

Hierarchy in America: Natural versus Artificial

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Introduction

Hierarchy is a fundamental part of every American life. From our grammar school days to our working careers, and even within our own families, we are constantly constrained within the limits of an established hierarchical structure, be it professional, societal, or even personal. Traditionally, the term *hierarchy* carries with it a negative connotation, a word that runs contrary to the American creed of challenging (and resisting) authority from another, a belief that we are taught from a very young age (and tend to perfect by our teenage years). Yet, most Americans still willingly (although perhaps grudgingly) submit and adhere to the orders of their bosses at work, never questioning why such an individual has the authority to tell them what to do (other than “because I told you so”). And we do not merely consent to a professional hierarchy either. Instead, we actively participate and promote established hierarchies within our communities and families. All along, though, we adamantly declare that we are our own persons, rejecting external constraints on our individual authority, all the while knowing that our society is essentially a web of hierarchies.

The most apparent hierarchy in America is our government, a massive behemoth of interconnected entities that work together to control and “lead” society. Yet most of the contention surrounding hierarchy that occurs here in the political realm is due to varying explanations of what (and where) that hierarchy is. Some, such as the Occupy Wall Street movement, vehemently detest the apparent domination of the “one percent” in the economy and government, dictating according to their own self-interests at the expense of the other ninety-nine percent. Others, including the Tea Party, argue that while there are certain natural leaders who consistently inhabit the upper echelons of government, in reality power is much more diffused and reciprocal between the governed and those who govern. Regardless of the rhetoric one chooses, though, the end result is still the admission that hierarchy is a noticeable component of American society.

These varying stances toward American hierarchy put forward by both the Tea Party and the Occupy movement are not new developments in American political debate. Both Thomas Jefferson and John Adams debated similar notions in the early 1800s, distinguishing between what they termed as either a natural or an artificial aristocracy of leaders, referring to the supposed hierarchs of America. This discussion has outlived both Jefferson and Adams, having been taken up by twentieth-century debaters, including sociologist C. Wright Mills (a subscriber to Adams' sentiments) and political scientist Robert A. Dahl (a follower of Jefferson), with today's Occupiers and Tea Partiers,

respectively, serving as the newest orators in this old forum. Both sets of debaters acknowledge that there is indeed some form of aristocratic hierarchy in America; however, each offers competing interpretations of a mutually beneficial natural hierarchy on the one side and a self-interested artificial hierarchy on the other.

Jefferson and Adams: Natural versus Artificial

As an Anti-Federalist, Thomas Jefferson's version of hierarchy was undergirded and validated by a strong belief in the virtuous nature of the people. Jefferson described the American elite in a dichotomous way, differentiating between a natural aristocracy based on "virtue and talents" and an "artificial aristocracy founded on wealth and birth, without either virtue or talents" (366). Thus, Jefferson believed that those who possessed the wisdom and virtue to "manage the concerns of society" were found within the natural aristocrats of the nation, and not with the men artificially exalted merely by birth or wealth (366). As such, virtuous citizens (in the Jeffersonian theme) were naturally inclined to assume the mantels of leadership because Providence had given them the inherent ability to do so. Every effort, therefore, should be made to prevent the influence of the artificial leaders in the government; otherwise society would become endangered (Jefferson 367). By endangerment, Jefferson was referring to the emergence of corruption in American society, a vice that would prevent the promulgation of the common good as well as create a hereditary class of artificial oligarchs.

As is typical in Anti-Federalist thought, Jefferson argued that the best remedy to prevent this venality was "to leave to the citizens the free election and separation of the *aristoi* from the pseudo-*aristoi*," since the people were morally capable of selecting the "really good and wise" for the halls of government (367, 369). This was not to say that Jefferson thought that wealth and birth could not blind people, but such deceit would not happen "in sufficient degree to endanger the society" (367). Therefore, Jefferson had a strong faith that the people, through their moral characters, would elect government leaders with natural talents and virtues, preventing an Old World order from taking root in America.

