

## The Configuration of Political Society: Elite Pluralism and the “Tacit Pact of Domination”

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### Abstract

The “elite theory” that flourished in Italy at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries gave birth to a kind of political analysis that was based on the premise of a vertical distinction between ruling minorities (“elites”) and a ruled majority. Political elites, as well as the foundations of their power, their “tacit pact of domination” with “the ruled”, and the problem of its concrete (un)feasibility, were some of the most central topics delved into by Italian elite theorists. In the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and up to the present day, however, the focus of the elite research has shifted: at the centre is the extreme social and organisational complexity of contemporary societies, which has brought to light an increasing pluralisation of elites, blurring the boundaries of the relationship between rulers and ruled. Nevertheless, the fundamental political structure described by the elite theorists, and set aside by part of the contemporary literature, seems to persist, even if reformulated within vigorous, Paretian “transformations of democracy”. The aim of this contribution is to reaffirm the relevance of the traditional relations of political domination, identifying in the blurring of their boundaries one of the central aspects of the transition of democracy and its political-institutional configuration.

*Keywords:* elite theory, ruling class, political class, political society, transformation of democracy

**Riassunto.** *La conformazione della società politica: pluralismo delle élites e il “tacito patto di dominio”*

La “teoria delle élites” fiorita in Italia a cavallo del XIX e XX secolo aveva dato vita ad un’analisi politica fondata sulla premessa di una distinzione verticale tra minoranze governanti (“élites”) e una maggioranza governata. Le élites politiche, così come le fondamenta del loro potere, ma anche il loro “tacito patto di dominio” con i governati e il problema della sua concreta (in)attuabilità rappresentavano alcuni dei temi fondamentali per gli elitisti italiani. Nel corso del Novecento e fino ad oggi, tuttavia, il focus degli studi sulle élites si sposta: al centro si trova l’estrema complessità sociale e organizzativa delle società contemporanee, che ha portato alla luce una crescente pluralizzazione delle élites, sbiadendo i confini del rapporto governanti-governati. Ciò nonostante, tuttavia, la compagine politica descritta dalle teorie delle élites, accantonata da una parte della letteratura contemporanea, sembra persistere, pur riformulandosi all’interno delle vigorose trasformazioni della democrazia di paretiana memoria. Scopo di questo contributo è riaffermare l’attualità dei tradizionali rapporti di dominio politico, individuando nel loro sbiadimento uno degli aspetti centrali della transizione della democrazia e della sua conformazione politico-istituzionale.

*Parole chiave:* teoria delle élites, elitismo, classe politica, società politica, trasformazioni della democrazia

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*Of course, the parliamentary representative system must not and cannot be immutable; as the conditions of society change, the political organisations must be changed.*

Gaetano Mosca<sup>1</sup>

*The game of deconstructing and restructuring the political organisation has only begun.*

Carlo Mongardini<sup>2</sup>

1 See Mosca (1925, p. 10 – my translation).

2 See Mongardini (2000a, p. 21 – my translation).

## 1. Introduction

Studies on elites, both in Italy and in international research, have not led an easy life. Several elements justify such a statement. The first consists in the old belief, gradually deconstructed and criticised by much of the literature, of the existence of “an elite theory”, i.e. of a cohesive and homogeneous elite theory school, which in reality has never existed (Bobbio, 2005; Mongardini, 2011). The second, which can no longer be supported (Bobbio, 2005), is the idea that this theory was itself fundamentally anti-democratic and inextricably linked to fascism<sup>3</sup> – an idea that has given elite *theories* (from now in plural) a bad reputation, forcing them to go through a long period of «rehabilitation» (Hartmann, 2007, p. 21). The third element, of most interest to us here, is the (only partly justifiable) conviction that “classical elitism” dealt almost exclusively with a single elite, which is considered to be compact, homogeneous and mostly identifiable in the wake of Gaetano Mosca with the «ruling class» (Keller, 1963; Hoffmann-Lange, 2003, p. 111)<sup>4</sup>. Consequently, in reaction to this supposed limitation of “classical elite theory”, new theories developed over time that were more attentive to the existence of a multiplicity of elites and to their growing complexity, which is linked to the general transformation of society and politics. The result was a contrast between different schools (Bachrach and Baratz, 1962; Hartmann, 2007; Sola, 1993), which became more acute over time, summed up in the contrast between a more properly elitist “pure” strand (Mongardini, 2011), and a so-called “pluralist” one.

The first, which ended up being considered obsolete, conservative, if not in some cases directly anti-democratic, argues that power tends to be concentrated in the hands of a few and implies an unequal distribution of resources in contemporary societies. Hence, a perennial and ineliminable opposition would result between a few dominant elements, the

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3 However, the claim that certain variants and/or aspects of elite theories have favoured the rise of fascism and were instrumentalised by the latter is certainly worthy of continued study (Hartmann, 2007, p. 3). As is well known, some elite theorists contributed to strengthening a link between elitism and fascism. In particular, Robert Michels (2009), with his 1927 *Corso di Sociologia Politica*, formulated a new elite theory in support of the fascist regime. On Michels and Fascism, see in particular Trocini (2020).

4 The other great classic scholar, Vilfredo Pareto, is acknowledged as having a greater, though still limited, variety of views: «Pareto [...] was aware that in principle there are as many elites as there are different occupational groups, but his writings as well as Mosca's concentrate on the political and governing elite» (Keller, 1963, p. 11).

holders of power, considered as a more or less unique, homogeneous, and cohesive minority, and the “disorganised many”, mostly identified with “the masses”. The most classic authors included in this strand are Gaetano Mosca and Vilfredo Pareto (the inaccuracy of this classification will be discussed later), but also later authors such as the American sociologists Floyd Hunter (1953) and, above all, Charles W. Mills, with his *The Power Élite*, first published in 1956.

