



Role of Elite Class in Social Change

Seema Sharma

Lecturer, Dept. of Sociology, SD Govt. College, Beawar, Rajasthan, India

ABSTRACT: Elite are the most influential and prestigious stratum in a society. The 'elite' are those persons who are recognized as outstanding leaders in a given field. Thus, there are political, religious, scientific, business, and artistic elite. Pareto, Mosca, Wright Mills, Lasswell, Mannheim, Bottomore, etc., have given different definitions. Parry Geriant (1969) has defined elite as "small minorities who play an exceptionally influential part in the affairs of society in specific fields". Bank (1966) has described elite as "decision-makers whose power is not subject to control by any other body in the society". Nadel (1956) maintains that elite are "those who have an influence over the fate of the society because of their superiority".[1]

The members of an elite group have important influence in shaping the values and attitudes held by their segment of society. Wright Mills (1956) has described them as "those who make decisions having major consequences, who are able to realise their will even if others resist, and who have the most of what there is to have-money, power and prestige". I describe elite as "a dominant group which possesses distinctiveness and exclusiveness".

Secondly, the term does not apply to any one person but refers to a plurality, a collectivity of persons, however small it may be.

Thirdly, this identifiable collectivity has certain attributes and skills which give it not only a certain superiority but also power of decision-making and influencing others.

Lastly, elite is a relative term. A group is identified as an elite group in a particular field in which it is 'power exerciser' or 'influential' or commands 'excellence', but in other groups, these elite may be considered as 'ordinary' members.

On this basis, the term 'political elite' may be defined as "a group of high stratum decision-makers in political culture or concrete political structure which monopolises political power, influences major political policies and occupies all important posts of political command".

KEYWORDS: elite class, social change, culture, ordinary members, monopolises, power and prestige

I.INTRODUCTION

In philosophy, political science and sociology, **elite theory** is a theory of the State that seeks to describe and explain power relationships in contemporary society. The theory posits that a small minority, consisting of members of the economic elite and policy-planning networks, holds the most power—and that this power is independent of democratic elections.^[1]

Through positions in corporations or on corporate boards, and influence over policy-planning networks through the financial support of foundations or positions with think tanks or policy-discussion groups, members of the "elite" exert significant power over corporate and government decisions.[2,3]

The basic characteristics of this theory are that power is concentrated, the elites are unified, the non-elites are diverse and powerless, elites' interests are unified due to common backgrounds and positions and the defining characteristic of power is institutional position.^[2]

Elite theory opposes pluralism (more than one system of power), a tradition that emphasized how multiple major social groups and interests have an influence upon and various forms of representation within more powerful sets of rulers, contributing to decently representative political outcomes that reflect the collective needs of society.

Even when entire groups are ostensibly completely excluded from the state's traditional networks of power (on the basis of arbitrary criteria such as nobility, race, gender, or religion), elite theory recognizes that "counter-elites" frequently



develop within such excluded groups. Negotiations between such disenfranchised groups and the state can be analyzed as negotiations between elites and counter-elites. A major problem, in turn, is the ability of elites to co-opt counter-elites.

Democratic systems function on the premise that voting behavior has a direct, noticeable effect on policy outcomes, and that these outcomes are preferred by the largest portion of voters. Strikingly, a study published in 2014, which correlated voters' preferences to policy outcomes, found that the statistical correlation between the two is heavily dependent on the income brackets of the voting groups.^[3] At the lowest income sampled in the data, the correlation coefficient reached zero, whereas the highest income returned a correlation coefficient above 0.6. The conclusion of this research was that there is a strong, linear correlation between the income of voters and how often their policy preferences become reality. The causation for this correlation has not yet been proven in subsequent studies, but is an active area of research.

