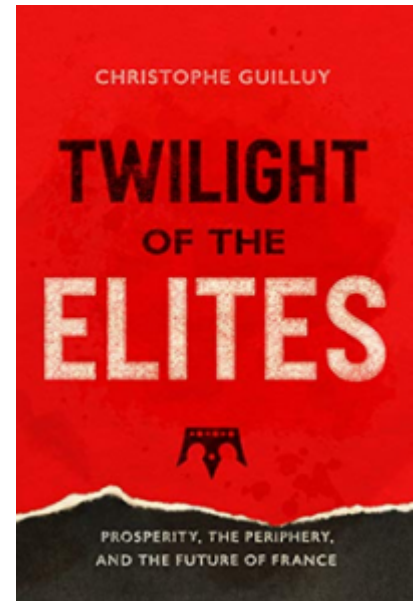




## REVIEW OF TWO BOOKS WITH THE SAME TITLE AND A MARKED DIFFERENCE: TWILIGHT OF THE ELITES

Christopher Hayes, *Twilight of the Elites: America After Meritocracy* ((NY: Broadway Books, 2012)

Christophe Guilluy, *Twilight of the Elites: Prosperity, The Periphery, and the Future of France* (New haven, CN.: Yale University Books, 2019).



These two books were written almost a decade apart, one in the USA, the other in France. Each addresses the role of elites in the unfolding (now unraveling) of Western societies. By the term 'elites', each is describing what evolved in the early part of the twentieth century with the formation of a middle-class meritocracy, the shaping of a technocratic, professionalized level of society. Its purpose was to serve the needs of an increasingly complex, technological and market-driven society through roles in government and in the professions, in the bureaucratic oversight of the state. These elites became an essential part of the social fabric of the West; to a large extent they were the basis of its institutions. Their roles often created, across the classes, a sense of confidence in the nation state and the economic system that undergirded it. For both writers, this relationship between the populations of the West and the elites has come apart as new social and economic relationships have emerged through the powerful realities of neoliberalism and globalization.

A legitimate question for anyone reading this Journal is what such books have to do with the questions of missional practice in Christian communities across the West. Why read such books when there are pressing needs for better evangelism, a different kind of formation, more creative means of church planting and a better sense of how the churches can fix their own unraveling? The brief, simple answer is that unless Christian leaders take in the arguments of books like these, they don't stand a chance of discerning the ways in which the Spirit is calling Christians to be God's people in this time of unraveling. If Lesslie Newbigin's question (*Can the West be converted?*) still has relevance for Christians today, or, if the question in a different form (*Where is God at work already converting the West?*) has any relevance, then paying attention to what Hayes and Guilluy are arguing is critical. What has to be understood in all the handwringing about the church and its future across the West is that for more than a hundred years the majority of Protestant churches on both sides of the Atlantic have been formed to create and serve religious social organizations and the religious needs of the middle classes. But these are the very middle classes which these books argue are no longer capable of addressing the shifts now remaking Western societies. Part of what is at stake for Christian mission in the West is the question of how these churches can untangle themselves from this middle-class ethos, this colonization

by the notions of a meritocracy of technocratic professionals who could manage the levers of the social, political and economic systems. Increasingly, large numbers of people across Western societies now find this middle-class religion, with its generalized, personalized 'moralities' of the workplace, untenable.

Such a dramatic shift in Western imagination did not suddenly happen with the economic meltdown of 2008-09. The roots of the problem were present long before that.. Almost a quarter of a century ago the American social theorist Christopher Lasch, was already writing about the deeper, structural and imaginative issues tearing at the fabric of the West. Two of his more famous books, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Era of Diminishing Expectations* (New ed., Norton, 1991) and *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy* (New ed., Norton, 1996) underlie and inform both Hayes' and Guilluy's books. These important books[1] carry forward the arguments of Lasch and provide a penetrating analysis of a situation that goes a long way to explaining the growing irrelevance of the Euro-tribal churches[2].

While their titles are the same and, to a large extent, their critiques, Hayes and Guilluy bring two different perspectives to the crises confronting western democracies. Hayes, writing almost a decade ago as the processes of globalization were still being understood, argues for ways of reconstructing, out of a younger, more disillusioned middle class, a meritocracy that would contribute to the remaking of society. Guilluy has no such hope. From the perspective of 2019 he is describing a class breakdown that cannot be fixed. The class distinctions that formed the basis of Western democracies through the twentieth century, with their concomitant sense that anyone with ability (the meritocracy) could climb the ladder to join the echelons of the well off, are finished. Radical new divisions are emerging. The basis of western democracies in terms of politics, social life and economics are in tatters; they are being replaced by a new class warfare unlike anything we have experienced to date. The presence, for example, of the *Yellow Jackets* in France or the populism of Trump or the power of Brexit are not the results of failed people out of touch with the brave new world of globalization and who, in their fears of change, are championing nativism and neo-fascism. Such readings by the elites fail to see a critical revolution fermenting on the ground among a new majority that has lost its faith in the pillars of the West. If the Euro-tribal churches fail to attend to these subterranean transformations while continuing to be shaped around the narrowing base of an old middle class formed by a cultural narrative of rising expectations, suburban morality and their own continuing power, they will be irrelevant to the remaking of the West.