While agreeing with Jefferson that there was a natural aristocracy of virtues and talents, John Adams contended that *any* form of aristocratic hierarchy would lead eventually to despotism. For Adams, the natural talents that Jefferson referred to were shrouded in ambiguity, with items such as education, wealth, beauty, genius, and attitude all potentially being construed as talents (570). As such, while Jefferson wished to differentiate between a natural and a pseudo-aristocrat (implying that there was a fundamental difference), Adams argued that any talent "that in fact commands or influences true Votes in Society, gives to the Man who possesses it, the Character of an Aristocrat" (570-71). Therefore, Adams believed that there was no distinction between a natural and artificial aristocracy, as "Birth and Wealth are conferred on some Men, as imperiously by Nature, as Genius, Strength or Beauty" (571). Whereas Jefferson argued that wealth and birth could not be considered natural talents, Adams argued that they indeed were, thus invalidating any supposed dichotomy. Thus, Jefferson's natural aristocracy was just another example of an artificial group that would, eventually, endanger society.

Adams did not dismiss the existence of an artificial aristocracy, however; instead he redefined such pseudo-aristocrats as the byproducts of manmade laws and political institutions, resulting from corruption that becomes "dominate [*sic*] and uncontrollable" (571). Such corruption creates laws that codify the natural aristocracy in the nation's legal tradition, causing "irresistible Corruption in Elections," since the *aristoi* seek to maintain control. The long-term result of this competition is a hierarchical despotism, since mankind has yet to develop a mechanism to control such corruption, other than by hereditary institutions, a situation that originated from the "natural Aristocracy of 'Virtues and Talents'" (Adams 571-72). Instead of preventing the emergence of an Old World regime in

America, Adams believed that both natural and artificial aristocracies would encourage and promote hierarchical despotism, contrary to Jefferson's assurances.

Mills: The Power Elite of America

Certainly, nineteenth-century America was not the hierarchical oligarchy that Adams prophesied, although by the middle of the twentieth-century the situation had become much more alarming. As described in his book *The Power Elite* (published in 1956), C. Wright Mills argued that modern America had become dominated by a class of ruling elites, validating Adams' fears. Like Adams and Jefferson before him, Mills argued that not all men are ordinary, as some come to occupy positions in which their "decisions mightily affect the everyday worlds of ordinary men and women" (Mills 1264). Such individuals constitute the "power elite" in America, persons who "command...the major hierarchies and organizations" of society, possessing the ability to "make decisions having major consequences" for all Americans (Mills 1265). These major hierarchies are the big corporations, the political state, and the military, each of which commands the means of power, wealth, and prestige (Mills 1265). For Mills, national power in contemporary America resided with the elites from these Big Three, with all other centers of power, including the family, the Church, and educational institutions, being shaped by these upper elites, transforming these lesser institutions into means for legitimizing the decisions and power of the Big Three (Mills 1266-67).

From this perspective, American society (not just the government) has become not only hierarchically arranged from the top down but also despotic in practice, as all other entities are directly influenced by the Big Three. Mills easily illustrates contemporary America's hierarchical despotism, describing how the economy has become dominated by "two or three hundred giant corporations...which together hold the keys to economic decisions," how politically the nation no longer is a diffuse set of individual states, but instead a centralized, executive establishment that "enters into each and every cranny of the social structure," and how the military has evolved from a small, mistrusted entity, into a "sprawling bureaucratic domain" with a life of its own (1267-68). And at the center of it all are "the warlords, the corporation chieftains, [and] the political directorate," who come together and dominate American society in a largely despotic fashion (Mills 1269).

This despotism is further reinforced through the interconnectedness of the power elite. Interdependence among elites in the varying spheres has resulted in an "ever-increasing interlocking of economic, military, and political structures" in America, a situation which requires each sphere to act in tandem with another (Mills 1268). This interlocking is obvious in the economy, where the adage "If there is government intervention in the corporate economy, so is there corporate intervention in the government process" rings true (Mills 1268).

