

## **Elite Theory: Theorizing Stratification and Domination in Society**

### **Introduction**

Elite theory has evolved out of a fundamental contradiction—few are able to dispute the existence of a superior stratum elevated above the rest of society, yet many are unwilling to accept the proposition that such stratum wields disproportionate amount of control and influence over the exercise of political power. To subscribe to both propositions is to acknowledge that human society is not only stratified but also dominated by a select few. This is the stance taken by some elite theorists, whereas others are more reluctant to do the same. After all, what is at stake is nothing less than the principle of equality and the belief that such principle can be realized through the abolition of classes and private ownership or through democratic political institutions. Elite theory is therefore highly provocative given its potentially consequential implications, yet it is also haunted by its own profoundly pessimistic conclusions about the possibility of an equitable social life under current or future political order.

In this paper, I examine how the development of the elite theory literature reflects different ways in which elite theorists have confronted with the reality of stratification and the possibility of domination in society. Stratification, on the one hand, implies the demarcation of structural and symbolic boundaries which reinforces as well as naturalizes actual or perceived differences across social groups. Domination, on the other hand, describes a chronic pattern in which the relationship established between socially differentiated groups empowers one group to thrive at the expense of another. The scholarly attempts by elite theorists to problematize and reconcile this remarkable affinity between stratification and domination have produced a shared domain of analytically diverse scholarly inquiry which usefully captures both dynamics without reducing one to the other. Elite theory therefore remains an indispensable analytical tool for understanding how the

dialectical processes of stratification and domination unfold and can unfold differently under a range of historical and institutional conditions. Furthermore, the lack of definitional and conceptual consensus over the notion of elites permits fruitful theoretical and methodological divergences, allowing scholarly debates surrounding the role that elites play in modern society to fragment and evolve in ways that are meaningful and applicable to a wide range of political analysis today.

The paper focuses on the development of four lines of debate which not only remain fundamentally unresolved but also contain important implications for current and future theorization of stratification and domination. These include the central debates over (1) psychological and the technical/institutional basis of power, (2) class domination and elite domination, (3) elite unity and elite disunity, and lastly (4) the process through which democratic procedure produces inequality versus the process through which inequality becomes benign via democratic procedure.

### **The Development of Elite Theory**

The purpose of tracing the development of elite theory is not to provide a comprehensive overview of what has been said about elites by a range of theorists we associate with the literature, however loosely connected. Rather, it is to explore why the literature developed the way it did by highlighting how certain analytical trends and theoretical issues become more central than others at different junctures. As such, this paper considers the sequence in which the literature developed as a broader trajectory informed by a series of underlying debates over four central issues. This thematic approach is intended to provide an assessment of the elite theory literature in ways that capture the central debates which have prompted elite theorists as well as other theorists to engage

in theoretical considerations of stratification and domination regardless of where they stand on these issues.

According to many accounts, classical elite theory emerged as an attempt to develop a set of law-like theoretical propositions with universal validity in response to Marxism (Mosca 1896; Pareto 1901, 1916), providing the analytical building blocks with which powerful critiques of representative democracy could be formulated, extended, and expressed in novel ways (Michels 1911; Hunter 1953; Mills 1956; Kornhauser 1959). Yet, the same theoretical foundation built for negating the notion of a classless society and the creed of liberal democracy could not fully withstand the challenges posed by the pluralist conception of democracy (Aron 1950; Dahl 1958, 1960; Meisel 1958). These developments, I argue, reflect an ongoing theoretical dialogue over four major issues concerning the sources of elites' superior position in society, the nature of elite domination, the degree to which elites cohere, and the extent to which political institutions can moderate or reinforce elite rule over time. I proceed to analyzing how the development of elite theory is formed around these central issues one by one.

### **Sources of Elites' Superiority in Society**

How do elites become distinguished from the rest of society? Are the sources of their supremacy economic, psychological, technological or institutional? These questions have been raised throughout the development of the elite theory literature, yet it remains inconclusive whether elites derive their superiority from the essential role they play in society or merely from innate attributes. Such interest in the constitution of the elite as a distinctive social category can be traced all the way back to classical elite theorists who, far from attempting to denying the uniqueness of elites, were very much invested in demonstrating that social stratification and elite

formation constitute a universal phenomenon. For classical elite theorists such as Mosca and Pareto, formulating a theory which clearly singles out the elites as a group distinguished in every way from other members of society is central to their attempts to refute the prevailing axioms of Marxism. Yet, it remains unclear how such attempts have motivated Pareto and Mosca to establish theoretical claims of elite distinction in the way that they did. For the purpose of this analysis, therefore, their critiques of Marxism serve as a more useful analytical starting point than their theoretical formulations of elites for which they are renowned. This is not to say that such critiques can be considered in isolation of elite theory but rather that they provide the much-needed contextualization of elite theory in its early stage as a deliberative theoretical project designed to accomplish a specific task.

