Elites, Elitism and Elite Theory: Unending Confusion?

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Abstract
The elite perspective on politics and society emerged early in the twentieth century but was relegated to the century’s intellectual sidelines while visions about the coming of egalitarian and stateless societies and self-governing democracies held sway. No such society or democracy materialized and the century’s socio-political developments were consistent with the elite perspective. This is reason to believe the perspective’s long eclipse may be ending, especially given the dire economic-political trends and crises much of the world currently confronts. Yet confusion continues to envelop the elite concept, the meaning of elitism, and the main tenets of theories derived from the perspective. In attempting to clarify these matters we seek to bolster the elite perspective’s acceptance and contribute to its rejuvenation.

Like the birth of Marxism amid revolutionary upheavals a half-century before, the elite perspective emerged at the start of the twentieth century in the face of looming crises that threatened European political and social orders. And like Marxism, the elite perspective contained prescriptions for a good society, one in which effective elites would produce individual dignity, mass welfare and political stability. But unlike Marxism, the elite perspective eschewed economic determinism and any vision of a happy end point in human affairs. It offered, instead, a sober prognosis derived from comparative and historical analysis, in which hierarchical social organisation and accompanying power concentrations are seen as inescapable, political and social development depends heavily on choices made by self-interested elites, and ideals must always be tempered by these realities. To be sure, in modern societies the power of elites – small and increasingly professionalized ‘ruling minorities’ - is constrained by legal-constitutional rules and practices, yet elites usually have enough autonomy to interpret laws, modify rules, and alter public responsibilities in ways that protect their interests. They generate the support of non-elite populations by employing formidable coercive machines of states, persuasive powers of mass media, and payoffs to discontented groups. Most of the time elites rely on persuasion, but coercion is always a possibility if their vital interests are threatened.
Marxists and enthusiasts of democracy attacked the elite perspective and offered more alluring prospects. Insisting that broad propertied classes, not tiny elites, rule modern societies, Marxists theorized that class conflict and struggle would lead inevitably to revolutionary destructions of those classes and open the way to egalitarian and stateless societies. Enthusiasts of democracy decried the manipulative practices of elites and foresaw a direct or mirror-like indirect rule by the demos. The failure of an egalitarian and stateless society or a self-governing democracy to emerge during the twentieth century revealed the utopian character of those visions, while the persistence of hierarchical social organization and power concentrations accorded with the elite perspective.

Nevertheless, utopian visions and debates about them shunted the elite perspective to the century’s intellectual sidelines. Classical texts outlining it were misinterpreted, the perspective was accused of an authoritarian bent, and confusions about elites, elitism and elite theory abounded. In today’s populist discourse, elites are everyone’s favourite bête noire, elitism is an all-purpose epithet for perceived exclusivity and condescension, and elite theory receives little attention. In the Handbook of Political Sociology (Janoski et al 2005), elites receive mention on but five of its 800 pages, while elitism and elite theory are ignored altogether. In the 1,900-page Encyclopedia of Political Science (Kurian 2011), elites and elite theory are discussed on three pages but elitism on none. Although social scientists refer to elites in books and articles, they prevailingly take the concept as self-evident and without need of definition, specification or theoretical mooring. Efforts to reduce this confusion, misunderstanding and inattention are needed if the elite perspective is to have the central place it deserves in political and social discourse.

Elites

Whether as noun or adjective, ‘elite’ is a study in semantic confusion. During the 17th century it was a French word for exclusive and expensive goods, and during the 18th century it was extended to crack military units and aristocratic groups claiming social superiority – ‘la crème de la société’. Vilfredo Pareto (1916/1935: paras. 2026-2059) retained the word’s evaluative meaning to denote individuals who most excel in all walks of life (artistic, economic, intellectual, martial, political, etc.), but he also labelled those possessing much power and wealth, whether excellent or not, the elite. Pareto observed that hierarchies of excellence and of power and wealth sometimes overlap and produce elites of much social distinction and merit; more often, however, they are divorced and elites lacking distinction and merit result. For stylistic variety Pareto spoke of aristocracies and a ruling or governing class as synonyms for elites, and he also distinguished between governing and non-governing elites. Seeking to construct a ‘science of politics’, Gaetano Mosca (1923/1939:50-51), Pareto’s Italian contemporary, distinguished between tiny ‘political’ or ‘ruling’ classes (elites in Pareto’s descriptive sense) and larger ‘second strata’ in which elites are embedded socially and from which they are typically recruited – a useful distinction that eludes the many who today confuse elites with a much wider political class.

