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The Many Futures of Élites Research. A Comment on the Symposium

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The Many Futures of Élites Research

A Comment on the Symposium

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It is a pleasure and an honor to comment on these four major contributions to the study of the sociology of élites. They represent an exciting intervention, in large part because they provide detailed, concrete empirical findings about what has been, until recently, a relatively understudied group. The papers do not advance new theoretical ground. This is not a critique; I mean it as praise. Rather than pontificate about how we might understand élites, they get down to work actually understanding them giving us a series of rich empirical descriptions. If we are to proceed to an understanding of élites this is where we must begin. The capacity to refine theoretical frameworks only comes with enough descriptive understanding; we are not there yet, but these works sent us firmly down that path.

I am completing this reflection rather late, in the immediate aftermath of my own nation's election of Donald Trump, not long after Britain's voting to exit the EU, and not long before a series of European elections that could herald in a new political and economic era, dominated by right wing ethno-cultural nationalism. It would not be an overstatement to say that I am horrified by the potential consequences of these developments. Trump has recently named a white nationalist, Stephen Bannon, to be a chief advisor to the White House, and his surrogates have indicated an interest in forcing all Muslims to register with the government.

Many are looking back at early fascist movements for insights into these developments. Sadly, they are likely correct in suggesting that authoritarianism is yet again an important category for understanding the political present in the West. The

question for me, as someone who has written extensively on the sociology of élites in the United States [Khan 2011, 2012a, 2012b, 2015, 2016; Khan and Jerolmack 2013], is what élite theory can tell us about this moment. Worryingly, the answer is not readily clear. There is often a strong tie between élites and neo-liberal policies, but these recent developments could hardly be described in those terms. Further, while populist movements are often based in a critique of élites, élites have played a central role in reviving ethno-cultural nationalism within the West. But from within the current collection of papers we may well be able to fashion the sketches of an answer – one that might help guide us as we think through explanations of the present and anticipations of our future.

Roughly, the four papers make two major contributions. The first is to understand the ways in which social structures work upon élites; the second is to understand variations within the élite. These insights matter because in the first instance they help us better understand how and why institutions might matter to work for and against élites; and in the second, to recognize that there is no élite, instead there are élites who may be in conflict, have the possibilities of coordination, and can work differently within an institutional environment to realize different ends.

While some readers might think "of course élites are varied, and of course institutions and structures matter for élite," I would say that yes, this is obvious. But it is not the starting point for the vast majority of élite research. Sociologists tend to reserve structure for poverty, and culture and agency for élites. That is to say that there is a general reticence to deploying explanation of poverty that rest upon the cultural traits of poor people, or the kinds of action pathways they are likely to take. Instead, structural constraints are of primary interest. Élites, by contrast, are often thought of as existing as a kind of organized cabal – one might think of Mills' "*Power Élite*" – whose disproportionate concentration of power allows them to realize their interests through their coordinated activity.

Of course, analytically it is perfectly possible that the explanations of élite positions and the explanations of dominated positions are different. If we transcend linear thinking then we quickly see that *explananda* of oppositional positions need not be the inverse of one another, or, that explanations at one "end" need not be the same as those at the other "end" of a spectrum. Yet just how structures work upon élites is important for us to understand – in the case of the collected papers we see, for example, the impacts of the structures of finance and of networks. None of this is to say that power does not enable greater agency (though this is an empirical question), only to say that the suggestion that élites are in control of things like culture, or politics, and the economy and thereby able to act relatively more effectively

given their interest posits of model of human action and agency that we would largely reject in other social contexts.

The sociology of Pierre Bourdieu gets us through many of these challenges – allowing us to conceptualize multiple élites who are contentious (that is, imagining a field of power as a field of struggle between different holders of different conglomerations of capital). Similarly, the Bourdieuian framework allows us to think about the structural properties that influence élites, by demanding that we consider the structured set of spaces that élites occupy and struggle within. But if there is a weakness to the Bourdieuian position it is in its inattentiveness to demographics. Bourdieu has little to say on gender, and is almost completely silent on issues of race. And yet it would be nearly impossible to understand our current moment without attention to these factors. The construction of an ethnic other, and the rise of ethno-cultural nationalisms happens within a context of deeply racialized and gendered politics. We may well amend Bourdieuian models to make sense of this. But Bourdieu's work itself has surprisingly little to say.

