

Bokessay

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New Directions in Elite Studies

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In the public discourse, focus on social elites has surged during the last decade due to attacks from populist movements, both from the left and the right. Although not with the same visibility, questions and debates on elites have been present in modern social science since the mid-1950s, since the iconic debate between the topics of elite integration and elite pluralism (see, e.g. Mills, 1956 and Dahl, 1957, 1961). In the introduction to *New Directions in Elite Studies* the editors announce that a renewed interest in elite questions has emerged after 2000, also in academic circles, in parallel to increases in economic inequality and emerging populism in Western societies. The ambition of the book is to develop the understanding and conceptions of elites by mobilizing the theoretical framework of Pierre Bourdieu.

Of the 15 chapters in the book, 13 are empirical studies. The empirical field is mainly Northwestern Europe: Germany, Switzerland, France, the Netherlands, Great Britain and Scandinavia. All the chapters are well researched; methodologically they are on a high level, albeit of differing interest when it comes to the research problems they raise and discuss. In a brief review it does not make sense to go into all the chapters; what seems to be the most noteworthy contributions are briefly mentioned below. Toward the end, a few more theoretical questions are raised.

The most fascinating study in the collection is by Ugo Lozach, on elite status at a second-rate school of the French *grandes écoles*. Schools of second-rate status are operationalized as local branches of the national system of the Science Po (excepting Paris). This may seem a rather peripheral topic, but it becomes pertinent not least due to the deep knowledge of

the author after many years as participant and observer in this system. The result is a very neat example of how boundaries are drawn, in this case boundaries around elite status. Whereas the first-rate *grandes écoles* (elite schools) generally serve as springboards to elite status, the Science Po system becomes a terrain in which the dividing lines between students who succeed or fail in their way to the top are drawn.

The myth of a global business elite is taken up in a set of three papers, where a common thread is that business elites, with some exceptions, are solidly anchored in their country of origin. In a pertinent formulation from the introduction: «If capital flows freely across borders, capitalists do not» (p. 15). Close studies of Swiss banking and Dutch business in general, show that the tendencies to international mobility and alliances that are observed, are to a large extent connected to the EU. A wider perspective is brought up by Michael Hartmann, who takes as his field of study international capitalism as a whole. He demonstrates a strong tendency to local anchorage in world capitalism in general. This is not limited to business enterprises; the same picture appears in high prestige business schools and among the super-rich (pp. 38–39). Despite some variation, for «the vast majority of national CEOs we cannot identify anything that might be called familiarity with foreign cultures, which holds most of all for the two biggest economies, the US and China» (p. 35). An extrapolation near at hand, is that rivalries between the world's largest economies are only in their beginning.

In the literature, economic inequality is mainly studied in terms of unequal incomes. Two papers in the volume move the attention to inequalities in wealth. Of special interest is a longitudinal study by Martin Gustavsson and Andreas Melldahl on changes in the structure of wealth dispersion over almost a century in the Swedish upper class, operationalized as owners located in the Stockholm area. Their study reveals that only half of the total wealth is owned by active investors; the other half is owned by people who are not primarily active in the business field; many have their occupation in liberal professions and similar positions. This demonstrates a crucial division between active and passive ownership of capital. The authors point out that this implies that interests linked to investment management are not limited to the capitalist class in a narrow sense, but are present within a broader professional field. However, the authors assume that this is a strategic move: «the ruling class attempts to reproduce the order and remain in power through a division of labour of its members, spread over various sectors of society» (pp. 193–94). But this is a strained assumption, coming close to the old story of the secret central committee of the bourgeoisie. A more plausible conclusion may be drawn with respect to power; if half of the wealth of the country is owned by passive owners, the uses of these fortunes are also affected by active investors. If so, the active group is much more powerful than indicated by sheer numbers.

