

# **Elite Theory in Political Sociology**

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Elite theory's origins lie most clearly in the writings of Gaetano Mosca (1858-1941), Vilfredo Pareto (1848-1923), and Robert Michels (1876-1936). Mosca emphasized the ways in which tiny minorities out-organize and outwit large majorities, adding that "political classes" – Mosca's term for political elites – usually have "a certain material, intellectual, or even moral superiority" over those they govern (1923/1939, 51). Pareto postulated that in a society with truly unrestricted social mobility, elites would consist of the most talented and deserving individuals; but in actual societies elites are those most adept at using the two modes of political rule, force and persuasion, and who usually enjoy important advantages such as inherited wealth and family connections (1915/1935, paras. 2031-34, 2051). Pareto sketched alternating types of governing elites, which he likened, following Machiavelli, to lions and foxes. Michels rooted elites ("oligarchies") in the need of large organizations for leaders and experts in order to operate efficiently; as these individuals gain control of funds, information flows, promotions, and other aspects of organizational functioning power becomes concentrated in their hands (1915/1962; see Linz., 2006). Emphasizing the inescapability and also the relative autonomy of elites, all three men characterized aspirations to fully democratic and egalitarian societies as futile.

Many democrats and social radicals have rejected this "futility thesis" (Femia, 2001). They have sought to demonstrate that particular elites are not those with superior endowments or organizational capacities, but merely persons who are socially advantaged in power competitions. Adherents of this view have argued that the existence of elites can be terminated either by removing the social advantages that some people enjoy or by abolishing the power concentrations that spur competitions among them – remedies that often go hand-in-hand. There are no historical instances, however, where these remedies have been successfully applied in a large population for any significant length of time.

The writings of Mosca, Pareto, and Michels constitute a paradigm from which a general theory of elites and politics might be derived (Field and Higley, 1980). But efforts to produce such a theory have not been conspicuously successful. Linking elites causally to major regularities in politics remains elusive; there is no accepted typology of elites and no accepted specification of the circumstances and ways in which one elite type replaces another; political interactions between elites and non-elite populations are captured only piecemeal. Nevertheless, political scientists and sociologists pay much attention to elites and

their key roles in democratic transitions and breakdowns, revolutions, political regimes of all kinds, mass movements, democratic politics, globalization, and many other political phenomena. By outlining a general treatment of elites and politics, this paper seeks to provide elite theory and the attention paid to elites with more coherence and direction.

## **Elites**

Elites derive from a fundamental and universal fact of social life, namely, the absence in any large collectivity of a robust common interest. While it is true that most large collectivities rest on a base of social and cultural understandings, these tend to be ambiguous and rough. The satisfactions some of their members seek are only partly compatible with the satisfactions sought by other members. Members constantly claim statuses and other valued goods for themselves, their kin, friends, and allies that other members do not accept as fully legitimate. Acceding to these claims is often more a matter of judging that it is dangerous or inexpedient to resist them than of recognizing that the persons and groups making the claims have some right to do so. In large collectivities common interest is fairly minimal and must always be supplemented by authoritative decisions that dissenters and opponents dare not or find it inexpedient to resist.

Common interest is even more limited as regards the detailed features of any large collectivity's functioning. Its operations involve day-to-day decisions and, thus, allocations and re-allocations of tasks and statuses. Merely for a large collectivity to survive, 'intelligent' and 'objective' decisions that transcend individual interests must regularly be taken. But there can seldom be any firm consensus among a collectivity's members about the rightness of these decisions. This is partly because only a few are in positions that afford a relatively comprehensive view of the collective effort and its present location in time and space relative to its goals. Yet such a view is usually necessary for knowing if a particular decision is "right". Moreover, the need for constant decision-making deprives members of the time they would need to reach agreement about how their interests apply to current problems and needs. Even a relatively unimportant decision changes the line-up of influence for the next decision so that the details of a collectivity's structure and needs are always different today from what they were yesterday. This means that any incipient consensus among its members necessarily focuses on yesterday's structure and needs.

These aspects of collectivities give to elites their importance in political and social theory. Collectivities of any size and complexity require decisions by persons who happen to be strategically located in them. Because such collectivities are concentrations of power in the wider society, their top decision-makers have disproportionate societal power and influence, and they nearly always enjoy disproportionate privileges and protections. If we call these persons elites we can

say that large and complex collectivities necessarily create elites. In this sense only are elites an inherent feature of societies; all other reasons for the existence of elites are less persuasive and more debatable. Recognizing this is not, however, merely to echo Michels' dictum that "Who says organization says oligarchy." For oligarchy, aristocracy, and other euphemisms for elites imply or impute specific structural and behavioral features. Whether elites are cohesive, conspiratorial, self-conscious, and so on is answerable only through empirical investigation. While elites are the inescapable consequence of conflicting interests in all large and complex collectivities, their configurations vary according to political and social circumstance.