Fortunately, the collected papers provide a fuller path forward. Their rich empirical work provides us with insights of how to press forward. For the remainder of this reflection I do three things. First I reflect upon the insights of how structures work upon élites; I begin with the Glucksberg and Burrows [2016]. While this paper may not seem particularly "structural," what struck me was just how much wealthy families were not managing institutions, but instead managed by them. I then use the Heemskerk *et al.* [2016] to think in a different way about structure – in particularly the structure of social network relations, providing new insights for perhaps the oldest tradition of élite analysis, board interlocks. This paper leads nicely into my second point, which is to reflect upon how élites vary. The Lebaron and Dogan [2016] provide a wonderfully detailed account of this, showing how differences in biography produce differences in positions within central bankers. The Hjellbrekke and Korsnes [2016] push this even further, demanding that we being to take seriously demographic differences within élites, specifically the positions, experiences, and trajectories of women. I conclude by extracting from these to return to my opening, and to reflect, briefly, upon our present.

1. How Structures Work Upon Élites

Glucksberg and Burrows [2016] bring the reader into a world we rarely see: that of family offices. Even as an ethnographer of élites who has integrated into a variety of élite worlds, I was thrilled and amazed to see behind these offices and develop

a far richer understanding of how dynastic wealth is managed from generation to generation. Yet if I were to take home a lesson from this unique work, it was how much money was protected from élite families. That is, we often imagine that money itself is a vehicle for élites to realize their interests. Yet in the case of what managers of family offices do, it seems that one – though certainly not the only – aim is to protect money from the capricious desires of heirs (and especially those who married into the family).

The very term, "family office" suggests that it is not people who are served, but instead, an institution – the family – to which individuals belong. They key dimension, that "you have to manage the family" of such offices suggests something important when thinking about how intergenerational wealth is maintained, and how family influence works. For élite families to become influential, in the long run, they must be institutionalized, with a professional class of lawyers, bankers, and managers who run this institution. The resultant vision is not one wherein élites are actors realizing their ends. Instead, they are structurally constrained in order to sustain other ends. These insights may well be bound to dynastic wealth – that is, the inheritors rather than producers of wealth.

We require further empirical insights to evaluate this. Yet given the enormously complex task of managing massive amounts of wealth, it is highly likely that organizational and structural forms work upon all élites in some of the same ways they work upon all of us. And if Piketty [2014] is correct, then the dynamics of dynastic wealth will become increasingly important for us to understand over the next generation. Understanding the logics of these institutional structures is an essential task for understanding élites. For élite scholars the primary insight is that we should not always imagine élites as engines of outcomes, but instead, often as subject to social structures. Glucksberg and Burrows have opened up some rich empirical insights into this form. But far more work is needed to know the range of institutional forms that mediate élites, and to understand the logic and mechanisms of structural constraint upon and construction of élite interests.

Heemskerk et al. [2016] guide us to consider another form of structure – related, but somewhat distinct: interlocking directorates. Since the pioneering work of Brandeis at the beginning of the Twentieth century, its extension by Lenin, this field has been one of the richest traditions within élite studies. I will assume that Mark Mizruchi, my fellow commentator [2016], will have far more to say about this, as he has done some of the most important empirical, technical, and theoretical work in this area over the last quarter century.

The empirical work that Heemskerk et al. have done is tremendous, providing a major advance in what is possible for us to empirically understand. This contri-

bution alone makes this a massively important paper. There are, of course, certain concerns about the data – there always are – but we are in a better place today to understanding interlocking boards than we have ever been thanks to this kind of project.

Their specific question in this paper is about the relationship between local and nonlocal interlocking directorates. In more prosaic terms, the core question is whether or not élites are truly "global" and how their structural character may help us make sense of international economic dynamics. Their findings are reminiscent of the important recent work of Cristobal Young, who has shown that millionaires are astonishingly local [Young *et al.* 2016; Young and Verner 2011]. Young has used his work to suggest that taxation of millionaires at high rates is unlikely to yield their exit from national context, as they have social ties to particular communities, and can almost never simply "pick up and move" as an act of protest.

Heemskerk *et al.* affirm these basic insights, using a different data approach and a different empirical object (the unit of analysis is ties on boards, rather than individual people). In short, what they find is that,

> the increase in transnational corporate networks typically does not connect far away regions in the world, but rather integrates business élites that are relatively nearby [2016, p.3].

Even across "global" firms, ties tend to be largely "local." The structural arrangements of these different boards reflect different opportunities and interests. Within some regions élites are highly localized and nationally bound; within others they're highly localized and more international (say, in several European nations). And in still others, the structural arrangement of ties is far more global and international. Those within a local-national context may wish themselves to be more global-international, but they cannot simply will this to be. Global economic and social relationships structure opportunities for élites. Just as Glucksberg and Burrows suggest a set of institutional and structural constraints on dynastic wealth, here too we see the ways in which structures influence – which is to say both limit and enable – élite actors.