As understood by most social scientists, political elites (hereafter ‘elites’) consist of persons who are able, by virtue of strategic positions in powerful organizations and movements, to affect political outcomes, usually at the level of
national states, regularly and substantially. They are the principal national-level
decision makers in the largest or most pivotal organizations and movements. Elites
include top business, government and military leaders, along with leaders of parties,
professional associations, trade unions, media combines, major interest groups,
important churches and other politically influential and hierarchically structured
organizations and movements. The outcomes they affect are the basic stability or
instability of political regimes, the forms and workings of political institutions, and
the main policies followed by national governments (Higley & Burton 2006:7).
Typically, elite persons enjoy elevated social status (sometimes ‘celebrity’ status) and
large financial rewards, though these and other perquisites are best seen as
consequences and correlates of their organizational positions, not separate bases of
influence and power.

Elites are differentiated and stratified. Differentiation accords principally with
economic, political, administrative, military, and other ‘strategic’ or functional sectors
of society (Keller 1963). As these sectors wax or wane in power and functional
importance, relations between elites heading them shift (Putnam 1976). Moreover,
historically contingent crises sometimes alter elite relations profoundly (Dogan &
Higley 1998). Elites are stratified, with central circles, executive cores, power cliques,
inner leaderships or other ‘elites within elites’ discernible. Debates about the extent
and shape of elite differentiation
and stratification are similar to the old Marxist
debates about compositions and structures of capitalist ruling classes.

There is considerable confusion about the size and cohesion of elites. Mosca
contended it is their small size and internal cohesion that enables elites to dominate a
society. He depicted a tiny ‘top clique’ whose members share ideas, sentiments and
policies, and are therefore capable of agreed and continuing actions (1939:430).
Mosca estimated that in the Italy of his time those who directly participated in or
decisively influenced the government in Rome numbered no more than one or two
hundred persons holding the most important state, parliamentary and party positions.
Adumbrating a ‘law of the small number’, Max Weber (1978:1393-1462) likewise
circumscribed ‘ruling minorities’ narrowly as holders of top executive positions in the
German state and main political parties. Similarly, C. Wright Mills (1956:4-11)
estimated a tripartite ‘power elite’ in mid-twentieth century America as numbering
hundreds rather than thousands of persons. Yet many who talk or write about elites
today blur their size. For example, in pursuing his thesis that America’s white
population has been ‘coming apart’ since 1960, Charles Murray distinguishes between
a ‘narrow elite’ consisting of ‘fewer than a hundred thousand people and perhaps only
ten thousand or so’ and a ‘broad elite’ consisting of the top five per cent of adult
Americans ‘located in managerial positions, the professions, and content-production
jobs in the media’ - some 1,427,000 persons by Murray’s count (2012:17-20).

There is also confusion about the character and extent of elite cohesion. Pareto
sought to forestall this by observing that elites ‘hold no meeting where they
congregate to plot common designs, nor have they any other devices for reaching a
common accord.’ Elites are ‘carried along by the sheer force of the system to which
they belong, involuntarily, and indeed against their wills, following the course that is
required of the system.’ Thus the road elites follow, he concluded, is ‘the resultant of
an infinitude of minor acts, each determined by the present advantage’ (1916/1935:
para. 2254). However, Pareto’s reference to a ‘system’ that constrains and propels
elite actions is obscure and unobservable empirically (Femia 2012). James Meisel (1958), an interpreter of Mosca and Pareto, held that effective elites are defined by three C’s: cohesion, conspiracy and consciousness. If these features are absent, Meisel contended, one is speaking only of an impersonal statistical category of position-holders. In his influential — yet not entirely clear — rendition of this view, Mills claimed that the frequency with which leading business, government and military figures in post-World War II America rotated between elite sectors, held interlocked positions, and voiced convergent interests and policies constituted evidence of a tightly knit power elite. Yet, Mills was later less certain if there was one or several power elites:

“[P]ower in the United States involves more than one elite. How can we judge the relative positions of these several elites? It depends upon the issue and decision being made. One elite sees another as among those who count. There is this mutual recognition among the elite that other elites count; in one way or another they are important people to one another” (1965:163).

