Elites

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Abstract

By definition, individual elite actors have a disproportionately high level of resources at their disposal with which to influence society. The question is whether such elites are able to act in a unified and effective manner. During the twentieth century, scholars discovered mechanisms that led to elite cohesion and unified political action. In the early twenty-first century, these mechanisms have ceased to function. Elite researchers are thus faced with the challenge of identifying alternative mechanisms capable of fostering elite influence. In addition to cohesion, mechanisms of elite institutional influence and durable dominance are promising areas for study. Against the current backdrop of popular interest in elites and the many theoretical avenues opened up by researchers doing related work in fields such as economics, organizational theory, business, and psychology, the twenty-first century promises to be an important period for elite scholarship.

INTRODUCTION

In the United States, elites—actors with vastly disproportionate access to or control of resources (Khan, 2012)—are viewed with both admiration and suspicion. Some observers view elite status as a legitimate outcome of a meritocratic system, in which those with superior ambition and skill achieve great rewards through a process of fair and open competition. Others believe that elite status is preserved and inherited as the consequence of a system in which the elites write the rules, tailoring them to maintain elite privilege. This latter view has tended to prevail during periods when inequality and elite power are especially pronounced, such as during the Gilded Age of robber barons and more recently since the Occupy movement.

In the mid-twentieth century, although some researchers (e.g., Domhoff, 1967; Mills, 1956) held that elites had a distinctive influence on society, most social theorists did not distinguish elite and nonelite actors. The sociological literature on stratification emphasized mobility among the vast majority of the population that spanned the ladder of occupational status and income.

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Theorists of institutional change and social movements neglected to provide separate consideration to the dynamics of elite-led change initiatives.

One reason for the relative paucity of work on elites is that it has been difficult to gather data on them. Elites constitute a miniscule segment of the population, and thus rarely appear in surveys of the general population. Gaining access to exclusive elite enclaves to study their attitudes and actions can be especially difficult.

Fortunately for elite researchers, in the latter half of the twentieth century, data became readily available on one increasingly consequential elite group: the leaders of large corporations. Public companies by law are required to publish data on their executives and directors, and company leaders often speak with journalists and business academics. Scholars have put these data to good use, and much of what we know about elites in the United States and elsewhere comes from the study of corporate elites.

Recent findings (e.g., Chu & Davis, 2013; Mizruchi, 2013), however, suggest that the corporate elite are losing their cohesiveness and power. Researchers can no longer use the corporate elite as a proxy for elites in general, and are faced anew with the problem of identifying elites to study. This difficulty is compounded by the disappearing boundary between elite and nonelite cultures; elites no longer distinguish themselves through highbrow cultural consumption (Khan, 2011; Peterson & Kern, 1996).

This seeming absence of a cohesive, distinct elite might suggest that American society is trending toward the open, meritocratic ideal. Yet over the past 40 years, economic mobility has declined (Kopczuk, Saez, & Song, 2010), while the wealth gap between elite and nonelite has dramatically increased (Piketty & Saez, 2003). Future studies of the elite must address this paradox of durable dominance, wherein the elite maintain their disproportionate advantage seemingly without cohesive action or class distinction.

FOUNDATIONAL RESEARCH

As democracies emerged in Europe, scholars noticed that small, resilient groups continued to maintain their power over society. Robert Michels ([1911] 1962) and Gaetano Mosca ([1896] 1939) argued that domination by small groups of elites was inevitable. Michels famously suggested that the challenges of organizing large groups invariably led to oligarchies—small cadres of governing elites, who were able to maintain their privileges because their limited numbers allowed for superior intraelite coordination. Vilfredo Pareto ([1916] 1935) modified this view by suggesting that elites were able to maintain their domination only through a certain level of circulation, in which gifted and talented individuals from nonelite groups were permitted to enter the elite. Without such openness, Pareto argued, the elite would lose its ability to rule, thus providing opportunities for gifted nonelites to seize power.

