

## **THE POPULIST DELUSION**

(NEEMA PARVINI)

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What is populism? The snap answer is rule by the people. The more accurate answer is rule by an elite who strongly claim that they govern on behalf of the whole people. That claim is sometimes true and sometimes false, but as Neema Parvini's *The Populist Delusion*, a compact summary of what is often called elite theory, pithily shows, it is always an elite who actually rules. Thus, the key question for a society's flourishing is whether it is ruled by a virtuous elite, who rules for the common good, or by a rotten elite, as America is ruled by now. Embedded in this question is another question, however—how an elite can be removed and replaced. This latter question is the most important question in 2022 America.

Parvini is an expert on Shakespeare who has become a presence in the dissident Right, under the moniker Academic Agent. He has a YouTube channel, has appeared on Alex Kaschuta's eclectic and always excellent podcast, and is someone to whom you should pay attention (perhaps through listening to the recent series of podcasts on this book by the insightful Peter Quiñones). Parvini defines the "populist delusion" as the belief "if conditions get bad enough, if the plebians become too disgruntled with their leaders, then the people will rise up and overthrow them." He asserts that the reality is that "if people want change even at a time of popular and widespread resentment of the ruling class, they can only hope to achieve that change by becoming a tightly knit and organised minority themselves and, in effect, displacing the old ruling class." There is, as we will discuss, some truth to this, but Parvini ignores that, as José Ortega y Gasset said, force follows public opinion, and he therefore considerably overstates the degree to which radical change must begin, rather than end, with an organized minority in charge.

Parvini ably summarizes and coheres the core thought of eight men (and in many ways this book, including Parvini's incorrect belief that the desire for power is the only possible motive for nearly all human political action, is a sequel or update to James Burnham's *The Machiavellians*, which analyzed three of the eight thinkers profiled here). Gaetano Mosca, the first modern political theorist to point out that every society

always is ruled by an elite (usually one composed of two layers, what Parvini names the “governing elite” and the “non-governing elite”) and that all attempts to deny this end in disaster. Vilfredo Pareto, who offered a complex and highly original social analysis, showing that ruling class overthrow was not the result of competing ideologies, but of the inability of a calcified ruling class to absorb external talent. Robert Michels, who coined the Iron Law of Oligarchy, that every organization, not just every society, “becomes divided into a minority of directors and a majority of the directed” (something every person involved in an organization, or that horrible thing in business school and corporate work, a “team,” knows). Carl Schmitt, who piercingly analyzed sovereignty and legitimacy, and rejected the liberal delusion that democracy or parliamentarianism was in any way a more effective or more desirable system of government than ones which did not pretend the people ruled.

These four wrote before World War II, which birthed the world in which we live and changed, in many ways, the manifestation of elites in the West. The second set of four men Parvini profiles brings us up to the present. Bertrand de Jouvenal, theorist of power, who noted that democracy in practice was “the broadest highway to tyranny that has ever existed,” and described, in his “high-low-middle” mechanism, how the ruling high uses patronage handed out to the underclass low to drain power, and wealth, from the most populous group, the middle—and, not coincidentally, thereby destroys the intermediary institutions that are the bedrock of any successful society. James Burnham, who analyzed how modernity had introduced managers, who had absorbed the functions of both the governing and non-governing elite, a “fused political-economic apparatus.” (Parvini does not discuss what seems highly relevant to today, that Michels concluded that the necessary political end of all modern societies was Bonapartism, or that Schmitt concluded much the same in his *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*, and Burnham largely agreed, in that he predicted a type of fractalized Bonapartism.) Samuel T. Francis, who updated Burnham’s thought to incorporate the explicit Left beliefs that had come to characterize the modern managerial elite, though he wrongly thought this largely cynical, a function rather than a set of core beliefs, and who called for a “revolution from the middle.” And, finally, Paul Gottfried (the only

one of these men still alive), who identified the final stage of modern elite intentions, to change the people, who when they will not accept elite dictates are viewed as insane, through a twisted form of therapy, into a better people, willing to accept falsehood and unreality as truth and reality.

It's all an excellent summary. But what does elite theory tell us about this moment? No sensible person can deny that every society is dominated by the powerful, and by definition, the powerful are a minority. In no real society can everyone, or even most people, be powerful, or equal in power. To all Western societies before the so-called Enlightenment, this was a feature, not a bug. Because power must reside in the few, a well-run society was seen not as extending power to all, but as ensuring that power was used generally for the good of the whole—"for the people," rather than "by the people." If correctly done, this means most citizens need not, and should not, trouble themselves about power or politics. Given human nature, the success of this project has been mixed from a historical perspective—but it has a far better track record than Enlightenment-based chimeras that claim to distribute power to everyone, most notably so-called liberal democracy. These not only fail to actually distribute power, but destroy any society, as we are seeing unfold before our eyes today in the West.

