



Twilight of the Elites: America After Meritocracy

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A powerful and original argument that traces the roots of our present crisis of authority to an unlikely source: the meritocracy.

Over the past decade, Americans watched in bafflement and rage as one institution after another – from Wall Street to Congress, the Catholic Church to corporate America, even Major League Baseball – imploded under the weight of corruption and incompetence. In the wake of the Fail Decade, Americans have historically low levels of trust in their institutions; the social contract between ordinary citizens and elites lies in tatters.

How did we get here? With *Twilight of the Elites*, Christopher Hayes offers a radically novel answer. Since the 1960s, as the meritocracy elevated a more diverse group of men and women into power, they learned to embrace the accelerating inequality that had placed them near the very top. Their ascension heightened social distance and spawned a new American elite--one more prone to failure and corruption than any that came before it.

Mixing deft political analysis, timely social commentary, and deep historical understanding, *Twilight of the Elites* describes how the society we have come to inhabit – utterly forgiving at the top and relentlessly punitive at the bottom – produces leaders who are out of touch with the people they have been trusted to govern. Hayes argues that the public's failure to trust the federal government, corporate America, and the media has led to a crisis of authority that threatens to engulf not just our politics but our day-to-day lives.

Upending well-worn ideological and partisan categories, Hayes entirely reorients our perspective on our times. *Twilight of the Elites* is the defining work of social criticism for the post-bailout age.

Twilight of the Elites: America After Meritocracy Details

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From Reader Review *Twilight of the Elites: America After Meritocracy* for online ebook

aPriL does feral sometimes says

I love Chris. I love that he is intelligent and that he has a forum. I love that he does excellent and accurate research.

But I dislike books like this. He is making an argument either without the 'deep history' he is claiming to know, or this is truly how he sees things: *unique to the present time*, the elite lately are so corrupt and separated from the rest of us, and feel so superior to us, that we common people are waking up to their power and authority for the first time and we are discontinuing our previous awe of them or we no longer trust them to be fair and just in their dealings with us economic bottom 90%. That elites in disrespecting the 90% have destructively lost the faith of the masses, and in doing so, are severely damaging the institution of democracy (emphasis on the constitutionally protected ability to advance economically through merit) which perhaps may be crippled as a viable type of governance, a tremendous loss to everyone, ultimately.

I don't think it's unique to our time, or that the elites are currently unusually corrupt and disrespectful since civilization began or even that they are the worst generation of the wealthy to rule since America existed as a country.

There has truly been epic instances of corruption in the last decade from elites, some of whom appear to have done so with self-justifications of 'I'm smarter and richer'. The best thing about this book, the five star part, is the research and documentation Hayes provides in telling the stories of various and famous cons, cheats and white-collar crimes committed by elites in the last few decades who felt deserving of ill-gotten wealth because they had the nerve and lack of morality (i.e., 'balls') to not simply steal, but prove their superiority over folks supposedly way more dumb than themselves. But I think it's due more to the natural corruptibility of people in general throughout written history. It's proof that more safeguards, watchdogs, analysts and auditors with authority and power are needed. George W. pretty much finished gutting federal government of its auditors, and government watchdog departments still have not recovered. It's worrying.

But the getting away with corruption, in my opinion, comes and goes in cycles, and it happens because people in position to be corrupted take advantage of the lack of safeguards or punishment. The more they can hide it, the more they steal or take. Internal morality is a muscle for most that needs exercise, and many of us need a watchful environment or a decent friend for maintaining moral fiber. Our current political times have fewer reasons to impose self-control other than public shaming.

I am a child of the sixties, a protester of the Vietnam War and an old style feminist. I understand about framing an argument, and that's what this book is trying to do, maybe for today's liberal activists. To me, it sounds overcooked and strained, making linkages between scandals from this decade and a particular upper crust elite mindset that doesn't exist in such dramatic numbers or strength. Corruption has always been a scourge of societies throughout history. The upper crust in past centuries, I think, felt a hundred times more justified in screwing over the general public than the elite do today. The public today, like the general population through the centuries, turn a blind eye for a variety of reasons, but I find it hard to believe they are really oblivious of the signs corruption is occurring. Outrage is stoked by the exposure of the facts and proofs of corruption to light of day, but it quickly dies down in this country because people expect the creaking and somewhat gutted institutions that provide legal justice to be doing their jobs once public exposure has happened. At least in the USA, public shaming ITSELF is a punishment with bite and consequences - most

of the time., because the masses vote with their spending, or not, of money, a seriously underrated attack on legally unpunished lawbreaking. For this reason, I'm grateful for a free press (mostly free), the Internet, and living in a democracy.

I am a mixed race, an economically poor female, and I know the poor sometimes make horrendous choices in their lives that are disgusting and abhorrent, if sometimes forgivable or understandable. But you don't have to be an elite to be disgusted or to use those underclass failures as a justification for hoarding money, or wonder if because you wouldn't have made those choices you are a better person or smarter. I still believe in equalizing opportunities and education and supporting the poor with housing/food/training/health care benefits as much as possible, and I think it's shameful how Americans have stepped away from that aspect of American belief.

I remember a Republican white elderly lady joining with us mostly liberals in a classroom for non-teachers to learn how to use a 'Each One Teach One' literacy program for adults. I asked her why she was here, and she said, "So they get off their asses and get a job and reduce my taxes by paying some of their own!" Her impulse to help came from class hatred, disrespect, assumed laziness in the adult students, and disgust. At first, hot rejoinders burst in my brain, but after a tick or two, I bit my lips. She was there, volunteering and helping to encourage the impoverished to improve their lives, whatever her personal beliefs.

Well. She turned out to be a good amateur teacher. So, I guess if this book likewise motivates people or starts the conversation...

