

Elitism in Gaetano Mosca's Treatment

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Abstract

Socially, the word "elite" is broadly used to refer to a superior group of people regarding skills or privileges and associates with other terms such as political systems, "authorities", "minority favorite". Elites are cautious and opportunistic people. They are in every way and situation regarded as people's favorites. Focusing on concept of "elite" and "elitism", the author in this paper, attempts to study Gaetano Mosca's elite theory and ideas of other thinkers both advocating and opposing the idea. Exploring the impact of this theory on political science realm and comparing it to other theories in the same area and fairly criticizing them, the author comes to the conclusion that "elitism" generally believes every society and/or organization ends up in oligarchy. That is, a powerful elite minority will eventually take over and also the emersion of a ruling class is an exclusive attribute of every political organization and society.

Keywords: Elite, Elitism, Gaetano Mosca

Introduction

Gaetano Mosca was a sociologist, political scientist and one of the most famous anti-democrats. The most important book putting his views on the map in Italy was "*Elementi di scienza politica* (The Ruling Class) (1895)". He attempted to include all of the problems he had seen in Italy up to the first half of 21st century in it.

Mosca argues that every political society and human community, whether developed or underdeveloped are split between two social classes: the one who rules and the one which is governed. The former is the minority, but it owns more political power and utilizes the whole privileges such as welfare, respect, and power. Whereas, the latter, compared to the former, is far much higher in number but it plays a little role and is called "the masses" which itself consists of different classes each, legally or illegally, willingly or unwillingly accepting the government. In Mosca's perspective, for history to emerge, there has to be two social classes – the ruling and the obedient.

The condition of Italy between the two World Wars and of its weak parliamentary system paved the way for the theory of political elite. Therefore, the theory was first proposed in Italy. Nevertheless, the theory met too many problems ahead. However, Gaetano Mosca, a skillful author arranged and made the framework for the theory. Opposing this idea,

Marxists reject the concept of “the elites” and take the governance from the realm of elite leaders and put it on that of the masses.

In political theories, the concept of elite conveys the best should govern. In this regard *Vilfredo Pareto*, the church as well as religions, Thomas Carlyle, and social Darwinists emphasized the governance of the intellectuals, supreme clerics, great man, and the fittest, respectively. Gaetano Mosca, Vilfredo Pareto, and Robert Michels are the most important theorists of the political elite theory.

Gaetano Mosca

Gaetano Mosca (1858-1941), Italian political science was born in Sicily, Palermo. He graduated in law field in 1881. His thesis made the ground for his further works. Employing historical approaches, entities, and political theories, he put forward the theory of ruling class. His theory had the largest impact on the fascism advocates who had not fully and correctly comprehended the concept of this theory. His Theory influenced by other thinkers turned into the theory of elitism.

Mosca studied in university of Palermo and taught constitutional law in the same university (1885-1888), as well as Rome (1888-1896), and Turin (1896 – 1908) universities. He began his political activity as a member of Italian senate in 1908, and was the Deputy Secretary of State of Italy (1914 – 1916) as well as a Senator during the *Victor Emmanuel III's* kingdom. His last lecture was a critique against *Benito Mussolini*, the Italian fascist leader. In his theory of ruling class, he stresses the minority including military elites, clerics, and blue-bloods should govern the society. He remained natural about political philosophies and deemed that God's will, people's desire, and dictatorship of the proletariat is but myth.

Mosca believed most of theories put forward by *Machiavelli* were impossible. He was against *Nazi* racial elitism and disapproved of Marxism so strongly that even he despised *Karl Marx* and did not believe in democracy. He took the view that the government should be partly of a dictator and partly liberal, in order that aristocracy gradually disappears and is replaced with the ruling class consisting of elites.