Elites may be defined as *persons who, by virtue of their strategic locations in large or otherwise pivotal organizations and movements, are able to affect political outcomes regularly and substantially*. Put differently, elites are persons with the *organized capacity* to make real political trouble without being promptly repressed. They consist not only of prestigious and "established" leaders – top politicians, important businessmen, high-level civil servants, senior military officers – but also, in varying degrees in different societies, relatively transitory and less individually known leaders of mass organizations such as trade unions, important voluntary associations, and politically consequential mass movements. "Counter-elites" are subsumed by this definition because they clearly have the organized capacity, although perhaps mainly through negation, to affect political outcomes regularly and substantially.

It is important to stress that this is a limited and specifically political definition of elites. It is restricted to persons who are at the top of the pyramid or pyramids of political, economic, and social power (Putnam, 1976, 14). It does not consider all those in a society who enjoy high occupational, educational, or cultural statuses to be elites in a political sense. As defined, national political elites are not large in number. Geraint Parry (1969/2005) has observed that the entire British elite could be seated with ease in a soccer stadium. Using strict organizational and positional criteria, as well as data about sizes of elite networks, some researchers have estimated that the national political elite in the United States numbers perhaps ten thousand persons (Dye, 2002), maybe half this number in medium-sized countries like France (Dogan, 2003), Australia (Higley, Deacon & Smart, 1979) or Germany (Hoffmann-Lange, 1992), and about fifteen hundred in small countries like Denmark (Christiansen, Möller & Togeby, 2001) and Norway (Gulbrandsen and Engelstad, 2002). This last estimate of fewer than two thousand persons is probably the most plausible for all countries during the early modern historical period and all but the most populous developing countries today.

### **Elites and Political Stability**

The presence or absence of stable political institutions is one of the major differences between political systems that can be explained on the basis of differences between elites. It is unusual for political power to be institutionalized effectively, as it has been for many years in Great Britain, the United States, the Netherlands, Sweden, Switzerland, and a few other Western countries. Stable political institutions are marked by the *absence* of irregular seizures of government executive power or obvious military influence in policy-making through threats of military intervention. Every four years since 1789 a president has taken office in the United States on the basis of election and has served out a term, unless dying in office, as the more or less effective head of the American political system. In Britain over an even longer time span prime ministers and cabinets have regularly succeeded each other as the chief political authority in accordance with principles and rules that, in spite of being largely informal, are well known.

The personalized manipulation of political institutions through individual and direct control of military and police forces has been, and is, much more common. Typically, there is a distinct elite group that effectively commands organized coercive forces and is prepared to arbitrate political decisions no matter what existing institutions prescribe. It is of little consequence analytically whether this group centers on a traditional monarch, a civilian coalition tied closely to professional military commanders, or it is an overt military junta. What is consequential analytically is that elites, no matter what their partisan inclinations may be, see power as personalized and directly dependent on the support of organized coercive forces. Elites critical of current social organization, for whatever reason, necessarily view political change in terms of removing or altering the group that effectively commands those forces. In their eyes and the eyes of their opponents, power flows from gaining at least temporary control over the principal means of coercion. Attempts to seize government executive power by force are seen by all as plausible, even probable, eventualities.

This is the basic aspect of a *disunited elite*. For long periods, as in Spain, Portugal, and Latin America during the nineteenth and most of the twentieth centuries, governance oscillates between “dictatorial” and “democratic” poles. These oscillations are transitory and circumstantial manifestations of the political system’s inherent instability so long as most elite persons believe that the hold on government power is subject to sharp and sudden changes. The historical record shows overwhelmingly that politics in most countries normally approximate an unrestrained struggle among mutually distrustful elites to defend and advance their interests with little regard for cost or propriety.

Of supreme interest in political analysis, therefore, are the relatively few countries in which political instability is not the order of the day. For, as noted, a few countries have displayed patterns of institutionalized authority and procedure that have been respected and perpetuated over long periods. In them, irregular

seizures of government power by force are unknown and informed observers consider such seizures highly unlikely. Elite theory holds that these deviant cases are explicable *only* in terms of elite behavior. More specifically, the historically normal situation of political instability has been abrogated in countries only when a *united elite* has formed.

There are, however, two markedly different types of united elites and, consequently, two quite different forms of political stability. One type is an *ideologically united elite*, which is marked by the uniform profession of a single and defined ideology by all or nearly all elite persons. These persons consistently avoid taking conflicting positions in public about current policies and political beliefs; they foster the image of a single and homogeneous leadership group. But given the conflicting interests that exist in any society, this image is more apparent than real. To some extent it arises from the determination of uppermost leaders imbued with a specific ideology to afford no opening for the intrusion of “unsound” outsiders into policy-making. But even for elite insiders the ideological uniformity is in part coerced. Behind the public profession of more or less complete agreement about current policies and goals – behind the expression of a single and defined ideology – there exists an apparatus of power sufficient to force all or most current and aspiring elite persons to harmonize their public statements with the views that are currently orthodox. Defining what is orthodox is the task of a few individuals in the highest elite positions, and adhering to this orthodoxy obviously blocks the expression of divergent interests.

