# Epstein, Lasch And the Revolt of the Elites

**By Patrick Keeney**

**The public fixation on the Epstein files has settled,** predictably, on the most lurid elements of the story. This is understandable. Sexual exploitation, particularly of the young, is among the most corrosive of crimes, and the scale of Epstein's abuse, as well as the apparent indifference of powerful institutions to it, demands moral outrage. But to focus exclusively on the sexual scandal is to miss the deeper and more unsettling lesson the affair reveals.


What the Epstein files expose, above all, is the social and moral estrangement of American elites from the people they claim to govern.

Epstein was not merely a predator who gained access to power. He was a node within a closed world of wealth, influence, and immunity. The scandal is not that powerful people behaved badly in private—history shows many such examples—but that they did so with a confidence rooted in the belief they were insulated from the consequences of their behaviour. They moved through a transnational elite culture that had largely severed itself from ordinary moral constraints, legal accountability,

and civic obligation. That culture did not merely tolerate Epstein but normalized him.

This echoes the point Christopher Lasch made decades ago, long before private islands and hedge-fund philanthropy became familiar symbols of elite excess. In his 1994 book *The Revolt of the Elites*, Lasch argued that the modern American ruling classes had stopped seeing themselves as stewards of a shared national project.

Instead, they increasingly saw themselves as a mobile, globalized caste, educated in the same institutions, moving through the same cities, governed by the same tastes, and primarily accountable only to each other. Citizenship was seen as a minor inconvenience. Nationhood and patriotism were just sentimental relics from less enlightened times.

The Epstein affair reads like a case study in Lasch's thesis.

Here was an individual whose wealth was opaque, whose sources of income were rarely scrutinized, and whose social standing seemed immune to ordinary reputational risk. He functioned as a social broker among financiers, politicians, academics, royalty, and celebrities, many of whom publicly advocated policies of moral uplift, social justice, and global responsibility. Yet in private, they inhabited a world defined by indulgence, entitlement, and a contempt for limits.

Elite detachment today is not just economic but also existential, and it is hardly limited to Americans. The British writer David Goodhart offers a handy shorthand for the governing classes of advanced democracies: he divides the world into the "somewhere" people, who remain rooted in communities tied by tradition and history, and the "anywhere" people, who increasingly live in a world shaped by mobility, abstraction, and insulation from consequences. The loyalties of the anywhere people are professional rather than civic, global rather than national, and managerial rather than moral.

They see society less as a shared inheritance and more as a set of problems to manage from a distance. In such a world, attachment to place, memory, and shared fate seems parochial, even suspicious, while belonging itself is quietly redefined as an obstacle to progress.

Those who create policies affecting immigration, policing, education, public health, and national security rarely face the consequences themselves. They do not send their children to failing schools, live in high-crime neighbourhoods, compete for scarce housing, or navigate broken public institutions. Their lives are shielded by wealth, location, private services, and increasingly by law itself.

The Epstein files sharpen this reality because they reveal not just hypocrisy, but impunity. Despite extensive documentation, repeated warnings, and credible testimony, accountability arrived slowly and incompletely. This is not because the crimes were ambiguous, but because the accused moved within a protected sphere where consequences were negotiable and enforcement discretionary. Justice, like morality, was something applied elsewhere for other people.

What truly enrages the public is not prurience, but recognition. The scandal strikes a nerve because it crystallizes an intuition that has been gathering force for years: that there exist two moral universes—one for those who govern and another for those who are governed. The anger arises from the dawning realization that the standards so confidently proclaimed from podiums and panels are not, in fact, universally binding.

The governing class speaks fluently of restraint, sustainability, and shared sacrifice. It invokes responsibility as a civic virtue and moderation as a planetary necessity. Yet its own habits suggest something rather different. It lives expansively, insulated from the consequences of the policies it recommends. It urges ordinary

citizens to temper their expectations, reduce their consumption, and accept limits for the sake of the collective good, even as the elites inhabit a sphere of extraordinary mobility and indulgence.

This dissonance has become difficult to conceal in the Internet age. When elites preach austerity while enjoying privilege without remorse, they undermine the moral framework of public life.

What truly offends is not wealth or success itself, but exemption: the quiet assumption that the moral structures they confidently promote and preach are meant for the great unwashed. They are not meant for the few whose wealth and privilege exempt them from such constraints.

And so the scandal resonates because it confirms a suspicion that has become hard to dismiss: that the language of progress conceals a more subtle form of decadence. The rhetoric is future-focused, technocratic, and sincere, while the reality is isolated, defensive, and hedonistic. In such an environment, public trust evaporates.

The result is not just cynicism but also alienation. A society cannot last if its leaders live in decadence while sanctimoniously telling their fellow citizens that they must make sacrifices to support the public good.  At day's end, it is the recognition of this divide that truly unsettles the public mind.

Lasch warned that such a ruling class would eventually forfeit legitimacy, not because of ideology, but because of character. A society cannot be governed indefinitely by people who do not believe they belong to it. When elites become tourists in their own countries, financially global, culturally unrooted, and morally untethered, their authority rests on little more than coercion and spectacle.

The Epstein files should therefore be read less as an

aberration than as a symptom. They reveal a governing class that has lost the habits of self-restraint that once justified its power, and the sense of common fate that once bound leaders to citizens.

For many, the salient point of the Epstein Files is the scandal. I think it is more accurately seen as a disclosure.

The danger is not merely that such elites are corrupt, but that they are bored. Bored with limits, bored with norms, bored with accountability, and ultimately bored with democracy itself. That boredom, Lasch understood, is the precondition of revolt, not by the masses, but by those who no longer feel answerable to them.

If the Epstein affair provokes lasting anger, it is because it crystallizes a truth many citizens already sense, that the people shaping the future live in a world apart, governed by different rules, and increasingly incapable of moral seriousness. No society can long endure that division without consequence.

The question is not whether further revelations will emerge. It is whether the public will finally insist that elites once again live under the same moral and civic conditions as those they presume to lead.

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