Parvini, however, goes farther and concludes that popular action that seeks radical change, whether the (fantastic and excellent) Electoral Justice Protest, the Yellow Vests in France, the Canadian truckers, or other such bottom-up movements emerging from those denied power and harshly oppressed, will necessarily fail. This is, as I noted, his "populist delusion." I think he is too hasty in this conclusion, because it is easy to demonstrate that under the correct circumstances, the populace can destroy a regime without being led by a counter-elite, or even without the existence of a counter-elite. The people of the tyrannized countries of Eastern and Central Europe (tyrannized less, for the most part, than we are today) did it in 1989 (and not because they wanted blue jeans and rock music, but for much deeper principles, and all this is well discussed in Stephen Kotkin's *Uncivil Society*). Sri Lankans did it recently (although I claim no special insight into the politics of that country, or how successful mass action ultimately was), and the unhinged reaction of the extremely punchable Justin Trudeau and his filthy henchmen

clearly suggested they feared a similar result from the trucker protests. It only takes a little historical reflection to see that the often-held belief, which is also Parvini's, that a counter-elite must originate and control such a uprising by the common people for it to be successful is false, the exception rather than the rule, and that this false belief is usually held mostly by eggheads and monomaniacs who incorrectly think that they would be part of such an elite, which could be nothing without them. Yes, it is sometimes true that a counter-elite first organizes, and only then replaces an existing elite; Vladimir Lenin is the best Western historical example. But if you change a few minor variables in 1917, the Russian ruling class is still overthrown, yet not replaced by the Bolsheviks, which suggests it is mere happenstance that Lenin spent decades preparing for the role that history ultimately granted to him.

Thus, it is no doubt true, as Parvini states, that "tight organizational ability and iron discipline" are necessary for a new elite to ultimately take control, but it is a confusion to suggest that those virtues must be operative for an existing regime, particularly an extremely fragile one such as ours, to meet its well-deserved end. Put another way, it is false, what Parvini claims, that "Change always takes concerted organization." Seizing power with finality takes concerted organization, but the rapid upheaval that makes such seizure possible is driven by the release of boiling, chaotic internal forces, sometimes with future elites bobbing within them, like a cork on a stormy ocean. Once the slate is wiped clean, elite leaders necessarily emerge to take and exercise power (Burnham called this gaining "social weight")—but the point is that, at least at first, they will likely rule as the populace desires, not as the former ruling class desires (though often enough members of that class throw on a fresh coat of paint and try to insert themselves into the new elite, if they are not first dealt with adequately). We must remember that this consummation has, historically, been accomplished by the masses, who in such times of change have the chthonic power, if they can stay the course in the face of ever-more-desperate attacks by the regime (such as "President" Biden's bizarre and incompetent, hateful yet inevitable, speech the other day, a spectacular sign of regime fragility), to destroy a regime. Thereby the people hold a veto over when and how the new begins, even if they do not directly create the new elite, which emerges organically.

Although the end always comes, any elite can survive longer by taking shrewd (the word used by Pareto) actions, most of all by absorbing and coopting those outside the elite. Michels noted that his conclusions did not imply that oligarchs could do whatever they wanted without consequences. Quite the contrary—they had to be smart, and know both what the masses wanted, and if they themselves did not want what the masses wanted, what they could get away with. The relationship between elites and the governed is a complex relationship, not the caricature we have absorbed from the movies, which tend to posit either demagogues whipping up a stupid populace, or sinister men pulling the strings from behind the scenes. But even with shrewdness, the elite can only survive if those outside the elite do not become too hostile to the governing elite; I suspect we have long passed the point at which the American regime could recover. No matter, since our regime is the very opposite of shrewd, so we will never know if it could have retained its power by taking actions such as coopting those outside the elite.

Not everyone sees our regime as irredeemably incompetent. One can argue, for example, that our regime does coopt those outside the elite, bringing them into the professional-managerial elite, and despite elite-overproduction, managing to devote ever more stolen resources to ensuring these new entrants are able to live adequately well. After all, a majority of the talented young still aspire to join the PME, to go to a credentialing college which will indoctrinate them in regime loyalty and Left principles, and then to obtain a well-paid, or at least decently-paid and socially reasonably prestigious, job that marks them as part of the PME. Viewed from one angle, this process, successfully operated for decades by the Left, skims the cream of America's young people, leaving few of the most talented to operate on the Right—and, not coincidentally, making it hard for a counter-elite to rise, even an inchoate one.

This is a problem for overthrowing the regime, but it's a problem that is rapidly fixing itself, because whatever such cooption took place in the past, it is rapidly failing now. Our current elite deliberately and insanely selects as the beneficiary of money and honors anybody but those who have been the backbone of every successful Western elite ever—unfeminized heterosexual white men, whom the regime today instead aims to harm, and announces their aim through a megaphone. Yes, a few such men, though ever fewer, are admitted to the track leading

to today's elite, if they abase themselves adequately. But an ever-growing pool of such men exists completely outside the elite, and it is from these men that the new elite will be formed, after the chaos that will rise from below, sweeping everything before it.