The second strand, on the other hand, stemming from the idea of a diffuse and shared power and rejecting the idea of an inevitable unequal distribution of resources, focuses on the interdependence and reciprocal conditioning between the few and the many, blurring their reciprocal opposition and interpreting the elites as a plurality of heterogeneous and mutually competing minorities. The examples – even just considering the most classical ones – are numerous and varied, starting with Arthur F. Bentley (1908), often considered to be the forerunner of the pluralist strand, continuing with the German sociologist Karl Mannheim (1997a; 1997b), with his two writings *Mensch und Gesellschaft im Zeitalter des Umbaus*, first published in 1935, and *Demokratisierung des Geistes*, written in 1933, up to the “polyarchy” of Robert Dahl (1956; 1971) and the “strategic elites” of Suzanne Keller (1963). Considered more “open” and “democratic” than the “pure school”, this strand allowed studies on elites to regain credibility in the scientific debate. One central reason is that it – with its focus on “elite pluralism” and concurrence – contributed to the birth of so-called “democratic elitism”, whose founding date is often made to coincide – as will be seen, not without neglecting the works of certain previous authors – with the year 1942, when Joseph A. Schumpeter published his famous *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*.

To date, we can say that elite studies have regained some vigour. However, in spite of some important approaches that have attempted to go beyond the division between strands (Field and Higley, 1980) and in spite of the remarkable efforts of the literature in revisiting and updating the often elusive concepts of “elites”, “organised minorities”, and “ruling classes” (Best and Higley, 2010; Hartmann, 2007; Hradil and Imbusch, 2003), there remain important gaps and confusion in the exegesis of the classics, as well as several open questions. The discussion of these aspects, which are, however, only rarely addressed

(Higley and Pakulski, 2007; Mongardini, 2000b), is crucial in order to assess the relevance and analytical potential of a more or less “elite-theoretical” approach.

Put in very broad terms, the research question of this contribution could therefore be summarised as follows: *what can elite research tell us today about contemporary organisational structures, forms, and dynamics, regarding the distribution of resources within and outside them, and about the power relations established within and through them?*

However, given the vastness of the subject, it is necessary to refrain from over-ambitious investigations, to fix the fundamental concepts, narrow the field, and formulate a more circumscribed guiding question. First of all, we understand power by moving on from Weber’s classic definition – power as the possibility within a social relationship to assert one’s own will in spite of opposition (Weber, 1922). Then, we specify the political meaning of power, according to a definition that is close to the approach of the elite research: political power is «the possibility of taking and imposing, even using force, decisions that are valid for all members of society» (Sola, 2006, p. 91 – my translation). Political power, therefore, has a «socialised» purpose (Burdeau, 1982, p. 26). We then define “domination” as institutionalised power (Popitz, 1992), specifying its more properly relational dimension (Lasswell and Kaplan, 1968, p. 75), because power always addresses the subordinate, and its interactional dimension (Simmel, 2017), because the subordinate subject always exerts an influence on the subordinating subject (Mongardini, 2011, p. 27). Let us now limit our analysis to that specific set of relations between the rulers and the ruled, typical of modern (western) politics, which classical elite theories had dealt with, despite their reciprocal differences, and which is centred on a tacit pact of domination, an “implied contract” (Ferrero, 1947; Pacelli, 1990), based on the consent of the ruled and on the legitimacy of the rulers, and made explicit in modern western democracies through the system of political representation. With Carlo Mongardini (2011), we summarise this set of relations as “political society”. We then ask *to what extent this set of relations still really plays a central role in contemporary political life. We ask, more precisely, to what extent the internal differentiation of political elites, the pluralisation of elites in general (some specifications*

*will be needed on the term “elite”), and the transformations of (political) power, fragmented outside its traditional arenas (e.g. parliaments), render political society and the very idea of a political class anachronistic.*

Let us now present the problem from which we start. The strength of the pluralist current has been to go *Beyond the Ruling Class*, to quote Suzanne Keller’s famous book (1953), and to give rise to a rich season of studies on the “pluralism of elites”. Any analysis that prescind from pluralism, from the diversification of centres of power (Burns, 1994; Mongardini, 2011), from the extreme fragmentation of decision-making processes, and from the existence of «implicit holders of decision-making power» (de Ghantuz Cubbe, 2019, p. 21) can no longer suffice (Mongardini, 2000b; 2017). However, scholars of elites seem to underestimate a central aspect. Since modern political society – with all its structures, starting with the political class (or, if we want to use a less ambiguous term, the “political personnel”) and the system of representation – continues to exist and there are no signs of it being replaced, it is not enough to emphasise its downsizing in favour of new centres of power; but it is necessary, on the other side of the coin, *to analyse the modalities and above all the consequences of its persistence.*

In other words, differentiating the political class within itself has meant emphasising its heterogeneity, and re-dimensioning the role of political “elites” has meant affirming that «the point of view of politics [in the traditional sense] is no longer privileged» (Donati, 2000, p. 73 – my translation). Nevertheless, the existence of a set of individuals – “the rulers” – who are jointly accountable to the ruled, cannot be ignored, and “non-privileged” cannot be mistaken for “insignificant”. The traditional configuration of politics persists in the general change. Consequently, it is not so important today to go beyond the ruling class, but to resume and update the analysis of the relationship between pre-existing and persistent political-institutional forms on the one hand and general social and political change on the other. That is, between “old elites” embedded in these forms, and “new elites” riding on the coattails of contemporary societies’ transformations). It is necessary, namely, to study the continuous game of «de-structuring and restructuring of political organisation» (Mongardini, 2000a, p. 21 – my translation).

With this in mind, this contribution has two interconnected objectives:

1. the first goal, which is a necessary premise of the second, consists of reducing the fracture between the “pure” and the “pluralist” school. Although there are clear differences between the authors of the two strands, and this distinction maintains a classificatory usefulness, it risks substantially dividing strongly interconnected aspects and topics.
2. Then, by re-examining the classics of Italian elite theories, I will discuss the problem of the relationship between the persistence of the political-institutional configuration of modern politics in the face of the pluralisation of elites and the fragmentation of power.

