

INTRODUCTION. ELITE THEORY: PHILOSOPHICAL CHALLENGES

Giovanni Damele
Andre Santos Campos

Ifilnova, Nova Institute of Philosophy
Nova University of Lisbon

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Great attention has been paid in the last few years to the contraposition between *people* and *elite*, perceived as a fundamental character of the populist discourse. Within this frame of reference, both the people and the elite express a conception of the univocal will and of the homogeneous interest of two collective bodies—a conception that often hinges on fiction. Criticisms levelled against populism typically focus on the way populist-friendly discourse distorts the values and ends of democratic procedures, and especially on how it misconstrues the people through polarisations based on social, political or nationalistic characteristics. Less attention has been paid to the other element of the contraposition—the elite.

Such inattentiveness is surprising due to the existence of a philosophical tradition dating back to the nineteenth century's final decade that sought to identify the internal dynamics of the 'elites' or 'ruling classes'. Confronted with profound changes in the political landscape due to the progressive enlargement of the franchise in Western democracies, authors such as Vilfredo Pareto, Gaetano Mosca, and Robert Michels insisted on the inevitable oligarchic nature of any kind of collective organisation, including modern mass parties. While insisting that politics is always a powerstruggle within the ruling elite, these authors centred their analysis on the unintended political consequences of irrational (or non-completely rational) behaviour, especially by establishing a distinction between the 'rhetoric of legitimation' and 'true' motives, which in turn mirrored a more significant and fundamental social distinction between the ruling class and the ruled (per Mosca) or between the elite and the non-elite (per Pareto).

The elitist tradition strongly affected the analysis of political phenomena during the twentieth century by developing a 'democratic elitism' that interpreted liberal-democratic regimes according to a model of institutionalised competition between ruling elites. Democratic elitism played a prominent role in explaining the 'third wave' of democratisation that took place after the Second World War by providing a conceptual and explanatory framework for the emergence of regimes exceedingly dependent on well organised, centralised mass parties. However, this framework (and its practical effects) has been challenged recently not only by populist political movements but also by theories of deliberative and participatory democracy, which emphasise the direct involvement of citizens in informed processes of collective decision-making, thereby accusing democratic elitism of being either a perversion of democracy or no democracy at all.

Still, the fact remains that current liberal democracies tend to preserve the party-dependent model that prompted the rise of democratic elitism in the first place and that the revival of populist discourse produced the consequence of directing the spotlight of contestation towards extant (and undismissed) political elites. An inquiry into the connection between classical elite theory and some of the foremost

con-temporary challenges to liberal democracy remains wanting in the literature. The purpose of this issue is to carry over the ambition of re-introducing 'elite theory' onto the centre stage of philosophical and political-theoretical debates, especially against the backdrop of democratic theory and experiences.

1. Classical Elitism

It may seem surprising at first to evoke authors such as the Italian Vilfredo Pareto and Gaetano Mosca and the German Robert Michels, the founding fathers of classical elitism, regarding debates that are frequently interpreted as concerning the need for more and better democracy. Mosca was a conservative whose theories aimed at falsifying the belief in universal suffrage as a 'government of the majority'; Michels was a deluded socialist who became a vocal supporter of the fascist regime in the 1930s as a result of a lifelong reaction against the 'false democracy' of the social-democratic movement; and Pareto's reputation as liberal-conservative was reinforced by the infamous political act of publicly supporting Mussolini's march on Rome. Altogether, they seem three perfect examples of a 'rhetoric of reaction' (Hirschman 1991).

However, their influence looms large. Not only did they shape the contemporary approach to the study of the 'ruling classes decisively', but they also provided the groundwork for elitist theories of democracy. The impact of their work on the current theoretical diagnoses of democracy suggests that their analyses are worthy of more attention than usually acknowledged.

