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## **The Collapse of Democracies and the Need for a New Aristocracy**

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### **0. Introduction: Democracy in a Time of War?**

The famous American journalist and political commentator Walter Lippmann in 1938 began to write a book on the decline of Western liberal democracies. At the time he was living in Paris, close to the European developments leading to World War II. In December 1941 the then 52 years old Lippmann, as he later recounts, had

put the manuscript away, knowing that so much was going to happen to the world and to me that if ever I went back to the book, it would be to start all over again. When I did come back to it after the war, the foreboding which had inspired it was in a

terrible measure realized. Something had gone very wrong in the liberal democracies.<sup>1</sup>

The present humble author's situation is in a sense similar to that of Lippmann in 1941. When some few years ago I first conceived of the main ideas of the paper that follows, the Russian invasion of Ukraine was not in sight, the close collaboration between the Russian and Iranian dictatorships not conspicuous, the military alliance of Russia with North Korea unimaginable, and the Palestinian–Israeli war not regarded as a near probability. Now in the light of recent developments I began to doubt, and I still do doubt, if it makes sense to philosophize about democracy at a time overshadowed by the threat of an imminent world war. On the other hand, a central topic of my envisioned paper is the history of theories, from Plato and Aristotle to say José Ortega y Gasset, C. Wright Mills and Christopher Lasch, on the role of elites. And I feel that a survey of these theories has, in the course of the past few months, indeed become timely in my home country, Hungary, with the ruling elite now having a promisingly threatening competitor. I argue for the necessity of a new aristocracy – an intellectual aristocracy<sup>2</sup> – both in Hungary and in the Western world in general.

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Lippmann, *Essays in the Public Philosophy*, Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1955, p. 5. This is the book to which Lippmann came back after more than a decade.

<sup>2</sup> An intellectual aristocracy not quite in the sense discussed by William Whyte, in his “[The Intellectual Aristocracy Revisited](#)”, in the *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 2011. As Whyte there puts it (pp. 23 and 26): “the university and public school system was intended to create a caste of educated, active citizens; a society of well-meaning gentlemen. It was this system that perpetuated the intellectual aristocracy. ... Family and friends, schools, colleges and clubs, together produced a new class. Or, to be more exact, produced a social fraction, with its own common culture and shared identity.” My concept of a new intellectual aristocracy does not include “caste” or “new class”. It does include the characteristics of being well-educated – today both in the world of books and in the online digital world – but also loyalty to one's local surroundings, to the soil one lives on: compare e.g. Dewey's discussion on the significance of locality in his *The Public and Its Problems* (1927, 2nd ed. 1946, see here esp. pp. 158 f.), or the references to Dew-

# 1. Why Democracies Are Not Possible

The turn of phrase “the collapse of democracies” in the title of the present paper is slightly misleading, since democracies actually do not exist and never existed, with two exceptions that come to my mind. The two exceptions are Switzerland, a direct democracy since 1891<sup>3</sup>; and the early New England townships by the end of the 18th century,<sup>4</sup> still enjoying considerable autonomy at the time Tocqueville visited America in the early 1830s.<sup>5</sup>

The city-state of Athens, widely regarded as the birthplace of democracy, was a slave society. And there are arguments to show that what is called Athenian democracy – with allowing free labour as one of its elements – could not have existed if *not* being a slave society. Such an argument was put forward by Eduard Meyer, in a

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ey by Lasch in his 1995 book [The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy](#) (see esp. p. 84), or indeed his own pronouncements on the issue, cf. e.g. *ibid.*, pp. 34 f.: “the new elites ... are international rather than regional, national, or local”. For more on this topic see section 2.2. below, and also a recent first summary I attempted to provide in my paper [“Towards a New Aristocracy”](#) (uploaded on May 15, 2024).

<sup>3</sup> The correct date is actually 1971, since that was the year when at the federal level women were granted the right to vote. I am obliged to Barbara Tversky for having alerted me to this fact.

<sup>4</sup> For a more inclusive view see James Bryce, [Modern Democracies](#), New York: The Macmillan Company, 1921, cf. the introductory passages on pp. 6 and 22. Not incidentally, Bryce provides a detailed description of the history of Swiss democracy. Lippmann in his [Public Opinion](#) (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1922) repeatedly refers to Bryce.

<sup>5</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville’s classic *De la démocratie en Amérique* was published in 1835. The first American translation, *Democracy in America*, appeared in 1838, I will here quote from the [Henry Reeve translation](#), first published in 1899, reprinted by The Pennsylvania State University in 2002. Township autonomy is discussed in great detail throughout the book, with the first important formulation on p. 58: “In New England townships were completely and definitively constituted as early as 1650. The independence of the township was the nucleus round which the local interests, passions, rights, and duties collected and clung. It gave scope to the activity of a real political life most thoroughly democratic and republican.”

Die freie Arbeit ist so wenig ein später, durch lange Zwischenglieder vermittelter Nachfolger der Sklaverei, daß sie vielmehr in demselben Momente entsteht, in dem auch die Sklaverei als wirtschaftlich bedeutender Faktor in die Erscheinung tritt; beide sind gleich alt, beide sind nur zwei verschiedene und konkurrierende Formen, in denen dasselbe ökonomische Bedürfnis sich zu befriedigen sucht, in denen dieselbe ökonomische Umwandlung sich ausdrückt.

little-known talk given in 1898. Let me here quote, or rather present, a passage from that talk:

That is, free labour and slavery emerged at the same time, serving, in competing forms, the same interests.

The cradle of modern democracy, North America, began as a slave society. The first settlement, the Jamestown colony, was established in 1607; the first ship carrying slaves from Africa arrived there in 1620. Let me here give a quote again from Tocqueville, this time a lengthy one:

Virginia received the first English colony; the emigrants took possession of it in 1607. The idea that mines of gold and silver are the sources of national wealth was at that time singularly prevalent in Europe; a fatal delusion, which has done more to impoverish the nations which adopted it, and has cost more lives in America, than the united influence of war and bad laws. The men sent to Virginia were seekers of gold, adventurers, without resources and without character, whose turbulent and restless spirit endangered the infant colony, and rendered its progress uncertain. The artisans and agriculturists arrived afterwards; and, although they were a more moral and orderly race of men, they were in nowise above the level of the inferior classes in England. No lofty conceptions, no intellectual system, directed the foundation of these new settlements. The colony

was scarcely established when slavery was introduced, [here a footnote by Tocqueville: “Slavery was introduced about the year 1620 by a Dutch vessel which landed twenty negroes on the banks of the river James.”] and this was the main circumstance which has exercised so prodigious an influence on the character, the laws, and all the future prospects of the South. Slavery, as we shall afterwards show, dishonors labor; it introduces idleness into society, and with idleness, ignorance and pride, luxury and distress. It enervates the powers of the mind, and benumbs the activity of man. The influence of slavery, united to the English character, explains the manners and the social condition of the Southern States.<sup>6</sup>

The Tocqueville edition I cite has a “special introduction” by John T. Morgan. We are in 1899. Morgan praises Tocqueville for recognizing “the nature and value of the system of ‘local self-government’”, but is in a sense critical of the author’s views on how blacks should be treated in the future. “[T]hose who were then negro slaves”, writes Morgan, “are [now] clothed with the rights of citizenship, including the right of suffrage. This [is the result of] a political party movement, intended to be radical and revolutionary, but it will, ultimately, react because it has not the sanction of public opinion.” And Tocqueville, continues Morgan, would find the reason for this sentiment “in the unwritten law of the natural aversion of the races. He would find it in public opinion, which is the vital force in every law in a free government.”<sup>7</sup> The expression Morgan here uses, “public opinion”, was originally a political expression, not a theoretical one. Tocqueville had been aware of this, as shown by his reference to the [\*Historical Collection of Massachusetts\*](#).<sup>8</sup> He himself however found public opinion to be a deceptively complex phenomenon, worthy of being discussed. He points out that, in America, “public opinion

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<sup>6</sup> Tocqueville, *op. cit.*, pp. 46 f.