The central thesis of this paper is that political society and the tacit pact of domination between the rulers and the ruled persist to this day unchanged in their fundamental characteristics, producing two effects. On the one hand, an anachronistic situation is created, which is a symptom of the crystallisation of (political) forms in the face of (social) life (Simmel, 1918)<sup>5</sup>. On the other hand, political society continues to represent the only pillar for dealing with the current phase of transformation (and crisis?) of democracy and for avoiding dangerous «untimely changes» (Mosca, 1925, p. 11 – my translation), if not real “leaps in the dark”. The contribution begins by reconstructing the development of the literature on “elite pluralism”, but limits itself to providing some definitional clarifications and demonstrating the compatibility of the strands mentioned above. The second chapter argues for the relevance of elite research and analyses the relationship of modern political society to general social and political change. The final chapter, taking its cue from Vilfredo Pareto’s transformations of democracy, outlines some central dynamics around which contemporary democracies seem destined to revolve.

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5 For Simmel’s central idea that collective life constantly goes beyond all forms, which then become detached from its incessant flow, see Mongardini (1976, p. LIX) and Simmel (1976, p. 75).

## 2. “Pure” versus “pluralist” elite theories?

A lot of ink has been spilled over the problem of defining elites, and the concept of “elite” has undergone quite a few variations depending on how it has been used by different authors. Gaetano Mosca was not an advocate of the term, criticising its evaluative meaning and preferring concepts such as “political class”, “ruling class”, or “organised minority”. However, he did not refuse to refer to the “bests” and oscillated, at times, towards a melancholic view of the role of the “aristocracy” (Mosca, 2021, p. 535 ff.; Bobbio, 1962, p. 16). Vilfredo Pareto, on the other hand – who was re-examined by authors closer to us such as Giovanni Sartori (1977) – clearly linked the elite to the concept of “aristocracy”; the elite thus represented essentially a value group (Sola 1993). For Robert Michels, who held a radical vision of democracy, the elite ended up, especially before his adherence to fascism, corresponding with the oligarchy, the inevitable product of any form of organisation, (Bluhm and Krause, 2012; Michels, 1911; Tuccari, 2012). Accordingly, without having to go beyond the three great classical scholars – to which, however, Guglielmo Ferrero should always be added – we can generically derive three fundamental meanings of “elite” (Sola, 1993):

- *neutral*: elite as a “status” and/or position (organised and superordinate minority),
- *ameliorative*: elite as a restricted value group and/or aristocracy,
- *pejorative*: elite as oligarchy.

The strictly definitional problem of the elite, however, soon became inextricably linked to the typological one. In other words, the question, “What is the elite?” intertwined with the question, “Who are the elites?”. Thus, the problem of “pluralism” was born. It was the starting point for the separation of the two strands mentioned above, whose alleged incompatibility, however, rests largely on some scholars’ *inaccuracies* in the exegesis of the Italian classics on the one hand and on an internal diatribe within US literature on the other. In the following, while not denying the distinction between strands per se (and without reconstructing the very long path of elite research in full), I will address both of these aspects.

According to the most frequent interpretations (Keller, 1963; Hartmann, 2007, pp. 19-20; Hoffmann-Lange, 2003, p. 111), the great shortcoming of classical elite theory – again, it should be remembered that a homogeneous “classical elite theory” never existed – was that it did not (sufficiently) address the typological problem. In other words, according to such interpretations, the Italian authors had an (almost) exclusive and one-dimensional interest in *the* political elite, *the* ruling class. It was only through Karl Mannheim (nevertheless, still often overlooked) and Joseph Schumpeter that the topic of the pluralism of elites and their competitive differentiation took hold in elite studies, laying the foundations for the birth of democratic elitism (Best and Higley, 2010; Sartori, 1977; Schumpeter, 1943).

Now, there is no doubt that the dichotomy between the organised minority and the disorganised majority that was elaborated by the classic scholars can be considered at least partly one-dimensional. However, some important clarifications are necessary. First of all, it is not possible to place the views of the classic scholars side by side without appropriate distinctions. As stated by Bobbio (2005, p. 240), for example, «the current opinion» – current in his time, but never really outdated – «which considers Mosca and Pareto as twin brothers, is an indication of a shallow analysis of the thought of both». If the idea of an almost absolute interest in the “ruling class” in the strict sense may be largely valid for Mosca<sup>6</sup>, it wavers with reference to Pareto. While not denying the centrality of politics in Pareto’s treatment, one cannot fail to note the breadth of his analysis beyond the mere ruling class (Krais, 2001, p. 12). Indeed, one can undoubtedly state that the study of the latter represents for Pareto a specific aspect of a general theory of society. A prime example here is the distinction between the “elected governing class”, which takes a more or less direct part in the decision-making processes within the political sphere, and the “elected non-governing class”, which comprises members of a broader upper stratum, but outside the more strictly governing sphere (Pareto, 1916 § 2032)<sup>7</sup>. As already pointed out by Zuckerman (1977, p. 334), this subdivision is presented by Pareto almost as a matter of

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6 For an informative revisiting of the one-dimensionality of Mosca’s analysis see Piano (2019, p. 526), but also, in part, Zuckerman (1977, p. 333).

7 It is worth remembering that the elected non-governing class is extremely broad, so much so that the first example Pareto gives to describe it is that of the “famous chess player” (Pareto, 1916 § 2033). See also Krais (2001, pp. 12-13).



course and introduces the reader to the theme of “social heterogeneity”. It is also worth mentioning the clarity with which Pareto rejects a definition of the “political class” as a homogeneous block, thus initiating reflection on the internal differentiation of elites: the «governing class is not a homogeneous body. It too has a government – a smaller, choicer class (or else a leader, or a committee) that effectively and practically exercises control» (Pareto, 1935 § 2254).

