THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF ELITES

POWER, CULTURE, AND THE COMPLEXITIES OF DISTINCTION

EDITED BY
JON ABBINK AND
TIJO SALVERDA

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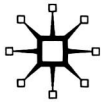

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The Anthropology of Elites

Acknowledgments

This book is the product of a collective effort started in 2008 at the Department of Anthropology at VU University in Amsterdam where both the editors were then working. We are both fascinated by the elites and their life styles and cultural patterns and organized together with our colleague Sandra Evers a conference gathering many international scholars, both at senior and PhD levels. We were gratified with the papers presented and the lively debates that followed and took up the suggestion made by some colleagues to work on a book. The final product is significantly detached from the original conference program but is similarly focused on a specifically anthropological perspective on elites cross-culturally.

We are grateful to the Faculty of Social Sciences at VU University for having facilitated the original conference and to the Royal Netherlands Academy of Sciences in Amsterdam for having provided a conference grant.

Above all, we owe a debt of gratitude to the contributors to this book, whose patience was seriously tested but who were cooperative, enthusiastic, and forthcoming throughout the project despite our litany of editorial queries and suggestions. We also express our deepest thanks to our editors at Palgrave Macmillan, New York (Robyn Curtis and Desiree Browne), for their excellent advice and support in this venture.

Contents

Introduction: An Anthropological Perspective on Elite Power and the Cultural Politics of Elites

Tijo Salverda and Jon Abbink

Aim and Rationale of the Book

This volume is about the anthropological study of elites and addresses anew the challenges of research and theoretical interpretation that this social stratum evokes. On the basis of a fascinating array of case studies and with reference to previously published work, we explore the potential of anthropological approaches to elites and aim to reconfigure their comparative study.

Providing a definition of the concept of "elite"—or "the elect," derived from the Latin *eligere*—is always a challenge, and ours is a nominal one: an *elite* is a relatively small group within the societal hierarchy that claims and/or is accorded power, prestige, or command over others on the basis of a number of publicly recognized criteria, and aims to preserve and entrench its status thus acquired. This definition avoids a moral qualification: the manner in which elites acquire prestige or power can be violent, coercive, or benevolent, and whatever form they take to assert their position, they are societal frontrunners and usually the loci of dynamics and change, because they are emulated and evoke admiration or rivalry and resistance.[1] Elites are dominant in some sectors of society on the basis of certain (im)material characteristics, skills, and achievements, and this can be in any socially relevant field, from crime to politics and from military to entertainment. Elites usually form a numerical minority, but their size can sometimes be very significant.[2]

Anthropological studies on elites are still relatively scarce compared to those in sociology, history, or political science, which may

be partly explained by the historically strong focus in social science on social stratification, political-economic power formations, and the challenges of inequality in the emerging political systems in the industrializing West since the mid-nineteenth century, rather than on stratification and power struggles in non-Western settings. Among the early sociological theorists regarding Western elites were Pareto (1991 [1901]),[3] Mosca (1923 [1895]), Michels (1911), Weber (1958 [1918]; 1985 [1922]; 1997 [1922]), and Mannheim (1940 [1935]). As a theorist of stratification and class society, Karl Marx, of course, also had much to say about the old (feudal) and the new bourgeois elites in the mid-nineteenth–century Europe as part of his analysis of class relations, and he inspired numerous studies on emerging elites and their relation to hierarchy and class structures. Historical studies on elites, including intellectual and religious elites, in the West and elsewhere are thus well-developed.[4]

Among modern elite scholars in sociology and political science, some of the most important have been Mills (2000 [1956]), Dahrendorf (1959), Dahl (1961), Dreitzel (1962), Bottomore (1993 [1965]), Putnam (1976), Domhoff (1978), Etzioni-Halevy (1993), Lerner, Nagai and Rothman (1996), and Bourdieu (1984 [1979]; 1996 [1989]), and the more recent works are by Higley and Burton (2006), Hartmann, (2007), Engelstad and Gulbrandsen (2007), and Daloz (2010). Attention has also been grabbed by more popular, wide-ranging works about Western elites (notably in the United States), such as Schwartz (1987), Rothkopf (2008), or Wedel (2009), which stand in the line of C. Wright Mills's classic *The Power Elite* (2000 [1956]).[5] These books constitute a popular genre notably in the United States and are concerned with how the formation of rich and powerful politico-economic elites may undermine the workings of political democracy and limit real power to the one percent of power-holders in society.[6] Compared to these political analyses and insights on Western elites (in democratic societies), it is remarkable that we still know rather little of the emergence and functioning of elites in the much more closed societies of China, Africa, and the Arab/Muslim world, both in the recent past and in the contemporary globalized era. Especially striking is the absence of recent anthropological monographs on elites, with most work appearing in journal papers and book chapters.[7]

