

# The Elite Paradigm

*by Jan Pakulski*

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**Influenced by Weber, Marx and Bourdieu, Milner undertakes, in his latest book, to revamp a general model of elites and nonelites. Adopting a historical approach, he defines the contours of power relations in three very distinct civilisations in an attempt to provide an updated analytical framework.**

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**Reviewed:** Murray Milner, Jr, *Elites: A General Model*, Cambridge, Wiley, 2015, 216 p.

The time seems to be ripe for refocusing our attention on power elites and their actions, and for revamping the elite paradigm – a social science approach to study of social and political change that places at the centre of attention ‘ruling minorities’ seen as the key social-political actors. The momentous events of the last century clearly point in this direction. China’s spectacular development was triggered by a small group of Deng Xiaoping reformers, with minimal – and tightly controlled – mass or class involvement. Similarly, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the post-Cold War re-arrangement of power relations was the accomplishment of small circle of Gorbachev’s perestroika reformists (though not necessarily in line with their intentions). The new phase of the EU integration and expansion has been widely seen as ‘an elite project’, pursued with minimal, and often reluctant, involvement of mass citizenry. Similarly, the ‘third wave’ of democratisation in Europe and East Asia (1974-2002) was engineered by small groups of powerful reformers through ‘elite pacts’ and ‘round table’ elite agreements, in most cases with minimal (or post-factum) mass mobilisations. Most conspicuously, the sudden and deep re-orientations of politics and policies in the most advanced societies – from the ‘Reagan revolution’ to the most recent ‘Trump’s turn’ – are widely interpreted as autonomous, if not arbitrary, ‘elite actions’.

## A 'New Model' of Elites ?

In such historical circumstances, a book *Elites, A General Model* by Murray Milner Jr, aiming at revamping a 'general model of elites', is not only timely and relevant, but also exciting. While it coincides with the waning utility and popularity of Marxist class analysis, Milner's scheme promises to combine elite model with the Marxist, mostly mass/class-focused, analytic scheme (including Bourdieu's insights). The purpose of the book is 'to improve the analytical tools for addressing such problems by proposing a new model of elites and nonelites... that is general enough to usefully analyse a variety of societies and historical periods...' This is an ambitious task already undertaken before Milner by three generations of social theorists, starting with Max Weber himself, and including James Burnham, William Domhoff, Eva Etzioni-Halevi and John Higley, to mention a few. Milner takes a somewhat distinctive task declaring that he 'subsumes' the Marxist class analysis under the more general umbrella of elite analysis and 'elite paradigm' – the later involving the general model of social divisions and dynamics focusing on elites and non-elites. Moreover, unlike the contemporary neo-Marxist scholars who occasionally add the concept of 'political elites' to the class scheme (e.g. William Robertson, Saskia Sassen, Leslie Sklair), Milner treats the elite paradigm as the key overall framework and promises to answer a central question of political sociology: 'what are the most common varieties of elites and non-elites and the related patterns of cooperation and conflict in different historical periods?'

The answer suggested by Milner is interesting, but seldom departing from the well-trodden Weberian path. The main types of elites – political, economic and status-based – are distinguished by the principal power resources: state authority, means of production, and approval ('honour', I take it) as reflected by Bourdieuesque 'cultural capital'. The key categories of nonelites, include not only property-based and market classes and 'dangerous', 'disreputable' and 'unrespectable' status groups, but also 'priests and prophets', as well as 'celebrities' (including what American scholars label 'key opinion makers'). Both elites and nonelites, described in Chapters 1-2 are diverse and internally differentiated – Milner stresses and elaborates. The relations between the two – elites and nonelites – range from cooperation to antagonism and open conflict – again, a point that is stressed by the author. The only significant departure from the Weberian (and Michael Mann's) analytic path is a dismissal by Milner of 'military elites' as a distinctive type – a well taken point, considering the political means and power resources such elites use.