Alternative conceptions of elite cohesion have been advanced. Robert A. Dahl’s well-known conception of polyarchy, rendered by Giovanni Sartori (1987:155) as ‘a multiple, diffuse, and, at best, open constellation of power groups’, manifests a plural elite position often pitted against the more unitary power elite thesis. Some scholars have contended that the cohesion of polyarchal elite constellations lies mostly in a tacit consensus about norms and rules of political behaviour, according to which multiple and competing elites strive to keep politics from becoming violent (Higley & Burton 2006:11-12). Meanwhile, populist commentators and politicians have appropriated ‘elite’ and ‘elitists’ as vague labels of abuse for critics and rivals. Consider the following exchange between TV anchorman Brian Williams and candidates Sarah Palin and John McCain during the 2008 US presidential campaign:

Williams to Palin: “Governor, what is an elite? Who is a member of the elite?”
Palin: “Anyone who thinks that they are, I guess, better than anyone else — that’s my definition of elitism.”
McCain (smiling): “I know where a lot of them live.”
Williams: “Where’s that?”
McCain: “Well, in our nation’s capital and New York City. I’ve seen it. I’ve lived there...These elitists think they can dictate what they believe to America rather than let Americans decide for themselves.” (New Yorker, August 16, 2008:27).

Admittedly, ‘elite’ is a somewhat elastic category, though it is much less elastic — and less arbitrarily demarcated — than capitalist ruling classes, British establishments, American charter groups and the like. Elites can be mapped with considerable precision by employing well-known positional, reputational, decisional and sociometric research techniques or combinations of them (Kadushin 1968, 1979; Laumann & Knoke 1987; Knoke 1990; Higley et al 1991). Such mapping indicates that elites vary in size from about 2,000 persons in countries like Norway and Denmark to perhaps 5,000 in Australia, France or Germany to upwards of 10,000 in the United States (Best and Higley 2010:6-7). It can of course be argued that these sizes are implausibly small and that elites are more numerous and omnipresent. Yet the mappings that have been done are consistent with the elite perspective’s tenet that in modern, hierarchically structured societies the ability to affect national political
outcomes regularly and substantially does not extend beyond a few thousands of persons. That these persons comprise consciously conspiratorial elites is not, however, a tenet of the elite perspective but, rather, one of several configurations it is prepared to entertain.

Elitism

Elitism has no agreed meaning inside or outside social science. One meaning, of course, is belief in or the practice of rule by elites, which implies focusing on them as the key political and social actors. A more diffuse and normatively coloured meaning is consciousness of or pride in belonging to a highly selective or favoured group. Still more diffuse meanings are respect for or deference toward leadership; esteem for accomplishments; reverence for heritage; insisting that some idea or contribution is better than others. As an adjective, ‘elitist’ is routinely used by media commentators and politicians to denigrate anyone who questions egalitarian outcomes and values, who agrees with Weber that effective politics rest on talent (charisma) and professionalism, or who claims, as Pareto did, that people differ innately in ruling and non-ruling abilities and talents (Henry 1994).

The multiple meanings of elitism and elitist inhibit a usage tied directly to the elite perspective. Consistent with the perspective’s recognition of elites as inevitable and central elements of complex modern societies, elitism means identifying and promoting conditions that enhance elite effectiveness. For example, empowering elites or believing they should be empowered to act with relative autonomy, lest non-elitist pressures force disastrous actions, is in step with the perspective. Accepting that by dint of superior information, greater experience or wider horizons elites are often (but certainly not always) better able than most to discern and choose prudent courses of action is also in step with the perspective and is an aspect of elitism.