For example, when the government passed the financial bailout in 2009, there was an immediate effort among the corporate executives to ensure that the government would not pass any further legislation aimed at reform, as they pumped money into the campaigns of numerous politicians to essentially ensure their cooperation. Moreover, the prevailing belief among the political directorate at the time was that any failure in the economy would lead to a failure for all (including the politicians and military officials), thus leading to a class mentality among the elites that an attack on one is an attack on all (Mills 1269, 1271). Those who seek to reform or modify this arrangement are systematically cast as outsiders, and national power is brought to bear from across all three power hierarchies (Mills 1271). For Mills, therefore, modern America fulfilled Adams' prophecy of a hierarchical despotism, an oligarchy characterized by both despotic leadership and mutual support between elites, so as to maintain their positions at the apex of American society.

Dahl: Governors and the Governed

Whereas Mills validated Adams' concerns of an artificial hierarchy, Robert A. Dahl reinforced Jefferson's assurances of a natural hierarchy. Previously in America, Dahl (writing in his 1961 treatise on the distribution of political power in New Haven, Connecticut) argued that political inequality (or power) was marked as a cumulative inequality, meaning that those who possessed power were also better off in all other aspects (such as wealth) (1283). This led to the domination of society by a "cohesive set of leaders," a societal oligarchy not unlike Mills' power elites (Dahl 1283). However, unlike Mills, Dahl contends that today's political system is "dominated by many different sets of leaders, each having access to a different combination of political resources," making America a pluralist society that prevents the total domination by elites, although absolute popular government has not emerged either (1283).

Instead, Dahl describes American society to be composed of two different strata: the political stratum is composed of those individuals who are more politically active and astute than the ordinary citizen, while those more apathetic towards government form the apolitical strata (Dahl 1285). Essentially, the political stratum is highly educated, politically active, and much more directly involved in government policy, while the apolitical stratum is relatively ignorant, removed from politics, and much less influential in policy debates (Dahl 1285-86). Consequentially, the ruling elites are drawn from the political stratum, as they "are the main bearers of political skills," although their rise to power is somewhat contingent on their apathetic peers (Dahl 1285). Therefore, Dahl describes a system quite analogous to Jefferson's, in which leaders are selected, through popular election, for their inherent political talents and not merely because of their resources (e.g., wealth, education, or birth).

Moreover, Dahl's description of the current hierarchical relationship in America tends to demonstrate a reciprocal arrangement. While leaders are enormously influential and have much more direct influence over governmental issues than others, "the decisions of leaders are also determined in part by...the preferences of their constituents" in the apolitical strata (1284). A leader who wishes to win reelection, for instance, will be more inclined to vote his constituents' views than the party line, an arrangement that benefits both the leader (he wins reelection) and his constituents (they get policies they favor). Furthermore, due to the permeable and heterogeneous nature of the political stratum, "widely shared values and goals in society" are diffused, largely through the addition of new elites as well as elections (Dahl 1286). Such permeability helps to also explain why leaders are motivated by myriad factors and interests, there being no single common denominator, thus requiring decisions and policies to be based upon consensus more than self-interest (Dahl 1287).

Elites, however, do require assistance in implementing their policies and decisions, employing what Dahl calls sub-leaders who are rewarded through political patronage (1288). In order to dispense such patronage, however, leaders must obtain the resources necessary to do so from outside sources, using the government's power of coercion (thus explaining why the government is an important pawn in elite power struggles) (Dahl 1288). Such outside sources are the elite's constituents, who are coerced into contributing resources (in the form of money or votes) by popular programs implemented by the leaders, with such programs serving as the necessary motivation to keep voters happy who, in turn, keep the hierarch in power (Dahl 1288).

Thus, the mutual benefit relationship between leaders and constituents is again demonstrated: even though the government is controlled by a few elites, "the policies of the leaders...tend to reflect the preferences of the populace" at large, with elections serving as an indirect, and important, way of requiring elites to adopt favorable policies that the people want (Dahl 1289). Thus, modern America is governed not by despotic power elites, but instead by naturally talented political leaders, whose power is checked by the rest of us.

