

# The Sociology of Elites

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## Abstract

Elites are those with vastly disproportionate control over or access to a resource. We can understand this as a position that a social actor occupies, or we can imagine such resources as a possession of an actor. The study of elites is the study of power and inequality, from above. It involves looking at the distribution of social resources, which can include economic, social, cultural, political, or knowledge capital. It also means exploring the role of institutions such as schools, families, and clubs in how such resources are organized and distributed. Over the past decade, particularly as social power and economic rewards have become increasingly concentrated in the hands of the few, elite sociology has experienced a revival. Empirical observations of these phenomena point to the changing character of American inequality.

## INTRODUCTION

The sociology of elites is, like many areas of sociology, faddish. At times elite studies have been quite popular and some might even say central to our discipline, and at other times such work has been largely abandoned. Today work on elites is experiencing a revival, in part because of the recent dramatic role played by elites in increasing inequality. In this review, I attempt to provide a general overview of the (primarily American) scholarship on elites. This task is easy and difficult for the same reason: No review of this area has appeared upon these pages or, indeed, in any other venue, and so there is much ground to cover. The result is a review that some may call sweeping and others shallow. I call it a start.

To begin I must define my object—elites. This is no simple task, as scholars in this area rarely define their term, and thus there is little agreement on (or even discussion over) a definition. Yet in general there are two schools: Those who, following a kind of Weberian definition of class, generally think of elites relative to the power and resources they possess, and others who, following a more Marxist line of thought, think of elites as those who occupy a dominant position within social relations. In both instances, elites are those with power and resources, and the disagreement is whether one looks at the individual control over these properties or instead explores the structure of relations that empowers or enriches particular position-takers.

I will try to have my cake and eat it too by defining elites as those who have vastly disproportionate control over or access to a resource. Within this definition we can think of elites as occupying a position that provides them with access and control or as possessing resources that advantage them—the difference is in our unit of analysis (individuals or the structure of relations). Important for this definition is a secondary point: The resource must have transferable value. Imagine, for example, that I am the greatest jump-shooter in the world. I can likely convert this skill into considerable

economic rewards, influence the national culture through my fame, and integrate myself into some of the higher social echelons. If, by contrast, I am the greatest jump-roper in the world, I may be admired, but I am likely not well compensated for my skill, and my hold on the cultural and social life of the nation will be nonexistent. Understanding elites means not just making sense of the resource they control or have access to; it also means considering the conversion of that resource into other forms of capital.<sup>1</sup> For the remainder of this review, I consider capital as an object of social contention—what counts as a resource and its transferability are defined socially. There are almost limitless capacities that could be of social use; what is of interest is less the content of these capacities than the social processes by which some become valuable and others do not.

In addition to understanding what resources might be valuable and why, elite scholars are also interested in the varying rates of conversion across time and place. In a capitalist society, money is king, and it is continually mobilized to ensure this dominance. But in more aristocratic or status-based societies, economic capital's conversion into other forms of capital can be constrained, and money is perhaps not the most important resource. In all societies, other resources can be mobilized to beget money, and money can be used to acquire other resources. Of empirical interest, then, are the exchange rates of resources across social forms. And so we often observe actors struggling with one another, attempting to create more favorable conditions of exchange for the particular resource they control most dominantly.

To study elites, then, is to study the control over, value of, and distribution of resources. In simpler terms, this means studying power and inequality—from above. Though elites are not representative of society, the distribution of power in their favor often means that elites are the engines of inequality. This is particularly

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<sup>1</sup>Throughout this review, I use “capital” and “resource” interchangeably.

the case when the balance of power becomes heavily or increasingly skewed. Today, elite power seems to be on the rise.

Although many point to a new gilded age, our elites are also quite different from those in the past. Rather unfortunately, demographic data on this group are incredibly difficult to acquire (and perhaps unreliable). Thus, I am somewhat limited in revealing who the members of the elite are. A few basic observations are certain: First, present economic shocks notwithstanding, today's elite are wealthier than any elite we have seen since before World War II (Atkinson & Piketty 2007). Second, increasingly elites are engaged in the finance sector. Looking at the Forbes 400, one can see that in 1982 finance was the primary source of wealth of only 9% of the world's richest. In contrast, by 2007 those working in finance made up 27.3% of the Forbes list. This superelite is also more international than 30 years ago, and it is increasingly likely that such superelites are self-made (Bernstein & Swan 2007). Such trends from a rather tiny sample of the Forbes 400 are in evidence among the broader elite: There has been a decline in dynastic wealth since the 1970s and a rise of self-made elites (Edlund & Kopczuk 2009), and elites are less likely to own capital and increasingly likely to rely upon earnings for their incomes (Piketty & Saez 2003). In brief, members of today's elite are less likely to have inherited their wealth than those a generation ago (though this is relative), more likely to work in finance, more likely to rely upon earnings than ownership of capital, more global, and more diverse geographically and racially (Domhoff & Zweigenhaft 1999).

