ELITES AND PEOPLE

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ELITES AND PEOPLE: CHALLENGES TO DEMOCRACY

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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ELITES AND PEOPLE: CHALLENGES TO DEMOCRACY

Fredrik Engelstad, Trygve Gulbrandsen, Marte Mangset and Mari Teigen

The past decade has been a period of severe crises centred in the West but with significant repercussions for the rest of the world: the financial crisis, euro crisis, populist resurgence, immigration crisis, gender revolt, cracks in the European Union and dramatic backlash against the Arab Spring. All of these crises have involved elites in various ways and raised questions about the roles of elites in existing forms of social and political governance. Although these issues have significant transnational aspects, crucial differences among them also exist due to national variations in institutions and socio-political traditions. To avoid facile generalisations, thorough comparative studies are crucial.

Numerous contemporary tensions concern not only elites as governing groups but also elites' relationship to democracy, which always has been strained. Over time, the discussion on elites and democracy has taken several turns. The pioneers of elite theory in the early twentieth century were sceptical and sometimes outright dismissive of the possibility of democratic governance. In the second half of the twentieth century, this theme was reintroduced from a different angle underscoring the concentration of power in unified elite as a threat to democracy (Mills, 1956). This perspective was further elaborated by the emphasis on democratic participation as a contrast to Schumpeterian versions of elite democracy (Bachrach, 1969; Bottomore, 1966). The debate recently took a new turn with the proposal of the argument that elites should be regarded as a precondition for democracy (Burton & Higley, 1987; Higley & Burton, 2006), supported by explorations of various types of elite democracy (Best & Higley, 2010; Gulbrandsen, 2019). Undoubtedly, good reasons for questioning the blending of elites with democracy exist. Indeed, the very concept of elites – of chosen people – blatantly contradicts the democratic ideal of political equality. However, strong reasons for regarding elites as necessary parts of democratic societies also exist.

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From a structural perspective, in any large-scale society, democracy is unthinkable without large organisations, whether political bodies, bureaucracies, enterprises or voluntary organisations. Inevitably, power becomes concentrated at the top positions of these organisations (Michels, 1959 [1911]), and the incumbents who exert this power potentially constitute groups that may be termed elite groups. Power and the concentration of power are multi-faceted phenomena. They obviously can be a source of repression but equally can be a source of innovation and new opportunities, initiating cooperation and overcoming problems of collective action.

From a process perspective, the plurality of organisations consolidates elites to differing degrees into acting groups, even if they are caught in ambivalent positions. They may engage in open conflict with each other or act in relatively loose cooperation. Some sort of interdependence, though, is nearly inevitable (Aron, 1950). The modes of cooperation among elites are circumscribed by the limitations and resources of the organisations they command, the institutions within which they operate and their varying scopes of action within their general institutional frameworks.

From a comparative perspective, the study of elites invites a large set of research questions in addition to the well-established questions concerning elites' structure and integration. Elites may be a precondition for the initial constitution of democracies (Higley & Burton, 2006) or contribute to processes of further democratisation (Engelstad, 2018; Schmitter, 2018). Processes of democratisation are rarely due to the actions of a single elite group but rather results from agreements among competing elites. However, elites may also, and often do, stage the destruction of democracy, most fatefully in the Weimar Republic (Hoffmann-Lange, 1998). In the contemporary world, the resilience of democracy to attacks from elites has been put to trial in Turkey and Hungary, among other nations, also manifested in a flood of books with titles such as *How Democracies Die* (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). In the age of globalisation, elites are no longer limited within the borders of nation-states. International treaties and conventions and intergovernmental organisations indicate the emergence of transnational elites anchored in national contexts but simultaneously transcending the limits of nation-states. The constellation of the European Union and its member states is a significant case.

