

ON MODELS AND REALITY: SOME NOTES ON THE APPROACHES TO THE STUDY OF ELITES IN DEVELOPING SOCIETIES

DANTE C. SIMBULAN

THE TERM *ELITE*, LIKE OTHER SIGNIFICANT CONCEPTS, has been the subject of much intellectual debate. It has also been utilized to advance diverse points of view. A mere listing of the proponents of the theory of the elite will indicate the dynamic nature of the concept. Men of varied political persuasions such as Saint-Simon, Auguste Comte, Gaetano Mosca, Vilfredo Pareto, and Robert Michels were among the early writers on the subject.¹ Thus some elite writers have been called "elitist" anti-democrats, but even liberal democrats and socialist writers have since used the term. Furthermore, the term *elite* has been alternately applied to the "right leaders" of Saint-Simon, the "scientific priesthood" of Comte, the "leaders of the social forces" of Mosca, the "superior beings" of Pareto, and lately, to the men who occupy the "institutional command post" of C. Wright Mills.² Even Karl Marx's "ruling class" which refers to "those who own and control the means of production" could, in some ways, be related to the elite concept although in a much broader context.

The above illustrates the flexibility and analytical advantage of the concept. It identifies and concerns itself with the leading individuals in a group or community, independent of the personal preferences or ideological persuasion of the investigator. But, more importantly, it relies on empirical proof for its development.

I

It is perhaps for this reason that the study of elites has already undergone an interesting revival. The series of studies on American com-

¹ See *Doctrine of Saint-Simon: An Exposition*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958), particularly the discussion of George G. Iggers in the Introduction, ix-xi; Gaetano Mosca, *Elementi di scienza politica*, trans. by Hannah D. Kahn and ed. and rev. by A. Livingston as *The Ruling Class*, (New York and London: McGraw-Hill Book Co., Inc., 1939); Comte published in 1853 a work entitled *Système de politique positive, ou traité de sociologie*, an elaboration of Saint-Simon's idea of the ruling group; Pareto was the more elaborate of the elite theorists. His *Trattato di sociologia generale*, trans. as *Mind and Society* by Andrew Bongiorno and Arthur Livingston, ed. by A. Livingston, (London: Jonathan Cape, 1935) appeared in several volumes; Robert Michels, *Political Parties: A Sociological Study of The Oligarchical Tendencies of Modern Democracy*. (Glencoe: The Free Press, 1949).

² C. Wright Mills, *Power Elite*. (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1956).

munity power structure by Floyd Hunter, Robert C. Schulze, Delbert C. Miller, W. Lloyd Warner, and the Lynds³ among others have, aside from Harold Lasswell and C. Wright Mills, provided the data upon which the continuing analysis of elites has centered.

The studies made by the above scholars suggest, in general, the existence of a pyramidal "power structure" and that the influentials in the community could be located at the apex of the social pyramid.⁴

These findings in America are, of course, no different from those earlier made by Robert Michels in his penetrating studies of political parties in Europe from which he came out with his now classic "iron law of oligarchy."⁵

But the oligarchic (or undemocratic) situation described in the findings of these sociological studies could not long remain unanswered. Dahl, Polsby, Meisel, and others soon came up with articulate demands for "tests" of the existence of "ruling elites," and polemics on the "myth of the ruling class."⁶ Soon a *pluralist* (and presumably "democratic") concept of elites and the power they wield was developed which, as to be expected, is critical of the *stratification* approach of the earlier investigators.

Essentially, the "pluralists" accept the reality of power in the community but reject the research findings of Hunter, Schulze, Miller, Warner, Mills and the Lynds that the socio-economic elite in a community dominate political life. They find these findings irrelevant in New Haven and comes up with their own model of community power.⁷ The common theme of the "pluralists" is that power and influence are so well dispersed in the community that the period has ended "when social

³ See Floyd Hunter, *Community Power Structure*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1953); Robert O. Schulze, and Leonard U. Blumberg, "The Determination of Local Power Elites," *American Journal of Sociology* LXIII, (1957); Delbert C. Miller, "Industry and Community Power Structure . . ." *American Sociological Review*, XXIII (1958); W. Lloyd Warner *et al.*, *Democracy in Jonesville*, (New York: Harper and Bros., 1949); Robert S. Lynd and Helen W. Lynd, *Middletown in Transition*, (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1937); Harold Lasswell *et al.*, *The Comparative Study of Elites*, (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1952).

⁴ See particularly, Hunter, *Ibid.*, pp. 75 ff., 156 ff., 195; and the Lynds *ibid.*, pp. 74-101.

