

Foreword

In studies of elites, historians have been generally reluctant to offer too close a definition, considering the capaciousness of the term to be its principal merit. ‘Useful on account of its very generality’, the notion of elites has often been so broadened, however, as to lose any precision as an analytical tool.¹ For the Cambridge–Rome–Paris international research project on elites in the High Middle Ages (2002–9), the label of elite thus applied to ‘all those who enjoy a high social position, which means possession of wealth, power and knowledge that is recognised by others.’² Elsewhere, historians have urged a broad understanding of elite since the names given to leading men in the Middle Ages were also diverse – in cities, the name of *domini viri* thus frequently alternated with *nobiles, potentes, milites, consules*, and so on.³ The application of the idea of elite to the peasant countryside, although yielding a more nuanced understanding of rural society, has in its turn identified a further ‘social group with blurry boundaries’ that stands in need of semantic accommodation.⁴

The difficulty with the notion of elite is that it is a historically bounded term that acquired currency little more than a hundred years ago. During the course of the nineteenth century, the old social order with its hierarchies of power dissolved under the combined forces of industrialisation and popular revolution, and the ideological certainties of the Old Regime were eroded. A new order was discerned, comprising the masses and the crowd on the one side and a new ruling class on the other. Although associated with Vilfredo Pareto, Gaetano Mosca and Robert Michels, the distinctions that they made were to a large extent anticipated by François Guizot, who posited the existence, above the ‘floating mass of the population’, of a ‘natural aristocracy’, who ‘through their acquired positions, their fortunes and their habits bring to public affairs the most natural authority.’⁵ It was, however, Mosca and Pareto who coined the term of elite (Michels stuck with oligarchy) and attempted to establish the mechanisms by which they exerted influence. Along with Michels, both sought to understand elites as emerging from the organisational demands of modern society, which required special skills and expertise. As Michels put it, ‘Whoever says organisation says oligarchy.’⁶

1 Elisabeth Crouzet-Pavan, ‘Les élites urbaines: aperçus problématiques’, in *Les élites urbaines au Moyen Âge (Actes des congrès de la Société des historiens médiévistes, 27, 1996)*, pp. 9–28 (p. 9).

2 Thus Laurent Feller and Régine Le Jan, in *Les élites au haut Moyen Âge. Crises et Renouvements*, eds F. Boucharde, F. Feller and R. Le Jan, Turnhout, 2006, p. 6. A further definition, which highlights the importance of wealth, is given by Laurent Feller in *Les élites et la richesse au haut Moyen Âge*, eds Jean-Pierre Devroey, L. Feller & Régine Le Jan, Turnhout, 2010, p. 5.

3 Henryk Samsonowicz, ‘Hiérarchies économiques et hiérarchies sociales dans les villes’, in *Gerarchie économique et gerarchie sociale*, ed. Annalisa Guarducci, Florence, 1990, pp. 163–70 (p. 165).

4 F. A. Romero & V. R. Pérez, ‘Fractures in the Community: A Historiographical Review’ in *Rural Elites and Economic Differentiation in Pre-Modern Europe*, eds Frederic Aparisi & Vicent Royo, Valencia, 2014, pp. 21–36.

5 Guizot, *De la Démocratie*, Paris, 1849, pp. 23, 90–1. Of course, one may look for antecedents at length, ranging from Nietzsche to the Social Darwinists. Mosca was thus highly influenced by the Austrian Darwinist and race-theorist Gumpłowicz, and so on.

6 Robert Michels, *Political Parties*, trans. Eden Paul & Cedar Paul, New York, 1962, p. 114 (first published as *Zur Soziologie des Parteiwesens*, 1911)

A leadership group was thus to be found at the forefront of every profession and organisation, although it was subject to periodic change and renewal, history being, in Pareto's lapidary formulation, 'the graveyard of elites'.⁷ Only a small section, however, comprised the political elite, exerting influence through 'force and fraud' (Pareto), or as an organised minority who 'have some attribute, real or apparent, which is highly esteemed and very influential in the society in which they live' (Mosca).⁸ Mosca was, however, alert to the mechanisms by which the ruling elite maintained its hegemony, positing a 'political formula' or ruling class ideology, which served as a legitimating discourse.⁹

