

# ELITES OF LARGE CITIES RECKON ONLY WITH PROFESSIONAL UNIONS

Thomas R. Dye



THOMAS R. DYE

is a Professor of Political Science at the State University of Florida, and a consultant for intelligence activities research at CIA. He is believed to be the founder of the 'neoealist' scientific school (also known as the functional theory of elites). Its followers believe that power in society always belongs to the elite, and that it is an absolute social norm.

Thomas R. Dye is the author of many books, the most popular of which are *Understanding Public Policy* and *Politics in America*, and have been re-published 14 and 8 times respectively

*RJ* Professor Dye, my first question is about the state of bureaucracy in big cities. Do you think the influence of bureaucracy in the life of megalopolises is increasing or decreasing? What is the reason for this trend?

It is a good question, and here is why: local municipal employees are increasing their influence in the big cities. **Right now in the United States, only the unions of municipal employees are increasing the number of their members.** Private sector pro-

fessional unions are in decline, while the number of members of the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) increases every day. I would say it is the fastest growing professional union in the United States. AFSCME includes state employees, workers, janitors, etc., and it has become especially strong on the national level since Barak Obama's election. Professional unions of policemen, fire fighters, and teachers are now very strong in America (such as the National Education Association, and the American Federation of Teachers). In the course of recent years, municipal bureaucrats have increased their power in large American cities, notably through the development of professional unions of municipal employees, which are joined by teachers, fire fighters, and policemen. It is this force that the elites of large cities now have to reckon with.

*RJ* Can the citizens of megalopolises participate in the real governance of their city?

There is a very low level of participation of individual citizens in the municipal governance of large cities. On the whole, around 25% of eligible voters come to municipal elections in the United States. Sometimes there can be higher results, but 25% is the average. At present, the municipal government operates as follows: **decisions taken by municipal authorities are agreed upon with the big businesses present in each large city** — in most cases, these are the construction companies, banks, real estate companies, and industrial groups.

*RJ* My next question is about town hall meetings. How autonomous are town hall meetings in megalopolises in Western countries like the United States? Do they play an independent role? Are they at all influential?

General town hall meetings have an official capacity in the US only in the states of New England, where they are held once a year. Any citizen can participate in such a meeting. **But town hall meetings are only held in small cities.** In Boston, for example, this institution no longer exists. Sometimes in the US, what we mean by the term 'town hall meeting' is when a congressman arrives in a city and asks for a meeting with the citizens who elected him. Such meetings, however, don't have any official status, and the congressman just wants to get input from his constituents. Also, such meetings are only officially held in small cities throughout New England. The local government is actually elected during such meetings as well; but this is certainly just a local phenomenon.

*RJ* So, town hall meetings don't play any role in big cities in America?

No, they don't.

*RJ* What forces in American society might serve as the vanguards of city resistance when big business and bureaucracy get out of control and start to harm the interests of citizens? Do you think it would be possible for renowned intellectuals to lead such an opposition?

At present, there are neo-populist groups, which form the so-called Tea Party brigades. You may have heard in Russia about numerous protests initiated by these groups in the US. On the whole, these protests are against the federal government, against the financial tycoons on Wall Street, against the increasing national debt (which is still increasing), and against excessive expenditures in relation to GDP. If we review just the expenditures in relation to GDP, we can see that they have increased during Obama's presidency by 20-25%. However, **it is a national protest movement.** There have been times, of course, when the African American

population in big cities carried out violent protests. However, these, too, did not really result in much change towards municipal governance.

**RJ** *And do you see any intellectuals leading these anti-governance protests?*

I don't think so. **Most of these protests, even if we take the protests of the Tea Party brigades as an example, are formed on the grass roots level; intellectuals, and the university environment in general, participate very little in them.** Of course, sometimes a few professors can participate in such protests, but on the whole intellectuals stay away from public processes; it is a group that is separate from the rest of the society.

**RJ** *What role do representatives of subculture and religious groups play within the broader social and cultural life of Western megalopolises? Do they influence city policy?*

Participation of various minorities in municipal governance has expanded in the United States, from African Americans to Hispanic groups. Detroit is governed by an African American mayor, and Los Angeles by a mayor of Latin American descent. In Atlanta, the mayor, until very recently, was also African American. Though they brought almost no changes into the basic structure of governance, they brought with them many African Americans or Latin Americans to bureaucratic posts in the police and fire fighting structures. I also would like to add that **today, the municipal elite in large US cities is mostly a plural elite.** On the one hand, you have the historical business and economic elite, and on the other hand you have the political and bureaucratic elite. Together, they pretty much decide everything through negotiation and competition..

**RJ** *As you have mentioned, there is a heterogeneous elite with varied interests in big cities. Can you give more details?*

Right now, many politicians elected by citizens work in the large cities,



and there is a powerful, separately functioning bureaucratic structure in place. At present, business and industry feel the pressure from such forces. Their elite status no longer has the same power it once had.

**Thirty or forty years ago, big cities were pretty much run by industrial, banking, and financial interests.** In the city where I am from, Pittsburgh (Pennsylvania), everything was run by Jay Paul Mellon, the chairman of the board of the Mellon bank. On the whole, this bank, together with the United States Steel company, decided what the city needed. However, **today these economic elites have to share power with the political elite,** which is represented by African Americans and Latin Americans in some large cities. The financial and the industrial elite still have a lot of power, because they can always threaten to move their offices and plants abroad if the municipalities don't heed their interests. But the

collapse of the auto industry, for example, has demonstrated that the Henry Ford dynasty no longer controls Detroit, as it once did during the prosperous years of the Ford Motor Company. Today, the struggle between the political, industrial, and financial elites dominates every large city throughout America.

**RJ** *Can some radical social group emerge in big cities to oppose bureaucracy and large business?*

No. **I do not think that radical social forces have any influence in large American cities today.** Such forces are more readily found in suburbs, or provincial towns, and here, again, we can recall the Tea Party brigades. Large cities of America, however, have mostly been turned over to ethnic minorities. ■

*Thomas R. Dye was speaking with Yulia Netesova*