

Current Concepts for the Study of Elites

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Recently the study of “Elites” has become increasingly popular among historians in general and of Antiquity in particular.¹ However, many or most contributions do make only limited use of “Elite” by using the term (only) in a somewhat vague way to label one or several groups of privileged and influencing individuals.² While this is, of course, a legitimate approach, it remains, then, unclear in which way the application of the modern term “Elite” on premodern periods provides insights beyond introducing a label for groups also known as aristocrats, bishops and high ranking clergymen etc. To stimulate methodological discussions the paper gives a (very short) overview on concepts for the study of Elites in current sociological research. The proposed definition of “Elite” is the following (key aspects underlined):

Elites are minorities within an organization (or even a whole society) who exercise significant influence inside this organization and, potentially, beyond. They reach this influential position by specific prerequisites such as economic resources, qualifications, achievements or personal relationships. To maintain their position elites need to visualize and to successfully justify it in a way valued by the non-elite people. Finally, elite members have to maintain their position over a certain period of time to the effect that others can and have to take them into account.

Despite a century long debate, sociology has not reached an agreement on major issues such as what Elites are, how they are to be analyzed and how they are related to other relevant forces of a society.³ Of the two major concepts currently applied the first one goes back to the turn from the 19th to the 20th century, when Mosca, Michels and Pareto developed the concept of a single “Power Elite”.⁴ According to them in every society a single cohesive elite is to be found whose members come from a similar social and economic background, share certain values and views, and have the same goals they are trying to achieve. Members of the Power Elite establish and use specific types of interaction among themselves, thus trying to guarantee and maintain cooperation. Finally, the Power Elite tends to monopolize power and influence by the interchangeability between top positions in economy, military, the political sphere and so on.

In the 1950s and 1960s the second important elite concept emerged, the “Functional Elites Concept”.⁵ The following major differences are to be stressed in regard to the Power Elite Concept: Rather than assuming a cohesive ruling elite, the adherents of this concept emphasize the existence of distinct and at least partially autonomous sectors in every complex society. Thus, in the words of Suzanne Keller, “in modern society, there is no single comprehensive elite but rather a complex system of specialized elites”.⁶ Each of them holds the top positions of a distinct sphere of social activity, i.e., again, economy, science, culture, religion, the intellectual, and the political sphere. The reasons why the specialized elites cannot be seen as one single ruling elite are: Each sphere has its own specific rules how top positions are achieved and maintained, which major goals are aspired by the elite members, how elite members usually interact with ordinary people and how the elites tend to visualize their elite position, i.e. which modes of elite representation are dominant. Keller and others also try to find an answer to the crucial question of the Functional Elites Concept: How is a stable society possible if several distinct elites are dominant, who aspire different, even opposing goals? Her answer is to point to a “core or symbolic center [...] that signifies the common and enduring characteristic of the differentiated whole.”⁷ In other words, there must be a set of commonly accepted ideals and according

¹ Cf. among other Salzmann/Rapp 2000; Cébeillac-Gervasoni, M./L. Lamoine 2003 (esp. I. Savalli-Lestrade, "Remarques sur les élites dans les peuples hellénistiques", pp. 51-64) and Bartels 2008. For later periods cf. Duchhardt 2004.

² In fact, some studies do not make any attempt at all to define what “Elite” stands for (e.g. Fernoux 2004; Duplouy 2006).

³ See Akard 2000; Etzioni-Havely 2001; Hartmann 2008; Kraus 2001; Wassner 2004 for summaries of the current research on elites in the social sciences and the ongoing debate.

⁴ Mosca 1896; Michels 1911; Pareto 1916.

⁵ However, first critical objections against the dualistic view of an opposition between the ruling elite and the non elite ordinary people were already raised in the 1930s. Cf. esp. Mannheim [1935] 1967.

⁶ Keller 1968. Fundamental is Keller [1966] 1991, first published in 1966. The study remains the most complex and sophisticated elite concept I know of. See also Dahl 1958 and 1962; Dreitzel 1962.

⁷ Keller 1968.

rules all (or the majority of) elites are willing to accept and which has to be represented in a symbolic way.

While both the Power Elite and the Functional Elite Concept are still prominent in sociological research, at least two later developments should be mentioned, who try to combine basic assumptions of the two traditional approaches. The models of J. Higley and U. Hoffmann-Lange both acknowledge the existence of several distinct elites in complex societies while placing them altogether (and similar to Power Elite Concepts) at the top of the society in question. Two perspectives on elites are central: 1. To what degrees are the different elites united or integrated? 2. In how far are the Elites differentiated and independent with regard to central power (Higley) or in how far have elites to represent and take into account non elite opinions and interests (Hoffmann-Lange, cf. Fig. 1&2).

Elite Unity			
		Strong	Low
Elite Differentiation (heterogeneity, autonomy)	Wide	Consensual Elite (consolidated democracy)	Fragmented Elite (unconsolidated democracy)
	Narrow	Ideocratic Elite (totalitarian or post-totalitarian)	Divided Elite (authoritarian or sultanistic regime)

Elite Unity ("Eliteintegration")			
		High	Low
Representation (of non elite interests/opinions)	High	Established Democratic Elite	Pluralistic Elite
	Low	Power Elite	Disintegrated Elite

Fig. 1 (cf. Higley/Hengley 2000: 3)

Fig. 2 (cf. Hoffmann-Lange 1992: 37)

What are we to do with the concepts under discussion in the social sciences? While it seems clear that none of these concepts can simply be applied to ancient societies, the prominent sociological questions (e.g. how elites are to be identified, how an elite status is reached, maintained and justified, which goals do elites aspire, how do they interact, the problem of elite integration and configuration etc.) are stimulating. This is true as well – and to my view even more – once we are trying to apply “Elite” as a real concept, i.e. using “Elite” to analyze the interplay of otherwise very disparate influence groups in a society as heterogeneous and transforming as the Late Roman Empire.

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