolt of the elites against older conceptions of prudence and constraint is occurring at a time when the general course of history no longer favors the leveling of social distinctions but runs more and more in the direction of a two-class society in which the favored few monopolize the advantages of money, education, and power. It is undeniable, of course, that the comforts of modern life are still distributed far more widely than they were before the Industrial Revolution. It was this democratization of comfort that Ortega had in mind when he spoke of the “rise of the historic level.” Like many others, Ortega was struck by the unheard-of abundance generated by the modern division of labor, by the transformation of luxuries into necessities, and by the popularization of standards of comfort and convenience formerly confined to the rich. These facts—the material fruits of modernization—are not in question. In our time, however, the democratization of abundance—the expectation that each generation would enjoy a standard of living beyond the reach of its predecessors—has given way to a reversal in which age-old inequalities are beginning to reestablish themselves, sometimes at a frightening rate, sometimes so gradually as to escape notice.

People in the upper 20 percent of the income structure now control half the country’s wealth. In the last twenty years, only they have experienced a net gain in family income. In the brief years of the Reagan Administration alone, their share of the national income rose from 41.5 percent to 44 percent. The middle class, generously defined as those with incomes ranging from \$15,000 to \$50,000 a year, declined from 61 percent of the population in 1970 to 52 percent in 1985. These figures convey only a partial, imperfect impression of momentous changes that have taken place in a remarkably short period of time. The steady growth of unemployment, now expanded to include white-collar workers, is more revealing. So is the growth of the “contingent labor force.” The number of part-time jobs has doubled since 1980 and now amounts to a quarter of all available jobs. No doubt this massive growth of part-time employment helps to explain why the number of workers covered by retirement plans, which rose from 22 percent to 45 percent between 1950 and 1980, slipped back to 42.6 percent by 1986. It also helps to explain the decline in union membership and the steady erosion of union influence. All these developments, in turn, reflect the loss of manufacturing jobs and the shift to an economy increasingly based on information and services.

The upper middle class, the heart of the new professional and managerial elites, is defined, apart from its rapidly rising income, not so much by its ideology as by a way of life that distinguishes it, more and more unmistakably, from the rest of the population. This way of life is glamorous, gaudy, sometimes indecently lavish. The prosperity enjoyed by the professional and managerial classes, which make up most of the upper 20 percent of the income structure, derives in large part from the emerging marital pattern inelegantly known as “assortative mating”—the tendency of men to marry women who can be relied on to bring in income more or less equivalent to their own. Doctors used to marry nurses; lawyers and executives, their secretaries. Now upper-middle-class men tend to marry women of their own class, business or professional associates with lucrative careers of their own. “What

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if the \$60,000 lawyer marries another \$60,000 lawyer," Mickey Kaus asks in his book *The End of Equality*, "and the \$20,000 clerk marries a \$20,000 clerk? Then the difference between their incomes suddenly becomes the difference between \$120,000 and \$40,000"; and "although the trend is still masked in the income statistics by the low average wages of women," Kaus adds, "it's obvious to practically everyone, even the experts, that something like this is in fact happening." It is unnecessary to seek further for an explanation of feminism's appeal to the professional and managerial class.

How should this new social elite be described? Their investment in education and information, as opposed to property, distinguishes them from the rich bourgeoisie, the ascendancy of which characterized an earlier stage of capitalism, and from the old proprietary class—the middle class, in the strict sense of the term—that once made up the bulk of the population. These groups constitute a "new class" only in the sense that their livelihood rests not so much on the ownership of property as on the manipulation of information and professional expertise. They embrace too wide a variety of occupations—brokers, bankers, real-estate promoters and developers, engineers, consultants of all kinds, systems analysts, scientists, doctors, publicists, publishers, editors, advertising executives, art directors, moviemakers, entertainers, journalists, television producers and directors, artists, writers, university professors—to be described as a "new class" or a "new ruling class." Furthermore, they lack a common political outlook.

In Secretary of Labor Robert Reich, the new American elite has found its philosopher. Reich's category of "symbolic analysts" in his book *The Work of Nations* serves as a clumsy but useful, empirical, and rather unpretentious description of the new elite. These are people, as Reich describes them, who live in a world of abstract concepts and symbols, ranging from stock-market quotations to the visual images produced by Hollywood and Madison Avenue, and who specialize in the interpretation and deployment of symbolic information. Reich contrasts them with the two other principal categories of labor—"routine producers," who perform repetitive tasks and exercise little control over the design of production, and "in-person servers," whose work also consists of the routine, for the most part, but "must be provided person-to-person" and therefore cannot be "sold worldwide." If we allow for the highly schematic and necessarily imprecise character of these categories, they correspond closely enough to everyday observation to give us a fairly accurate impression not only of the occupational structure but of the class structure of American society today. The "symbolic analysts" are clearly rising in wealth and status while the other categories, which make up 80 percent of the population, are declining.