By the mid-twentieth century, American political theorists sought to reconcile the presence of elites with assumptions of democratic rule. Schumpeter (1942), Lipset (1960, 1962), and other scholars in what came to be known as the pluralist tradition asserted that democracy under elite rule was possible if elites engaged in a "competitive struggle for the votes of a mainly passive electorate" (Lipset, 1962, p. 33). Through this struggle, the interests of different segments of the population would be represented by different segments of the elite.

A new generation of American elite theorists took issue with this argument, suggesting instead that elites were generally unified. According to Hunter (1953) and Mills (1956), the disagreements expressed in electoral politics were relatively minor and not threatening to elite interests. Ruling elites were thus seen as offering a highly restrictive set of political choices—all of which ultimately served the interests of the overall elite. Mills' book, in which he described a "power elite" consisting of leaders within corporate, political, and military institutions, set off an intense debate between pluralists and elite theorists.

A natural extension of this debate was the question of whether the leaders of major corporations—the corporate elite—were unified in their political opinions and actions. This question became especially important by the mid-twentieth century, as corporations grew increasingly large and powerful. Even pluralists acknowledged the potential power of these large firms, but maintained that the corporations lacked mechanisms that would allow them to engage in unified collective action.

Writing in the late 1960s, elite theorists G. William Domhoff (1967, 1970) and Ralph Miliband (1969) responded to this criticism by identifying mechanisms that could resolve conflicts within the business elite, thereby allowing elites to present a unified face to the state. These mechanisms included kinship ties and socialization devices (such as prep schools, elite colleges, and social clubs) that fostered a unity of outlook, board of director interlocks and cross-ownership of stocks among firms that aligned interests, and policy making organizations (such as the Committee for Economic Development, which was prominent at the time, and later the Business Roundtable) that explicitly represented business interests to policy makers. These theorists were in turn criticized by a group of Marxist scholars, who argued that the state itself served as the mechanism reconciling disparate corporate interests (Poulantzas, 1972). Both Marxist (Block, 1977) and pluralist (Lindblom, 1977) critics suggested that the state worked to uphold the interests of business not because corporations controlled the government, but because the government depended on business for its revenue.

A considerable amount of evidence was presented by all sides in this debate (see Mizruchi, 1992, Chapter 2 for a summary). The corporate elite appear to be both unified and divided, which leads to a perhaps more pertinent question: under what conditions is business unified or divided? Michael Useem (1984) provided insight into this question with his groundbreaking study of corporate elites in the United States and Britain. Although Useem found that the majority of the business community was fragmented, a small group of leaders of the largest corporations—what he termed the "inner circle"—was able to achieve a unified perspective and act collectively to further the long-term interests of the business community. Mark Mizruchi (1992) established the theoretical and empirical bases for a synthesized theory of elite influence, showing that political unity is most likely to occur in the presence of interfirm networks created by economic interdependence among firms and board of director interlocks, rather than shared interests per se.

A related debate concerned the importance of social background and family resources in rising to positions of corporate power. In the 1930s, Adolf A. Berle Jr. and Gardiner C. Means ([1932] 1968) argued that as corporations became increasingly large and stock ownership dispersed, the professional managers who ran the day-to-day affairs of the firm gradually wrested control of corporations from their legal owners. Three decades later, John Kenneth Galbraith (1967) argued that because of improvements in technology, power was now vested in those with control of information and knowledge, who often operated a step below the firm's top management. If power was increasingly linked to expertise, then to the extent that the society was meritocratic, the traditional elite was being replaced by one whose status was based on achieved rather than ascribed criteria, that is, on their skills rather than their social backgrounds. On the other hand, there was continuing evidence that upper-class individuals—or at least the offspring of high-status professionals—were disproportionately represented in these new positions of power (Useem & Karabel, 1986), and that upper-class families continued to transmit advantages to their offspring.