II.DISCUSSION

Ancient Perspective on Elite Theory

Polybius (~150 B.C.) referred to what we call today Elite Theory as simply "autocracy". He posited with great confidence that all 3 originating forms of sources of political power: one man (monarchy/executive), few men (autocracy), many (democracy) would eventually be corrupted into a debased form of itself, if not balanced in a "mixed government". Monarchy would become "tyranny", democracy would become "mob rule", and rule by elites (autocracy) would become corrupted in what he called "oligarchy".^[4] Polybius effectively said this is due to a failure to properly apply checks and balances between the three mentioned forms as well as subsequent political institutions.

Italian school of elitism

Vilfredo Pareto (1848–1923), Gaetano Mosca (1858–1941), and Robert Michels (1876–1936), were cofounders of the Italian school of elitism, which influenced subsequent elite theory in the Western tradition.^{[5][6]}

The outlook of the Italian school of elitism is based on two ideas:

1. Power lies in position of authority in key economic and political institutions.
2. The psychological difference that sets elites apart is that they have personal resources, for instance intelligence and skills, and a vested interest in the government; while the rest are incompetent and do not have the capabilities of governing themselves, the elite are resourceful and strive to make the government work. For in reality, the elite would have the most to lose in a failed state.^[4,5]

Vilfredo Pareto

Pareto emphasized the psychological and intellectual superiority of elites, believing that they were the highest accomplishees in any field. He discussed the existence of two types of elites:

1. Governing elites
2. Non-governing elites

He also extended the idea that a whole elite can be replaced by a new one and how one can circulate from being elite to non-elite.

Gaetano Mosca

Mosca emphasized the sociological and personal characteristics of elites. He said elites are an organized minority and that the masses are an unorganized majority. The ruling class is composed of the ruling elite and the sub-elites. He divides the world into two group:^[6,7]

1. Political class
2. Non-Political class

Mosca asserts that elites have intellectual, moral, and material superiority that is highly esteemed and influential.

Robert Michels

Sociologist Michels developed the iron law of oligarchy where, he asserts, social and political organizations are run by few individuals, and social organization and labor division are key. He believed that all organizations were elitist and that elites have three basic principles that help in the bureaucratic structure of political organization:

1. Need for leaders, specialized staff and facilities
2. Utilization of facilities by leaders within their organization
3. The importance of the psychological attributes of the leaders[20]

Contemporary elite theorists

Elmer Eric Schattschneider

Elmer Eric Schattschneider offered a strong critique of the American political theory of pluralism: Rather than an essentially democratic system in which the many competing interests of citizens are amply represented, if not advanced, by equally many competing interest groups, Schattschneider argued the pressure system is biased in favor of "the most educated and highest-income members of society", and showed that "the difference between those who participate in interest group activity and those who stand at the sidelines is much greater than between voters and nonvoters".^[7]

In *The Semisovereign People*, Schattschneider argued the scope of the pressure system is really quite small: The "range of organized, identifiable, known groups is amazingly narrow; there is nothing remotely universal about it" and the "business or upper-class bias of the pressure system shows up everywhere". He says the "notion that the pressure system is automatically representative of the whole community is a myth" and, instead, the "system is skewed, loaded and unbalanced in favor of a fraction of a minority".^[8]

C. Wright Mills



On the left we have the sociologist C. Wright Mills and on the right we have the writer Saul Landau (at that time his assistant).

Mills published his book *The Power Elite* in 1956, in which he claimed to present a new sociological perspective on systems of power in the United States. He identified a triumvirate of power groups—political, economic and military—which form a distinguishable, although not unified, power-wielding body in the United States.

Mills proposed that this group had been generated through a process of rationalization at work in all advanced industrial societies whereby the mechanisms of power became concentrated, funneling overall control into the hands of a limited, somewhat corrupt group.^[9] This reflected a decline in politics as an arena for debate and relegation to a merely formal level of discourse.^[10] This macro-scale analysis sought to point out the degradation of democracy in "advanced" societies and the fact that power generally lies outside the boundaries of elected representatives.