Reich's portrait of the "symbolic analysts" is extravagantly flattering. In his eyes, they represent the best and brightest in American life. Educated at "elite private schools" and "high-quality suburban public schools, where they are tracked through advanced courses," they enjoy every advantage their dotting parents can provide.

Their teachers and professors are attentive to their academic needs. They have access to state-of-the-art science laboratories, interactive computers and video systems in the classroom, language laboratories, and high-tech school libraries. Their classes are relatively small; their peers are intellectually stimulating. Their parents take them to museums and cultural events, expose them to foreign travel, and give them music lessons. At home are educational books, educational toys, educational videotapes, microscopes, telescopes, and personal computers replete with the latest educational software.

These privileged young people acquire advanced degrees at the "best [universities] in the world," the superiority of which is proved by their ability to attract foreign students in great numbers. In this cosmopolitan atmosphere, they overcome the provincial folkways that impede creative thought, according to Reich. "Skeptical, curious, and creative," they become problem solvers par

excellence, equal to any challenge. Unlike those who engage in mind-numbing routines, they love their work, which engages them in lifelong learning and endless experimentation.

Old-fashioned intellectuals tend to work by themselves and to be jealous and possessive about their ideas. By contrast, the new brain workers—producers of high-quality “insights” in a variety of fields ranging from marketing and finance to art and entertainment—operate best in teams. Their “capacity to collaborate” promotes “system thinking”—the ability to see problems in their totality, to absorb the fruits of collective experimentation, and to “discern larger causes, consequences, and relationships.” Since their work depends so heavily on “networking,” they settle in “specialized geographic pockets” populated by people like themselves. These privileged communities—Cambridge, Silicon Valley, Hollywood—become “wondrously resilient” centers of artistic, technical, and promotional enterprise. These new workers represent the epitome of intellectual achievement, in Reich’s admiring view, and of the good life conceived as the exchange of “insights,” “information,” and professional gossip.

The geographical concentration of knowledge producers, once it reaches a critical mass, incidentally provides a market for the growing class of “in-person servers” who cater to their needs. “It is no accident,” says Reich,

that Hollywood is home to a conspicuously large number of voice coaches, fencing trainers, dancing instructors, performers’ agents, and suppliers of photographic, acoustic and lighting equipment. Also found in close proximity are restaurants with precisely the right ambience favored by producers wooing directors and directors wooing screenwriters, and everyone in Hollywood wooing everyone else.

Universal admission to the class of “creative” people would best meet Reich’s ideal of a democratic society, but since this goal is clearly unattainable, the next best thing, presumably, is a society composed of “symbolic analysts” and their hangers-on. The latter are themselves consumed with dreams of stardom but are content, in the meantime, to live in the shadow of the stars, waiting to be discovered. They are symbiotically united with their betters in the continuous search for marketable talent that can be compared, as Reich’s imagery makes clear, only to the rites of courtship. One might add the more jaundiced observation that the circles of power—finance, government, art, entertainment—overlap and become increasingly interchangeable.

Though Reich turns to Hollywood for a particularly compelling example of the “wondrously resilient” communities that spring up wherever there is a concentration of “creative” people, his description of the new kind of elite community fits the nation’s capital as well. Washington becomes a parody of Tinseltown; executives take to the airwaves, creating overnight the semblance of political movements; movie stars become political pundits, even presidents; reality and the simulation of reality become more and more difficult to distinguish. Ross Perot launches his presidential campaign from *Larry King Live*. Hollywood stars take a prominent part in the Clinton campaign and flock to Clinton’s inaugural, investing it with the glamour of a Hollywood opening. TV anchormen and interviewers become celebrities; celebrities in the world of entertainment take on the role of social critics. The boxer Mike Tyson issues a three-page open letter from the Indiana prison where he is serving a six-year term for rape condemning the President’s “crucifixion” of Lani Guinier. The star-struck Rhodes scholar Robert Reich, prophet of the new world of “abstraction, system thinking, experimentation, and collaboration,” joins the Clinton Administration in the incongruous capacity of secretary of labor—administrator, in other words, of the one category of employment (“routine production”) that has no future at all (according to his own account) in a society composed of “symbolic analysts” and “in-person servers.” Only in a world in which words and images bear ever less resemblance to the things they appear to describe would it be possible for a man like Reich to refer to himself, without irony, as secretary of labor or to write so glowingly of a society governed by “the

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best and the brightest." (The last time the best and the brightest got control of the country, they dragged it into a protracted, demoralizing war in Southeast Asia, from which the country still has not fully recovered.)