Mosca's attack on Marxism can be summarized as an attempt to debunk the economic determinism implied by Marx's conception of historical materialism and, by extension, the professed inevitability of a revolution that will usher in a classless society. In demonstrating through empirical analysis that political change cannot be explained solely on the basis of prior changes in the modes of production, Mosca writes,

The error of historical materialism lies in holding that the economic factor is the *only* factor worthy of consideration as cause, and that all other factors have to be regarded as effects...It seems altogether absurd to regard as mere effects, and never as dignified, respectable causes, the political doctrines and religious beliefs which constitute the moral foundations of state organisms. Penetrating deep down into the consciousness of ruling classes and masses alike, they legitimize and discipline, command and justify obedience, and they create those special intellectual and moral atmospheres which contribute so greatly toward determining historical circumstances and so toward directing the course of human events.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Gaetano Mosca, *The Ruling Class* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1896), 443–444.

While Mosca is willing to accept that economic factors play an important role in generating changes in the organization of politics and society, he rejects Marx's framework of historical materialism to the extent that it refuses to acknowledge the role that other forces play in shaping historical and political outcomes. This raises an important question—what kind of factors does Mosca have in mind as the more probable or salient causes of political change? The passage above indicates that whatever the causes may be—political doctrines, religious beliefs, intellectual and moral atmospheres—those causes must be mediated by the agential capacity of human beings. Mosca's emphasis on human beings as actors capable of making their own history is extended to his critique of Marx's vision of an inevitable revolution: “[Marx] dispenses with the individual will and has the desired results achieved by the fatal course of history.”<sup>2</sup> At the core of Mosca's response to Marxism, then, lies an attempt to rescue subjectivity or human agency from determinism.

A very different but related analysis is found in Pareto's theory of the human condition in *The Rise and Fall of Elites*. According to Pareto, “the greater part of human actions have their origin not in logical reasoning but in sentiment...the man who thus deceives his fellowman begins by deceiving himself, and he firmly believes his own contentions.”<sup>3</sup> Through this analytical lens, Pareto likens socialism to a religious sentiment with which the new elite persuade not only the mass but also themselves in their attempt to overthrow the old elite. Pareto's response to socialism and Marxism is therefore very different from that of Mosca. While both scholars attempt to surpass Marxism by attending to causes of change which exist more or less independently of economic conditions and are rooted in human consciousness, Mosca is the one who pays greater attention to

---

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 448.

<sup>3</sup> Vilfredo Pareto, *Rise and Fall of Elites: An Application of Theoretical Sociology* (Transaction Publishers, 1901), 27.

the agential capacity of human beings. Pareto, on the other hand, is committed to developing an analysis of sentiments of which human beings are not necessarily aware or in control.

These underlying differences help explain why Mosca and Pareto arrive at different theoretical formulations of elite distinction, despite taking similar analytical steps to illustrate that (1) political elites are inevitable and, by extension, (2) the abolishment of classes on the basis of private ownership of the means of production is not sufficient for bringing Marx's vision of a classless society to fruition. Mosca develops an organizational basis of the elites' dominant position in society in the following terms:

In reality the dominion of an organized minority, obeying a single impulse, over the unorganized majority is inevitable. The power of any minority is irresistible as against each single individual in the majority, who stands alone before the totality of the organized minority. At the same time, the minority is organized for the very reason that it is a minority. A hundred men acting uniformly in concert, with a common understanding, will triumph over a thousand men who are not in accord and can therefore be dealt with one by one.<sup>4</sup>

For Mosca, the inevitability of minority rule is rooted in the capacity of a minority group to act as a singular and coherent organizational entity, or, as Mancur Olson reframes it, in their ability to overcome the problem of collective action. Some tension nevertheless exists between this structural conceptualization of elite distinction and Mosca's broader analysis of the actual composition of the elites. According to Mosca,

Ruling minorities are usually so constituted that the individuals who make them up are distinguished from the mass of the governed by qualities that give them a certain material, intellectual or even moral superiority; or else they are the heirs of individuals who possessed such qualities. In other words, members of a ruling minority regularly have some attribute, real or apparent, which is highly esteemed and very influential in the society in which they live.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Mosca, *The Ruling Class*, 53.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

How elites come to have these material, intellectual and moral attributes is of less concern to Mosca; what matters is that these attributes are recognized by society as valuable. This emphasis on attributes necessarily contrasts with his formulation of the organizational basis of elites' superiority. The same tension is not found in Pareto's theoretical formulation which provides a far greater emphasis on the probabilistic distribution of individual attributes, naturally endowed or inherited:

So let us make a class of the people who have the highest indices in their branch of activity, and to that class give the name of *élite*...we further divide that class into two classes: a *governing élite* comprising individuals who directly or indirectly play some considerable part in government, and a *non-governing élite*, comprising the rest.<sup>6</sup>

For Pareto, then, elites are elites purely by virtue of their attributes. No organizational structure is needed to confirm this reality. The inevitability of distinction between elites and the rest of society is, for Pareto, rooted in attributes, whereas for Mosca it originates not only from attributes but the capacity of the elites as a minority group to organize themselves into a coherent whole.