The history of elitism and political elites

The word ‘elite’ was used to describe goods with special quality in 17th century, and later on to refer to superior social classes such as military special forces or higher levels of aristocracy. However, it was gradually used to socially refer to a superior group in terms of skills or privileges. *J. Schwarz Mantel* believes that every elitist view is rooted in Plato. Actually he – Plato – is the father of elitism. In his “*Republic*” book, he described selection, education, and lifestyle of the ruling elite (Mantel, 1999: 87). However, *Dr. Bashiriyeh* believes the history of the concept of elite goes back to Machiavelli's ideas. Machiavelli generally attributed all of the social processes to fundamental realities, the difference between elites and non-elites. Every

premier theorist such as *Pareto, Mosca, Michels* were influenced by his notions. In fact, *Machiavelli* considered the elites as ruling groups revealing the will required to protect their Foundations of their power (*Bashiriyeh*, 1999:67). He undoubtedly influenced largely on many further political and sociological thoughts. *Pareto, Mosca, Michels* in Italy, and Chicago School in America were influenced by him; even further than that, *William Blum* believes that the authors of the United States constitution – *James Madison, John Adams, and Alexander Hamilton*—included *Machiavelli's* pessimistic assumptions about human nature into the United States constitution. (William T. 1994; 407)

Nevertheless, one should notice the elitism as an intellectual school in political science was first established in 19th century by Mosca and Pareto and gradually spread afterwards. Actually in late 19th century, the mindset led to a new school primarily known as elitism and the thinkers thereof as neo-Machiavellists. Nowadays elitism is one of the common patterns in political science and sociology, emphasizing the existence of ruling elite in a given society.

The most important problem for elitist theorists was “who governs”, or “who exclusively owns the power?” (Stephen D. Tansey, 2000:811). In order to address the issue, elitism highlights the centralized power, rather than distribution of power. Elitists simply argue that the effective political power always remains in hands of a specific minority in every given society. This is why they see the differences between the powerful and the powerless masses as the major classification in a political society. Elitist theorists split the society into ‘the elite’ and ‘the masses’ and regard the masses as unorganized and disordered communities that are socially lower than the elite, whereas the elite is regarded as the self-conscious class with coherent behaviors sharing the same feelings. The theorists are anti-Marxists, mainly aiming to reject economic determinist ideas as well as Marx’s class struggle. They are also anti-democracy. The reason is that they view democracy as contradicting the reality, deeming it as practically a weak form of governance.

In a given country, the society is shaped by its elite; however, the elite’s governing principle and fundamental might be illegitimate or minimally legitimate, which is entirely beside the point of this paper. In ancient Greece, the notion of a ruling elite was put forward. The following which is from Plato’s book of “Republic” proves the idea of a ruling elite originated in ancient Greece;

“You all Athenians are brothers. But from amongst you God has gifted those competent to rule the rest with golden natures. Therefore they are most valuable ones. And God has gifted the Guards with silver natures and elders and other craftsmen with iron and brass. Therefore philosophers should be kings in towns and/or those currently being the kings should become philosophers, indeed.” (Plato, 1995. 202,316).

Aristotle also saw the aristocrats as the best to govern the society. (*Dariush Ashoori*.2006: P19).

However, theoretically there is no evidence revealing the importance of the elite’s position in ancient Iran. One can speak of an official elite referred to as “power elite” by Wright Mills: “The king’s dynasty, nobles, and clerics remained the basis of the Sasanian Empire. This structure was admired by Arab’s historian. They regarded it as a guideline of political technique. The nobles retained lands, were granted some inheritable privileges, and selected the king.”

Roman Ghirshman. 2001:p416). It is to note that the history of power elite should be assumed to root in Achaemenid Empire. “Dynastic noble group stayed at the top of the pyramid comprised of seven dynasties all shaping Achaemenid society.” (Habibi, 2001. P12)

