

THE ORIGINS OF TOTALITARIANISM: INTERLUDE DEFINING ELITES

Previous posts in this series:

The Origins of Totalitarianism Part 1:
Introduction.

The Origins of Totalitarianism Part 2:
Antisemitism

The Origins of Totalitarianism: Interlude on the
Tea Party

The Origins of Totalitarianism Part 3:
Superfluous Capital and Superfluous People

The Origins of Totalitarianism: Interlude on The
Commons

Capitalism Versus The Social Commons (published
at Naked Capitalism; discusses privatization
using Rosa Luxemburg theory)

The Origins of Totalitarianism Part 4: Humanity
under Totalitarianism

The Origins of Totalitarianism: Interlude on
Right-Wing Authoritarianism

The Origins of Totalitarianism Part 5: Artistic
and Intellectual Elites and the Rise of Fascism

In Part 5 I discussed Hannah Arendt's view of
the role of the elites in the rise of fascism.
She defines the term elites as the artists,
composers and intellectuals in Germany and
Austria in the late 19th and early 20th
Centuries. We use the term "elites" more broadly
today. Depending on the context, it might mean
some or all of the following:

1) a few very rich people. This group is
described by Robert Reich as

█ ...the major corporations, their top

executives, and Washington lobbyists and trade associations; the biggest Wall Street banks, their top officers, traders, hedge-fund and private-equity managers, and their lackeys in Washington; the billionaires who invest directly in politics; and the political leaders of both parties, their political operatives, and fundraisers.

2) the people whose views are most respected in some scientific field or some academic area;

3) pundits, writers, media people, and the talking heads and experts who appear in their outlets. The experts themselves fall into two categories. One group comes from academia, and generally are actual experts. The other comes from think tanks, national issue-oriented organizations and other holding pens where they try to influence policy and wait for an opportunity to move into government.

4) top government people, including those in the legislature and their top staffers, top administration officials and of course, the President. This group also includes members of the deep state, the permanent group of military and security officials and bureaucrats who stay on election to election.

Taking these groups together, we have a working definition of the Establishment, and by separating them along the lines of their political party identifications, we have the Republican and Democratic Establishments.

You'll note there is no mention in my list of artists or composers, and no mention of "intellectuals". We have a complicated relationship with any kind of intellectualism, as Richard Hofstadter explains in *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*, a book I read in college, reread later, and kept, I thought, until I went to look for it. Nicholas Lemann discussed it in an article in the *Columbia Journalism Review*, from which the following is

taken.

It helps in understanding Hofstadter to know what [Hofstadter] takes intellectualism to mean. Here is a passage that comes as close as any in the book to a definition:

It accepts conflict as a central and enduring reality and understands human society as a form of equipoise based upon the continuing process of compromise. It shuns ultimate showdowns and looks upon the ideal of total partisan victory as unattainable, as merely another variety of threat to the kind of balance with which it is familiar. It is sensitive to nuances and sees things in degrees. It is essentially relativist and skeptical, but at the same time circumspect and humane.

I'm not sure how well that definition works with Arendt's general description, but there certainly was a group of intellectuals in the late 19th and early 20th Century, and I think there would be general agreement on its members. Today, we don't actually have many intellectuals in that sense. Instead, we have experts, people wired into the economic and social structure who are thought to have special expertise in some area of study. Judge Richard Posner of the Seventh Circuit wrote a book about this issue, *Public Intellectuals: A Study in Decline*. This is from a review in the Economist:

He starts off by ruling out what most of us would take as archetypal intellectuals: scientists who explain science to lay people (eg, Steven Weinberg), philosophers with an influential vision of society (eg, John

Rawls or Robert Nozick) and literary intellectuals of high Bohemia (eg, Susan Sontag). No, his public intellectuals are really pundits: people who opine about issues of the day on television or in newspaper columns. On the theory that if it's real it must be countable, he ranks what he calls the top 100 on the basis of scholarly citations, media mentions and web hits.

Here's Posner's expanded list of over 600 public intellectuals. Arendt made the list, and it's fun to see the people who are quoted or sought on the internet 15 years ago; for example, David Brooks and David Broder are there, next to each other. Posner says the problem is that the then current crop of pundits (who are a subset of that list) is really bad at opining. As you would expect from the founder of the Law and Economics movement, he explains this with simplistic ideas about supply and demand. He says there are too many commentators, and that they are not held accountable for their errors, which is obviously true.

There have been a number of studies of the ability of experts to predict the future. In this review in the New Yorker Louis Menand (also on the list, and deservedly) discusses *Expert Political Judgment: How Good Is It? How Can We Know?* by Philip Tetlock, a Berkeley psychologist and researcher. It turns out experts aren't good at predicting the future either in their own fields or in other areas.

Posner is quite right that those who spout what Paul Krugman (on the list) calls zombie ideas are never held accountable for being totally wrong. Instead, their views are considered highly valuable by policy makers. This, of course, shows how badly Posner has missed the real problem. Pundits and experts who shriek about deficits and inflation in today's economy are prized by those who serve the interests of the rich, and who provide their PR.

Until the last few years, the elites have generally agreed on policies on most issues. You can see a good example in the way the New York Times discusses the refusal of the Republicans to govern, as in this astonishing piece by Jennifer Steinhauer. The destruction of institutional norms that once made government work under our ancient Constitution is now perfectly normal for our elites. For another, and more dangerous example, there is nearly universal agreement among the elites that prosecuting bank executives for their crimes that crashed the economy would not be possible. In fact, the elites generally agree that none of them can be held accountable for any of their actions, regardless of the damage done . We can no more punish Rick Snyder for poisoning Flint families than we could punish anyone for Iran-Contra or the top executives of American Water for failing to notice that the water they had privatized and sold to the people of Charleston WV was sickening. It mustn't be done.

That kind of consensus indicates that the large bulk of our public intellectuals are completely indifferent to and unaware of the level of anger at the corruption that affects every aspect of our public lives. Zephyr Teachout explains corruption succinctly: the use of public office for private gain. Our elites refuse to accept this definition. There is no better proof that we need new elites.

Note: this post was updated by expanding paragraph 1) above.