Strongly influenced by political realism and, in a broad sense, positivism, both Mosca and Pareto sought to establish political science and sociology as objective sciences that made use of empirical methods. The search for 'constants' and 'general laws' of political action seemed a natural consequence of such methods. What Mosca called 'the struggle for pre-eminence' (Mosca 1939, p. 29) is nothing more than the striving for social and political power seen as a 'constant' and a 'fundamental law' of every political phenomenon. In order to bring this 'constant' into light, it is crucial to identify the means through which the ruling class sought to justify (and, at the same time, to conceal) its predominance. According to both Mosca and Pareto, there is a clear distinction between the 'façade legitimation', represented by political programs, ideologies, public declarations, and even laws and constitutions, and the real motives for political action. Legitimation may not necessarily be strategical or even conscious since human beings have a spontaneous inclination to cover their action's irrational (and frequently egotistic) motives with the 'varnish' of *ex post* and apparently rational justification.

However, this distinction between the 'rhetoric of legitimation' and 'true motives' needs to be related to a more significant and fundamental social division: the one between the ruling class and the ruled (in Mosca's terminology) or between the elite and the non-elite (in Pareto's terminology). In the words of Pareto, political science needs to be based on 'the study of the elite, its composition, its structure and the mode of its relation to the non-elite' (apud Burnham 1943, p. 165).

In a nutshell, classical elite theory involves the following items (Burnham 1943: 165 ff.):

1. The primary object of every elite or ruling class is to preserve power and privilege.
2. The rule of the elite is based upon (not-necessarily explicit) force and fraud. The social structure is sustained by a political formula that typically correlates with a generally accepted religion, ideology or myth.
3. Every elite has two opposing tendencies: (a) an aristocratic tendency, by which the elite seeks to

preserve the ruling position of its members and to prevent others from entering its ranks; (b) a democratic tendency by which (i) new elements force their way into the elite from below or (ii) the ruling class opens ranks and absorbs new elements from below.

4. In the long run, the democratic tendency always prevails. Consequently, no social structure is permanent, and no stable utopia is possible.
5. When the aristocratic tendency prevails, rapid shifts occur in the composition and structure of elites (e.g., social revolutions).

The gist of this frame of reference is that the idea of democracy conveyed by contemporary suffragist and socialist movements, as synonymous with 'self-government' or 'government by the people', is false for both Mosca and Pareto. This definition cannot be taken seriously because of its practical impossibility and of the inner characteristics of social organisations: no social groups are governed by a majority; all social groups, including societies qualified as democratic, are ruled by a minority. Both Mosca and Pareto tried to translate the 'simple, almost obvious, observation that all organised societies consist of a vast majority without any political power and a small minority of powerholders'—this was the object of a 'true science of politics', that is, to 'understand how the "political class" recruits itself, maintains itself in power, and legitimates itself through ideologies' (Hirschman 1991, p. 52).

From the classical elitist viewpoint, political representation is only indirectly connected to elections by voters. Primarily, it relates to the ability of an organised minority to force 'its will upon the disorganised majority'—a characteristic that can be found in any political regime. Robert Michels would later delineate this principle in the so-called 'iron law of oligarchy': political parties, trade unions, and other mass organisations are invariably ruled by largely self-serving and self-perpetuating oligarchies, which defy attempts at democratic control or participation (Michels 1962; Hirschman 1991, p. 57). In the end, the ruling minority always seeks to justify and legitimise its rule through 'ideological' formulae, without which the social structure would disintegrate. This is precisely what the theory of democracy as self-government boils down to: a myth.

2. Democratic Elitism

With their interpretation of the universal suffrage as an 'exercise in hypocrisy', the elitists have been considered by Albert Hirschman a perfect example of the 'rhetoric of futility', one of the three main arguments typical of what he called the 'rhetoric of reaction' (the other two being the perversity and the jeopardy theses) (Hirschman 1991). According to Hirschman, the assertion that any society, regardless of its political structure, is always divided between the elite and the non-elite was 'tailor-made [by classical elitists] to prove the futility of any move toward true "political citizen-ship" via the franchise' (Hirschman 1991, p. 51). The main goal of the elitists was to demonstrate that universal suffrage would have changed very little, if anything. In order to strengthen this argument, it was crucial to translate it into a 'scientific law' that would have shown the impossibility of genuine political change. Pareto and Michels' theories were instrumental to that end. 'Pareto's Law' and Michel's 'iron law of oligarchy' conspire (indirectly and directly) against any attempt at establishing a 'government of the majority'. The contemptuous attitude towards purported change and progress induces Hirschman to include the futility thesis in the conservative camp. From the rhetorical point of view, the description of elitism as reactionary is clear in the light of the heavy use that the elitists made of metaphors such as the mask, the veil, and the disguise.