<sup>7</sup> Cited edition, p. 7.

<sup>8</sup> Tocqueville, *op. cit.*, p. 395. Tocqueville is here referring vol. 4, p. 198 of the [\*Historical Collection of Massachusetts\*](#). The topic is slavery in Massachusetts after 1630, how it was much later abolished in that state, and how “public opinion” influenced the process.

grows to be more and more evidently the first and most irresistible of existing powers”<sup>9</sup>. Just a few years later J. St. Mill referred to public opinion as a “yoke”, a “tyranny of opinion”, with “the opinions of masses of merely average men ... everywhere ... becoming the dominant power”.<sup>10</sup> But Mill also sensed that public opinion can occasionally be “some people’s opinion of what is good or bad for other people”<sup>11</sup>, that is, not public opinion at all. As Gabriel Tarde argued from 1895 on, the concept *public opinion* is vacuous. And this has indeed become the mainstream view after Lippmann’s book *Public Opinion* had left the press in 1922.<sup>12</sup>

### 1.1. Public Opinion a Myth

Unknownst to the scholarly world, as early as 1820 the British Home Secretary Robert Peel questioned the sense of the expression “public opinion”. A quote from Lippmann’s 1922 book: “Sir Robert Peel called “that great compound of folly, weakness, prejudice, wrong feeling, right feeling, obstinacy and newspaper paragraphs ... public opinion.””<sup>13</sup> The scholarly discussion began with Tarde’s 1895 edition of *Les lois de l’imitation*.<sup>14</sup> Towards the middle of this book Tarde cites the Tocqueville passage I just quoted (see footnote 8 above), and subsequently quotes another Tocqueville passage: “In times of equality men have no faith in one another because of their mutual likeness; but this very resemblance inspires them with an almost unlimited confidence in the judgement of the public; for it seems improbable to

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<sup>9</sup> Tocqueville, *op. cit.*, p. 510.

<sup>10</sup> John Stuart Mill, [\*On Liberty\*](#) (1859), pp. 64 and 62.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 77.

<sup>12</sup> A. Lawrence Lowell in 1913 published a book under the title [\*Public Opinion and Popular Government\*](#), New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., but the book did not have any considerable impact. Lippmann in his [\*Public Opinion\*](#) refers to Lowell on pp. 195, 253, and 405.

<sup>13</sup> Lippmann, *Public Opinion*, *loc. cit.*, p. 197. The source is [a letter by Peel](#) to John Wilson Croker.

<sup>14</sup> First edition 1890, [second edition](#) 1895, English translation 1903: [\*The Laws of Imitation\*](#), New York: Henry Holt and Company. In the 2nd French edition Tarde uses the expression “l’opinion publique” on pp. 150 and 180.

them that when all have the same amount of light, the truth should not be found on the side of the greatest number.”<sup>15</sup> Tarde then proceeds to give his counterargument: “This appears logical and mathematical; if men are like units, then it is the greatest sum of these units which must be in the right. But in reality this is an illusion based upon a constant oversight of the rôle played here by imitation. When an idea arises in triumph from the ballot-box we should be infinitely less inclined to bow down before it if we realised that nine hundred and ninety-nine thousandths of the votes that it polled were but echoes.”<sup>16</sup>

Tarde had two main conceptions. The first, that “when a man unconsciously and involuntarily reflects the opinion of others, or allows an action of others to be suggested to him, he imitates this idea or act”.<sup>17</sup> The second: journalism has an irresistible power over public opinion. This conception has been just hinted at in *The Laws of Imitation*, but was then presented in quite some detail in the 2nd edition of his *L’opinion et la foule* (1901).<sup>18</sup> Tarde points out that while “foule” – the *crowd* – is a physical mass of people, the *public*, by contrast, should be defined as a mass of people the members of

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<sup>15</sup> English edition, p. 230.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xiii (from the “Preface to the second edition”), see also p. 167. Tarde actually complements the imitation idea by adding to it the idea of *invention*: “Invention and imitation are, as we know, the elementary social acts” (*ibid.*, p. 174). Indeed he adds yet another notion, that of *initiative*, exploiting this notion for a digression on aristocracy and democracy: “The principal role of a nobility, its distinguishing mark, is its initiative, if not inventive, character. Invention can start from the lowest ranks of the people, but its extension depends upon the existence [of an aristocracy]. ... At every period and in every country the aristocratic body has been open to foreign novelties and has been quick to import them... ... As long as its vitality endures, a nobility may be recognised by this characteristic. When, on the other hand, it throws itself back upon traditions, jealously attaches itself to them and defends them against the attacks of a people whom it had previously accustomed to changes, it is safe to say that its great work is done ... and that its decline has set in” (*ibid.*, p. 251).

<sup>18</sup> Translated in part as “The Public and the Crowd”, in Terry N. Clark (ed.), *Gabriel Tarde: On Communication and Social Influence*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1969.

which are connected to each other via distant communication only. Communications these days, stresses Tarde, do not anymore need physical proximity; even without it “currents of opinion” can emerge when people e.g. sitting at home “read the same newspaper”. Being aware of this, they “are influenced by each other, and not just by the journalist, who is the common inspiration of them all”.<sup>19</sup> The public emerged with the invention of printing, the railroad, the telegraph, and the telephone.<sup>20</sup> In sum: “public opinion” is an illusion, it is a hazy fog of beliefs manipulated by the press, or more precisely, by leading journalists.<sup>21</sup>

Tarde was taken note of by Lippmann in his *Public Opinion*.<sup>22</sup> He, too, emphasizes the significance of communication technologies: “Travel and trade, the mails, the wires, and radio, railroads, highways, ships, motor cars, and in the coming generation aeroplanes, are ... of the utmost influence on the circulation of ideas. Each of these affects the supply and the quality of information and opinion in a most intricate way.”<sup>23</sup> However, according to Lippmann, there are more fundamental factors that make *public opinion* a questionable concept. First – this is the argument Lippmann begins with – the “world outside”

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<sup>19</sup> *L'opinion et la foule*, pp. 2 f.: “toutes les communications d'esprit à esprit, d'âme à âme, n'ont pas pour condition nécessaire le rapprochement des corps. De moins en moins cette condition est remplie quand se dessinent dans nos sociétés civilisées des courants d'opinion. ... [les gens] lisant le même journal et dispersés sur un vaste territoire ... influencé car ceux-ci pris en masse, et non pas seulement par le journaliste, inspireur commun”.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7: “Le public n'a pu commencer à naître qu'après le premier grand développement de l'invention de l'imprimerie, au XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle”, and then follows a more complete list: “imprimerie, chemin de fer, télégraphe, la formidable puissance de la presse, ce prodigieux téléphone” (*ibid.*, p. 11).