Whereas Mosca's formulation of the organizational basis of elites' dominant position in society is reworked and developed into critiques of democracy by Michels (1911) and Mills (1956), the emphasis on individual attributes has somewhat lost its relevance in elite theory. While Michels retains much of the original focus on the psychological distinction between elite and mass, he accounts for this psychological factor as an outcome caused by organization rather than a cause of organization. Michels describes the psychological makeup of elites in the context of office holding in the following terms: "one who holds the office of delegate acquires a moral right to that office...an election made for a definite purpose becomes a life incumbency. Custom becomes a right. One who has for a certain time held the office of delegate ends by regarding that office as

---

<sup>6</sup> Vilfredo Pareto, *The Mind and Society: A Treatise on General Sociology*, 1916, 1423.

his own property.”<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, he also underscores the idea that elite leadership is not only preferred by elites who come to occupy a position of power but also demanded by the masses who inevitably become more helpless in the face of ever-increasing complexity of political life.

According to Michels,

Though it grumbles occasionally, the majority is really delighted to find persons who will take the trouble to look after its affairs. In the mass, and even in the organized mass of the labor parties, there is an immense need for direction and guidance. This need is accompanied by a genuine cult for the leaders, who are regarded as heroes.<sup>8</sup>

The supremacy of elites in society, therefore, stems as much from the necessary political functions they fulfil as from the image of the necessity of their leadership projected and perpetuated by the elites and the masses alike. Mills, on the other hand, provides a more systematic analysis of the sources of distinction between elites and masses, yet in doing so he rejects outright the psychological components of elite superiority. For Mills, the elites are simply those who occupy strategic positions in the dominant institutions in any given society—their individual attributes mean little in comparison to the means of power at their disposal. To be clear, Mills does not deny that elites do in fact exist in the American context, but simply argues that the actual sources of their dominance in society are institutional rather than psychological, moral or intellectual in the way that Mosca or Pareto might have it. According to Mills,

By the powerful we mean, of course, those who are able to realize their will, even if others resist it. No one, accordingly, can be truly powerful unless he has access to the command of major institutions, for it is over these institutional means of power that the truly powerful are, in the first instance, powerful.<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> Robert Michels, *Political Parties: A Sociological Study of the Oligarchical Tendencies of Modern Democracy* (Kessinger Publishing, LLC, 1911), 33.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>9</sup> C. Wright Mills, *The Power Elite*, A Galaxy Book ; GB-20 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), 9.



This definition of power elite substantially removes other considerations of the sources of elites' dominance in society and establishes access to the institutional means of exercising power as the only relevant criteria in defining elites. While Mills' institutional approach to locating the source of stratification and domination under elite rule yields a systematic framework with clearly specified unit of analysis, in leaving the territory in which elites are defined by their attributes, he leaves elite theory more vulnerable than ever to those who advance a pluralist interpretation of elites and their role in democracy. The implication of this development will be explored in subsequent sections.

To conclude this section, we briefly retrace our steps. In responding to Marx, both Mosca and Pareto devised theoretical formulations of elites with the aim of proving the inevitability of political elites. For Mosca, this inevitability is rooted in both the organizational capacity of the elites and the possession of socially valuable attributes by elites. For Pareto, on the other hand, this inevitability is rooted in the fact that some men are simply better, in an absolute sense, and more suited to governing than others given the attributes with which they are endowed. As for Michels, the inevitability of stratification is rather a symptom quite natural to any form of social organization. Lastly, for Mills, this inevitability is not an outcome of the organizational complexity of political life as envisioned by Michels *per se*, but rather of the technological growth of dominant institutions in which elites come to occupy. After Mills, questions concerning the sources of elites' dominant position in society have more or less formed around the institutional nexus proposed by Mills—elites can be distinguished from the rest of society based on their relative proximity to the exercise of power located in key institutions. Few subsequent elite theorists have made a serious analytical attempt to extend the debate into other areas. Yet, to state that Mills has the final say would be misleading, given that more nuanced conceptualizations of the sources of elites'

distinction do exist (Bourdieu 1979), but these conceptualizations simply do not have the same degree of analytical leverage with which to formulate powerful critiques of representative democracy as Mills' institution-oriented conceptualization does.

