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## Introduction. Theoretical assessments on political elites

“If we know how the participants [to the political game] got there, where they came from, by what pathways, what ideas, skills and contacts they acquired or discarded along the way, then we will have a better understanding of political events. [...] [K]nowing their abilities, sensitivities, aims and credentials, we are better able to anticipate what they say and do, and to evaluate elites, institutions and systems performance.” Dwaine Marvick (1968: 273-282)

When engaging in an argumentation, rarely does an issue present itself which cannot be best illustrated by one of Aesop’s fables. Abiding by this principle, the contemporary understanding of the concept of elites, as rendered in the writings of many scholars, receives a fair portrayal within such a tale where reason and guile are left to have their moment. The fable entitled “The Fox and the Lion” proceeds with its moral as follows:

“When first the Fox saw the Lion he was terribly frightened, and ran away and hid himself in the wood. Next time however he came near the King of Beasts, he stopped at a safe distance and watched him pass by. The third time they came near one another, the Fox went straight up to the Lion and passed the time of day with him, asking him how his family were, and when he should have the pleasure of seeing him again; then turning his tail, he parted from the Lion without much ceremony.” (Aesop, as cited in Gibbs 2002: 216).

Expressed in fuller form, this fable offers a brief account of the first instance from which the concept of elites departed as well of its last and present condition. Owing to its close ties to other concepts beset in the field of political science, the concept of elite rose and counted its gains once with political science, remaining largely true to itself. As such, it is advisable to set about this short journey which oversees the implications that the concept of elites bore across time, with a general definition provided by one of the elitists and summarized here by S. J. Eldersveld:

“In all regularly constituted societies [...], the ruling class or rather those who hold and exercise the public power, will be always a minority and below them we find a numerous class of persons who do never, in any real sense, participate in government but merely submit to it. These may be called the ruled class.” (Eldersveld 1989: xv)

As phrased above, all early elite theorists consent that it is particular to each and every at least moderately complex societies that power and privilege are set aside for those few ones addressed as elites. It is they who accrue the greater part of that which has been laid for grabs. This fact stems from the early days of humanity, when the wretched ways of a yet debased social and political order distinguished between master and slave. In order to salvage his life, the weaker opponent of those days of yore, admitted to his limits revealed to him

by his thereafter master. He then wept and begged for his life, bowed and began praising his master, as accustomed to all subjects in front of the triumphant, the powerful and the grand heirs. Rejoicing in their victory, those distinguished by birth and riches thrived upon those of infinite lesser breeding and earthly possessions. In the words of Sidney Hook, “all political rule is a process [...] by which a minority gratifies its own interests [...] the masses who have fought, bled, and starved are made the goat” (Hook 1939: 562-563).

In this initial landscape, Ancient philosophers made the first attempts in accounting for the immanent division of power, influence, privilege and morals. Books III and VI of the *Nicomachean Ethics* contain the Aristotelian perspective in regard to the normative approach on the political elite. Aristotle constructs here the cornerstone of the normative direction in the definition of the “political elite”, in which this group of powerful, influential “few” represents the ones possessing a series of special, distinguished qualities. Among these qualities, “*arete*” of the *dianoia* [thought] becomes of paramount importance for the ones in leadership, for the potentates in the *agora*. Indeed, these patricians, these potentates are (or should be) the bearers of “*arete*”, of mere virtue, of some form of intellectual excellence. Aristotelian “virtue” tends of overlap with the Platonian “virtue”, in the sense that “*arete*” would always constitute a faculty, a capability of the soul, not of the mind. Paradoxically, “*arete*” is the halfway, the median between virtue and vice, the “*aurea medicritas*”; therefore, the leading ones, in Aristotelian *imaginarium*, should have the capability of finding a middle ground between virtue and vice, hence excelling in moderation, in *equilibrium*. The measure in which the elite is able to reach “*eudaimonia*” [“happiness”] is an aspect not discussed by the Greek philosopher, though one might hypothesize that, since “*eudaimonia*” is defined as the “activity of soul in accordance with *arete*, or [...] in accordance with the best and most complete *arete*” (Aristotle, Bartlett, & Collins 2011), the leading few might be prone to acquire *eudaimonia*. In a nutshell, it appears sure for Aristotle that the political elite is to possess moral and intellectual prominence, is to consist of men of distinguishable virtue.