⁵ "It is organization, [Michels wrote], which gives birth to the domination of the elected over the electors, of the mandataries over the mandators, of the delegates over the delegators. Who says organization says oligarchy." *Political Parties*, (Introduction, Collier Book Edition, 1962, p. 15).

⁶ Robert A. Dahl, "A Critique of the Ruling Elite Model," *American Political Science Review*, LII (1958), pp. 468-469; "The Concepts of Power," *Behavioral Science*, II, (1957) pp. 201-215; *Who Governs?* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961); Nelson Polsby, "The Sociology of Community Power: A Reassessment," *Social Forces*, Vol. 37, (1959), pp. 232-236; James H. Meisel, *The Myth of the Ruling Class*, (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1958).

⁷ See, for example, Robert A. Dahl, *Who Governs?* *Ibid.*; Dahl has as collaborators in this study Nelson Polsby who wrote *Community Power and Political Theory* and Raymond Wolfinger who come out with *The Politics of Progress*.

status, education, wealth, and political influence were limited in the same hands,"⁸ They raised questions such as, "Is influence predictably distributed in the population?" "Does the possession of economic resources make one influential?"⁹ Dahl talks of a "slack in the system," which means to say that "a great gap between their [the influentials] actual influence and their potential influence exist."¹⁰

How relevant are these models, which have been developed out of Western community studies, when applied to non-Western settings? To even the cursory observer of the environment of non-Western politics, these questions may seem a bit like exercises in futile hair-splitting. Dahl himself has made the warning: "I had better make clear at once that explanations presented in this study [*Who Governs?*] are tested only against the evidence furnished in the political system of New Haven."¹¹

But the problem is a real one. Already foreign-trained scholars of the "Dahl School" have returned to their "underdeveloped settings" and are conducting inquiries along the New Haven-type model. Offhand, there seems to be nothing wrong with the procedure so long as the model is taken *as such* and abandoned or modified if the facts do not fit it. But when the empirical data are forced into the model, as one graduate student recently tried to do, the result can be chaos and utter confusion. This confusion is not limited to students. Even established authorities and scholars sometimes manifest this confusion. Pye, for instance made the observation that

the dominant characteristic of all the political systems of Southeast Asia is that they are still, as in the traditional and colonial periods, sharply divided between the ruling few, who possess a distinctive outlook and culture, and the vast majority of the population, who are oriented to village units and the peasant's way of life.¹²

Similarly, Malcolm, an American official of long residence in the Philippines,¹³ observed that

The Filipino social system divides among [along?] class lines. On the lower level are the *taos*. On the higher level are the *caciques* or *ilustrados*. Sandwiched between the two widely separated extremes is the middle class. The *taos* are peasants who constitutes the rural laborers of the Islands. They are the largest group in number, but provide the smallest count in the matter of education. Hard workers in the fields, although often paid

⁸ Dahl, *ibid.*, p. 24.

⁹ See Polsby, "The Sociology of Community Power. . ." *op. cit.* pp. 232-233.

¹⁰ Dahl, *ibid.*, p. 305.

¹¹ Dahl, *Who Governs*, *ibid.*, Preface, vi.

¹² Lucian Pye, "The Politics of Southeast Asia" in Gabriel A. Almond and James S. Coleman (eds.), *The Politics of Developing Areas*, (New Jersey: Princeton Univ. Press, 1959), p. 117.

¹³ From 1912 to 1949, George A. Malcolm was successively Dean, College of Law, Univ. of the Philippines; Justice of the Philippine Supreme Court, Staff member of the Office of the U.S. High Commissioner to the Philippines; and Professorial Lecturer, U.P.

barely living wages, they are resigned to their lot, if not stirred by leaders to violence. The sad fate of the *taos* has been that from time immemorial they have all too often been oppressed by their employers and preyed upon by usurers

The *caciques* are large landowners or persons of influence. Small in number, but wealthy, well educated, and cultured, they constitute the ruling class.¹⁴

More recently, David Wurfel noted that "to a larger extent than in any Southeast Asian country, except bureaucratic-capitalist Thailand and Communist North Vietnam, the Philippine economic and political elites are coterminous."¹⁵