I return to these points in the three sections that make up this review. First, I begin with the classic literature on elites (see also Bottomore 1993). Second, I build on these theoretical trends to outline how five different resources have been mobilized for or by elites: political, economic, cultural, social (networks), and knowledge capital. And third, I consider how three kinds of social organizations help create such resources and distribute them more or less equitably: clubs, families, and schools.

## PART I: CLASSICS

The earliest questions about elites center around rule. In the history of the written word there has been an almost overwhelming consensus that a small group should rule the larger society. We might call that small group the elite. Yet with the advent of modernity, a two-pronged process began to unsettle this view, heralding a new era of how we understand the elite, the distribution of power within a society, and the importance of equality. On the one hand, social contract theory and a kind of Lockean liberalism presented a vision of the moral equivalency of humans, with some currents even suggesting a superiority of the rights of the ruled over those of the rulers. Rule was by consent, not right, and thereby conditional on the will of the many rather than the power of the few. On the other hand, social differentiation—or the division of labor—undermined the consolidation of power within a singular concentrated elite and resulted in the growth of multiple or various elites who began to rely upon somewhat distinct resources as the basis of their social power.

These two processes serve as the foundation of the basic questions that elite thinkers have asked. The first process has led scholars to wonder how a small elite has continually ruled even as the rights of the many expanded. The second process has inspired thinkers to consider the structure of the elite more generally—their interconnections, concentration, and capacity to and interest in colluding or competing. Underpinning both these areas of inquiry is a somewhat novel position that long-term concentrations of power and rule are illegitimate and that durable inequality is immoral.

At the end of the long nineteenth century, many thinkers were fixated on the first question: How is it that as democracies progress, a seemingly resilient small group is able to rule the many? This question was particularly acute in Europe, where aristocratic legacies were difficult to escape. To answer this curiosity, Gaetano Mosca (1960) argued that a small group was more capable of being organized

than was a large group and that this facilitated the coordination of interests and actions. Although such an argument has few followers today, scholarly attention to the structural properties of elites is widespread.

Robert Michels (1962) also adhered to a kind of structural argument, writing that because of organizational demands—such as the drive to expand an organization, the difficulty of communication with members, the growth and complexity of organizational tasks, and divisions of labor—organizational leaders tended to act in antidemocratic ways (for a modern reworking of oligarchy, see Winters 2011). Although Michels imagined organizational forms as being inherently antidemocratic, he also argued that the masses were necessarily incompetent, as their large size made organization almost impossible.

Like Mosca and Michels, Thorstein Veblen (1994) suggested that, upon close inspection, the puzzle of elites within democracies was not a puzzle at all. He felt that in some respects too much was made of the kind of modernity thesis I have offered—contemporary society is not very different from other societies, and the culture of elites today can be understood relative to those of tribal life. Veblen proposed that in warring tribes the winners would make the losers perform degrading and difficult tasks. Though these jobs were more socially productive than those performed by the rulers, the result was that higher-status groups began to be valued for their lack of social activity. From this perspective, elites do little to advance the economy or the general social welfare and instead define themselves by their leisure and consumption. Veblen's work was a precursor to those studies that emphasized the cultural character to the elite.

Yet Vilfredo Pareto opposed this view, arguing that a useless elite was not the norm, but instead the sign of a dying elite. Premised on the idea that people are unequal in their qualities, Pareto (1935) argued the most gifted group is the elite. From this axiom, Pareto developed his classic theory of the "circulation of elites." In healthy societies, elite status is not relentlessly

inherited or protected through social institutions, but rather new members join the elite because of their talents. Pareto (1984) argued that within democracies such a circulation does not always happen, and therefore democracies have a "natural tendency toward decay." Yet, such decay creates the conditions of reinvigoration, wherein new, more talented members can seize the opportunity created by decline.

Although these classic elite theories continue to influence our thought on elites, in the postwar period elite scholarship made a critical turn and began to articulate the question of elites as an almost moral one. With few exceptions, scholars have tended to code "elite" as the mark of a social problem. And even those who take an alternate view—say, the pluralist school in political science—do so by arguing that the supposed elite are not elite. In general, elites and illegitimacy (or unjustness or problems) tend to be tightly coupled.

Part of this transition is no doubt grounded in the fact that American social scientists began to inherit the elite legacy. And building upon the long tradition of American exceptionalism, the problem of the elite became more acute. With no aristocrats to hand down power and mold the institutions they formerly controlled to their continued advantage, how is it that a new world elite managed to emerge and dominate in the United States much as it did in Europe—and perhaps even more so?