The content of the single ideology that marks an ideologically united elite is of little analytical importance. It must probably be sufficiently diffuse and removed from present conditions to permit flexibility in interpreting always changing realities. It must probably be focused on some future, imaginary social condition toward which society is allegedly moving. It must, in short, be substantially utopian. But analytically speaking, whether the ideology describes a future classless society or one in which eternal salvation or pastoral contentment for all will be realized is of little consequence for the enforced unity that prevails among elite persons. Because the only permissible public position for organizing endeavors is defined and monopolized by those in power, political institutions can be centralized to a degree unknown elsewhere. Individuals and groups who want to alter those institutions can be identified easily, and they possess few means with which to appeal for public support. Evidence indicates that, once established, institutions operated by an ideologically united elite are stable for long periods.

The other type of united elite, a *consensually united elite*, does not depend on all elite persons taking essentially the same political position in public. There is no single and defined ideology to which all must adhere. Instead, persons with power and influence take clearly divergent positions on public matters. These positions often accord with opposing ideologies, as in the long conflict between

conservatives and liberals within British and Swedish elites during the nineteenth century, and the subsequent conflict between liberals and socialists within the same elites during the first half of the twentieth century. The striking aspect of these conflicts is that they occur under a set of rules that is nowhere comprehensively codified but is tacitly and widely understood to remove serious personal danger from elite contests and competitions. These informal rules emanate from a structuring of power that gives all or most elite persons and groups sufficient access to decision-making so that it is in their collective interest to avoid seriously disruptive actions and keep the political situation manageable. Although elite members disagree and oppose each other in limited struggles for ascendancy, power is distributed so that all or most can have influence on political decisions sufficient to deter them from translating their oppositions into attempts to seize government power by force. Political institutions are, accordingly, stable for long periods.

### **Origins of Elite Types**

Ideologically united elites originate in revolutionary circumstances that enable a movement dogmatically expressing a specific ideology or creed to suppress and supplant previously existing elites. Examples are Russia 1917-1921, Italy 1922-1925, Germany 1933-1934, North Korea 1946-1948, China after 1949, Cuba 1959-1961, and Iran 1979-1981. Ideologically united elites may also originate when an external power possessing such an elite imposes its clone on a conquered or otherwise subordinated country, as in East Germany and Eastern Europe following World War II. By contrast, consensually united elites sometimes originate through dramatic changes in the situations and attitudes of the key groups that have constituted a disunited elite. This involves an *elite settlement* in which warring elite camps manage to bring their major disputes to a close and establish a basis for mutual trust (Burton and Higley, 1987; 1998). The first historical instance of an elite settlement occurred in England's 'Glorious Revolution' of 1688-1689, and it is worth recalling its basic features.

English elites had been bitterly and deeply disunited, as evidenced by the Civil Wars and Interregnum between 1642-1660. In 1660 the monarchical system was restored, albeit with some shifting of positions and blurring of lines between the previously warring elites. Thereafter one main elite camp, the Tories, sought to exploit their association with the monarchy, while the other main camp, the Whigs, maintained its anti-monarchical stance. The Tories were thoroughly identified with the religious doctrine and institutions connected to the Church of England. But when in 1685 the birth of a son to James II, who professed both Roman Catholicism and an absolutist version of monarchical power, made an indefinite Catholic succession to the throne likely, the Tories were as discomfited as their Whig rivals. Fearing a resumption of civil war, key leaders of the two elite camps conspired to invite the successful military intervention of the Dutch *stadtholder*,

William of Orange, and the elite camps subsequently agreed, in early 1689, to establish William as king under terms that effectively guaranteed them joint political influence. Occurring in a predominantly agrarian society where the elite stratum was necessarily small and exclusive, these events marked the beginning of the limited and restrained political contests with understood informal rules that have characterized the British polity ever since (for a fuller account and the English Settlement's ramifications for American political stability, see Barone, 2007). Essentially similar events constituting elite settlements occurred among Swedish elites in 1809 after a century of infighting (Higley and Burton, 2006, 68); Swiss elites in 1848 following a brief civil war between contending elite camps (Tilly, 2004, 168-205); and, more debatably, among Mexican elites in 1928-1929 when they created an omnibus party, eventually known as the PRI, to operate a stable presidential system after a long experience of bloody turmoil (Knight, 1992).

