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America in the Age of Myth

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We live in a mythic age — but mythic in the sense of made-up.

The Coastal Aristocrat

In the last thirty years, I have probably spoken 200 times at a coastal university of some sort, most of which were on the Eastern seaboard. I spent eight years at UC Santa Cruz and Stanford. I go to Palo Alto every week to work, and often lecture or teach in southern California.

So I know the Bay Area and Los Angeles almost as well as I know the San Joaquin Valley and the culture of the Eastern seaboard. I talk sometimes with the media, academics, foundation heads, a few in entertainment, and some politicians. All are coastal-based. Here is what I've learned over the last three decades about the mythologies of our national oligarchy.

There is a liberal coastal aristocrat, but he is really not very liberal, at least in the sense of his regressive life not matching his progressive rhetoric. His views are mostly conditioned on his education, salary, and material circumstances. Put the coastal aristocrat in charge of a 7-Eleven in Stockton, and his therapeutic view would turn tragic quite quickly. And that fear is why he rarely goes to either a 7-Eleven or Stockton.

Let me give a few examples.

Fracking is seen as mostly bad, not because of any firsthand knowledge, any in-depth reading of the literature, any quid pro quo, or any cost/benefit analysis of the effect of more oil and gas production on the lives of the poor, but largely because the coastal aristocrat senses that he 1) has quite enough money and job security [to ignore the price of gas](#) ^[1], 2) does not drive all that much in comparison to the red-state interior Neanderthal, and 3) receives enormous psychological comfort and social acceptance from the fact that he is opposed to carbon emissions. Why, he wonders, do the poor on the way to work drive those gas-guzzling used Yukons, when a second-hand Prius would work just as well?

Illegal immigration? The Palo Alto aristocrat's position is predicated on two realities: his hardworking nanny, yardman, and cook are often rather recent arrivals from Mexico, and he most certainly does not wish his children to attend school anywhere near Redwood City. Thus he is for

“comprehensive immigration reform,” with the understanding that the benefits are his, and for others the downside.

Taxes? They are the cost of a utopian worldview, a mordida necessary to live in Cambridge or Santa Monica. For the aristocrat making over \$500,000 a year, a few extra thousand dollars a year is a price worth paying, at least for the psychological guarantee that the distant food-stamp recipients, who mostly go to Safeway rather than Ralphs or Whole Foods, are content to live their happy lives as they do. Pay up the penance and be done with the guilt is the creed.

Guns? For the coastal elite, who do not hunt, who do not live in a dangerous neighborhood, and who believe the Bill of Rights are sacrosanct to the degree they support progressive change and fluid when they do not, guns more or less should just go away. Of course, the celebrity, the CEO, and the politician [may need “security.”](#)^[2] but no one much asks what hides inside the coats of the husky men at their sides.

Education? Public unions are saintly. Charter schools and vouchers are satanic. But the aristocrat, who knows best [what is good for the masses](#)^[3], prefers and can afford the private school, and feels no guilt in his choice because his version is liberal while the more low-brow alternative is often crappy and not that much better than the public offering. (E.g., if you wish to duck out of the public school system, at least have the class to do it with style rather than on the cheap: a Castilleja or Andover rather than First Christian Academy.)

In lieu of the traditional aristocrat estate, peerage, or title, the outward manifestation of aristocracy is an Ivy League brand or a West Coast Stanford version. The proper campus is one’s lifelong entrée. The right quad is where your kids meet the right mate and receive a bumper sticker that opens the right doors. Such university snobbery is inconsistent with classical liberalism, but not with liberal aristocratic values, which are based on exclusionary criteria. For the NBC anchor, or the Massachusetts senator, or the Google executive, the key is to get your kid into the right prep school, as requisite for the even more correct Ivy League, where the perfect spouse and Facebook founders-like coterie are found. It is not just that junior [will emerge with correct ideas](#)^[4] about gay marriage, abortion, green power, the U.S. role abroad, and the poor, but that he will be seen, by virtue of his degree, as having the right ideas.

Apartheid is the unifying theme of coastal aristocracy. Without it, reality would disabuse the grandee of his worldview. Take any tenured Berkeley professor of environmental studies and make his existence hinge on squeezing a daily profit out of a Selma Stop-N-Go, and this gentle brontosaurus would turn into a Tyrannosaurus rex in a nanosecond. Therefore exclusion of all sorts from the underbelly of America is an essential.

