

# How Elites Got Us Into Trouble -- and Can Help Get Us Out

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Commentary

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In the Trump era, the conviction has spread among elites—especially, but not only, among progressive elites—that the people have failed them. This very conviction, though, is an indication of how American elites have failed the people.

By almost any measure, the vast majority of blue America—the bustling metropolises in states that went for Hillary Clinton as well as those that went for Donald Trump—has recovered just fine from the Great Recession of 2008. Meanwhile, much of red America—30 miles or so beyond the downtown of any major American city and covering most of the landmass of the United States—still reels from the aftershocks of the 2008 financial crisis. The larger forces that were already sweeping away good jobs, depressing wages, and eroding hopes in the Rust Belt, Midwest, and rural America show little sign of abating.

Although foreign policy touches the heartlands less directly, events since the early 1990s, when the dissolution of the Soviet Union ended the Cold War, have also stoked discontent. As Walter Russell Mead recently observed, “Building a liberal world order is much more expensive and difficult than it appeared a quarter-century ago, when America was king.”

For all the blood and treasure America has devoted to advancing democracy abroad since communism’s collapse, “the world is only becoming more dangerous,” Mead writes. “North Korea threatens to take America hostage. The Middle East burns. Venezuela descends into chaos. Jihadist groups develop new capacities. A failing Russia lashes out. The European Union risks breaking apart. China presses toward regional hegemony. Trade liberalization grinds to a halt. Turkey turns away from democracy.” Yet Democratic and Republican elites continue to overlook or scorn efforts to make the case publicly and clearly that the benefits of post-Cold War American foreign policy have outweighed the costs.

Even as the economic recovery passes by wide swaths of ordinary people and as foreign policy mandarins ignore the need to build domestic support for international engagement, a media establishment and entertainment industry based in blue America—whose members for the most part attended the same exclusive schools to which they send their children—casually mock working-class people’s political judgment, values, tastes, and religion.

Many Trump voters recognize the president's glaring limitations. But they observe the paucity of publicly available evidence supporting the feverish 24/7 speculations about collusion between the Trump campaign and the Russians. They watched the recent round of breathless impeachment talk stemming from the leaked accusation that Trump improperly disclosed classified information to the Russians in the Oval Office, an accusation National Security Adviser H.R. McMaster emphatically denied. And they can't help but see glaring hypocrisy.

After all, this is the same media establishment and entertainment industry that downplayed the more than 30,000 work-related emails that then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton improperly sent using her private server. They deflected attention from the thousands of emails she deleted despite the government's claim on them. They treated as a non-issue her use of the unsecured server to send or receive more than 2,000 emails containing information that was then or would later be classified—which she was under a legal obligation to transmit by means of specially designated secure systems. And they paid little attention to the (at least) 22 emails containing “highly classified information” considered “top secret”—the disclosure of which could directly endanger critical programs and human assets—she sent through her home system.

Despite the good reasons people have to be angry with the elites and to seek alternatives, the elites (particularly progressive ones) have amplified the people's anger by asserting that racism and authoritarianism motivate the voters who made Trump president. Edward Luce is a refreshing exception.

Born and educated in the United Kingdom, Luce is the Washington columnist for the Financial Times, where he has worked since 1995, including stints in the Philippines and India and a year away in the late 1990s to write speeches for Treasury Secretary Lawrence Summers. In “The Retreat of Western Liberalism,” Luce focuses on two major threats to nations devoted to human rights, democracy, and free markets. One is globalization and automation; the other is the rise abroad of authoritarian alternatives, starting with China. Compounding both, Luce maintains, are elites' flawed responses. These, he argues, have fueled populist backlash throughout the world's liberal democracies.

Occasionally, Luce slips in a Trump-bashing comment that can be difficult to distinguish from the Trump-voter bashing that he criticizes. But the overall thrust of his book is that the future of freedom depends on Western elites looking within and grasping their culpability.

Luce nimbly presents a staggering array of data detailing the blighted economic prospects of those who have lacked the good fortune to secure a position in the remunerative and prestigious professions in the West's large cities, or to earn a living through facility with words and images. The data is not new. Nor is his extended argument that the principal culprit is neither bad trade deals nor broken immigration policy but rather the onrush of globalization, which enables companies to find cheap labor abroad, coupled with stunning

advances in automation that equip firms to manufacture more and better products with fewer and fewer employees. Luce's analysis stands out for his contention that elites have failed to address the toll these relentless disruptive developments have taken on working-class families and communities.

Similarly, his exploration of the West's setbacks in foreign affairs is literate, succinct, and incisive. But it is not his examination of China's rise, Russia's belligerence, the dispiriting results of American interventions in the Middle East, the evasions of and ineffective answers to jihadism, and the dissolution of no fewer than 25 democracies in the first 17 years of the 21st century that sets his book apart. It is rather his insistence that the combined weight of these setbacks has provoked in the people a legitimate crisis of confidence in the elites.

One can quarrel with the elements of the "new social compact" that Luce proposes to assist Western elites in regaining the people's trust. In America, the compact would comprise an array of policies that are, he notes, not easy to pigeonhole. But with its call for universal health care, humane immigration laws, free speech on campuses and in the media, a greatly simplified tax code, a Marshall plan to retrain the middle class, emancipation of politics from money, and a reimagining of representative democracy, it resembles nothing so much as an updated version of the moderate center-left politics championed by Bill Clinton and Tony Blair.

At the same time, Luce's assessment of the starting point for beneficial reform is spot on. "Donald Trump, and his counterparts in Europe, did not cause the crisis of democratic liberalism," Luce writes. "They are a symptom." That reality, however, is proving "hard to digest, particularly for American liberals, whose worldview has been shaken by his victory yet who retain faith that things will turn out fine." It is also hard to digest for many establishment conservatives in America.

Progressive and conservative elites, nevertheless, must come to grips with their role in generating the populist counter-movement if they hope to avoid the further damage to Western liberalism that would come from failing the people again.

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