Another aspect is employing élite in its original French and Paretian sense of excellence to evaluate and thereby condemn or condone actions and behaviours of concrete elites. Giovanni Sartori urges this in his admonition that unless research on elites applies criteria of excellence, it ‘misses what is fundamentally at stake – which is not that the powerful exist, and not only whether power elite(s) is a plural, but ultimately whether the powerful represent authentic or apocryphal elites’ (1987:168; his emphasis). Elitism is thus dualistic: it involves recognizing and accepting that elites require distinctive conditions to be effective; it simultaneously judges their effectiveness according to standards of excellence – or as Sartori puts it, according to élite value parameters.

The notion of elite value parameters – qualities of excellence in Pareto’s sense – is as important and useful as it is controversial and misunderstood. Elite qualities should not be confused with the social graces and cultural refinements of traditional aristocracies; nor should they be seen as synonymous with intellectual sophistication and wisdom, moral rectitude or virtuous character. In fact, elite qualities cannot be codified easily. They are personal attributes that contribute to effective exercises of power serving collective needs and goals, and the attributes most needed are contingent on circumstances. Pareto theorized, for example, that in times of political
crisis bravery and loyalty are at a premium; in times of political stability cleverness and innovation are most needed.

Elite qualities have a structural or group dimension. Weber held that effective ‘ruling minorities’ exhibit an array of complementary qualities: charisma and passion; professional political acuity; bureaucratic rationality and objectivity; partisan commitment; a capacity for realistic judgments unclouded by sentiment and free from emotionalism. More specifically, he held that mass democracy increases the importance of charismatic qualities among political leaders, especially the ability to win mass confidence in competitive election campaigns. He also highlighted the importance of administrative skills as a key quality for elites sitting astride states. Successful business elites, Joseph Schumpeter (1942) later added, exhibit entrepreneurial qualities, especially innovativeness. Still later, Pierre Bourdieu (1984) observed that ‘authority figures’ need cultural capital and social distinction. All of these group qualities, it must be emphasized, are relativised by the functional roles elites play in ever changing socio-historical circumstances. When such qualities are exhibited in circumstantially appropriate amounts, elites are effective and successful. They sustain a stable order in which individual dignity and prosperity are widespread. Sustained failures to exhibit such qualities indicate gradual degenerations of elites and the likelihood of socio-political crises (Higley & Pakulski 2011, 2012).

The application of elite value parameters can be illustrated by considering elite recruitment – the ‘supply side’ of elite qualities. It is plausible to hold that highly qualified, carefully groomed recruits to elite positions contribute, *ceteris paribus*, to elite effectiveness and excellence. Recruiting persons who have grown up in cosmopolitan and cultured families, performed at high academic levels when attending the most demanding schools and universities, served as diligent apprentices to top-level actors in major organizations and acquired the sagacity that often comes from long and multifaceted careers – persons who are, in short, ‘the best and the brightest’ – amounts to a consciously *elitist* process of recruitment. Although contemporary recruitment processes are diverse, it is difficult to avoid observing that, on the whole, they are less and less consciously elitist because of overriding concerns with ‘fairness’, ‘inclusion’ and ‘representativeness’ when recruiting persons to elite positions. Indeed, in electoral competitions for high government office ‘elitist’ credentials and ‘elite’ qualities are frequently mocked and reviled. It therefore comes as no surprise that populist demagogues, shrill adventurers and moneyed parvenus prevail in many elections. In today’s politics elite recruitment is less and less consciously *elitist*, and lacklustre elites are distressingly prevalent.