Beyond the corporate world, sociologists examined the role of resources in maintaining and transmitting elite status. Pierre Bourdieu's (1984) insight into the role of cultural capital was particularly influential. DiMaggio and Mohr (1985) found that familiarity with "high culture" in high school predicted educational attainment and marital selection. Michèle Lamont (1992) interviewed successful men in the United States and France, finding that they defined their social class boundaries based on shared tastes and attitudes. The men preferred to socialize and conduct business with others who shared cultural markers.

CUTTING-EDGE RESEARCH

Recent findings suggest that the elite have changed in two important ways. First, the corporate elite are decreasingly cohesive, and are less consequential as well. In America, Useem's inner circle of well-connected "corporate diplomats" has all but disappeared. Chu and Davis (2013) find that the number of individuals serving on five or more S&P 1500 boards declined from 61 in 2000 to 11 in 2010. In 2000, Vernon Jordan served on nine boards. By 2010 no director served on six or more boards. Chu and Davis attribute this decline to a reversal in the status accorded to directors serving on multiple boards. Before the corporate scandals of the early 2000s, recruiting such in-demand directors was a signal of a firm's quality. After the scandals, multiple-board directors became seen as stretched too thin to provide an appropriate level of governance.

Mizruchi (2013) argues that the US corporate elite has become fragmented, and thus ineffectual at pursuing the group's collective interests. Corporate leaders successfully united to confront labor and government in the 1970s, but then were forced to focus on short-term shareholder value after the takeover wave of the 1980s. In the twenty-first century, they lack both the willingness and the ability to unite behind solutions to issues of concern to both business and the larger society.

Similar changes have been observed in Europe. Beyer and Hoppner (2003), David, Ginalski, Rebmann, and Schnyder (2009), and Heemskerk (2007) have found evidence of declining network density in Germany, Switzerland, and the Netherlands respectively. Corresponding to the decline in density, Heemskerk (2007) has also found a decline in class consciousness among Dutch elites.

The second important change is the disappearance of exclusively elite cultural activities and tastes. Although elites in both the United States and Europe have traditionally sought to set themselves apart by monopolizing consumption of highbrow culture (Levine, 1988), today's elite are increasingly inclusive in their cultural tastes (Peterson & Kern, 1996). Shamus Khan (2011) argues that such eclecticism is what now sets elites apart from nonelites. In his ethnographic study of an elite prep school, Khan finds that students there are provided exposure to a variety of cultural experiences that others with less privileged backgrounds would find difficult to emulate.

Cultural capital gained from school-age experiences is consequential in launching elite careers. Lauren Rivera (2012) illuminates the mechanisms behind this relationship in an ethnographic study of hiring at elite professional firms (law firms, investment banks, and management consultants). She finds that cultural matching processes played a large role in hiring decisions, with applicants being evaluated on how well their experiences, leisure pursuits, and presentation styles matched the preferred culture of the firm and its incumbent employees.

Rivera's study is one example of a promising wave of recent scholarship that examines mechanisms related to elite status. Another example is Rider and Tan's (2014) paper on lateral partner hiring at large US law firms. Their study suggests that high status firms are able to generate increased profits by attracting partners from lower-status but high profit firms. Conversely, lower status but high profit firms purchase status by hiring partners from high status firms with lower profits. Rosette and Tost (2013) examine a microlevel mechanism in their study of individuals' perceptions of privilege. They find that highly successful individuals are less likely than less-successful individuals to view social inequity as the result of privilege. This tendency to be blind to privilege is tempered, however, when an individual is low status on at least one dimension of social hierarchy. White women, for example, are more likely to perceive the advantages of white racial privilege than are white men.