One associates with mostly fellow one percenters. One picks and chooses friends on the basis of where they work and where they were educated and the views they hold. A Chevron field job, a University of Idaho degree in sports journalism, a strong aversion to abortion — all this is impermissible. In some Frankenstein-like laboratory, an evil genius cooked up Sarah Palin, whose looks, accent, background, views, and style were designed [to enrage the coastal aristocracy](#)^[5].

I used to think that the coastal aristocracy was just hypocritical in matters of race, but as I age I fear I have become more cynical: it is not white guilt that explains why the coastal elite seek gestures of progressive caring (how else would an anti-Semitic, race-baiting provocateur [like Al Sharpton](#)^[6] be given his own show? Or an unaccomplished Touré rate [over the accomplished Dr. Carson](#)^[7]?), but a real aversion to mixing with unlike kind. On matters of race, the liberal worldview of affirmative action, busing, amnesty, and vast entitlements is a psychological mechanism for conniving to get your own into Princeton, for ensuring they are not schooled in fourth grade with a bused-in student body, and ensuring that you are not in the evening line at Save Mart as the only English speaker or privately racially profiling the two scary people who just lined up behind you at the convenience store checkout stand. An alien from Mars who studied the liberal aristocrat would conclude that he is a segregationist [of the first order](#)^[8].

The Iconic UFW

Another myth. I opened my Easter Sunday Google browser and did not find a Christian icon on the page, but instead a (badly done) [romantic rendition of a youthful Cesar Chavez](#)^[9], apparently our age’s version of a politically correct divinity.

Yet I wondered whether the midlevel Googilites who post these politically hip images knew all that much about Chavez. I grant in this age that they saw no reason to emphasize Christianity on its most holy day. But there is, after all, Miriam Pawel’s 2010 biography of Chavez [still readily](#)

[accessible](#) ^[10], and a new essay about him [in the Atlantic](#) ^[11] — both written by sympathetic authors who nonetheless are not quite the usual garden-variety hagiographers. To suggest something other than sainthood is heresy in these parts, as I have discovered since the publication of *Mexifornia* a decade ago.

I grew up in the cauldron of farm-labor disputes. Small farms like ours largely escaped the violence, because there were five of us kids to do the work in summer and after school, and our friends welcomed the chance to buck boxes or help out propping trees or thinning plums. Hired help was rare and a matter of a few days of hiring 20 or so locals for the fall raisin harvest. But the epic table grape fights were not far away in Parlier, Reedley, and down the 99 in Delano. I offer a few impressions, some of them politically incorrect.

First, give Chavez his due. Farmworkers today are more akin to supposedly non-skilled (actually there is a skill required to pruning and picking) labor elsewhere, with roughly the same protective regulations as the food worker or landscaper. That was not true in 1965. Conservatives will argue that the market corrected the abuse (e.g., competition for ever scarcer workers) and ensured overtime, accessible toilets, and the end to hand-held hoes; liberals will credit Chavez — or fear of Chavez.

But that said, Chavez was not quite the icon we see in the grainy videos walking the vineyards with [Robert Kennedy](#) ^[12]. Perhaps confrontation was inevitable, but the labor organizing around here was hardly non-violent. Secondary boycotts were illegal, but that did not stop picketers from yelling and cursing as you exited the local Safeway with a bag of Emperor grapes. There were the constant union fights with bigger family growers (the 500 acre and above sort), as often demonstrators rushed into fields to mix it up with so-called scabs. Teamsters fought the UAW. The latter often worked with the immigration service to hunt down and deport illegals. The former bused in toughs to crack heads. After-hours UFW vandalism, as in the slashed tire and chain-sawed tree mode, was common.

The politics were explicable by one common theme: Cesar Chavez disliked small farmers [and labor contractors](#) ^[13], and preferred agribusiness and the idea of a huge union. Otherwise, there were simply too many incongruities in an agrarian checkerboard landscape for him to handle — as if the UAW would have had to deal with an auto industry scattered among thousands of small family-owned factories.

