

November 1, 1994 (Vol. 10, no. 5)

Dear Colleague:

Some are born to be servants, others are born to think great thoughts. Is this a paraphrase of Aristotle? A Victorian sahib? Neither. It is the sentiment of the distinguished American historian and diplomat--our contemporary--George F. Kennan. He is harassed by the servant problem. "A society wholly devoid of the very institution of domestic service is surely... a deprived society, if only because this situation represents a very poor division of labor. There are people for whom service in and around the house pretty well exhausts their capabilities... There are others who have different and rarer capabilities; and it is simply not a rational use of their abilities that they should spend an inordinate amount of time and energy... washing pots and pans and removing trash from the kitchen premises."

Talk about elitism! America is both elitist and egalitarian. Quite often the same person is both, depending on circumstance. Indeed, the American people as a whole are both. The people. What word has a greater egalitarian ring than that? Yet the people, for all their embracement of egalitarian ideals, vigorously support excellence and individual talent in those areas that command their attention--sports and popular music. Who, on a Sunday afternoon, would prefer to watch the bush rather than the national league? "Bush league"--that expression itself is richly condescending toward those not sufficiently gifted.

Grad students, I notice, are similarly both elitist and egalitarian. In a seminar, they would like everyone to be given his or her five-minutes of celebrity and that no single opinion ends up finding general acceptance, for that would make it hegemonic. On the other hand, they trump one another with the prestige of a name--my Foucault outranks your Lévi-Strauss, my Rorty your Nagel, my Susan Smith your David Harvey. (Dear Grad, please excuse this bit of teasing).

But it is in the realm of nature that elitism gets out of hand. Grand Canyon! High Sierras! Giant Sequoias! They parade themselves like the lords and ladies of a darker age, and we--we the people--defer to them by flocking to their courts. Hence the crowding of the National Parks and the neglect of the wildernesses (as Bill Cronon reminds us) in our own backyards. What really angers me is to be called "foothills" by the high-and-mighty Sierras. Foothills--can any term be more demeaning? "Height-challenged mountains"--that's what we are--and if we do lack elevation now, it is because we have been worn down by millions of years of oppression.

Best wishes,