The above and other observations made by some scholars are remarkable in their similarity. Yet, what is noteworthy is that in spite of such suggestion of the existence of an oligarchical situation, the picture that emerges is somewhat muddled, especially when viewed in the light of other comments from the *same* writers. Wurfel, for example, has written elsewhere that "the Philippines, thanks in part to American tutelage, today enjoys the most democratic government in Southeast Asia."¹⁶ Malcolm, in the same book where he described the Filipino "ruling class", has also referred to the Philippines as the "show window of democracy in the Far East."¹⁷ Coleman, drawing on Pye's study of Southeast Asia politics, has made the Philippines a "model" of political democracy.¹⁸ These observations tend to blur the leadership picture for they suggest the existence side-by-side of "democracy" on the one hand and a "ruling few" on the other.¹⁹

One difficulty seems to be partly due to the limitations imposed by the "models". The symbolic reality — found in the political rituals and in the official utterances of the elite — is confused with the objective reality. What *ought* to be is often mistaken for what *is* and deviation from the established social myths is usually looked upon with disapprobation. Fred Riggs has expressed this view quite well and he calls it a "vicious circle": "the more artificial and remote from reality the alien models, conventional wisdom, and cliches accepted by an entrenched intelligentsia elite", he wrote, "the more difficult it becomes for realistic

¹⁴ Malcolm, *First Malayan Republic*, (Boston: The Christopher Publishing House, 1951), p. 36.

¹⁵ David Wurfel, "The Philippines," in George McTurnan Kahin (ed.) *Government and Politics of Southeast Asia*, (New York: Cornell Univ. Press, 1961), p. 457.

¹⁶ Section on the Philippines, "Comparative Studies in Political Finance," *Journal of Politics*, Vol. 25, No. 4, November 1963, p. 757.

¹⁷ Malcolm, *op cit.*, Chapter I, p. 21.

¹⁸ See concluding Chapter in Almond and Coleman, *op. cit.*, pp. 559-560; also Table 6, p. 564.

¹⁹ Much, of course, depends on what one means by "democracy" but the two terms generally suggest divergent connotations.

thinking and scholarly research to gain acceptance — the more “subversive” such activities appear to be.”²⁰

What is suggested here is that the conditions present in Western models — both social and economic — may be absent in the developing societies and, therefore, the “pluralistic” situation described by Dahl may not be expected to operate. Why is this so? Let us now examine an alternative approach.

II

Let us adopt the most common usage of the term *elite* as applied to those individuals who occupy those positions in society which are at the summits of key social structures. Thus we have economic elites, political elites, intellectual elites, military elites, social elites, etc. who occupy, respectively, the top of the corresponding social structures (namely, the economy, government and politics, education, the military, and so forth).

What are the characteristics or attributes that place individuals or groups in dominant positions way above the rest of society? We shall refer to these attributes as the *key values* essential to the exercise of influence. These key values are wealth, skill, education, political power, and status or prestige.²¹ Under this definition, there could be as many elites as there are *values*.

Elite status, therefore, is largely determined by the possession of these key values. Hence, most people in different societies desire these key values and often engage in competitive activities to attain them.

Theoretically, elite status may be attained by any individual who acquires these values and possess them in sufficient amounts as compared with the members of his group or community who may not have them at all or who may have them in much lesser amounts. It should be noted that this analysis makes no reference to the social class origin of the individual. It merely states that an individual who is “successful” in acquiring these key values become an elite of the functional social structure. The elite concept, therefore, is also *theoretically* independent of the class concept.

But, in practical life, the sharing and distribution of these values differ from culture to culture, from country to country. Where these are widely shared or distributed, larger and broadly-based elites may emerge; where there is high inequality in their sharing and distribution, a small and narrowly-based elite often results.

²⁰ Fred Riggs, “A Model for the Study of Philippine Social Structure,” *Philippine Sociological Review*, Vol. VII, No. 3, July, 1959, p. 18.

²¹ This list of key values is not comprehensive. A particular society may have other key values but these are to be established by first-hand investigation. All influence-wielders in most societies, however, possess one or more of these key values.

A common pattern, too, is the tendency of concentration or agglutination of these values in the same hands since possession of any, or all of these values enhances the acquisition of more of the same or provide the possessor with the means to acquire the other values. Thus, the better off an individual is, the more opportunities in life he enjoys. Wealth may not only bring more wealth but also facilitates the acquisition of power, prestige, and the other values. Those categorized as belonging to the elite of wealth will *most likely* also be the best educated, the most skilled, the most prestigious and the most influential in the realm of decision-making. Or some of those possessing wealth, but not having skills, can "buy" these by putting technocrats — bureaucrats, image-builders, mass media people, politicians, military men and even intellectuals — in their payrolls.

Here we can see the other side of the "pluralist" coin, where those possessing the key values may not necessarily fight among themselves, but may collaborate within the elite system to preserve elite interests. This is particularly true when middle class intellectuals are coopted into the elite system and become eloquent defenders of the *status quo*.

