

ELITES AND THE STUDY OF ELITES: A SHORT CRITIQUE

Dr. Elone J. Nwabuzor

Abstract

The study of elites in all political societies has constituted one of the perennial problems of political sociology. This paper looks in some critical details at the classical works on elites as well as their more recent critics. It identifies crucial areas of methodological and empirical difficulties in the more recent studies of elites in society. However, important comparative findings are identified, while noting the areas of more useful further research needed in order to attempt in filling of the wide gaps in our knowledge of elite-mass relationships as well as the nature and the scope of elite autonomy and policy impact.

The Elite Concept

The elite concept has been plagued by two closely related problems, namely, the difficulty of definition, and the problem of identification of the elites in the field, in the modern political and sociological thoughts of the West, the concept of elite can be identified with four scholars: Marx (1906), Michel (1911), Pareto (1919), and Mosca (1939). While it is true that the very essence of the writings of each of these authors has too often been made by opponents to sound tautologous (Bottomore 1964:32) or as a naive truism (Runciman 1965:68), - namely that government involves a minority that rules the majority, and those who rule are the elites and vice versa - one cannot deny the major value and thrust of these works. The charge of tautology becomes invalid if we understand these four writers as using these terms "elites" and "subjects" not as simple conceptual categorization aimed at facilitating description, but as almost water-tight human compartments (like males and females) where individuals in a social system will find themselves in either group and never in both. Moreover, unlike the male and female categorisations, our four scholars further argue that members of each of these societal compartments are essentially oppositional both in characteristics and their interests. It would appear, therefore, that on this cardinal tenet are all elite studies implicitly or explicitly based. Is it any wonder then that the study of elites has a resounding ideological ring to it? Consequently, scholars who either ostensibly or sincerely disagree with the basic tenet have often found great difficulty in understanding and evaluating such more recent writers as Mills (1950) or even Djilas (1956) who may be considered the most modern scholars of the nature and operations of elites. Several criticisms have been directed against the ruling elite model of the study of political life. Foremost among the critics are Bottomore (1964) and Dahl (1958, 1966) whose well-known commitments to the ideal democratic ideology have often rendered their criticisms very incisive and thorough. These criticisms have been focused on the two previously mentioned weak spots of the elite model. One of the most untenable postures of elite doctrines, it has been argued, is its assumption that men who govern in mass societies constitute of cohesive group. It must be said here and then that this criticism is very rarely directed against Marx but only on such writers [like Mills who have substituted the ruling class concept with that of the governing elite. The major difference between the two conceptions is that while the ruling class concept clearly articulates the opposition of the classes, the governing elite concept presents the organised ruling minority as in passive relationship with the unorganised majority. With this apparent passive relationship posited, the elite model is often open to the charge that the fact of organisation of a group in a society, however loosely organised, should not constitute a good enough proof of the existence of a power elite.

We however find this criticism invalid because it seems to us that what Mills tried to show was (3) how the American society, in the process of its transformations unto a mass industrial society had drifted from a political-system in which many small organised groups could be effective in *national* decision-making., into a new one in which only large complex organisations could influence decision; (2) how the very large size of these new power centers has made it possible for only the top clique to continuously make the important decisions with little or no reference to the affected public to which this clique sees itself as only marginally responsible; and (3) how the dominant values of the acquisition of wealth and world military power have produced three principal ruling elites: the political, the military and the corporations. One can indeed say that after depicting these trends in American life, Mills really does not lament the appearance of these three groups per se, but rather that those who wield so much power cannot rightly be called leaders with an accountable public or national reference

group. They have formed a clique; responsible largely to its own desires namely, the acquisition and maintenance of wealth and military power. It is apparent then that any real criticism of Mills will be of the greatest significance if it can conclusively refute the above three points.