Andy says

The main thesis of the book relies on a weird definition of meritocracy. According to Hayes, we have a problem in this country because the meritocracy system selects for incompetent people to be in charge of everything. This is not logical; if the people are incompetent, then by definition they do not deserve to be in the positions that they hold. So the issue is not that we have meritocracy; the issue is that we do NOT have a meritocracy. Or, that the meritocracy we are supposed to have is broken. This is not a trivial distinction. What he's doing is like saying that democracy itself is bad because democracies don't function perfectly. So we should have what instead- fascism? He actually praises the thinking of a writer who switched from backing meritocracy to supporting Mussolini!

His arguments rest on the assumption that people are all equally able to perform various tasks. This is preposterous. He knows it is, because he keeps hedging it with "of course we want surgeons to be qualified" type of statements. If we want people in any position (not just political leadership) to be qualified, then we want a meritocracy. What is wrong with matching people with what they are good at?

He throws a straw-man argument into his discussion of meritocracy by saying it involves "matching the hardest working and most talented to the most difficult, important, and remunerative tasks." This is a tangent about inequality, which the book then focuses on, but this is not inherently about meritocracy. If you are well matched to your job, whether important or not, it shouldn't be difficult, and there's no particular reason for important jobs to be super-remunerative. Cleaning toilets, putting out fires, taking care of children are all important, and potentially very difficult but are not highly remunerative in our current system.

As far as I can tell, Hayes's beef is really with a certain class of "cheaters, shirkers and incompetents" who never actually do anything useful but feel entitled to rule the world. They are ambitious and competitive.

When they get in charge, they cause disasters that destroy companies, institutions, countries, etc. Again, this is not meritocracy, but the opposite.

If this situation obtains, a major part of the responsibility belongs with the press, which keeps failing in its responsibility to be a watchdog and check facts. So perhaps the most galling thing in the book, is that Hayes admits he likes to "trust authority." Whatever happened to "newspapers should have no friends" ? Perhaps he is not matched well with his job.

Very disappointing. I do not watch MSNBC so I bought this on the basis of reviews from Publishers Weekly etc. I expected an "erudite" investigation of an important problem (widespread incompetence in many fields). Instead I got inexpressive gutter language and spurious arguments. This is a shame because it would be good to know more about how a society can make meritocracies function better. As Thomas Jefferson said, "we must dream of an aristocracy of achievement arising out of a democracy of opportunity."

Linda Robinson says

Reading this book gave me the answer why Chris Hayes is bouncing in his chair all the time. It's his brain. I thought it was caffeine. Hayes is smart, informed, intellectually curious and an analytical buzzsaw. And he's a hell of a writer, too. Having just finished Maddow's Drift about how American political power put us on a permanent warpath, reading this book finished the analysis for me with the rest of what's going on in the American economy, media, corporations, banking and our own households. We've been outclassed. Literally, and with no apologies from the .01 percent that figured how to pick our pockets and keep the money, along with the get out of jail free card. Hayes' most biting observation is that while the people with the financial fist on the neck of the rest of us talk, talk - and may in fact believe, that there is a level playing field of opportunity; the power elite also enjoy complete awareness that there is no equality of outcome. It's rigged thataway. While I finished reading this book, Mitt Romney is bussing around Republican strongholds in Michigan, telling voters that he pulled himself up by his bootstraps, that he's just a regular guy, that he started with nothing, and he made himself the success he appears today. Anybody buying that story needs to read this book. And a whole bunch of other books, too. Hayes called this book "The Twilight of the Elites." We'll see if the twilight bit turns out to be so any time soon.

Sheri says

This is oddly an interesting book to read with/after Reality is Broken. A lot of the systemic societal problems discussed are the same in both books. Hayes and McGonigal are coming at the same problem from very different perspectives.

There's a sort of parallel between Hayes' idea of fractal inequality and the progression through difficulty levels in video games that I find fascinating. The system Hayes describes, of endless social climbing with no hope of actually making it to the top because of the increasingly steep inequality, reminds me of how video games used to be designed. Early games were, for the most part, literally impossible to win. The levels and difficulty were procedurally generated, which means the computer can always make the next level harder than the last. Games like Zuma or Bejeweled could be designed like that still, but game designers have abandoned that type of hopelessly continuous game play because it is a deeply frustrating and dispiriting experience to play a game you will never ever win. Game designers now create artificial end points to allow

the player to win. If accumulating wealth is a game, then right now it's an MMO with no level cap and finite equipment. There's no end game, only level grinding. Only those at the top have the resources to get good experience, while the rest of us noobs are stuck in the starter area trying not to be killed by rabbits.

I'm not really sure what could or should be done about fractal inequality, but it is very apparent that something needs to change. Hayes makes a convincing argument for the surprisingly popular (if difficult to actually implement) idea of taxing the rich. In *Reality is Broken* McGonigal proposes what I think is a much more dramatic societal shift away from seeking extrinsic rewards (such as wealth) towards an emphasis on the importance of intrinsic rewards from meaningful work and community engagement. If we can get our society to a place where we don't care so much about money, it may be easier to implement true progressive taxation. But then again, we may need to have progressive taxation to create a more equal society in order to help people make the mental shift away from seeking monetary rewards to seeking meaningful rewards.

Rick says

I wish this book was written at a fifth grade level. As it is, it's comically, absurdly well written, with a staggeringly glorious diction. If you watch Hayes' show, you know that diction isn't affected - it rolls off his tongue in the expository segments of his show as easily as it does in this book. Which I love, and I find very satisfying.

And yet, that selfsame diction makes his very important points less accessible to precisely the people who need to understand them. Like most books that cut to the heart of what's wrong with America, the "remedies" reflected therein usually boil down to one of two things; a constitutional amendment or the rising up of the masses to vote and be heard. And to get the masses to rise up, they probably need to actually understand your arguments and read them. I don't say this to say "the masses are dumb," but from the title on, this book is semi-impenetrable to all but those who already think on such matters.