The imprecision in lumping together Mosca and Pareto under the same banner with regard to the theme of “elite pluralism” is then flanked in elite research by the complete absence of references to the development of elitist theories in Italy in the years immediately following the publication of the works of the two masters (and those by Michels). Not only did several prominent Italian thinkers insist on the existence of multiple elites, but also on their necessity in and for democracy, giving rise to what would be called the «pre-Schumpeterian season of democratic elitism» (Portinaro, 2009, p. 325 – my translation). Without claiming to be exhaustive, it is worth recalling here not only the important contribution of Piero Gobetti (1923; 1924), but also that of Filippo Burzio, whose interest was far from being directed solely at the ruling class and who contributed to underlining the clear differences between Mosca and Pareto. Burzio affirms that Mosca’s «political class is only one – albeit one of the most important – of the many elites considered by Pareto; the latter, moreover, took care to distinguish the political class from the others, calling it the “elected governing class”» (Burzio, 1945, p. 40 – my translation).

Another important example is Guido Dorso (1949) with his *Dittatura, classe politica e classe dirigente*, where the political class represents a specific group of the broader ruling class, which also includes the economic and intellectual spheres (Bobbio, 2005, p. 232). The political class, indeed, was defined by Dorso as a “specialised subsection” of the ruling class (Dorso, 1949, p. 127). Moreover, going beyond Mosca’s vision of a homogeneous and cohesive political class, Dorso anticipated one of the pillars of democratic elitism, namely the idea that democracy is possible only where we find *elite differentiation and pluralism*. This point is brilliantly summarized by Bobbio (2005, p. 233 – my translation): Dorso

marks the passage from the primitive phase of the doctrine, as formulated by Mosca, in which the political class constitutes an undifferentiated group, to a more mature phase, better suited to interpreting the power situation of an industrial society, in which the political class, understood as the class of politicians, is but one of the groups holding power, and not always the most important.

As can be seen, therefore, the idea of an incompatibility between a “pure” elite school and a “pluralist elite school”, at least as far as classical theories and their developments in Italy are concerned, becomes somewhat blurred<sup>8</sup>. In addition to Italian thinking, it was the German sociologist Karl Mannheim who contributed to the discussions on the pluralism of elites. According to Mannheim, who was mainly interested in *Wissenssoziologie*, elites can be categorised into the following types: the political, the organizing, the intellectual, the artistic, the moral, and the religious (Mannheim, 1997a, p. 82-83). Mannheim ascribed to elites the task of fulfilling specific social functions; elites are for him «part of a system of collective relationships and necessities» (Keller, 1963, p. 14). As Suzanne Keller points out, Mannheim thus added to the classic dichotomy between state and society – or between the ruling class and the social body – the distinctions between economy and society, culture and society, army and society, the academy and society (Keller, 1963, p. 14).

The growth and diversification of elites in modern industrial societies were, according to Mannheim, linked above all to the democratisation of the latter, which had given rise, in particular, to four processes: 1) the increase in the number of elites; 2) the collapse of their exclusivity as guiding and orienting groups; 3) the transformation of the principle that regulates their selection (distinguishing three principles: blood, heritage, personal merit); 4) the change in their composition. Although Mannheim (1997a) focused on the negative effects of these processes on cultural life, stating in particular that an excessive pluralisation of the elites entailed their mutual neutralisation and made it impossible for them to perform their function of orientation in modern societies, he showed to what degree differentiation/pluralisation of the elites and democratisation of society represent two sides of the same coin: «[d]emocratization, then, means a loss of homogeneity in the governing

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<sup>8</sup> It is not possible here to refer to the reception of elite theories by fascist literature.

elite» (Mannheim, 1997b, p. 172)<sup>9</sup>. Mannheim also anticipated some of the most important assumptions of democratic elitism, first and foremost, that according to which «it is sufficient for democracy that the individual citizens, though prevented from taking a direct part in government all the time, have at least the *possibility* of making their aspirations felt at certain intervals» (Mannheim, 1997b, p. 179 – italics in the original).

However, it was only Schumpeter who received real recognition in the literature<sup>10</sup>. Although he dealt much less with the pluralism of elites as such, he placed them within the framework of a new democratic theory. There are several reasons for Schumpeter's success. The most important is that, as is well known, he not only recognised from the outset the internal differentiation of political elites – although he spoke rather of “specialists”, “individuals”, or “representatives” (Schumpeter, 1943, p. 250ff.) – but also carried out a systematic analysis of their relationship to democracy. Democracy, then, is characterised by competition between individuals whose object is the attainment of the popular vote and, therefore, leadership. The strong generalisability of Schumpeter's approach in the field of democratic theory thus surpassed both the work of Italian scholars, whose analysis remained in many ways inseparable from Italian history, and that of Mannheim, which, despite their breadth, remained largely enclosed within the sphere of *Wissensoziologie*<sup>11</sup>. Schumpeter, however, highlighted the *internal differentiation* between subjects competing for the popular vote, but he focused mainly on the relationship between rulers and the ruled. Therefore, his contribution to the study of non-political elites and the *pluralisation* of elites in general should not be exaggerated. Hence, we come again to our previous conclusion: the too-sharp division between a pure and a pluralist strand is again problematic (where to put Schumpeter?), unless one wants to separate the strongly interconnected themes of internal differentiation and pluralisation.

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9 Mannheim's works represented an important precedent for the German literature of subsequent years; only Hans Peter Dreitzel (1962) and Otto Stammer (1964) can be mentioned briefly here.

10 For a topical review of Schumpeter's work, see in particular Piano (2017).

11 A second reason for the greater success of Schumpeter's work is, so to speak, editorial. Schumpeter, who had moved to the United States in 1932, published the first edition of *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* in 1942 in English at Harper & Brothers. The anglophone cultural environment was far more powerful and influential than the Italy of 1945 and 1949, when Burzio and Dorso published their works cited here, and the Germany of 1935, when Mannheim published *Mensch und Gesellschaft im Zeitalter des Umbaus* (translated, however, shortly afterwards into English).