For Chavez, the ideal was a vast, simple us/them, 24/7 fight, albeit beneath an angelic veneer of Catholic suffering. In contrast, small farmers were not rich and hardly cut-out caricatures of grasping exploitation. Too many were unapologetic Armenians, Japanese (cf. the Nisei Farmers League), Portuguese, and Mexican-Americans to guarantee the necessary white/brown binary. Many had their own histories of racism, from the Armenian genocide to the Japanese internment, and had no white guilt of the Kennedy sort. I cannot imagine a tougher adversary than a Japanese, Armenian, or Punjabi farmer, perched on his own tractor or irrigating his 60 acres — entirely self-created, entirely unapologetic about his achievement, entirely committed to the idea that no one is going to threaten his existence.

The local labor contractors were not villains, but mostly residents who employed their relatives and knew well the 40-acre and 100-acre farmers they served. When there were slow times on the farm, I picked peaches for two summers for a Selma labor contractor, whose kids I went to school with. He was hardly a sellout. The crusty, hard-bitten small farmers (“don’t bruise that fruit,” “you missed three peaches up there on that limb,” “you stopped before it was quite noon”) who monitored personally the orchards we picked looked no different from the men on ladders.

In contrast, Chavez preferred the south and west Central Valley of huge corporate agribusiness. Rich and powerful, these great captains had the ability by fiat to institute labor agreements across hundreds of thousands of acres of farmland. Chavez’s organizing forte was at home in a Tulare, Delano, Shafter, Mendota or Tranquility, not a Reedley, Kingsburg or Selma. In the those days, the former were mostly pyramidal societies of a few corporate kingpins with an underclass of agricultural laborers, the latter were mixed societies in which Mexican-Americans were already ascendant and starting to join the broader middle class of Armenians, Japanese, and Punjabis.

Chavez was to be a Walter Reuther or George Meany, a make-or-breaker who sat across from a land baron, cut a deal for his vast following, and then assumed national stature as he doled out union patronage and quid-pro-quo political endorsements. In that vision, as a 1950s labor magnate Chavez largely failed — but not because agribusiness did not cave in to him. Indeed, it saw the UFW and Chavez as the simple cost of doing business, a tolerable write-off necessary to making all the bad press, vandalism, and violence go away.

Instead, the UFW imploded by its own insider and familial favoritism, corruption, and, to be frank, lunatic paranoia. The millions of dollars Chavez deducted for pension funds often vanished. Legions of relatives (for a vestigial experience of the inner sanctum, I suggest a visit to the national shrine southeast of Bakersfield) staffed the union administration. There were daily rumors of financial malfeasance, mostly in the sense of farmworkers belatedly discovering that their union deductions did not lead to promised health care or pensions.

Most hagiographies ignore Chavez's eerie alliance with the unhinged Synanon bunch. In these parts, they had opened a foothill retreat of some sort above Woodlake, not far from here. (I visited the ramshackle Badger enclave once with my mother [I suppose as her informal "security,"], who was invited as a superior court judge to be introduced to their new anti-drug program in their hopes that county officials might save millions of dollars by sentencing supposedly non-violent heroin addicts to Synanon recovery treatments. Needless to say, she smiled, met the creepy "group," looked around the place, and we left rather quickly, and that was that.)

I don't think that the Google headliners remember that [Charles Dederich](#) ^[14] (of rattlesnake in the mailbox and "Don't mess with us. You can get killed, dead" fame) was a sort of model for Chavez, who tried to introduce the wacko-bird Synanon Game to his own UFW hierarchy. No matter, deification of Chavez is now de rigeur; the young generation who idolizes him has almost no knowledge of the man, his life, or his beliefs. It is enough that Bobby Kennedy used to fly into these parts, walk for a few well-filmed hours, and fly out.

When I went to UC Santa Cruz in September of 1971, I remember as a fool picking a box of Thomas seedless grapes from our farm to take along, and soon being met by a dorm delegation of rich kids from Pacific Palisades and Palos Verdes (a favorite magnet area for Santa Cruz in those days) who ordered me not to eat my own grapes on my own campus in my own room. Soon I had about four good friends who not only enjoyed them, but enjoyed eating them in front of those who did not (to the extent I remember these student moralists, and can collate old faces with names in the annual alumni news, most are now high-ups and executives in the entertainment industry).