C. Wright Mills (2000, 2002) set the terms of debate for much of postwar elite scholarship. Mills argued that the American power structure was characterized by three levels: (a) the power elite, consisting of corporate, military, and executive leadership; (b) a middle stratum consisting of labor, regional/local elites, members of Congress, and other organized groups; and (c) the unorganized masses. The trinity of military, state, and industrial power was a kind of upper-class caste whose members, because of their shared origins, positional interests, and mutual reliance, acted in ways that helped solidify power. Given the institutional collusion among state administrators, military leaders, and corporate

executives, Mills believed that the kind of Lockean liberalism I identified as an important social force had lost its relevance, becoming rhetorical cover for organizational power. In this sense, Mills's work combined elements of early elite theorists: a structural analysis (Mosca) wherein organizational demands generate undemocratic ends (Michels), with a caste-like power elite (Veblen) that is nonetheless rather robust insofar as new members can join without destabilizing power (Pareto) because of the location of power in institutions, not people (Marx).

G. William Domhoff (1967, 1974, 1978, 1979) is the principal inheritor of this legacy. Like Mills, he argues that the American upper class is different from the upper classes of European countries in that it is made up almost exclusively of successful businessmen and corporate lawyers (rather than descendants of aristocrats). Following Pareto, Domhoff describes the mechanism through which social mobility into the ruling group occurs: the "co-optation of brilliant young men" by education and membership in elite institutions. Because of this common socialization and network participation, people in higher levels of government and business tend to have similar mindsets reinforced by social ties to one another.

The most notable exception to this critical turn in elite scholarship is the work of E. Digby Baltzell, who tended to think of elites as a kind of social fact. Baltzell (1987, 1989, 1995, 1996) was not interested in "the problem of the elite"; as I discuss below, he sought to provide a detailed account of their composition, lives, trajectories, and mores.

After the first two decades of the postwar period, there was a relative lull in elite scholarship, particularly in America. The question of the elite seemed almost quaint in light of the rights movements of the 1960s. As women and nonwhites began to demand and acquire greater social integration and opportunities, the future seemed a question of the impact of these social processes to our social world. The corresponding changes were profound—the household structure of Western nations radically changed,

the economy transformed, cultural tastes were realigned, and the legitimacy of social barriers was undermined. In comparison to these processes, knowledge about the elite seemed rather unimportant.

Recently, elite scholarship has revived, in part owing to three factors: (a) the great income divergence that began in the 1970s; (b) the improved technical capacity—thanks to social network analysis—to address questions of the structure and interrelations of the elite; and (c) the popularity of the work of French scholar Pierre Bourdieu. Bourdieu's (1990, 1998) attention to power and inequality resonated with traditional sociological interests, but it did so in new ways as part of a broader cultural turn. His most influential work, *Distinction*, is a modern classic that expands the bases of inequality, providing a broad theory of its maintenance and reproduction with elite tastes (consumption), associations, and dispositions at the core (Bourdieu 1984).

## PART II: RESOURCES

With these general theoretical frameworks in mind, I now turn to five significant resources that elites control or have access to: political, economic, social, cultural, and knowledge capital. My purpose here is not to provide an exhaustive review of the literatures in each of these areas but instead to use each to highlight some of the basic insights within the elites literature.

### Political

Considerable work on political power seeks to demonstrate the noneconomic bases of inequality. For example, in his work on American political life, Bartels (2008) explores the political foundations of the increasing income gap by pointing to the overrepresentation of elite interests in political institutions. He emphasizes how political decisions help produce inequalities because elected officials tend to be keenly aware of and responsive to the interests of the wealthy and often ignore those of poorer citizens. Bartels's work is a rich representation of this tradition. Yet my focus in this section

lies elsewhere: on political transitions and how elites manage them.

Though not often considered elite scholars, historical sociologists often emphasize the elite as central to political processes of state formation, transformation, and even decline. The resulting state forms can be structured to the advantage of the already advantaged, thereby requiring little subsequent active intervention. In this sense, political power is often conceptualized not as something actors have but instead as something that is built into the arrangement of political processes to create biases in favor of a particular group.

Somewhat counterintuitively, scholars have suggested that elite activity was central to the realization of democracy. The classic articulation comes from Barrington Moore (1966), who argued that democracy is not the overthrow of elites but instead a negotiated order between elites and rising classes (see also Higley & Burton 2006). Moore's analysis, while seminal, has hardly been without its critics. Scholars have noted how elites can impede economic, social, and political development. Lachmann (2009) argues that elite self-dealing weakened the European great powers and blocked reforms, leading to the loss of colonies and the inability to make the necessary investments to retain economic leadership. The exception for Lachmann is Britain, which enjoyed its success by limiting such collusionary activities by the elite (see also Brewer 1989).

Yet some scholars have noted that under certain conditions, collusion can be productive. When making sense of Dutch state formation, Adams (1999, 2007) emphasized the importance of elite patrimonial practices to the construction of early modern states. Integrating political work on elites with the cultural turn, Adams finds that political elites, as male heads of the family, became lineally identified with intergenerational privilege and thereby instituted those sentiments into political arrangements—arrangements that helped form early modern states.