Moreover, even considering much of the US debate on elites, the distinction between strands seems to merit revisiting. A first reference that must be made is to one of the most important scholars of democratic elitism, Peter Bachrach (1980). Pointing out the difference between the two editions of Mosca's *Elementi di Scienza Politica* of 1896 and 1923, he observed in the second one a clear differentiation within the ruling class, thus providing an important correction to the frequent exegetical inaccuracies mentioned above. Bachrach (1980, p. 16) indeed underlines the transformation in Mosca's conception: «the dictum of the universality of the role of unified elites is brushed aside to make room for the more liberal and, it should be noted, more empirically defensible concept of elite pluralism». Another of the most famous US scholars of elites, Harold D. Lasswell, played a central role in extending the field of analysis in a "pluralistic" sense beyond the political class strictu sensu (Sola, 1993), without, however, denying the validity and centrality of political power. Lasswell *et al.* (2010, p. 14) defined the elite in a markedly broad sense, indicating with it «the holders of high positions in a given society. There are as many elites as there are values»<sup>12</sup>. Among the elites, however, a central typology stands out, that of the "ruling class", «from which rulers are recruited» (Lasswell and Kaplan, 1968, p. 206; Muno, 2007; Sola, 1993)<sup>13</sup>.

At this point, however, we must remember that it is precisely within the US debate that a dispute between pure elitists and pluralists has developed. The most significant reference, although certainly not exhaustive, is to the strong contrast between *Community Power Structure: A Study of Decision Makers*, by Floyd Hunter (1953), and *The Power Elite*, published in 1956 by the sociologist C. Wright Mills on the one hand, and *Who Governs? Democracy and Power in an American City*, followed by *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition*, published by Robert Dahl in 1961 and 1971 respectively, on the other. Hunter

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12 According to another, older definition, formulated in *Politics: Who Gets What, When, How* (Lasswell 1971, p. 13 – italics in the original): «The influential are those who get the most of what there is to get. Available values may be classified as *deference, income, safety*. Those who get the most are elite; the rest are *mass*».

13 With reference to the complementarity between strands, mention should also be made here of the German sociologist Ralf Dahrendorf and his «pluralist interpretation of post-capitalist society» (Dahl, 1982, p. 22), which, however, was well reconciled with the idea of a pact of domination (*Herrschaftsvertrag*) (Dahrendorf, 1965, p. 245). Finally, it is necessary to mention Raymond Aron (1950a, 1950b), who focuses on political minorities underlying their complexity, although his analysis can be applied more broadly (Dahrendorf 1976, p. 194; Keller, 1963, p. 18).

aimed to demonstrate the existence of a single power elite which is closed, homogeneous, and willing to manipulate in order to obtain and/or retain power. Mills, while dividing his power elite into three subgroups, namely the political, the military, and the economic, argued for their unity, which is made possible not least by jointly managed and directed organisational structures and by a restrictive process of co-opting new members (Mills, 1956, p. 274ff). Robert Dahl arrived at completely opposite conclusions, arguing for the existence of a pluralism of elites, in no case identifiable with a single homogeneous group (Dahl, 2005, p. 91), but rather in competition with each other. In contrast to Hunter, Dahl (2005, p. 89) did not focus on the manipulation of the electorate by the elite, but, in the opposite sense, on the influence of citizens on the latter through voting and/or political participation<sup>14</sup>.

In the following years it was that group of studies linked mainly to the US sociologists G. Lowell Field and John Higley (1980), Michael Burton (Higley and Burton, 2006), as well as the German sociologist Heinrich Best (Best and Higley, 2010), that would provide research on elites with a new direction. The central achievement of these authors – an achievement that we also find, *mutatis mutandis*, in the work of the German scholar Klaus von Beyme (1993) – is to have carried out a comprehensive analysis, considering the pluralism of elites<sup>15</sup>, but reconciling it with a specific focus on the political dimension, and revisiting the simplistic and rigid opposition of “elites’ homogeneity-cohesion” *versus* “elites’ heterogeneity-competition” (Field and Higley, 1980).

But here the most innovative step seems to have been another one. The authors underline the interdependence between elites (the rulers) and non-elites (the ruled) and, in particular, the need for the former to be provided with some justification of their superordinate status – on pain of breaking the relationship with the non-elites (Higley and Barton, 2006). It is therefore at this point that the path of the elite research seems in some way to turn back on

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14 That the greater success of Dahl, who was considered the ultimate exponent of a pluralist and democratic elitism, contributed to the marginalisation of “pure” theorists is well expressed by Piano (2019, p. 536): «Once Dahl was considered to be the paragon of a democratic kind of elitism, the Italian intellectuals came to be seen as proponents of oligarchy who celebrate the way in which liberal political institutions contain mass/popular participation».

15 A categorisation of elites («Business Elite», «Labor Union Elite», «Civil Service Elite») can be found, for example, in *Elite Structure and Ideology*, published by Higley et al. (1976) – albeit with specific references limited to an empirical study in Norway.

itself, taking up old problems that are still extremely topical and revealing its relevance precisely in overcoming its internal divisions. The study of political elites and their relationship with non-elites is then simply a specific – and *entirely legitimate* – point of view within a broader field of research on organised minorities in contemporary societies. The idea of an incompatibility between this specific standpoint and others has no solid roots. The crucial point is to analyse the current characteristics of political elites and the ways in which their relations with other elites and non-elites continue to exist and to function.

### **3. Political society, relations of domination, and social change**

In order to analyse the current configuration of political society and thus, of the relations of domination between the rulers and the ruled with respect to the pluralisation of elites, it is necessary first of all to restrict the research perspective in a descriptive sense, avoiding hypotheses that are too broad and linked to normative evaluations. The questions, central to many of the theories on elites, 1) whether the distribution of resources and power is always and necessarily unequal<sup>16</sup>, 2) whether political elites are inevitable<sup>17</sup>, and 3) whether they play a (normatively) positive or negative role for democracy per se, cannot be taken into account. Instead, it is necessary to start from a minimal observation: in Western democracies a *certain type of political-institutional system*, that is, a “standard account” of representative democracy (Urbinati and Warren 2008, p. 389) *continues to exist to this day* – in spite of all the relativisations that one might wish to make on this point. This account is based on the following: 1) a vertical relationship between those who govern and those who do not (we will return briefly below to the agents of mediation between these two groups). 2) This relationship corresponds with a super- and sub-ordination bond between the two

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16 On the topic of inequality and its justification by political power, see Poggi (2001, 31-37).