### **The Nature of Elite Domination**

The second line of debate is closely associated with the first. It concerns the question of *how* elites dominate or, to use a more neutral term, govern rather than the question of *what* constitutes elites. It may appear as though classical elite theorists would have little to say about how elites dominate except that they dominate, given that their analysis is designed to illustrate elite existence. Classifying between different types of elite domination matters less for what they set out to accomplish theoretically. Nevertheless, a specific type of domination is often implied in their usage of the term elite, that is, even prior to Mills and Dahl who made the distinction between elite stratification and elite domination more explicit. In contrast to Marx's class domination which operates through ownership over the means of production, Mosca has focused on bureaucratic organizations as the primary vehicle of domination. Mosca writes,

Once bureaucratization is well advanced, it in turn enhances the coercive efficiency of the state machine and so enables the ruling class, and especially the leading group in it, to exercise greater and greater influence over the governed masses and to direct the efforts of the governed more and more efficiently toward the purposes that their governors wish to achieve. In other words, a bureaucratized autocracy is a perfected autocracy and it has all the advantages and disadvantages of that perfection.<sup>10</sup>

As indicated in the passage above, Mosca is painfully aware of the possibility that elite domination can take place in society via bureaucratic organizations. This implies that, for Mosca, elites derive their power to dominate society from the state rather than from their ownership of the means of

---

<sup>10</sup> Mosca, *The Ruling Class*, 406.

economic production in the Marxist sense. This theoretical treatment the state as an autonomous source of power is therefore driven by a logic similar to what can be found in Weber's theorization of the state. Parallel to Mosca who focuses on elites' involvement in state bureaucracies is Michels who sees that large political parties operates likewise and is led to conclude that "it is indisputable that the oligarchical and bureaucratic tendency of party organization is a matter of technical and practical necessity. It is the inevitable product of the very principle of organization."<sup>11</sup> The type of domination that these classical elite theorists are concerned with, as such, is specifically one which implicates state power rather than economic sources of power conceived in Marxist terms.

This raises an important question for elite theory: why shy away from theoretical considerations of "class" domination as defined by Marx? Building on Mosca, one attempt to address this question from the standpoint of elite theory is Aron (1950) who persuasively shows that defining class based on economic power is simply too narrow to capture the different patterns of stratification and domination which exist in reality. Building on Mosca and Pareto, Aron likewise argues that "inequality in political power is in no way eliminated or diminished by the abolition of classes, for it is quite impossible for the government of a society to be in the hands of any but a few."<sup>12</sup> Instead, Aron argues in favor of the use of elite theory as a framework which can better capture the diverse patterns of differentiation upon which relations between those who govern and those who are governed are established without imposing any analytical restrictions in the same way that a Marxist approach would. On this point, Aron writes,

---

<sup>11</sup> Michels, *Political Parties*, 27.

<sup>12</sup> Raymond Aron, "Social Structure and the Ruling Class: Part 1," *The British Journal of Sociology* 1, no. 1 (1950): 9.

The analysis of the groups included in the elite is, in my view, more useful because the structure of the elite is as characteristic of the society as the structure of the social groups. By the structure of the elite I mean the relation between the various groups in the elite which is peculiar to each society.<sup>13</sup>

Aron thus rejects the Marxist perspective in favor of elite theory on the basis that the composition of classes varies across different societal contexts in ways that Marx's materialist framework cannot account for. This line of argument, which contains a methodological critique of the Marxist definition of class, is shared by Mills.

Mills who proposes abandoning the term "ruling class" in favor of the term "power elite" is the one who most explicitly draw the distinction between elite domination and class domination in the Marxist sense of the term. However, Mills moves beyond the analysis of state bureaucracies as a source of power to other types of institutions including the corporate and the military institutions. According to Mills,

'Ruling class' is a badly loaded phrase. 'Class is an economic term; 'rule' a political one. The phrase, 'ruling class,' thus contains the theory that an economic class rules politically. That short-cut theory may or may not at times be true, but we do not want to carry that one rather simple theory about in the terms that we use to define our problems...we do not accept as adequate the simple view that high economic men unilaterally make all decisions of national consequence.<sup>14</sup>

In rejecting the exclusive focus on class and proposing three institutional circles, Mills thus conceives of power in broader terms than Marxists, Mosca, and Michels combined. Furthermore, it must be noted that, for Mills, what is meant by "institutional" has to do not only with the centralized and hierarchical nature of state, military, and corporate organizations but also with their national significance. Mills, once again, appears to have the final say over the distinction drawn between elite domination and class domination. However, this is not necessarily the case.

---

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>14</sup> Mills, *The Power Elite*, 277.