An anthropological approach to elites—in contrast to the more standard political science and sociological approaches—sets itself the task of studying and understanding them from within, trying to chart the *cultural* dynamics and the *habitus* formation (the

internalized behavioral routines and social ideas of a defined social group) that perpetuate their rule, dominance, or acceptance. The claim is often made that anthropological methods can reveal more about the nature of elites as a sociocultural phenomenon and about how they operate. Empirical attention is then paid to the internal workings of elite cultures, to the way they construct, employ, and perpetuate their power and influence, and to the social perception and cultural valuation of elites among the larger public. In addition to the more macro approaches of historians, political scientists, and sociologists (cf. Dronkers and Schijf 2007), anthropology can make specific, empirically rich contributions to elite studies in general, due to its methodological and theoretical focus on the social routines, cultural repertoires, and on the (self-)representations of elites. Related to this, but perhaps not just an anthropological interest, is charting the reactions and the behavioral strategies of nonelite people toward elites. There are obviously significant methodological challenges, because elites are seen to be rather closed and impervious to critical researchers. In addition, the subject demands (self-)reflexivity on the positioning of field researchers toward elites,[8] notably of anthropologists, who due to the particular history of their discipline were not particularly attracted to elites as such, but more to subaltern and marginal groups—they tended to study down rather than up (as Laura Nader [1972] already noted).

In recent decades the study of elites in anthropology has therefore not been very fashionable, although empirical studies of leading groups in non-Western contexts continue to be made. In previous generations, anthropologists perhaps did field research mainly on leaders, big men, religious dignitaries, or chiefs—all elites of a sort, but they were not much theorized as such. A more self-conscious focus on elites is a recent thing and therefore still scarce. The interesting volume edited by De Pina-Cabral and Pedroso de Lima (2000) was specifically concerned with recruitment, succession, and leadership among elites. The last important general collection was that of Shore and Nugent (2002), published a decade ago, an excellent overview that put the issue of elites and their anthropological study again on the agenda. In the present collection we pursue its lead and inspiration by looking at new cases and new ways of doing field research and theorizing on elites, trying to evaluate what we have learned since. We thereby add to the empirical record by presenting a number of well-chosen case studies of contemporary elite formations in their rise or decline. A notable lacuna in the Shore and Nugent volume was the absence of studies on emerging new economic elites or transnational

elite groups that have come to prominence in recent years and are discussed here in three chapters (Horacio Ortiz, France Bourgouin, and Irene Skovgaard Smith).[9]

In our view, elite studies should be directed at the processes, mechanisms, and strategies of the reconfigurations of power in the current global world (cf. Rothkopf 2008; Seidel 2010), as well as at the changing symbolism of elite cultures (Daloz 2007; 2010) and at the implications of transnationalism (Beaverstock 2002; Beaverstock, Hubbard, and Short 2004; Hay 2013; Graz 2003; Robinson 2010). Moreover, elites exist in relation to other social groupings, and understanding the latter's role in constructing or confirming elite positions is equally important. Among the central questions to be discussed are the following: Why are elites considered inevitable in the social order? What is the role of elites ***and*** of other social groupings in shaping distinction? How do elites recruit and replace themselves? What is their social and cultural cohesiveness? How do they define their legitimacy and manufacture consent, if any? How do they avert decline and change? Di Lampedusa, in his unsurpassed novel on the declining Sicilian elite, *Il Gattopardo* (1958), has his main character say the famous words: "If we want things to stay as they are, things will have to change."[10] No contemporary elite has stayed the same, and the perpetual challenge of renewal is incumbent upon them in the face of shifts of power, mutating global production processes, and popular challenges from below—at present not in the least via the new media (blogs, social media). This is even apart from the emergence of *new* elites of various kinds—from criminal to financial to entertainment to sports elites in the postmodern world—and from the new global dynamics in the developing world that have given rise to the reemergence or adaptation of incumbent political and social elites (cf. Taylor and Nel [2002] on Africa).