If elites are to exert power, they are dependent on their non-elite constituency in the long term. In democratic societies, elites' legitimacy is contingent on the degree of their social distance from the general population and thus the degree of the openness of the elite structure. Social distance involves opportunities for mobility into elites, hindrances to be overcome (e.g. gender and class background) and the socialisation and education required to enter elite positions. In another sense, social distance refers to the social and political gaps between elites and ordinary citizens, ranging from elites' attitudes and self-presentation to their ability to develop and present policies furthering the welfare of large segments of the population. If a common feeling that elites live in a bubble and do not take popular interests seriously develops, then populism lies close at hand.

In the present volume of *Comparative Social Research*, all of these aspects are prominent. Moreover, this volume examines a broad set of relationships between

elites and non-elites, including ordinary citizens, popular protest movements and prospective elite members. In democratic societies, elites constitute a wide range of social groups, as mentioned; as presented in this volume, from the Arab Spring in Tunisia and Egypt to women's political leadership in Brazil and Germany, via attainment of elite positions among minorities in France and the US.

This diversity needs to be stressed, even if a main focus in the volume is political elites in democratic societies, particularly in European contexts. The quality of democratic governance seems to be declining in many parts of the contemporary world, but political elections, even when far from free and fair, nevertheless remain a main source of legitimacy. Most of today's well-established democracies, as found in Europe and North America, resulted from social processes taking place over more than a century and even longer in some cases. In contrast, societies where democratic governance is developing today face various and often intractable problems, not the least because institutional changes are more condensed in time. These uncertainties justify a close study of how new democracies are constituted, reinforced, succeed and fail in the contemporary world. Here, the aftermath of the Arab Spring may yield important insights. In the present volume, this focus is expanded to elites in the so-called third-wave democracies mostly established around 1990. How do they fare several decades later? Other chapters turn to elite recruitment, socialisation and consolidation in terms of both class and gender. The volume concludes by highlighting elites' various entanglements with populism: on the one hand, underlying reasons for the recent populist expansion, on the other, various images of elites in populist movements.

THE ARAB SPRING – FEASIBLE TRANSITION TO DEMOCRACY?

A major contribution to understanding the emergence of democracy comes from Robert Putnam's *How Democracy Works* (1993), comparing political development in northern and southern Italy over several hundred years. In line with the Tocquevillian tradition, the core notion of Putnam's work is that civil society is a precondition for democracy. A broad set of voluntary organisations becomes an arena for interactions among citizens and thus functions as a source of social capital and trust. The variations in civil society organisations in northern and southern Italy are assumed to be the determinant of the high quality of democracy in northern Italy and the low quality in southern Italy. Social trust certainly is a salient, if also precarious, component of democracies. However, Putnam (1993) proposes a structural, bottom-up model, stressing the impacts of organisations as meeting places for citizens and downplaying the significance of social and political institutions and the actions of elite groups. Consequently, the crucial dynamics of conflict and compromise among elite groups slip out of sight.

Closer to the present, the Arab Spring and its aftermath may serve as a prism for understanding core preconditions for democratisation. At the outset, the Middle East was exceptional as no Arab country had been a democracy (Diamond, 2016, p. 160ff). In its most visible examples, Tunisia and Egypt, two of

the most authoritarian countries in the Arab world (Diamond, 2016, p. 162), the aims of democratisation have taken very different roads. Why does the former still have a promise of success, whereas the latter has ended in complete failure? Stig Stenslie and Kjetil Selvik's detailed analysis in this volume points to the quality of civil society as a key to understanding, much in line with Putnam (1993). Their concept of civil society, though, is much broader and includes three closely related factors: civil society organisations with potential relevance to politics, relatively independent social institutions and, accordingly, a set of forceful elite groups. Egypt presents a negative case that supports Putnam's (1993) theory. Egypt possessed few arenas where social trust could develop (but see Kindt, 2013), civil society was very weak, and the army had a dominant position in the economy. In contrast, the case of Tunisia makes it clear that in the processes of democratisation, generalised trust was far from sufficient to change the given social order. Other elites outside the purely political elites also turned out to be necessary to counteract a full return to the old order (see also Schmitter, 2018, p. 598).