Domhoff (1967) suggests that one potential consequence of dismissing or not engaging in any theoretical consideration of elites in the Marxist sense is that one may lose sight of the fact that social upper class, as defined by elite theorists, and economic upper class can and do overlap. Domhoff in fact incorporates this consideration into his own concept of “governing class” which he defines as follows:

A “governing class” is a social upper class which owns a disproportionate amount of a country’s wealth, receives a disproportionate amount of a country’s yearly income, and contributes a disproportionate number of its member to the controlling institutions and key decision-making groups of the country.<sup>15</sup>

Notice that Domhoff retains much of Mills’ theoretical formulation of the institutional basis of power, yet he also reintroduces the importance of economic basis of power into the analysis of elites in ways that further nuance elite theory’s traditional focus on state bureaucracies and position-based political resources. It must be added that Domhoff’s contribution to elite theory came at a time in which elite-oriented analysis had been significantly undermined by (1) the pluralist conception of elites in democratic contexts and (2) the normative association of elite theory with Fascism (see Higley and Pakulski 2000). Reworking the role of economic classes into elite theory thus constitutes an important theoretical project on two counts given that the pluralist attack on elite theory could not be reliably or validly extended to class-based framework and that class-based terminologies proved more popular and relevant to the political circumstances at the time. At any rate, the debate over the distinction between elite domination and class domination is far from over, given that control of the means of production and control of state bureaucracies both provide valid instruments of elite domination (see Codato and Perissinotto 2011 for further discussion).

---

<sup>15</sup> G. William Domhoff, *Who Rules America?*, A Spectrum Book (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1967), 5.

## Elite Coherence and Elite Unity

In the previous two sections, we have discussed the questions of *what* constitutes elites and *how* do elites dominate. In this section, we pose a different question: do elites cohere? The significance of this question is not rooted in the attempt to move away from Marxism, as in the first two questions, but rather in the pluralist attempt to debunk elite theory on its own terms. Once elite theorists have fully subscribed to the organizational and institutional rather than economic, moral, or psychological basis of elite domination, all that one has to demonstrate is that elites do not organize themselves like “a hundred men acting uniformly in concert, with a common understanding” as Mosca had envisioned.<sup>16</sup> Hence, the elites do not rule, and in fact *cannot* rule. In other words, elite stratification is not sufficient for elite domination. This is precisely the line of argument that the pluralists have pursued in response to the critiques that elite theorists have directed against democracy and representation. Before moving to discuss the implications of this counterattack by the pluralists, it is important to first show how this line of argument originates in the first place. Even prior to Mills and Dahl, Aron had already conceived of the possibility that there may be not one but multiple elites with reconcilable or irreconcilable differences. Aron’s comparative analysis of France and England demonstrates that some degree of unity among elites is necessary for the betterment of society. According to Aron,

The composition of the governing elite may be progressively altered, the relative importance of the various groups in the elite may be changed, but a society can only survive and prosper if there is true collaboration between those groups. In one way or another there must be unity of opinion and action *on essential points* in the elite [emphasis added].<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>16</sup> Mosca, *The Ruling Class*, 53.

<sup>17</sup> Raymond Aron, “Social Structure and the Ruling Class: Part 2,” *The British Journal of Sociology* 1, no. 2 (1950): 129.

In a society in which elites disagree to the extent that they are not able to reconcile their disagreements within the existing political framework, political competition becomes more or less a zero-sum game. But do elites disagree in the first place? If we simply define elites in class terms, by that I mean in terms of ownership of the means of production, it would appear as though there would be no possibility of disagreement—capital owners are united on all fronts against labor. However, Aron warns us that this is not a realistic assumption. He writes,

*The structure of the elite* is not merely a reflection of the *structure of society*. The extent to which the social groups are consciously organized and the nature of their ideologies are far from being completely determined by the economic sub-structure. Lastly pluralistic regimes, which allow all groups freedom of expression, find themselves faced with two fundamental difficulties: how far do the different sections of the elite succeed in settling disputes within the framework of the existing regime? How far are they committed either to defend or to overthrow the regime?<sup>18</sup>

Hence, the source of elite conflicts may be thought of in broader terms than economic. Only when elite conflicts can be settled within the existing political framework can there be a stable regime.

This is precisely the argument that Higley proposes many years later in different terms:

Elite settlements are relatively rare events in which warring national elite factions suddenly and deliberately reorganize their relations by negotiating compromises on their most basic disagreements...they transform unstable political regimes, in which irregular seizures of government executive power by force are frequent or widely expected occurrences, into stable regimes, in which forcible power seizures no longer occur and are not widely expected.<sup>19</sup>

However, it must be mentioned that Higley considers elite unity to be necessary for stability, yet he disregards the potential consequence that this unity can have on the levels of freedom and liberty in a given society. The stability of democratic politics implies nothing about the quality of

---

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.

<sup>19</sup> John Higley and Michael G. Burton, "Elite Settlements," *American Sociological Review* 52, no. 3 (1987): 295, doi:10.2307/2095351.

democracy. The question of elite domination, as such, disappears from Higley's analysis, leaving us with a rather unsatisfactory conclusion that democratic politics can be stable without being free. In this regard, Aron is more attentive to the distinction between order and liberty. Once elites settle on a political framework, whether they continue to compete or cohere is particularly significant for Aron. As Aron concludes,

A unified elite means the end of freedom. But when the groups of the elite are not only distinct but become a disunity, it means the end of the State. Freedom survives in those intermediate regions, which are continually threatened when there is moral unity of the elite, where men and groups preserve the secret of single and eternal wisdom and have learnt how to combine autonomy with co-operation.<sup>20</sup>

Aron therefore disagrees with Higley in terms of the degree to which elites cohere. Whereas Higley seems to orient his theory of elite settlement towards one end of the spectrum, elite unity, Aron prefers that elites are neither completely united or disunited. Aron's conclusion thus yields the following framework:

1. Do elites agree or disagree on the current political framework?
2. If they agree, do they compete in a pluralistic society or do they operate as a unified elite?