In trying to explain elite reconfigurations and thus reveal more about the generative societal mechanisms that produce or change them, a more interactionist perspective is useful, looking at infrastructural and cognitive-symbolic elements, articulating upon each other. A political-economy approach—focusing on the material interests, property relations, class bases, and power structures involved—is a first prerequisite of analysis and requires basic quantitative and historical research. But it seems to us not sufficient in itself, as it often does not say enough about the social, cultural, and socio-cognitive aspects of elite (re)production or about the processes and implications of habitus formation involved.

In this book, references are made to important previous anthropological work on elites by, for example, Cohen (1981), Marcus (1983), De Pina-Cabral and Pedroso de Lima (2000), Shore and Nugent (2002), Werbner (2004), and Wedel (2009) to chart the development of elite studies as a distinct field and to emphasize the renewed relevance of anthropological perspectives on elite formation, durability, and transformation, where economic, political, and cultural factors play an interlocking role.

On Locating and Defining Elites

We have given a definition of elite above and will substantiate it more in this section. When the term "elite" is mentioned, most people have an image of what this represents, even though this often remains conceptually vague. In academic literature the term "elite" is often taken for granted and barely explained. It seems to be a container concept. Bert Schijf, in the first chapter, poses the question of *who* actually are the elites in the society. He contends that the answer is still far from easy: elites are often related to positions of power but also to the process of social mobility. Moreover, as he shows, different disciplines use different methods to define and research elites, consequently coming to different outcomes. In a concise way Schijf thus demonstrates the values and the limits of the different approaches to elite research.

If we say that an elite is a social group within the societal hierarchy that claims and/or is accorded power, prestige, or command over others on the basis of a number of criteria and aims to preserve and entrench its status (see above), this refers to groups of persons possessing certain *resources,* a fact that grants them a position of command (cf. Dogan 2003a). Our perspective also implies that elite members share a variety of interests arising from similarities of experience, training, public roles or duties, and way of life (Cohen 1981, xvi). According to Scott's sociological definition (2003), only those collectivities based in positions of command should be seen as elites—this, he writes, distinguishes an elite from privileged or advantaged groups. In the fullest sense, an elite is a social grouping whose members occupy similar, advantageous command situations within the social distribution of authority or social hierarchy and who are linked to one another through demographic processes of circulation and interaction (cf. ibid., 156, 157).

Many of these elites tend to control only *certain* resources that may be mobilized in the exercise of power, since hegemonies, controlling

all resources, are very rare. Consequently, most elites are functional elites, and a distinction can be drawn between, for example, business elites, ethnic elites, military elites, political elites, religious elites, academic elites, entertainment/showbiz elites, and bureaucratic elites (cf. Dogan 2003b, 1; Shore 2002, 4). Even Mills (2000 [1956]) acknowledged the existence of functional elites; yet he argued that the political, military, and business elite in the United States shared interests, tying them into a unified "power elite."[11] Needless to say, such elites are always quite limited in number.

A further distinction is often made regarding the influence that elites wield, to avoid defining every group with a certain prestige and specific skills as an elite. Susan Keller (1963) argued that elites such as sportsmen tend to be significant only to their specific field. Strategic elites, however, have a much wider influence, as their power, decisions, and control over resources have consequences for many members of society. The "1 percent versus the 99 percent" metaphor in debates in the United States, in this sense, is a striking example of probing the (unwelcome) influence of a strategic elite. Although the case studies in this volume are about so-called strategic elites, we want nevertheless to state that we should be cautious not to be too narrow in defining elites. How many people have to feel the consequences of the decisions of an elite? In other words, where do we draw the line of what is a strategic elite and what not? It would be counterproductive, from our point of view, to limit our definitions, as new insights may actually come from empirical research on elites other than the usual suspects of political and economic elites, consequently increasing the understanding of elites and elite-related issues more generally.