Much the way Michael Pollan made "food rules" to simplify "The Omnivores Dilemma", I'd love to see Hayes make a 50 page pamphlet called "you are getting fucked you're not actually gonna randomly get rich so you better work to fix things" or something. Obviously I don't have the penchant for titles that Chris Hayes does.

Reading through my Kindle highlights, I see so many amazing concepts in this book that hadn't ever really hit me, even as someone who thinks about this stuff a lot. This one, in particular, really struck home: "In his 2001 Guardian op-ed, Young noted that the mechanisms of meritocracy robbed the working class of potential leaders. The working classes, he wrote "have been deprived by educational selection of many of those who would have been their natural leaders, the able spokesmen and spokeswomen from the working class who continued to identify with the class from which they came.""

Highly worthy reading.

Bill Kerwin says

Chris Hayes is not only the host of MSNBC's *All In*, a civil and intelligent political talk show. He is also the

author of *Twilight of the Elites*, a timely and persuasive book which may--at least in part--explain the surprising victory of Donald Trump.

In it, Hayes argues that the very concept of meritocracy is flawed, and that its failure is in part responsible for our growing disillusionment with society's institutions. Each meritocratic elite will devise a host of ways to maintain its position and perpetuate itself, severely limiting upward mobility in the process. Sure, an occasional member of the lower classes may rise, but the mechanisms of meritocracy insure that such persons identify with the elite itself, thus depriving the regular citizenry of its most gifted potential leaders. This self-perpetuating elite will eventually develop its own insular and aggressive subculture, inevitably becoming out of touch, ill informed, and incapable of making intelligent, objective decisions. The resulting incompetence may be seen all around us: the Iraq war, the Catholic pedophile scandal, the inadequate response to Katrina, and the recent financial crisis.

Our society operates on the assumption that if we work for equality of opportunity, we need not strive for equality of outcomes, but Hayes argues that, unless we find some means of lessening the widening income gap, the insularity of our elites--and their wrongheaded decisions--will continue to wreak havoc and produce disillusionment. The obvious solution is a return to a more distributionary tax policy, and Hayes--a cautious optimist--believes this could be achieved by a revolutionary activism that transcends party lines, encompassing both the Occupy Movement and the Tea Party.

I can't claim to be as optimistic as Hayes, but he makes a compelling case and enriches it with a wealth of examples and anecdotes.

Ryan says

I'm a humble book blogger who happens to be addicted to politics and public policy almost as much as I am to reading. I will never claim to be a policy wonk or to know everything there is to know about the way our government works, but I think I stay abreast more than most. I wish I had the time or made a different career choice when I was in college, but I learn what I can, pay attention to what is being debated, and really try to analyze the way I think about a given topic or situation. Now being a life long reader, you would think that I would be reading a ton of books on public policy, political history, and maybe a civics text book or two. That would make sense, but it really doesn't reflect the reality of my reading habits.

Since I was a kid, reading has been an escape from the everyday world, something that politics and policy are a huge part of. It's only been within the last few years that I've become interested in combining my two interests. It's a combination that has allowed me to further develop my personal beliefs and has shaped the way I analyze the information that seems to be pouring in 24/7. But when I add in blogging/reviewing into that mix, I fell myself doubting my choices. After reading *Twilight of the Elites*, I'm left with some serious qualms.

There are times I like to think I'm smarter than I am, that I know more than those around me. When I read a book like *Twilight of the Elites*, I realize that my grasp on reality may not be as strong as I would like to think. It forces me to acknowledge the fact that maybe I don't follow the inner workings of government and policy makers as much as I thought I did. It makes me rethink the amount of time I actually put into the endeavor of learning all there is to know in order to make better decisions. It makes me grateful that there are people like Chris Hayes who do take the time to learn, analyze, and share the information that I simply don't have the time to gather myself.

I can not, nor want to, delve into the arguments that Mr. Hayes makes for why our upward mobility through meritocracy has created the very fissures that seem to be dotting the political landscape. I don't have the vocabulary nor the knowledge to make any sort of analysis credible to anyone who happens to read this. What I do want to touch on is the obvious intellect that Mr. Hayes shows throughout the book and on TV, yes I do watch MSNBC for my news. At no point in time does the narrative that he is relating feel illogical or reaching in its conclusions. While there are some vocabulary choices that some may not know without having to look them up, he doesn't talk over the heads of his readers. It's all pretty straightforward, most of which can be credited to the way Mr. Hayes broke his argument down, allowing the reader to follow along at their own pace.

David Lentz says

This book with its Nietzschean sounding title ("Twilight of the Idols") is an intriguing read and goes on to deliver a better understanding as to the essence of the great divide between classes on the American political landscape. Hayes is articulate and ties together many observations that he has gathered from other intellectuals. At times, I wanted more of his original thinking and less of what others had said. There's quite a bit of recent historical catalog here and Hayes sees clearly the dangers of a meritocracy in which "merit" is not given access rendering it immobile and blocked from free expression by plutocrats who comprise our most elite society. He points to the dangers of insecure plutocrats who consider their financial achievements as proof of their entitlement. He shows how the middle- and lower classes have been nearly totally abandoned politically and how gains have gone consistently to entrench the power of the truly wealthy. I was interested that Hayes points out how America was a nation built on a true meritocracy because it offered upward mobility to its most gifted citizens as a core value. However, the elite have tricked the system by building so many blockades into mobility that Hayes feels we no longer have a true meritocracy which he considers a threat to the health of the nation. It means, in his view, that corruption will triumph and we run the risk of becoming self-defeated by jettisoning a core principle responsible for our vibrancy as a nation. I was most intrigued, after much of his rambling about the state of the union, in one of his proposed solutions: make America more equal than it now is by tearing down the roadblocks to upward mobility which is strategically and willfully constructed by the plutocracy solely to preserve wealth at the very top. Until true equality happens, if ever, then America runs the risk that its wealthiest citizens will ultimately sabotage our democracy and replace it with a plutocracy in which the only criteria that matters is how rich one is. This risk is real: perhaps, we're already there.

