

# **THE REVOLT OF THE PUBLIC AND THE CRISIS OF AUTHORITY IN THE NEW MILLENNIUM**

(MARTIN GURRI)

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As our ruling class drives the West into the ditch, from which a reborn society will probably emerge, but they and their rule will certainly not, it is natural for us to focus on elite theory—that is, who rules? This is an ancient question, although how the question is analyzed has changed with the rise of modern industrial societies. Unsurprisingly, much ink, from James Burnham to Neema Parvini, has been spilled on this important topic. Martin Gurri's *The Revolt of the Public* continues the analysis, but he asks not who rules, but how they maintain their rule, and if those mechanisms will continue.

Gurri's thesis is twofold. First, that narrative control through the gatekeeping of information has always, in the industrial era, kept the ruling class in power. Second, that technology is bringing about a dangerous change in this stable system, a barbed stalemate between ruling elites and those ruled. Access to information and communication among the non-elite, both enabled by the internet, necessarily erode elite dominance by reducing the ruling class's ability to control the narratives which justify their rule, by allowing competing narratives to emerge and by exposing elite failures and foibles. But the internet does not, cannot, birth a new elite, and this, Gurri says, poses the threat of "nihilism," as all sources of legitimate authority crumble, yet are not replaced as they would have been in the past, by a new, freshly legitimate ruling class.

The title of this book is a play on the title of the classic work by José Ortega y Gasset, *The Revolt of the Masses*. Gurri does not really discuss Ortega, however, whose work is mostly irrelevant to Gurri's points. He also seems to misunderstand what Ortega meant by "mass man," although he does offer some insightful thoughts on a different, and obscure, Ortega work, *Invertebrate Spain*.

In any case, I didn't think much of this book. Yes, it's a good starting point for discussing very important matters, but the discussion Gurri offers is neither particularly insightful nor particularly useful. The reputation of this book comes from an accident of timing—it was first published in 2014 (this edition also contains some new material from

2018) and can be read, in hindsight, to predict several eruptions of recent anti-elite behavior in Western societies, from Brexit to Donald Trump's election to the Freedom Convoy to the Electoral Justice Protest. But most of Gurri's analysis is filled with glaring blind spots, and depends heavily on misunderstandings of then-recent events, such as the dumb and disastrous "Arab Spring" of 2011, and of all Western global political currents. Fundamentally, Gurri is an aging Boomer unable to escape from Boomerism, from the idea that the world should be a certain way, a narrowness of thought not helped by that he spent his career as a CIA analyst and then working for a neoconservative think tank.

Gurri begins by analyzing our "turbulent age," in which, to a degree, the "public" has become able to alter the course of events as control of information has loosened. "Authority flows from legitimacy, derived from monopoly." Information acquired by the public, he says, has long been authoritative only if the public receives information through, and limited by, gatekeepers. This gatekeeping was part of elite maintenance of power throughout the industrial age. But the internet immeasurably expanded the amount of information the public received. And, crucially, because the vast majority of this new information was produced by those outside the elite, this information widely circumvented gatekeeping for the first time. This destroyed the elite monopoly, which destroyed legitimacy, which destroyed authority.

I don't think narrative control is the whole story of elite maintenance of power. Burnham, for example, claimed that the structure of managerialism was the wave of the governing future, and it was this which made possible modern elite dominance, a theme that Auron MacIntyre has recently expansively developed. And Carl Schmitt wrote a great deal about related topics, offering many other threads of analysis. But for today, we'll just focus on narrative control, for it is certainly true this is a key element of elite dominance.

In a somewhat circular manner, Gurri defines the elite as those who are part of the complex of hierarchical institutions that manage information in our society—government, corporations, mass media, academia, NGOs, and so forth. These are our sources of authority, and from that authority, they derive power. Gurri does not notice that these institutions are utterly dominated by one faction in America, the Left, and that they precisely map onto what is today simply called the Regime. They are

how the Left rules America, a one-party state (as Tucker Carlson noted this week, after he was deplatformed by the Regime, which correctly fears his power). This omission is not surprising; Gurri almost never mentions Left and Right. It is difficult to tell what his own politics are, though they seem generically center-left, with a touching belief in an undefined “liberal democracy” as the prime and final goal of political aspiration. While it may seem that disregarding political belief makes his analysis neutral, instead it cripples his analysis. Ignoring that authority is used by the Regime not merely to maintain power, but to advance a specific ideology, means that desperation at loss of authority has very different effects than it would otherwise.