Obamism

Our greatest legend is Barack Obama. Liberals believe that he is still the fierce anti-Cheney civil libertarian of 2008, as he institutionalized the idea that drones could target U.S. citizens (as they did in Yemen) and expanded or embraced renditions, preventative detention, tribunals, wiretaps, and intercepts. In our secular bible, Obama still shuns money from Wall Street [sorts like Goldman Sachs](#) ^[15], follows campaign-financing reform laws, vacations as a man of the people, and has squeezed out of the exploiting classes millions of new jobs for minorities.

There were not 50 consecutive months of 7.8% unemployment (until last month, no one month of the Obama administration saw unemployment lower than in any one month of the Bush administration). What about sluggish GDP, record debt, chronic deficits, unheard of zero interest, vast numbers on food stamps and unemployment and disability insurance? Bush did it.

We all know how this Paul Bunyan legend will end up. The next president, be it Hillary or Marco Rubio or Joe Biden or Rand Paul, will not embrace Obamism. They cannot and have the nation still survive. The federal saddlebags [are empty](#) ^[16]. We will not follow the Obama trajectory to 70 million on food stamps or \$30 trillion in debt. Even a President Hillary Clinton would not lecture us that we didn't build that. We cannot keep printing a trillion dollars through quantitative easing. Interest rates will climb. I don't think Rand Paul will tell the Tea Party "to punish our enemies" or Hillary Clinton "to get in their faces."

You see, Obamism is an emotional flight from reality, completely unsustainable to the degree it is a paradigm for anything. It is mythical, this notion of borrowing vast amounts of money to grow government and subsidize a new cadre on government support, or demonizing millions as suspect for their success, or assuming that foreign nations react best to apologies, contextualization, and sermons, or wish to join in the cultural adulation of an American president. Putin could care less. Ditto the North Koreans.

In short, in this mythical age, we all know that Barack Obama won the Nobel Prize, but none of us quite know what for.

Such is what passes for reality in [our age of myth](#) ^[17].

(Image atop article assembled from multiple [Shutterstock.com](#) ^[18] components.)

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[2] may need "security,": <http://www.rightwingnews.com/celebrities/one-day-after-calling-gun-owners-heartless-motherfckers-jim-carrey-admits-he-has-an-armed-bodyguard/>

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[4] will emerge with correct ideas: <http://www.freedomworks.org/blog/benjibacker/15-year-old-wisconsin-conservative-meets-bullying>

[5] to enrage the coastal aristocracy: <http://spectator.org/archives/2012/05/31/jfk-and-the-death-of-liberalis>

[6] like Al Sharpton: <http://pjmedia.com/eddriscoll/2012/05/29/obama-al-sharpton/>

[7] over the accomplished Dr. Carson: <http://www.breitbart.com/InstaBlog/2013/03/29/Tale-of-the-Tape-Toure-vs-Ben-Carson>

[8] of the first order: [http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0446528846/ref=as_li_ss_tl?](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0446528846/ref=as_li_ss_tl?ie=UTF8&camp=1789&creative=390957&creativeASIN=0446528846&linkCode=as2&tag=pjmedia-20)

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[9] romantic rendition of a youthful Cesar Chavez:

<http://pjmedia.com/eddriscoll/2013/03/31/google-easter-cesar-chavez/>

[10] still readily accessible:

[http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/1608190994/ref=as_li_ss_tl?](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/1608190994/ref=as_li_ss_tl?ie=UTF8&camp=1789&creative=390957&creativeASIN=1608190994&linkCode=as2&tag=pjmedia-20)

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[11] in the *Atlantic*: <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2011/07/the-madness-of-cesar-chavez/308557/>

[12] Robert Kennedy: <http://pjmedia.com/eddriscoll/2010/02/28/if-our-colleges-and-universities-do-not-breed-men-who-riot/>

[13] and labor contractors: <http://dailycaller.com/2013/03/31/psst-cesar-chavez-opposed-illegal-immigrants/>

[14] Charles Dederich: <http://www.positiveatheism.org/rw/dederich.htm>

[15] sorts like Goldman Sachs:

<http://clockworkconservative.wordpress.com/2011/12/04/president-goldman-sachs-or-who-owns-obama/>

[16] are empty: <http://www.nationalreview.com/corner/344336/end-stage-metastasis-mark-steyn>

[17] our age of myth: http://www.ideasinactiontv.com/tcs_daily/2006/05/why-isnt-socialism-dead.html

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