Therefore in countries which are characterized by a marked degree of social stratification, where no far-reaching social and economic change have yet affected the vast masses of the people and wide gaps divide social classes, there will likely be a high inequality in the sharing and distribution of wealth, education, power, prestige, and skill among the various social classes. The possession of these values tend to be concentrated, not only in the *same hands* but also in the *same social strata*. In short, when persons become "elite" in relation to several of these key values and have, therefore, a high generalized influence, we say that they are *the elite* of society.²² And when these individuals with high generalized influence are found in the same social strata, the elite concept becomes applicable, not only to *individuals* occupying a high position in a *functional* hierarchy but also to their families. The elite concept, in this case, may now be used with reference to the upper strata. Thus, the *elite* concept merges with the *class* concept.

III

No society may be said to be truly static for structures are generally in flux. Sociologists, however, speak of a "changing society and a "static" society depending on the presence or absence of certain dynamic factors that may produce social and economic changes resulting in the restratification of society. Thus, a "changing" society may be charac-

²² For a more elaborate discussion of this point, see Lasswell's *Comparative Study of Elites*, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

terized by limited extremes of wealth and poverty, rapid industrialization, wide occupational opportunities, minimum of class distinctions, education open to all with needed ability, etc. A "static" society manifests the opposite of the above: its economy is agrarian-based, great social and economic inequalities exist, class distinctions are markedly apparent, and an aristocracy is dominant in the social, economic and political spheres.²³

It is commonly pointed out that since most of the developing societies had the similar historical experience of having been colonized, they became beneficiaries of western political and economic institutions, which were consciously or unconsciously introduced by the colonial rulers. Western technology, public education, representative government, popular elections and "free enterprise", were supposed to have produced massive changes, not only in the economy but also in the social and political structures of the colonies.²⁴ But why did the traditional imbalance between social classes, between elite and non-elite continue to persist? What actual changes occurred and who were affected by these changes?

It should be noted that the colonial powers erected the superstructures of their regimes upon the foundations of the then existing social and economic institutions. In the process of consolidating their control, they saw the advantage of utilizing the native elite for their own purposes, thereby institutionalizing the status and role of the latter as the dominant class among the indigenous population. A direct consequence of this policy was of course the preservation of the social and economic superiority of this group.

The innovations that were introduced such as public education, representative government, "free enterprise," and popular elections did not basically alter the existing power relations. Since the basic social and economic structures remained essentially intact, "change," or what others would call "modernization" became circumscribed. The innovations did not permeate evenly to all levels of society. Traditional patterns of economic and social relations continued to persist and the prosperity associated with "progress" had generally been confined to a limited group in society. One has but to see the ever-widening gap between the developed and underdeveloped sectors of these societies, the contrast between the progressive urban enclaves where the rich foreign and indigenous elite reside and the stagnant rural communities, and the great

²³ This typology should be taken as a convenient analytical device to mark points in a continuum. Cf. Chester L. Hunt, "Social Class Structure," in Hunt, *et al.*, *Sociology in the Philippine Setting*, (Manila: Alemar's, 1959), pp. 154-155.

²⁴ "The Philippine society," writes Frank Golay in this connection, "for better or for worse, has made an unambiguous decision to organize its economy on the basis of private initiative... in which economic activity by the individual is rewarded liberally. This enterprise type of economic organization is a legacy of American colonial rule..." Golay, *The Philippines: Public Policy and Economic Development*, (New York: Cornell Univ. Press, 1961), p. 4.

disparities in the economic and material resources controlled by a tiny minority of plutocrats and the abject poverty of the great majority of these societies to realize the validity of this statement.

This does not imply, however, that the traditional indigenous elite continued to be caste-like in character. Entry to elite status did not remain closed for long. Since the colonial regimes failed to attract administrators in sufficient numbers from their own nationals, the need for recruiting trained colonials arose. This need became intense with the growth of colonial bureaucracy. Hence, promising young natives were recruited not only from the upper class but also from the other strata of society and these were given training in the local schools established by the colonial rulers or were sent to the schools of the "mother country" to be trained as teachers, soldiers, lawyers, doctors, etc.²⁵

These two groups then became the core of the "westernized" elite who closely collaborated with the colonial rulers in the furtherance of their objectives and in the attainment of the colonial goals. They acquired western values, learned to speak the western language, and adopted western styles of life.²⁶ As loyal agents of colonial rule, they naturally shared in the bounties of power. Having acquired education and skills they were given positions in the colonial government and soon acquired more of the key values previously discussed.