Indeed, much of the transitions-to-modernity literature emphasizes not the

triumph of a people over the elite, but elite participation in managing the modernization process. One of the fundamental insights of this literature is how the capacity to influence institutional structures can lead to continued advantages even under changing conditions that might have made such advantages unstable. For example, as state forms become more bureaucratic—where formal, impersonal rules mark decision making rather than inherited offices with particularistic/personal decision processes—how can elites still garner advantage within political institutions?

The answer is twofold. First, if we think of elites positionally, then “new men” might occupy powerful positions, but the logic of that position can be such that it structurally advantages a particular group. Brenner (2006) presents an argument for the rise of merchants in England using roughly this logic. The second is that as dominant forms of social organization change—say, moving from a status-aristocracy to capitalist-democracy—so too do elites. As Stone & Stone (1984) have argued, people adapt their practices and work to convert the formerly dominant resources they controlled (say, status) into those that are increasingly important (money) (though this is not always successful; e.g., Cannadine 1999). In short, as institutions change, so too do the practices of people within them. Institutions are made; this making allows those in dominant positions to shape their logics in ways that advantage them. And even as some new members join the elite, they do so within the context of the institutional arrangements that allowed for their ascent; thus, they often become committed to such arrangements.

## Economic

The recent revival in elite studies is in no small part due to the greater and greater seizure of national wealth by a smaller and smaller group. This has particularly been the case in the United States, but the process can also be seen in other national contexts (Atkinson & Piketty 2007, 2010).

Economist Wolff (1998, 2002) has shown that the distribution of wealth became much more unequal through the 1980s, and this trend continued through the 1990s, albeit at a lower rate (see also Keister 2000, 2005; Kopczuk & Saez 2004; for a fuller review of the work on wealth see Spilerman 2000). Building upon these insights, Piketty & Saez (2003, 2006) use tax return data to show how income inequality is returning to the levels seen between 1913 and the early 1940s. The tremendous concentration of income increases among the top 1% and 0.1% points to the increasing elite seizure of the national earnings.

How elites have been able to achieve this inequality is something of an open question. Looking at CEO pay, DiPrete et al. (2010) have argued for “leap-frog” effects, although Gabaix & Landier (2009) argue that such an increase in pay is due to firm size, and Kaplan (2008) has suggested that higher marginal returns to skill are central. Yet a cross-national view does not illuminate why these processes seem so amplified in the United States compared with other nations, suggesting that neither technological progress nor managerial skill is largely tenable as an explanation. Instead, much of the change is likely explained by the ability of executives to determine their own wages (DiPrete et al. 2010, Godechot 2008, Piketty & Saez 2006). Furthermore, the rise of finance capitalism and the decline of manufacturing and unionization have facilitated the increase in wage seizure by those at the top (Tomaskovic-Devey & Lin 2011, Western & Rosenfeld 2011).

Such rising inequality has also influenced mobility. Although the relationship between inequality and mobility requires considerably more study (Hout 2004), in most instances higher levels of inequality mean lower levels of mobility (Torche 2005). Mobility estimates once suggested a high degree of intergenerational movement (Becker & Tomes 1979, 1986), but such estimates have been revised using better data, suggesting that children strongly inherit the economic situation of their parents (Solon 1992, Corcoran 1995, Mazumder 2005). Intragenerational movement

seems greater than intergenerational, but this is largely explained by women’s recent labor market mobility (Kopczuk et al. 2010), which suggests that, as inequality has increased, social positions have become more stagnant and inequality far more durable (Massey 2008).

Finally, we should note the rather contradictory trajectories of the average American—who has experienced wage stagnation and low mobility—and the elite. Elites have experienced considerable wage movements in the past several decades. A wealthy individual has likely enjoyed income and wealth gains at rates far greater than those immediately below him. Simultaneously, those immediately above him have far outpaced his own considerable gains. Furthermore, there has been a relative increase in self-made elites. Unlike most Americans, elites have experienced considerable wage growth and mobility. This divergence between the elite experience and the average American experience can help explain why a shared understanding of the national situation may be challenging for those located in different positions. Some suggest that the resulting concentration of wealth is unstable, but we may alternatively ask whether the period between 1947–1970, which was marked by relatively high equality and mobility, was an outlier. The question remains whether elite seizure is an anomaly that will be rectified or a return to the kind of normal dominance experienced for much of history.

## Culture

The broader cultural turn in sociology has had a particularly significant influence on elite scholarship. Scholars have argued that cultural dispositions serve as markers of elite status and that, in addition to reflecting social position, culture also helps to produce it (Bourdieu 1984, 1993). Elites use culture both to help constitute their own identities (Beckert 2003) and—through boundary-drawing (Lamont 1994)—to exclude others. The historical establishment of a “cultural hierarchy” was central to elite formation, with highbrow art on one end of the spectrum and mass, lowbrow on the other

(Levine 1990). Elites used cultural institutions to construct themselves as a class—defined by a particular set of tastes, values, and ways of being (Beisel 1998, DiMaggio 1982). More recently, scholars have found that elite cultural tastes have shifted from snob to omnivore—yet all the while fulfilling the same process of differentiation and distinction (Peterson & Kern 1996).

