

ELITE”. APPROACHES TO A CONCEPT

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— Abstract—

The concept of "elite" frequently appears in public discussion and in specialized literature in social sciences. However, unlike what happens in this last field, in the media and through the daily informal exchanges, "elite" seems to have multiple meanings that distorts its original meaning. Therefore, it is precisely to step back in the timeline, to its origin. The concept means the way in which it has been problematized and what occurs with it in the contemporary debate.

Keywords

Elite; concept; language; social sciences.

The individual, to communicate, has developed a language composed of words and each one of them corresponds to a varied number of meanings (Sartori, 2015). This causes that, sometimes, those who participate in a conversation are not fully understood because what is said may not represent what is thought; therefore, it is essential to establish a convention on what words mean in certain contexts. Thus, natural sciences, humanities and social sciences –particular contexts where the phenomena that are observed, described, analyzed and explained are very specific– have their own, special language, as opposed to the mother tongue, standard or common use, which is the one that is available to everyone regardless of their training, age or social status (Sartori, 2015).

The individual requires concepts to understand reality and make possible the temporal continuity of their experience; the same goes for the sciences: they need a set of concepts to understand, differentiate, and compare phenomena (Ramírez Plascencia, 2018).

This paper offers an analysis of a concept used in political science, particularly when it comes to the structuring and social stratification, "elite", which is part of the specialized language; that is to say, that this concept has been adopted by the social sciences, and its scholars and practitioners have generated a convention around its meaning to avoid polysemy and reduce errors when identifying and explaining any phenomenon or social group that approaches it. These conventions on what the concepts mean are close to the paradigms: as long as their explanatory capacity is accepted, it won't be necessary to change it, but when they no longer have the capacity to provide analysis tools, it will be necessary to rethink it. The same goes for the concepts: as long as its content explains an object or phenomenon, there will be no need to review it, but when the phenomenon does not correspond to what the concept mentions, then it will be time to reinterpret or add a new one.

According to Kuhn (1986: 13), the paradigms are "scientific achievements universally recognized that, for a time, provide models of problems and solutions to a scientific community." This definition can be transferred to the formation and validity of the concepts. When these are constructed, an observable reality that is interpreted and expresses, of course, the moment in the development of that phenomenon is addressed; therefore, as long as it fits the concept, it will not lose its validity.

II. HISTORICAL NEWS OF THE CONCEPT

"Elite" comes from the French word *élite*, which means "set of the best in society." In turn, *élite* derives from *élire*, which means choosing or choice (Ferrando Badia, 1976). Towards the seventeenth century it acquired a

sense of commercial nature as it served to name the possessors of a special quality. In the eighteenth century, the word began to be used to designate small social groups. The concept "elite", as we now know it, emerged in the nineteenth century as an attempt, from the Social Sciences and language, to explain the new power relations that were appearing in societies.

It was in Italy where the conceptual development had its seat. Gaetano Mosca –first theoretician of the elite and founder of the elitist school– and Vilfredo Pareto –responsible for the worldwide dissemination of the concept and the theory of the "circulation of the elites"–, pioneers in the subject¹, stressed that in social groups, throughout history, a minority ruling class that monopolized, in all its forms, state power relations until such class was displaced by another:

They decline inexorably when they can no longer exercise the qualities through which they came to power or when they can no longer provide the social service they provided, or when their qualities and the services they provided lose importance in the social environment where they live (Mosca, 2006: 123).

Mosca conceived the history of mankind as the "history of the ruling classes" (Meisel, 1975), his theory was called "the organized minority", whom integrate this minority are all the same: they practice the same trades, they have very similar social and economic origins, and share values and ways of life. These elements generate in the organized minority a sense of belonging, cohesion and solidarity that allows them to deploy strategies to obtain, maintain and increase their power (domination), over a disorganized majority. Consequently, there are, at all times and places, some, the few, who govern and, others, the many, who are governed (Aron, 1996). It was imperative that the ruling class would not be lagged behind. Mosca is the first author to propose a differentiation between elites and masses, holding "as a universal and necessary fact the existence of two 'political classes': a ruling class — always a minority — and a governed class that makes up the majority" (Dupont and Suárez-Íñiguez, 1988: 63).