A third topic, which appears at several places in the volume, and might have been stressed more clearly by the editors, is gender relations in the upper classes. Viewed as a whole, three very good chapters deliver a broad illustration of gender problematics, with special emphasis on the business field. Magne Flemmen and Maren Toft give a comprehensive exposition of women's mobility into upper class positions in Norway, by analyzing gender effects both in class of origin and of destination. No significant effect is disclosed in the class of origin of parents' gender and their separate social status on daughters' social

mobility. However, in the class of destination there are visible effects. When distinguishing between economic, professional and cultural high-status groups, women have relatively easy access to the cultural upper strata, but not so in the other two. In these cases, some sort of selection biases are obviously at work. Luna Glucksberg makes two well-researched contributions to the chain of gender effects: first, in her description of a professionalized system of recruiting young, attractive women, presumably with some upper-class affiliation, into informal encounters between powerful capitalists. Here, their presence is meant to ease the atmosphere by creating a sort of semi-intimacy. In addition to the interesting description, it is tempting to speculate about the effects on women's social mobility. This system obviously reinforces images of gender hierarchies, both among top business actors and young women, with subsequent effects on women's mobility chances. One level up the chain, at the job level, Felix Stein gives a detailed account from an insurance company, of how a gifted female manager is met with disrespect by younger male co-workers. The ring is closed by Glucksberg's second analysis, of the work performed by women married to top level CEOs, who handle all kinds of everyday challenges to the household, family and children. Without this reproductive work, the capitalist class could not survive in its present form.

Now, a few remarks on conceptual and theoretical questions raised in the book. The notion of 'elites' seems to belong to the family of contested concepts, concerning both its valorization and extension, i.e. the value aspects and what the concept is assumed to cover. The value question – including the tricky relationship between democracy and elite power – is superficially brought up in the introduction (p. 5). However, any version of modern democracy presupposes large organizations with powerful leaders at the top. This raises serious normative questions, which have mostly been a blind zone in the literature as a whole, and which remain implicit in the present book as well.

On the question of conceptual extension, the numerous contributions to the volume do not reflect a common conception, something that appears already in the variety of notions in use. The title presents the concept of *Elite* without further qualification; some of the contributions instead refer to *upper class(es)*; two of the editors even put the concept in quotation marks: «*elite*» (p. 150 ff). This variation does not necessarily imply a weakness in these specific contributions, but taken as a whole it calls for theoretical reflection. The final chapter, by Mike Savage and Georgia Nichols, laudably takes up the task of «theorizing elites in unequal times». As the only contribution in the book with theoretical ambitions, partly synthesizing the book as a whole, the chapter deserves particular attention.

The result is mixed. Several important points are made, however, followed up by a puzzling lack of precision. The way recent developments in elite studies is described is perplexing. «No longer can we lament,» the authors claim, «as Savage and Williams (2008:1) did less than 10 years ago, that elites are «remembered by capitalism, forgotten by social science» (p. 297). Now, who is forgetful? Already before 2008 large scale elite studies had been undertaken in Australia, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Sweden, Norway, the United States, and the Baltic states, Eastern Europe and Russia after the fall of Communism. Continuities in this work during the last decade are recently testified by the *Palgrave Handbook of Political Elites* (Best & Higley, ed., 2018). The term 'political elite' should be taken in its

broadest meaning, generally referring to power holders, not only politicians. Overlooking this host of studies, in the year 2018 the concluding chapter attributes a resurgence of elite studies in the last decade to economists! (p. 296). If theory of elites is going to make substantial progress, at least it presupposes that the above-mentioned and many other more detailed studies are taken into consideration.

At the same time, the concluding chapter gives serious input to theoretical discussions, by making three significant points, each treated in a separate section: (i) Elite studies should not be confounded with studies of income inequality, not even studies of the upper 1 per cent of incomes. (ii) Elites should not be conceptualized along the same lines as classes, but be regarded as constellations. (iii) Elites and their resources should be studied in a long-term historical perspective. All of this is unproblematic; further implications are briefly discussed in the following.