Much of this work builds upon the Bourdieuan idea of cultural capital. In some of the earliest work in this tradition, DiMaggio & Mohr (1985) demonstrated the importance of cultural capital to life chances. They find that cultural capital has significant effects on educational attainment, college attendance, college completion, graduate attendance, and marital selection. Their work helps establish the importance of cultural factors as not just an outcome of elite status, but as an explanation for it. Further, scholars have argued that elites use culture to mark themselves and protect their status. Ostrower's (2004) work on the boards of major cultural institutions shows how elites seek to maintain the exclusive character of their boards and thereby help maintain their status, all the while negotiating the demands of artistic institutions that are supposed to be increasingly diverse and open. In addition to constituting themselves and their tastes through such cultural associations, elites create symbolic distinctions between themselves and others in society (Lamont 1994). Culture is a resource used by elites to recognize one another and distribute opportunities on the basis of the display of appropriate attributes.

The content of these attributes, however, has changed. Levine (1990) argued that through much of the nineteenth century there were few differences in the cultural tastes of elites and masses. However, during the Gilded Age (the 1870s to the 1920s), the rise of class and ethnic anxiety led elites to make greater cultural distinctions between themselves and others. They began to claim opera, classical music, fine art, and certain kinds of theater and literature. They became high brow (snobs). Yet in recent years, this high brow thesis—one seen to be supported by the work of Bourdieu (1984)—has

been amended. In their seminal work on the topic, Peterson & Kern (1996) use survey data to explore the musical tastes of wealthy individuals. They argue that elites are increasingly omnivorous in their tastes, listening not only to classical music, but to jazz and blues, world music, and maybe some hip hop and certain country (say, Patsy Cline, Johnny Cash, or Hank Williams, but likely not Garth Brooks; for more on omnivores, see also Bryson 1996, Goldberg 2011). Such omnivorousness could be because elites are more open or inclusive, or omnivorousness may be the new symbolic boundary that marks elites, like snobbishness of old (Khan 2011).

Scholars have also explored how elite cultural tastes have influenced other marginalized or excluded elites. For example, in their work on the life of Boston's Black Brahmins, Fleming & Roses (2007) argue that this group often mirrored the organizational practices and aesthetic sensibilities of Boston's Anglo-American cultural leaders. During a period of widespread and explicit discrimination, black elites' mirroring of white elites' tastes helped them with their project of cultural uplift while nonetheless reifying racial divisions.

Taken together, this work emphasizes how elites have deployed culture to their advantage. It also points to the ways elites fortify their position by not simply relying upon a single resource for their social advantage. There is nothing inherently elite about many of these developments in cultural sociology, yet the focus has tended to be on the elite. I suggest that, in part, this is because there is a greater comfort in mobilizing cultural explanations for the advantaged (the tendency when looking at disadvantage is to emphasize structure). No doubt this is because of the anxieties of explanations that rely upon the culture of poverty (but see Small et al. 2010). The culture of elites seems to carry no such baggage and, as such, is more easily deployed to explain inequalities.

## Social Networks

Ties to others serve as resources. Much attention in elite sociology has been paid to these



ties: how connections facilitate information transfers and help either to coordinate action or to produce consistent modes of action because of shared understandings produced through common experiences. In this tradition, elite scholars have emphasized the importance of interlocking corporate boards.

The earliest of this work was done at the turn of the century. Louis Brandeis (1995 [1914]) critiqued the ways bankers gathered the money of the average American and invested it in companies whose boards they sat on. These large companies then used this investment to stifle competition, thereby limiting innovation and growth. Brandeis argued that this was possible because a small group of elites sat on boards together and, cabal-like, acted upon their coordinated interests. V.I. Lenin (2010 [1917]) largely replicated Brandeis's findings in Berlin. Lenin argued that the interweaving (and at times merging) of banks and industrial cartels led to the development of the most advanced form of capitalism: finance.

The work of Mizruchi (1982) has powerfully continued this tradition, providing a portrait of the interlocking directorates of corporations in the United States from the turn of the century. Interested readers in corporate interlocks should look to Mizruchi's (1996) review of this area.

This literature has not been without its detractors. Fligstein & Brantley (1992) challenge the view that the interests of bankers, owners, or interlocking boards determine the actions of the American corporation. Instead, they argue that power relations in the firm, conceptualizations of control, organizational structure, and the action of competitors are central to explaining the actions of firms. Nonetheless, the work of network theorists has demonstrated the persistent ties of upper-level elites or, moving beyond the individual level, the structural relations of firms (Mizruchi & Schwartz 1992). Furthermore, such work on elite ties has produced a series of arguments about how the small size of the elite and the density of their ties help with the coordination of action. For example, Useem (1984)

argues that as profits declined and regulation increased, business leaders adapted a new network form. Creating solidaristic ties with one another, business elites began not competing with one another, but rather coordinating their activity. Useem describes an inner circle of business leaders who use this network to advise governments and guide them toward decisions that are favorable to the interests of large corporations. And thinking about the political sphere, Burris (2004) has used campaign contribution data to evaluate the emergence of political cohesion. He argues that instead of emerging around shared industry or geographic interest, such cohesion seems to be best explained by the social ties formed through common membership on corporate boards.

