

Christopher Hayes. 2012. *Twilight of the Elites: America After Meritocracy*. New York: Crown Publishers. 239 pages.

Accounts of the state of the country's institutions have been a growth industry in the past few years. While a great deal of the literature has been process oriented, a few political observers have attempted to step back and look for broader, more systemic causes of the recent deterioration of American institutions. Christopher Hayes, a senior editor at the progressive magazine *The Nation*, as well as the host of MSNBC's morning political show *Up*, has offered a provocative and counter-intuitive theory explaining what ails American politics and economic life. In *Twilight of the Elites*, Hayes points to Americans' widespread faith in merit as the basis of our recent troubles; rather than provide an objective and morally justifiable criterion for rewarding talent, meritocracy has provoked a kind of "race to the bottom" among American elites, creating a hyper-competitive environment that justifies both disproportionate compensation and an "anything goes" mentality that spawns cascading epidemics of corruption throughout society.

Noting the British (and somewhat portentous) origins of the term, Hayes traces the deep roots of meritocratic thinking in American political culture to the framers. Michael Young, the British parliamentarian and social thinker who coined the term in the 1950s, sardonically argued in a 2001 column that meritocracy originated as a term of the left, "but came to devour it" (p. 46). Hayes' analysis elaborates on Robert Michael's "iron law of oligarchy" to derive what Hayes calls "the Iron Law of Meritocracy":

The Iron Law of Meritocracy states that eventually the inequality produced by a meritocratic system will grow large enough to subvert the mechanisms of mobility. Unequal outcomes make equal opportunity

impossible. The Principle of Difference will overwhelm the Principle of Mobility (p. 57).

The resulting inequality – and the concomitant exertions of elites to succeed or to appear to be succeeding regardless of the consequences – produces a “crisis of authority,” in which people begin to lose faith that the mere replacement of one set of elites by another will actually improve the situation. Once people begin to question a governing elite’s competence or motives, the movement toward a corrosive and thorough-going cynicism brings the legitimacy of the whole system of institutions – be it political, economic, or religious – into question, creating further obstacles to reform. Hayes draws on elaborations of recent scandals – Enron, major league baseball’s steroid scandal, and the child abuse scandal in the Catholic church – to substantiate his conviction that these scandals are endemic to socially distant elites who are convinced that they are not only entitled to their privileged positions, but that they actually overcame enormous obstacles to achieve their status, and that the less fortunate among us are not merely unlucky but are somehow morally deficient. Hayes, for example, holds up Catholic bishops as “the very archetype of a cosseted elite” (p. 194) whose principal loyalty was to the church, and whose care for their parishioners was so remote, so theoretical, as to be safely ignored.

Hayes’ prescription for the ills of meritocracy is fairly straightforward. Higher taxation on the wealthiest both reduces social distance and help fund programs that improve the conditions of lower-income Americans. He accurately notes the correlation in American history between periods of high government spending and the reduction of social inequalities. More important is his recognition that Americans “are more egalitarian than we, ourselves, realize” (p. 228). Essential to the task of securing more equitable policies is to direct “the frustration, anger, and alienation we all feel into building a trans-ideological coalition that can actually dislodge the power of the post-meritocratic elite” (p. 233). Hayes’ discussion of the similarities between the Occupy Wall Street and the TEA Party suggests that the trenchant partisan divide can be overcome. However dubious that particular trans-ideological alliance may be (a progressive-independent alliance may strike the reader as more plausible), Hayes believes that remedies need to emerge soon; otherwise, future crises may yield far more radical and destabilizing programs.

Twilight of the Elites is not without flaws. Hayes' narrative could have been more concisely summarized in strategic places, and parts of his early narrative may strike a reader with a more sophisticated theoretical palate as a bit thin and trite. At the same time, the book is readable and plausible. Anyone concerned with the fate of the American Experiment would benefit from reading this timely book.

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