However, precisely because the slave alone has performed for ages the real work, thus renouncing his immediate delight, it grew in him the ability to open the world (Sloterdijk 2000/2002: 41). The skills which he acquired meanwhile his master indulged in the outcomes of foreign labour and abandoned himself to the working hands of others, paved the road of the subject’s emancipation from the stale authority of unjustified rule. Removed of that “certain material, intellectual, or even moral superiority” (Mosca 1939: 35) over those they govern, as the latter grew in intellect and skill, the ruler ceased to be so, and the ruled knew of a different destiny. As a consequence of the Enlightenment, this concept of leadership was deprived of part of its content, namely blind faith in the ruler’s arbitrary decisions. Among many, Napoleon was one to remark upon the new political reality and the opportunities it offered: “the idea of

equality, from which I could expect nothing other than rise, had for me something seductive” (Von Falkenhausen 1941: 104). From heretofore, it is precisely this equal ground from which men of greater ambitions and higher expectations rose above, and that rising distance is the measure of their power and the sign of them being an elite.

This newly found equality is the reason why men began preoccupying themselves with their *status* among the rest and voicing indignation at the superiority of others. The elitists wrote of the conscious, cohesive and conspiring groups, Mosca’s “political class” and Michels’ “oligarchs”, with deference and compliance. Mosca stressed the advantage of numbers in out-organizing and out-witting the larger masses, Pareto rooted the unrestricted social mobility as the prerequisite for the rise of those most adept at using force and persuasion, and gifted with inherited wealth and family connections. Michels postulated that through and through and without omission, elites will surface all large organizations, as a necessity of the inner workings of any functioning body of people. Together they grounded the thought that elites are incessantly placing themselves above the majority and that “democracies are divided into the wielders of power and those who are subject to it and have little power of their own” (Etzioni-Halevy 1997: 44). Within this framework, the concept of elite was tantamount to a detractor of democracy, and consequently of the better virtues of others. In agreement with the elitists, Weber supports the view that even in a democracy the *demos* itself never governs. Nevertheless, Weber and Mosca ascribe certain merits to democracy for counterbalancing the leverage of the bureaucracy, a second peril to the autonomy of the *demos*. However, the fact remains that, according to the elitists,

“political rule involves organization and all organization no matter how democratic its mythology, sooner or later comes under the effective control of a minority elite; the history of societies, despite the succession of different political forms, is in substance nothing but the succession of different political elites; democracy is a political form that conceals both the conflicts of interest between the governing elite and the governed and the fact that these conflicts are always undemocratically resolved in favour of the former.” (Hook 2008: 240)

Skepticism about the contingencies of ethics among the political elite imbued even the Weberian readings that conceive politics founded on the “principle of small numbers” and imagined, in turn, the “leader democracy” (Roth & Wittich 1978/1920: 41-71, 1111-1155, 1414, 1459-1460). Pareto, few years before him, did not imagine: he rather described a “demagogic plutocracy” (as opposed to “military plutocracy”), as a dangerous compromise between elites and democratic ideals, in which the former retain prevalence over the later through “deception, demagoguery and bribing” (thus, everything but moral stances!), giving only the appearance of democracy to the masses (Finer and Mirfin 1978/1902: 142). In effect, political elites are “persons at or near the top of the ‘pyramid of power’” (Putnam 1976: 14), “persons with the ‘organized capacity

to make *real and continuing political trouble without being promptly repressed*” (Higley and Burton 2006: 7 [italics added]).