Consensually united elites have also originated in the attainment of independence by former colonies in which local or "native" elites have been able to practice a restrained home-rule politics while waging long, in some cases violent, struggles for independence. As illustrated by elites in Britain's North American colonies, both American and Canadian, local elites in partially self-governing colonies may develop a high enough level of mutual trust when resisting the colonial power's interventions and seeking independence that they are consensually united from the date of independence or the grant of full home rule. In addition to the U.S. and Canada, this was the experience of elites in Australia and New Zealand during the latter part of the nineteenth century, and of white South African, Indian, and Malayan elites during the twentieth century's first half (Higley and Burton, 2006, 107-38). It is worth noting that Dutch elites became united in this manner before and during their successful struggle for independence from Spain late in the sixteenth century, although full integration of the seven Dutch provinces did not occur until after the Napoleonic Wars.

In cases where consensually united elites formed as an outgrowth of colonialism, colonial governments had active representative institutions that afforded elites a considerable practice of limited and restrained politics. But this was not the situation in the Latin American colonies of Portugal and Spain, where, moreover, there was little clear understanding of territorial boundaries when independence was gained. Consequently, military leaders and local political bosses (*caudillos*) tended to predominate in Latin America at independence and for long periods thereafter. Nor were the political experiences of elites under colonial rule and when struggling for independence propitious for the formation of consensually united elites in more than a few of the scores of ex-colonies that achieved independence during the decades following World War II. Except in India, Malaya (later Malaysia), Senegal, and no more than a handful of other ex-colonies, such as

Jamaica and Barbados, independence brought with it disunited elites and long-lasting political instability.

To summarize, there have been two ways in which disunited elite became consensually united historically: (1) through basic and sudden elite settlements in societies at relatively low levels of socioeconomic development; (2) through colonial home rule and struggles for independence where local elites had already received, or received in the course of those struggles, experience in political bargaining and restrained competitions. Neither origin appears relevant to the situation of most disunited elites in today's world. A necessary condition for an elite settlement appears to be a level of socioeconomic development lower than that of most developing countries with disunited elites today. At higher development levels elites are probably too numerous and closely tied to particular non-elite interests to be able to fashion a settlement. Colonial dependency is obviously a condition necessary for creating a consensually united elite through home rule and independence struggles, but it is a condition that is no longer seriously present. These observations raise the question of whether there may be a third way in which consensually united elites form. To address this, let me outline briefly what might be termed an *elite convergence*.

In countries that have transited to democratic elections, the opposing camps and factions making up a disunited elite may begin to converge if some of the opposing elites form a broad political coalition that mobilizes enough voters to win the elections repeatedly. This enables the coalesced elites to dominate government executive power and obtain the greater security that derives from this domination. An elite convergence may continue if factions hostile to the winning coalition conclude that seizing power by irregular means is not a realistic possibility and they must beat the winning coalition in election contests if they are to escape permanent political subordination. This means acknowledging the value of elections and promising to accept their results. An elite convergence may be considered complete when the formerly hostile and losing factions gain government executive power in an election and then govern in a way that is respectful of established institutions and tacit live-and-let-live reciprocities with the previously dominant elite coalition. As happens more clearly and quickly in elite settlements, through convergences elites gradually reach an underlying consensus about the norms of restrained political competition so that political institutions become stable.

Elite convergences occurred in several European countries and in Japan during the twentieth century's second half. All were at a relatively high level of socioeconomic development and general prosperity when the convergences took place. The four clearest cases were France once General de Gaulle's associates formed a winning electoral coalition after his return to power in 1958; Italy once the "organic" Christian Democrat - Socialist winning coalition took clear shape in

1963; West Germany after several victories by the Christian Democrat – Christian Socialist – Free Democrat winning coalition formed in 1953; Japan once the Liberal Democrats and centrist parties constituted a winning coalition starting in 1964. In each of these countries, dissident and hostile elite camps eventually came to see that they had no real political alternative to moderating their stances in order to compete effectively in elections, and in each what had previously been a disunited elite gradually became consensually united – by 1981 in France when the previously dissident Socialists won power and governed with moderation, during 1979 in Italy when the “revolutionary” Communist Party cooperated with the dominant Christian Democrats to repress extra-parliamentary terrorist groups; in West Germany when the dissident Social Democrats entered into a “grand” governing coalition with their previous nemesis, the CDU-CSU coalition (minus the Free Democrats); and in Japan once the Socialist Party jettisoned its Marxist baggage during the mid-1980s (Higley and Burton, 2006, 139-79).

### **Elite Theory and Democracy**

Although an elite theorist’s personal preference may be for democratic politics, he or she does not believe that in most countries and circumstances a practical and stable form of democratic politics can be achieved. Meaningfully democratic institutions and practices depend upon the type of elite that a society has. No type of elite is compatible with the full democratic ideal, and only one of the three types is reasonably compatible with the stable democratic politics that are practiced in Western countries and a few others today. However, none of the three elite types is *reliably* conducive to even this limited form of democracy.

