

FOREWORD

Unmasking the Urban Emperors

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WITH HIS LASER-LIKE focus on reality, Fred Siegel has inspired many, including this author, and in the process has also earned many enemies. At a time when urban pundits have largely embraced the celebratory—even amidst the wreckage of the 2020 pandemic—Siegel has been willing to show the unmistakable factors that previously led, and are once again leading, to urban decline.

Although many of his current admirers are from the right, Siegel is a product of a largely social democratic urban culture, notably epitomized by his mentor, Irving Howe, and Howe's magazine, *Dissent*. Yet Siegel's liberalism is focused not on addressing postmodern concerns such as transgender rights, reinventing American democracy as primarily an instrument of racist oppression, or the need for draconian steps to address climate change and the pandemic.

Siegel wants something more prosaic: the opportunity of ordinary, and extraordinary, people to get ahead in life. He is part of a small, albeit shrinking, cadre of urban thinkers who still think that, as Aristotle suggested, the city “comes into being for the sake of living, but it exists for the sake of living well.”¹ In American cities, this has meant a focus on improving the economic, educational, and housing available to urban

1. Aristotle, *Politics* 1.1252b.29–30.

residents. It is a liberalism of results, not the current progressivism of intent.

Siegel's sin, to the progressive left, has been to reject this intersectional agenda, largely cooked up in the ideological hothouses of the university. Decades ago, like the late New York Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, he identified issues of family, work ethics, and economic diversification as critical to the uplift of poor and working-class people. Bourgeois values of hard work, faith, and family, Siegel argued, were not oppressive but liberating, allowing the poor and ill-educated to improve themselves and their offspring.

The Urban Truth Teller

Siegel's important book *The Future Once Happened Here*² chronicled how the new liberal ethos of the 1960s contributed to the decline of great cities like New York and lay the basis for the "riot ideology" that expressed itself in many cities, including my own adopted hometown of Los Angeles. It also skewered the patronizing liberalism of John Lindsay's New York, as practiced by the likes of Welfare Commissioner Mitchell "Come and Get It" Ginsberg, who actually pleaded with poor people to sign up for welfare benefits.³

As we now know, as Siegel chronicles, this approach did not turn out well. The gentry liberal embrace of welfarism spelled disaster not just for city residents but for many of its recipients as well. In all too many cases, the dole replaced the former reliance on hard work and self-betterment that had led earlier generations to improve their lot.

This approach remains compassion for progressives. Yet it took a harsher hand, as Siegel shows in *The Prince of the City*,⁴ to change the urban decline trajectory. Crime was no longer tolerated, and attention was given to the city's neighborhoods, including the ethnic enclaves so central to New York's identity, which had gotten short shrift under mayors like Lindsay and Giuliani's predecessor, David Dinkins. Giuliani

2. Fred Siegel, *The Future Once Happened Here: New York, D.C., L.A., and the Fate of America's Big Cities* (San Francisco: Encounter Books, 2000).

3. John Tierney, "Brooklyn Could Have Been a Contender," in *Empire City: New York through the Centuries*, ed. Kenneth T. Jackson and David S. Dunbar (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2002), p. 416.

4. Fred Siegel, with Harry Siegel, *The Prince of the City: Giuliani, New York, and the Genius of American Life* (San Francisco: Encounter Books, 2005).

worked avidly with business and helped create a significant revival in the city's demographic, economic, and cultural dynamism. Critically, Giuliani's success was replicated in other cities, notably under Bob Lanier in Houston and Richard Riordan in Los Angeles.