Dahl (1958, 1966) is perhaps foremost in his criticisms of the elite model, but in our opinion, his criticisms can mainly be seen as methodological, or indeed definitional. Dahl is of the opinion that the theory of elite must fall or stand on empirically provable entities. Since Mills gives him the impression that behind the decision makers lurks some unidentified "covert ruling elite", the critic feels that both methodologically and logically such a theory of democratic decision-making is unacceptable. For such a theory to be acceptable then Dahl would require that it state the "scope of responses" upon which the actors have effect. This is the same argument as stating that for a group of persons to be said to be powerful, we must state the sphere of political action in which their opinions dominate. This, to us, is a very valid requirement, but most readers of Mills' *The Power Elite* will agree that it does not suffer from the lack of examples of decisions that he felt were made without due consultation with the public. Not only does Mills clearly identify the command posts for far-reaching decisions in *national* life, he does cite at least five 'big decisions' which he considers were made by a small number of men, namely military decisions concerning intervention in World War II, the bombing of Hiroshima, intervention in Korea, and non-intervention in Diemdiemphu and Matsu. One, therefore, can take issue with Mills for (1) considering these decisions as 'big decisions', and/or (2) for concluding that these decisions were really made by a clique of men in the power elite.

On the first issue, we think that a good case can reasonably be made that the decision to go or not to go to war in most societies will be considered important decisions requiring very careful and extensive consultations. What is however striking as an omission is that Mills cites no such example of far-reaching decisions in American life outside *military* operations. One can certainly find some big decisions in the political sphere, as well as in the economic sphere in order to further demonstrate the truth that big decisions are made by this power elite. Given the gigantic size and effect of the big corporations, would it not have been possible to examine how such decisions as when, and by what amount these big corporations decide to expand or to cut down production, are made? Even more interesting in this technological age is the decision about what technological innovation should be put to use. For example, why and how was it decided to use the power released by the splitting of the atom to produce the atomic bomb first, rather than concentrate its use in more peaceful and rewarding uses to the American public and industry?

On the second issue, namely a challenge to the truth that the so-called big decisions were really made by a small clique, we think that Mills' work is rightly vulnerable to this challenge. In the first place it seems as if Mills, after conducting his own research on each of these decisions only reports to us his conclusions without duly reporting as well how he arrived at these decisions. More and more, we are forced to take him on good faith or to deny the truth of his findings. For scholars who choose to disagree, the burden of proof rightly devolves to doing an onerous research into one or all of these decisions to see if indeed Mills' conclusions are well founded. Earlier critics of Mills did not do this, and it was only as late as 1956 did Rovers in his article in the *Progressive* (June, 1956) attempt to prove in a detailed analysis that the decisions referred to by Mills were not made by a "power elite". But even if Mills had been 'proved right' on these decision, many critics could still argue that in the realm of foreign and military policy, due to the responsibility for such big decisions has been clearly defined to belong to a small group, or indeed as belonging to the President of the country alone. This points further to our earlier observation that Mills limited his own credibility by restricting his examples to military decisions.

Operational Definitions

When then can we as scholars conclude that there is a power elite operating in a society, and how do we identify the individuals or groups of which it is composed? If we go along with Mills when he writes:

All means of power tend to become ends to an elite that is in command of them. And that is why we may define power elite in terms of power - as those who occupy the command posts.

Then, perhaps, our first task is to identify clearly those means the possession of which will command effective power. This is the same as the question precisely asked by Karl Marx when he

discovered that the wielders of power in his capitalist society were the owners of the means of production. Of these important means of power we can perhaps identify the command posts in the economy, in the military, in the image and opinion making apparatus, and finally (as Djilas¹ work on the socialist state tended to suggest) in the bureaucratic apparatus. But in identifying these command posts, we must concurrently demonstrate that each of these positions affects either the politics of the nation, or the welfare of its citizens. For example, an army chief that considers himself and his establishment out of politics can hardly be considered as a member of the power elite. The same also could be said of the intellectuals who potentially by virtue of their knowledge and ability to persuade can be members of the political elite as did happen in China of the Mandarins.