Chris says

Thought experiment inspired by Chapter 2 of Chris Hayes' awesome book (which you should read, by the way):

Imagine that the bookies in Las Vegas allowed gamblers to place bets every year on which 5th graders in New York City would test into Hunter College High School, one of the highest ranking public schools in the country. Getting into Hunter is particularly kick-ass because a large percentage of its graduates end up attending elite colleges and universities. To get into the school, students must first score high enough on their fifth-grade standardized tests to take the school's entrance exam (roughly 3,000 to 4,000 students qualify for the entrance exam each year) and then students must be one of the top 185 scorers on the exam.

Let's say that all bets would need to be placed by the eve of the fifth-grade standardized test. Bets could be placed on any 5th grade student in NYC and payouts would go to those who placed bets on the 185 students who tested into Hunter. Payouts would be based on the odds Vegas placed on each student. (If you're familiar with Vegas odds on something like March Madness or the World Cup, teams that are a long shot of winning the championship might have odds at 500,000 to 1 while the favorites might be 3 to 1.) The information about each child available to a gambler would be the race of the student, where in the city he or she lives, the student's family income, the student's grade average (Straight A's, A-, B, etc.), and other pertinent information that might be useful to the gambler's decision. (I'm not sure how Vegas would gather all of this information but bear with me. This gambling scenario doesn't need to be plausible.)

Ok, so you're in Vegas to see Dina Martina or Penn & Teller or whatever, and you decide to place a few bets on some of these NYC kids while you're there. Let's say you've considered all of the factors and determined that you would need roughly 200-1 odds (i.e. a 200 dollar payout for every dollar wagered) to place a bet on a poor black student from Harlem who has never earned less than an A in school. With that as your baseline, consider what odds you would need to be willing to bet on an upper-class black student from Manhattan who has never earned less than an A in school? Is it fair to assume they would be lower than the odds you needed for the poor student from Harlem? What sort of odds would you need if the upper-middle class A-student from Manhattan were white or Asian? How would the odds for an uber-wealthy white student in Manhattan who occasionally got Bs compare to the odds for the poor black straight-A-student from Harlem? After thinking through various scenarios, who would be the favorites? Who would be the long shots? How would you determine where all of these students fall on the continuum? You need to know all of this to determine where you are going to put your money, right?

In my mind, if you want to make money, one thing you're not going to do is listen to the crap so many people in America spew about how America is so great because we all have an equal opportunity to succeed and how America is truly a meritocracy where those who work hard are rewarded. Vegas will happily take all of the money you gamble on the hard-working low-income Black and Hispanic kids from Harlem who get straight A's. To make money on this bet, what you're going to need to rely on first and foremost are the indicators related to the student's socioeconomic status. The academic achievement and work ethic of these kids plays a role in your gambling decision but it's a decidedly smaller one than how much money and how much education mommy and daddy have. It's not rocket science. Do you know how lucrative it is to be a tutor or test prep company that offers prep classes for the Hunter entrance exam? According to Hayes' research, NYC parents pay \$90 an hour for private tutors and more than \$2,500 for a 14-weekend Hunter test prep package. And what about all of the resources that have been available to wealthier children from birth through 5th grade? I don't think I'm going out on a limb to say that the kids in Harlem probably didn't have the same resources and opportunities.

Even though NYC is 25 percent black and 28 percent Hispanic, it's not surprising that the entering 7th grade class at Hunter in 2009 was 3 percent black and 1 percent Hispanic.

In a truly meritocratic system, all kids would have access to the same resources and opportunities. This, of course, is impossible. There is no level playing field. There never has been and never will be. But that doesn't mean we can't try our best to even it out for those who aren't lucky enough to be born into a family that can afford expensive private tutor lessons and test prep packages. The next time you hear someone (or hear yourself) talk about how everyone in this country already has an equal opportunity and how the government shouldn't spend money to give unfair advantages to kids from low-income families, I ask you to think about how utterly ridiculous that sounds. If you're so sure about the meritocracy in America, you can go ahead and put all of your money down on the poor kids from Harlem. I'll take the rich kids from Manhattan every time. Then I'll use my winnings to ensure that my kids beat out your kids.

In this brilliant book, Chris Hayes develops what he calls The Iron Law of Meritocracy, which states that “eventually the inequality produced by a meritocratic system will grow large enough to subvert the mechanisms of mobility. Unequal outcomes make equal opportunity impossible... Those who are able to climb up the ladder will find ways to pull it up after them, or selectively lower it down to allow their friends, allies, and kin to scramble up.”

Nick Pageant says

Highly enjoyable and very well-written. Chris Hayes hits the nail on the head with where we have been as a society and where we might be going. This is great post-election reading.

Donna says

I plan my week around watching *Up with Chris Hayes* on Saturdays and Sundays, taping the morning show on MSNBC and watching segments of it all day long. In smart, lively discussions with knowledgeable people of differing persuasions, Chris provides depth and meaning to headlines of the week. His ability to analyze and articulate difficult concepts in simple, comprehensible language--and to have fun doing it--is a great gift to those of us who want to understand American politics and world events without going crazy.

But even trusting the author as I do to make things clear and interesting, I was intimidated by the title, *Twilight of the Elites: America After Meritocracy*. But trust me--the only thing about this book that is even faintly boring is that title, and that's only until you've read the book. The book reads like a well-crafted novel while providing new insights on every page about American history, culture, and politics. I cannot recommend it highly enough.