However, a peculiar version of democratic elitism arose in the late 1930s and 1940s at the crossroad between classical elitism and the debates about the possible conciliation of liberalism and democracy. In his book *The Machiavellians: Defenders of Freedom*, published in 1943, James Burnham made the then-astonishing claim that classical elitists were not necessarily anti-democratic. Burnham's first argumentative step was to reformulate democracy in accordance with Mosca's definitions: 'a political system in which there exists "liberty"'. By liberty, Mosca has in mind 'juridical defence', that is, 'a measure of security for the individual which protects him from the arbitrary and irresponsible of personally held power'. The most fundamental feature of democracy is, according to Burnham's reading of Mosca, the right of opposition, defined as 'the right of opponents of the currently governing élite to express publicly their oppositions views and to organise to implement those views' (apud Burnham 1943, p. 180).

Thus, classical elitists (qualified by Burnham as modern Machiavellians) are said to be defenders of liberty because they 'do not waste time arguing the merits or demerits of the myth of democracy defined as self-government', but are 'very profoundly concerned with the reality of democracy defined as liberty' (Burnham 1943, p. 181). Liberty, judicial defence, and the right of opposition are, thus, the keystones of Burnham's reinterpretation of democracy. This does not falsify the central premise of the elitist argument, namely that rulers' primary objective is to act at the service of their own interest and to maintain power and privilege. The 'will-to-power thesis' remains key in political processes. From this premise follows that 'only power restrains power' and that such a 'restriction of power' can only become visible in the existence and activity of oppositions (Burnham 1943, p. 182). This observation, which combines a realistic viewpoint with the liberal commitment to the limitation of power, sets a new research path for elite theory.

Democratic elitism accepts the main premise of elite theory: 'no societies are governed by the people, by a majority; all societies, including societies called democratic, are ruled by a minority' (Burnham 1943, p. 184). It also recognises that the democratic principle is nothing but a formula that allows the ruling class to legitimise its power. However, certain political practices are associated with the democratic formula. Universal suffrage is a typical example. From this viewpoint, the 'suffrage machinery' tends to favour 'those individuals who are more apt to use the machinery' (Burnham 1943, p. 185). Even if democracy is just one possible political model which legitimises the ruling class and its power, as classical elitists maintained, the adoption of one or another model is not without consequences for the members of non-elites. As Burnham pointed out, there are 'real and significant differences in social structures from the point of view of the masses'; 'these differences ... cannot be properly evaluated in terms of formal meanings, verbalism and ideologies' (Burnham 1943, p. 166).

This frame of reference allowed Gaetano Salvemini to adopt a competitive theory of democracy (very close to the one developed later by Joseph Schumpeter in the seminal work *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, which first appeared in 1942) in his article 'Democracy and Dictatorship', which came out in 1934 when he was professor of 'Italian Civilisation' at Harvard University. According to Salvemini, the main difference between autocracies and democracies is the fact that the latter comprise many elites in competition with each other. Like Schumpeter, Salvemini insisted on the dynamic dimension of elite theory; at a first level, a vertical dynamic between elites and non-elites allows the former to be tendentially open to external members; at a second level, however, a horizontal dynamic creates the conditions for competition between different elites. The vertical and the horizontal dynamics together generate a political system in which mass bureaucratic parties play a pivotal role. They make the selection of the elite possible, and they organise the majority while making the ruling minorities accountable. Salvemini's theory has an apparent democratic penchant for accountability, in sharp contrast with Schumpeter's later and famous view that the role of the people