POLITICAL ELITES AND RESILIENCE OF DEMOCRACY

If the Arab Spring reflected a crisis in authoritarian societies with pseudo-democratic façades, the financial crisis originating in 2008 can be regarded as a crucial test of the resilience of democracy. The financial crisis was the deepest economic crisis since the Great Depression in the early 1930s. Seymour Martin Lipset's (1959) classic conception, still relevant in political science, holds that stable democracies rest on a combination of economic efficiency and political legitimacy. The crucial question is the shape of the dynamic interdependence of these factors: When an economic crisis occurs, does it undermine legitimacy, or, to the contrary, does robust legitimacy provide confidence in the handling of the crisis? Since the mid-2000s, the world has seen a backlash against democracy. Nevertheless, studies have indicated that the crisis has had only moderate effects on political legitimacy, partly as most strongly affected countries have been rich nations with well-established democratic traditions (Diamond, 2016, pp. 101ff). Such general observations call for more detailed studies considering variations in the sources of legitimacy and the effects on institutional changes within a broad definition of democracy.

These questions are examined in several contributions in this volume in both a broad comparative and an intra-European perspective. They all present analyses of large-scale survey data from recent decades that together yield a picture of the present situation *in statu nascendi*, revealing some preconditions for later developments.

In one chapter, Ursula Hoffmann-Lange discusses variations in support for democracy in seven countries and whether the financial crisis affected that support. The objects of study are the electorates and members of parliament in two well-established democracies (Germany and Sweden) and five third-wave democracies (Chile, Poland, South Korea, South Africa and Turkey). Assessing support for democracy with three different measures finds only weak traces of the

financial crisis. Changes from 2007, before the crisis exploded, through 2013 are virtually negligible in both the political elites and the general population (with the exception of South Africa).

Not surprisingly, members of parliaments in the seven countries all express high support for democracy, with the highest support in Sweden and Germany. In general, parliamentarians tend to have a high degree of confidence in democracy independent of the political context, whereas citizens stand more aloof from political processes. While significant differences among countries and between the political elite and citizens are found, the general picture is of noticeably lower support for democracy in the general population than in the political elite. In the new democracies, considerable segments of the general population favour non-democratic modes of governance. The substantial cross-country variations in citizens' confidence in democracy are due foremost to internal political factors. If elites are carriers of the democratic creed, as pointed out by Hoffmann-Lange, they also bear a heavy responsibility for handling challenges to democracy. Even in the absence of economic recession and regardless of a country's economic situation, the gap between the political elite and the general population can deepen and develop into a legitimacy crisis due to significant cultural changes in the concentration of power and privilege. A prosperous country such as Norway demonstrates how rising economic inequality may increase the gap between the elites and the people.

EUROPEAN CRISIS – A CRISIS OF EUROPEANISATION?

In the European Union, the financial crisis took a special turn as the banking crisis fed into the regional euro crisis. In the rest of the world, political authorities managed the banking crisis at the national level, but in the Eurozone, the crisis had to be handled both at the European and the national levels. The whole EU system thus came into play, revealing the complexities of both EU institutions and the EU elite structure. Standard federal systems have a clear division of authority between the individual state level and the federal level, but the EU is a peculiar version of a federal system: individual states are sovereign nations but nevertheless are subordinate in certain aspects to a comparatively weak federal power (Cotta, 2012). Consequently, what may be termed the European elite system is haunted by inconsistencies and relatively low potential for political action (Cotta, 2014). The instabilities of such a system call for changes towards either stronger federal institutions and increased supranationalism or a more intergovernmental system in which bargaining between nation-states constitutes an important part of the *modus operandi*.

Confusing as it might seem, the aftermath of the euro crisis was a slow but nevertheless decisive strengthening of EU institutions, even if measures came late and were mostly reactive (for closer descriptions, see, e.g. Best & Higley, 2014; Cotta, 2012, 2014). Even so, the operation of the EU system remains largely dependent on the preferences and strategies of EU political elites anchored in national parliaments. Two contributions in this volume analyse different aspects

of national parliamentarians' visions of the EU's future. Both contributions are based on survey data on parliamentarians in nine European countries, some inside the Eurozone (France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Lithuania, Portugal and Spain) and some outside the Eurozone (Bulgaria and Hungary).

