PART I

DEMOCRATIC ELITISM: THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES
There is, unfortunately, no such thing as a unified theory of democratic elitism. Forty years ago Peter Bachrach (1967), a self-declared opponent of democratic elitism, identified a whole series of writers from the late nineteenth century to the 1960s as belonging to this notorious school of thought. Bachrach and critics after him drew a line of influence from Gaetano Mosca and Vilfredo Pareto through Max Weber and Robert Michels to Joseph Schumpeter, Robert Dahl, Seymour Martin Lipset, Giovanni Sartori and many others. The criticism that Bachrach and others put forward focused on tenets allegedly embraced by all these authors:

1. The idea of popular sovereignty must be subordinated – “sacrificed” – to a purely representative system, in which citizen participation is largely restricted to the periodic act of voting.
2. The existence of a political elite is natural and unavoidable, even in democracy.
3. Elite autonomy in governing is a desirable feature of any functioning democracy because elites promise to be more “enlightened” and more likely to promote the common good than the uneducated and self-interested masses.

Peter Bachrach and other critics charged that democratic elitism relegates citizen involvement to the sidelines, in both its empirical analyses and as a normative ideal of democracy. Most of the theorists labeled “democratic elitists” would deny at least the latter charge, however. They aim at a realist understanding of democracy. The first task is to analyze democracy as it is, not as it should be. In this view exposing and discarding myths about democracy is undoubtedly the most important contribution of democratic elitism. Different authors