Such social network tools have been used well beyond the corporate boardroom. Bearman (1993) has demonstrated the importance of social network analysis to understanding elite mobilization. Looking at the structural foundations of religious rhetoric, Bearman argues that elite networks shifted their basis from local kinship to cross-local religious ties. This facilitated a new structure of the elite, one that, tied to Puritanism, was central to the development of capitalism. In a similar analysis looking at the birth of the Renaissance state in Florence, Padgett & Ansell (1993) use network analysis to make sense of the elite consolidation of the Medicis. They argue that whereas class consciousness and fiscal crisis were significant causes of elite consolidation, Medicean political control was ultimately produced by the Medicean network structure. This elite network structure provided both the conditions of possibility for the state as well as serious limitations and elements of its decline.

Scholars have also blended the insights of elite interlocks with that of the Mills theory of a power elite. Domhoff (1979) best encapsulates this tradition with his argument that there is an upper class with distinct institutions, lifestyles, and outlooks. Domhoff argues that the upper class uses its wealth and shared interests (developed in clubs and schools) to control the polity and to construct institutional logics that

will favor it. The ruling class is, in many ways, a ruling cabal (see also Schwartz 1987).

This idea has received its most aggressive challenge from political scientists. Dahl (1963) argues that, instead of a power elite, American life is ruled by pluralism. Using data on political power and representation from New Haven, Dahl argues that many interest groups compete in the political sphere, and the government mediates between them. Power is not concentrated among an interlocked elite but instead is diffused across a variety of groups. Yet using Dahl's own notes and interview data, Domhoff (1978) argues that Dahl missed many of the critical ways in which businessmen achieve their power. Rather than a story of urban renewal, Domhoff argues that interlocked elites in New Haven acted in coordinated ways to expel the poor to make room for business.

## Knowledge

Ideas, knowledge, and ideology are seen as central to the maintenance of elite power. In some instances, these are presented as tricking nonelite classes into supporting elite interests. In others, the construction of a shared point of view is central to helping constitute an elite class and consolidating its interests in ways that limit internal contention.

The classic articulation of the role of knowledge in elite rule comes from Gramsci's idea of hegemony. Gramsci (1971) noted that, rather than rule by force, the dominant classes often used cultural knowledge to subsume the interests of the dominated under their own interests or persuade the dominated to share or adopt the values of the dominant. For Gramsci, hegemony is a process whereby the many are ruled by the few through consent insofar as their interests and values are aligned with bourgeois values. Building on Gramsci, Sartori (1969) argued that elites use ideology to manipulate the masses into particular political mobilizations. Ideology is the key tool of elites for doing mass politics. Such Gramscian positions can conceptualize the masses as ideological dupes.

Yet some work has thought of intellectuals quite distinctly and imagined that their control over ideas can be a source of social power in its own right. For example, Gouldner (1979) has argued that intellectuals have begun to emerge as a distinct class. As the bourgeoisie declines, the proletariat is unlikely to inherit social power. Instead, says Gouldner, a new class of intellectuals is emerging and taking power through ideology, social knowledge, the favoring of cultural capital, and professionalism. Through institutions such as schools and through professions, intellectuals make their interests more central and consolidate their social power.

Lamont (2009) has chronicled some of the logics employed by this new class, and Zuckerman (1977) has outlined the logic of status within a knowledge elite. Lamont explores the epistemic culture of the academic elite and argues that elite academics rely not simply upon their interests, but also upon what they view as culturally valuable when making judgments. She points to the emotional, social, and cultural bases of knowledge and judgment. By contrast, Zuckerman studies the stratification of knowledge elites and finds that those who win awards are increasingly and disproportionately rewarded, resulting in growing disparities between elite and other scientists. Some of the processes of inequality that we observe in the broader society can be seen among Zuckerman's Nobel laureates. In his history of the development of business schools, Khurana (2007) has outlined the ways in which the knowledge produced within business schools (knowledge that helped create legitimation for the profession) has largely given way to external pressures from corporations, foundations, and other interested actors. The basis of knowledge within business schooling and thereby business more broadly has shifted from the establishment of a profession to, in large part, the legitimization of market ideology. Khurana (2007) helps us see how the basis of knowledge is often institutional, and as institutions shift in light of demands and pressures, so too does the legitimized knowledge.