The most common political situation, that of disunited elites, has the basic feature of institutional instability. While institutions operated by some part of a disunited elite may at times have a formally democratic façade, the institutions are hardly worth much promotion or defense because they are unlikely to survive a serious political crisis. Commonly, any substantial increase in normal political tensions leads, with or without a military coup, to a more authoritarian and repressive government. Although such a government may eventually mellow or even be replaced by a more democratic one that has the tacit consent of the elite veto group associated with the military, this improvement is likely to be merely an interval in a succession of more or less repressive governments. As noted, historical evidence is overwhelming that disunited elites and the unstable institutions they create persist through most vicissitudes and that each government is in practice one permitted by those who happen to control military and police forces.

The circumstances in which disunited elites become ideologically or consensually united are unlikely to appeal to people with democratic sentiments. An ideologically united elite does not allow competitive politics, and where it

exists meaningful actions motivated by democratic sentiments are nearly impossible. The basic settlements in which a few consensually united elites originated historically had as their principal features substantial elite autonomy from mass pressures together with the sacrifice of deeply held political principles for which opposing elites and their supporters had long stood. The colonial origins of consensually united elites involved empires that are odious to convinced democrats and are, in any case, no longer feasible politically and economically. Where opposing camps in a disunited elite have gradually converged, those who have most liked to consider themselves genuine democrats have found themselves consistently in the minority, while more conservative and traditional persons who are part of the majority to which the winning coalition appeals are inclined to merely pretend that they are democrats (cf. Power, 2000; Alexander, 2002). Moreover, although a consensually united elite may emerge via an elite convergence and open the way to a more widely accepted and stable democratic regime, the process depends on socially radical groups becoming disillusioned with their democratic ideals.

It is also the case that the regime created and operated by a consensually united elite may not, in fact, be very democratic. It can be based, as in most historical cases, on a highly restricted suffrage. Even temporary dictatorship or the long dominance of a high-handed chief executive is possible so long as the elite remains internally trusting and is prepared to cooperate in removing the dictator or chief executive if he or she becomes seriously incapacitated or incompetent. Fundamentally, practical democracy depends on the ability of a consensually united elite to keep political tensions moderate. Where such an elite exists the problem for people imbued with democratic ideals is deciding how much public attention they should try to center on issues that they consider morally right but that are also potentially explosive. The champions of such morally charged issues are likely to find that members of a consensually united elite distort, partially suppress, or simply confuse the issues if doing so seems necessary to maintain institutional stability. Morally charged issues will be subject to “benign neglect” if elites conclude that the issues have reached a threshold of articulation and antagonism beyond which political stability is endangered.

Should those who cannot get the hearings that they believe their moral causes deserve acquiesce in such elite actions? If it is correct that consensually united elites are ordinarily quite capable of managing political tensions, the question is without significance. Yet, suppose that the elite cannot quite do this in the face of embittered demands and vehement mass demonstrations. On the assumptions of the approach to elites outlined here, this would break up the elite and in all probability create a disunited elite with the usual consequence of covert or overt military rule and the suppression of political dissent. Would it be right for staunch democrats to help bring this outcome about on behalf of a high moral cause? The answer is obvious.

Elite theory teaches, in other words, that a mature and experienced advocate of democracy must always settle for a political order that is considerably less than ideal. An elite that is consensually united, or one that approaches this condition, is necessary for practical democracy. Only such an elite will effectively manage conflicting interests whose open and dogmatic expression would create disastrous internal conflict. Where an elite does this over the course of many years, representative political institutions guided by reasonably competitive and influential elections are possible, although not inevitable. But where groups within the elite fully and openly reflect and express and conflicting non-elite interests, then at some point political freedom for considerable numbers of elite and non-elite persons alike will be suppressed or the polity will not survive. Elite theory rejects the fashionable but fatuous notion that the most desirable political system is one in which the divergent interests of a population are clearly represented and forcefully articulated at the elite level. Posing “a real choice, not an echo” in practical democratic politics threatens to weaken a consensually united elite and concomitant institutional stability. Recognizing this, proponents of elite theory cannot properly feel compelled to pursue the democratic ideal in all circumstances and at all costs.

### **Elites and Revolution**

There is no agreed definition of revolution that attaches the term to a clearly specified political event or process. It is sometimes used to mean almost any irregular and forcible seizure of power, thereby covering the many coups and sporadic uprisings that occur where elites are disunited. “Revolution” is also often used to label civil wars and wars of liberation that center on dynastic, ethnic, regional, or religious divisions. This definitional vagueness makes it a matter of subjective judgment whether to call a regime, movement, or violent conflict “revolutionary” – a judgment that is, indeed, frequently made after the fact, as happened with the so-called Cuban Revolution that established the Castro regime. When they were fighting the Batista dictatorship, Castro’s insurgents portrayed themselves as, and were widely believed to be, liberal and populist, not revolutionary. It was only after a year or two in power that Castro and his associates proclaimed themselves “revolutionaries” and a Cuban Revolution was widely perceived. By not distinguishing between many kinds of violent upheavals, “revolution” has lacked the precision required of a concept that can be utilized seriously in an elite theory of politics.