Definition and history of proposing the theory of elite

Vilfredo Pareto was the first one to comment on the role of elites in social change. Defining the word ‘elite’, he stated the word elite refers to those who practice according to their social role. They have natural talents and superior positions compared to the average people of the society. Actually one can refer to them as the privileged members of the society. (*Guy Rocher, 2004: p116*). He technically believes that humans are not physically, intellectually, and morally equal. Some people are more talented than others in the entire society and its classes and groups. The most competent individuals of this group are the elites of the group. He split up the elite into governmental and non-governmental. The former dominates Pareto’s treatment (*Lewis A. Coser, 2007, p523-524*). After Pareto, the theory of elite became the focus of his Italian fellow countryman, Mosca. Pareto and Mosca held differing views on ‘the elite’ as well as the way of its disintegration. Pareto stressed on psychological determinism, while Mosca emphasized the role of social organizations. Pareto held the view that human behaviors are rooted in their irrational factors which he called “residues” deeply lying in individual’s minds. These residues serve as the basis for the non-logical notions and behaviors. In his treatment, he posited these residues as instinct. He referred to the common elements among the non-logical beliefs that covers the beliefs as theoretical systems as derivation. Two of these residues opposing each other play the major roles in the theory of elite – instinct of combination and instinct of persistence of aggregates. The instinct of combination refers to humans’ inclination to explore the relationships between things, thoughts, and imaginations such as similarities, the causal relation, and logical relation etc. The latter one, instinct of the persistence of aggregates, is associated with humans’ tendency to resist any alteration of combinations and aggregates like traditional thoughts that are the irrational basis for social systems. The interaction of these two residues, Pareto thought, were responsible for the future alteration or persistence of the current state. Those more influenced by instinct of combination are ordinarily intelligent, thoughtful, wise, and resourceful. And those more influenced by the instinct of persistence of aggregates are creative, conservative, traditionalist and insensitive. The elites are primarily from the prior group i.e. instinct of combination. Whereas the masses are influenced by the instinct of persistence of aggregates. This situation is convincing as well as satisfactory to Pareto. On one hand, the elite group is intelligent and insightful enough to guide the masses. And the masses, on the other hand lack innovativeness and enough intelligent required in order to alter the circumstances.

Mosca held that social organizations are essential in order to guide the humans’ evil instincts. The talents needed to become an elite are dictated by the important social entities and are not results of individual’s inheritable talents. In some societies, being a good warrior and in some others religious positions or wealth are deriving factors to select people as the elite

group. In other words, social alteration causes changes in the elite, not the Pareto's psychological residues. (SeyedMohammadi, 2005, p 80, 83-84). While Pareto speaks of elite group, Mosca believes when groups are intellectually unified and connected in terms of family, beneficial, and cultural relations, they turn from groups to classes. (Guy Rocher, 2004: p117). Pareto and Mosca both highlighted the position of elites in historical flow of society, viewing them as effective on social alterations. Pareto thought if the ruling elite can't figure out a way to attract exceptional individuals to ascend from the lower classes, the political board of society and social body then meet inequality which would be mended through either opening new ways for social engagements or aggressive overthrow of the former incompetent ruling elite and replacing them with a new more competent elite to govern (Lewis A. Coser, 2007, p525) Mosca posits that the flow of history is technically influenced by the profits and ideas of the ruling elite. (Guy Rocher, 2004:117) Mills Wright, the American sociologist who is well-known for theorizing about elites, regarded personal and/or psychological common features like, friendships, family and marital relations etc. as effective in elites' intellectual unity and integration. (Guy Rocher, 2004:119) the significance of elites in society was highly focused by the majority of the western sociologists. In "The Three Types of Legitimate Rule", Marx Weber he mentions traditional, legal and charismatic authorities. Because Marx and Joseph Schumpeter thought it was impossible to perform participatory democracy in large societies, in order to avoid the political mass participation which a Spanish theorist Ortega y Gasset in his book of "The revolt of the masses" as well as Hannah Arendt in her book of totalitarianism warned about, they put forward the theory of democratic elitism, resulting in multi-party democracy. (Anthony Giddens, 2005. P347). Guy Rocher, the Canadian sociologist suggests the classification of six elites as follows: Traditional and religious elite (Chieftain, Khan and cleric), technocratic elite (senior staff ranging from government posts to those of private institutions), elite of property (owners of large industries or finances), charismatic elite (E.g. Mahatma Gandhi, doctor Mohammad Mossadegh, Gamal Abdel Nasser, Nelson Mandela among others, elite of ideology (religious authorities) and symbolic elite (folk artists) (Anthony Giddens, 2005. P121-125). In his treatment, one can refer to non-official elites as reference groups. In order to find an answer to the question how the theory of position of elites has contributed to sociology, one could study Thomas Bottomore's wisely-conducted researches: 1- superiority of open societies compared to closed ones; the difference between open and closed societies is in the enjoyment and/or lack of democracy. In open societies elite (economic, cultural and political) select their members. From different walks of life based on their individual merits (Thomas Bottomore, 2002. P18). 2- Disproof of Marx's theory on social classes: continuous circulation of the elites prohibiting the shaping of a permanent and closed ruling class in most societies, mainly new industrial ones, rejects the Marxian concept of class, demonstrating it is impossible to attain a classless society due to the fact that a minority necessarily governs (Thomas Bottomore, 2002. P19-20).