The relationship between theories of a political elite and the Marxist idea of a ruling class has been occasionally fruitful, even though the one deals with organisations and power and the other with control of the means of production. For a few social scientists, sections of the political elite and ruling class overlap to the extent of constituting a 'power-elite' that combines economic, political and military leaderships, and which is cohesive, self-sustaining and self-serving.¹⁰ For the majority, however, the complexity of the modern state prevents any single elite emerging to political predominance. Instead, there is a functionally-divided 'multiplication of elites' and a corresponding 'disassociation of powers', which prevents any single elite obtaining a position of hegemony and which urges instead negotiation, consensus and coalition-building. In this way, elite theory is tamed and made the servant of pluralist democracy.¹¹

Historians do not need social scientists to tell them how to do their job, although the reverse is not always the case. Nevertheless, in this instance sociology raises questions and gives stresses that historians might do well to consider.

First, there is the condition of nineteenth-century modernisation under which elite theory first developed. Rather than scrap the notion of elites as an anachronism in the pre-modern period, it is surely, however, sensible to see the term as usefully including those groups who wielded influence while yet standing outside the conventional hierarchies of esteem. The challengers to noble hegemony fit most suitably here—merchants, financiers, rural outsiders and the many new men who came to prominence through the 'professionalisation' of office. In a sense, the contributors to the present volume know this, but are just not saying so! For their essays are predominantly concerned with precisely these groups. We will notice, moreover, in the historical literature more generally that the term of elites is most commonly used in relation to the towns, thus intersecting with the further neologism, although in this case a sixteenth-century one,

7 Pareto, *Sociological Writings*, Oxford, 1976, p. 249.

8 Mosca, *The Ruling Class*, ed. Arthur Livingston, New York, 1939, p. 53 (first published as *Elementi di scienza politica*, 1896); for 'force and fraud', 'lions and foxes', see Alasdair J. Marshall, *Vilfredo Pareto's Sociology: A Framework for Political Psychology*, Aldershot & Burlington, VT, 2007, pp. 116–34.

9 James H. Meisel, *The Myth of the Ruling Class: Gaetano Mosca and the Elite*, Ann Arbor, 1962, p. 55.

10 C. Wright Mills, *The Power Elite*, New York, 1956, p. 81.

11 See thus Robert Dahl, *Pluralist Democracy in the United States: Conflict and Consensus*, Chicago, 1967; also, Martin N. Marger, *Elites and Masses: An Introduction to Political Sociology*, New York, 1981, pp. 48–50.

of ‘patrician’.¹² Although attractive, it is, however, disingenuous to use elite exclusively in the sense of non-noble, for it overlooks the retained political, social, economic and cultural influence exercised by the nobility in the modern period. In many respects, the nobility remained over centuries the premier elite which the members of all other elite groups sought either to emulate or to join.

Secondly, Pareto’s observations on the graveyard and circulation of elites carry obvious resonances for the historian, even if Pareto himself was less than clear whether he was talking about individuals moving in and out of elites or of one elite being replaced by another.¹³ As far as nobilities are concerned, it would seem that in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries lineages expired as a consequence of either biological or economic failure at a rate of very roughly 15% every 25 years, with the consequence that about over half of the nobility was replenished every century.¹⁴ Or to use another measure, where renewal was less an option: of the English, Irish and Scottish Jacobite lordships and honours created after 1689, 107 of the 170 recipient families, or 63 per cent, had vanished within a century of their investiture.¹⁵ All this may be put down to natural churn. Processes of replenishment as well as strategies of survival might, however, have the consequence of altering the substance of the elite so significantly as to render it qualitatively different from what had gone before. The involvement of later medieval and early modern noblemen in commercial enterprises is well-attested; likewise their recruitment into the state administration. The observation that the English nobleman of the late fifteenth century was distinguished by his castles, armouries and armed retinue, whereas his successor 200 years later had his Palladian mansion, political connections and pocket boroughs is applicable across a large part of the continent.¹⁶ In similar fashion, elites in towns experienced substantial alterations, even though some families were able to make the leap from one form of mercantile endeavour to another, variously moving from venturing to merchant-partnerships and then into the rental market. Some became nobles, just as noblemen themselves became increasingly urbanised. The speed of change prompted many towns to construct closed corporations, barring outsiders from government and its perquisites—hence, the several hundred *cittadini* who dominated the Corfiot *Consiglio generale* and established an exclusive and hereditary right both to power and to the accompanying revenues of high office.¹⁷