Gregg says

I've never seen Hayes on MSNBC, but I did see him speak on this subject in Chicago last summer, and immediately picked up his book. Hayes argues that America's meritocracy is flawed because it results in a new brand of elites who then proceed to create/maintain a system that guarantees the benefits of being in the elite to their own kith and kin. For example, parents concerned about getting their kids into elite schools in New York City spend thousands of dollars on test prep and other edges, leading to largely white institutions and a fairly skewed marketplace for upper crust education. Or, take the social distance between the poor and infirm population of New Orleans and the state's/government's inability to meet their needs after the devastation of Hurricane Katrina; yeah, some of them blindly elected to wait the storm out, but the vast majority of them were without a car, and without viable means of escape. Hayes argues that this tragedy is not possible without a meritocracy that demonizes the poor and alienates them from policy-makers, rendering them largely invisible in the sectors of society and government that are supposed to know them well enough to meet their needs and deal with their problems effectively.

Hayes' discussion of the issues is validating for me, but not particularly revelatory. What's worthy of note is his redefinition of meritocracy as something that needs to be more or less reinvented if we're going to come up with a society that truly rewards innovation, intelligence and character. We can't expect equity of opportunity to continue when equity of outcome is ignored; we can't expect anything but another generation

of oligarchs (his word) when "vertical distance" increases between the ones running the system and the ones living in it. See the financial crisis. See the blunders of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. See the corporatization of education "reform." Et cetera et cetera. Hackles will undoubtedly rise at the notion of "equality of outcome," but Hayes points out, correctly, in my view, that it's cheaper to do this than to clean up the results of an inequality of outcome. See the ruins of the Ninth Ward. See the rural sections of Iraq/Afghanistan and our current reputation there. See the racial divide in American students' performances in and out of school. Et cetera.

Hopefully, this will be part of the discussion now. When Obama said (however clumsily) that American enterprise didn't take place in a vacuum, he was perfectly correct. Here's one way to qualify the issue.

Brad Lyerla says

In the first decades of the 20th century preceding the Great War, a profound change took place in Europe. People lost faith in the ability of their governments to solve the complicated problems presented by the industrial revolution, burgeoning urbanization and the increasing internationalization of commerce. In the decades following this crisis, Europeans embraced a number of extremist philosophies including fascism, Bolshevism and existentialism.

This crisis of confidence changed the United Kingdom too and signaled the beginning of the decline of its international preeminence. England's response was to moderate its elitism and become more democratic. With the benefit of hindsight, we can see now that response did not save England from slipping economically, culturally and politically.

Christopher Hayes, who is best known as the host of MSNBC's "All In," believes that the United States now is facing a similar crisis of confidence, though Hayes fails to make the connection to the early 20th century. *TWILIGHT OF THE ELITES* was Hayes' book released in 2012 diagnosing the causes of our crisis of confidence now and offering suggestions for how to address and cure it. I am glad to have finally read it.

Hayes is a breathtakingly good writer. At the risk of gushing, *TWILIGHT* is beautifully, even elegantly written. Hayes is impressively well read. He knows how to marshal an argument to support his points. *TWILIGHT* is loaded with fitting references to history, science and philosophy. Hayes' expository style is sophisticated and polished. He has a way with prose that makes him fun to read without sacrificing erudition. But he failed to convince me of his most important arguments, which is fine. We should not have to agree with a book to enjoy and appreciate it. *TWILIGHT* is that kind of book.

Hayes' central argument is that America has come to rely on an undemocratic meritocracy to choose its leaders in business, finance, education and politics. This has created a class of elites in America based mostly on elite education. The elites have failed middle Americans. Metrics quantifying the wellbeing of the middle class demonstrate that it has declined steadily since the 1960s.

Worse, argues Hayes, this decline presided over by the undemocratic elite has undermined faith in the legitimacy of our basic and most cherished institutions. The loss of faith in patterns of behavior that have supported and sustained us for generations portends badly for our future. It deprives us of a common set of shared expectations (and facts) that in the past enabled compromise and collaboration.

Hayes is persuasive as he cites examples of how the elite have failed. Some of these include the Roman

Catholic pedophilia scandal, the Bush administrations' failure to find WMD in Iraq, the Major League Baseball steroid scandal and the mortgage backed securities meltdown in '07, among others. These failures of the elite to recognize and address sexual predation, brazen cheating and massive financial corruption have undermined the average American's belief in the elite class and the institutions they supposedly represent. That loss of faith destabilizes our politics as average Americans flail helplessly for solutions.

To restore faith, Hayes proposes that we jettison reliance on elites and become more democratic. He suggests that we experiment with more democratic ways of conducting government and offers the open town hall methods of Occupy Wall Street as an example for us to learn from. Writing in 2012, Hayes sounded very much like John the Baptist preparing the way for Bernie Sanders' Jesus of Nazareth in 2016.

Of course, a version of this was attempted during the Articles of Confederacy before we adopted our Constitution. A principal reason why we adopted our Constitution is because the un-moderated democracy enabled by the Articles of Confederacy did not work. In fact, it was more or less a disaster. That's why Madison, Hamilton, et al. built a bit of elitism into our Constitution. That's the idea your teachers were clumsily communicating in school when they explained that our system of government is a representative republic premised on democratic principles.

More simply put, democracy requires some gentle moderating and the elites must provide it. This does not mean that the elites are governing. But they do and should filter the choices for the voters. Wise voters should welcome such filtering. Voters do not have the capacity to govern themselves without such help. Our founders foresaw that clearly and when the anti-Federalists argued for a participatory democracy with fewer elites, they lost the debate. If that was true in the late 18th century, it is certainly even more so today. Enormous expertise is required to parse the complexity of issues that face us today. The voters cannot do it alone. Someone must help them. If not the elite, then who?

While I love his writing and his faith in democracy, I was not moved even a little when Hayes transitioned from diagnosing America's crisis of confidence to offering a remedy for it. His proposal has been tried and it does not work.

Frankly, I don't think the current problem is primarily a loss of confidence in our institutions. I think the problem is too much confidence in ideologies versus old-fashioned problem solving as conducted by patient adults working together. But that's a book that someone else will have to write.