The pluralist attack on elite theory can be situated at the second step as they argue that elites compete in a pluralistic society in the framework of stable democracy. We proceed to discussing the implications of this pluralist intervention.

Dahl (1958) formulates his critique of elite theory based on a series of theoretical and methodological innovations. First, he advances a pluralistic theoretical foundation for the analysis of elites. Elites, according to Dahl, may have a "high potential for control" but "low potential for unity."<sup>21</sup> This implies that a group which have all the characteristics of elites that elite theorists

---

<sup>20</sup> Aron, "Social Structure and the Ruling Class," 1950, 143.

<sup>21</sup> Robert A. Dahl, "A Critique of the Ruling Elite Model," *The American Political Science Review* 52, no. 2 (1958): 465, doi:10.2307/1952327.



have come up with may be politically ineffective insofar as they score low on one or both measures. In other words, high potential for control and high potential for unity are necessary conditions which are jointly sufficient for elite domination. Furthermore, Dahl argues that there exist multiple scopes of influence; an elite group may have a high degree of control and unity over one issue but not others.<sup>22</sup> These two theoretical components underpin Dahl's pluralist framework, setting the tone for future counterattacks on elite theory. At any rate, the more consequential aspect of Dahl's intervention in the development of elite theory lies in his methodological approach for analyzing elite domination. For Dahl, one must be able to demonstrate not only that an elite group indeed exists but also that such group frequently prevails over others in key political decisions in which the preference of the elite group contradict with the preference of others. This methodological approach is very much a direct response to Mills and Hunter who succeed in showing the former but not the latter.

Dahl's methodological critique applies especially to Hunter (1953), one of the first to undertake an empirical study of elites at the subnational level. Hunter arrives at the conclusion that power in Atlanta was concentrated in the hands of a small number of leaders through what is usually called the "reputational method" which entails using reputation as a measure of power. This operationalization enables Hunter to reach such conclusion despite not having directly observe multiple instances of power in its actual use and, therefore, runs contrary to Dahl's "decisional method" which emphasizes the need for such observations. The difference in methodology is rooted, in the first instance, in how Hunter and Dahl define power. According to Hunter, "power is a word that will be used to describe the acts of men going about the business of

---

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

moving other men to act in relation to themselves or in relation to organic or inorganic things.”<sup>23</sup> On the other hand, Dahl writes, “A has power over B to the extent that he can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do.”<sup>24</sup> Built into Dahl’s definition is a methodological concern over the “extent” of power whereas Hunter’s definition contains no such implication. While Dahl’s definition is substantially easier to operationalize, it also leaves out less overt dimensions of power including those which involve its non-use. This brings us to what Dahl has to say about elites in *Who Governs?* (1961).

Dahl’s theoretical argument in *Who Governs?* can be summarized as follows. The inequality of political resources in New Haven is distributed in such a way that no one group is better off or worse off than other groups in every types of political resources—inequality is “dispersed” rather than “cumulative.”<sup>25</sup> According to Dahl’s logic which holds that the use of political resources is necessary for political influence, this pattern of inequality implies that no one group can exert a disproportionate amount of influence in society, that is, even if the distribution of resources remains deeply unequal in that society. In other words, even if elites do exist, they often do not have sufficient control over all types of political resources to qualify as a ruling group. Dahl’s argument against elite theory is therefore simpler than it originally seems: elites do not rule if it can be shown that inequality is dispersed. One critique which can be made against Dahl using his own terms is that mayoral elections do not qualify as “key political decisions” and, as such, his analytical focus is misplaced since it cannot tell us much about whether A has power over B. On the question of external validity, one can also argue that Dahl’s New Haven is not representative

---

<sup>23</sup> Floyd Hunter, *Community Power Structure; a Study of Decision Makers*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1953), 2.

<sup>24</sup> Robert A. Dahl, “The Concept of Power,” *Behavioral Science* 2, no. 3 (1957): 202–3.

<sup>25</sup> Robert A. Dahl, *Who Governs? Democracy and Power in an American City*., Yale Studies in Political Science, 4 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), 228.

of subnational level American politics as a whole. However, at the end of the day, Dahl's major influence on elite theory resides not in the empirical substance of his study per se but in the ways in which he orients our way of thinking about the relationship between elites and power from an empirical, if not empiricist, standpoint. In conclusion, the question of elite unity, at least in pluralistic democracies, seems to end with Dahl, whereas it continues in other ways for scholars who consider unity as structure-shaping rather than an aspect of structure (see Higley and Moore 1981) or scholars who conceive of power and domination in terms that do not conform easily to Dahl's model of political resources.