<sup>21</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, p. 21, footnote, Tarde quoting the American sociologist Giddings: “La presse, dit-il, “a produit son maximum d'impression sur l'opinion publique lorsqu'elle a été le porte-voix d'une personnalité remarquable... De plus, le public ne se rend pas bien compte que, dans les bureaux des journaux, *l'homme à idées*, ignoré du monde, est connu de ses camarades et imprime son individualité sur leur cerveau et leur ouvrage”.”

<sup>22</sup> *Public Opinion*, p. 53: “there come to be established personal channels ... through which Tarde's laws of imitation operate”.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 48.



we actually perceive through the mediation of “pictures in our heads”, through *mental images* we have acquired.<sup>24</sup> So the environment we believe surrounds us is really a “pseudo-environment”<sup>25</sup>. Secondly, the information the public possesses of the world is entirely incomplete, since no one, and certainly not the average person, has the capacity or time to orient himself about all relevant facts. This incomplete information is organized around what Lippmann calls *stereotypes*: “For the most part we do not first see, and then define, we define first and then see. In the great blooming, buzzing confusion of the outer world we pick out what our culture has already defined for us, and we tend to perceive that which we have picked out in the form stereotyped for us by our culture.”<sup>26</sup> Lippmann concludes:

The orthodox theory holds that a public opinion constitutes a moral judgment on a group of facts. The theory I am suggesting is that, in the present state of education, a public opinion is primarily a moralized and codified version of the facts. I am arguing that the pattern of stereotypes at the center of our codes largely determines what group of facts we shall see, and in

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<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 3 f. and 13. – Lippmann lays unusual emphasis on the role of the visual throughout his book. See e.g. pp. 160 ff., where he draws attention to the significance of *gestures*, to the “visual and tactile” aspect ideas must have in order to be effective, to “muscular perception”, to newspaper pictures and the cinema. As he puts it: “Pictures have always been the surest way of conveying an idea, and next in order, words that call up pictures in memory.” Lippmann’s interest in the visual and the tactile was probably due to the influence of one of his professors at Harvard, William James. For a discussion of James, imagery, and motoricity see my [Meaning and Motoricity: Essays on Image and Time](#) (2014), pp. 15 f. and 26; I present a broader overview of the issue in my [“Postscript: The Victory of the Pictorial Turn”](#) (2019). – Lippmann also takes note of the fact that our mental images, and thereby our perceptions of the outer world as well as our capacity to understand verbal messages, are quite often neurotically distorted. In this connection he refers, on pp. 71 ff. of [Public Opinion](#), to the psychiatrist C. G. Jung’s 1904 word-association studies. I have discussed those in my paper [Forever Jung](#) (see there pp. 7 f.).

<sup>25</sup> [Public Opinion](#), p. 15, and *passim*.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 81. The expression “stereotype” stems from the printing industry, it was Lippmann who first applied the term in a psychological sense.

what light we shall see them. That is why, with the best will in the world, the news policy of a journal tends to support its editorial policy...<sup>27</sup>

Is there a way out? Lippmann is sceptical. For public opinion to be genuine, and so a democratic society possible, “the interests of democracy”, Lippmann writes, “must remain simple, intelligible, and easily managed. Conditions must approximate those of the isolated rural township if the supply of information is to be left to casual experience. The environment must be confined within the range of every man’s direct and certain knowledge.”<sup>28</sup>

Now a return to those bygone communities is of course not possible. Lippmann experiments with two suggestions. The first: a reliance on experts. However, as he remarks, “Those who are expert are so on only a few topics.” Also, “The experts themselves are not in the least certain who among them is the most expert. And at that, the expert, even when we can identify him, is, likely as not, too busy to be consulted, or impossible to get at.”<sup>29</sup> Lippmann’s conclusion: “the utmost independence that we can exercise is to multiply the authorities [i.e. experts] whom we give a friendly hearing”, to “develop more and more men who are expert”.<sup>30</sup> This is the solution he will lean towards in his 1925 book [\*The Phantom Public\*](#).

The second suggestion: “as in most other matters, “education” is the supreme remedy”. However, adds Lippmann, “the value of this education will depend upon the evolution of knowledge. And our knowledge of human institutions is still extraordinarily meager and impression-

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<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 125.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 270. – Lippmann’s 1922 book gave rise, in Dewey’s [\*The Public and Its Problems\*](#) (1927), to an interesting train of thought on the significance of the regional and the local (cf. above, footnote 2 of my present paper). As Dewey puts it, discussing Lippmann’s views: “citizens of small and stable local communities ... were so intimately acquainted with the persons and affairs of their locality that they could pass competent judgment upon the bearing of proposed measures upon their own concerns” (pp. 158 f.).

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 116 and 223.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 224 and 314.

istic”.<sup>31</sup> By the time he wrote *The Phantom Public*, Lippmann became convinced that education cannot be a remedy at all: “The usual appeal to education can bring only disappointment. For the problems of the modern world appear and change faster than any set of teachers can grasp them, much faster than they can convey their substance to a population of children.”<sup>32</sup> And so this is then Lippmann’s final judgment on the average citizen’s predicament in representative democracies:

As a private person he does not know for certain what is going on, or who is doing it, or where he is being carried. No newspaper reports his environment so that he can grasp it; no school has taught him how to imagine it; his ideals, often, do not fit with it; listening to speeches, uttering opinions and voting do not, he finds, enable him to govern it. He lives in a world which he cannot see, does not understand and is unable to direct. – In the cold light of experience he knows that his sovereignty is a fiction. He reigns in theory, but in fact he does not govern.<sup>33</sup>

Representative democracies are phoney. But how to save, then, Western societies? Lippmann had a dream. In *Public Opinion* he quotes Plato: “until philosophers are kings, or the kings and princes of this world have the spirit and power of philosophy, and political greatness and wisdom meet in one ... cities will never cease from ill, – no, nor the human race...”<sup>34</sup> In *The Phantom Public* he makes a parallel, though indirect, reference: Plato’s “*Republic* is a tract on the proper education of a ruling class.”<sup>35</sup> And in his 1955 *Public Philosophy*, the work I referred to in the present paper by way of introduction, he writes: “Much depends upon the philosophers. For though they are not kings, they are, we may say, the teachers of the teachers.

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<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 408.

<sup>32</sup> [\*The Phantom Public\*](#), p. 27.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 13 f.

<sup>34</sup> [\*Public Opinion\*](#), p. 412.

<sup>35</sup> [\*The Phantom Public\*](#), p. 169.

... The role of philosophers is ... critical, in that they have a deciding influence in determining what may be believed, how it can be believed, and what cannot be believed. The philosophers, one might say, stand at the crossroads.”<sup>36</sup> Now as Plato puts it in his *Πολιτεία*, Book IV: there are five forms of states, of which the first “may be said to have two names, monarchy and aristocracy [αριστοκρατία = ‘rule of the best’], according as rule is exercised by one distinguished man or by many. ... But I regard the two names as describing one form only; for whether the government is in the hands of one or many, if the governors have been trained in the manner which we have supposed, the fundamental laws of the State will be maintained” (445d-e).<sup>37</sup> Lippmann’s dream, then, was the creation of a new intellectual aristocracy.