The withdrawal of the colonial rulers from their colonies left this westernized elite firmly in control. They expanded and diversified their economic holdings. From agricultural landholdings, they went into banking, manufacturing, business, and the professions. Some entered into business alliances with foreign capitalists while others sought (and are seeking) to dislodge foreign businessmen from the premiere position they occupy. They organized, financed and led the political parties. They controlled bureaucracies and governments. They tried, and often succeeded, in controlling public opinion and education. In short, they developed and prospered while the mass of their countrymen remained stagnant. And the gap separating them and their people continues to remain today a wide chasm.²⁷

²⁵ Thus, many young Indians, Ceylonese, Malaysians, and Nigerians went to British schools; Indonesian students went to Holland; Algerians and Vietnamese went to France, and Filipino "pensionados" were sent to America to study.

²⁶ S. Arasaratnam, commenting on this phenomenon in Ceylon, noted that the westernized Ceylonese elite would describe the island as a "little bit of England" and take pride in this description. See S. Arasaratnam, *Ceylon*, (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1964), p. 9.

²⁷ For detailed evidences of these points, see, for example, Seymour Martin Lipset and Aldo Solari (eds.) *Elites in Latin America*, (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1967); Michael Brecher, *The New States of Asia: A Political Analysis*, (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1964); Rupert Emerson, *Representative Government in Southeast Asia*, (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1955); Hugh H. Smythe, and Mabel M. Smythe, *The New Nigerian Elite*, (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1960); E. Stanley, *The Future of Underdeveloped Countries: Political Implications of Eco-*

IV

The foregoing propositions and discussion are meant as possible starting points for a comparative and more intensive study of elites in developing societies. More refined techniques in methods need to be developed and more empirical data should be accumulated. But the main plea of this essay is that while details are important they should not distract the investigator from seeing the total picture. The aim is to look closer at the trees but at the same time not to get lost and fail to see the forest. Our concern with refined methodological tools, with empiricism and "behavioralism," should not reduce us, in the words of C. Wright Mills, to social scientists of the narrow focus, preoccupied with the trivial details "the almighty unimportant fact."²⁸

Researchers on elites in the developing societies must confront at the outset the reality of built-in oligarchical structures. They are often obvious enough that even the unsophisticated observer can easily detect their existence and operation. The problem, however, is to examine these structures systematically without distorting the total picture.

It may help also to heed the suggestion of Neumann that when we study the complex phenomenon of political power, we can use as a frame within which the analyses have to be made the basic proposition that "political power has its roots in economic power;" that "the form of government may or may not truly express the distribution of power."²⁹

The doctrine of separate powers may or may not express the fact that social forces are as balanced as are the political institutions. As a rule, they are not. Constitutional law merely supplies the frame for the exercise of political power but does not indicate its holder or its functions. . . . Constitutional law, secondly, indicates the form in which political power may be legitimately exercised. While the significance of both aspects of constitutional law may not be underestimated, empirical sociological studies of the locus of political power are indispensable.³⁰

Finally, the selection of a model should be based on its usefulness in the analysis, that is, one that approximates the reality that is being described and analyzed. The investigator must never be satisfied with ambiguities and clichés. Furthermore, he should strive to clarify re-

conomic Development, (New York: Harper and Bros., 1961); Charles A. Beard, *The Economic Basis of Politics*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1957); Jose Medina Echavarria and B. Higgins (eds.) *Social Aspects of Economic Development in Latin America*. Vol. II (Paris: UNESCO, 1963); and Dante C. Simbulan, "The Socio-Economic Elite in Philippine Politics and Government, 1946-1963," (Ph.D. dissertation, Australian National University, 1965, presently being prepared for publication in book form as the *Modern Principalia: A Study of the Philippine Elite*).

²⁸ C. Wright Mills, *The Marxists*, (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1962), p. 10.

²⁹ Franz L. Neumann, "Approaches to the Study of Political Power," *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. LXV, June, 1950, pp. 177-178.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 178.

relationships between the concepts and "models" he has developed or adopted on the one hand, and the concrete reality on the other.

But there is, however, a problem here. Scholars, like other human beings, develop preferences. They, too, acquire certain values which they unconsciously or (consciously) apply to the phenomena they are studying. In the process, they sometimes mistake their preferences (or ideals) for the reality they are investigating and in the resulting confusion, they may also mistake the part for the whole and end up describing, as in the Philippine example, the case of a "democratic" tail wagging the "oligarchical" dog.