The second key finding from Heemskerk et al. is that these structures, and the élites themselves, vary. They find considerable regional heterogeneity in networks structure; for example, Russia is rather territorial bound, whereas in the US there are those oriented to North America (and Israel), those structured around Europe, and those structured around Asia. This insight pushes me to my second point, about variations within the élite.

2. How Élites Vary

The work of Lebaron and Dogan [2016] combines a Millsian understanding of the importance of biography and history with a Bourdieuian theory of position-taking within fields. Exploring the lives and trajectories of élite central bankers, they note how different personal and professional biographies generate what they see as somewhat consistent dispositions among bankers. No doubt too parsimoniously, they find, for example, being a PhD in economics leads to an emphasis on economic and financial expertise, providing technical assistance, and being located within a more international network of organizations. Importantly, such biographical elements are independently explanatory; they cannot be reduced to nation of origin, when, for example, explaining how "hawkish" one might be in relation to fiscal policy.

Lebaron and Dogan's work is richly descriptive and suggestive over several other dynamics; I look forward to their further research into family backgrounds and networks to provide a fuller empirical picture of these banking élites. This is not a criticism, for their capacity to develop four "types" of bankers within this particular empirical analysis is enormously important. If we are to leave the world of central banking for a moment, and draw out some more general implications, I would suggest that they key insight is that within this group of élite bankers there is considerable variation, and that this intra-group difference reveals dimensions of élite struggle and re-organization. If we step even further back and realize that such variation can be found even with a relatively small group of central bankers, then we can only imagine the diversity we might find within a broader "power élite."

Lebaron and Dogan note

> a growing conflict between a legalist orthodox view, losing support and practical relevance over time, and a more pragmatic and flexible economic conception, that has taken the lead since a few years [2016, p.35]

There is no élite. Instead, there are élites, with different interests, capacities, trajectories, backgrounds, and ties. While at certain levels of analysis it may well be justifiable to think about élites as a "group," there are dangers to implying such group-ness [e.g. Brubaker 2004]. The lesson I draw from Lebaron and Dogan is that instead of being assumed, élite coordination and collective action should be empirically established. And more important, when thinking about élites we should pay far more attention to their internal variations and contentions. This suggests how they might mobilize other groups, and be mobilized by them, for shared aims. In short, it points to not just intra-group variation, but intergroup alliances – which once

considered, points to the problem of thinking about élites as a group at all. Finally, Lebaron and Dogan find a strong gender bias within the 312 bankers they studied. In order to better understand gender within position of power, let me turn, finally, to the paper by Hjellbrekke and Korsnes [2016] on women in the field of power.

I was thrilled to read the Hjellbrekke and Korsnes for two reasons: first I've long been interested in gender dynamics among the élite and second because of the paper itself, which takes so seriously its empirical analysis. It serves as a model for sociologists who believe fine-detailed empirical analysis to be the core building block of theoretical insight. The paper searches not for cute counterintuitive findings, nor does it demand that findings meet expectations. Instead it reveals a deep commitment to descriptive understanding through careful empirical work – one of the best things that any scientific work can offer. More specifically Hjellbrekke and Korsnes outline conditions where there are "no differences" between men and women, instances where there are, and instances where there are differences within women. In this last case, we see the same kind of general insight that Lebaron and Dogan provide – but instead of differences within central bankers, we see differences within kinds of élite women (meritocrats, outsiders, and inheritors).

The findings of this paper, as they are with all the collected papers, are too rich for me to fully review. Instead, I'll continue with extracting some general insights from what the authors discover. Hjellbrekke and Korsnes note that even in the context of social-egalitarian Norway, there is a strong gendered recruitment into the élite, across all positions and all sectors. Such masculine domination is not shocking, but it is surprising to see it so overwhelming within this particular case. What's also a compelling finding is how within women themselves there is a structural dimension of organization. As the authors note,

> the trajectories of women constitute its own tripolar structure of oppositions within the main structure. And these gendered structural oppositions tend to reproduce each other: as long as women do not access, or get access to the economic pole, their trajectories will tend to reproduce their internal structural oppositions, and as long as these oppositions are reproduced they will not access the economic pole [2016, p.24]

It's likely that these patterns, particularly the importance of access to higher levels of the economic pole, apply to other groups that are systematically underrepresented among the élite and within positions of powers. Yet we need more fine-grained analysis across a host of groups (racial and ethnic minorities, migrants, religious minorities, gay, lesbian, queer, and trans people, etc.) within a variety of national and local contexts to better understand the logics of the distribution of power. Even if the question of élites is not of interest, this connection between élites and

power means that understanding how power is held, wielded, structurally located, and thereby accessible or deployed disproportionately requires the kind of work that Hjellbrekke and Korsnes – indeed all the authors in this volume – have provided.