The next essential step is to determine clearly that members of these groups do indeed exhibit a community of interest, which they continually foster and protect. For to know of the existence of a power elite in the political system, we must have from time to time differences of preferences. The ruling elite must, therefore, be that minority whose preferences always prevail. However, as Dahl points out, if we discover that in the political system the pattern that emerges is that of "indifference versus preference", this should not be a conclusive proof of the existence of a power elite. In addition, a ruling elite must not be confused with a group that has high potential for control, because such a group may have the potential but may never be able to exercise it due to a low level of internal unity and cohesion.

We must add here that an elite can be said to exist even if it is not a unitary one. In other words, if Mills had been able to demonstrate that the three elites existed, but that they combined in different configurations of power from one decision to another; and further that all combinations were strictly within these groups, this would have been enough proof of the existence of a power elite in the American democratic system. In our opinion, therefore, the fact that it is a 'contingent' elite system as opposed to a 'continuous' one which makes all the decisions all the time, does not refute the existence of an elite, no more than the existence of factions in a military regime necessarily refutes the operation of a military power elite. There is thus inherent contradiction in having segments in an elite system. This is perhaps why we find quite attractive Lasswell's operational definition of the elite as including:

- a) All individuals occupying high office during the period of decision-making;
- b) All individuals who have held high office or any other position perceived to have a major effect on the decision-making process in a crisis situation;
- c) And individuals who are perceived as opponents through their counter-ideological affiliations, or membership in an opposing segment. (Lasswell 1950; 3-25).

But not all decision makers in all societies can be rightly described as composing a power elite. The burden of proof is first to demonstrate that these individuals have a monopoly of power. As Dahl succinctly stated in his criticism of elite theory of democracy:

"Political equality may well be among the most Utopian of all human goals. But it is fallacious to assume that the absence of political equality proves the existence of a ruling elite¹ (Dahl 1958).

Since not all political leadership can rightly be called a ruling elite, we are constrained to accept Dahl's definition of the concept as the most satisfactory:

A ruling elite, then, is a controlling group less than a majority in size, that is not a pure artefact of democratic rules. It is a minority of individuals whose preferences regularly prevail in cases of differences in preferences on key policy issues, (and) the composition of the ruling elite must be more or less definitely specified. (Dahl 1958).

Case Study Approaches

Despite the problem of the identification of the concept of elites, numerous case studies have been undertaken to study modern "elites". As would be expected, these studies are of widely varying quality with regard to both content and method. Rustow(1966) in a brilliant article undertook a review of at least six of such studies of elites. Since this paper cannot pretend to have much to add to Rustow's analysis, we shall instead briefly undertake a review of the approaches so far used in these elite studies, and try to map out their consequences for evaluation.

A brief survey would reveal three main approaches, which, in the terminology of Edinger, we describe as:

- a) The positional-ascriptive approach;
- b) The behavioural-descriptive approach; and

c) The cognitive-attitudinal approach (Edinger, 1964).

The first category includes studies that vary from the strictly constitutional approaches to the study of political decision making, to those that merely describe the command posts of power in a social system. Here, the emphasis is on those formal and identifiable offices, and functions, which are generally associated in the public mind with decision-making, or considerable power and influence over the formal decision makers. While the value of this institutional approach is often underrated, it seems to us that this approach if not used in exclusion of insight and of other methods, can be of great value precisely for this reason. That institutions, particularly in mass societies, help to structure reality for the actors, by defining the extent of their expectations and functions, thus permitting them to predict the behaviour of counter-players in the political system.

The second approach centres on the behaviour of individuals who have been identified as the key decision makers in the society. It is, however, concerned not just with what they do but also with the manner in which they do it. Being concerned with case studies of decisions, they are eminently suited for the corroboration or the refutation of social myths. Even more important, studies of this category are closely concerned with the problem of process. And being concerned with the process of decision-making, these studies could be of immense value in discovering and evaluating the methods whereby leaders of ability are able to direct collective behaviour. In this class rightly belong those studies which attempt to correlate social background, composition and recruitment patterns in order to be able to predict the attitudes and the behaviour of the relevant public and elites.