Defenders of democracy took offence at the slight odds which this most lauded regime was offered. Liberty and equality were brought to the fore, as universal suffrage was deemed the foundation of all sound government for it ensured that the general will shall be expressed and popular sovereignty will be entrusted to its chosen representatives. However, the rationale that elites, thus dignified under the name of representatives, are decided by the will of the people is somewhat inexact. In this respect the argument is forced into the direction of representation and the accompanying “mandate-independence controversy”, which has become an ordinary and familiar subject of discussion. The controversy resides in deciding whether the representative is to do what his constituents urge him to do or what he thinks best.

The beginning and the first half of the 20th century advanced the shift, not only towards an “over-consciousness” of the power gap between elites and the masses, but, paradoxically enough, the acknowledgement of the fact that political elites were, as an intrinsic rule, deprived of any moral prominence over the led masses, they actually eluded any moral stance of excellence and prevalence<sup>1</sup>. Therefore, probably, the veritable transmutation within the *academia* in respect to the moral overview on the political elites and the fashion of defining this group through the lances of ethic excellence and intellectual preeminence is to be found at the beginning of the last century, with the triptych of Italian “elitists” Vilfredo Pareto, Gaetano Mosca and Robert Michels. Paradoxically, though the newly-emerging perspective on the moral dimension of the constitution of the elite is – especially to the latter two – descriptive *par excellence*, daringly honest in the field of sociological research – though quite feeble in the sphere of empirical inquiry –, the exegetes, the observers, the critics hurried to express innumerable rejoinders, labelling – more or less justifiably – the descriptive approach to elites as inseparably intertwined with the prematurely and dangerously rising fascist-corporatist movement in politically infant Italy. Yet, the three prominent sociologists were observers *tout court*. The realities within the group of power- and influence-holders had irrefutably changed since Aristotle and, in addition, the realities of the polity *per se* and its expectations from the leading ones suffered transformable mutations. These modifications in the people’s, citizens’ expectations had to be voiced out in the very fashion in which the relationship between the political elite and morality was to be constructed. The descriptive line of thinking about elites has been courageously and vigorously continued and embraced in the 1950s, with the publication of C. Wright Mills’s *Power Elite* (1956), a painful radiography of

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1 It might be argued that the premises for this grim, coldhearted perspective on political elites are to be found on the Italian soil once more, with the Machiavellian depiction of the Prince, the philosophical cornerstone of modern politics. See Machiavelli, Skinner and Price (eds.) 1998/1505.

the American potentates at the middle of the century. Definitely and evidently enough, what conspicuously lacks from these descriptions is the moral dimension of the political leadership, which became diluted under the weight of sociological considerations regarding the corruptible nature and the mundane qualities of the political elite. Fair enough, attempts to rejuvenate elitism as moral and intellectual prominence have been unceasing from Machiavelli and his *virtu* onwards, particularly in the 19th century.

Suffice it to say that democracy eludes the overbearing power of elites solely within the first instance of representation where representatives heed their constituents' wants and interests with deference and devotion. With all honesty of purpose, each representative championing the interest of his district, even against the interest of other districts, ensures that democracy prevails by disallowing for any faction that may form itself. Where interests are multiple and diverse it is "less probable that a majority will have a common motive to invade the rights of other citizens; or if such a common motive exists, it will be more difficult for all who feel it to discover their own strength and to act in unison" (Madison 2003/1787: 45).

The other side of the argument is led by Edmund Burke whose address to the people of Bristol makes the most compelling argument. To Burke, the representative remains as with the Federalists a spokesman for the interest of the district, with the slight difference that "he owes his constituents a devotion to their interests, rather than to their opinion" (Pitkin 1967: 144). His case is argued most eloquently in the ensuing passage:

"Parliament is not a congress of ambassadors from different and hostile interests, which interests each must maintain, as an agent and advocate, against other agents and advocates; but Parliament is a deliberative assembly of one nation, with one interest, that of the whole—where not local prejudices ought to guide but the general good, resulting from the general reason of the whole. You choose a member, indeed; but when you have chosen him he is not a member of Bristol, but he is a member of Parliament."<sup>2</sup>