The public, by contrast, is “the persons who are interested in an affair,” who have “a shared point of reference,” and who attempt to influence an affair by supporting or opposing individuals directly involved in that affair. (While it might seem that this means the elite could also be a public, their ability to directly influence events distinguishes the elite from the public.) The public is not the whole people; it is an ever-shifting subset, called into existence by self-selected interest in an particular affair. The public does not necessarily have a uniform view of an affair; in fact, usually, there are many differences of opinion, even though the only power of a public is to express its opinion. The public is not the crowd, because it is more dispersed than a crowd, though a crowd can create a public. Nor is the public ever sovereign—it can never rule, it can never become authoritative, because it is atomistic, individualized, personalized, in its nature. It can, however, destroy existing authority by rejecting it.

Gurri offers a subtle analysis of why, precisely, information control underpins the Regime. For any elite to retain power, “A significant fraction of the public must find the status quo acceptable, and the larger the number of true believers, the more solid the foundation underneath a regime. Thus the potential influence of information over political power flows more from its fit into stories of legitimacy than, from, say, investigative reporting or the dispensing of practical knowledge.” Before the internet, during the industrial era where former sources of legitimacy had mostly disappeared, it was comparatively easy for an elite to offer the only relevant story of legitimacy. To counter that story, an “awareness threshold” of around fifteen to twenty percent of the total

population, who come to believe another story, must be reached. That is, an alternative narrative becomes self-sustaining when that percentage of the population forms a public around that narrative. When the elites are able to gatekeep information, it is difficult (though far from impossible, as shown by Eastern Europe in 1989, events Gurri ignores) to reach that threshold. But it is easy with the internet.

Or is it? In 2014, the ability of the internet to topple the powerful seemed obvious. It is far less obvious now, because the Regime has realized their danger, and taken action (as have other regimes around the globe). Gurri did not, and probably could not, foresee the giant Regime censorship/propaganda complex that the mainstream internet has become since 2016. Even in 2014, significant censorship designed to benefit the Left was normal, which Gurri disregards, but it kicked into overdrive after Donald Trump's election in 2016, and into hyperdrive in early 2021. The vast extent of the American corporate/government censorship machine has been recently formally, though very partially, unmasked by Elon Musk, but no honest person was very surprised. Yet Gurri actually says "social media and the new communication technologies remain a profound mystery to government." He also claims, repeatedly, that the media and technology companies are oppositional to the elites. The reader does not know whether to laugh or cry at this naivete. Gurri actually refers to YouTube, Facebook, Reddit, and so forth as "open platforms." I choked on my coffee when I read that.

With his blinders firmly on, Gurri talks at some length about the Tea Party, as a supposed example of a public reaching the awareness threshold and thereby successfully rejecting the preferred elite narrative. Whatever the accuracy of that history, if there was a new Tea Party today, it would be instantly deplatformed and denied use of the services of every Regime entity, from cloud internet services to banking to all social media (except, perhaps, Twitter). Its domain names would be seized and its leaders indicted for vague supposed crimes, and then tried in a Regime-friendly court by corrupt hand-picked juries who would not be in the least composed of their peers, but of their enemies and inferiors. The Regime has learned from its mistakes, something Gurri does not seem to think is possible, when it (now) obviously is. "You can jam Al Jazeera's signal, but you can't jam YouTube." Actually, yes, you can, if YouTube is voluntarily and eagerly doing the jamming as part of its

role as a Regime member in good standing. We will return, however, to whether such suppression of information will prove ultimately effective.

Gurri's concern isn't that the public is being hoodwinked, though. This is a clue he is a Regime member himself. Instead, he's concerned that the public's ability to see Regime failure and to, on that basis, criticize the Regime, "has trapped democratic politics in a perpetual feedback loop of failure and negation." Although he never quite comes out and says it, his apparent belief is that government can never withstand close scrutiny, because the public "expects impossibilities," such as good governance. This negation "has driven the democratic process to the edge of nihilism—the belief that the status quo is so abhorrent that destruction will be a form of progress."

The question that immediately springs to my mind, and to the mind of many today, is whether, in fact, destruction will be a form of progress. Gurri seems to think that's self-evidently false, but why? He ignores that our Regime might, in fact, actually be tyrannical and worthy of destruction, even though he identifies many other regimes, without hesitation, as tyrannical and worthy of destruction. There's no rationale offered for this line of thought, other than a vague feeling that We have liberal democracy (meaning Left rule) and They do not, so we are better.