### **Elite Tendencies and Political Institutions**

The last line of debate to be discussed concerns the process through which elitist structures are sustained, reproduced, and moderated by institutions. Marx writes, "the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles"<sup>26</sup> To this, Pareto responds, "the history of man is the history of the continuous replacement of certain elites."<sup>27</sup> In many ways, Pareto's theory of the circulation of elites falls short of explaining why such process occurs at all. Pareto insists that the old elites become vulnerable to the usurpation of power by the new elites as they become (1) more responsive to humanitarian sentiments and (2) more protective and appropriative of their privilege.<sup>28</sup> Yet, he fails to provide a clear explanation as to why such undesirable "residues" manifest themselves in the old elites, whereas other types of "residues" which are necessary for governing become concentrated in the new elites in the first place. At any rate, this vaguely specified formulation leads Pareto to conclude that "there must be a certain equilibrium between

---

<sup>26</sup> *Communist Manifesto of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels*, 1963.

<sup>27</sup> Pareto, *Rise and Fall of Elites: An Application of Theoretical Sociology*, 36.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

the power a social class possesses and the force at its disposal to defend it. Domination without that force cannot last.”<sup>29</sup> This conclusion contains a significant insight for elite theory, because it does not simply provide a hypothesis as to why elites rise and fall but also adds a temporal dimension as to how elite domination can be sustained over time. Pareto’s theory of the circulation of elites is best captured by the following metaphor:

The governing elite is always in a state of slow and continuous transformation. It flows on like a river, never being today what it was yesterday. From time to time sudden and violent disturbances occur. There is a flood—the river overflows its banks. Afterwards, the new governing elite again resumes its slow transformation. The flood has subsided, the river is again flowing normally in its wonted bed.<sup>30</sup>

The flood represents a breaking point of conflict between old and new elite groups, resulting in the overthrow of the former by the latter. However, according to Pareto’s theory, such breaking point can be avoided as long as “a certain equilibrium” can be achieved by allowing a part of governing elites to decay and a part of non-governing elites to rise without a major disruption, in other words, “slow and continuous transformation.” Pareto does not specify in detail how this second pattern—as opposed to the first, disruptive pattern—of elite circulation actually occurs. One possible interpretation which a number of elite theorists have proposed is that the circulation of elites can occur through a democratic process. This mode of interpretation would imply, however, that democratic institutions in fact operate to keep elites in power rather than undermining the possibility of elite domination as many would argue. That is to say, democratic procedure, by design, produces the inequality of political power over time. This argument is made implicitly and explicitly by Michels and subsequently rendered less consequential by Dahl’s pluralist counterattack.

---

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Pareto, *The Mind and Society: A Treatise on General Sociology*, 1431.

The trajectory of democratic rule is clear for Michels—towards that of oligarchy. Michels’ theoretical formulation needs no further elaboration except to restate the thesis that “organization implies the tendency to oligarchy.”<sup>31</sup> For Michels, democracy as a form of organization based on political parties is not an exception to this rule but rather the best example of how this rule applies even to patterns of association which claim to be free, fair, and equal in every way. The more complex the organization, the more oligarchical the organization becomes. As such, Michels expects the development of democracy to “have a parabolic course” in the sense that it is bound to enter a phase of diminishing returns and becomes less democratic over time.<sup>32</sup> Democratic institutions thus breeds domination by elites. Dahl, on the other hand, would argue in the opposite direction that, as inequality in society becomes more dispersed, democratic rule also becomes less oligarchical and more pluralistic over time, as he observes in the case of New Haven. For Dahl, then, the source of oligarchical tendency and elite domination is not inherent in the democratic process itself, as Michels would suggest, but located in society. If anything, a democratic procedure, such as the expansion of suffrage, would in fact make the inequality of political resources more dispersed by giving more influential leverage to the people who are less endowed in other types of resources, while such process may not lead to equality per se. Inequality of power thus becomes benign via democratic procedure. Note, however, that this debate, as exemplified by the contradictory standpoints taken by Michels and Dahl, remains unresolved. This is because the process through which democratic procedure produces inequality (Michels) and the process through which inequality becomes benign through democratic procedure (Dahl) are not mutually exclusive of one another in practice. Elite theorists who are concerned with democratic regimes may have more to learn from this debate given that the only kind of democracy that elites would

---

<sup>31</sup> Michels, *Political Parties*, 26.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

tolerate in the first place is one which protects rather than harm their interests (Acemoglu and Robinson 2008).