## 1.2. The Iron Law of Oligarchy

Lippmann often mentions Tocqueville, and was clearly influenced by Tarde. Another influence we should mention is Robert Michels, to whose book *Political Parties*<sup>38</sup> Lippmann in his *Public Opinion* at

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<sup>36</sup> [\*Essays in the Public Philosophy\*](#), pp. 177 f.

<sup>37</sup> Aristotle’s somewhat parallel formulations in his *Rhetoric*: “The forms of government are four: democracy, oligarchy, aristocracy, monarchy. ... under aristocracy [there is a property] of education. By education I mean that education which is laid down by the law; for it is those who have been loyal to the national institutions that hold office under an aristocracy. These are bound to be looked upon as the best men, and it is from this fact that this form of government has derived its name. ... The end of ... aristocracy [is] the maintenance of education and national institutions” (1365b30-1366a5, Roberts’ transl.). Incidentally, note that, as Felix Grayeff had put in his *Aristotle and His School* (London: Duckworth, 1974): “As to Aristotle, it is here essential to register the simple truth which centuries of specialist scholarship, for obvious psychological and sociological reasons, have refused to accept, namely that the Corpus Aristotelicum was not the work of a single individual, but of generations of teachers and students of the Peripatetic School.” I have quoted Grayeff in my chapter “Collective Thinking” in the volume [\*Mobile Understanding\*](#) which I edited/published in 2005/2006.

<sup>38</sup> Robert Michels, [\*Political Parties: A Sociological Study of the Oligarchical Tendencies of Modern Democracy\*](#), transl. by Eden & Cedar Paul, New York: Hearst’s International Library Co., 1915. Michels was a German-born Italian sociologist. *Political Parties* (an

one place, and in *The Phantom Public* repeatedly, refers to. Let us look at these references. The first, on p. 225 of *Public Opinion*, just mentions the Michels book. The second, on p. 19 of *The Phantom Public*, refers to “Robert Michels, ... a Socialist”, who “says flatly that “the majority is permanently incapable of self-government””. Lippmann here adds a footnote which points to p. 390 of *Political Parties*. That page belongs to the chapter “Democracy and the Iron Law of Oligarchy”. The third reference, on pp. 22 f., quotes Michels as pronouncing “in his “final considerations” that “it is the great task of social education to raise the intellectual level of the masses, so that they may be enabled, within the limits of what is possible, to counteract the oligarchical tendencies” of all collective action.”<sup>39</sup> We saw above that this is a task Lippmann at the end of the day deems hopeless.

But let us now turn to Michels’ own train of thought. The world he discusses is that of trade union and party politics, and his main theses are that “in every kind of human organization which strives for the attainment of definite ends” there exist “immanent oligarchical tendencies” – so an “ideal democracy”, whether direct or indirect, is impossible, unmanipulated masses will inevitably become *crowds*.<sup>40</sup> There follows a striking passage:

Even if we imagined the means of communication to become much better than those which now exist, how would it be possible to assemble ... a [great] multitude in a given place, at a stated time, and with the frequency demanded by the exigencies of party life? In addition must be considered the physio-

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American edition of his [\*Zur Soziologie des Parteiwesens in der modernen Demokratie: Untersuchungen über die oligarchischen Tendenzen des Gruppenlebens\*](#), Leipzig: Verlag von Dr. Werner Klinkhardt, 1911) contains the added chapter “Party-Life in War-Time”, but is otherwise identical with the German original (with some passages of a Turin 1910 preface deleted).

<sup>39</sup> [\*Political Parties\*](#), p. 407.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 11 and 25 – Michels repeatedly refers to Tarde and to the Italian political scientist Gaetano Mosca. On the latter, see below in section 2.2.

logical impossibility even for the most powerful orator of making himself heard by a crowd of ten thousand persons.”<sup>41</sup>

Michels’ final conclusion:

[O]ligarchy depends upon what we may term the PSYCHOLOGY OF ORGANIZATION ITSELF, that is to say, upon the tactical and technical necessities which result from the consolidation of every disciplined political aggregate. Reduced to its most concise expression, the fundamental sociological law of political parties (the term "political" being here used in its most comprehensive significance) may be formulated in the following terms: "It is organization which gives birth to the dominion of the elected over the electors, of the mandataries over the mandators, of the delegates over the delegators. Who says organization, says oligarchy.”<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 26 f. At the end of the passage Michels inserts a footnote referring to Wilhelm Roscher’s *Politik: Geschichtliche Naturlehre der Monarchie, Aristokratie und Demokratie*, Stuttgart: Verlag der J. G. Cotta’schen Buchhandlung Nachfolger, 1892. As the latter there puts it: “Die Stimme selbst des mächtigsten Redners wir wohl nicht über eine Versammlung von 10000 Menschen hinausreichen” (Roscher, p. 351). Today of course this could not have been written, see section 2.1. in the present paper below (“Elites in an Online Age”).

<sup>42</sup> *Political Parties*, p. 401. Earlier in the book Michels formulates this argument using the less negative term “aristocracy” instead of the term “oligarchy”: “Thus democracy ends by undergoing transformation into a form of government by the best, into an aristocracy. At once materially and morally, the leaders are those who must be regarded as the most capable and the most mature” (*ibid.*, p. 89). Note the expression “most mature”. Michels was alert to the phenomenon that politically successful leaders tend to lack inner stability. He quotes observations by Gustave Le Bon from the latter’s work *Psychologie des Foules*, Paris: Édition Félix Alcan, 1895 (English translation: *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind*, London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1896): “The leader has most often started as one of the led. He has himself been hypnotised by the idea, whose apostle he has since become. ... Contempt and persecution do not affect [these leaders], or only serve to excite them the more. They sacrifice their personal interest, their family – everything. The very instinct of self-preservation is entirely obliterated in them, and so much so that often the only recompense they solicit is that of martyrdom. ... [they show a] most astonishing weakness of character. They seem incapable of reflec-

As I indicated above, Michels' argument implies the impossibility even of direct democracies. Neither Tocqueville, nor Lippmann or Dewey held such a strict view. Nor, to quote a more recent author, did Lasch: "Democracy works best when men and women do things for themselves, with the help of their friends and neighbors... Self-governing communities, not individuals, are the basic units of democratic society... It is the decline of those communities, more than anything else, that calls the future of democracy into question."<sup>43</sup>

### 1.3. The Revolt of the Masses

Michels is nowhere referred to by José Ortega y Gasset, whose famous 1930 *La rebelión de las masas* begins with these lines:

There is one fact which, whether for good or ill, is of utmost importance in the public life of Europe at the present moment. This fact is the accession of the masses to complete social power. As the masses, by definition, neither should nor can direct their own personal existence, and still less rule society in general, this fact means that actually Europe is suffering from the greatest crisis that afflict peoples, nations, and civilisation. ... it is important from the start to avoid giving to the words "rebellion", "masses", and "social power" a meaning exclusively or primarily political. Public life is not solely political, but equally, and even primarily, intellectual, moral, economic, religious; it comprises all our collective habits, including our fashions both of dress and of amusement.<sup>44</sup>

Ortega's views are in some respects diametrically opposed to those of Michels, but note that while the latter focuses on politics, Ortega is primarily concerned with the social and the intellectual.

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tion and of conducting themselves under the simplest circumstances..." (Michels, *op. cit.*, pp. 205 f., 265, 159, is quoting Le Bon's text in French, for the English translation see [The Crowd](#), pp. 134 f. and 138.)