For the record, the type of government now favored by the current GOP leadership (pre- and post-Trump) has been tried and it doesn't work either. I am on Hayes' side there. What does work is in the middle – a whole bunch of entrepreneurship, a half cup of regulation, a dash of graduated income tax, a spoonful of organized labor, a safety net and a whole lot of education. See America circa 1955 (now we will include everyone, not just middle class whites!). But alas, no one speaks for the middle these days – even the elite are not schooled in moderation today.

Finally, let me say in concluding that reading Hayes' TWILIGHT helped me to understand all of this more clearly. It is a worthwhile book and you should read it too.

Colleen Clark says

This is an excellent and thought-provoking book. It's a sociological/philosophical description of our modern

political and financial dilemmas. In his book talk in Cambridge MA 10 days ago, Hayes pointed out that "meritocracy" started out as a pejorative word. Indeed, it's a modern word, not even listed in my 1945 unabridged Webster's. So I tried Wikipedia.

Here's the entire part of the Wikipedia entry under "Etymology."

"Although the concept has existed for centuries, the term meritocracy was first coined by British politician and sociologist, Michael Young in his 1958 satirical essay,[1][14][15][16][17] "The Rise of the Meritocracy", which pictured the United Kingdom under the rule of a government favoring intelligence and aptitude (merit) above all. The essay is written in the first-person by a fictional historical narrator in 2034, and interweaves history from the politics of pre- and post-war Britain with those of fictional future events in the short (1960 onward) and long term (2020 onward).[18]

The essay was based upon the tendency of the then-current governments in their striving towards intelligence to ignore shortcomings and upon the failure of education systems to correctly utilize gifted and talented members within their societies.[19]

Young's fictional narrator explains that, on the one hand, the greatest contributor to society is not the "stolid mass" or majority, but the "creative minority" or "restless elite".[20] On the other hand, he claims that there are casualties of progress whose influence is underestimated and that, from such stolid adherence to natural science and intelligence, arises arrogance and complacency.[20] This problem is encapsulated in the phrase "Every selection of one is a rejection of many".[20]

That last sentence - "Every selection of one is a rejection of many." encapsulates Hayes' points. Think of the 1%!

Hayes is so smart and so thoughtful, and all the more remarkable because he's only 33. He's fully aware of the irony of the way his own intelligence and education have brought him great success. His NYC public high school, Hunter College High, which he remembers with great fondness, selects students entirely on the scores they get on a test that applicants take in 8th grade. He remarks that the school is less racially and socio-economically less diverse than it was only 15 years ago. The availability of private test prep courses now gives an advantaged to the already advantaged. This is a prime example of the conundrum.

The book is well and straightforwardly written, much more like a long essay than any kind of tome. If you're interested in our modern situation with increasing income inequality and the failures of the elites - Jamie Dimon in this month's example - you will enjoy this, and then be buying for your friends.

Kristen says

I read most of the first and last chapters last night - easy reading, but with a lot of memorable information.

Hayes, who is editor of The Nation and a friend of my hero Ezra Klein, is concerned with the worrying decline in trust in our society, specifically trust in the maligned elites who, in a meritocracy, are the folks who supposedly are the cream of the crop.

We've all heard the sneering references to the elites from the right-wing, an ironic reality since it's the right-wing who go to the mat for the elites when it comes to money.

Hayes writes about how all the institutions of our society, with the exception of the military and perhaps the police, have lost credibility with the American people - although the left still has a residual faith in

government and the right still has a residual faith in corporations and business.

He writes about how in the 1950s, corporate CEOs made 25 times what entry-level workers made, and today they make 185 times what the janitor makes. He writes about how progressive the tax code was in the 1950s - with that last bit, the part over \$1 million that someone made, being taxed at 90 percent. The estate tax was 50 percent in those days too.

And yet those were the bad old days of patriarchy and homophobia.

He quoted someone saying that the right wants to go home to the 1950s, while the left wants to go to work there [or be taxed there!].

So there were two great equalizations in the last 70 years: the first, that equalization of income, which just happened to coincide with a huge economic expansion (which the right likes to think was purely coincidental, despite its predictability at different times around the world); and the second, the result of the tumult of the 1960s, the overturning of old patriarchal and homophobic assumptions.

The irony, he points out, is the fact that meritocracies need levelings in order to actually work. Yes, people should be rewarded on outcome, but in order to have a level playing field, you need some redistribution. Arrgh!

He includes one of my favorite surveys (one that Chris Mooney also includes in *The Republican Brain*,) that asked people what would be the best society:

- 1) Where the top 20 percent of earners earned 20 percent of GDP;
- 2) Where the top 20 percent of earners earned 35 percent of GDP (leaving 65 percent to be split amongst the bottom 80 percent); or
- 3) Where the top 20 percent earned 80 percent of GDP (leaving 20 percent to be split amongst the bottom 80 percent).

Even most Republicans chose #2. And even most Dems had no idea that the situation in the United States is #3 - winner take most all. And, of course, #2 is the case in Denmark.

He also opens one of his chapter with this great quote: "An imbalance between rich and poor is the oldest and most fatal ailment of all republics."

A quote from... Marx? Lenin? Try Plutarch.

Also a good quote from Churchill, who argued that an estate tax provided "a certain corrective against the development of a race of idle rich."

...and it was out of an ideological commitment to a kind of protomeritocratic vision of equality of opportunity that robber baron Andrew Carnegie, opponent of income and property taxes, argued for a steep and confiscatory tax on inheritance: 'As a rule, a self-made millionaire is not an extravagant man himself...But as far as sons and children, they are not so constituted. They have never known what it was to figure means to the end, to live frugal lives, or to do any useful work... And I say these men, when the time comes that they must die... I say the community fails in its duty, and our legislators fail in their duty, if they do not exact a tremendous share.'