In all societies, starting with the moderately developed, which have barely reached the preamble of civilization, to the most educated and strong, there are two kinds of people: the rulers and the ruled. The first, which is always the least numerous, performs all political functions, monopolizes power and

1 Both authors were called "Machiavellian" by Burnham (1949).

enjoys the advantages that are attached to it. Meanwhile, the second most numerous, is directed and regulated by the first in a more or less legal way, or in a more or less arbitrary and violent way, and it provides, at least apparently, the material and indispensable means of subsistence for the vitality of the political organism (Mosca, 2006: 106).

The same Italian author recognizes the works of Saint-Simon, Taine, Marx and Engels as background in the study of this subject, although there are considerable previous efforts in which some characteristics of the governing groups were mentioned: Plato, Aristotle and, of course, Machiavelli (Dahl, 2010), who in his *Speeches* expressed that the size or form of organization of the city did not matter, at the command levels there is always a small number of individuals; nevertheless, it was he who presented an argument with a scientific intent: based on the observation of the facts and raising it to the rank of constant law. Both authors, Mosca and Pareto, are influenced by positivism, which is no less because in the conceptual elaboration the positive inductive method is used with which they will highlight the unequal character of society, regardless of the historical moment of their constitution and the type of institutional organization they own (Cisneros, 1996).

In sum, the elite is composed of a small group of people, possessing influence, selected based on their capacity and training, who are located at the top of the power structure and access the positions, either through a single or collegiate designation or even through open commission exercises.

The central expression to understand the power that resides in this group is "political formula", composed of the education of the elite and its system of beliefs and values or, in Aaron's terms, the ideology of the political class. Such "political formula" amounts to legitimacy²: "The principles of this 'formula' must be rooted in mass consciousness and must not depart too far from these parameters to avoid conflicts, which can threaten the survival of society itself" (Blancha, 2005). Finally, the "political formula" also includes the administrative apparatus that defines the mode and scope of the power links (Blancha, 2015; Baras, 2001).

2 "By legitimacy I understand the fact that a political order is worthy of recognition. The claim of legitimacy refers to the guarantee at the level of social integration of a social identity determined by regulatory means. Legitimations serve to make this claim effective, that is: to show how and why existing institutions (or recommended ones) are adequate to use political power in such a way that the constituted values of social identity come to fruition." Habermas (1981: 266). Cfr. Bendix (2000).

III. CONCEPTUAL PROBLEM

Three approaches to elite formation can be recognized: merit-based theories; those that focus their attention on power, and elite approaches as a social class. The Italian school, represented by the aforementioned Mosca and Pareto, attended the merit of the elite. Pareto considered that its members were people with exceptional or eminent qualities: "The essence of the elite is superiority" (Alonso, 1997) and, for him, the circulation of individuals belonging to circles not influencing the position of the elites was imperative. In the elite there is a high degree of inexorable internal cohesion.

Charles Wright Mills (1987), on the other hand, analyzed the American structure of power and concluded that "although personal merit could contribute to a person becoming a member of the elite, the final element of this was his relationship with power" (Solimano, 2015: 43), invigorating the elitist theory of power against pluralist theory.

Mills, in his well-known book *The Power Elite* (1987), postulates that the population of the United States of America has been dominated by a small number of individuals that make up the "power elite": the owners and managers of large corporations, politicians and senior officials, and military commanders are the three sectors that have dominated the command structure in that country. However, there is homogeneity among the elite that is not only based on the structural coincidences of command and interests, but also on the action they take to coordinate their actions, as well as the network of social relations that they maintain with each other; in short, identical social origins, family and personal relationships and exchange of individuals from positions from one sector to another (Mills, 1987; Ruiz-Sánchez, 2009). Mills notes that there is an expansion and centralization of the means of power in the elite.

Finally, in the approaches of elites as a social class, it is necessary to refer to the contribution of Karl Marx and Max Weber. The first, through a comprehensive interpretation of society, defined the social classes in terms of ownership of the means of production, highlighting two large groups: the bourgeoisie, composed of the media, who controlled the wealth, shaped to the institutions and exercised political power; and the proletarians, owners only of their workforce (Solimano, 2015). It was, then, the notion of the ruling class, considering economic exchanges as the engine of history. However, it should be mentioned that social class and elite are different concepts: social class refers to structures integrated by economic processes, while elite is a minority with power and authority.

Max Weber highlights the concentration of the means of administration and violence available to the ruling minority to remain in power (Mejía Quintana and Castro, 2008). This author considers social stratification as a

selection product; that is, each individual is likely to have power based on their actions and the disposition of classes, classes and parties (Duek and Inda, 2006). Weber expresses in a letter to Robert Michels³ dated 1908 that the elite is the most appropriate word "to speak on behalf of the entire nation" and not the "will of the people", which is a fiction (Zabludovsky, 1995: 28).