The arrogance of the elite, in its revolt against civilizing limits, should not be confused with the pride, characteristic of aristocratic classes, that rests on the inheritance of an ancient lineage and on the obligation to defend its honor. Neither valor and chivalry nor the code of courtly, romantic love, with which these values are closely associated, has any place in the worldview of the best and the brightest. A meritocracy has no more use for chivalry and valor than a hereditary aristocracy has for brains. Although hereditary advantages play an important part in the attainment of professional or managerial status, the new class has to maintain the fiction that its power rests on intelligence alone. Hence it has little sense of ancestral gratitude or of an obligation to live up to responsibilities inherited from the past. It thinks of itself as a self-made elite owing its privileges exclusively to its own efforts. Even the concept of a republic of letters, which might be expected to appeal to elites with such a large stake in higher education, is almost entirely absent from their frame of reference.

Meritocratic elites find it difficult to imagine a community, even a community of the intellect, that reaches into both the past and the future and is constituted by an awareness of intergenerational obligation. The "zones" and "networks" admired by Reich bear little resemblance to communities in any traditional sense of the term. Populated by transients, they lack the continuity that derives from a sense of place and from standards of conduct self-consciously cultivated and handed down from generation to generation. The "community" of the best and the brightest is a community of contemporaries,

T in the double sense that its members think of themselves as agelessly youthful and that the mark of this youthfulness is precisely their ability to stay on top of the latest trends.

The identification and promotion of "the best and the brightest" is the meritocratic ideal. Meritocracy, however, is a parody of democracy. It offers opportunities for advancement, in theory at least, to anyone with the talent to seize them; but "opportunities to rise," as R. H. Tawney pointed out in *Equality*, "are no substitute for a general diffusion of the means of civilization," of the "dignity and culture" that are needed by all "whether they rise or not." Social mobility does not undermine the influence of elites; if anything, it helps to solidify their influence by supporting the illusion that it rests solely on merit. Furthering upward mobility merely strengthens the likelihood that elites will exercise power irresponsibly, precisely because they recognize so few obligations to their predecessors or to the communities they profess to lead. Their lack of gratitude disqualifies meritocratic elites from the burden of leadership, and, in any case, they are less interested in leadership than in escaping from the common lot—the very definition of meritocratic success.

The inner logic of meritocracy has seldom been more rigorously exposed than in the British writer Michael Young's dystopian novel, *The Rise of the Meritocracy 1870–2033* (1959), a work written in the tradition of Tawney, G.D.H. Cole, George Orwell, E. P. Thompson, and Raymond Williams. Young's narrator, a historian writing in the fourth decade of the twenty-first century, approvingly chronicles the "fundamental change" of the century and a half beginning around 1870—the redistribution of intelligence "between the classes." "By imperceptible degrees an aristocracy of birth has turned into an aristocracy of talent." Thanks to industry's adoption of intelligence testing, the abandonment of the principle of seniority, and the growing influence of the school at the expense of the family, "the talented have been given the opportunity to rise to the level which accords with their capacities, and the lower classes consequently reserved for those who are also lower in ability." In Young's world, a doctrinaire belief in equality collapsed in the face of the practical advantages of an educational system that "no longer required the clever to mingle with the stupid."

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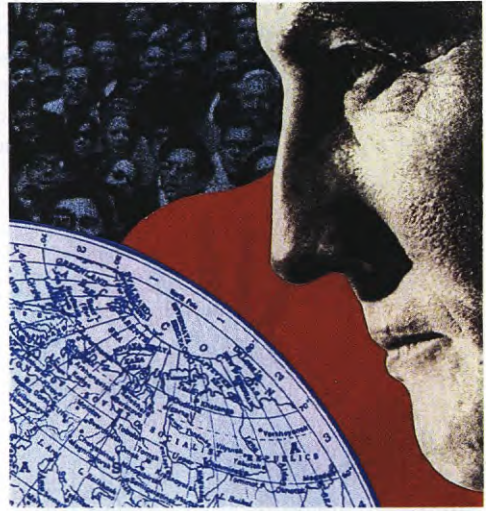
Young's imaginative projection sheds a great deal of light on trends in the United States, where a seemingly democratic system of elite recruitment leads to results that are far from democratic—segregation of social classes, contempt for manual labor, collapse of the common schools, loss of a common culture. As Young describes it, meritocracy has the effect of making elites more secure than ever in their privileges (which can now be seen as the appropriate reward of diligence and brainpower) while nullifying working-class opposition. "The best way to defeat opposition," Young's historian observes, "is . . . appropriating and educating the best children of the lower classes while they are still young." Liberals and conservatives alike ignore the real objection to meritocracy—that it drains talent away from the lower classes and thus deprives them of effective leadership—and content themselves with dubious arguments to the effect that education does not live up to its promise of fostering social mobility. If it did, they seem to imply, no one would presumably have any reason to complain. Those who are left behind, knowing that "they have had every chance," cannot legitimately complain about their lot. "For the first time in human history the inferior man has no ready buttress for his self-regard." It should not surprise us, then, that meritocracy also generates an obsessive concern with "self-esteem." The new therapies (sometimes known collectively as the recovery movement) seek to counter the oppressive sense of failure in those who fail to climb the educational ladder even while they leave intact the existing structure of elite recruitment—the acquisition of educational credentials.