## **Conclusion**

In this paper, I have considered the development of the elite theory literature as reflecting four underlying debates concerning the source of elites' supremacy in society, the nature of elite domination, the degree to which elites cohere, and the extent to which elitist structures are mediated or moderated by political institutions. In addition to providing an assessment of how elite theorists have dealt with stratification and domination in different ways, I hope to have demonstrated how elite theory may remain valuable as a lens of analysis in future sociological and political science research. The strength of elite theory, first and foremost, lies in its refusal to conform to any single conceptualization of power. As Mills have argued, a Marxist approach would imply that elite domination is limited to one type of domination, economic, whereas an elite theoretical approach allows for greater flexibility in our definition, hence providing greater leverage for an examination of diverse cases. Yet, the same may not be true for the type of comparative analysis which requires a more stable conceptualization of elites, as a unit of analysis, and domination, as the principle instrument of maintaining or exercising power, across cases. At any rate, it is my belief that elite theory can yield more fruitful insights by expanding the theorization of domination to those sources power which have less overt linkages to the state. This is because power exists in symbolic and ritualistic forms (Bourdieu's cultural capital and Geertz' theatre state) as well as in less visible forms (Foucault's disciplinary power and governmentality or James Scott's analysis of power based on legibility). This analytical move away from the state in its formal understanding may be disputed as a step away from the conventional line of critique

against theories of democracy, which elite theory is renowned for. However, what is urgently needed today in society may not be a theoretical critique of democracy as a method of organizing power but of the failure of democracy to address a broad range of issues which fall outside the domain what we consider to be political but are in fact highly political. Elite theory possesses the analytical capacity to capture both of these aspects. The conclusion that it reaches may be deeply pessimistic but never ignorant of the possibility that power in society could be unevenly distributed and has no equalizing tendencies that most optimists would idly hope for.

## Bibliography

Acemoglu, Daron, and James A. Robinson. "Persistence of Power, Elites, and institutions.(Report)."

*American Economic Review* 98, no. 1 (2008): 267–93. doi:10.1257/aer.98.1.267.

Aron, Raymond. "Social Structure and the Ruling Class: Part 1." *The British Journal of Sociology* 1,

no. 1 (1950): 1–16.

———. "Social Structure and the Ruling Class: Part 2." *The British Journal of Sociology* 1, no. 2

(1950): 126–143.

Bourdieu, Pierre. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Cambridge, Mass.:

Harvard University Press, 1984.

Codato, Adriano, and Renato M. Perissinotto. "Marxism and Elitism: Two Opposite Social Analysis

Models?" *Revista Brasileira de Ciências Sociais* 5, no. SE (2010): 0–0.

*Communist Manifesto of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels*, 1963.

Dahl, Robert A. "A Critique of the Ruling Elite Model." *The American Political Science Review* 52,

no. 2 (1958): 463–469. doi:10.2307/1952327.

———. "The Concept of Power." *Behavioral Science* 2, no. 3 (1957): 201–215.

———. *Who Governs? Democracy and Power in an American City*. Yale Studies in Political

Science, 4. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974.

Domhoff, G. William. *Who Rules America? A Spectrum Book*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall,

1967.

Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. 2nd Vintage Books ed.. New York:

Vintage Books, 1995.

Geertz, Clifford. *Negara: The Theatre State in Nineteenth-Century Bali*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton

University Press, 1980.



- Higley, John, and Michael G. Burton. "Elite Settlements." *American Sociological Review* 52, no. 3 (1987): 295–307. doi:10.2307/2095351.
- Higley, John, and Gwen Moore. "Elite Integration in the United States and Australia." *The American Political Science Review* 75, no. 3 (1981): 581–597. doi:10.2307/1960954.
- Higley, John, and Jan Pakulski. "Elite Theory versus Marxism: The Twentieth Century's Verdict [2000]." *Historical Social Research / Historische Sozialforschung* 37, no. 1 (139) (2012): 320–32.
- Hunter, Floyd. *Community Power Structure; a Study of Decision Makers*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1953.
- Kornhauser, William. *The Politics of Mass Society*. Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1959.
- Meisel, James. "The Myth of the Ruling Class: Gaetano Mosca and the Elite." *Political Research, Organization and Design* 1, no. 5 (May 1, 1958): 42–42. doi:10.1177/000276425800100519.
- Michels, Robert. *Political Parties: A Sociological Study of the Oligarchical Tendencies of Modern Democracy*. Kessinger Publishing, LLC, 1911.
- Mills, C. Wright. *The Power Elite*. A Galaxy Book ; GB-20. New York: Oxford University Press, 1959.
- Mosca, Gaetano. *The Ruling Class*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1896.
- Pareto, Vilfredo. *Rise and Fall of Elites: An Application of Theoretical Sociology*. Transaction Publishers, 1901.
- . *The Mind and Society: A Treatise on General Sociology*, 1916.
- Scott, James C. *Seeing like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*. Yale Agrarian Studies. New Haven [Conn.]: Yale University Press, 1998.