There is, however, one special kind of upheaval with features that are objectively different from those of coups, civil wars, secessions, and popular outbursts. This is an upheaval that begins when normal government authority, most manifest in disciplined military and police forces, suddenly and dramatically collapses. During the shorter or longer interval that follows, maintaining order

against riot or pillage becomes highly problematic until government authority and military and police discipline are either restored or built anew by some victorious group. One cannot say that an elite of any of the three types exists during this interval. Power resides, as radicals like to say, “in the people” or, more precisely, in persons who assemble fairly spontaneously, usually under arms, and respond to immediate propaganda and oratory with mass actions. Such assemblages typically include bodies of rank-and-file troops who have either liquidated their officers or are simply ignoring officers’ orders.

As Pareto clearly saw (1915/1935, paras. 2056-57), an upheaval of this kind eventually brings a substantially different body of persons to elite status, and it changes political and especially economic institutions in fundamental ways. But before such sweeping alterations become apparent, whoever attempts to restore or construct a semblance of organized power in the area where government authority has collapsed usually comes under attack from areas to which the government collapse did not extend. To survive this attack, the new power organizers must quickly create some degree of bureaucratic centralization accompanied by disciplined military and police units. Sooner than later, the popular assemblages that have held forth are policed and suppressed. When this happens, the observer can again speak of a regime operated by one or another type of elite. In the English and French upheavals of 1642-1645 and 1789-1794, respectively, the new elite was again disunited. But after the upheaval in Russia, 1917-1921, the elite was ideologically united as a consequence of the victorious Bolsheviks’ tight organization and doctrinal coherence during the upheaval.

If for purposes of conceptual order and terminological consistency “revolution” refers only to an upheaval involving the collapse of government authority and an ensuing interval when coercive power is located in more or less spontaneous popular assemblages, it is a rare and unlikely event (Brinton, 1938). A revolution in this sense can probably occur only in societies at low levels of socioeconomic development, that is, largely agrarian or peasant societies. In more bureaucratized societies at higher development levels the widespread collapse of government authority and disciplined military and police forces seems even more implausible today than it did when proponents of revolution counted, for the most part mistakenly, on large numbers of citizen-soldiers turning on governments after hardships and defeats in large-scale warfare. Moreover, advances in military technology, especially nuclear weaponry, suggest that wars fought by mass armies may now be relics of history.

Whether or not they are any longer likely, do revolutions in the present sense of the term bring political improvements? From the standpoint of democratic and liberal criteria, the answer is an emphatic No. Because of the searing enmities and political scars they create, revolutions never eventuate in consensually united elites. Their consequences are either disunited or ideologically united elites,

neither of which is congenial to reliable democratic practices. Although much has been heard from persons outraged by what they regard as fundamental moral deficiencies of contemporary political regimes, not least Western democracies, the sweeping “revolutionary” changes that these persons have demanded lie well beyond what elite theory depicts as possible; they are just dreams and wishful thoughts that are from a liberal and democratic standpoint deeply imprudent.

### **Elites and Non-Elites**

How does elite theory treat non-elite populations and link them to elites? The bulk of Pareto’s million-word *Treatise* was an attempt to answer this question and it is self-evident that no satisfactory answer to it can be offered here. The question requires conceptualizing a dynamic relationship between elites and non-elites in which, under specifiable conditions, elites override non-elites, but under different and equally specifiable conditions non-elites override elites. Where elites prevail, a theory must be content to specify the *outer limits* of possible elite behavior and, thus, of political outcomes. Where non-elites prevail, political outcomes can be forecast with greater certainty. Specifying the changing predominance of elites and non-elites theoretically is, therefore, the crucial task.

To illustrate how this might be tackled, consider the proposition that at low levels of socioeconomic development a leftist or leveling propensity is potentially widespread among non-elites. In extreme political circumstances, this propensity may eventuate in a revolutionary collapse of government authority and military discipline of the kind just discussed. But such leveling revolutions appear possible *only* in an early phase of development, and even then they are exceedingly rare: the English, French, and Russian revolutions are the classic instances and all three occurred in pre-industrial conditions. Much more normally in pre-industrial societies, bodies of peasants and artisans are not greatly aggravated by the encroachments of elites, and their fundamentally leftist or leveling propensity is not strongly activated. Non-elite propensities become more enflamed, however, when societies reach the industrial stage of development. In this stage, manual industrial workers, who are numerous, hold consistently to egalitarian sentiments and a hostile view of elites, clearly articulated by the powerful trade unions and leftist parties that mobilize them. Bureaucratic and service workers, who are also numerous, tend to accept the presence of elites even if they do not condone all of their actions and features. Diminished and now more or less comparable numbers of artisans and ex-peasants, who in industrial conditions typically own small farm properties, are ambivalent about elites and elite actions: they resent elite interferences in their farming and artisan endeavors but are inclined to support those elites who seek to check leveling forces. In extreme political circumstances, an anti-egalitarian and possibly “fascist” upheaval aimed at crushing leveling forces is possible: northern Italy in the 1920s; Weimar Germany in the late 1920s and early 1930s; Spain in the late 1930s; strong fascist movements in Austria,