Also, we claim that an elite should not be narrowed down to a group in actual possession and exercise of the commanding positions only. Although an elite is indeed constituted of people in command, as Scott mentions, linked to one another through, for example, demographic processes of circulation, those in command are linked to a wider group that does not only directly exercise command but also *shares a way of life* and a variety of interests arising from *similarities*. Arguably therefore, an elite includes more than just those in positions of command. For example, and clearly illustrated by the significance of education, the younger generation of a specific elite may have privileged access to commanding positions at a future moment in time. Widening the elite's functioning beyond their occupying top positions, moreover, is necessary because not everyone in the specific wider social group may exercise command. But these people may nevertheless have influence on the persons who *are* in those positions

through, for example, the shared way of life or their sociocultural frame of reference. Partners and families of the elite thus conceived may impact on the construction and maintenance of this way of life. It is therefore precisely the combined feature of possessing commanding positions and exercising control over particular resources along with sharing sociocultural characteristics, customs, and modes of life—in short, a habitus—with a wider group or a social (sub)system that defines an elite. This, however, should not prevent us from asking new questions about what constitutes an elite, especially in an age of increased global mobility. Ortiz's chapter about professionals in the financial sector perfectly illustrates this—and research on the (global) operations of the super-rich is relevant in this respect as well (Beaverstock, Hubbard, and Short 2004; Hay 2013).

The complexity of the term "elite" also relates to the fact that it is usually a term of reference rather than of *self*-reference, as George Marcus noted (1983, 9)—this is probably because those who look up often see more homogeneity than the people at the top themselves (Fennema and Heemskerk 2008, 29). Elite members may not use the elite label defined according to the above-mentioned characteristics. But when an elite downplays its leading role this does not automatically deny its occupying the top positions. Identifying the aforementioned characteristics that define an elite does not need the approval of the group itself. A critical approach will, therefore, combine the analysis of the elite's self-definition and of "probing their intimate space rather than relying on their formal self-presentations" (Herzfeld 2000, 227).

Elite Phenomena: Some Behavioral Aspects

In many people's daily lives contact with elites seems to play a marginal role. Their interactions are predominantly with people of a similar (nonelite) background. Elites are usually distant, infrequently discussed in detail, though ever present in the media and the entertainment discourse that extends globally. Vague notions and popular beliefs about the power and the influence of elites certainly abound, but are rarely precise. A recurring theme is the mixture of envy and respect for elites, notably the political and the economic elites with tangible power over the lives of others. Elites are almost by definition the object of contestation and challenge, and despite the deserved or enforced prerogatives they have they can never be secure in their possession of them. This also shows that elite is an inherently ambiguous concept.

Issues of growing inequality in power, wealth, consumptive display, and prestige symbolism around the globe seem to indicate that the role of elites at present might be more contested and challenged than ever. A curious fact is that academic insights about the power, influence, and behavior of elites have not run parallel with the fact of their increasing global role and impact. Research on elites in social science shows some significant lacunae.[12] In a clear and concise manner, Savage and Williams (2008) illuminate these omissions of research and wonder whether this correlates with an increased focus on *quantitative* data gathering in the social sciences. It may be that due to their small size elites[13] are easily underrepresented in quantitative studies.

Anthropology, the study with a qualitative approach par excellence, could have filled the gap; yet it has, generally speaking, continued to focus on the marginalized and the less powerful. However, understanding the position of the latter is enhanced by better insights in the actions and choices of elites. When elites are discussed in studies about the marginalized and/or other social groups, the analysis of their choices and practices remains limited, often even simplistic, framed usually in terms of easy antagonisms. One of the notable exceptions in the ethnography of elites, Abner Cohen's *The Politics of Elite Culture* (1981) on the Creole elite of Sierra Leone, indicated that there was much to gain from the combination of in-depth ethnographic data with the theoretical interpretation of elite practices. Yet this book already dates back three decades, and has few if any successors. In the earlier mentioned collective volume *Elite Cultures* (2002), Shore and Nugent presented a rich array of field-based studies that showed once more the great relevance of an *ethnographic* approach to elites. Since then, however, with a few exceptions—such as Werbner (2004)—mostly silence has reigned. Due to a number of institutional, practical, and historical reasons, a field called the "anthropology of elites" was not developed.[14] As noted, this is not to say that many studies have not dealt with elites and their power; yet they often do not tend to take forward elite theory as such.

In the current era of growing (global) inequalities, altering geopolitical balances, sociocultural contestation,[15] and mounting (popular) resistance to the established political classes in much of the democratic world, it is timely and topical to (re)interpret elite behavior and practices and consider them from a cultural point of view. In this vein, the present volume tries to push forward the study of political, economic, and social elites with a number of historical and ethnographic case studies. They all shed new light on a number of theoretical and

methodological issues, relevant not only to the discipline of anthropology but also to social science more generally. Below, we identify a number of common themes of relevance in this endeavor.