The third method, which we see as a useful step forward, tries to fuse the findings and theories of social interaction derived from the more advanced field of social psychology, with the substantive interests of political scientists. Here the emphasis is on interactions and perceptions of the leaders. Whether these studies worked within the rational-behavioural model of social action, or within the actor-centred personality model, it seems to us that the beginning was a welcome change. In the last analysis, we, as political scientists, have to concern ourselves with the personalities of leading actors, for their orientations to the political environment and their perceptions of specific situations are conditioned by psychological factors which in turn determine their responses to environmental cues.

Queries and Gaps

The most baffling observation about most of the elite studies (except when like C.W. Mills or Djilas the principal aim is to prove the existence of a power elite) is that writers seem to assume that those who govern are necessarily an elite. The notion of elite in these studies becomes completely identical with leadership, and indeed in some studies, it becomes identical with parliamentarians and no one else. A flagrant example of this is found in the work of Singer (1964). Here the author arbitrarily delimits the Ceylonese (now Sri Lankan) 'elite' to just members of parliament from 1924-60, a definition which he sticks to even when this "has meant the exclusion in some instances of the other sources of power like the army or economic power¹" (Singer, 1964: 52).

While the argument about whether or not an identified elite structure is "unitary" or "segmental", "continuous" or "contingent" may be of some interest, it seems to us that our students of elites as well as their critics could better spend their energies asking some more relevant questions. Two areas of research seem to have been neglected: the detailed study of the nature of the interaction between the so-called elite and the masses; and the manner in which elites are changed.

In connection with the first area, research will go a long way if certain of the following questions were asked. What are the special attributes that qualify these individuals for their assumed leadership roles? What are the primary motivations for the 'elite' role? What are the psychological or material links, which the masses see between themselves and their leaders? How do members of the elite ascertain the desire of their followers? And is it more accurate to say that these leaders 'guide and structure' the collective behaviour of their followers, than that they are largely 'reflectors' of the mood of the followers?

In respect of the latter area of research, the following questions could fruitfully be asked. How does one kind of elite (e.g. economic) transform itself into another type (e.g. the political)? How does a substantial change in the nature of an elite take place, and can this take place without a revolution? When an elite change is made, is this generally affected by a change in the method of replacement and recruitment or is it better done by the transfer of control to a group with new traits? These and other interesting questions can certainly be asked by modern case studies of the elites, and the sooner perhaps, the better for this field of endeavour in political studies.

Empirical Elite Findings

Until the 1980's elite research had been bugged down with the question of locating the power structures of many political societies. In the identification of these power structures, the debate was not settled because it seemed that the *method* used by the researcher determined the result obtained. For example, it was evident that sociologists not only preferred the "reputational approach" in the identification of who governed, but also consistently discovered a narrow political elite. Political scientist, on the other hand, tended to prefer the "decisional approach" and also consistently discovered a more dispersed, polyarchic set of leaders with little or no permanence from one decision to another. It is probably this unsettled position about the nature of the power structure that led to plethora of definitions of who constituted the elite in each society.

Research thereafter shifted to the analysis of the social background of the identified elite. These background data became important because it was assumed that those characteristics would explain the political output of the elite, and would in turn help in predicting the direction of public policy. The massive data so produced have enabled two conclusions to be made: (1) that the social and psychological background of leaders are a strong determinant of who gets *recruited*; (2) that elite social background has very *little* influence on elite behaviour and policy attitudes.

In both industrial and developing countries elites are certainly recruited disproportionately from the upper echelon of society. This is more so in the recruitment of the bureaucratic and business elites than "the political elites. But even in the case of democratically chosen political elite, the mass electorate invariably elects those who have superior socio-economic indices than the electors. As Kjekshus put it while describing the socio-economic distance between the masses and the elected members of parliament in the socialist regime of Julius Nyerere's Tanzania: "The voters are electing their superiors rather than their peers" (Kjekshus, 1974:375). Indeed the greater the responsibilities of the elite, the more do they over-represent the upper strata of their society (Quandt, 1970; Mwansasu, 1974; Putman, 1976; Friedgut, 1979; Bunce, 1980; Aberbach et al, 1981).