On pro-elitism and anti-elitism

Study on Elitist thinkers

1. Mosca

In *Mosca's* view, an elite is a group of people highly capable of bringing about an integration. They are not much different with ordinary people; however, their sovereignty is. Therefore, the elites' capability of integrating in a national level can be utilized as a criterion to distinguish them in a given society.

Essence of elite

Mosca stated elite is a cohesive political group enjoying their own special organization and establishment. These groups have a certain political formula that can simply explain moral power, not reflect reality and truth. In other words one of the factors of power in

a political structure of a society is the power of its elites who can discern the specific and appropriate political formula to a given society. This capability is beyond reach of others.

In Mosca's treatment, governance of elite is not heritable and every individual of any social classes can be an elite. He also thought the elites are continuously in a contest. Following a group, there will come another group.

Mosca remarked there are two classes of people: the ruling class and the class being ruled, in every society ranging from the less developed ones by far through to those at the dawn of civilization to the most advanced societies. Mosca deems the existence of elite and the masses as universal in all of the political societies. He also attributed the governance and dominance of an elite minority over the masses to the features of organization rather than superior psychological features. Therefore in his perspective, the dominance of the organized minority with common motivations over the unorganized majority was unavoidable. Then he continued no society had ever experienced absolute equity. Political power had never been based on majorities' consent. It had always been applied by organized minority and it always would and these minorities utilized instruments that changed as the time changed, in order to establish their superiority over common people. Hence, he claimed it is impossible for a social order to exist without a political class. That is, a dominant political class which also remains an organized minority.

Mosca asserted the existence of elites is unavoidable. For the dictatorship of minority over majority is the feature of all societies. He mentions a ruling class from which governmental authorities rose. He believed every ruling class to protect and legitimize their governances, began to create a political formula. Mosca's conceptualization of political formula is remarkably similar to the concept of domination. (Marsh and Stoker, 1999, 367). Thus, in every historical level the idea of ruling class is dominant. In his treatment, domination of the minority over majority is solely due to organization as well as unity and integration in their objectives. Mosca states the domination of an organized minority following a common motive over unorganized

majority is unavoidable. Since every individual from the unorganized majority has to stand up against an organized minority, eventually their resistance will be impossible (Marsh and stoker,1999. 367). He saw elements other than force as essential to increase the influence of governance of every ruling class. Mosca named this elements as political formula. Actually in political societies, the ruling class never justifies its sovereignty only by conquering the power but it attempts to create moral or legal basis for its domination. 'Political formula' does not represent rightfulness or righteousness but it may be merely a myth. In addition to emphasis on organization of the minority, Mosca mentions supremacy-seeking traits of other ruling elites including material advantages, open-mindedness, and mental capabilities. Technically, he believes the ruling class should consist of those with these characteristics.

2. Pareto

Definition of elite in Pareto's treatment: an elite is an individual who naturally enjoys intelligence, physical, spiritual, mental advantages, grafting him superiority over others.

Essence of elite in Pareto' view

Pareto regards the elite as being intelligent and talented in different political, economic, social, cultural , etc. areas. They score 100 in a related realm. Thus, being an elite is not a privilege; because there can be some elites in immoral areas as well. Therefore this is the ground for the shaping elites and the origins of their power are different with those of others in terms of psychology and in-born talents. And these talents contributes to splitting people into minor elites and the large masses.