Belgium, France, and most other European countries during the interwar period (Paxton, 2004). Normally in industrial societies, however, the large numbers and political influence of non-manual bureaucratic and service workers, augmented by ambivalent artisans and ex-peasants, are sufficient to prevent strongly egalitarian mobilizations of manual industrial workers from gaining government power. If elections are held, the latter are simply out-voted. Finally, the pervasiveness of non-manual bureaucratic and service workers in socioeconomic development's postindustrial stage (Bell, 1973, 121-64) rules out the dramatic leveling and anti-leveling political changes that are possible in earlier stages of development.

There is an important caveat. In societies that are late-comers to socioeconomic development and in a handful of mostly small societies with large petroleum reserves it is clear that today's production and communication technologies greatly accelerate the conversion of workforces from an overwhelmingly peasant and artisan composition to one that consists predominantly of bureaucratic and service workers. In these accelerated and technologically more sophisticated circumstances, manual industrial workers are at once fewer in relative numbers and, perhaps because of their smaller numbers and more sophisticated work tasks, their outlooks appear to be less intransigently egalitarian and hostile toward elites. The main political problem in societies coming late to socioeconomic development may, consequently, reside less in the composition of their rapidly changing workforces than in the inability of these work forces to provide employment for large parts of swollen and mostly young non-elite populations.

The illustrative point, in any case, is that non-elite configurations, sketched here as distinct workforce compositions and concomitant mixes of orientations toward elites, rule out certain elite actions and political outcomes at different stages in socioeconomic development, but they do not determine what elites will do and what political outcomes they will produce. Thus, early in socioeconomic development non-elites tend toward a hostile view of power exercised by elites, and their impoverished situations give non-elites little reason to fear a general leveling of existing hierarchies. If elites are exceptionally incompetent or unlucky, a collapse of government authority that triggers a leveling revolution is possible. But elites may circumvent this by couching effective appeals for non-elite support in terms of religious and other traditional beliefs. In socioeconomic development's industrial stage, a shift to fascist rule is possible, although entrenched elites may circumvent it by holding elections in which leveling forces simply lack sufficient numbers to prevail. What is not possible in industrial societies – in other words, what is precluded by the non-elite configuration – is a successful leveling revolution, and, *pace* Marx, none has occurred. Meanwhile, industrial societies appear to prevent sudden and deliberate settlements of basic elite disputes because their relative complexity makes the elite stratum large and not sufficiently autonomous from non-elites. Elite actors are numerous and many give their

primary allegiance to the partisan interests of the mass organizations and movements they head. Negotiating behind the political stage to compromise principled interest positions that elite factions have repeatedly taken when mobilizing non-elite support and then getting followers to accept such compromises is unlikely. Forming a winning political coalition that successfully defends existing hierarchies is the more plausible option for elites in industrial societies.

### **Elites and Non-Elites in Postindustrial Conditions**

How do elites and non-elites affect each other in postindustrial conditions? By the 1970s all of the Western countries that were experiencing these conditions – the Anglo-American, Scandinavian, and Benelux countries, plus West Germany and perhaps Austria - had consensually united elites and stable political institutions. Disunited elites in several countries that were just then reaching the postindustrial stage of development were becoming more consensually united – French, Italian, Japanese, Greek, and Portuguese elites via convergences; Spanish elites via a dramatic elite settlement in the wake of the *Franquist* regime (Linz and Stepan 1995; Gunther 1992). Initially, postindustrial conditions seemed to accentuate the political stability that consensually united elites produce. This was because the preponderance of bureaucratic and service workers blurred class lines and weakened customary partisan alignments among non-elites. Consequently, elites needed less recourse to ideologies, such as socialism and liberalism, in order to justify their statuses, policy positions, and governing actions. Elite political discourse shifted to discussing affluence and the welfare state as solvents of historic discontents and problems. Observers avidly discussed the ‘end of ideology,’ a thesis that is probably best seen in hindsight as rationalizing blandly optimistic views of the postindustrial landscape, especially as viewed by sub-elite commentators. With high productivity and nearly full employment, the absence of serious economic downturns, a shrunken working class acquiring middle-class life styles, and no other large and obviously discontented collectivities in sight, there was the appearance of considerable harmony among non-elite populations (e.g., Beer, 1965). Elites, accordingly, adopted a more blatantly managerial posture and they voiced a complacent belief that mere ‘fair’ treatment of individuals and groups would ensure social progress and tranquility (Thoenes, 1966).