Giuliani's billionaire successor, Michael Bloomberg, retained many of Giuliani's successes, notably on crime and the attempt to reform the schools, but he did not retain the same focus on the outer boroughs or working-class New Yorkers. Siegel, sometimes in concert with his journalist son and *New York Daily News* columnist Harry, was astute in his criticism of Bloomberg's "luxury city" approach, which sought to turn much of the city, notably Manhattan, into a cross between a high-fashion boutique and Copenhagen's Tivoli Gardens.⁵

The "luxury city" offended Fred in part because it doubled down on a finance-driven New York, which offered little opportunity to its now overwhelmingly minority economy. He proposed looking at how to restore the economic dispersion of the "harbor economy," which provided decent jobs for working-class people in the boroughs. Bloomberg's New York was really about Manhattan and the elite sections of Brooklyn, not the city as a whole. It was the whole city, down to unfashionable Brooklyn and the impoverished Bronx, that Siegel, the social democrat turned "conservative," cared about.⁶

Anyone raising these concerns—including the long-time Flatbush resident—has been tarred with the epithet of being "anti-urban."⁷ Yet in recent years his prophetic warnings have been all too accurate. After two decades of growth and rising migration, largely from abroad, New York is now losing population, as are our two other great cities, Chicago and Los Angeles. San Francisco, Seattle, and Portland have fared better economically but have become increasingly dystopic places with large homeless populations and pervasive street crime.⁸

5. Fred Siegel and Harry Siegel, "Can Bloomberg's 'Luxury' City Survive?" *Wall Street Journal*, October 15, 2009, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052748704107204574472892886003298>.

6. Fred Siegel, "New York City on the Edge," *Observer*, December 20, 1999, <https://observer.com/1999/12/new-york-city-on-the-edge/>.

7. David J. Barron and Gerald E. Frug, "After 9/11: Cities," *Urban Lawyer* 34, no. 3 (2002): 583–98.

8. Joel Kotkin, "The Luxury City Is Going Bust," *Daily Beast*, February 17, 2020, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/the-luxury-city-is-going-bust>.

Now when we add the COVID-19 pandemic to the mix, the potential for a further unraveling seems enormous. New York and its suburbs were hit hardest by the pandemic, and there are signs that hundreds of thousands have already left. Many of these generally affluent refugees may never return, leaving the city ever more bifurcated between rich and poor. The social democratic New York envisioned by La Guardia and others is becoming ever more improbable.⁹

The New Elites

Siegel's arguably most important book, *The Revolt Against the Masses*, details the intellectual forces that propelled the first urban decline, and which are likely to accelerate this process in the post-pandemic era. Siegel dissects the rise of our currently dominant cognitive elites, what we both refer to as the "clerisy"—a group that essentially seeks to serve as the arbiters of our society.

These have become the true heirs of the medieval First Estate, mainly the church, but are now increasingly secular in outlook. They tend to espouse a viewpoint that is fundamentally hostile to the kind of democracy that once characterized our cities at their best. Academics, think-tank executives, scientists, and high-level bureaucrats, as well as well-educated managers of major companies and their technical staff, are naturally attracted to the idea of a society ruled by professional experts with "enlightened" values—that is, by people much like themselves.¹⁰

This trend among corporate leaders brings the oligarchy closer to the elements of the clerisy—lawyers, academics, the media—that have long looked down on the middle orders. "Rid society of the dictatorship of the middle class," as Siegel quoted the 1920s literary historian Vernon Parrington, "and the artist and the scientist will erect in America

9. Ibid.; Charles Blain and Joel Kotkin, "The Virus's Uneven Path," *City Journal*, May 29, 2020, <https://www.city-journal.org/working-class-economic-stress>.

10. Christine Simmons, "For Many Big Law Trump Donors, 'Stigma' Kept Support below the Radar," *New York Law Journal*, January 12, 2017, <https://www.law.com/newyorklawjournal/almID/1202776732756/For-Many-Big-Law-Trump-Donors-Stigma-Kept-Support-Below-the-Radar/>; Andy Kiersz and Hunter Walker, "These Charts Show the Political Bias of Workers in Each Profession," *Business Insider*, November 3, 2014, <https://www.businessinsider.com/charts-show-the-political-bias-of-each-profession-2014-11>.

a civilization that may become what civilization was in earlier days, a thing to be respected.”¹¹