3. Michels

In *Michels'* treatment, elites of a society are the same experienced individuals of the society which are placed in an organization and are responsible for finding out and resolving administrative flaws of the organization. And the establishment relies on their skills and experiences and is widely dependent on them.

Essence of elite in Michels' view

In *Michels's* treatment, the essence of elite is a group who own administrative and organizational skills and every organization is run by a minority group whose opinions are regarded as rules. This minority group is the elite group.

Necessity of elite: in this sector one can remark the technical and executive functions of an organization cause the bureaucracy in the organization. In other words, elites originates in their executive and technical functions in the organization.

Basis of human behavior in society; instincts shape the basis of human behavior and humans behave according to their instincts. And this is the instincts that directs people' behaviors which can be categorized as follows:

1. Instinct to devise and combine; based on which the elites are equipped with thought, creativity, and innovativeness, helping them with problem-solving.

2. Instinct to aggregate and persist; which is to encourage humans to persist and resist, resulting in a conservative atmosphere in the society.

Pluralism, a theory against elitism

This theory has been suggested in a response to some thinkers such as Pareto and Mosca who stressed on the existence of a united sovereignty elite. Pluralist model studies the relation between governmental power and the set of groups as well as social forces. The underlying assumption of pluralism is plurality and diversity of power sources. Political power is the unceasing contest and compromise between various forces which each represent various interests and desires such as industrial and commercial groups, labor movements, religious and ethnic groupings, etc.

Pluralists believe politics is all about beneficial groups contesting and never thoroughly overcoming one another. For they all have access to different sources. Moreover, pluralists consider the government as body of rival entities, not an integrated entity to apply its power over the society. This is why pluralists hold people don't benefit an integrated whole and a united will. However, they are not a cold-blooded, inactive and incompetent mass that requires the elite to rule them. In their treatment, democratic policy involves an endless bargaining to impact the governmental policies (Nash, 2010: 35)

Groundwork for the theory of elitism and impact of environment on formation of the theory

It is difficult to understand to what extent the climate of the Sicily, where Mosca lived, impacted these theory. Sicily was both socially and politically the least developed region in Italy and introducing a representative for this region was one of the issues of the South. Therefore, thinkers like Antonio Gramsci, Italian Marxist and William Solomon, American historian, attributed Mosca's hatred of democracy to him being a Sicilian, which is entirely obvious in his first work.

The theory of elite suggests two pessimistic climates towards human after World War 1st, rooted in the followings:

a) Pessimism about principles of modernity

Trusting and believing in human reason and interpreting their life based on evolutionism and development, are one of axioms of all the thinkers ever since Renaissance as a result of the scientific, industrial, economic, and cultural developments. This successes in this era caused an unswerving trust in logical essence of human behavior and societies to develop towards the evolution. However following the bloody world war 1st, this trust in the role of human in history and society was damaged. And thinkers suggested new theories based on which human behavior is not according to reasoning but on sentiments and prejudice. Elitism is one of these theories based on pessimism about principles of enlightenments as well as on disbelief in human capabilities. Thus, one can see pessimism about enlightenment as one of the groundworks for the emersion of this theory. Modernism, based on ancient Greece and the following principles, is a new civilization formatted after the end of European Medieval Era.

b) Ration

Rationality is the key concept of the new civilization. As Kant put it; new civilization caused human to step from nonage into maturity. In this era human has gained how to think and reason and become rescued from the chains of government, church and tradition. Various flourishes of new civilizations are manifests of human rationality. Science, industry, bureaucracy, democracy among so many others are derived from rationality. Reasoning based on rationality was of permanent principles of modernism until France revolution; however, the chaos insecurity caused doubts about rationality. This hesitations were increased during the World War 1st, resulting in theories questioning rationality. Theory of elite was one of these pessimist theories about rationality and elitists believed humans were motional and instinctive rather than rational.

c) Evolutionism

Evolutionism is another principle of elitism. Every society goes through some levels to reach the developed level. *Auguste Comte* states the path of social evolution started out from religious thoughts through philosophic ones to practical ideas. That is; the human matured notion where decisions are made based on will. Marx Weber remarks societies' behavior are according to instincts and when they calculate based on rationality, they are matured. But elites don't regard the social changes as in a circular manner but they think politics are not evolvable and nothing evolves. In their view, democracy and socialism are delusions and never fulfilled.