Thirdly, the functional definition of elites stands in the way of the proposition that there was a single power-elite in any of the lands and kingdoms of late medieval and

12 Jan Dumolyn, ‘Late Medieval and Early Modern Elites: Social Categories and Social Dynamics, in *Urban Elites and Aristocratic Behaviour in the Spanish Kingdoms at the End of the Middle Ages*, ed. Maria Asenjo-González, Turnhout, 2013, pp. 3–18 (p. 4).

13 T. B. Bottomore, *Elites and Society*, Harmondsworth, 1966, p. 48.

14 Frederik Buylaert, ‘The Late Medieval “Crisis of the Nobility” Reconsidered: The Case of Flanders’, *Journal of Social History*, 45, 2012, pp. 1–18 (pp. 8–9), with comparative statistics.

15 Based on the Marquis of Ruvigny and Raineval, *The Jacobite Peerage, Baronetage, Knightage and Grants of Honour*, Edinburgh, 1904. My calculation, not counting ‘unknowns’.

16 Lawrence Stone, *The Crisis of the Aristocracy, 1558–1641*, Oxford, 1965, p. 201.

17 Stefano Mastraca, *Descrizione dell’Isola di Corfu fatta nel 1630*, Venice, 1869, p. 22; Anastasia Papadia-Lala, ‘Society, Administration and Identities in Latin Greece’, in *A Companion to Latin Greece*, eds N. I. Tsougarakis & Peter Loch, Leiden & Boston, 2015, pp. 114–44 (pp. 136–8).

early modern Europe. Indeed, princely courts acted very much as the centres in which the interests of the various elite groups were negotiated and reconciled. Rulers were alert to the need to broker agreements and build consensus. Charters, decrees and electoral compacts issued in the late Middle Ages thus frequently drew attention to the way in which their publication had taken place in the presence or with the agreement of assembled great lords, nobles, churchmen and others. In time, these groups would formally stabilise into estates and would bargain with each other, as well as with the ruler, in two-, three or even four-chamber assemblies that brought together noblemen, clergy, burghers and some categories of peasant.

Relations between elites were less institutionally mediated in the Romanian principalities and in parts of South-Eastern Europe. In Wallachia and Moldavia, the government passed in the early eighteenth century to princes appointed by the Sultan, usually from among the wealthy Greek merchant or Phanariot community of Constantinople. These brought with them retinues of kinsmen, favourites and creditors, who for their own profit carved up the fiscal apparatus. Given that the Phanariot princes were replaced or alternated every few years, we would appear to have here a veritable circulation of elites! Nevertheless, side by side with these parvenus were representatives of the old boyar families, who continued to hold both influence and office right through to the nineteenth century. Thus, of the register of Wallachian boyar families drawn up by the Russian army in 1829, 44 were scions of families that may be traced back to at least the seventeenth century, and only eleven were of Phanariot descent. This hidden 'power-elite' doubtless owed its extraordinary longevity to its control of the resources of the countryside and to the absence of alternative social forces, such as townsfolk or a wealthy clerical estate, on which the princes might build politically. Marital strategies of endogamy also helped prevent the dissipation of boyar wealth and contributed to social cohesion.¹⁸

Fourthly, elites once they had emerged to political and social dominance often cemented their authority through ideological formulations. Besides appealing to a natural order of society that justified hierarchy and inequality, noblemen, townsfolk and privileged rural communities might also invent histories for themselves that led back to a mythologised or classical past. Several contributions to the present volume attest to this phenomenon. Even individual families were not averse to constructing elaborate genealogies that established their historical pre-eminence in a town or region.¹⁹ More usually, however, authority was projected through symbolic and visual means, in the rituals by which new councillors were appointed in towns, in theatrical *entrées* and *tableaux*, or in ceremonies such as Nuremberg's famous Lenten Dance,

18 Neagu Djuvara, 'Les Grands Boiars ont-ils constitué dans les principautés roumaines une véritable oligarchie institutionnelle et héréditaire?', *Südost-Forschungen*, 46, 1987, pp. 1–56 (pp. 38–44).