Adam Heffelfinger says

Chris Hayes' *Twilight of the Elites: America After Meritocracy* is a critical look at one of the most basic and taken for granted aspects of American society: the meritocracy. Second-nature to most of us, meritocracy is the idea that the best and the brightest among us should rise to the top. That pulling oneself up by one's bootstraps is possible, that the elite have earned their place, and that everyone has that opportunity. Ironically, this distinctly American ideal was first defined by an English writer who saw the "meritocracy" as the thing that would rise up to replace democracy once the latter had met with its inevitable failure. Early in the book Hayes introduces us to the Manhattan based magnet school Hunter College High School. Hunter is lifted up by its administrators and alumni as a beacon of the meritocratic ideal. Entry to the school is gained through a single standardized test--the brightest get in. Period. Hunter is the perfect example of the level playing field of 'equal opportunity.' Any kid of any color from any borough can take the test and get in. The reality of 'equal opportunity,' though has produced stunningly unequal results: as the wealthy hire private tutors to prepare their kids for the Hunter entrance exam, Hunter administrators are (some privately, some publicly) watching the demographics of their school grow further and further from those of the city at large and are preparing for the rapidly approaching year where an incoming Hunter class contains no black or latino students.

Hayes then takes us on a tour through some of the most public failures of meritocracy. In Enron and Major League Baseball we see that it is very difficult to produce a system that rewards effort and doesn't also reward cheating. In the Catholic Church and the federal response to Hurricane Katrina we see the folly in a ruling class that lives a life insulated from those it is meant to serve, or that is unable to understand the basics of the underprivileged's lives (like that Katrina might have been difficult to escape for those on welfare because it made landfall at the end of the month, and there was no remaining room in folks' budgets for an additional tank of gas).

The thesis of the book is essentially that pure meritocracy fails when it pays attention to equality of opportunity and ignores equality of outcomes. Within a generation (or less) those who benefit from meritocracy learn to game the system and hold onto their power. Then as inequality widens, these elites fall out of touch with the 'common man.' In American society, the idea of an elite ruling class socially distant from the vast majority of the population ought to be anathema; it is precisely the injustice of such an arrangement that drove our founding fathers to declare their independence.

Twilight of the Elites is one of the smartest books I've ever read. The case studies Hayes lays out are sharp and informative and the insight he adds, both himself and through the many interviews he conducted in writing the book, is even sharper. This book also marks the first time in my adult life I've found myself consulting a dictionary to ensure I've got the author's meaning (expiate and plebiscite).

It's certainly written from a progressive point of view, and I don't know that anyone who thinks of themselves as leaning towards the right side of the aisle would enjoy it as much as I did, but it is challenging and persuasive all the same. For liberals it's a must read.

Kelly says

It took me nearly four years to finally pick this up, but it's even more relevant and easy to see in today's world than I think it would have been then. I regret reading this not at all. Review soon.

Trish says

Were it twilight, would the glint of diamonds in the streetlight thrill us or enrage us?

I don't get MSNBC on my TV, though if I did, I wouldn't watch it. Everyone there sounds exactly the same, no matter which program they are on. There is a sensationalist tone I abhor when they are talking about issues that concern me. Somewhere I read something about this book and thought I would take a look.

Hayes had been a fellow at Harvard University's Edmond J. Safra Foundation Center for Ethics in 2010-2011, during which time, one assumes, this book was written. It has too many words and is neither surprising nor particularly insightful, but this was five years ago, and Hayes was in his early thirties at the time, so deserves some credit for lighting fire to possible paths of his own advancement. He learned some fundamental ethical lessons early, and I appreciate his moral grounding and clarity.

In this book Hayes asks whether or not it is the upper middle class who, recognizing the essential unfairness of the system as it has developed the past sixty years, won't insist that certain protections be put in place to keep the top 1%, the oligarchs, from controlling access to wealth and all decision-making. "A significant gulf has opened up between the middle class, upper middle class, professionals, and the mass affluent and the genuine plutocrats."

First he shows us how, given free reign and no constraints, practically any industry will become corrupt. Over time those erosions of fairness begin to rankle, and voices rise up which question the status quo. When they are loud enough, things change. Hayes sees significant cracks in our society now and a wellspring of well-educated unemployed young people with expectations. He believes the imbalances in our society make crises inevitable and suggests that the angry left (Occupy Wall St.) and the angry right (Tea Party adherents) are not so far apart in their distaste for Big Business and Big Government.

A couple of interesting things found late in the book:

- * most Americans are not really aware of the wage differentials in this country and are actually more egalitarian than we knew. Other countries in Europe and Asia also have graduated wage scales, but nothing like the huge disparities found in the United States. A flattening of the wage scale would appeal to a large majority of Americans, if shown the data.

- * the increasing inequality, compartmentalization, and stratification of (he calls it post-meritocratic but that wasn't convincing) American society has seduced those who profited in the 'meritocratic' society into complacency, and thinking themselves better somehow, despite their clear and obvious advantages.

- * nice comparisons of rampant abuse and denial by decision makers re drug use in sports, crazy instruments in the mortgage market, greed on Wall Street, with sexual abuse by the priests of the Catholic Church. Moral hazard gone berserk is a good moment to stand back and see what is happening off the court.

- * the conviction that in America those at the top and those at the bottom are equal under the law is a belief pretty much completely debunked today.

I am having difficulty with the definition of 'meritocratic,' as used by Hayes and by Brookings scholar Richard Reeves in his book *The Dream Hoarders*. The term has become so debased when we really discuss who has chances, opportunity, education, and financial backing in our society. Merit? Even a rich white kid who 'works hard' can never claim 'merit' anymore, or suggest they got some exalted school or job because of

cleverness or skill.

Franz says

Hayes's book brilliantly shows how seemingly separate strands of society are united in the way they depend on meritocracy--that the best and brightest, the elite, ought to run the country, the economy, education, religious life, and more. A meritocracy depends on two principles, according to Hayes: the Principle of Difference, the fact that there are differences in ability, and that we should allow a natural hierarchy to emerge in which the hardest working and most talented be given the hardest, the most difficult, the most important tasks, and for their efforts they should be the highest paid; the second is the Principle of Mobility, which ensures that there will be competition to select for these elite positions based on performance.