This is not the place to write a comprehensive analysis of each book. But there are commonalities and differences that are important to highlight. Both describe the growing disillusionment of large numbers of the population with what were once the normative pillars of society. Trust in government, the social systems of support and the economic mechanism of society are all but gone. What had been the established basis of shared life through the twentieth century has come apart. For Hayes, the most pertinent and least understood element in this failure of the established narrative is the role of the elites (p.13). Decades of accelerating inequality have resulted in elites who are now largely seen as dysfunctional and corrupt. They are not to be trusted. Thus, the basis of society, shaped in the twentieth



century around a trusted technocratic meritocracy is gone. Hayes provides important background to the formation of these elites and their central role in the formation of that post-war, middle-class meritocracy that became the foundation for the working of modern societies.<sup>[3]</sup> In describing how this meritocracy came into being he also shows how the seeds of inequality were already present within its structures so that, from the 70s onward, the trajectory of American society has been one of a deepening inequality. In the end (though this was written near the end of the first decade of this millennium) while Hayes' analysis is potent, his prescription seems to be anything but helpful. It would seem that his own social position among the elites led him to propose that the only real solution is the formation of 'a newly radicalized upper middle class' (p.230) - a renewed elite coming from the young middle and upper middle classes who are disillusioned and frustrated with the failure of the social contract. These are the ones who might sow the seeds of a revolutionary movement. I won't be holding my breath awaiting this revolution from above.

I find Guilluy's analysis and prognosis not only more compelling but also providing far more helpful pointers for Christians asking how the West can be converted. Guilluy's language is uncompromising in its description of the divisions now defining Western societies. His context is France but his perspective carries into most Western societies. For Guilluy there now exists a massive divide splitting the West asunder and undermining the old divisions around right-left, progressive-conservative. This divide is about class (the one thing North America doesn't believe it has). There are two competing camps and underneath them a revolution is simmering. In contradistinction to Hayes' assessment, the so called middle and upper middle classes have not led a revolution from above but have become the acolytes of the super-rich who control the continued levers of globalization. The neoliberal economic system based on globalization has created, for Guilluy, what he calls a new *metropolization* (great urban centers like Paris, London, New York and so forth) which are the centres of globalized power over against the *peripheries* and city edge *banlieues* that house immigrants who provide cheap labor for the neoliberal, global market. It is to each of these locales, where those who are unable to manage the exorbitant prices of the metropol, now find themselves. These globalized cities are what Guilluy describes as *citadels* with invisible ramparts to keep out the losers in the globalized economies. They are run by upper-middle classes where the intellectuals and the media are beguiled by the power of globalization that makes invisible the peripheries. These cities are being emptied of working-class people who, for generations, were rooted in place. What we are seeing is a forced exodus of the working-classes (p.55) banished to the peripheries of the globalized world. Guilluy argues that the new elites are not the 1 or 2% of the wealthy but the new upper middle classes of the metropol who willingly serve the them.

In these globalized cities a narrative has emerged (an ideology, a myth) that lifts up globalization as the 'modern' (and, therefore, the progressive), the means of 'openness', the basis of 'equality for all' and the best system for 'diversity'. It is inside this globalized metropol that, so the argument goes, can be found the common good. All who stand against this inevitability are nativists, reactionaries, fascists, racists and so on. As Guilluy argues, the new bourgeoisie elites (think of many congregations in the West) cannot be expected to critique this myth of globalization because it is the very basis of their success and livelihood. 'The metropolitan ideology rests in large measure on the myth of an open society in which everything is possible' (p.27) - ideas, perseverance and a good computer will permit

everyone to climb the social ladder. This is not just a field of dreams; it's a destructive myth creating massive cultural alienation and a broad crisis across the West that will not be addressed from within the existing political, social and economic arrangements. This is the scary element of Guilluy's analysis. What we have created cannot be fixed with a little tinkering or some new moral awakening of the middle classes. The common good is being destroyed on the altar of globalization.

Guilluy's analysis of what needs to happen is, for Christians wrestling with these issues (and not just trying one more method for successful churches), important and insightful. What he sees is what we might call a bottom-up revolution fermented by increasing numbers of people who no longer trust the elites in politics or finance. There is a stirring already going on even in the midst of the hollowing out of social life. With the loss of public trust and the increase in insecurity, disillusionment is birthing something else. He describes this in terms of a return to "villages" (p.118), what we would describe as a return to the local.<sup>[4]</sup> This is not some irrational retreat from the world. It is a rational response to a neoliberal model that destroys all sense of community. It is a movement from the ground, among those set aside by the metropolises and their globalization. It is about ordinary people rediscovering a common good in the everyday rhythms of ordinary life among the ruins of a society whose promises have run dry. Guilluy sees a revolution of proximity coming from below, where ordinary people are rediscovering that the common good lies in the local and regional rather than any centralized or international forms of control. For the Christian who is aware of their own theological inheritance rooted in the Incarnation, this is a hopeful word. But is it a word that challenges Christians to re-enter their own local, daily life and let go of the need to improve their churches, shaped, as so many of them are, by a middle-class vision of life that is soul destroying.

<sup>[1]</sup> There were others writing about these issues on both sides of the Atlantic. See, for example, Janine R. Wedel, *Shadow Elite* (NY: Basic Books, 2009) and Michael Young, *The Rise of the Meritocracy* (NY: Transaction Publishers, 1994)

<sup>[2]</sup> That is the churches which can be traced back to the ethnic and religious identities of the fifteenth and sixteenth century reformations.

<sup>[3]</sup> For an excellent analysis of the development and problematics of this new meritocracy, see George F. Will, *The Conservative Sensibility* (NY: Hachette Books, 2019)

<sup>[4]</sup> See Alan Roxburgh and Martin Robinson, *Practices for the Refounding of God's People* (New York, NY: Church Publishing Incorporated, 2018).



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