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Sarah Palin: Closet Elitist?

Leon Wieseltier: Invoking "the People" Sounds Inclusive, but it's a Technique of Exclusion

I should not speak ill of the dead, but what of the dead who spoke ill of the dead? Many years ago an acquaintance of mine applied for a position at the Museum of the City of New York, over which Louis Auchincloss presided. The search committee met in the writer's apartment on Park Avenue. When the candidate was asked to describe what he would do to improve the institution, he replied that too many people were not represented in its galleries, and noted in particular the inadequacy of the museum's portrayal of African Americans.

"What would you have us do," Auchincloss sneered, "create a period room with a hovel in it?"

I was reminded of that sickening remark when I read Auchincloss's obituary in the Times a few weeks ago. It was one of those death notices that make me chuckle. How's this for immortality? "I knew perfectly well what it meant to be rich in New York. If you were rich, you lived in a house with a pompous beaux-arts façade and kept a butler and gave children's parties with spun sugar on the ice cream and little cups of real silver as game prizes. If you were not rich you lived in a brownstone with Irish maids who never called you Master Louis and parents who hollered up and down the stairs instead of ringing bells."

This was Auchincloss's bathetic reminiscence of his boyhood, though it also anticipates the shrunken epicene standpoint of the Manhattan of Bloomberg and Blankfein--except for one glaring difference, one deliciously American usurpation. Master Louis never knew what it meant to be poor in New York, of course; and when critics accused him of Park Avenue provincialism, he accused them of "class prejudice," and protested grumpily that "nobody holds it against" James and Wharton and Thackeray and Proust. That is because their subject was not money, even if they wrote about the rich; but never mind, snobbery is a hurtful thing. It pleases me to think of Auchincloss's white-shoe resentment. A country in which he whined about class prejudice is a hopeful place. We are not a solid but a fluid. In America, elitists cannot sleep.

And certainly not if Sarah Palin has her way. "I'm never going to pretend like I know more than the next person," she recently told Chris Wallace, which is just as well. And she added: "I'm not going to pretend to be an elitist. In fact, I'm going to fight the elitist, because for too often and for too long now, I think the elitists have tried to make people like me and people in the heartland of America feel like we just don't get it."

At the Tea Party convention in Nashville, Palin made a similar claim for the moral superiority of ordinariness, twangily championing "real people, not politicians, not inside-the-Beltway professionals," and "everyday Americans," and finally "the people." Palin is packaging herself as the perfect image of the American mean. It is an affront to the heartland. But since the pitch is working--"the lady is good," the sobersides David Broder exclaimed--a few clarifications are in order. For a start, there are no unreal people. Even Mitch McConnell is real. Even Frank Rich is real.

The invocation of "the people" sounds inclusive, but it is a technique of exclusion. (This was also the case in the preamble to the Constitution.) It is based upon a particular definition of "the people." How do Palin and the partiers know who the real Americans are? The mystical certainty of her divisive intuition reminds me of what intellectual historians used to call the "epistemological privilege" of Marx's proletariat, his reprehensible old idea that access to truth is a feature of class position.

Palin, too, is idealizing the proletariat for the uniqueness of its understanding, though her economics is starkly indifferent to its tribulations. And if you throw in Palin's views on the "social issues," on the questions by which we measure the decency of our society, then it is clear that this is an anti-elitism that is not an egalitarianism, a common touch without genuine commonality, which is quite an accomplishment.

There is also the rather immense hypocrisy of Palin and many other populists. Anyone who has run for the vice presidency, and has published a monster bestseller, and appears regularly on television, and will run for the presidency is a member in good standing of the American elite. Even lesser attainments of prominence and success confer the same loathed status.

The anti-elitists in the Republican caucus in the House and the Senate, and in the conservative commentariat, and in the Heritage Foundation and the American Enterprise Institute and the Cato Institute--they are anti-elitists in the elite. Scott Brown proved that nothing gets you to Washington faster than a pickup truck, but he will have a hideaway now.

For years liberals used to be ridiculed for their condescension to "the people." (Like every common man I adore the scene in *The Deer Hunter* when Robert De Niro, John Cazale, Christopher Walken, and the others in the bar sing "Can't Take My Eyes Off You" along with the jukebox, but when I saw it a few weeks ago it looked to me like a bunch of guys from Tribeca slumming in a Pennsylvania steel town.) Now conservatives deserve the same ridicule.

The comforting fact is that there is no significant ideology and no significant policy agenda that is not represented among the elite. The appeal to authenticity is universal (Obama has his "folks" and the netroots have their "roots"), but it is universally beside the point. The wisdom of a policy is not determined by its social origins. There is a distinction between populism and "the people," though most populists do not want you to know it. The populism that bases its criticisms on a preference for one segment of the populace is merely another special interest, its denunciations of special interests notwithstanding.

This does not mean that its criticisms are wrong; but when they are right, it is because their reasons are moral, not sociological. The appeasement of Wall Street after what Wall Street did to this country is objectionable not on grounds of class, but on grounds of fairness, of justice. Is there any more inclusive standard for public policy? (Financial regulatory reform *and* gay marriage: that's populism!) But justice is not well-pursued by resentment. The anti-politician politicians who seek the favor of angry Americans are deceiving them, because anger is nothing more lasting than a political consultant's contract. Emotions are stoked by elections and are spent by them. What remains after the great manipulation is the increasingly Sisyphean task of public reason, which is its own kind of insurgency.

By Leon Wieseltier:
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