Representative democracy does not reject the presence of an organized minority vis-à-vis a passive majority, but in the type of existing elite. The fundamental point is found in "this relationship of inequality and hierarchical subordination [...] based on the contrast between the 'elites that are imposed' and the 'elites that are self-constituted and proposed' (Yturbe, 2007: 114). Let us insist: "The democratic ideology [...] does not suffer great damage, making itself seen in the arm of the theory of elites" (Yturbe, 2007: 115).

IV. CONTEMPORARY DEBATE AS A CONCLUSION

Globalization has led to a significant concentration of individuals with high levels of education and special talents, originating a new elite, the so-called "talent elite", in the 36 countries considered rich by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (Mejía Quintana and Castro, 2008). Studies on inequality, such as those of Thomas Piketty (2015a, 2015b, 2015c) account for this type of elites.

The economic orientation of the "elite" concept allows us to notice the expressions of discontent in *Occupy Wall Street and We the 99 Percent* in the United States; the *Indignados*, in Spain, the student movement in Chile and the protest movements in Brazil against the celebration of the 2013 FIFA Confederations Cup, the 2014 Soccer World Cup and the 2016 Rio de Janeiro Olympic Games, and Turkey against the First Minister Recep Erdogan, among others. The participants in these mobilizations argued that the results of globalization have disproportionately benefited a small elite, while most see that their prospects for real economic progress decrease (Solimano, 2015).

3 Robert Michels is an author who also studied the forms of social organization, especially within political parties. From the observation made within these types of organizations, the well-known "Iron Law of oligarchy" is the result: "[...] most human beings are predestined, due to the tragic need to submit to the domain of a small minority, to a condition of permanent guardianship, and must agree to build the pedestal of an oligarchy. [...] Reduced to its most concise expression, the fundamental sociological law of political parties [...] can be formulated in the following terms: the organization is what gives rise to the dominion of the elect over the electors, of the presidents over the constituents, of the delegates over the subordinates. Who says organization says oligarchy." (Michels, 2008).

The above is verified with the report *An Economy for the 1%*, prepared by Oxfam, which indicates that in 2015, 62 subjects accumulated the same wealth as 3,600 million people, and that since the beginning of the 19th century, the world's half poorest population has only received one percent of the total increase in world wealth, while half of that "new wealth" has been received by the richest one percent (Oxfam, 2017, 2016, 2014).

The presence of the five monopolies that characterize the "polarizing globalization of contemporary imperialism," according to Samir Amin (2004) can be noted: the monopoly of new technologies; control of financial flows worldwide; control of access to the planet's natural resources; media control, and the monopoly of weapons of mass destruction. Beyond that, and countries are immersed in the globalization process, characterized among other things, by the high level of interconnection and intercommunication through the use of Information and Communication Technologies, these are presented as an alternative to raise the readers indexes. However, Castells asserts that:

This new elite has generated a new debate around democracy. While it is true that democracy, as mentioned earlier, does not face, in principle, the theory of elites, we must bear in mind Joseph Schumpeter's reflection on the democratic elitism he performs in his work *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* (2015), which consists in the designation of a minority of individuals by citizens who must take political decisions on their behalf (Fernández Santillán, 2007). Those who embrace elitist theory express that by examining the history of societies it is possible to find a constant: a minority has the ability to dominate the rest of the subjects. However, the influence of the super-rich in the designation process alters the essence of democracy: they, the few, can incur expenses for advertising, research and advice, mobilization; in short, campaign financing, to favor their relatives to the detriment of the original decision of the people.

Individuals, to use the concept to which Schumpeter (2015) resorts, vote for a representative; however, the guarantee that this actually represents the general interests is void (Manin, 1997). Bottomore points out that the existence of elites is incompatible with the postulates of an egalitarian and plebiscitary democracy (Bottomore, 1965; Laurin-Frenette, 1989).⁴ The possibility, often materialized, appears that democracy is filtered by money (Jiménez and Solimano, 2012).

4 According to Bottomore, "the political elite can be considered as a leading class in the Marxist sense, in cases where their power is based on economic bases, and in which, therefore, it belongs to a larger group, defined by private ownership of the means of production to whose protection and perpetuation power serves." Laurin-Frenette (1989: 11).

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