Another interesting finding is that the process of development has some effect in the way members of the elites are recruited, producing a movement away from ascriptive criteria (such as family, ethnicity, and religion) to a greater emphasis on education, useful skills and technological competence, as the society becomes more industrially and technologically advanced (Dogan, 1961; Putman, 1976).

By definition, elites are more influential on political issues than the masses. However, the vexing issue for research is to ascertain exactly *how much* impact they do make, more than their mass publics. Most elite studies simply assume (1) that elite outputs are not substantially influenced by the pressures from the masses, and (2) that these elite preferences do indeed determine the outcomes of public policy. This brings to the fore the troublesome research lacuna in respect of the linkage between elites and masses. This lacuna has led to two extreme positions regarding the extent of elite output impact. On the one pole is the extremist deterministic position of Nordlinger (1981), which insists that public officials enjoy such a wide range of autonomy that their decisions are hardly affected by mass preferences even in so-called democratic regimes. Indeed in the same vein, Field and Higley (1982) have argued that changes in public policy are strictly due to whether the elite are divided or-not, with little influence of mass preferences in the agitation in the USA against the notorious Vietnam War, in the mass pressures in Indonesia against the Suharto clique, and the recent youth restiveness in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. It is quite possible to dismiss these examples as mere exceptions to the dominant elite determinism, but also research will be needed to resolve this area of contradiction.

A more startling empirical finding is that the social background of elites has *little* or no influence on their issue preferences and political behaviour. The only usefulness, it would seem, of the knowledge of elite social characteristics is for us to be able to assess the degree of social inequality in that society. Surprisingly, research after research especially in industrial societies; continue to confirm the low predictive power of elite social background to national policy. Changes in the social composition of parliaments in Western Germany from 1949 to 1970, Van Beyme (1982) found, did not correlate with governmental policy outputs. This is corroborated by findings about elites of Britain, France, Italy, USA and Netherlands, where the correlation coefficients between elite's social class and their ideological positions ranked only 0.10 for politicians, and 0.03 for bureaucrats (Aberbach et al, 1981:161-164). The conclusion one must draw from these findings about social characteristics of the elite is that early political socialisation attributable to background factors is strongly counteracted by adult recruitment political socialisation for the elite. This is in contrast to the dominant influence of early socialisation on the political views of the mass public.

Conclusion

On the whole, we must conclude that elite studies though prolific in recent years have left substantial areas of controversy largely unresolved. When Mills exploded the egalitarian myth of American society in his seminal work: *The Power Elite*, the challenged American scholars jumped into the fray, but what resulted was a methodological obfuscation of the basic problem. Eventually, the numerous community power structure studies divided into not only micro-studies, but also along 'reputational versus 'decisional methodological camps. The latter camp found no unified elite, while the former camp always found one.

Even the very definition of the elite became difficult. While some researchers made fine distinctions between political, economic and bureaucratic elites, others were content to admit into elite status any member of society that occupied any organisational decision-making role. Of even greater controversy has been to provide the answer to *how much* power over public policy the elite enjoy, and why they wield such power. This has exposed the extremely complex and difficult nature of the empirical work needed in the analysis of elite-mass relationships. The few attempts in this area have tended to focus narrowly on voting and the area of economic policies. This has been to the exclusion of non-electoral cleavages. Between the elite studies, we have still not been furnished with lavish empirical findings to enable us resolve the burning controversies.

This noticeable lack of resolution to these controversies may have a philosophical reason namely, that owing to the objective laws existent in any political society, the history of political and legal thought move along defined lines of continuity and repetition of ideas, a relentless return to the so-called eternal problems. One such eternal political-sociological problem of who or what groups govern, in whose interest, and by what methods, just about continues to hold centre stages in any approach to the study of the state in all organised societies..