Fair enough, at this end of the argument, elitism is somehow rejuvenated, as the mandate of the representative is thus relieved of a strict accountability to the grievances and demands of his constituents. The political elites retreat within the Parliament under the panache of more qualitative representation, and govern from this enclosed, higher ground, in an Enlightened fashion, those whom they can barely distinguish from the distance. If democracy is to rely upon the responsiveness of the elected to their electors, given the previous *scenario*, the decisions of the government may tend to reflect the wants of the

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2 The famous address of Edmund Burke to the electors of Bristol (Speech to the Electors of Bristol, 1774), in Browne 1993: 67-82. The mandate of the representative, of the political leader, is thus relieved of a strict accountability to the grievances and demands of his constituents, pointing out the superior qualities of the leading few once more.

governors, more so than those of the governed and popular sovereignty may be abandoned by the wayside, only to be picked up again upon securing a subsequent mandate.

As the debate lingered on, the concept of elite was again revisited, once with Schumpeter's minimal, procedural, instrumentalist concept of democracy (Schumpeter 1942). Democracy was defined as a limited political regime in which power is achieved through competitive elections. To his mind, due to the development of mass democracy, popular sovereignty as depicted in all classical works became inadequate. "A new understanding of democracy was needed, putting the emphasis on the aggregation of preferences, taking place through political parties for which people would have the capacity to vote at regular intervals" (Mouffe 2000: 1). Schumpeter impresses upon his readers the banished thought of the elitists; modern times disavow notions like "common good" and "general will" which they replace with pluralism of interests because only self-interest is held to move and stir any individual who is engrossed only with his own pursuits. Drawing on the elitists' appraisal, individuals are not motivated to act by the moral belief that they should pursue the interest of the whole and consent to the general will, but by more narrow preferences and interests. These preferences are to be voiced and heeded by political parties in their struggle for gaining the votes. Schumpeter manages to rebalance the gains in favor of the descriptive, "a-moral" (one might be inclined to label it) perspective, by eloquently pleading for an elite that seems rather selfish in nature, manipulative towards its voters, displaying no moral, superior stance in reference to the masses.

Therefore, the concept of political elite has arrived at the admission that within representative democracy, each elite is to be confirmed by popular vote. However, the conditions under which the vote of the people is expressed, pose some objections to democracy itself. Firstly, as stated above, "there can be no guarantee that these decisions as well as the discretionary powers they entail will be carried out in the same spirit as that in which they were authorized" (Hook 2008: 242). This is mainly the case of the Burkean elite who think of themselves as being unbound to the views of their constituents and who take pride in following only their conscience and principles. Therefore, what the representative thinks is of paramount importance. However, the followers of the mandate theory are not to be exempt of weariness towards their devotion. Secondly, "we can never be sure that consent is freely given, that is not in bondage to ignorance, rhetoric, or passion" (Hook 2008: 115). Democracy frequently receives such blows, as the speech of a gifted demagogue can override the better judgment of people. Similarly, passions may cloud their mind, just as indecision and disregard may mislead their vote. Lastly, and in close connection to the previous two factors, the vote of the people is usually guided by the political parties' selection of candidates. The electorate is limited in expressing its preference by the initial, prevailing preference of the party. Non-



partisan municipalities necessarily fall outside this category. Thus, it may be concluded that popular legitimization appears to be less of a democratic safeguard when facing the pervasive influence of elites. In order to safeguard the many led, a revitalization of the Aristotelian virtue should have taken place in contemporaneity.