What follows in Chapters 3-7 is quite an innovative 'application' of the proposed general analytic model in what Geertz labelled 'thick descriptions' of power-political relations in traditional India, ancient Greece ('classical Athens') and – most importantly – in the United States (1980-2009, including the 2008-9 Great Financial Crisis or GFC). Considering the scope of existing literature covering these societies and period, such a 'thick description' may seem illustrative and rather superficial – and the author does acknowledge that. But he defends this descriptive *tour de force* by pointing to its specific purposes. It

demonstrates – one must say, convincingly – that the general elite model he proposes is adequate in charting the main contours of power relations in three extremely diverse social-historical settings. Those familiar with Pareto’s monumental *Trattato*, Weber’s unfinished study of ‘world religions’, and with Mosca’s more modest *The Ruling Class*, will not be surprised, and critics may argue that the elite model, in its diverse renditions, has already been ‘tested’ – and shown useful – in many social-historical settings. But the novelty of Milner’s argument in applying the model in ancient and contemporary, non-Western and Western settings should be acknowledged – and appreciated. The readers of contemporary analyses of the American elites during the ‘Transatlantic Crisis’ (e.g., Best and Higley 2014) may find some parallel analyses there.

## ‘Strategic shortcomings’

While one may admire such an ambitious undertaking, it is also hard to resist a sense of regret due to three ‘strategic shortcomings’. The first one is a rather shaky ‘combination’ between elitism and Marxist class analysis. The two analytic schemes, (and the accompanied theoretical models) – the class- and elite-focused – are not just different, but in many respects opposed to each other. The second is omitting many key works of *contemporary* elite theorists, such as Robert Putnam, John Higley and his collaborators or Heinrich Best – works that would help Milne in his ambitious analytic synthesis. The third one is Milner’s restricted focus on the general analytic-descriptive scheme. Contemporary debates, by contrast, revolve around some key theoretical-explanatory issues.

But these ‘shortcomings’ (the inverted commas signal that they are also author’s conscious choices) do not diminish the value of Milner’s book. It is a refreshing contribution to the growing volume of elite-focused analyses of power and politics. Perhaps the value of the book should also be appreciated for what it promises. The book looks like an exciting preface to a (forthcoming one hopes!) *theoretical* elaboration of contemporary elitism.

### Further reading :

- Best, Heinrich (2008), ‘New Challenges, New Elites? Changes in the Recruitment and Career Patterns of European Representative Elites’ in M. Sasaki (ed.) *Elites: New Comparative Perspectives*, Leiden and Boston: Brill, pp. 77-102.
- Best, Heinrich and Higley, John (eds) (2014), *Political Elites in the Transatlantic Crisis*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Burnham, James (1942), *The Managerial Revolution*, London and New York: Putnam.

- Dahl, Robert A. (1971), *Polyarchy*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
- Domhoff, William G. (1979) *The Powers That Be: Processes of Ruling Class Domination in America*, New York: Random House.
- Domhoff, William G. (2009), *Who Rules America? Challenges to Corporate and Class Dominance*, New York: McGraw Hill, 6th edition.
- Etzioni-Halevi Eva (1993) *The Elite Connection*, Cambridge: Polity.
- Higley, John and Michael Burton (2006), *Elite Foundations of Liberal Democracy*, New York and Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Michels, Robert (1958), *Political Parties*, Glencoe, IL: Free Press.
- Mosca, Gaetano (1939), *The Ruling Class*, New York: McGraw-Hill. ↵
- Pareto, Vilfredo (1935), *The Mind and Society*, New York: Dover.
- Putnam, Robert (1976), *Comparative Study of Political Elites*, Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Robinson, William (2004), *A Theory of Global Capitalism*, Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press.
- Sassen, Saskia (2007), *A Sociology of Globalization*, New York & London: W.W. Norton.
- Sklair, Leslie (1995), *Sociology of the Global System*, 2nd edition revised and updated, London: Prentice Hall, Harvester Wheatsheaf.
- Sklair, Leslie (2001), *The Transnational Capitalist Class*, Oxford: Blackwell.
- Weber, Max (1978), *Economy and Society*, Berkeley: University of California Press.

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