Borbála Göncz studies changes in support for models of EU development due to the financial and euro crises. She finds that all members of these political elites express strong support for EU membership as a useful instrument, and this support did not decline due to the crisis, which may indicate general, stable support for EU institutions. However, views on the future of the EU changed considerably, and from 2007 to 2014, the intergovernmental model of limited EU integration generally gained support alongside the growing significance of identity politics. The expansion of parties on both the right and the left extreme accounts for the growing support for the intergovernmental option, whereas members in mainstream parties express feelings of attachment to Europe and more favour supranationalism.

Given diverse political elites' growing emphasis on the nation-state as constitutive of the future EU, it seems that the financial crisis affected political elites' level of trust in EU institutions. This becomes more precarious as trust generally refers to the present, not so much to a distant future. Trust in different EU institutions also varies. In this volume, György Lengyel and Laura Szabó show that among the political elites in the same nine countries as analysed by Gönsz, trust was not strongly affected, albeit with some variation between institutions. Trust in the European Parliament even slightly increased from 2007 to 2014, whereas trust in the European Commission and the Council of Ministers slightly declined. These findings underscore the tensions within the EU system as unlike the latter two institutions, the European Parliament has members elected at the national level.

Tensions become more visible when hearing the voice of the general population. Using data from Eurobarometer surveys for the same years, Lengyel and Szabó show that voters in the same countries do not share the political elites' rather optimistic views; popular trust in the European Parliament fell quite drastically from 2007 to 2014. Thus, developments after the euro crisis have taken a paradoxical turn. On one hand, scepticism of core EU institutions has increased among both parliamentarians and the general population. On the other hand, core EU institutions have been extended and reinforced. What has emerged from the crisis is what Cotta (2014) terms a compound system, with both intergovernmental and supranational elements more solidly present.

The changes described reflect quite general tendencies to which one exception is Hungary, which was hit hard by the crisis. In 2009, 'the GDP contracted by more than 6 per cent. … Total external debts, including the debts of households, amounted to 158 per cent in 2009' (Fric, Lengyel, Pakulski, & Somolányi, 2014, p. 94). When the Fidez Government came into power in 2010, it moved to the right and introduced drastic austerity measures, including nationalisation of private pension funds, changes in the tax system and revisions of the labour law. These austerity measures were masked by attacks on foreign forces, profit-hungry private firms and the EU bureaucracy (Fric et al., 2014, p. 95). Lengyel and Szabó show that during this time, the Hungarian political elite's trust in the EU declined

drastically; in 2007, they consistently had higher average scores for trust than the other eight EU countries, but seven years later, their scores were well below average. It is worth noting that the most recent data were from 2014, so developments in the past five years are not recorded.

The Hungarian situation is not without paradoxes when compared to the other eight countries studied. The general tendency is that the political elite are more supportive of the European Parliament than the general population, but the opposite is the case in Hungary. Despite a decline, the trust of the general population was significantly higher than that of the political elite, as of 2014. Moreover, consistently higher trust in EU institutions than that held by the political elite is also found in other prominent groups, including the economic, media and administrative elites. Thus, changes in the political elites' trust stem from processes internal to the political milieu rather than pressures from other segments of society.