<sup>43</sup> Lasch, *op. cit.* (cf. note 2 above), pp. 7 f.

<sup>44</sup> Ortega, [The Revolt of the Masses](#), New York: W. W. Norton, 1932/1957, p. 11.

Still, Ortega's interests do encompass the political, too. As he some pages later writes:

To-day ... the mass acts directly, outside the law... It is a false interpretation of the new situation to say that the mass has grown tired of politics and handed over the exercise of it to specialised persons. Quite the contrary. That was what happened previously; that was democracy. The mass took it for granted that after all, in spite of their defects and weaknesses, [the specialised persons] understood a little more of public problems than it did itself. Now, on the other hand, the mass believes that it has the right to impose and to give force of law to notions born in the café.<sup>45</sup>

Ortega's main point throughout his book is that *mediocrity* has come to rule the world. The mass is "the average man"<sup>46</sup>, while the man "who demands more of himself than the rest"<sup>47</sup> has become a suppressed minority. As Ortega will put it: "the vulgar proclaims and imposes the rights of vulgarity, or vulgarity as a right".<sup>48</sup> Politicians are no exceptions, they are mediocre and vulgar. "[T]he most radical division that it is possible to make of humanity", writes Ortega,

is that which splits it into two classes of creatures: those who make great demands on themselves, piling up difficulties and duties; and those who demand nothing special of themselves, but for whom to live is to be every moment what they already are, without imposing on themselves any effort towards perfection...<sup>49</sup>

Scientists are no exceptions either. While they are, "within the middle class", considered as "the aristocracy of the present"<sup>50</sup>, it

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<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 17 f.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 70.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p.108.



ought to be recognized that “the actual scientific man is the prototype of the mass-man”, since “science itself – the root of our civilization – automatically converts him into a mass-man, makes him a primitive, a modern barbarian”.<sup>51</sup> The progress of science, writes Ortega, demands specialization, and so

generation after generation ... the scientist has been gradually restricted and confined into narrower fields of mental occupation. ... in each generation the scientist ... was progressively losing contact with other branches of science, with that integral interpretation of the universe which is the only thing deserving the names of science, culture, European civilization. ... we meet with a type of scientist unparalleled in history. He is one who, out of all that has to be known in order to be a man of judgment, is only acquainted with one science, and even of that one only knows the small corner in which he is an active investigator. He even proclaims it is a virtue that he takes no cognisance of what lies outside the narrow territory specially cultivated by himself, and gives the name of “dilettantism” to any curiosity for the general scheme of knowledge. ... experimental science has progressed thanks in great part to the work of men astoundingly mediocre, and even less than mediocre. That is to say, modern science, the root and symbol of our actual civilization, finds a place for the intellectually commonplace man.<sup>52</sup>

Science today, emphasizes Ortega, needs “an effort towards unification”.<sup>53</sup> The unificatory force cannot be but *philosophy*. It is philosophy that is free “from all subservience to the average man”,<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 109.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 109 ff. – Ortega’s stress on “European civilization” should be seen in the context of his view – formulating it in 1929! – that “a United States of Europe” has become the necessity of the day (*ibid.*, p. 139). As he somewhat later in the book puts it: “Only the determination to construct a great nation from the group of peoples of the Continent would give new life to the pulses of Europe” (*ibid.*, p. 183). I will come back to this issue in section 2.2 below.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 113.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 86.

and so from subservience to the average scientist. Ortega mentions Einstein, who “needed to saturate himself with Kant and Mach before he could reach his own keen synthesis”.<sup>55</sup> That is how Einstein became an aristocrat of science. Science needs its aristocrats, just as society needs aristocrats. “I uphold”, writes Ortega, “a radically aristocratic view of history. ... human society *is* always, whether it will or no, aristocratic by its very essence, to the extreme that it is a society in the measure that it is aristocratic, and ceases to be such when it ceases to be aristocratic.”<sup>56</sup> Ortega has an aristocratic view of history, and detests the “mediocrities” for being devoid of an “‘historic conscience’”. The average man is “leaving out of consideration all that is past”, “can find no direction from the past”.<sup>57</sup>

Let me conclude the present subsection with two remarks. The first is that Ortega’s 1930 book was, contrary to a widespread belief, in no way influenced by Heidegger. Neil McInnes in his very biased “[Ortega and the Myth of the Mass](#)” contributed to that belief when writing that “many of [the *Revolt*’s] ideas had been in the air. What Heidegger in *Sein und Zeit* (1927) had called inauthentic life, the world of *das Man*, sounded like Ortega’s mass-man”.<sup>58</sup> McInnes seems to be unaware of the fact that the notion of the mass-man was there in Ortega’s work as early as 1921, in his *España Invertebrada*, see the telling phrase “una masa vulgar y una minoría sobresaliente”<sup>59</sup>, i.e. “a vulgar mass and an outstanding minority”, or later in 1923, in his *El tema de nuestro tiempo*, see here e.g. the passages “los individuos superiores y la muchedumbre vulgar” and “la dis-

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<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 113.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 92, 44, and 47.

<sup>58</sup> *The National Interest*, Summer 1996, p. 82. McInnes quotes from § 27 of *Being and Time*: “In utilizing public means of transport or in making use of information services such as the newspaper, every Other is like the next. This Being-with-one-another dissolves one’s own Dasein [existence] completely into the kind of Being of ‘the Others’, in such a way indeed that the Others, as distinguishable and explicit, vanish more and more. In this inconspicuousness and unascertainability, the real dictatorship of the ‘they’ is unfolded.”

<sup>59</sup> [España Invertebrada](#), Madrid: Calpe, 1921, p. 131.

tancia permanente entre los individuos selectos y los vulgares”<sup>60</sup>, or indeed his 1925 *The Dehumanization of Art*,<sup>61</sup> *passim*, but see especially the sentence: “Accustomed to dominate in everything, the masses feel that their ‘rights’ are threatened by modern art, which is an art of privilege, of an aristocracy of instinct.”<sup>62</sup> By contrast, Ortega was of course influenced by the towering figure of Nietzsche, whom he mentions both in *España Invertebrada* and in the *Revolt*; and was influenced also by Max Scheler,<sup>63</sup> the latter too being, inevitably, very much under the impact of (and at the same time criticising) Nietzsche. In his 1912–1915 essay “Das Ressentiment im Aufbau der Moralen”<sup>64</sup> he writes about “the oppressive sense of inferiority which always goes with the ‘common’ attitude”, a “painful tension” that “demands relief”.

This is afforded by the specific *value delusion of ressentiment*. To relieve the tension, the common man seeks a feeling of superiority or equality, and he attains his purpose by an illusory *devaluation* of the other man’s qualities or by a specific “blindness” to these qualities. ... the ressentiment directed against all that is unattainable to the common herd.<sup>65</sup>

Another author who Ortega has been very probably influenced by is José Enrique Rodó, a literary critic from Uruguay. His 1900 book

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<sup>60</sup> [\*El tema de nuestro tiempo\*](#), Madrid: Calpe, 1923, pp. 19 and 21.

<sup>61</sup> [\*La deshumanización del arte\*](#) (1925), Madrid: Austral, Grupo Planeta, 2016.

<sup>62</sup> I here quote from an [English translation](#), cf. p. 66.