17 To date there is little doubt that «in countries of a size normal in the modern world, elites are inescapable and, one might add, essential. They are not merely a consequence of population size; they stem from urbanization and at least incipient industrialization. With these qualifications, one can say that modern societies of any size and complexity *always* have a small number of people in them much more able than others to shape political outcomes» (Higley, 2020, p. 1213 – italics in the original).

groups, where power is institutionalised into domination (Popitz, 1992). 3) The relationship expresses itself through the system of representation (Cotta, 2016; Lanchester, 2006; 2011; Pasquino, 2009).

There is quite an extensive bibliography on the foundations of such a relationship, especially with specific reference to the genesis, forms, and meaning of representation (Duso, 2003; Moschella, 1999; Urbinati, 2000; Urbinati and Warren, 2008). For the purposes of our analysis, which focuses on the definition and persistence of political society, it is sufficient, however, to limit ourselves to some commonly accepted aspects, which were already well expressed by the classical theorists of elites. The first is that rulers cannot justify their position to the ruled merely by possessing power *de facto* (Mosca, 2021, p. 85). Rather, they must have a certain degree of legitimacy (Ferrero, 1947). The second, the obvious counterpart to the first, is the existence of consent on the part of the ruled. The relationship described is therefore one of «command-obedience between rulers and ruled based on the obligation of representation-responsibility of the one and participation-legitimation of the other» (Mongardini, 2011, p. 38 – my translation).

Now, we can say without any doubt that this relationship is essentially dualistic. If, indeed, from a *horizontal* point of view, one of the fundamental presuppositions of democracy is pluralism, on the contrary, from a *vertical* point of view, the foundation of contemporary political society continues to be bilateral at its core. The rulers, who are entirely and collectively answerable to the ruled, continue to represent the first “pole” of the relationship of domination. For their part, the ruled – or, if one prefers, “civil society” – are united by a bond of horizontal equality and by their common subordination to the rulers, and, thus, continue to constitute the other “pole”. Now, it is true that between these two poles there are agents of mediation (Kitschelt, 2006; Massari, 2007, p. 111). It is also true that the system described here has modified itself over time (Mongardini, 2011)<sup>18</sup>. However, it does not seem possible to affirm that the *foundations* of the relations of domination and the basic configuration of political society have changed.

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18 See, for example, the transition of representation from a purely liberal conception to a more properly pluralist one, based on the role of the parties (Massari, 2007). On parties, just as an aside, an updated reflection about Michels' perspective is increasingly necessary.

Here we come to a crucial question. What is the relationship of this persistent political-institutional configuration with the transformations of power (and what can elite research tell us about it)? Today, the processes of (internal) differentiation and pluralisation of elites on the one hand and the increasing complexity and diversification of the “ruled” in contemporary extreme social pluralism<sup>19</sup> on the other hand produce a double effect. In the following, I will argue two theses. Accordingly, I will describe the normative conclusions one might draw from these theses – conclusions, however, which are deliberately presented as contradictory and insufficient. Finally, I will attempt to identify a synthesis.

1. *Without a clear reworking and redefinition, the current political-institutional system and the current relations of political domination present the risk of anachronism.* Much has been said about the current conditions of the structures, institutions, and players of contemporary political society, starting with the big question of the role of parties, and then moving on to the crisis of the nation-state, passing through the issue of pressure groups, the crisis and/or rupture of the axis of resonance between citizens and political institutions, the problem of political corruption, and continuing all the way to populism (Chieffi, 2006; Hawkings *et al.*, 2019; Pasquino, 2016; Rosa, 2015; 2016; Sciarrone, 2017). But what about power transformation?

It is well known to what extent the differentiation and fragmentation of power have ended up expanding politics beyond the (national) parliamentary arena, not least by calling into question the very role of the political personnel encapsulated in it<sup>20</sup>. The processes of differentiation of the traditional political elites, both at the supranational and the subnational levels, limit the space for the maneuvering of the national decision-making centres on which political society continues to be based. Moreover, the diffusion of decision-making power among the various social and economic powers (finance, banks, consumers, associations,

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19 The existence of the “ruled” as a “pole” of the relationship of domination with the rulers is strongly linked, for example, to the problem of the composition of the ruled themselves – with particular reference to the size of the electoral body, the question of citizenship, and the legal status of the foreigner (Lanchester, 2011, p. 80).

20 In this context, it is important to underline the importance of public opinion, which is increasingly aware of the difficulty of traditional political personnel to cope with the growth of general uncertainty, especially that linked to the economic processes of globalisation (Schwan, 2010, p. 13). Similarly, Greven (2010, p. 66) states: «when a majority of citizens believes that those holding the central government-offices do not really “govern” as they proclaim, the fundamentals of democratic legitimacy will erode». On the widespread and increasingly difficult-to-circumvent dominance of the large networks of the world economy and finance, see Tuccari (2020, p. 19).



stakeholders in general)<sup>21</sup>, which has taken place through formal and informal processes, has contributed to producing what has been defined as «organic governance»<sup>22</sup> (Burns, 1994). In other words, the traditional vertical relationships of delegation/representation are thus flanked by a set of horizontal decision centres. Meanwhile, there is a liquefaction of decision-making and executive structures (Eckardt, 2016, p. 161)<sup>23</sup>. It is important to emphasise, as has been done in much of the literature, that in this context the system of representation can be “corrected” and “integrated”: the most classic example (but certainly not the only one) is that of the strengthening of institutions like the referendum. On the other hand, we cannot exclude the possibility of giving a coherent form to new instances of democratic participation (an obligatory reference here is to “participatory democracy” – Allegretti, 2010)<sup>24</sup>.