ELITE RECRUITMENT AND SOCIAL IDENTITY

Filling elite positions in complex, modern societies obviously presupposes a wide filter of learning and socialisation processes for potential incumbents. Not surprisingly, a general finding in empirical studies is that elite members disproportionately have upper and upper-middle class backgrounds. One important reason is the conformation of social identity in these strata closely connected to class habitus, as propounded by Pierre Bourdieu (1992) in *The Logic of Practice*. Bourdieu (1998) and Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) showed how school systems value the knowledge and skills nurtured by specific social groups, such as the middle and upper classes. Elite families invest in their children's social careers, and attending elite schools is a salient resource in the creation of elite identity (Mangset, Maxwell, & van Zanten, 2017; van Zanten, 2018). In line with Bourdieu's insights, Sheamus Kahn's (2011) study of an elite prep school demonstrated that an important part of the hidden curriculum is social intelligence and the social aptitude to connect to people in unconstrained ways. Nevertheless, in democratic societies, a necessary condition for entering elite positions is an education yielding professional competence. Admittedly, there is a high correlation between family background and school attendance, but the connection might not always be straightforward. Rather than simply pointing out that middle- and upper-class children attend elite schools, we should investigate more closely the different social profiles developed by elite schools that, to some extent, cater to different social strata. Family background, thus, has variable effects on recruitment into schools and subsequent elite attainment.

Anja Gibson elucidates both these points in her chapter in the present volume. Her analysis of two elite boarding schools in Germany, one private and one public, brings out significant contrasts in both recruitment and learning processes. She depicts the construction of schools as elite institutions via mechanisms that shape social exclusivity. The private school caters to a socially homogenous upper-class group, and its main outcome is not so much outstanding academic results

but more the cultural integration of the student body. The public school, however, is characterised by a less homogenous student group and thus has a more mixed class composition, giving rise to a strongly competitive culture among students far more individualistic than in the private school. These findings relate to the central issue of how elites in modern democratic societies seek to legitimise their power and privilege through (at least seemingly) meritocratic selection systems. Which of the two student groups has higher chances of making it to the top in their occupational careers remains an open question, but it will not be surprising if those who have the most solid social identity attain the highest degree of success.

The scope of analysis may be shifted from family and educational institutions to the persons who are candidates to and later do enter into elite positions. It is quite commonly assumed that prospective elite members constitute a relatively homogenous group by social class, ethnic affiliation and gender and can slide effortlessly into top positions. This stereotype obviously is not true for elite members with working class and ethnic minority backgrounds, who become marginal groups in relation to elite culture; in Bourdieu's (1999, p. 511) expression, with 'a habitus divided against itself'. This has been discussed and empirically demonstrated in several studies on recruitment to elite schools (e.g. Reay, Crozier, & Clayton, 2009). Typically, minority affiliates experience various types of ambivalence with differing positive and negative emphases. This runs parallel with expectations of change, termed anticipatory socialisation by Robert Merton (1957, p. 293), in relation to the group of destination.

In Scandinavia, the incongruity of origin and destination is summarised in the concept of class travel, proposed in the memoir *My First Name is Ronny* by Swedish university professor Ronny Ambjörnsson (1996). More recent and more widely read is the French contribution, *Returning to Reims*, an autobiography by Didier Eribon (2013). Regardless of whether incumbents with minority backgrounds feel less at ease in their achieved positions, they commonly experience a strong sense of belonging in two worlds. This, however, does not necessarily mean that these elite members handle their professional responsibilities differently and develop special political and social attitudes. A study of Norwegian elites, for instance, showed that in this respect, class of origin is not relevant to elites' professional orientation (Gulbrandsen & Engelstad, 2005).

Jules Naudet and Shirin Shahrokni's study in the present volume concentrates on the ambiguities related to ethnic minority status at work in elite recruitment. Comparing upwardly mobile racial minorities in the United States and France, the authors point to similar ambiguities in the recruitment pattern between the origin and destination groups in the two countries. Racial discrimination is part of daily life, so ambiguities in these minority groups are more significant than in the case of pure class inequality. Ties to the groups of origin become more crucial. In both countries, strong attachments to the family and social group of origin are present. However, the ways in which mobility patterns are structured and experienced vary among societies. In France, the mobility of sons (and daughters) in minority groups is very much a family project, whereas in the United States, norms of racial equality, even if still unaccomplished at the societal level, give upward mobility a stronger political flavour connected less to family relationships and more to