In *Revolt*, Siegel ties much of this sentiment to the Left, which has become increasingly alienated from both the working and the middle classes. The massive rise of an educated elite class has become in itself a definitive force and has been gaining power since its origins in the Progressive Era. At the beginning of the twentieth century, H. G. Wells envisioned an “emergent class of capable men” who could take upon themselves the responsibility of “controlling and restricting very greatly” the “non-functional masses.” Wells predicted that this new elite would replace democracy with “a higher organism,” which he called “the New Republic.”¹²

Yet this same technocratic and elitist vision also characterized many far more lethal political tendencies. The idea of an anointed elite leading a society of compliant followers was also notable in the rise of Bolshevism, Fascism, and National Socialism. All embraced some form of technocratic scientism. Mussolini’s Fascist ideology is now viewed as reactionary and clownish, but it highlighted the idea of a society governed with scientific principles by a cognitively superior ruling class.¹³

Soviet Communism, the sworn enemy of Fascism, followed a similar technocratic course.¹⁴ Marx believed utterly in the crucial role of technocratic administrators and scientists in society. He even offered to dedicate *Das Kapital* to Charles Darwin.¹⁵ Marx’s first successful acolytes, the Bolsheviks, believed that a small, ideologically motivated elite could turn a backward Russia into the most advanced and progressive regime on earth. The Bolsheviks would replace the old aristocracy

11. Fred Siegel, *The Revolt Against the Masses: How Liberalism Has Undermined the Middle Class* (New York: Encounter Books, 2015), p. xv.

12. H. G. Wells, *Anticipations of the Reaction of Mechanical and Scientific Progress upon Human Life and Thought* (1901; Mineola, NY: Dover Books, 1999), pp. 85–87, 99, 151; Siegel, *The Revolt Against the Masses*, p. 100.

13. Ernst Nolte, *Three Faces of Fascism*, trans. Leila Vennewitz (New York: New American Library, 1969), p. 7; Michael Grant, *The Fall of the Roman Empire* (New York: Collier, 1990), p. 92.

14. Friedrich Engels, “Socialism: Utopian and Scientific,” in *The Essential Left: Marx, Engels, Lenin: Their Basic Teachings*, trans. Edward Aveling (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1961), pp. 138–42.

15. Isaiah Berlin, *Karl Marx: His Life and Environment* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1963), pp. 63, 244–45.

with their own ideological elite, whom they believed could orchestrate a more egalitarian society. “If 10,000 nobles could rule the whole of Russia,” Lenin asked. “why not us?”¹⁶

On a far less grisly level, we in the West have experienced the emergence of our own elite class. The New Deal era brought considerable support for placing more decision-making power in the hands of university professors and other specialists, and even some well-credentialed journalists. During the Second World War and the Cold War, the idea of relying more on scientists, engineers, and other intellectuals in matters of public policy gained strength.¹⁷ The sociologist C. Wright Mills advocated the creation of a ruling cognitive elite, asking, “Who else but intellectuals are capable of discerning the role in history of explicit history-making decisions?”¹⁸

As economic competition from Germany, Japan, and other countries grew in the 1970s, some American policy intellectuals argued for establishing a powerful cadre of planners to bring rational order to the “untidy competitive marketplace.”¹⁹ Today, people such as the journalist Thomas Friedman and the former Obama budget adviser Peter Orszag have called for granting more power to credentialed “experts” in Washington, Brussels, and Geneva, in the belief that our societal problems are too complex for elected representatives to address.²⁰

16. Dmitri Volkogonov, *Autopsy for an Empire: The Seven Leaders Who Built the Soviet Regime*, ed. and trans. Harold Shukman (New York: Free Press, 1998), pp. 63, 75, 78; Orlando Figes, *A People's Tragedy: The Russian Revolution, 1891–1924* (London: Bodley Head, 2017), pp. 125, 127, 511, 551, 682; Masha Gessen, *The Future Is History: How Totalitarianism Reclaimed Russia* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2017), pp. 38–39; Richard Pipes, *Russia under the Old Regime* (New York: Scribner, 1974), p. 161; Nicholas Riasanovsky, *A History of Russia* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1963), p. 521.