An aristocracy of talent is superficially an attractive ideal, which appears to distinguish democracies from societies based on hereditary privilege. Meritocracy, however, turns out to be a contradiction in terms: the talented retain many of the vices of aristocracy without its virtues. Their snobbery lacks any acknowledgment of reciprocal obligations between the favored few and the multitude. Although they are full of "compassion" for the poor, they cannot be said to subscribe to a theory of noblesse oblige, which would imply a willingness to make a direct and personal contribution to the public good. Obligation, like everything else, has been depersonalized; exercised through the agency of the state, the burden of supporting it falls not on the professional and managerial class but, disproportionately, on the lower middle and working classes. The policies advanced by new-class liberals on behalf of the downtrodden and oppressed—

racial integration of the public schools, for example—require sacrifices from the ethnic minorities who share the inner cities with the poor, seldom from the suburban liberals who design and support those policies.

To an alarming extent, the privileged classes—by an expansive definition, the top 20 percent—have made themselves independent not only of crumbling industrial cities but of public services in general. They send their children to private schools, insure themselves against medical emergencies by enrolling in company-supported plans, and hire private security guards to protect themselves against the mounting violence. It is not just that they see no point in paying for public services they no longer use; many of them have ceased to think of themselves as Americans in any important sense, implicated in America's destiny for better or worse. Their ties to an international culture of work and leisure—of business, entertainment, information, and "information retrieval"—make many members of the elite deeply indifferent to the prospect of national decline.

The market in which the new elites operate is now international in scope. Their fortunes are tied to enterprises that operate across national boundaries. They are more concerned with the smooth functioning of the system as a whole than with any of its parts. Their loyalties—if the term is not itself anachronistic in this context—are international rather than regional, national, or lo-



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cal. They have more in common with their counterparts in Brussels or Hong Kong than with the masses of Americans not yet plugged in to the network of global communications.

In the borderless global economy, money has lost its links to nationality. David Rieff, who spent several months in Los Angeles collecting material for his book *Los Angeles: Capital of the Third World*, reports that "at least two or three times a week . . . I could depend on hearing someone say that the future 'belonged' to the Pacific Rim." The movement of money and population across national borders has transformed the "whole idea of place," according to Rieff. The privileged classes in Los Angeles feel more kinship with their counterparts in Japan, Singapore, and Korea than with most of their own countrymen.

The changing class structure of the United States mirrors changes that are taking place all over the industrial world. In Europe, referenda on unification have revealed a deep and widening gap between the political classes and the more humble members of society, who fear that the European Economic Community will be dominated by bureaucrats and technicians devoid of any feelings of national identity or allegiance. Even in Japan, the very model of successful industrialization in the last two or three decades, public-opinion polls conducted in 1987 revealed a growing belief that the country could no longer be described as middle-class, ordinary people having failed to share in the vast fortunes accumulated in real estate, finance, and manufacturing.

Outside of the industrial democracies, with their increasing social polarization, the global disparity between wealth and poverty has become so glaring that it is hardly necessary to review the evidence of growing inequality. In Latin America, Africa, and large parts of Asia, the sheer growth in numbers, together with the displacement of rural populations by the commercialization of agriculture, has subjected civic life to unprecedented strains. Vast urban agglomerations—they can scarcely be called cities—have taken shape, overflowing with poverty, wretchedness, disease, and despair. Paul Kennedy projects twenty of these "megacities" by 2025, each with a population of 11 million or more. Mexico City will already have more than 24 million inhabitants by the year 2000; São Paulo, more than 23 million; Calcutta, 16 million; Bombay, 15.5 million. As the collapse of civic life in these swollen cities continues, not only the poor but also the middle classes will experience conditions unimaginable a few years ago. Middle-class standards of living can be expected to decline throughout what is all too hopefully referred to as the developing world. In a country like Peru, once a prosperous nation with reasonable prospects of evolving parliamentary institutions, the middle class for all practical purposes has ceased to exist.