Finally, with increased complexity and division of tasks, understanding how to mediate organizational environments has become a resource in itself. In his early work, Putnam (1976) argued that the development of technical, exclusive, and administrative knowledge by specialist knowledge-groups can usurp the democratic process. It is not that the less powerful are dominated; it is that knowledge specialists can best understand a complicated system and thereby influence how decisions are arrived at. Looking at socialist transitions, Eyal et al. (2001) build upon these insights by pointing to the importance of dissident intellectuals to the formation of Eastern European states. They argue that the breakdown in 1989 was led by the former technocratic faction of the communist ruling class (fighting against bureaucracy). Yet these technocrats were only successful once they made considerable concessions to dissident intellectuals. Both of these elite groups built the foundation of capitalism out of socialism, one using organizational capacity and the other serving as the basis of new knowledge.

### **PART III: INSTITUTIONS: CLUBS, FAMILIES, AND SCHOOLS**

The study of elites often emphasizes how social institutions play a central role in the (re)production of elites. Rather than inheriting titles, today's elites often navigate institutions that help credential them. This is not to say that family inheritance is no longer important. Indeed, many scholars have focused on the family as one of the central ways by which people learn to mediate social institutions (Bourdieu & Passeron 1990); the family is seen as highly adaptive and at the heart of creating durable inequalities. One of the places in which families help one another is in their association with clubs and training for schools. Educational institutions are particularly complex insofar as they are central to both elite reproduction and broader social mobility.

Social clubs have served both to constitute an elite and to exclude people from social power (Beisel 1998). Such clubs typically

emerge during moments of threat. When economic mobility increases, or when "new men" seem increasingly able to join or even surpass the richer families of the age, social institutions like clubs emerge or gain prominence, thereby helping to create forms of protection from the rising, threatening mobility of the new rich. Through clubs, the new rich can be sanctioned, excluded from opportunities, or manipulated into coordinating their interests with an older elite (Beckert 2003). Clubs also help to create class consolidation by constructing a shared culture (Domhoff 1974).

The work on clubs moves the research on interlocks out of the boardroom and into more social engagements, and the research on families at times moves such work into the bedroom. Beisel (1998) has argued perhaps most forcefully for the importance of family when making sense of the elite. She argues that the aim of the Gilded Age capitalist was not to accumulate as much capital as possible, but to establish a family embraced by the socially elect. Such work builds on that of Baltzell (1987, 1989, 1996), who noted some of the more aristocratic features of the American elite, particularly how patterns of intermarriage have allowed for degrees of social closure. For Baltzell, the United States is a "business aristocracy" where colonial Protestants expanded beyond their personal family ties to create institutions such as boarding schools, Ivy League colleges, and social clubs. This created an upper class founded in family, mediated through institutions, and ruled by a shared culture. Yet this dense overlap of social, familial, and economic ties led Baltzell to worry that the upper class is decreasingly an aristocracy that rules and increasingly a caste that is likely to collapse.

Baltzell's works (1987, 1989, 1996) provide a mostly structural analysis—using marriage records, the social register, and other materials to provide an account of the arrangement of the elite. But the work of Aldrich (1997) helps us actually see how elites make sense of their own lives. Aldrich, scion of the Rockefeller family, interviews his family and other superelites to understand the culture, values, and meaning

of inherited wealth (see also Marcus & Hall 1991).

This attention to families has also been taken up by the unfortunately small literature on the nonwhite, non-Protestant upper class. These elites are not just a particular case, but could serve as important empirical material for understanding the position of advantage even under conditions of relative disadvantage. The work of Graham (1999) has focused on the often neglected black upper class, tracing this group back to some of the first black millionaires in the 1870s. Rather than focus on black celebrities, Graham focuses on elite families: the institutions they belong to, the places they summer, and the ways they mirrored the white elite, but often with a greater commitment to those less fortunate. And in a discussion of the Jewish elite, Birmingham (1967) traces the experiences of wealthy German-Jewish families in New York. Birmingham gives accounts of how this marginalized population often embraced its Germanness over its Jewishness in order to join New York's growing financial elite. We are fortunate that scholars have recently taken up this kind of work on nonwhite elites (Lacy 2007) and pushed forward our thinking by emphasizing the intersections of race, class, gender, and elite status (Sherwood 2010).

Whereas families and clubs are often thought of as creating social closure, schools are more complicated. They are some of the greatest sources of mobility, yet can be tremendous gatekeeping institutions. The growth of and changes in schooling have created some of the most fertile ground for the study of elites. On the one hand, elite schools have increased the levels of access to valuable resources to those who have previously been excluded. On the other, schools are engines of inequality, often helping to convert birthright into credentials and thereby obscuring some of the ways elites are reproduced.

In his work on schooling, Bourdieu asks how, as society rejects aristocratic advantage, the elite seem to be from the same families (Bourdieu 1998, Bourdieu & Passeron 1990). Bourdieu argues that the logic of educational

institutions corresponds to the orientations of the elite. In short, the strategies and actions that are rewarded within institutions like schools generally match how the already advantaged tend to play the game. Expanding these insights to the American case, Khan (2011) provides an analysis of an elite boarding school (on elite education, see also Cookson & Persell 1986, Espenshade & Radford 2009, Gaztambide-Fernández 2009, Karabel 2005, Stevens 2007). Khan shows how elite educational institutions increasingly use the language of talent, merit, and hard work (rather than appeals to their ties or to other powerful institutions such as families and firms). Yet in doing so, elite educational institutions obscure the systematic inequality they help produce. Elite schools, like the elite more broadly, seem to be more open and fair, yet inequality rises.