References

- Aberbach, J. D. et al. (1981). *Bureaucrats and Politicians in Western Democracies*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Aron, R. (1953). Social Structure and the Ruling Class. In R. Bendix, and S. Lipset, *Class Status and Power*. Glencoe, Free Press.
- Barton, Allen H. (1978). Determinants of Leadership in a Socialist Society. In Allen Barton, Brydan Denitch & Charles Kadushin (Eds.), *Opinion-making Elites in Yugoslavia*. New York: Praeger.
- Bonnilla, Frank (1970). *The Failure of Elites*. Cambridge: M.I.T. Press.
- Bottomore, T. B. (1964). *Elites and Society*. New York: Pelican.
- Bunce, Valerie (1980). The Succession Connection. *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 74, 966-977.
- Dahl, Robert (1958). A Critique of the Ruling Elite Model. *American Political Science Review*, (June).
- Dahl, Robert (1966). Further Reflection on Elite Theory of Democracy. *American Political Science Review*, (June).
- Djilas, M. (1957). *The New Class*. London: Thames & Hudson.
- Dogan, Mattei (1961). Political Ascent in a Class Society: French Deputies 1870-1958. In Dwaine Marvick (Ed.), *Political Decision-Makers*. New York: Free Press.
- Edinger, L. J. (1964). Political Science and Political Biography: Reflections on the Study of Leadership", Parts I and II, *Journal of Politics*, pp. 423-39; pp. 648-76.
- Field, Lowell G. & John Higley (1982). The State of National Elites and the Stability of Political Institutions in 81 nations, 1950-1982. Paper presented at the 1982 Denver meeting of the American Political Science Association.

- Frey, F. W.- (1965). *The Turkish Political Elite*. Cambridge: M.I.T. Press.
- Fredgut, Theodore (1979). *Political Participation in the USSR*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Guttsman, W. L. (1960). The British Political Elite. In D. Marvick, *Political Decision-Makers*. Glencoe, Free Press.
- Hyman, Herbert H. (1959). *Political Socialisation*. Glencoe: Free Press.
- Kjekshus, Helge (1974). Socialism and Participation: Some Concluding Remarks. In the Election Study Committee,, University of Dar-es-Salaam, *Socialism and Participation: Tanzania's 1970 National Elections*. Dar-es-Salaam: Tanzanian Publishing House Ltd.
- Kornberg & Thomas (1965). Political Socialisation of National Legislative Elites in U.S and Canada. *American Political Science Review*, (Nov.).
- Lasswell, H. (1950). *Politics: Who Gets What, When, How*. New York: Peter Smith.
- Lasswell, H. & D. Lerner (Eds.) (1965). *World Revolutionary Elite: Studies in Coercive Ideological Movements*. Cambridge: M.I.T. Press.
- Marx, Karl (1906). *Capital*. Chicago: Charles H. Kerr & Co.
- Meisel, J. M. (1965). (Eds.). *Pareto and Mosca*. Englewood-Cliffs: NJ., Prentice-Hall.
- Mills, C. Wright (1950). *The Power Elite*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Mosca, G. (1939). *The Ruling Class*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Mwansasu, B, U. (1974). The Selection of Candidates in the Election Study Committee, University of Dar-es-Salaam, *Socialism and Participation . Tanzania's 1970 National Elections*. Dar-es-Salaam: Tanzanian Publishing House Ltd.
- Nordlinger, Eric A. (1981). *On the Autonomy of the Democratic State*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Pareto, Vilfredo (1919). *Traite de Sociologie Generate*. Paris.
- Putman, Robert D. (1976). *The Comparative Study of Political Elites*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall.
- Quandt, William B. (1970). *The Comparative Study of Political Elites*. Beverly Hills CA., Sage Professional Papers in Comparative Politics, Vol. I, No. 01-004.
- Runciman, W. G. (1965). *Social Science and Political Theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press."
- Rustow, D. A. (1966). The Study of Elites: Who's who, When and How. *World Politics*, Vol. XVIII, No. 4, (July) pp. 690-717.
- Seligman, L. (1964). Elite Recruitment and Political Development. *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 26.
- Singer, M. R. (1964). *The Emerging Elite: A Study of Political Leadership in Ceylon*. Cambridge: M.I.T. Press.
- Von Beyme, K. (1982). Elite Input and Policy Output: The Case of Germany. In Moshe Czudnowski (Ed.), *Does Who Governs Matter?* Dekalb: Northern Illinois University Press.