A main influence for the study was Franz Leopold Neumann's book, *Behemoth: The Structure and Practice of National Socialism, 1933–1944*, a study of how Nazism came to power in the German democratic state. It provided the tools to analyze the structure of a political system and served as a warning of what could happen in a modern capitalistic democracy.^[8,9]

Floyd Hunter

The elite theory analysis of power was also applied on the micro scale in community power studies such as that by Floyd Hunter (1953). Hunter examined in detail the power of relationships evident in his "Regional City" looking for the "real" holders of power rather than those in obvious official positions. He posited a structural-functional approach that mapped hierarchies and webs of interconnection within the city—mapping relationships of power between businessmen, politicians, clergy etc. The study was promoted to debunk current concepts of any "democracy" present within urban politics and reaffirm the arguments for a true representative democracy.^[11] This type of analysis was also used in later, larger scale, studies such as that carried out by M. Schwartz examining the power structures within the sphere of the corporate elite in the United States.^[12]



G. William Domhoff

In his controversial 1967 book *Who Rules America?*, G. William Domhoff researched local and national decision-making process networks seeking to illustrate the power structure in the United States. He asserts, much like Hunter, that an elite class that owns and manages large income-producing properties (like banks and corporations) dominate the American power structure politically and economically.^[13]

James Burnham

Burnham's early work *The Managerial Revolution* sought to express the movement of all functional power into the hands of managers rather than politicians or businessmen—separating ownership and control.^[14]

Robert D. Putnam

Putnam saw the development of technical and exclusive knowledge among administrators and other specialist groups as a mechanism that strips power from the democratic process and slips it to the advisors and specialists who influence the decision process.^[15]

"If the dominant figures of the past hundred years have been the entrepreneur, the businessman, and the industrial executive, the 'new men' are the scientists, the mathematicians, the economists, and the engineers of the new intellectual technology."^[16]

Thomas R. Dye

Dye in his book *Top Down Policymaking*, argues that U.S. public policy does not result from the "demands of the people", but rather from elite consensus found in Washington, D.C.-based non-profit foundations, think tanks, special-interest groups, and prominent lobbying and law firms. Dye's thesis is further expanded upon in his works: *The Irony of Democracy*, *Politics in America*, *Understanding Public Policy*, and *Who's Running America?*.

George A. Gonzalez

In his book *Corporate Power and the Environment*, George A. Gonzalez writes on the power of U.S. economic elites to shape environmental policy for their own advantage. In *The Politics of Air Pollution: Urban Growth, Ecological Modernization and Symbolic Inclusion* and also in *Urban Sprawl, Global Warming, and the Empire of Capital* Gonzalez employs elite theory to explain the interrelationship between environmental policy and urban sprawl in America. His most recent work, *Energy and Empire: The Politics of Nuclear and Solar Power in the United States* demonstrates that economic elites tied their advocacy of the nuclear energy option to post-1945 American foreign policy goals, while at the same time these elites opposed government support for other forms of energy, such as solar, that cannot be dominated by one nation.

Ralf Dahrendorf

In his book *Reflections on the Revolution in Europe*,^[17] Ralf Dahrendorf asserts that, due to advanced level of competence required for political activity, a political party tends to become, actually, a provider of "political services", that is, the administration of local and governmental public offices. During the electoral campaign, each party tries to convince voters it is the most suitable for managing the state business. The logical consequence would be to acknowledge this character and openly register the parties as service providing companies. In this way, the ruling class would include the members and associates of legally acknowledged companies and the "class that is ruled" would select by election the state administration company that best fits its interests.