<sup>63</sup> See the informative essay by Harold Raley, “[Reflections on Ortega y Gasset’s ¿Qué es filosofía?](#)”, *Revue internationale de philosophie*, 2015. But note that Scheler is *not* mentioned in the *Revolt*.

<sup>64</sup> See Scheler’s volume [\*Vom Umsturz der Werte\*](#), Leipzig: Verlag Der Neue Geist, 1919.

<sup>65</sup> I am quoting from the translation by Louis A. Coser, see [Ressentiment](#), pp. 13 and 72.

[Ariel](#) was at the time widely known and celebrated in the Spanish-speaking world.<sup>66</sup> Let me cite some crucial lines from that book.<sup>67</sup>

Rodó's main argument begins with referring to "the daily newspaper" and its effects on "the nameless crowd", arriving, after some pages, at the statement that what has made humanity "mediocre" is, probably, *modern democracy*. Democracy carries the danger of yielding to "the caprices of the rabble"<sup>68</sup> and of "extinguishing the idea of any superiority". A few pages later: "the high culture of to-day should guard itself against the soft and gradual dissolvent work of ... crowds, pacific, even educated – the unescapable multitudes of the vulgar". The present tendency to the "vulgar", Rodó continues, "may fairly be blamed upon the democracy of the nineteenth century". He speaks of "the awesome Nietzsche". A central idea of his is that the workings of *science* show us how democracy might be compatible with the recognition of an "aristocracy of morals or of culture", that is, of select minorities.<sup>69</sup>

Although McInnes's paper,<sup>70</sup> as I remarked some passages earlier, was biased against – and even hostile to – Ortega, his point that the ideas of the *Revolt* "had been in the air", was, as we see, valid. Take a look also at the 1926 book by Wyndham Lewis, [The Art of Being Ruled](#). Lewis discusses egalitarianism and the "mob", but at one stage, strikingly – and here he, too, indeed anticipates Ortega –

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<sup>66</sup> See Rodolfo Gutiérrez Simón, "[Lippmann–Ortega: On the Role of Elites in a Democracy](#)", *International Journal of Media & Cultural Politics*, vol. 18, nos. 2 & 3 (2022), p. 162.

<sup>67</sup> I am quoting from the [American translation](#) published in 1922 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co.).

<sup>68</sup> In the Spanish original: "los caprichos de la multitud".

<sup>69</sup> [Ariel](#), pp. 33, 43, 61, 64, 69, 73, 76, 77 and 85. – As Simón emphasizes: "For Rodó the working of science is one of the best examples of the nonproblematic recognition of elitism. Even for the most hard-working and most competent scientists, the periodic emergence of outstanding individuals ... should not awake resentment. Science, then, would have managed to generate among their participants the ability to acknowledge human superiority without holding a drudge" (*op. cit.*, p. 162).

<sup>70</sup> See above, note 58.

argues that *scientists*, so highly regarded, mostly also belong to the mere crowd. The “egalitarian position”, Lewis writes, is

criminal ... in its logical results. We depend entirely, for our relatively enviable position above the animal flux and chaos, on a very few men. ... The anonymity of science covers that howling, foaming mob. Why should we expect the average man of science – a man of very average intelligence, trained as a physicist or a chemist by some chance ... – not to behave, if he gets the chance, like the average of the mob...<sup>71</sup>

An egalitarian movement Lewis especially focusses on is *feminism*. Feminism in the beginning, he writes,

was simply the conscription, under a revolutionary egalitarian banner, of an army of women, for the purpose of the attack on and destruction of the home and the family. ... That the “sex war” is not at the finish (whatever it may have been at the start) an egalitarian movement is certain. It is not an insurrection with an egalitarian watchword any longer, but a “war” for domination, not “equal rights”.<sup>72</sup>

Let me here add a last brief reference: to the 1930 manifesto by F. R. Leavis, [\*Mass Civilization and Minority Culture\*](#). “In any period”, Leavis writes,

it is often [on] a very small minority that the discerning appreciation of art and literature depends... [Those] minority constitute the consciousness of the race (or of a branch of it) at any given time. ... [they carry the] responsiveness to theory as well as to art, to science and philosophy... Upon this minority depends our power of profiting by the finest human experience of the past; they keep alive the subtlest and most perishable parts of tradition.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> [\*The Art of Being Ruled\*](#), p. 231.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 193 and 199.

<sup>73</sup> [\*Mass Civilization and Minority Culture\*](#), pp. 12 f.

Some pages ago I promised to burden the reader with two concluding remarks. I have now reached the end of the first one. The second remark will be shorter, but more important. I am quoting from the best writing on our present topic I am aware of, Geoffrey Clive's 1974 essay "[Revolt of the Masses by José Ortega y Gasset](#)".<sup>74</sup> "In spite of the fact that the *Revolt of the Masses* was inspired by Ortega's firsthand knowledge of traditional European culture", writes Clive,

a reevaluation of his point of view in terms of American realities appears singularly appropriate in the year 1973. For me, a directly perceived aspect of this experience which offers some germane insights into the mass mentality revolves around the great experiment in universal higher education which has gained momentum since World War II. ... quantitatively, there can be little doubt that the extension of educational opportunities to more and more people is proving beneficial and humane. ... Qualitatively, however, broad aspects of this educational growth are discouraging. ... What really concerns ... students is credit... [they] comprise collectively a paradigm case of Ortega's *Mass-Man*... Alas ... faculty members develop a passion for identification with the young... Emulating the silliness of those whom he likes to refer to as his co-workers, many a faculty member today ... is prepared to sacrifice all standards of scholarship and teaching for the sake of gaining the widest possible popularity. He comes to see grades as obsolete, lectures as academic, traditional problems as dead by definition, and excellence of performance as irrelevant to the poor in their quest for equality.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> *Daedalus*, Winter 1974, vol. 103, no. 1, pp. 75–82.

<sup>75</sup> [Revolt of the Masses by José Ortega y Gasset](#), pp. 80 f. – In my 2023 paper "[Back to the Past: Notes towards a Conservative Revolution](#)" I have quoted Roger Kimball's essay "From Farce to Tragedy", *Partisan Review*, vol. 60, no. 40 (Fall 1993), p. 565: "[A]nyone who has taken the trouble to observe what has happened in the academy knows that over the last couple of years political correctness has evolved from a sporadic expression of left-leaning self-righteousness into a dogma of orthodoxy that is widely accepted, and widely enforced, by America's cultural elite."

May I stress that what Clive wrote in 1973 is even more relevant today than it was in that year, or indeed in 1930; and that what was true for America in 1973, is today true of Western Europe, too.

## 2. The Need for a New Elite

### 2.1. Elites in an Online Age

That today's elites are not respectable anymore in any political or cognitive sense hardly needs proof. On the one hand they are deeply uneducated when it comes to classical learning, while on the other are strengthening the negative trends of the digital world. Even the best (not to speak of the mediocre) politician or scientist does not hesitate to make use of the nastiest dimensions of social media, and these people are by now in the last stages of being morally and mentally corrupted by AI. Already many decades ago, in his 1956 book [\*The Power Elite\*](#), C. Wright Mills, not oblivious of Ortega, could write: "The second-rate mind is in command... ... The men of the higher circles are not representative men; their high position is not a result of moral virtue; their fabulous success is is not firmly connected with meritorious ability", adding: "They are not linked with the world of knowledge".<sup>76</sup> – Today's elites are entirely irresponsible in every occupation – political, business, cultural – by contributing to the climate catastrophe. They are not attached to the region they might belong to. As Lasch put it in 1995:

Advancement in business and the professions, these days, requires a willingness to follow the siren call of opportunity wherever it leads. Those who stay at home forfeit the chance of upward mobility. ... [The new elites] associate the idea of home with intrusive relatives and neighbors, small-minded gossip, and hidebound conventions. ... The new elites are at home

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<sup>76</sup> *Loc. cit.*, pp. 360 f. – Incidentally, the present humble author's recent experience in his home country is that connections between the political and the scientific elite can have detrimental consequences for the perspectives of independent research.