A common misconception of elitism is that it denies the importance of non-elites or portrays them as easily manipulated ‘masses’. This is a misconception because non-elites are the inseparable ‘pair-concept’ of elites. They are the constituencies and social forces to which elites must necessarily – and effectively – appeal for support when seeking and exercising power. If elites fail to obtain and maintain the support of relevant non-elites, elite tenures are usually brief. However, elitism implies that as key social actors elites often format the support of non-elites by shaping non-elite political organisation, identities and activism. By embracing and espousing strict egalitarian goals during the industrial revolution, for example, leftist elites formatted and organised diverse manual industrial workers into nationalised working classes. They persuaded workers about common material and ideal interests
and forged a budding consciousness and program of class action. The working classes of industrial societies were in considerable measure elite creations. A gradual weakening of elites at the head of working classes during the twentieth century’s last decades led to the waning of class identities and class-based politics (Pakulski and Waters 1996; Pakulski 2005). To take a US example, the ‘southern strategy’ pursued by Richard Nixon during his presidency was followed by targeted appeals of Ronald Reagan and his lieutenants to politicize a ‘Bible Belt’ that helped keep Republicans in presidential and congressional power for most of four decades. In many European countries at present, persons and groups seeking to gain or solidify elite status format anti-Muslim parties and movements. Elitism involves recognizing the extent to which non-elite political alignments and loyalties are shaped ‘from above’ by elites.

One further misconception of elitism is that it implies defending and embracing existing elites or apologizing for ‘the powers that be’. As demonstrated by Pareto’s withering attack on elites in Italy’s ‘demagogic plutocracy’ (1921) and Weber’s biting critique of inept leadership groups in Wilhelmine Germany (1978:1424-31), this is obviously incorrect. What elitism does imply is recognizing that elites may be successful or unsuccessful, brutal or persuasive; they may deliver what non-elites hope for or betray those hopes. Unlike class analysis, in which elites are discussed (if at all) in terms of their ideologies and class affiliations, elitism involves evaluating elites in terms of their effectiveness. Elitism does not mean defending or embracing elites; it means accepting their inevitability and searching for reasons why they succeed or fail. This search is the domain of elite theory.

**Elite theory**

Elite theory draws on the master distinction between elites and non-elites to advance explanatory constructs that can be assessed empirically for accuracy or at least plausibility. But because theories are always aspectual – they explain particular aspects of a configuration or process – elite theory is actually a constellation of theories. Some of them cluster around the seminal works of Pareto, Mosca, Weber and other pioneers of the elite perspective; others address relatively specific phenomena such as patterns of elite circulation, networks, opinions and recruitment. It is not the case, however, that elite theories build on each other and progress in a coherent, cumulative way. We live in a time when ‘theorising’ means innovating, not cumulating, and when research follows imperatives for speedy results that attract grants for further research. During the 1960s and 1970s when Marxist and democratic visions and debates held sway (Higley & Pakulski 2000), elite theories were surveyed and critiqued by three scholars: T.B. Bottomore (1964) from a Marxist standpoint; Geraint Parry (1969) from a democratic pluralist position; Robert D. Putnam (1976) from the vantage point of American political science. No comparable survey and critique has since appeared, and this leaves elite theory in need of a non-doctrinaire agenda today. Let us sketch one by re-visited tenets derived from the master distinction between elites and non-elites.

(i) **In every complex and large society power is distributed unequally and concentrated in the hands of elites.**
Yes, of course, but what are principal configurations of elite power in contemporary societies? It is widely claimed that globalisation and neo-liberal (de-regulatory) reforms have caused a basic shift of power to corporate and financial elites with global reach. Sceptics point to three problems with this claim: (i) the current financial crisis spawns strong demands to regulate markets in ways that will limit corporate and financial power; (ii) state-based elites have bailed out or effectively nationalised numerous corporations and financial firms; (iii) the rapidly expanding BRIC economies – Brazil, Russia, India and China – are state-regulated and state-dependent, which many observers view as a key to their success.

There is a related but largely ignored question about elite persistence. During the 1960s Mills speculated about a weakening and possible collapse of elites (1965:161-4). Similarly, William Kornhauser (1959) theorized that in mass societies intermediate groups serving as buffers between elites and non-elites diminish or dissolve, leaving elites and non-elites vulnerable to each other’s unmediated penetrations and depredations. Mills’s speculation and Kornhauser’s scenario need more scrutiny. Might discontented segments of non-elites, whipped into frenzies by nascent leaders and elites, overwhelm today’s fragmented and quite dilatory elites? If this were to occur, what qualities would newly ascendant leaders and elites display? Would Pareto’s ‘leonine’ label be most apposite?