A great number of scholars accuse a rampant crisis of legitimacy affecting Western democracies. This crisis is closely connected to the manner in which political elites are easily legitimized by popular vote following the recommendation of political parties. Therefore, a short comment on the influence that political parties possess within the process of legitimizing political elites is needed. Needless to say that if each voter were to vote for the candidate whom he saw fit to be his governor, then we would most likely be faced with a wide scattering of votes. Therefore, it was found necessary to coordinate and organize the votes of the people because, if left untutored, they would never come to an agreement on a given candidate. "If his vote is to have any efficacy at all, therefore, each voter is forced to limit his choice to a very narrow field, in other words to a choice among the two or three persons who have some chance of succeeding; and the only ones who have any chance of succeeding are those whose candidacies are championed by groups, by committees, by organized minorities" (Etzioni-Halevy 1997: 56). This prerequisite for an efficient, working election restrains the liberty of choice of the voters to a number of eligible candidates endorsed by different kinds of organizations among which political parties.

A candidacy endorsement is not without previous reflection and deliberation. In order for a political party to nominate a candidate for an upcoming election, the soundness of the candidate is brought to bear. The ritual of candidate selection is "the predominantly extralegal process by which a political party decides which of the persons legally eligible to hold an elective public office will be designated on the ballot and in election communications as its recommended and supported candidate or list of candidates" (Butler, Peniman, and Ranney 1981: 75). There are various aspects attached to candidate selection and many issues to consider before putting forth a nomination. Important to bear in mind is the fact that parties enjoy a degree of centralization, meaning that they have party agencies present at the national, regional and local levels. Candidates are usually elected by local party agencies, under supervision by the national or regional agencies. Just as frequent, candidates are selected by national agencies at the suggestion of regional and local agencies. The process of selection can therefore be top-bottom, and just as easily bottom-top. There is however such a thing called "placement" known for stirring resentment among local selectors, when the national leaders take the liberty of suggesting the nomination of candidates whom they support against the preference of local agencies. Instead, the national and regional agencies have the power to refuse their support to a locally selected candidate and even deny him

the use of the party's label, if they disagree with the nomination of the respective candidate. However, any veto practice may render the party divisive and therefore, the national leaders "rely instead upon the local selectors' discretion to avoid choosing candidates that would have to be vetoed".

Another thing to consider during the selection is how many candidates will be enlisted and in what constituencies. This allocation *calculus* will ensure that a balanced number of candidates will be put forth in each constituency, because "too many will spread the party's votes so thin that all its candidates will lose and too few will waste the party's votes and keep it from electing as many candidates as its voting strength permits" (Butler, Penniman, and Ranney 1981: 83). However, being included in the list of nominations does not secure a mandate to any candidate. The number of seats won by the party during the election is distributed according to the list, starting with those at the top and ending with those placed at the bottom, until the number of seats is exhausted. Chances are that only the upper part of the list will assume incumbency, while the rest, though victorious, cannot share in the seats. Hence, "positions on party lists are almost as important as their presence on them" (Butler, Penniman, and Ranney 1981: 84).

Hence, on the background of increasing accusations regarding a rampant crisis of ethics and morality (deontologically understood) affecting the political leadership, the recent, largely empirically scholarly, emerged in order to reconcile somehow the dispute between those voicing the downfall of morals among politicians (that is, professionalized political elite) and thusly asking for moral and intellectual prominence and virtuous qualities, and those boldly pointing out that, with the virtually unrestricted access of individuals in politics, the moral and intellectual quality of elites became inherently decadent. Based on vast and almost exhaustive quantitative research on political elites (conducted especially in Western, highly developed, democracies), this "neo-descriptive" direction is set up to measure the impact of values – either moral, political, social, etc. – on shaping the existing tableau of the "leading few". Moreover, this approach tends to consider aspects that were previously neglected (e.g. commenting on the influence that political parties as "selectorates" or "gate-keepers" possess within the process of recruiting, selecting and legitimizing political elites, considering the importance of preference aggregation in shaping the form of the elites). As such, the overbearing presence of parties and their intricate system of selection and appointments expand to the very outskirts of the political society in which they dwell. Political elites are daily recruited and groomed so to occupy their higher political standing once with the coming of elections. Very little is left to odds, much is thought ahead. The tightly woven system of nominations is solid proof of the capacity of the leading minority to organize itself better than the heavy and robust masses. Political elites spare no effort or wit in achieving incumbency. Popular sovereignty is professed as both political parties and elites are clothed in skins