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. Theirs is essentially a tourist's view of the world – not a perspective likely to encourage a passionate devotion to democracy.<sup>77</sup>

## 2.2. What Would a “New Aristocracy” Amount to?

Let us recall (see p. 12 above) what the ancient Greek term ἀριστοκρατία meant: the “rule of the best”. Discussing the later Roman Empire, Niebuhr in his *Römische Geschichte*<sup>78</sup> could refer to the senate's “signal aristocratic wisdom”<sup>79</sup>. Gaetano Mosca in his *Elementi di scienza politica* (first version 1896, enlarged and revised version 1923) wrote of “a small moral and intellectual aristocracy, which keeps humanity from rotting in the slough of selfishness and material appetites”<sup>80</sup>. Rodó in 1900 used the formula “aristocracy of morals or of

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<sup>77</sup> Lasch, *op. cit.* (cf. note 2 above), pp. 5 f.

<sup>78</sup> Berlin: G. Neimer, 1827.

<sup>79</sup> I am quoting from G. B. Niebuhr, *The History of Rome*, vol. I, Cambridge: John Taylor, 1828, p. 539. The wording in the German original, in the chapter “Die Auswanderung der Gemeinde, und das Volkstribunat”: “die Häupter des Senats [entschieden sich] mit ausnehmender aristokratischer Weisheit” (see p. 638).

<sup>80</sup> See *The Ruling Class*, New York – London: McGraw-Hill, 1939 (introduction by Arthur Livingston), p. 493. The lines following this passage are also worth quoting: “To such aristocracies the world primarily owes the fact that many nations have been able to rise from barbarism and have never relapsed into it. Rarely do members of such aristocracies attain the outstanding positions in political life, but they render a perhaps more effective service to the world by molding the minds and guiding the sentiments of their contemporaries, so that in the end they succeed in forcing their programs upon those who rule the state.” The wording in the Italian original: “In ogni generazione vi è un certo numero di caratteri, generosi che sanno amare tutto ciò che è, od appare, nobile e bello e consacrano una buona parte della loro attività ad elevare od a salvare dalla decadenza la società nella quale vivono. Costituiscono essi quella piccola aristocrazia morale ed intellettuale che impedisce all'umanità di imputridire nel fango degli egoismi e degli appetiti materiali, ed a questa aristocrazia principalmente si deve se molte nazioni sono uscite dalla barbarie e non vi sono mai del tutto ricadute. Raramente coloro che di quest'aristocrazia fanno parte arrivano ai posti più eminenti della gerarchia politica, ma essi fanno opera forse più efficace, perchè, plasmando la mentalità ed



culture” (see p. 20 above). Michels in 1911/1915 leniently wrote that “democracy ends by undergoing transformation into a form of government by the best, into an aristocracy” (see note 41 above). Around 1911 and in the following years Max Scheler worked on his paramountly important study *Vorbilder und Führer*, in which he distinguished between “exemplary persons” and “leaders”, referring to the significance of “personal exemplars”. “A person functioning as an exemplar to someone else”, wrote Scheler, “neither has to know nor have the will to be such an exemplar, even when the person for whom he is such an exemplar knows him to be such. By contrast, a leader must *know* both that he is a leader and must have a *will* to lead.”<sup>81</sup> Translated into the framework of our present issue I take Scheler to say that the new aristocrat should strive to be an exemplary individual, while not want to be a leader.<sup>82</sup> Dewey in his [\*The Public and Its Problems\*](#) (1926/27) contrasted “dynastic and oligarchic aristocracies” to a coming “intellectual aristocracy”.<sup>83</sup> And let us here quote again Ortega’s pronouncement (1930): “human society *is* always, whether it will or no, aristocratic by its very essence, to the extreme that it is a society in the measure that it is aristocratic, and ceases to be such when it ceases to be aristocratic” (see p. 18 above).

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orientando i sentimenti dei loro contemporanei, riescono per questa via ad imporre il proprio programma ai reggitori degli Stati.” (Gaetano Mosca, [\*Elementi di scienza politica\*](#), Torino: Fratelli Bocca, 1923, p. 504).

<sup>81</sup> I am quoting from the volume Max Scheler, *Person and Self-Value: Three Essays*, ed. by M. S. Frings, Springer Netherlands, 1987. The German original wording: “Eine Person, die jemandes Vorbild ist, braucht nicht zu wissen und zu wollen, daß sie Vorbild ist, – auch wenn es derjenige weiß, der sie zum Vorbild hat. Dagegen muß der Führer *wissen*, daß er Führer ist; und er muß führen *wollen*.” (Max Scheler, *Schriften aus dem Nachlass*, vol. 1: *Zur Ethik und Erkenntnislehre*, Bern: Francke Verlag, 1957, p. 259.)

<sup>82</sup> Scheler stresses that the exemplary individual should neither overly focus on the future, nor indeed dwell in the past; he should certainly not be a one-sided traditionalist (see *Zur Ethik und Erkenntnislehre*, p. 270). I have referred to Scheler’s views on the dilemmas of traditionalism in my introductory paper “[Notes towards a Theory of Traditions](#)” (Vienna: IFK, 1995, p. 8).

<sup>83</sup> [\*The Public and Its Problems\*](#), pp. 203 f.

In 1949 the American poet and political thinker Peter Viereck published a fundamentally important book: *Conservatism Revisited*.<sup>84</sup> His crucial message: “Democracy, though slowly attained and never by revolutionary jumps, is the best government on earth when it tries to make all its citizens aristocrats.”<sup>85</sup> Another of his crucial formulations: “Today what is precious is not the aristocratic class, increasingly anachronistic and functionless, but the aristocratic spirit. And the spirit – dutiful public service, insistence on quality and standards, the decorum and ethical inner check of *nobesse oblige* – is open to all, regardless of class.”<sup>86</sup> Clearly Viereck was influenced by, and indeed quotes, Ortega. Looking at his contemporaries, Viereck sees a “morally illiterate culture of unhappy and untragic pleasure-seekers”.<sup>87</sup> His views parallel those of Ortega also on the need for a unified Europe. He goes back to the Habsburg Monarchy of the 19th century, and to the Austrian statesmen Klemens von Metternich. “More than a century before the founding of the U. N.”, he writes, “Metternich viewed his continent not as separate clashing races and nations but as a single indivisible nation, ‘the Republic of Europe.’”<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> [\*Conservatism Revisited\*](#), revised and enlarged edition, New York: The Free Press – London: Collier-Macmillan Limited, 1962.