Impact of elitism-based notions on political science

Politicians and administers, in other words, political elites are more prominent and known, for they are reference group responsible for organizing social, economic, and cultural affairs. However, it does not mean a neutral impact of other elites on running the society. In other word one can say this is the logical and organized interactions among different elites that define the future of the society and can cause it to evolve. Hence, it is essential that one don't take the impact of different types of elites on all areas of social life for granted in analyzing the role of elites in different aspects of collective life.

Considering the proceeding discussion, the role of political elites in creating healthy political traditions is now clarified. The impacts of different types of elites on a society is unavoidably interwoven and every branch might impact other aspects of a collective life as well. For instance, simply and non-technically stating, a cultural elite can definitely have influence on politics. And the odds are they might, benefiting their cultural background, directly engage in politics or direct people towards a certain political current.

Criticizing the theory

It is obvious that one should draw a line between elitism as a theory and accepting elites as social and political real phenomena, for sake of precision. Regarding this fact, Pareto, Mosca and Michels are highly elitist in their theories and suggest somehow radical and determinist ideas about the role of elites in political campaigns. However, Mills Wright and James Barnham view acceptance of elites, a real phenomenon in human social life, as a deflection from democracy. The two thinkers has warned about the widespread of this phenomenon referring to it as a major threat against democracy and peoples' sovereignty.

Pluralism is at the opposite side of elitism. Pluralists hold politics is all about beneficial groups contesting and never thoroughly overcoming one another. For they all have access to different sources. Moreover, pluralists consider the government as body of rival entities, not an integrated entity to apply its power over the society.

Since elitism sheds light onto the world politics and highlights the significance of emotions and warns about mysterious charlatans of politics, wolves in sheep's clothing, it is important; even though, it is not pleasant and appears to be radical and pessimist.

Conclusion

Elitist theorists investigate why and how the minority should always rule over the majority, which is a situation where they deems as universal and unavoidable in every given society. Political elitist theorists pay attention to decision-makers of a society, viewing them as a coherent and rather self-cautious group that owns the power. In general, in elitism, individuals like Pareto, Mosca, Michels among others hold every society and/or organization ends up in oligarchy. That is, a powerful elite minority will eventually take over and also the emersion of a ruling class is an exclusive attribute of every political organization and society.

However, for the sake of precision, one should draw a line between elitism as a theory and accepting elites as social and political real phenomena. Regarding this fact, Pareto, Mosca and Michels are highly elitist in their theories and suggest somehow radical and determinist ideas about the role of elites in political campaigns. However, Mills Wright and James Barnham view acceptance of elites, a real phenomenon in human social life, as a deflection from democracy. The two thinkers has warned about the widespread of this phenomenon referring to it as a major threat against democracy and peoples' sovereignty.

As discussed, Mosca totally opposed Marxism. The theory of elitism was in response to progressive Marxism. The first theoreticians of elitism were conservatives who opposed not only socialism but also liberal democracy in a way that helped every movement to give people deeper and broader political influences. They argued the elite was essential and unavoidable and that every revolution claiming to put an end to the elites would eventually end up replacing the former elite with new ones. The theorists of elitism employed two main arguments: first, they argued certain aspects of human nature made the emersion of elite unavoidable. Second, elites are essential for any social organization in order to function efficiently.

Gaetano Mosca succeeded in connecting his theory of elite to a limited liberal democracy. In Mosca's treatment, the major difference between political systems are mainly dependent on atwo-class organization within the elites; those on the top of the power and a large group are not a part of the ruling class; yet they have remarkable power and sources.

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