boils down to the election of a government and nothing more. Even though both Salvemini and Schumpeter underline the importance of the bureaucratic organisation of mass parties, Salvemini insists that 'competitive democracy' has to do mainly with the possibility of controlling the ruling class through the electoral machinery. In this setting, Salvemini adds a novel dimension to the 'futility thesis'. According to Hirschman, the classical use of the futility argument is based on the idea that any progressive action aimed at changing structural characteristics is doomed to failure; the typical progressive-friendly counterargument is based on the opposing statement that the same action 'is backed up by powerful historical forces that are already "on the march"' and that opposing these forces would be 'utterly futile' (Hirschman 1991, p. 167). Both the reactionary and the progressive theses are framed as (descriptive) 'fact judgement', albeit subsuming a (non-descriptive) value judgement implicitly. Salvemini overcomes this setting by making the implicit value judgement explicit. With this move, he can develop the explanatory capacities of elite theory and explicitly defend the democratic principle as a political formula with positive consequences from the viewpoint of the masses.

3. Elitism in the Age of Populism: An Outline of the Issue

As Cas Mudde pointed out, one of the main features of populism is the anti-elitist / anti-establishment rhetoric. Populist leaders present themselves as strong opponents of the elites. Passing from practice to theory, democratic elitism can help to unveil this rhetoric.

It is possible to interpret elite theory as a periodical reaction to social revolution. The strong trend in elite theory during the second half of the nineteenth century can be seen as a reaction against socialism. Before that, the elitist rhetoric present in the *réactionnaire* literature of the late eighteenth century and the early nineteenth can be seen as inspired by a strong reaction against liberal revolutions. During the 1940s, democratic elitism was used as a theoretical weapon against neo-Bonapartism and fascist dictatorships. Could it be used now to counter, from a liberal-democratic point of view, the populist drift? Perhaps there is room here for applying an analysis similar to the one developed by Hirschman in his *Rhetoric of Reaction*. Conversely, elite theory can function as a test to different kinds of hypotheses, namely:

- (1) that the appeal to a will of the people or even to direct democracy or deliberative democracy is nothing but a political formula in Mosca's sense of the term;
- (2) that modern populism is not an exception to Michel's 'iron law of oligarchy';
- (3) that the new populist drift towards Bonapartism (and against a model of competitive democracy such as the one introduced by Salvemini) does not represent an alternative to the inevitability of government by elites but somewhat weakens the control of the majority over the elite through disintermediation and de-politicisation.

Taking elite theory seriously implies the recognition that it may yet preserve its original analytical force and that it might be helpful to demystify certain kinds of political formulae while bringing to light the crucial dynamic of the competition between different political actors typically in charge of the operation of government. The essays contained in this dossier develop this working hypothesis by ambitioning to explore the full potential of elite theory, both by applying the historically-situated conceptual framework to contemporary phenomena and by conducting further inquiries into the actual contents of elite theory developed by some of its prominent authors.

The first four articles delve into the relevance of certain aspects of elite theory for analysing problems faced by contemporary liberal democracies. Albert Weale questions the association of populism with the will of the people in light of an elitist framework. In his view, this association is senseless and dangerous to democracy. Citizen engagement should be viewed in accordance with a model of civil society organisations undertaking practical public deliberation—elitist theory may have something to add to this view, despite its possible inconsistencies.

Antonio Campati offers next a reflection on what he calls a weakening of the liberal-democratic link between the minority principle and the democratic principle in relation to the theory of elites. His main contention is that ‘the logic of distance’ inherent in liberal democracies should be strengthened as a mechanism for improving democracy via elites, in contrast with the views that promote democracy only by eliminating the ontological gap between those who rule and those who are ruled.

Roberta Astolfi builds on the same connection developed by Campati, but her itinerary leads her to diametrically opposed conclusions. Drawing mainly on a conceptual framework developed by Gramsci, she introduces the idea of a hegemonic majority that, by accounting for greater individual and collective engagement and responsibility, breaks the exclusivity of elitism. Her intention is to reinforce the democratic decision-making process without developing a concept of authority based on an exclusive elite. Her argumentative path leads her to an interpretation of the role that intellectuals might undertake of connecting civil society and the government, of fortifying or even restoring the trust between the individuals and their representatives, thereby strengthening the levels of legitimacy in contemporary democracies.