(ii) In every complex and large society the key socio-political distinction is between elites and non-elites.

Some elite theories modify this stark dichotomy by postulating bonds of loyalties, shared identities, common commitments and convergent interests between elites and non-elites. Other theories shift its focus from dissimilarities between the two categories’ social and occupational profiles to patterns of elite unity and disunity, different modes of elite coupling with non-elites, and elite strategies for containing conflicts among non-elites. There may be emerging theoretical agreement that successful elite management of non-elite conflicts requires substantial elite insulation from non-elite pressures, as well as a shared elite respect for norms governing intra-elite competitions. Schumpeter’s ‘democratic elitism’, which has been criticized so bitterly by theorists enamoured of participatory democracy, warrants reconsideration (Best and Higley 2010).

The other side of this coin is elite failure, typically in the form of polarising tendencies and populist encroachments that profit from them. Greater attention should be paid to (1) elite blunders and miscalculations that contribute to turmoil like that stemming from the present economic-political crisis; (2) consequences of ‘decapitating’ through external military interventions like those in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya; (3) reconstitutions of elites after sudden and sweeping elite circulations, as in Egypt and Tunisia during 2011-2012.

(iii) Elite configurations are key determinants of economic and political success or failure.

Theories linking elite configurations with long-term political and economic success or failure appear to be flourishing. One theory contends that a basic but historically rare and contingent consensual unity of elites lay behind the gradual political liberalisation and socioeconomic development of countries such as the Netherlands, Britain and its English-speaking colonial offshoots, Sweden and
Switzerland (Higley and Burton 2006). Other theories invoke the gradual creation of ‘open access’ or ‘inclusive’ institutions – disembodied euphemisms for distinctive elite configurations – to explain why a few societies developed successfully in economic and political terms but most did not (North, Walls & Weingast 2009; Acemoglu & Robinson 2012). Dramatic political changes that came mainly ‘from above’ during the twentieth century’s final decades created elite configurations with consequent successes and failures. Where changes occurred through careful and largely secret elite negotiations – famously conducted at ‘roundtables’ in several Central and East European countries – stable democracies and expanding economies soon emerged. Where changes occurred through abrupt seizures of executive power – as in Iran and most ex-Soviet republics – ensuing elite power struggles produced authoritarian or theocratic regimes, in which elites holding the upper hand excluded or suppressed rivals and muffled economic growth.

Applying theories about the determinant effects of elite configurations in current circumstances and trends provokes important questions. Do gridlocked American and euro-zone elites and the zero-sum politics in which they engage portend lasting political instability and economic stagnation? In this vein, one theory highlights the declining power of political parties and their bosses to sustain elite unity (‘good institutions’) through compromises and deals. It contends that elite unity rests increasingly on integrative actions by prime ministers and presidents, whose charismatic qualities and political skills vary greatly and are, therefore, frail reeds (Pakulski and Körösényi 2012). One might also ask if increasingly desperate efforts by Chinese elites to maintain a fragile configuration of ideological unity that inhibits open access or inclusiveness signal political and economic disarray.

(iv) The social backgrounds of elites are disproportionately those of privilege.

That elites come disproportionately from privileged social backgrounds is axiomatic. However, two sets of theories deserve attention. The first are sociological and cultural-anthropological theories about elite social distinction, the diverse forms it takes, and the purposes for which elites employ it (Daloz 2010). Modern elites try less and less hard to conceal social distinction and cultural capital and seek to convert both, often brazenly, into political capital. Members of political, business, state administrative and other key elites now cultivate media fame and celebrity status, appearing frequently in settings and entertainments that have little to do with their organizations’ imperatives. This trend raises questions about a symbiosis of politics and popular culture in today’s societies, in particular a media celebration of political leaders regardless of political capacity and performance.