Destroying a doomed and evil system is not nihilism. Nihilism is destruction for its own sake; it has always only been a tool of the Left, on display most recently in the Floyd Riots (although those overall were a political tool, they contained much nihilism within them). The desire to burn everything down, when a dead end has been reached and wickedness cannot be destroyed in any other way, such that something new may emerge from the ashes, is simply logical and practical, not nihilism.

Maybe instinctively realizing the contradiction at the heart of his argument, Gurri tendentiously conflates opposition to the Regime with being "a bomber, the random shooter: a terrorist without a cause." He repeatedly concludes, without argument, that the future, if the public successfully strips authority from the Regime, will be that of Anders Brevik writ large. Compounding his incoherence, he does not even understand the relevant American public in his own dynamic. The public he really means, that he really fears, is what are now called, following Hillary Clinton in 2016, the deplorables. These are those excluded, by and large, from power and wealth, and treated with contempt and hatred by

the elite, the Regime. But the public Gurri says is relevant, the only public on which he focuses, are actually cadet members of the Regime, the very opposite of the deplorables. For example, he bizarrely claims that “Virtually none of those who rail against the established order belong to the economically downtrodden or the politically oppressed; rather, they are middle class, well educated, mostly affluent.” The supposed nihilist who rejects the Regime’s authority is the “pampered poster boy of a system that labors desperately to make him happy.” This is a good description of Left members of the public revolting against non-Left regimes here and elsewhere in the world (and to be fair, Gurri is referring in part to those). It bears no relation at all to the real opponents of the Regime in 2023 America, or in any other country of the West.

Another crucial flaw in this book is that Gurri does not seem to grasp that, although the details are somewhat opaque, the vast majority of internet-driven “revolts of the public” outside the West in recent years have been astroturfed operations, color revolutions, organized and initiated by the Regime to advance its filthy goals, which today are primarily forcing onto other countries such joys as limitless baby killing and unbridled sexual perversion while lining the pockets of Regime oligarchs. What Gurri ascribes in other countries to an awareness threshold being reached through the internet is more the result of bags of cash being handed out by Americans to their puppets (not a new idea; famously the Germans did the same to the Russians by funding the Bolsheviks with a billion dollars in gold). For example, Gurri offers the so-called Maidan Revolution, the 2014 overthrow of the freely-elected government of Ukraine by a small, but very well-funded, minority, as an example of a spontaneous victory of democracy demanded by an internet-informed public. We now know that was a deliberate step in the Regime’s driving Russia to war, and had very little to do with what the Ukrainians wanted.

Whatever the infelicities of Gurri’s analysis, the key takeaway from this book is true enough: that in our society today narrative control is the key to our rulers retaining power (a point Michael Anton has often made, with more insight). This is done directly, by literally commanding that attention be paid only to the cant issuing from Regime mouth-pieces, and indirectly, by forbidding any attention to unapproved ideas, branding discussion of them conspiracy theories, or misinformation, or

disinformation, or whatever the latest term is. And as Auron MacIntyre has recently pointed out, the internet itself, completely aside from censorship, is not a freedom machine—rather, it now enables the Regime “to wash the masses in propaganda every moment of the day and create a panopticon where public displays of loyalty are mandatory. The trick to defeating instant access to truth is creating so much noise that the signal is lost.” The Regime has learned the techniques to prevent otherwise inevitable preference cascades that would destroy its power (and no doubt so-called generative AI, robustly censored, will be used by the Regime to create even more noise to hide the signal).

Nonetheless, the sheer volume of information out there contains the truth, which cannot be wholly erased. This necessarily erodes the Regime narrative, at least for a minority, those who still think for themselves and who actively seek out information and friends in uncensored nooks and crannies of the internet (or, gasp, in old books and by meeting people in real life). Gurri is therefore indeed correct that the “information sphere” cannot be completely blocked by a government. Information still bleeds into public consciousness regardless of Regime counter-actions, increasingly using encrypted communications resistant to government attack. And, of vast importance, aside from substantive content, this information flow also allows such people to realize they are not isolated and alone, from which realization great changes often emerge, coalescing rapidly and unexpectedly.