In the fourth essay, Alfred Archer and Amanda Cawston tackle an interesting phenomenon in the dynamics of certain representative democracies that resonates with elite theory: the involvement of celebrities in politics. This phenomenon acquired a new dimension with the election of Donald Trump, who was considered first and foremost a celebrity rather than a politician. Their starting point is the view that celebrities possess a significant degree of epistemic power (the power to influence what people believe) that is unconnected to appropriate expertise, a phenomenon that presents a problem for deliberative and epistemic theories of democratic legitimacy. They then argue that recognition of celebrity epistemic power can be a valuable resource for supporting the legitimacy and practice of democratic elitism, though these benefits carry certain risks to which elite theories are particularly vulnerable.

The following three articles redirect their attention to the fundamental elements of elite theory, following the assumption that the history of classical and democratic elitism requires a constant re-reading in order to have some utility for analyses about the present. Robert P. Jackson and Marco Di Giulio, who write the fifth and the sixth articles, respectively, focus on the work of Mosca and Pareto. Building on recent re-assessments of Pareto and Mosca, Jackson discusses whether their socio-political orientations contribute to the ‘disfiguration’ of democracy (in Nadia Urbinati’s terminology) or provide a resource for the renewal of democratic institutions. Highlighting the significance of internal tensions within each thinker’s work, between the causal primacy of psychic states and the ‘mutual dependence’ of social factors (Pareto), and between the elite principle and ‘balanced pluralism’ (Mosca), Jackson develops the hypothesis that the ‘sceptical liberal’ Pareto or the ‘democratic elitist’ Mosca elude Urbinati’s unpolitical, populist, and plebiscitary ‘disfigurations’ of democracy. Di Giulio, in turn, carries out the view that Pareto and Mosca, despite their deference to a positivist epistemology, significantly anticipated a sort of epistemological realism unsympathetic to linear notions of causality embedded in contemporary social sciences. With their emphasis on history, contexts and agents, they ushered into the debate of their time some arguments that realist epistemology fully developed, emphasising the role of context-specific and not directly observable explanatory features.

In the seventh essay, Pedro T. Magalhães calls the readers' attention to a towering political and sociological theory figure that is seldom associated with elite theory, but which should be so: Max Weber. For Magalhães, Max Weber's elite theory has recently been rediscovered by political scientists and theorists who have sought to explore both the heuristic and the normative potential of plebiscitary leader democracy. Magalhães, however, argues that attention should be shifted from Weber's context-specific defence of plebiscitary leadership in post-WWI Germany to his broader conception of charisma as an attempt to grasp the meaning of significant social and political change. The upshot is that contemporary democratic theory can draw on Weber to sink into the ambiguities of transformative democratic politics.

The final essay combines the contemporary-focused approach of the first four essays and the historically-charged approach of the following three essays by focusing on a specific national experience: elite recruitment in Italy from 1919 to 1994. Adinolfi aims to answer one major question: What are the effects of a critical juncture on the formation process of what he calls 'the political field'? His starting point is that transition processes during critical junctures are negotiated inside the ministerial elite. Several patterns observable in Italian recruitment processes are preserved from one regime to another, such as party membership, career length, and cohort effect among the core group of ministers. Adinolfi concludes that 'the political field' is formed through waves of new forces (e.g., via elections) that are tightened by impermeable bounds. This research, however, leaves room for the observance of a contrary trend in the last few years that differs from such patterns and according to which the ministerial elite is losing its capacity to reproduce itself and allowing outsiders to occupy the public sphere.

In summary, the papers presented in this issue allow new analyses of the contemporary political landscape through the lens of the study of the elites. This approach can ultimately shed light on the other element of the opposition between the people and the elite, especially by offering the interpretative tools by which to understand how this opposition might sometimes conceal a competition between the ruling minorities or the epiphenomenon of the 'circulation of the elites' (in Pareto's words). We are confident that this issue's contributions will help revive interest in elite theory and highlight its potentially fruitful explanatory strength vis-à-vis key problems and challenges faced by contemporary democracies.¹

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