Tracing the history of such elite boarding schools, Levine (1980) shows how they became popular in the late nineteenth century because of a desire on the part of old established families to create cultural institutions they could use to define their own cultural identity and to isolate themselves from *nouveaux riches* industrialists and lower-class immigrants. However, they soon became places where the children of new wealth were brought together with those of the old families. This upper class was not the most talented or capable. Following 1960s graduates of Harvard, Zweigenhaft (1993) finds that elite prep school students are among the least academically qualified upon entering school, that they continue to underperform relative to their public school and less elite private school peers, and that they are less likely to earn any professional degree except a law degree (see also Useem & Karabel 1986). Yet still they earn more.

Elite colleges have experienced significant demographic changes since the 1970s; today many Ivy League schools are or are almost majority minority, with black populations that reflect the nation as a whole. But the class composition of elite colleges is still very biased toward the already wealthy (Bowen & Bok 1998, Charles et al. 2009, Massey et al.

2003). This points to a tremendous change in the elite, which is where I conclude my review: On the one hand, we have a more diverse elite, with women outperforming men in schools (Buchmann et al. 2008) and higher-than-ever rates of attendance at elite colleges of African Americans and Latinos (Espenshade & Radford 2009). Yet although there seems to have been an elite opening, on average the student bodies at schools are richer than they once were (Bowen et al. 2006, Golden 2006), and elites have a greater and greater share of the national wealth.

## CONCLUSION: NEW DIRECTIONS AND A NEW ELITE

As social institutions have opened and inequality has increased, scholars have pointed to the ways in which a new elite has emerged (Khan 2011). This idea of a new elite has two currents. First, scholars look within nations, emphasizing how national transformations have changed the conditions of possibility for the elite. Some social commentators think of the new elite as bourgeois Bohemians, emerging out of the rights movements of the 1960s (Brooks 2001). And they have reflected upon an increasing diversity among the elite, though not all these diverse elites enjoy similar life chances (Zweigenhaft & Domhoff 1991, Domhoff & Zweigenhaft 1999). The second current considers elites on a more international scale. Here the elite are thought of as a new “superclass” (Frank 2007, Rothkopf 2009). As the economy has globalized and elites have become increasingly distributed in the rising economies, scholars have moved their attention away from national boundaries and toward how elites are made in a more globalized world. These new elites are thought to have properties and sensibilities different from those in the more nationally focused contexts.

These trends highlight three important points that elite scholarship must address. First, most research on elites has focused on those who are white, Protestant, and male. This makes sense, as those with the greatest power

and advantages have tended, overwhelmingly, to come from this triad of categories. However, looking more globally, we must recognize that knowing about the elites requires an expansion beyond this group. We know comparatively little about nonwhite, nonmale elites, who are growing as a proportion of this population. If we think of elites positionally, then empirical work on the conditions and positions of advantage can no doubt yield significant insights into the structure of power and inequality of which elites play such a central role. This means that researchers might glean insights from looking at the dominant of various hierarchical systems, even if such dominance is local rather than global.

Second, elites reveal something important about the nature of inequality. Although we often focus on the condition of disadvantage when exploring inequality, recent work points to how inequality has largely been driven by the wealth and income seizure and protection of the advantaged. Elites are often the engines of inequality, whether we look at economic distribution, political power, the definition of what is culturally desirable, or access to and control over institutions that help create social knowledge. Furthermore, as elite institutions have opened in the past few decades, inequality has increased. This requires us to format explanations of inequality that do not simply rely upon social closure or exclusion. This difficult-to-access group is not easily studied with the traditional tools of stratification research (surveys). Yet to understand the changing character of inequality, we require a deeper understanding of elites. This requires using administrative data (as economists have so fruitfully) and qualitative methods such as interviews and field research.

Finally, it is unlikely that all insights from elite research will yield generalizable rewards. Although there is extensive evidence for the “strength of weak ties” (Granovetter 1973; Montgomery 1991, 1992, 1994), we might ask why elites seem such a robust group, when most work reveals their tremendous density. It is not that the “weak ties” thesis is wrong; it

is that elites might be ruled by different social processes than other groups are. We might also say that, analytically, there is no a priori reason to believe that the explanations of disadvantage and advantage are consistent (or the inverse of one another). It could be that the explananda of inequality (or power) from the top are different

from those generated when looking at the bottom of the hierarchy. As such, the work on elites may represent theoretical rewards that are limited to a definitionally tiny population. But given their power and impact on social life, we must know much more about them if we are to understand our social world.

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