3. The Implications for Understanding the Social World

Taken together these are four enormously exciting papers. I feel this way not because they advance new theories, but because they give us a far richer understanding of the world. While some areas of sociology are concentrating on outlining key causal pathways within fairly clearly delineated contexts, élite sociology is not at this stage of development. By this I mean that we still have an enormous set of descriptive work ahead of us before we can sufficiently narrow our scope to test which among a few variable pathways or mechanisms are explanatory. It is enormously refreshing to see four papers that undertake this essential empirical work. Each advances our knowledge in important ways by helping us better understand the world, and the world of élites.

I pivot from this happy position, to the far darker one of considering our current state of political affairs. While I often hesitate in my scholastic writing to reflect on things of the moment, for fear that such an orientation may quickly make my writings irrelevant or obsolete, the potential consequences of the political present seem so important that I feel it would be irresponsible not to push my fellow scholars to consider them.

The two general insights I have drawn from these papers are that we need to do deeper analyses of what structures work upon élites, and how they do so, and be more attentive to varieties of élite. Exploring how those varieties may mean thinking beyond "groupness" and considering the range of alliances between those we think of élites and others, in order to wield and arrange power in new ways.

As the reader might guess, I'm rather unwilling to speak across all national contexts, as I too quickly reach the limits of my own knowledge. But if there is a global concern, it is one of the loss, or at least decline, of the liberal model of nationhood. While liberalism's problems have been well rehearsed, the potential decline of Europe as an idea, and liberalism as an organizing model for nations in Europe, the US, and perhaps well beyond leaves us with few realized alternate models, which themselves are far from desirable (e.g. Russia and China). While authoritarianism and ethnic nationalism are often thought of as mass movements, élites are playing central roles in these processes. The questions are, which among the various élites promote such

movements, how are such inter-"group" alliances built and maintained, and how are institutional and structural forms promoting or inhibiting these dynamics?

The curiosity within such "populist" ethno-nationalist movements is that, at their core, they are structured around a critique of élites, and yet they align with some sub-set of élites. This points to a few of our previous insights. First, that there are varieties of élites, some of whom may have deeply illiberal positions. Second, we may well want to be more attentive to how élites are subjectively understood, and not only scientifically described. This means understanding not just the objective conditions of the making of élites, but also the subjective conceptualizations of élites by élites and others, in order to see how different conglomerations are socially and politically possible. While some of my own previous work has been critical of the "attitudinal fallacy" – taking attitudes as proxies for behavior [Jerolmack and Khan 2014] – this does not mean that we should completely abandon attitudinal frames and their impacts on constructing worlds of possibilities within the social world.

Finally, thinking of this process helps us see something important. Liberal economic and political processes have often been intimately tied with élites. Even within conceptualizations of comparatively conservative élites, especially within the post-war era, a commitment to liberal economic policies is often presumed. Yet we are now witnessing the rise of a different set of élites, who are using ethno-national logics, underpinned by a commitment to white supremacy. These élites are certainly interested in their own economic dominance, but it would be hard to argue that a logic of liberal markets – a form of contemporary capitalism – drives their actions. To get through our present morass we must understand the interrelationship between these various élites, and the political and economic ideologies they deploy, in part through their work upon and work with other social groups. The appearance of these papers reflects an exciting and important contribution to understanding élites; with any luck scholars will learn from and build upon them and hope us better mediate the terrifying political climate that seems on the horizon.

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The Many Futures of Élites Research

A Comment on the Symposium

Abstract: In this paper I argue that the contributions collected in this issue make major advances in our understanding of élites by focusing on developing concrete empirical findings rather than theoretical contributions. These findings point to two things that scholars of élites should more attentive to: first, the structural conditions that work upon élites; second, the ways in which there is no élite, instead there are élites. This variation within élites pushes us to think less about élite "groupness" and more about the intra-élite conflict, how different structural forms work upon and are produced by different élites, and how inter-group collaboration, co-optation, and conflict are possible. Finally, I use these insights to reflect upon how it is that scholars of élites can contribute to our understanding of the recent turn in global politics against liberalism and toward ethno-cultural nationalism.

Keywords: Élites; Social Structure; Multiple Élites; Ethno-Cultural Nationalism.

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