None of this is static; this is an arms race. For every action, a reaction. On the one hand, the Regime has failed, despite its best efforts, to control crucial narratives. For example, despite the greatest propaganda campaign in history, nonetheless a very large public exists, exceeding a third of the population, which still believes (correctly) that the 2020 election was stolen. Similarly, much of the American populace rejected the Regime’s innumerable lies about the Wuhan Plague (although the incoherence of the many strands of that narrative certainly assisted in its rejection). On the other hand, we can already see Regime tactics evolving in response to failure, to add to direct and indirect information control other traditional weapons of tyrants, violent repression and using the justice system to terrorize anyone whose contributions to the information sphere might threaten the Regime narrative. This reaction is assisted by the decayed and passive nature of much of the American

populace; earlier generations would long since have overthrown the Regime with guns and fire. Still, I think, without being able to prove it, that this passivity, shown in the obesity, addiction to entertainment and stultifying drugs, and a general lack of vigor, combined with constant inchoate fear, of much of the American populace, would rapidly correct itself if people felt they had to improve their situation, such as if they were unable to feed their children, or their children were taken to be killed in Regime wars.

But at the end of the day, the Left and Right are not similarly situated. The Left has all the actual power; the Right has some new tools of limited usefulness. How can the Right overcome this imbalance? Gurri extols protests as a mechanism for a public to coalesce around a new narrative. However, in America, and in Canada, and in the West in general, protests are only allowed by the Left; the Regime uses violence and tactics formerly strictly reserved for wartime to ensure that no Right protest can ever gain traction, and that any participants are terrorized (as happened in the Freedom Convoy and the Electoral Justice Protest, with the Yellow Vests in France, and more recently with Dutch farmers), to make an example of anybody who might openly dare to challenge the Regime. This is smart; it was street protests that overthrew Communism in Eastern Europe, and might already have overthrown the Regime, or at least tentacles of it, had the Regime not recognized its danger. The fear and rage of the Regime at any protests against their nasty rule is perfectly understandable, and perfectly justified; I merely hope it will become more justified soon, when the risk/reward balance among the public shifts.

It is entirely plain that the opponents of the Regime will never, ever, be allowed to achieve any degree of narrative control through the mechanisms that historically have been involved in the circulation of elites. In fact, both America and Canada are about to pass extreme new internet censorship laws, naturally masquerading as modest needed protections. The interlocking web of Regime control today means that on a march by a public toward narrative control, so many points where the march can be forcibly terminated exist, all controlled by the Regime, that even if the awareness threshold is reached, the public thereby created is ghettoized and excluded both from any chance at increasing its numbers or obtaining any real power or change.



We should not fool ourselves—short of alien invasion or the sudden arrival of Christ in glory, there is no longer any path from here to there, to the destruction of the Regime, and the setting of new, non-ideological, reality-based narratives that will allow the men and women of what used to be America to flourish, that does not lead through violence. Given apparent Regime hegemony, this may seem like an irresolvable problem with an unlikely solution. But all problems of this sort seem irresolvable, until one day they are resolved, and that with finality. The resolution is inevitably in favor of reality, which means against Left ideology and hegemony. And that resolution is, always, a phase change—which can never be foreseen in its details. The best example of this is the fall of Communist satellite regimes in 1989, about which I have earlier written. None of what we face now is any different in quality than those suffering under Communism faced, which all the smartest people said was forever, until one day, it wasn't. Moreover, as I have detailed at length elsewhere, the Regime is extremely fragile, and thus the phase change is likely to happen when any significant crisis arrives. A betting man would say this is probably going to be soon.

Nonetheless, after the Regime is destroyed, all the wealth of those who enabled it or enriched themselves within it seized, and its key members either exiled or rusticated and lustrated, with the remaining mass of former Regime functionaries choosing new principles and becoming required to provide value, the structural problem will remain. In an industrial, mass media society, the attraction to those in power of maintaining narrative control, as long as the government has immense power over and is intertwined with every citizen's life, is nearly impossible to resist. A new Right regime that simply took over the existing levers of power, and focused on narrative control in the traditional industrial-era manner, with different narratives, would be far preferable to the Left regime we have now. But it would very likely become less preferable over time, and it would struggle to truly rebuild America, as it must needs be rebuilt.

The ultimate solution is to reject the forms of government and social organization that create this problem, by adopting Foundationalism, or some variant of it. A society that has a government of very limited ends but unlimited means to achieve those ends, where authority does not come from control of information but rather from more traditional,

pre-industrial, sources, and where a public, or publics, has very little interest in, or involvement with, national political matters, is a society that has to worry a lot less about ruling class control of information. We see, and Gurri treats, the political and social structures of modern industrial society as inevitable. If history teaches anything, however, it is that this is a mirage. It is time for us to build something new, root and branch.