First, Savage and Nichols notably point out that income inequality varies greatly between modern democratic countries. The United States and Great Britain (liberal market economies in the taxonomy of Varieties of Capitalism) show a drastic development in inequality between the top 1 per cent and the rest since the mid-1970s, compared to the western part of Continental Europe (p. 301). The general tendency is that the increasing inequality flattens out; in France and Denmark the data even indicate that the share of the top group is diminished. These are certainly key observations. But on these grounds, the authors state that it «would be risky indeed to link an analytical interest in elites to these economic trends, important as they are» (p. 303). This, however, is not a sufficient reason to exclude income from analyses of elites. If elites are conceived as constellations, as the authors suggest, variation in inequality over time and between countries does not mean that they are irrelevant for elite structure, only that they are a part, and that elite constellations are in change.

Second, this leads over to a few remarks on elites as constellations. Savage and Nichols take as their point of departure that elites are not equivalent to classes, in contrast to earlier work by Savage (p. 304). This makes good sense. Elite heterogeneity is a thread running through this volume as a whole. It is true for specific elite groups, be it economic or cultural elites, and of course more so for more comprehensive elite groups. On the high level of conflict between elite groups Bourdieu is insistently cited several times, they constitute «a fraught and contingent assemblage» (p. 307). At the same time, «elites are not simply a collection of powerful people» (p. 305). How and to what extent, then, do these scattered elites constitute something that resembles a common group? The authors vaguely point to culture as a common integrative element. Using the metaphor of stellar constellations (!), the authors ascribe «an aesthetic aspect» to the concept of constellations «in terms of their stylistic configurations» (p. 305); hence, elites can «be seen as linked together in an aesthetical meaningful web» (p. 308). Taken as a sketch of mechanisms of elite integration, this is hardly impressive. A more down-to-earth alternative may be suggested: The basis of elite integration is the socio-political constitution of society. Basic norms of course vary between societies; and they may be more or less contested, as exemplified by the present political situation in, e.g. Hungary and the United States. Nevertheless, it delivers a sort of common «language» which forms the basis for a comprehensive set of integrative mechanisms. The resulting pattern of elite constellation is an open empirical question.

But without a more precise understanding of the forces that tie elites together, it becomes impossible to achieve a realistic picture of the conflicts between them.

The third point, that elites should be studied in a historical perspective, is more open to interpretation. The historical perspective is underscored by a citation from Bourdieu: «The social world is accumulated history...» (p. 310), which is followed up by a comment from the authors: «The concept of accumulation allows a focus on elites to be linked to wider historical trends...» (p. 310). Towards the end, changes in academic credentials are briefly sketched. However, attention in this section of the chapter is not so much directed to history as to the accumulation of wealth. In itself this is a crucial topic. But in the first section of the chapter, income differentials were dismissed as too tightly connected to theory of class. It is not easy to see the difference between income and wealth when it comes to class formation, and no argument is made to the contrary. Given the strong emphasis on elite conflict, it would be reasonable to expect a call for analyses of developments in elite constellations, variations in points of gravity based on changes concerning numbers, power resources, structural positions, to mention a few topics of historical analysis. Instead, the reader is told that «economic capital, especially in the form of accumulated wealth, is now driving the development of a spectacular constellation, one which stands brighter and brighter in the sky» (p. 312). Elites and their constellations are better viewed on the earth, rather than in the sky.

In several of the empirical studies, inspiration from Bourdieu works well. This is not the case for the attempt at a synthesizing theory of elites. One hypothesis is that Bourdieu's concept of 'field of power' becomes a straightjacket. The concept of field may be very fruitful, not least demonstrated by Fligstein and McAdam (2012). But as conceived by Bourdieu, the field of power becomes a reified meta concept. He even explicitly characterizes it as a transhistorical structure (in Wacquant, 1993, s. 24). The cost is that the crucial specificity of institutions, their variation across societies and over time, gets lost. How can we then understand elites? This is a more wide-ranging debate.

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