Another set of theories raise questions about long-term changes in the social backgrounds and recruitment of parliamentary elites (Best and Cotta 2000; Cotta and Best 2007; Higley 2011). Is attaining parliamentary elite status increasingly a do-it-yourself undertaking, in which image management and the raising of vast funds by lone political entrepreneurs main determinants of success? If so, is the incidence of incompetent or inexperienced members of parliaments increasing and does this help explain the declining respect for and importance of parliamentary elites?
(v) Elites require relative autonomy to be effective.

Weber diagnosed the deleterious consequences of populism (‘plebiscitary democracy’), leaderless democracy, and radical popular mobilisations (‘democracy of the street’). He portrayed charismatic legitimacy and firm electoral mandates as essential elite insulations from constant, direct and uncontrolled mass pressures (1978:241-71, 985-6, 111-55, 1460). Schumpeter (1942:290) likewise stipulated in his competitive theory of democracy (‘democratic elitism’) that during periods between democratic elections elites must be relatively free of mass pressures to formulate and implement policies effectively. Today, however, the complexity of issues, proliferation of elections, 24-hour electronic media and the Internet subject elites to instant and crippling attacks that make Schumpeter’s stipulation wishful thinking. Astute observers of today’s democracies depict them as jeopardized by narrowed elite autonomy (Sartori 1987:131; Hobsbawm 1994:579; Zakaria 2003:240-41). They link elite failures and resulting crises to a colonisation of policy domains by special interests and social movements that leave elites little room for manoeuvre. Conversely, other observers depict spreading political corruption and rule violations as the result of excessive elite autonomy (e.g., della Porta & Vannucci 1999). Distinguishing the autonomy essential for robust democracy from that feeding failure and crisis is an urgent matter. What scope and form of elite autonomy is needed to resist sectional pressures, combat divisive allegiances and harmonise major interests in support of effective and sustained policies? Most perplexing, is a necessary amount of elite autonomy compatible with elites’ essential alliances with segments of non-elites?

(vi) Elites are transformed through gradual or sudden circulation.

Elite transformations were the central topic of early elite theories. Pareto sought at length to identify cycles in the rise and fall of elites historically. Mosca focused on transformations of ‘political classes’ when new social forces lying beyond their control enter the political arena. Weber highlighted long- and short-term transformations of political elites and leadership under the impacts of modernization and mass democracy. During the twentieth century’s second half, however, theories of elite transformation narrowed to a focus on gradual changes in the social class compositions of elites: the decline of aristocratic land-owning elites; the increasing incidence of bourgeois and ‘enbourgeoised’ elites; the scarcity of elite persons with genuine working-class backgrounds (Putnam 1976:166-214). Some recent theories concentrate not on changes in the social compositions of elites, but on their changing psychosocial make-ups and governing styles (Best 2011; Marshall 2010). Observing that elite circulation appears to be intensifying in many Western countries, other theorists ask why and with what consequences? Are Western countries on the cusp of another Paretian cycle of elite circulation followed by gradual decay and eventual upheaval?

Conclusions

Given the political utility of decrying elites and elitism at every opportunity and the inattention from which elite theory suffers, it would be naïve to expect that confusion can be dispelled and elite theory rejuvenated with a single stroke. We have offered
some clarifications of the elite concept, what elitism means and what a revived agenda for elite theory might look like. Harking back to the elite perspective, it is important to remember it is meta-theoretical and like all meta-theories it has no epistemological status as true or false. The perspective’s value must be assessed in terms of its realism in analyses of politics, its sophistication when dealing with historical complexities and its potential for inspiring theoretical developments and applications. Judged by these standards – and by the already considerable accomplishments of the relatively few scholars who study elites – the perspective deserves a more central place in political and social discourse than it has had during the past hundred years. The time may be ripe for securing this place. For the twentieth century’s main theoretical fixations – class conflict and democratic prospects – seem incapable of explaining current crises and anticipating directions of change plausibly. Emerging amid crises a century ago, the elite perspective may yet take pride of place amid crises with which the present century has begun.

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