Martin Gilens and Benjamin I. Page

In their statistical analysis of 1,779 policy issues professors Martin Gilens and Benjamin Page found that "economic elites and organized groups representing business interests have substantial independent impacts on U.S. government policy, while average citizens and mass-based interest groups have little or no independent influence."^{[18][19]} Critics cited by Vox.com argued, using the same dataset, that when the rich and middle class disagreed, the rich got their preferred outcome 53 percent of the time and the middle class got what they wanted 47 percent of the time. Some critics disagree with Gilens and Pages' headline conclusion, but do believe that the dataset confirms "the rich and middle (class) are effective at blocking policies that the poor want".^[20]

Thomas Ferguson

The political scientist Thomas Ferguson's *Investment Theory of Party Competition* can be thought of as an elite theory. Set out most extensively in his 1995 book *Golden Rule: The Investment Theory of Party Competition and the Logic of Money-driven Political Systems*, the theory begins by noting that in modern political systems the cost of acquiring



political awareness is so great that no citizen can afford it.^[21] As a consequence, these systems tend to be dominated by those who can, most typically elites and corporations. These elites then seek to influence politics by 'investing' in the parties or policies they support through political contributions and other means such as endorsements in the media.^[10,11]

III.RESULTS

Elitism is the belief or notion that individuals who form an elite—a select group of people perceived as having an intrinsic quality, high intellect, wealth, power, notability, special skills, or experience—are more likely to be constructive to society as a whole, and therefore deserve influence or authority greater than that of others.^[1] The term elitism may be used to describe a situation in which power is concentrated in the hands of a limited number of people. Beliefs that are in opposition to elitism include egalitarianism, anti-intellectualism, populism, and the political theory of pluralism.

Elite theory is the sociological or political science analysis of elite influence in society: elite theorists regard pluralism as a utopian ideal.

Elitism, closely related to social class and what sociologists term "social stratification". In modern Western societies, social stratification is typically defined in terms of three distinct social classes: the upper class, the middle class, and the lower class.^[2]

Some synonyms for "elite" might be "upper-class" or "aristocratic", indicating that the individual in question has a relatively large degree of control over a society's means of production. This includes those who gain this position due to socioeconomic means and not personal achievement. However, these terms are misleading when discussing elitism as a political theory, because they are often associated with negative "class" connotations and fail to appreciate a more unbiased exploration of the philosophy.^[3]

Attributes that identify an elite vary; personal achievement may not be essential. Elite status can be based on personal achievement, such as degrees from top-rate universities or impressive internships and job offers, as well as on lineage or passed-on fame from parents or grandparents.

As a term, "elite" usually describes a person or group of people who are members of the uppermost class of society, and wealth can contribute to that class determination. Personal attributes commonly purported by elitist theorists to be characteristic of the elite include: rigorous study of, or great accomplishment within, a particular field; a long track record of competence in a demanding field; an extensive history of dedication and effort in service to a specific discipline (e.g., medicine or law) or a high degree of accomplishment, training or wisdom within a given field; a high degree of physical discipline.^[14,15]

Elitists tend to favor social systems such as meritocracy, technocracy and plutocracy as opposed to political egalitarianism and populism. Elitists believe only a few "movers and shakers" truly change society, rather than the majority of people who only vote and elect the elites into power.^[4]

Elitism can not be entirely defined in one nature. Its interpretations broaden over time and communities or groups can create their own interpretations of elitism. The common characteristic among all these forms of elitism is that it shows some form of heavy inferiority-superiority.^[18,19]

Liberal elite,^[1] also referred to as the **metropolitan elite** or **progressive elite**,^{[2][3][4]} is a stereotype of politically liberal people whose education has traditionally opened the doors to affluence, wealth and power and who form a managerial elite. It is commonly invoked pejoratively, with the implication that the people who claim to support the rights of the working class are themselves members of the ruling classes and are therefore out of touch with the real needs of the people they say that they support and protect.^{[4][5][6]}

Because the label is a rhetorical device, it carries flexible meaning depending on the circumstances in which it is used. The concept arose in the United States, but has spread to other English-speaking countries, where the term metropolitan elite is more common because liberal can have the opposite meaning, depending on country^[12,13]