KEY ISSUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The changes noted above beg the question of whether a cohesive, distinct, and consequential elite still exists in the United States. If the corporate elite is no longer capable of collective political action (Mizruchi, 2013), has another cohesive elite arisen to take its place? Davis (2009) has argued that the corporation is no longer the center of economic power, and that instead finance and financiers determine the conditions of the American economy. Today's financial firms, however, do not seem interested in using their power to control or influence nonfinancial firms. Although commercial banks from the late 1940s through the early 1980s filled their boards with prominent corporate executives, this practice declined in the 1980s, as the banks lost their role as both holders and providers of capital (Davis & Mizruchi, 1999).

Another possibility is that the elite reduced its use of corporate boards as centers of interaction and shifted to other, less-visible fora (Chu & Davis, 2013). In the mid-twentieth century, large bank boards and other corporate directorships were sinecures, with few expectations for time-consuming work, little personal liability, and abundant opportunities to socialize with other elites. Since the 1980s, however, directors' responsibilities and liabilities have increased, making board service increasingly onerous. Directors have been increasingly compelled to fill the role prescribed for them in agency-theoretic formulations of firm governance, acting foremost as stewards of shareholder value. As improved board oversight became the norm and financial products allowed for easier diversification, elites may have seen less need to actively monitor their investments by sitting on corporate boards.

If elites have taken their interactions elsewhere, researchers are again faced with the problem of gaining data on the elite and access to their interactions. Researchers will need to investigate new arenas for elite socialization, possibly including private equity boards, nonprofit boards, online communities, and elite social events.

Regardless of whether elites are losing their cohesiveness, they continue to bequeath economic, social, and cultural capital to their children—albeit in qualitatively different ways than in previous generations. Children of elites have greater opportunities to travel, eat more exotic food, and have more diverse friends than do children of nonelites (Khan, 2011). They are also likely to be highly competent in leisure pursuits that require high levels of parental economic support and investment of time. These cultural markers provide access to elite careers (Rivera, 2012). However, access to these formative experiences is no longer proscribed by race, gender, or ancestry. The increasing heterogeneity of the elite may have contributed to the difficulty of unified political action. (Zweigenhaft & Domhoff, 2006).

Yet if elite cohesion has disappeared and elite membership has become more open, what explains the increasing and durable gap in wealth between elites and nonelites? In the United States, money is easily transposed into and from other resources. Khan (2011), Rider and Tan (2014), and Rivera (2012) all describe mechanisms whereby actors convert economic capital into other forms of capital and back. The distribution of wealth in the population is thus a useful proxy for the distribution of other resources—and this distribution is becoming increasingly skewed. Between 1989 and 2008, the average family income of the top 0.1% more than doubled. During the same period, the bottom 90% experienced a decrease in average income and the bottom 99% an increase of only 6.7%.[1] Moving between income percentiles is becoming increasingly difficult, as economic social mobility for men has substantially decreased (Kopczuk *et al*., 2010).

Researchers face a paradox of durable dominance: continuous, often trans-generational control of disproportionate resources by a small group of actors that persists even though previously identified mechanisms of elite cohesion have ceased to function. To resolve this paradox we need to address two broad questions.

First, how and when can elites alter institutions? Although the mid-twentieth century debates centered on the existence of collective elite action targeting the state, newer scholarship has examined the actions

1. Data from Emmanual Saez at http://elsa.berkeley.edu/~saez/.

of actors targeting not just regulative institutions, but normative and cognitive ones as well. Teles (2008), for example, has examined the conservative legal movement that, beginning in the 1970s, altered the taken-for-granted norms of discourse within the academic legal community, the federal courts, and regulatory agencies. This movement helped institutionalize an economics-driven approach to the law, which laid the foundations for the rise of the shareholder value paradigm in the corporate world. Movement leaders included the John M. Olin Foundation and academics at the University of Chicago, and the movement targeted elite academics, jurists, and policy makers. Others have examined the role of elites in moving American political discourse and policy in a more conservative direction (see Himmelstein, 1990 for an excellent example of this work, and Mizruchi, 2013, Chapter 6 for citations to this literature).