17. Peter Bachrach, *The Theory of Democratic Elitism* (Boston: Little Brown & Co., 1967), pp. 58–60; Arthur Herman, *The Idea of Decline in Western History* (New York: Free Press, 1997), p. 17; Talcott Parsons, “The Distribution of Power in American Society,” in *The Power Elite*, ed. C. Wright Mills (Boston: Beacon, 1968), p. 9; E. J. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolution* (New York: New American Library, 1962), p. 327.

18. C. Wright Mills, *The Causes of World War Three* (1958; Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1985), p. 170.

19. Robert B. Reich and Ira C. Magaziner, *Minding America's Business: The Decline and Rise of the American Economy* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1982), pp. 13, 378.

20. Thomas L. Friedman, “Our One-Party Democracy,” *New York Times*, September 8, 2009, <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/09/09/opinion/09friedman.html>; John Hudson, “Peter Orszag Is So Over Democracy,” *Atlantic*, September 26, 2011, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2011/09/peter-orszag-so-over-democracy/337475/>;

Siegel, the old social democrat, recognizes the dangers—first addressed a half-century ago by Daniel Bell—of an emerging “knowledge class,” composed of people whose status rests on educational attainment and access to knowledge in a postindustrial society.²¹ Theoretically it represents a meritocracy, but this class has become mostly hereditary, as well-educated people, particularly from elite colleges, marry each other and aim to perpetuate their status.²² As Bell observed, parents of high status in a meritocracy will use their advantages to improve their children’s prospects, and in this way, “after one generation a meritocracy simply becomes an enclaved class.”²³

Post-literate America

As an educator, Siegel, like many others, has identified another huge issue: the growth of mass illiteracy. In the middle decades of the last century, he notes, there emerged a widely shared culture between the traditional arbiters and the ascending middle class. By the mid-1950s the middle-class yeomanry were purchasing large numbers of both classical works and contemporary ones by the likes of authors like Ruth Benedict and Saul Bellow. Many even watched Shakespeare on television, with one program attracting a remarkable fifty million viewers.²⁴

Yet this shared notion of an enlightened democratic culture is fading, and the creators of culture increasingly reflect not the mass market but the particular concerns of the clerisy. This is evidenced by a declining television audience for events like the Oscars, particularly among younger viewers. Increasingly, “quality” movies are chosen for their appeal to insiders, but rarely does something win that approximates in appeal such earlier, mainstream winners as *West Side Story*, *The Sound*

Joseph C. Sternberg, “The European Union’s Democracy Deficit,” *Wall Street Journal*, February 15, 2018, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-european-unions-democracy-deficit-1518739588>.

21. Daniel Bell, *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), pp. 15, 51, 213, 387.

22. “A Hereditary Meritocracy,” *Economist*, January 22, 2015, <https://www.economist.com/briefing/2015/01/22/an-hereditary-meritocracy>; Kevin Carey, “‘I Do’ Between Elites Widens Class Gap, Researchers Say,” WRAL, March 31, 2018, <https://www.wral.com/-i-do-between-elites-widens-class-gap-researchers-say/17456597/>.

23. Bell, *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society*, p. 427.

24. Siegel, *The Revolt Against the Masses*, pp. 112–15.

of *Music*, or even the original *Lord of the Rings*.²⁵ At the same time, Hollywood makes most of its money from cartoonish superhero movies, entertainment appropriate for the largely clueless and increasingly post-literate majority.²⁶

Finally, despite the spreading of mass education, cognitive skills now seem to be weakening. Many employers, at least in the United States, experience difficulty finding workers capable of having a serious conversation, with over sixty percent of applicants lacking basic social skills.²⁷ Rather than opening minds, social media seems to be creating a generation largely unable to communicate in person.²⁸ Today's teens are often limited in their experiences to what they access on their phones