of humility and reserve towards the word of the people. "The vast machinery of party politics convey to most citizens the belief that minorities finally chosen to govern have been selected by procedures which permit an acceptable measure of popular control" (Prewitt 1970: 110). Upon sober reflection, everyone will be made sensible to their inconsequence within the process of determining the candidates whom they will later entrust with the right to present the person of them all. Democracy is given the backseat in politics because men regularly consent to authorize all the actions and judgments of one man or an assembly of men at the biased advice of political parties.

In these sentiments and in fully descriptive vein, political elites go to the extent of fully organizing themselves in order to secure a popular mandate which they obtain in violation of popular sovereignty. Michels was among the first to argue openly that any "system of leadership is incompatible with the most essential postulates of democracy" (Michels 1962: 364). The inconsistency of leadership with democratic values is owed to the idea and the content of leadership itself. When closely examined, the skills, talents and other qualities embodied by our leaders discriminate against the average citizen, less gifted with those attributes and who is refused the opportunity of being the governor and not the governed.

All researchers who ventured in the field of political elites agree that:

"Legislators are far from being an average assortment of ordinary men. Almost everywhere legislators are better educated, possess higher-status occupations and have more privileged backgrounds than the people they represent." (Loewenberg, Patterson, and Jewell 1985: 18)

Aspirants to political leadership find their chances have improved considerably if they are possessed with private wealth, sufficiently large to fund their electoral campaigns in entrepreneurial political systems, or simply to secure them a higher education. This rationale applies to candidates from both parts of the ideological spectrum, and it remains as true for conservatives as for socialists. The reason is rarely snobbery because these people "are more likely to speak and write well, they are more likely to look healthy and well dressed" and "to work in occupations with flexible hours" (Butler, Penniman, and Ranney 1981: 102) leaving them sufficient time for leadership duties. As a rule, when this above-average socioeconomic and educational status is attributed to a member of the male sex, this man will embody the general definition of an eligible candidate. The most disadvantaged aspirants to national or even local leadership are by far women. Statistics show that 41 percent of the women who served in the American Congress before 1979 were given the seat vacated by their recently deceased husbands. Therefore, "lawmaking remains essentially a man's game" (Loewenberg, Patterson, and Jewell 1985: 21).

The nature of the profession that the candidate is practicing is of equal importance, lawyers and people with verbal jobs, alongside businessmen being the most frequent incumbents of all legislatures. These elites are more apt for

legislative roles owing to the skills which they acquired in their instruction and experience, not quite to their moral outlook. Also, these professions may be thought to encourage an interest in political activity.

As can be deduced from previous comments, being member of a party is a valued asset and almost a vital one outside nonpartisan municipalities. Equally valuable is having occupied the same position for which one is running once more. Incumbents are preferred to non-incumbents because of their experience. These political elites are familiar to the electorate, to the party, to the campaign funders and “they already wear the mantle of the elected public official” (Butler, Penniman, and Ranney 1981: 98). Being guided by the lights of experience and having the weight of precedence to justify its measures, the leadership of an incumbent is favoured by the majority of electorates. Similarly, another attribute of political elites is their local connections, which make them known and trusted throughout their constituency. Unlike an outsider, a local is “more likely to have contributed work and money to the local party and thus to have earned its candidacy” (Butler, Penniman, and Ranney 1981: 100). It is worth mentioning that affiliations either to an interest group, say labour union, religious laymen’s league, farmer organization, or to a certain faction of the party to which the political elite is member, emphasize his *status* and make him a true commodity for his party, but it might cast a shadow of morality in the front of the electorate, as well.