A middle class, as Walter Russell Mead reminds us in his study of the declining American empire, *Mortal Splendor*, "does not appear out of thin air." Its power and numbers "depend on the overall wealth of the domestic economy"; and in countries, accordingly, where "wealth is concentrated in the hands of a tiny oligarchy and the rest of the population is desperately poor, the middle class can grow to only a limited extent. . . . [It] never escapes its primary role as a servant class to the oligarchy." Unfortunately, this description now applies to a growing list of nations that have prematurely reached the limits of economic development, countries in which a rising "share of their own national product goes to foreign investors or creditors." Such a fate may well await even industrial nations like the United States.

The world of the late twentieth century thus presents a curious spectacle. On the one hand it is now united, through the agency of the market, as it never was before. Capital and labor flow freely across political boundaries that seem increasingly artificial and unenforceable. Popular culture

follows in their wake. On the other hand, tribal loyalties have seldom been so aggressively promoted. Religious and ethnic warfare breaks out in one country after another: in India and Sri Lanka, in large parts of Africa, in the former Soviet Union and the former Yugoslavia.

It is the weakening of the nation-state that underlies both these developments—the movement toward unification and the seemingly contradictory movement toward fragmentation. The state can no longer contain ethnic conflicts; nor can it contain the forces leading to globalization. Ideologically, nationalism comes under attack from both sides: from advocates of ethnic and racial particularism and also from those who argue that the only hope of peace lies in the internationalization of everything from weights and measures to the artistic imagination.

Fears that the international language of money will speak more loudly than local dialects inspire the reassertion of ethnic particularism in Europe, while the decline of the nation-state weakens the only authority capable of holding ethnic rivalries in check. The revival of tribalism, in turn, reinforces a reactive cosmopolitanism among elites. Curiously enough, it is Robert Reich, notwithstanding his admiration for the new elite of “symbolic analysts,” who provides one of the most penetrating accounts of the “darker side of cosmopolitanism.” Without national attachments, he reminds us, people have little inclination to make sacrifices or to accept responsibility for their actions. “We learn to feel responsible for others because we share with them a common history . . . a common culture . . . a common fate.” The denationalization of business enterprise tends to produce a class of cosmopolitans who see themselves as “world citizens, but without accepting . . . any of the obligations that citizenship in a polity normally implies.” But the cosmopolitanism of the favored few, because it is uninformed by the practice of citizenship, turns out to be a higher form of parochialism. Instead of supporting public services, the new elites put their money into the improvement of their own self-enclosed enclaves. They gladly pay for private and suburban schools, private police, and private systems of garbage collection; but they have managed to relieve themselves, to a remarkable extent, of the obligation to contribute to the national treasury. Their acknowledgment of civic obligations does not extend beyond their own immediate neighborhoods. The “secession of the symbolic analysts,” as Reich calls it, provides us with a particularly striking instance of the revolt of elites against the constraints of time and place.

The decline of nations is closely linked to the global decline of the middle class. It is the crisis of the middle class, and not simply the growing chasm between wealth and poverty, that needs to be emphasized in a sober analysis of our prospects. Ever since the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the fortunes of the nation-state have been bound up with those of the trading and manufacturing classes. The founders of modern nations, whether they were exponents of royal privilege like Louis XIV or republicans like Washington and Lafayette, turned to this class for support in their struggle against the feudal nobility. A large part of the appeal of nationalism lay in the state's ability to establish a common market within its boundaries, to enforce a uniform system of justice, and to extend citizenship both to petty proprietors and to rich merchants, alike excluded from power under the old regime. The middle class understandably became the most patriotic, not to say jingoistic and militaristic element in society. But the unattractive features of middle-class nationalism should not obscure its positive contributions in the form of a highly developed sense of place and a respect for historical continuity—hallmarks of the middle-class sensibility that can be appreciated more fully now that middle-class culture is everywhere in retreat. Whatever its faults, middle-class nationalism provided a common ground, common standards, a common frame of reference without which society dissolves into nothing more than contending factions, as the founding fathers of America understood so well. The revolt of the masses that Ortega feared is no longer a plausible threat. But the revolt of the elites against time-honored traditions of locality, obligation, and restraint may yet unleash a war of all against all. ■

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