19 F. R. H. Du Boulay, 'The German Town Chroniclers', in *The Writing of History in the Middle Ages: Essays Presented to Richard William Southern*, eds R. H. C. Davis & J. M. Wallace-Hadrill, Oxford, 1981, pp. 445–69 (p. 450).

which advertised the exclusivity of the town's forty *Ratsfähig* families.²⁰ Architectural display reinforced elite status. In towns, the Ringbürger built ostentatious houses around the market square, often ornately decorated in the latest styles, like the Black House and Bandinelli Palace in Lviv. According to the census made in Wilno in 1636, wealthy guildsmen, councillors, no less than seven former burgomasters and a burgomaster's widow dominated the triangular market square, building for themselves ornate two- or three-storey brick houses.²¹

In the countryside, icons of power took the place of the municipal architecture of status. The late medieval castle was not just a defensive work, but designed to awe the senses through its sculptured setting: hence this description from the mid-fourteenth century Gawain poet—'a castle the comeliest a knight ever saw, set in a meadow surrounded by a park, enclosed by a thick palisade of spikes, which enclosed many trees in its circuit of more than two miles.'²² Although we cannot determine the designed landscape in which it sat, the late medieval manor house (*curia nobilitaris*) at Pomáz in Hungary emphasised for its part the lineage and religious devotion of its owners, the Cykó family, for it was conjoined to a twin-towered church, which loomed over the rest of the complex and which provided the family's place of burial. The living quarters were luxurious and with their decorated stoves, glass windows and elaborate decoration were intended to impress. This was the residence of a family that belonged to the upper layer of the common nobility.²³ Aristocratic homes of the same period often retained strongly fortified walls, but these might be supplemented (as at Trenčín) with elegant apartments including a large ceremonial or knights' hall, courtyards for jousting and tournaments, a jewel garden, and adjacent deer parks.²⁴ In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, these fortress-palaces were superseded by 'prodigy houses' built in the late Renaissance or baroque style and surrounded by cultivated woodland, hunting grounds and ornamental gardens.²⁵

In the Romanian principalities and the Balkans more generally, icons of power played only a minor role. Castles performed an exclusively military function. Wealthy merchants and boyars resided mostly in urban settings, in block-like stone houses and sometimes towers, often with external stair cases and verandas. Display was largely confined to the interior, taking the form of silk furnishings, imported rugs and multi-colour stucco

20 'Tanzstatut' in *Stadtlexikon Nürnberg*, eds Michael Diefenbacher & Rudolf Endres, 2nd edition, Nuremberg, 2000, p. 1063; Andrew Brown, 'Ritual and State-Building: Ceremonies in Late Medieval Bruges', in *Symbolic Communication in Late Medieval Towns*, ed. Jacoba van Leeuwen, Leuven, 2006, pp. 1–28; Eberhard Isenmann, 'Norms and Values in the European City, 1300–1800', in *Resistance, Representation and Community*, ed. P. Blickle, Oxford, 1997, pp. 187–215.

21 David Frick, *Kith, Kin and Neighbors: Communities and Confessions in Seventeenth-Century Wilno*, Ithaca, NY & London, pp. 28–9.

22 *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ed. W. R. J. Barron, Manchester, 2004, p. 72 (lines 767–70).

23 Gábor Virágos, 'Noble residences in the Middle Ages: Pomáz and its owners (A case study)', *Annual of Medieval Studies at the CEU 1996/1997*, Budapest, 1998, pp. 245–51.

24 István Kenyeres, 'A Szapolyai család es Trencsén', *Publicationes Universitatis Miskolcensis. Sectio Philosophica*, 13, no 3, 2008, pp. 177–93 (pp. 185–6).