Together, all assets listed above render the candidate for political leadership more commendable than his peers who may lack them, but may cherish ethical positions instead. With these differences in mind, if one is to conclude if democratic principles and ethics – as commonly defined as incontestable human attributes – are at work in present-day societies, inductive reasoning seems to have fallen down to a certain extent. Indeed, one may reason that “elites don’t believe in democracy. They pretend to be interested in the public and engage in deceptive patterns of behaviour in appealing for public support. Hence, they assume a passive public, and they are not really accountable, responsive, nor egalitarian” (Eldersveld 1989: xv-xvi).

Generally, in the field of political elite studies, two intellectual and research directions are customarily distinguished: (1) the normative theories on elites, and (2) the descriptive elite approach. Chronologically, the normative approaches precede the descriptive ones, for they are inclined to identify elites on the basis of their excellence (or “*arete*”), furthermore, on their moral stance or virtue. Pareto, the pioneering name in the descriptive tradition in studying elites, is actually in between the two approaches: the elite was formed either by those who are the best in their field of activity – namely, politics –, who excel in the realm in which they work or by those who are more or less circumstantially, but always temporarily, ephemerally in top decision-making positions in the hierarchy of power, those being in possession of “residues” or “combinations” or “persistence of aggregates” (Finer 1966/1916). The descrip-

tive manner was, starting from Pareto and the Italian “elitists” Mosca and Michels at the beginning of the 20th century, happily and exhaustively embraced by the contemporary scholarly, but most prolific oeuvres written in this fashion appeared in the context of a new “elitist” wave of studies, overwhelmingly empirical ones, at the end of the century: Higley’s numerous books (most important, those co-authored with Dogan (1998), Pakulski and Wesolowski (1998) and Lengyel (2000)), Mattei Dogan’s *Elite Configurations at the Apex of Power* (2003), Etzioni-Halevy’s *Classes and Elites in Democracy and Democratization* (1997), Hoffman-Lange’s compelling study on elites in FRG (1987: 27-47), Scott’s *The Sociology of Elites* (1990) and the countless studies conducted by Eyal, Szelényi and Townsley, separately or in co-authorship (*Making Capitalism Without Capitalists: The New Ruling Elites in Eastern Europe*, 1998) on “transformative” and “revolutionary” elites in East-Central Europe. These largely empirical inquiries appear in the special context of a decade after the communist breakdown and, consequently, treat extensively the process of elite transformation in transitional societies, in the new democracies. Their contribution to the overall scholarly production in the field of elite research is irrefutable, since the focus, the interest of research shifts from the Western democracies to the mutations in East-Central Europe, opening new paths of scientific endeavor for a region constantly in development. In this climate, C. Wright-Mills’s *Power Elite* (1956) appears as an enclave for the descriptive tradition in Western developed democracies in the middle of the 20th century. In the center of the normative “preoccupations” remains the issue of the “quality of elites”, i.e. excellence, which is somehow intrinsic, inherent in the very definition of “elites”; the moment in which the “quality of elites” becomes problematic is the transition between normative and descriptive approaches, when the collocation “the quality of elites” starts to pose serious problems of definition and operationalization: what is, in effect, this “quality”? Is it a moral one, denoting an elite that is ethnically superior, acting for the supreme “good” and being in itself of special “fabric”, axiologically righteous and virtuous? Is it a professional, technocratic one, linking the *status* of “political elite” to a certain degree of efficiency, performance, proper decision-making, good governance? Eventually, is it the representation constructed by a group of individuals able to seize and retain political power, a public image in the face of the masses in order to consolidate power? In his attempt to answer this series of pressing preliminary questions, György Lengyel quoted his compatriot and forerunner István Bibó, when discussing “quality of elites” as degree of “social sensitivity”, defined as both “*caritas*” and “a wide sense of culture-creating, needs-refining sensibility” (Bibo 2004/1942, as cited in Lengyel 2007: 6). To this, Lengyel adds predictability, accountability, replaceability – but only if one inquires on elites as a fully-fledged, comprehensive, unified, largely homogeneous group. If analysed as heterogeneous, fragmented, well-differentiated, easily distinguishable islands of political power forming an all-