<sup>85</sup> *Loc. cit.*, p. 34 f.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 38. – Viereck’s position on how to instil an ethical inner check into children growing up (a position the present humble author is very much in agreement with): “Despite eloquent advocates of progressive education, the function of education is conservative: not to deify the child’s ‘glorious self-expression’ but to limit his instincts and behavior by unbreakable ethical habits” (*ibid.*, p. 35). A remark by Wittgenstein written in 1948 comes to my mind: “I think the way people are educated nowadays tends to diminish their capacity for suffering. At present a school is reckoned good if the children have a good time. And that used not to be the criterion. Parents moreover want their children to grow up like themselves (only more so), but nevertheless subject them to an education quite different from their own. – Endurance of suffering isn’t rated highly because there is supposed not to be any suffering – really it’s out of date.” (For a context of this remark see my 2020 essay “[Back to the Roots – Conservatism Revindicated](#)”).

<sup>87</sup> Viereck, *op. cit.*, p. 49.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 58. For a detailed history of Austro-Hungarian conservatism see my 1988 volume [Am Rande Europas](#).

Earlier in the present paper I have quoted from Walter Lippmann's 1955 book [\*Essays in the Public Philosophy\*](#): "Much depends upon the philosophers", Lippmann wrote, for "they are, we may say, the teachers of the teachers". In the course of the argument to which this pronouncement forms a conclusion, Lippmann refers to "the people of light and leading"<sup>89</sup>, who represent, as he puts it, an "aristocratic code" which is "not inherent in prerogative and birth"<sup>90</sup>. – Now I believe my foregoing references to Niebuhr, Mosca, Rodó, Michels, Scheler, Dewey, Ortega, Viereck, and Lippmann do add up to a great part of the picture I attempt to form of what I call a new aristocracy. Let me complete the picture, and let me go back to Dewey, and to my note 2 above. To Dewey's discussion on the significance of locality<sup>91</sup> I would like to add a reference to a passage in the book *Der Einfluß der herrschenden Ideen des 19. Jahrhunderts auf den Staat*, written by an Austro-Hungarian aristocrat, the liberal-conservative novelist/thinker/politician József Eötvös (in German using the name Joseph Freiherr von Eötvös), Part 1 (1851). The Hungarian edition (actually a translation of the German original), was published earlier in the same year, under the title *A XIX. század uralkodó eszméinek hatása az álladalomra*. The passage runs: "der Begriff des Vaterlandes [ist] für einem großen Theil der Menschen an jenen Fleck gebunden ..., den sie selbst bewohnen". In my English translation: "the concept of the fatherland is for a great part of men bound to the spot which they themselves inhabit". Eötvös was a representant of localism.

We are now in a position to arrive at a summary.<sup>92</sup> Lippmann repeatedly refers to the "philosophers", by whom I guess we should understand *exemplary educated intellectuals*. Intellectuals, who – we are living in the 21st century – are professionals when navigating in the online world, but also possess classical knowledge, being in the habit of reading printed books,<sup>93</sup> or say are able to use pencil and

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<sup>89</sup> Lippmann, *op. cit.*, p. 135.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 140.

<sup>91</sup> See also note 28 above.

<sup>92</sup> What follows is, with some insertions, taken over from my "[Towards a New Aristocracy](#)" paper.

<sup>93</sup> See e.g. my paper "[Turn the Leaf](#)".

paper when designing a text. The new intellectual aristocrats should be exemplary also in the sense that they will not contribute to the greatest problem of our envisioned future, indeed our catastrophic present: climate change. They should not travel superfluously to far-away conferences, giving to the same audience the same paper no-one will read anyway. They should care for their home locality,<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> While realizing that “nations” are political constructions, and that the unifying of regions into greater entities – as e.g. The European Union – is a historical necessity. – The first time the idea of a *new localism* occurred to me was in 1991, when I wrote a brief article for the *Liechtensteiner Vaterland* newspaper, see [http://www.hunfi.hu/nyiri/CCW/LV\\_Engl.pdf](http://www.hunfi.hu/nyiri/CCW/LV_Engl.pdf), I am grateful to Barry Smith for having recently translated the text into English. As I there wrote: “the scientifically determined division of labor of modern times has put the individual in a position in which his life and survival have become completely dependent on the smooth functioning of a gigantic enterprise that embraces all of society, and is becoming gradually ever more global. Where a hundred years ago each individual was fundamentally able to know everything that there was to know about his own way of life and, at least in rural areas, rely upon the fact that his household would be, at least in the medium term, self-sustaining, matters are such in industrialized countries that today there can be disruptions in energy and water supply, in traffic, in exchange of goods and information that can very quickly lead to a breakdown of individual living conditions. It is obvious that from here there is no return to a pre-scientific world; still, a sort of solution is afforded by the potential for decentralization that is inherent in very modern technology. Above all, think of the possibilities of decentralized energy supply through wind and sun. The example of the farmer, who produces in his flowery meadows the environmentally friendly fuel for his tractor called ‘vegetable oil’, is symbolic. This opens up a picture not of isolation and loneliness, but rather of a new, more autonomous way of life, ... a new individuality. The prerequisite for this, however, is decentralized access to information for society as a whole – of the sort that is increasingly being made possible through the networking of personal computers.” That I was too optimistic about the psychological effects of the internet became clear to me when I encountered Raimondo Strassoldo’s 1992 “Globalism and Localism: Theoretical Reflections and Some Evidence”. As he there puts it (I am quoting from my edited volume [\*A Sense of Place: The Global and the Local in Mobile Communication\*](#), Vienna: Passagen Verlag, 2005): “Post-modern man/woman, just because he/she is so deeply embedded in global information flows, may feel the need to revive small enclaves of familiarity, intimacy, security, intelligibility, organic-sensuous interaction, in which to mirror him/herself, contrary to the process oc-

cultivate their garden in every sense of that expression, maintaining face-to-face relationships with people in their neighbourhood.<sup>95</sup> The new aristocracy should educate the masses by showing them how to live an authentic life.

Dunabogdány, Dec. 3, 2024.\*

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curing in front of the subjectivity-effacing TV screen.” I re-quote this passage in my “Images of Home”, in the same volume, p. 381.

<sup>95</sup> Suggestive here are two papers by Heidegger, I have quoted from them in my “[Back to the Roots – Conservatism Revindicated](#)”, pp. 1 f.: “Heidegger was definitely not fond of travelling to remote worlds. Where he felt safe – indeed philosophically safe – was in his hut up the mountains in the Black Forests, and in the pub not far from that hut, in the company of village peasants, smoking his pipe in silence. As he put it: ‘my whole work is sustained and guided by the world of these mountains and their people. Lately from time to time my work up there is interrupted for long stretches by conferences, lecture trips, committee meetings and my teaching work.’ The world of conferences and lecture trips was one Heidegger detested. Compare a famous passage by him: ‘The scholar disappears and is replaced by the researcher engaged in research programs. These, and not the cultivation of scholarship, are what places his work at the cutting edge. The researcher no longer needs a library at home. He is, moreover, constantly on the move. He negotiates at conferences and collects information at congresses. He commits himself to publishers’ commissions. It is publishers who now determine which books need to be written.’” (The quotes are from “Why Do I Stay in the Provinces?”, 1933, translated by Thomas J. Sheehan, in *Martin Heidegger: Philosophical and Political Writings*, ed. by Manfred Stassen, New York: Continuum, 2003, p. 17, and his “The Age of the World Picture”, 1938, translated by Julian Young, in Heidegger, *Off the Beaten Track*, p. 6.)