25 Thus, for instance, at Bytča, Bernolákovo, Holíč, Oponice etc.

work.²⁶ In the Romanian principalities, the decorations on stove tiles suggest that some of the motifs and trappings of knightly society were prized, with images of chivalric and mythological scenes, heraldic emblems and depictions of hunting, dances and courtly love.²⁷ Appropriations of this type were, however, rare. Coats of arms thus barely figured as symbols of status. Social position was more frequently manifested in the colour and style of clothing, giving strong visibility to distinctions of rank. For members of the political and commercial elites, turbans or tall hats, baggy trousers and long coats were until the nineteenth century the usual manner of dress. Thereafter, western fashions prevailed – if only because they were more convenient for waltzes and quadrilles.²⁸

Symbolic means of communication are important for the study of elites. In so far as communication is a two-way process, it provides the critical linkage between elites and masses. The most obvious criticism of historical investigation into elites is that it supposes politics and power to be a matter of networks and chains of influence, which through family, business and other common activities establish group cohesion and collective agency. Elites and their clients thus become the drivers of historical development, and it is their ‘self-interest, meaning a fierce Hobbesian competition for power and wealth and security, [that] makes the world go round.’²⁹ The detailed study of elites, often through prosopography, is intended to expose this dynamic, often through the sort of case studies given in the present volume. In this scheme, ideology plays little role, save as opportunism, and the masses themselves become the simple objects of manipulation—as Guizot saw, a floating population denied agency on account of its susceptibility to persuasion.³⁰

Nevertheless, the means by which elites projected their power – be this through their castles or homes on the *Ring*, in civic display and ritual, or in fashion – were not directed at a blank canvas. They depended for their success upon, at the very least, their recognition as symbols of authority and, more importantly, upon the participation of broader sections of the population in the acting out of their abstract meaning. As elsewhere, theatrical performances and costumes were intended to reconcile ‘the political metaphysic with the existing distribution of power.’³¹ Audiences were expected to respond, enacting out their own parts in these public demonstrations of social inequality, either by organising reciprocal displays, participating in status-laden

26 Maria Magdalena Székely, ‘Colour Garments: Tradition, Fashion or Social Mark? The Romanian Principalities in the 16th–17th Centuries’, in *From Traditional Attire to Modern Dress: Modes of Identification, Modes of Recognition in the Balkans (16th–20th Centuries)*, ed. Constanța Vintilă-Ghițulescu, Newcastle u/T, 2011, pp. 12–28 (p. 13)

27 Paraschiva-Victoria Bataruiuc, *Civilizație medievală românească. Ceramica monumentală din Moldova*, Bucharest, 2012.

28 Constanța Vintilă-Ghițulescu, ‘Introduction’, in *From Traditional Attire to Modern Dress*, pp. 1–9 (p. 5); Ghițulescu, ‘Constructing a New Identity: Romanian Aristocrats between Oriental Heritage and Western Prestige (1780–1866)’, in *From Traditional Attire to Modern Dress*, pp. 104–28 (pp. 110–1); Székely, ‘Colour Garments’, pp. 15–21.

29 Lawrence Stone, ‘Prosopography’, *Daedalus*, 100, no 1 (1971), pp. 46–79 (p. 47). See also K.S.B. Keats-Rohan, ‘Introduction: Chameleon or Chimera? Understanding Prosopography’, in *Prosopography: Approaches and Applications. A Handbook*, ed. Keats-Rohan, Oxford, 2007, pp. 1–32 (pp. 10–11).

30 Guizot, *De la Démocratie*, p. 23.

31 Clifford Geertz, *Negara: The Theatre State in Nineteenth-Century Bali*, Princeton, NJ, 1980, pp. 13–4.

processions, or donning apparel appropriate to their rank.³² To be effective, rituals in the sense of a chain of symbolic actions required reciprocating responses. They did not create of themselves legitimacy but depended for their power upon the reactions of the audience, which by its involvement and approbation made these displays not only reflective but also paradigmatic of the social order and thus of elite hegemonies. To paraphrase Clifford Geertz, in the theatres of pre-modern polities, the elites of princes, noblemen, merchants and prelates may have been the impresarios, but the peasants and common folk were the supporting cast, stage crew and audience.³³

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32 Wim Blockmans & Esther Donckers, 'Self-Representation of Court and City in Flanders and Brabant in the Fifteenth and Early Sixteenth Centuries', in Blockmans & Antheun Janse, *Showing Status: Representations of Social Positions in the Late Middle Ages*, Turnhout, 1999, pp. 81–112 (pp. 88–90).

33 Geertz, *Negara*, p. 13.