25. Nina Metz, "Hollywood's Sweeping Generalizations about 'Mainstream America' Are Getting It Wrong," *Chicago Tribune*, May 24, 2018, <https://www.chicagotribune.com/entertainment/tv/ct-ent-inclusion-minorities-0529-story.html>; Jason Guerrasio, "The Last 16 Best-Picture Oscar Winners Show How Out of Touch Hollywood's Biggest Night Is with General Audiences," *Business Insider*, February 25, 2019, <https://www.businessinsider.com/best-picture-oscar-winners-compared-to-yearly-box-office-winners-2018-3>; Raquel Laneri, "The Oscars' New 'Popular Film' Award Proves It's Out of Touch and Elitist," *New York Post*, August 9, 2018, <https://nypost.com/2018/08/09/the-oscars-new-popular-film-award-proves-its-out-of-touch-and-elitist/>; Chris Lee, "Why the Academy Keeps Giving Oscars to Movies No One Sees," *Fortune*, February 29, 2016, <http://fortune.com/2016/02/29/spotlight-oscars-movies-box-office/>.

26. "All Time Worldwide Box Office for Super Hero Movies," *The Numbers*, <https://www.the-numbers.com/box-office-records/worldwide/all-movies/creative-types/super-hero>; Erin Free, "The Age of Heroes: Why Are Superhero Movies So Popular?," *FilmInk*, March 19, 2016, <https://www.filmink.com.au/the-age-of-heroes-why-are-superhero-movies-so-popular/>; Dave Gonzales, "Hollywood Loves White Guys, but Its Real Superhero Audience Will Surprise You," *Guardian*, July 29, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/jul/29/hollywood-superhero-audience-box-office-comic-con>.

27. "Prepared Project on Millennial Preparedness," Bentley University, 2014, <https://www.slideshare.net/BentleyU/prepared-u-project-on-millennial-preparedness>; Robert Schooley, "Why Are Soft Skills Missing in Today's Applicants," Murray State University, 2017, <https://digitalcommons.murraystate.edu/etd/42/>.

28. Glenn Harlan Reynolds, "Social Media Firms Want Us Addicted to Approval. So Much for WiFi Making Us Smarter," *USA Today*, April 1, 2018, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2018/04/01/social-media-business-model-addicts-us-approval-not-information-column/476719002/>; Jean M. Twenge, "Have Smartphones Destroyed a Generation?," *Atlantic*, September 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/09/has-the-smartphone-destroyed-a-generation/534198/>; Sara G. Miller, "Too Much Social Media Use Linked to Feelings of Isolation," *Live Science*, March 6, 2017, <http://www.livescience.com/58121-social-media-use-perceived-isolation.html>.

and social media.²⁹ Given the predominance of these forces of intersectionality and escalating censorship by both the tech oligarchs and the clerisy, free thought and speech are increasingly threatened.³⁰ Cut off from the values that created liberal society and the modern city—notably, glorious New York—more young people here and abroad reject free speech, democracy, and the market system themselves.³¹

If there was ever a time that America, and New York, needed Fred Siegel, this is it.

29. Twenge, “Have Smartphones Destroyed a Generation?”

30. Paul Bedard, “Social Media Companies Back Liberals, 72% ‘Censor’ Views They Don’t Like,” *Washington Examiner*, June 28, 2018, <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/washington-secrets/pew-social-media-companies-back-liberals-72-censor-views-they-dont-like>; Brad Parscale, “Big Tech Is Becoming Big Brother,” *Washington Examiner*, August 16, 2018, <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/opinion/op-eds/brad-parscale-big-tech-is-becoming-big-brother>; Mark Epstein, “The Google-Facebook Duopoly Threatens Diversity of Thought,” *Wall Street Journal*, December 18, 2017, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-google-facebook-duopoly-threatens-diversity-of-thought-1513642519>; Robert Tracinski, “Don’t Be Evil? Google Is Becoming a Police State,” *Federalist*, January 12, 2018, <http://thefederalist.com/2018/01/12/dont-be-evil-google-is-trying-to-become-a-police-state/>.

31. Joel Kotkin, “The Coronavirus Means Millennials Are More Screwed Than Ever,” *Daily Beast*, May 16, 2020, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/the-coronavirus-means-millennials-are-more-screwed-than-ever>.