The irony is what Hayes calls the Iron Law of Meritocracy: a meritocracy eventually and inevitably produces an inequality that sabotages the Principle of Mobility by rigging the system: for example, by encouraging the elites to advance the prospects of their children through the schools they attend and test preparation courses they attend, and the access that great wealth gives to politicians and manipulating the political system.

A further irony is that elites of the second generation and beyond came to believe that they deserve their status and that they've earned them by hard work. They don't recognize that they are the products of a system structured to give them advantages denied to the non-elite, which is generally, though not exclusively, the bottom 99% on the scale of wealth. The consequence is that bright and talented people in the lower tiers of society have less and less access to the portals of elite careers. At the same time the distance between the elites and the rest of us increased to the extent that the elites no longer recognize or react to the legitimate interests of those outside their class. Another consequence is that the elites lost their moral compass, doing anything they can to maintain their power and position. They see themselves as special and unique and beyond the moral norms and laws governing society. For examples, see Enron and the financial crisis caused by the misbehavior of a few bankers who are now enjoying obscene wealth while much of the rest of the country continues to reap the misery the bankers sowed. See also the enormous amount of money contributed by billionaires to PACs for the purpose of maintaining their privileged status.

Another irony is that the elites have, despite their alleged smarts, led the country into one crisis after another. Hayes is excellent guide in documenting and explaining these preventable tragedies.

So what is the solution? Basically, adopting policies to reduce inequality. Hayes doesn't seem to have much faith that such policies will soon be promoted. This requires a radicalized middle class, he believes, since much of the benefits accruing to the top 1% have come at their expense. He doesn't see them radicalizing soon enough. What may be required is another crises or two that reveal that the real enemy of equality is not government but the people who own government and subvert policies that extend equal opportunities across all levels of society. Perhaps only then will changes emerge, and capitalism will once again be saved from the capitalists.

Trevor says

I decided to read this book after reading Bill's review here - <http://www.goodreads.com/review/show/...>

I really enjoyed this book and found it really useful. A discussion of education forms a large part of the start of the book, education being, supposedly, the main entry card into the meritocracy. He talks about his own high school, one that has an entrance test to ensure the children who get to go to this school are deserving. What is interesting is that over the years fewer and fewer Black or Latin American children have been able to get into the school. But since everyone can sit the test, clearly this is just a reflection of merit and, if we weren't going to be all PC about it, a clear demonstration of some sort of genetic inferiority... Such views are immediately contradicted by looking at the 'reality' on the ground. One of my favourite sayings lately is that you don't need to lock a door to make sure certain people never enter by it. In the case of his school he points out that there has been an entire shadow industry that has sprung up to help children prepare for the entrance test. This industry charges many thousands of dollars for tuition, but parents able to pay this money are buying advantages for their children. Advantages that people without that money will struggle to overcome (and are very unlikely to overcome at all). Since poverty is so nicely colour coded in America, this means there are predictable results in entrance to these 'better schools'.

The interesting thing here, and all the way down, is the concept of merit. It would be stupid to say that the White and Asian kids that got into these schools had not worked hard to get there – often they have given up large parts of their summer holidays to study. It would be wrong to say they didn't deserve to get these opportunities – we do like to think that hard work should pay off. But the problem is that we all too rarely see the other side of this – that 'merit' is often really another name for 'advantage'. Sure, it is not advantage that comes automatically, but it is advantage that is cashed in and used to privilege one group at the expense of another.

The fact is that while we like to think of our society as a meritocracy – where those in power and in privileged positions are those who have earned their stripes – the fact is that we actually live in a society of remarkable social reproduction. That is, where the best predictor of your location in society will be the position your parents held in that society. Such social reproduction has more in common with a caste system than with a meritocracy. And he explains that real meritocracies would only be possible in relatively equitable societies, and the West is anything but that – and becoming increasingly less equitable over time.

All the same, the myth of a meritocracy, particularly in the US, is so generally held that it would seem almost un-American to talk against it. However, the elites have so comprehensively failed to live up to promise – the global financial crisis and the Catholic Bishops protecting paedophile priests as just two examples – that the elites are increasingly not trusted. Given elites are meant to have gotten there on the basis of merit – you might think this would be cause for a rethink of the nature of our 'meritocracy'.

There is an interesting discussion on how the right wing in the US, particularly the right wing media, have appropriated the term 'elite' to mean someone who likes good cheese – rather than say, someone earning a billion dollars a year, a television station and who has direct access to the President when he wants a chat or a tax cut.

The most interesting part of this book was the end. Essentially, he believes there will be an upper middle class rebellion against the 'top 1%'. He sees the upper middle class as those who are mostly disadvantaged by the gush of resources up to the very peak of the social pyramid and that they will increasingly see how this is impacting on society as both unfair and unsustainable. I'm not as sure of his class analysis here – but that something needs to be done is clear.

I like that he is attacking the notion of merit – as Bourdieu points out somewhere, merit is the excuse the upper classes use while dispossessing the poor. An excuse that rings more than a little hollow on even a slightly close analysis. The benefit this book has over Bourdieu, I guess, is that it is very easy to read. But it

should likewise leave you outraged and less likely to be fooled by talk of ‘merit’ – and that has to be a good thing.

I can’t end without mentioning something I particularly liked here. He tells a parable of a farmer who told his sons on his death bed that he had buried a treasure on their farm. The sons spent weeks digging up all of the ground of the farm in an unsuccessful attempt to find the treasure. But digging up the soil renewed the fertility of the land and the next year’s harvest was improved because of their efforts. This is the point he is making in this book. The work of increasing democracy and improving real equality of opportunity is hard, but its payoffs are great. And the rewards come from the efforts themselves, not from some hidden treasure.