In investigations of elite influence, researchers can benefit from recent advancements in theories of institutional change and social movements. Neo-institutionalism has been criticized for bracketing out motivated, agentic behavior, but scholars have recently begun to bring power back into studies of institutional change (Lawrence, 2008). Social movement theory tended to focus primarily on actions of the disenfranchised targeting the state, but here too attention has turned toward the role of the powerful in targeting cultural institutions (Armstrong & Bernstein, 2008). Investigations of elite influence will draw from and contribute to these literatures.

The second question that we need to address involves the mechanisms that contribute to durable dominance and the conditions under which they are effective. Rider and Tan's (2014) study demonstrates how resources can be transposed and traded to maintain the dominance of elite actors. Elite law firms can maintain high profitability by attracting profit innovators from lower status firms. This mechanism works primarily in industries such as law, in which status and performance rankings are clearly visible and consequential. High status firms can bill out the same work at higher rates, and thus more than recoup the costs of hiring high-profit partners from lower-status firms.

What systems and taken-for-granted institutions buttress the mechanisms of durable dominance? This is a difficult question to answer. Transparently pro-elite institutions are likely to become targets of attack by the nonelite supermajority, and so the links between institutions and their effects will tend not to be obvious. Consider the deep-rooted American belief in the power of open markets and fair competition. Critics of large corporations have argued that industries with high barriers to entry and large economies of scale have deleterious consequences for society, since elite firms can use their advantages to unfairly lock out would-be challengers, and thus deter innovation as well as price competition. On the basis of this rationale, policy-makers regulate markets to discourage excessive rent-seeking by market-dominant companies and to create as open and level a playing field as possible (although the extent to which the state does this varies depending on who is in power).

A thought experiment suggests, however, that measures for open and fair competition can create an immutable elite/nonelite dichotomy. Consider an industry or society in which the important resources are scalable (i.e., resource levels can differ between actors by many orders of magnitude) and Matthew effects (Merton, 1968) apply such that each actor's gain or loss of resources over a given time period is proportional to the actor's existing stock of resources at the beginning of the period. In such a situation, we expect to see a highly skewed distribution of resources, in which a few actors control the bulk of total resources—that is, a system of elites. On the other hand, since each gain sets up the possibility of an even greater gain in the next time period, over time, lucky or skillful nonelites can grow their resources to reach elite status—and a streak of bad luck or bad judgment can cause an elite actor to lose almost all its resources. Although the distribution of resources is skewed, elite/nonelite mobility is possible and elite status is not durable.

If policy-makers subsequently enforce restrictions on the use of existing resources to amass future resources, however, then the Matthew effect disappears. Each actor's gain or loss of resources over a given time period is no longer proportional to the actor's existing stock of resources. The distribution of gains (losses) per time period has a central tendency, and the center point of this distribution will be many orders of magnitude smaller than the difference in resource levels between elites and nonelites. Those actors who had disproportionate resources at the moment of policy implementation will continue to do so in perpetuity, and no other actors will be able to achieve elite levels of resources. The result is a dichotomized system where the elite stay elite and the nonelite stay nonelite. Changing the rules of competition to be "level" freezes in place the advantages of the elite gained in the prior period of less-level competition.

The two questions we have posed—one concerning elite influence on institutions and the other concerning the effect of institutions on elite mobility—are obviously related. Elites may be motivated to influence institutions so as to preserve their disproportionate resources over time. Such conscious self-interest is not necessary for durable dominance to occur, however. Like everyone else, elites are affected by cognitive and normative institutions—taken-for-granted common sense. Indeed, as Rosette and Tost (2013) show, elites may be more susceptible than nonelites to holding simplistic beliefs about factors underlying their success in life. Durable dominance may be a natural and inevitable consequence of a society in which personal wealth is unlimited and eminently transposable, and where meritocracy and open competition are revered.

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