Modern Examples: The Tea Party and Occupy Wall Street

From a twenty-first century perspective, the Occupy Wall Street movement demonstrates both Adams' and Mills' fears and contentions concerning a hierarchical despotism present in America. Arguably, the Occupiers have considerable evidence of how corporate executives have come to dominate not just the economy but also the political system. For example, the auto and financial bailouts instituted by the Obama administration were done largely without wide-scale public backing; the government justified the legislation by using tag lines such as "too big to fail" or "if we didn't do anything, it would have caused further economic failures." As Mills described, such rhetoric proves interdependence among the political and economic elites, showing how both spheres have essentially worked in tandem concerning the economic rescue packages, as the corporation chieftains appeared on Capitol Hill to testify that they needed a bailout, giving the political directorate a democratic façade from which to quickly pass legislation.

Moreover, the latest response to the Occupy movement has seen the emergence of the third sphere of national power, the military, into the fray, with governments calling up police and National Guardsmen to disperse the tent cities and forcibly remove protesters who refuse to leave. The combined power of the Big Three has hence come to bear on the outsiders who have challenged the hierarchical society that the power elite currently dominates and controls, proving not only Mills' thesis but also Adams' beliefs that an artificial aristocracy based on manmade legislation (i.e., an economic bailout) will inherently devolve into a despotic situation.

Still, others will contend that while America is governed by an elite hierarchy, such an aristocracy is of the Jeffersonian and Dahl variety. Most notably, Americans have shown a remarkable capacity recently to hold politicians accountable for their actions, with the influence of the Tea Party being a prominent counter-example to the Occupiers' claims of an extant hierarchical despotism. The Tea Party, which emerged as a powerful and influential social movement in late-2009, has aptly demonstrated that Americans can force elites to implement policies to their liking and get rid of those who stand opposed. During the 2010 mid-term elections, a swath of Republican candidates defeated their Democratic challengers in large part thanks to the financial and political support from Tea Partiers, an election that collectively gave the Republicans nominal control of the US House of Representatives. Moreover, the power of the Tea Party was used against Speaker of the House John Boehner (R-OH) during the debt ceiling negotiations with President Barack Obama (D), with the Tea Party threatening to withdraw support from Republicans who voted to increase the debt limit without substantial spending cuts in exchange. The result was a bloc of the Republican caucus that refused to endorse any of Boehner's compromise positions (which were supported by the corporate and military elites), since such representatives feared they would be subjected to a beating in the 2012 elections. A similar situation has occurred surrounding healthcare reform, with politicians on both sides of the aisle being subjected to voter wrath for supporting (or in some cases for refusing to support) "Obamacare," with the 2012 elections surely destined to be another example of voter dissatisfaction, with the Tea Party leading the way. Such examples demonstrate that a political elite does exist, but their control is dependent on the mutual success of the people they are charged to lead, and that we, as their constituents, can remove them from power.

Conclusion

As the examples of Occupy Wall Street and the Tea Party demonstrate, hierarchy is an acknowledged part of today's American society. Despite widespread rhetoric condemning such authority, Americans have shown a great disposition to live within the confines of such a hierarchical arrangement, although disputes continue about what exactly this American hierarchy actually is. For some, including Jefferson and Dahl, America's hierarchy is characterized by elites who are naturally suited to govern, with such elites

possessing beneficial talents that differentiate them from others. Members of this natural aristocracy lead the nation, but their power depends on the support of the governed, with such consent being communicated through popular elections (and, likewise, being withdrawn). Conversely, others, such as Adams and Mills, point out how an artificial aristocracy has given way (through these natural leaders) to an institutionalized hierarchical despotism, one characterized by power concentrated in the hands of a few power elites that dominate national economic, political, and military circles. The power monopoly that these elites possess causes them to become interconnected and dependent, creating a relationship where each acts in tandem with the others and treats an attack on one as an attack on all, resulting in an elite establishment that deploys autocratic methods aimed at maintaining its control. Arguably, both interpretations have merit in contemporary and historical America, illustrating that while Americans may detest and loathe the idea of hierarchy, it certainly continues to exist in an otherwise individualistic society.

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