However, it is legitimate to ask whether (some of) these corrective attempts, as things currently stand, are actually sufficient or are at least partly mere palliatives (Lanchester, 2011, p. 37). Looking through the lens of elite theories, it seems in fact that one of the central problems continues to remain unaddressed, *namely, that political society as we know it and the traditional relations of domination themselves continue to exist but may be in a phase of splintering away*.<sup>25</sup> Perhaps it is the very dualistic verticality between rulers and the ruled, and the legitimacy of the relationship of supra-ordination and sub-ordination, that has entered a crisis<sup>26</sup>, *simply because social and political life has extended too far beyond the limit to which this relationship can reach*: there «is a structural deficit between societal conditions and forces, on the one hand, and government institutions and capabilities, on the other» (Burns, 1999, p. 167)<sup>27</sup>. In this context, then (and here we come to the first normative

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21 On this aspect and in particular on the relationship between «Business and Politics», see Poggi 2001 (p. 141f).

22 The concept of “organic governance” should not be confused with that of “multilevel governance”, with which it is intertwined but not identified. For a systematic reconstruction of the meaning of governance see Iannone (2005).

23 On this point, with particular reference to the role of the state and its difficult relationship with supra- and sub-national competitors, see Lanchester (2011, p. 31 – my translation), who refers to a «change that has involved the forms of politicalness».

24 On the role of alternative representative bodies, interest groups, and «citizen representatives», see Urbinati and Warren (2008) and Warren (2008).

25 In a similar vein, see Antonio Campati (2022, p. 1), according to whom «in contemporary democracies, the balance between the minority principle and democratic principles, one of the components underlying the relationship between liberalism and democracy, is being broken».

26 On the “vertical dimension of democracy”, see, in particular, Sartori (1995).

27 In addition to this, the literature also underlines a more “agent-related” problem, so to speak, namely the decline of

– and unsatisfactory – thesis), one might conclude that politics must *overcome* the traditional boundaries of the parliamentary arena, political parties, and electoral systems, and abandon what now appears to be a fragile political configuration. But is this really the case?

2. *The transformation processes of contemporary society and politics have presented no real alternative to the current relations of political domination.* Political society continues to exist, and despite its serious internal shortcomings, it continues to provide ineliminable means of defence for the ruled that cannot be found in any form of non-institutionalised power. Thanks to the persistence of political society, there continues to exist a “central source” of political power, which is linked to national sovereignty (flanked and/or challenged, as far as EU member states are concerned, by the role of supranational institutions), which through central political institutions maintains the monopoly over physical coercion (Weber, 1922) and which continues to be identifiable, traceable (because it is institutionalised) and also *sanctionable by the withdrawal of consent by voters*. The relationship between the dominant and the dominated, therefore, has not ceased to make power relations (at least somewhat) more secure (Poggi, 2001, p. 43). Thanks to the persistence of political society and relations of domination, power remains interactional: «[p]recisely because [power is] institutionalised, the forms of dominance are never unilateral expressions of power, but forms of interaction between the dominant and the dominated within a constant relationship» (Mongardini, 2011, p. 91 – my translation). Therefore, the “minimal” basis of representative democracy described by Schumpeter and brilliantly summarised by Best and Higley (2010, p. 15), also remains both valid and *essential*, because no alternatives can be identified:

[g]overning power is centered in some representative body or office and transferred from one political

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“political class”, which is often reduced to a “consortium” that is concentrated on defending its own interests (Mongardini, 2017) and likewise, is prone to corruption. On the role of this agent-related dimension, it is worth quoting here a short passage from a posthumous essay by Giovanni Sartori (2005 – my translation), which is concise but pregnant with meaning, and refers to both the rulers and the ruled: «democracy as a set of structures is, or can be, a machine that functions. Those who do not function are the machinists, at all levels: from the heads of the machine (the rulers) to the mini-machinists (the people, the ruled)». More recently, Campati (2016; 2022) too focuses on the “quality” of the political elites.

faction to another through open, periodic electoral competitions to dominate that body of office. Acting as voters, citizens choose which competing persons and parties will represent them [...]. Once chosen by voters, representatives and executives conduct the people's business consonant with not jeopardizing their chances of re-election too greatly.

Political power is thus forced to continue to justify itself, to seek legitimacy: «the principles of legitimacy are justifications of power, that is, of the right to command; because of all human inequalities, none has such important consequences and therefore such a need to justify itself as the inequality deriving from power» (Ferrero, 1947, p. 29 – my translation). It might then seem appropriate to affirm – and here we come to a second, and also unsatisfactory, conclusion in a normative sense – that the preservation and protection of this political-institutional order should be encouraged in every way, despite the fact that it entails a long list of failures, starting with the parties' inability to prevent oligarchic drifts (Urbinati, 2020, p. 32) and ending with the «divorce of the “few” from the social pact on which democracies were built after the Second World War» (Urbinati, 2020, p. 28 – my translation). Indeed, it could be said that the central objective is precisely to repair those failures. But is that really the crucial point?

I think that it may not be productive to concentrate all of our energies on the internal problems of political society, while much more attention needs to be invested in the issues related to its general configuration and that of its relationship with the “outside world”. *Political power is changing but political society is crystallised.* This, then, is the crux of the matter: *we are currently experiencing a short circuit between the preservation of persistent political forms and the transformation of the general societal and political order.*

We can then perhaps normatively affirm that politics must bring transformation and conservation together again. It must «adapt to the new spaces of collective life and necessarily go through an anarchic-constitutive phase of a new type of organisation» (Mongardini, 2007, p. 100 – my translation) and recreate forms, institutions, and personnel capable of «offering an answer to [the new] collective problems» (Subirats, 2010, p. 163 – my translation) *beyond but also alongside and through* the classic political-institutional

sphere. And it is with regard to these aspects that the challenge for political elites will be played out, because «an elite worthy of the role cannot limit itself to defending its own world, without understanding that something in that world has not worked or no longer works» (Nevola, 2019 – my translation).

#### **4. Conclusions: elites and the transformation of democracy**

Observing the processes involving political elites, their relationship with the ruled, and the general configuration of political society in the context of the growing complexity of contemporary society, we see a long process of transformation that the crystallised forms of the political society are only partly able to follow. Taking an up-to-date elite theory perspective (on which, however, there is still much work to be done), freed from conflicts between strands, and taking into account the reflections made here, three central relationships are identifiable, through which this transformation takes place and on which it is important to reinforce research.