In India, the term 'liberal elite' is used to describe the English speaking, left-leaning establishment, aligned to Nehruvian socialism and Marxism, who have formed much of the mainstream intelligentsia and the ruling political class of India since its independence in 1947. The Indian National Congress, often referred to as the 'Grand Old Party' of India, is a left-liberal party, which has dominated Indian politics for much of the country's independent history



IV.CONCLUSIONS

The broad sweep of the chapters in this book is intended to capture the reach that elite theory has across the spectrum of disciplines. While each of the authors of the various chapters is individually embedded in a specific discipline, the combination of their insights offers an extraordinary insight into the activities, behaviour, and outcomes of elites.[21] By providing a critical survey of the relevant literature in their areas of focus, authors reveal the lens through which they interpret elites. The incorporation of these different angles of analysis enables this volume to draw out the wider lessons about how elites interact with society. This chapter pegs out the frame of the book, introducing the research work in broad brushstrokes and some of the important lessons offered up to policy makers.[16,17]

REFERENCES

1. "Theories of American Democracy"
2. ^ Deric., Shannon (2011-01-01). Political sociology : oppression, resistance, and the state. Pine Forge Press. ISBN 9781412980401. OCLC 746832550.
3. ^ Gilens, M., & Page, B. (2014). Testing Theories of American Politics: Elites, Interest Groups, and Average Citizens. *Perspectives on Politics*, 12(3), 564-581. doi:10.1017/S1537592714001595
4. ^ Polybius.(~150 B.C.) The Rise of the Roman Empire: Book 6. Translated by Ian Scott-Kilvert (1979). Penguin Books; London, England
5. ^ Robert A. Nye, The Anti-Democratic Sources of Elite Theory: Pareto, Mosca, Michels, Sage, 1977.
6. ^ J. J. Chambliss (ed.), Philosophy of Education: An Encyclopedia, Routledge, 2013, p. 179.
7. ^ Woolley and Papa 1998, 165
8. ^ Schattschneider 1960, 30-36
9. ^ Bottomore, T. (1993). Elites and Society (2nd ed.). London: Routledge. p. 25.
10. ^ Mills, C. Wright (1956). The Power Elite. p. 274. ISBN 0-19-541759-3.
11. ^ Hunter, Floyd (1953). Community Power Structure: A Study of Decision Makers. p. 6. ISBN 0-8078-0639-0.
12. ^ Schwartz, M., ed. (1987). The Structure of Power in America: The Corporate Elite as a Ruling Class. New York: Holmes & Meier. ISBN 0-8419-0764-1.
13. ^ Domhoff, G. William (1967). Who Rules America?. McGraw-Hill. ISBN 0-7674-1637-6.
14. ^ Bottomore, T. (1993). Elites and Society (2nd ed.). London: Routledge. p. 59.
15. ^ Putnam, Robert D. (1977). "Elite Transformation in Advance Industrial Societies: An Empirical Assessment of the Theory of Technocracy". *Comparative Political Studies*. **10** (3): 383–411 (p.385). doi:10.1177/001041407701000305. S2CID 154141193.
16. ^ Putnam, Robert D. (1976). The Comparative Study of Political Elites. New Jersey: Prentice Hall. p. 384. ISBN 0-13-154195-1.
17. ^ Dahrendorf, Ralf (1990) Reflections on the Revolution in Europe: In a letter intended to have been sent to a gentleman in Warsaw. New York: Random House
18. ^ "Study: US is an oligarchy, not a democracy". BBC News. 17 April 2014. Retrieved 24 October 2016.
19. ^ Testing Theories of American Politics: Elites, Interest Groups, and Average Citizens (Fall 2014)
20. ^ Matthews, Dylan (9 May 2016). "Remember that study saying America is an oligarchy? 3 rebuttals say it's wrong". Vox. Retrieved 24 October 2016.
21. ^ Ferguson, Thomas (1995). Golden Rule : The Investment Theory of Party Competition and the Logic of Money-Driven Political Systems. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. ISBN 0226243176.