Elite Power

As we noted above, despite scant attention over the last decades, the study of elites and elite-related issues has a long tradition in social science, especially in sociology, history, and political science. In their quest for understanding the complexities of emerging capitalist society, social theorists in the nineteenth and early twentieth century paid significant attention to the power and influence of elites, mostly as a part of their wider analysis of class, society, and social stratification. Mosca's work in particular has given rise to a tradition of scholarly theorizing on "democratic elitism," which runs via Schumpeter to Habermas (cf. Best & Higley 2010). Especially Pareto's model of elite circulation—that is between "foxes," or cunning elites using manipulation and diplomacy, and "lions," elites not hesitating to use force—has been seen as relevant to the understanding of different forms of elite power (Higley and Pakulski 2007). And Antonio Gramsci's well-known work about hegemony has been relevant for understanding the ways in which elites try to dominate the ideological conceptions of the order of societies (cf., for example, Fontana [1993]). While Pareto praised the virtues of elites, on the other side of the spectrum, Gramsci—as a Marxist—was highly critical of them and found this reasoning about their virtues not valid as an analysis. According to his more political than sociological analysis of this specific form of power, the (ideological) control of the sociopolitical order by the elite and the concomitant disqualification of dissidents not adhering to this of course helped rulers to maintain the status quo but did not by definition validate or confirm the legitimacy of their position. His famous concept of "hegemony" referred to the social phenomenon that elites could maintain control also ideologically, by declaring a set of cultural values as normative or hegemonic so that they appeared as common sense values of all. This line of reasoning foreshadows some of Pierre Bourdieu's work on elites.

In his well-known work of 1974 (2005 edition) on power, political sociologist Steven Lukes took up key points of the Gramscian view and argued that there were three views of power. The "one-dimensional" view, the so-called concrete and actual exercise of power, is the most striking and consequently first and foremost identified as power (Lukes 2005 [1974]). His "two-dimensional view of power," that is,

power as controlling the political agenda and keeping the potential issues out of the political process, was based on a preceding analysis of the political process (Bachrach and Baratz 1962; Dahl 1961). He made clear that (elite) power is often applied in such way that unfavorable issues are kept out of the discussion before they may lead to head-on ("one-dimensional") confrontations. Lukes's third and "radical view of power," which posits that dominant ideologies tend to work against people's interests by misleading them, distorting their judgment, and applying the ruler's power in such an effective way as to prevent conflicts from rising up (Lukes 2005 [1974], 13, 27), was related to Gramsci's arguments.

These theoretical approaches to (elite) power have been influential and may still serve us well as a tool to deconstruct elite power in its constitutive elements and mechanisms. However, Gramsci's analysis of hegemony may not always survive the scrutiny of empirical evidence, because the interaction between elites and other segments of society tends to be more diverse and complex than suggested. Dominant ideologies may certainly serve the elite, but it should be realized that they may equally believe in these ideologies as the unquestionable truth. Moreover, dominant ideologies can indeed be very strong, but are not always static and are adapted and altered under the influence of social change.

The question of how elite power relates to the distribution of power in the society more generally also needs to be raised. John Scott (2008) rightly challenged the notion that elites by definition are all-powerful and argued that their power must be seen as open to challenge (see Salverda's chapter for what this may entail in our conceptualization of elite power).[16] The relationships of elites' vis-à-vis counter-elites and/or other groups resisting elite power are two sides of the same coin: the elite tries to maintain the status quo while the opposing group pushes for change. Despite the great diversity in elites, a shared trait among them is their resistance to change. In their comfortable positions at the top change is suspect because obviously it may jeopardize status and privilege: "The highest classes, as everyone knows, are the most conservative... No change can bring them additional power, and every change can give them something to fear, but nothing to hope for" (Simmel 1957 [1908], 99). At the same time, however, it is argued that elites create crises (Dogan and Higley 1998, 23, 24), such as political and economic rivalry, group conflict, and repression, which often result in change.[17] Since change is part and parcel of human life and of the societal process, some elites have inevitably disappeared and new ones have arisen (Cohen 1981,