*1. The relationship between centripetal and centrifugal forces.* Pareto had already addressed this issue, stating the contrast between a force that pushes for the concentration of central power, and another that pushes for its division (Pareto, 1980, p. 931). Where the centrifugal force grows, central power, which Pareto identifies with sovereignty, tends «to become a meaningless name»; meanwhile, the power of certain individuals and/or groups, which are subordinate in theory, but which acquire «independence in practice», grows (Pareto, 1980, p. 937 – my translation)<sup>28</sup>. The relationship between these two forces and between centralisation and decentralisation, however, does not end with the problem of sovereignty, but is closely interconnected with the more general pluralisation and fragmentation of power. With reference to the internal processes of contemporary organisational structures, this relationship is taken up, among others, by Robert Dahl (1982,

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<sup>28</sup> It should be specified here that the two forces, as well as the elites themselves, who alternate in the circulation process, «never appear in pure form and never operate in isolation from each other. The predominance of each is always a matter of degree» (Higley and Pakulski, 2012, p. 338).

p. 102), who classifies it as one of his «dilemmas of pluralist democracy». But the dialectic between centripetal and centrifugal forces also remains essential for the relationship between rulers and the ruled in two senses.

- On the one hand, *within* the relationship there are simultaneously thrusts that support the action of power (centripetal) and thrusts that push for its contestation and renegotiation (centrifugal) (Dahrendorf, 1976; Mongardini, 2011, p. 61)<sup>29</sup>. In its various facets, this is one of the most classic problems in the history of political thought.
- On the other hand, however, the relationship between the two forces concerns *the relationship of domination per se*: the centrifugal thrust of the general social and political change shifts power to external, non-institutionalised centres, and tends to override the classical relationship of domination. The centripetal force, on the other hand, tends to keep power within it.

2. *The relationship between explicit and implicit holding of political power*. In traditional political society, political power is closely linked to political personnel and the structures in which it operates. In other words, it is explicitly linked to a specific group of subjects with a precise position within a political-institutional organisation, who are thus destined (if elected) to become holders of public office. The blurring of political society, however, implies the growth of an implicit political power (de Ghantuz Cubbe, 2019), which presents itself as non-institutionalised, and is not linked to a “specific group”, nor to specific political offices<sup>30</sup>, and which increasingly resembles the “second face of power” highlighted by Bachrach and Baratz (1962). As we have seen, new actors have entered into politics, or, more precisely, politics has spread among new actors. But the institutionalisation of this kind of politics (in genuinely democratic fora) is lacking. It therefore seems increasingly a matter of urgency to assess the forms and consequences of what we might call an infinitely

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29 See also the approach of Urbinati (2020, p. 28).

30 In a similar way, Urbinati and Warren (2008, p. 388) affirm that we are witnessing a «disjunction between the standard accounts of democratic representation, focused primarily on territorially based electoral representation, and an increasingly complex political terrain, which is less confined within state territoriality, more pluralized, and increasingly dependent on informal negotiation and deliberation to generate political legitimacy».

and nebulously extended “political field” (Bourdieu, 2001)<sup>31</sup>.

3. *The relationship between verticality and horizontality of political power.* The relationship between these two dimensions concerns both the internal organisation of political elites and their relationship with other elites on the one side, and with the ruled on the other side (Sartori, 1995).

- Regarding the first point, it can be said that in contemporary democracies political elites present a fundamentally pluralistic internal configuration. This, however, under certain conditions, can be subject to strong «top-down elitarian logic» (Donati, 2000, p. 78 – my translation) and it is not to be excluded that one elite may gain power over the others. This happens, above all, where political society undergoes processes of authoritarian involution by radical populist forces, which significantly change elite structures and dynamics.
- Regarding the second aspect, a relevant point is the *responsiveness* of the “vertical dimension” of democracy in the face of the dispersion of power along the horizontal line<sup>32</sup>. Here, in turn, in this horizontality new forms of “verticality” emerge, namely, (implicit) substantial inequalities – not too far removed from Robert Dahl’s «dispersed inequalities» (2005, p. 85).

It is important to recall here that these processes, as such, do not seem to indicate a “crisis of contemporary democracies”. This dubious expression<sup>33</sup> would be perhaps better replaced by the concept of “transition” or “reformulation” of democracy (even if one should recognise important elements of crisis *within* contemporary democratic societies). However, it cannot be ruled out that a general crisis may indeed arise in the perhaps not-too-distant future. Looking at political society and its relationship to the transformation of the general social and political order, *the crisis is not to be found in the very existence*

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31 On the political field for Pierre Bourdieu, see in particular the work of Hans Peter Müller (2016). On the link between the political field and representation, see in particular Lanchester (2006).

32 The relationship between verticality and horizontality becomes even more central when radical populist forces delegitimise the vertical structure of representative systems (Diehl, 2019).

33 Gaspare Nevola (2007, p. 171 – my translation) affirms that «we have sufficient elements and documentation to agree on the fact that contemporary democracies, and the consolidated ones in particular, are very persistent and do not seem to be on the verge of a “collapse”. For them, the typical conditions that define the situation of crisis of democracy cannot be recorded at the moment».

*of transformative dynamics*<sup>34</sup>, but in their hardening. It is the disconnect between form and change, between conservation and transformation, that tends to push democracies into a short circuit<sup>35</sup>. It might then be worth recovering those theories of power that today still have much to say on these aspects and whose never-exhausted originality continue to guarantee an overall vision. They contextualise the institutions and forms of democracy in terms of the dynamics of social relations and transformation, carrying out an operation of fundamental importance, namely that of linking «the current deficits in the functioning of representative democracy with the general changing framework of the time» (Subirats, 2010, p. 155 – my translation).

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34 One is reminded here of Norberto Bobbio (2014), who stated that for democratic regimes, being in transformation is a natural condition.

35 As recalled by Donatella Pacelli (1990), this aspect was already central to Guglielmo Ferrero, who identified fatal consequences in the lack of harmony between political institutions and the needs of the social body.

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