With the passage of time, however, the greater non-elite harmony and elite complacency that appeared to be the principal political effects of postindustrial conditions diminished. Increased crime, narcotics use, and other deteriorating social conditions became apparent in many cities; a seemingly intractable form of poverty spread in urban slums and rural backwaters; and many young people with essentially privileged family backgrounds displayed considerable alienation and discontent. These trends suggested that postindustrial conditions could be more difficult politically than they first seemed.

Postindustrial conditions are in important respects the terminus of socioeconomic development. They complete the conversion of workforces that consisted overwhelmingly of peasants and artisans at development's outset into workforces pervaded by bureaucratic and service personnel. It is quite unlikely that some further stage of development, conceived in terms of new basic kinds of work and new workforce components, lies beyond postindustrial conditions. If this is so, it must be asked whether postindustrial societies can over the longer haul remain viable politically without the sense of progress and spread of hope that development engendered historically. Crudely put, can postindustrial societies "stagnate" indefinitely in their non-elite configuration without suffering major political upheavals?

One concern is the increased empathy between elites and non-elites that occurs in postindustrial conditions. The preponderance of bureaucratic and service work intermingles previously distinct social strata. Persons more frequently and routinely ascend to elite positions from non-elite origins and locations than happens in more rigidly stratified societies at earlier development levels. As a consequence, not a few persons holding elite positions in postindustrial conditions see themselves as one of a kind with non-elites, among whom they frequently have intimate personal associates and for whom they have considerable empathy. These close and empathetic ties to non-elites help ensure that elite persons are better able to determine measures that at least partially assuage non-elite discontents and aspirations. But what may happen if it is not possible to assuage non-elites? Presumably, actions and measures ranging from deception to discouragement to outright repression will be more reviled by non-elites and harder for elites to take.

A still wider difficulty confronts elites in postindustrial conditions. In all earlier stages of socioeconomic development political action was not generally required to keep most persons steadily engaged in the performance of necessary work. For the most part, internalized attitudes and customary social controls supplied by neighbors and work mates sufficed. In postindustrial conditions, however, such close social controls, along with most religious and other traditional belief systems, attenuate greatly. In earlier stages of socioeconomic development, moreover, most persons worked diligently in order to stave off dreadful personal circumstances – dismissal, eviction, hunger, etc. – and a significant proportion worked without surcease because they could plausibly believe that by doing so their strong personal ambitions could be realized. In these earlier societies only a small number of specially favored persons – mainly the offspring or friends of the rich and powerful – were unmotivated to work in disciplined ways and were inclined toward a self-indulgent, if perhaps esthetically satisfying, leisure.

It is easy to see that the proportion of people who are unmotivated for steady work increases markedly in materially affluent and empathetically

indulgent postindustrial conditions. It is useless to ignore this by holding that modern technology greatly reduces the need for human labor. Responsible work is not readily parceled out in little pieces in any society. Some tasks must still – and presumably must always – be performed with care, diligence, and forethought, and those who perform them will not allow a large body of essentially idle people, however decorative they may be, to receive substantial rewards for their idleness. This disjunction between the diligent and the idle signals a growing clash between segments of non-elite populations in postindustrial societies, although it is uncertain if this clash will have a magnitude that consensually united elites are unable to manage.

### **Elite Theory's Limits**

Elite theory's predictive pretensions are necessarily modest. Elite behavior cannot be inferred, let alone projected, from knowledge of non-elite configurations and propensities. For instance, neither the creation nor persistence of a consensually or an ideologically united elite is discernibly linked with non-elite propensities. The probability of a united elite of either kind forming and creating stable political institutions can only be guessed at from knowledge of recent elite history. Does this history display long and costly, but essentially inconclusive, warfare between disunited elite factions who, in consequence, may be disposed toward a basic settlement of their disputes? Have elites recently suffered a defeat so grave that the way may be open for a well-organized but previously peripheral group to seize and consolidate power in revolutionary circumstances? The difficulty is not merely that elite behavior is poorly understood; it always contains enough elements of arbitrariness, capriciousness, or simple lack of obvious explanation to defy deterministic explanation. Thus, while societies have displayed similar non-elite configurations during socioeconomic development, no such regularities in the behaviors and configurations of their elites can be identified. Any theory that recognizes this disjunction between elites and non-elites must allow considerable leeway for political accident and unpredictable political choice, so that its explicative claims must be quite modest.

It must also be recognized that elite theory is distasteful to many because it rules out the more ideal aims and outcomes that are regularly voiced by intellectuals, mass movement leaders, and even loosely predicted by social scientists. Elite theory has no place for idealized visions of democracy or social revolution, nor does it have a place for the spread of new values that dispose human beings toward a consistent and thorough altruism. Human conflicts inevitably dilute social cohesion and constitute political problems that elites must manage as best they can. However well or poorly they accomplish this task, elites are the central actors in politics, but the theory that centers on them is unlikely to have many enthusiastic adherents.

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