If, as I claim, our current elite is foundering before our eyes, and will shortly be replaced, what does that imply an ambitious young man should do right now, at this moment? He cannot aim at joining the current elite, but there is no other elite yet taking applicants. It is yet aborning, and no action can offer a direct path to something that does not exist, meaning all choices must be based on gambles about the future. What such a man should do is a crucial question, and I discussed this in my recent article "My Advice to the Young"—though I said little about how a young man can become part of the future elite.

Now, it is true that I look, and walk, and talk, like an elite. Thus, as with the proverbial duck, am I not elite? And if that is true, what I am doing drawing a line between myself and today's elite? Well, it's not actually clear that I am part of today's elite. If I wanted to be socially accepted by, say, Chicago high society (Indianapolis has no high society; while nobody likes to admit it, and as much as I love my state, this really is the provinces, even more so than other Midwestern states), that would not work out for me; I would be reviled, despite my notable good looks and undeniable charm. Still, I have many personal connections in various segments of America's regime elite, because I came of age in a different time, when the regime was both less malicious and more competent. And my wealth necessarily creates around me a distortion field in some elite quarters, as well as insulates me from nearly all attacks by those who take offense at my beliefs, making such attacks stillborn, so far at least. If, in some future, I lead some segment of the Right as it ascends to full-spectrum dominance, or I become the local leader of a successful armed patronage network, then I will be fully elite, and that will be a good thing. I will celebrate by wearing only clothes shot through with gold thread. There is nothing wrong in the least with being elite; the problem is being a bad elite.

Aside from me, who will be elite in the new Right-dominated society, after the "circulation of elites," when the Right has definitively wiped out the power and presence of the Left? The percentage of today's elite who are Right is vanishingly low, and completely invisible. This is in

part due to deliberate Left exclusion of those who fail loyalty tests, and also due to herd behavior, but one way or another, it is almost impossible to ascend or remain in the elite if one is Right. (The exception, or quasi-exception, is Right pundits, who have one foot in the elite, to the extent they can claim to be public intellectuals—but it is a very crippled, conditional form of elite status.) Obviously the Republican Party, which does contain some elites, is not Right; only a trivial number of prominent Republicans are other than handmaidens of the Left, and, sadly, many of those are simply charlatans and clowns with a tenuous grasp of reality, little charisma, and very desirous of attention to them as its own end, rather than as a tool. None of them would know what to do with power if they had it, and thus cannot be considered elite. Long ago and far away there was a Right that seemed to have power, exemplified by William F. Buckley and *National Review*. But it was all lies; we were betrayed, and it ended in tears for those who followed those supposed leaders (and Left-funded sinecures for the Judas sheep, such as Jonah Goldberg and David French, though the most guilty, such as Buckley himself, have mostly died). True, there exists the dissident Right, and it has many interesting voices, but it has no elite, for an elite must have power, and the dissident Right has none at all. It seeks power, but there is a long way from here to there, although that ground can, in the right circumstances, be covered fast as lightning. Thus, the answer to the question who will be elite is—we cannot know, for history twists and turns. We can only say it will be revealed to us.

What, then, should young men do on the Right to prepare to be part of the future elite? Some claim, as Scott Greer did in a recent somewhat-confused article, in which he seemed unable to determine at whom his thoughts were aimed, that the best path to joining the future elite is to continue treading the current path to joining the PME. To do this, you must go to college. He claims that without college, you can't be qualified for a decent job, you'll be poor, and you'll always be irrelevant—by implication, even in future changed circumstances. Greer's real, if hidden, objection is that he can't imagine not being in the PME, even in the very junior and subordinated role he occupies there, and he doesn't really believe the PME is going to disappear. He can't imagine himself, so he can't imagine anyone else, risking being forever excluded from the PME, so he counsels passivism and giving in to the sweet embrace

of terminal inertia (he is not alone in this; it is the entire program of Curtis Yarvin, for example).

As I have recently analyzed, there are high costs associated with refusing to go to college. But Greer spreads the falsehood that a person on the Right can tread the PME path and continue being Right. Only for a tiny percentage is this true—most will become Left, to a greater or lesser degree, because pressure and indoctrination is extreme, and that is the path of least resistance and greatest opportunity for (short-term) personal gain. What Greer really aspires to, and recommends others aspire to, is becoming part of the twenty percent of society accurately dubbed the premium mediocre, the central focus of whose existence is being able to feel that they are not part of those outside the PME, even though they offer nothing to society and their existence is wholly parasitical. Men who follow that path will never be the elite of anything, in this dispensation or the next. And let's be honest—if it's necessary to overthrow the regime by force, the foot soldiers of that effort will be men who didn't go to college, and most likely the new elite will emerge from these men who did the heavy lifting.

What a young man on the Right should do, instead of chasing membership in the present elite, is seek excellence—but not a passive excellence, nor one dependent for its future on the current frame. Rather a preparatory excellence, the details of which I have, as I say, recently discussed, making himself ready to both accept and successfully pass through the risks that will come along with overthrowing the current regime. On the other side, he will, maybe, reap the rewards.