

COMPARISON OF ELITE THEORY ACCORDING TO G. MOSCA AND V. PARETO

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Abstract

Critique of democracy and the elite theory represent the classical themes of political thought. Democracy was presented as an unacceptable form of government already in classical Greek philosophy. And elite theory, as a reflexion of practical democratic politics, belongs mainly to the second half of the 19th century while it also partially influenced totalitarian political movements of the first half of the 20th century. This paper will focus on the two most significant elite theories by Italian thinkers Gaetano Mosca and Vilfredo Pareto. The paper uses content analysis of their main works and subsequently tries to compare between them. In the conclusion it contains evaluation of the elite theory for the present day and the outcomes of the comparison.

Keywords: democracy, elite, politics, law, psychology

1 Introduction

Creation of elite theory is closely linked to social and political situation in 19th century Italy. Founders of elite theory began to develop its basic concepts exactly in the era of widespread frustration over politics in the society. Establishment of independent and united Italy in 1861 represented fulfillment of efforts of Italians fighting for unification of their fragmented country. At the beginning, Italy was ruled by centrist right, which advocated mainly the interests of educated middle and higher class and in the economy it preferred liberal principles, oriented mainly towards liberalization of the trade. This policy aimed to start up Italian economy, which seriously lagged behind those of Western European countries of that time. The Government also implemented several profound reforms including public administration reform, which paradoxically created a rigid centralized system and tax reform, which introduced uncommonly high tax burden.¹

After enactment of reforms and their problematic implementation, the government switched from right wing to left wing one. In this period the striking difference between economic base and performance of the northern and southern part of the country became prominent and visible for the first time. In the northern part of the country, most of the industry and significant part of educated and affluent population was concentrated. When the left-leaning government started to promote a change of tax system and mediate differences between north and south, it won the government strong sympathies of the predominantly rural south.² However, after some time, not even this left-wing government was able and willing to fulfill at least part of its promises. Political power was becoming more and more intertwined with the financial power. This great disappointment of Italian people with governments after unification of the country led to great surge of irrationalism and distrust towards parliamentary and governmental institutions of Italy.³ These conditions led to creation of classical elite theory in this time. The first formulation of the theory was created by Italian thinker Gaetano Mosca.

2 Gaetano Mosca – law of survival, political formula and legal protection of governed majority

The first of elite theory authors was a professor of constitutional law at University of Turin and later as a professor of political theory at University of Rome. He also had an active political career, becoming a member of parliament in 1909 for liberal-conservative party and a senator of Kingdom of Italy between 1919 and 1926. He wrote number of theoretical works, among which Theory of Governments and Parliamentary Government, The Ruling Class (with a second part added in 1923 and being his most important work) and History of Political Doctrines, were the most significant.⁴

During his academic career, Mosca concentrated on analysis of discrepancies between political reality and classical theory of democracy. Using historical method, which he considered a cornerstone of political science, he analyzed these discrepancies and identified primary, stable and unchanging laws, existing in human history. He divided history into two phases – phase of pre-civilization and phase of civilization:

¹KOPEČEK, Lubomír (2007): Elity a demokracie. In: Hloušek, Vít.; Kopeček, Lubomír (eds.): Demokracie: Teorie, modely, osobnosti, podmínky, nepřátelé a perspektivy demokracie. IIPS: Brno. s. 149

²PROCACCI, Giuliano (1997): Dějiny Itálie. Lidové noviny: Praha, s.266

³KELLER, Jan (2005): Dějiny klasické sociologie. Sociologické nakladatelství: Praha, s. 292

⁴JODL, Miroslav; PECKA, Emanuel (1994): Teorie elity. VŠE: Praha, s.31-32

a) phase of pre-civilization – era of fight for life and consequently the law of survival; according to this „law“ only the strongest individuals and those most adaptable to their environment will survive,

b) phase of civilization – the main law is fight for recognition, which manifests itself by competition between individuals to gain the highest positions in society, while primary goal of every individual is to gain authority and wealth. Primary law of civilized society influences structure of society, which leads to its division into ruling minority and governed majority.⁵

It can be asserted, that even in democratic societies, this thesis about ruling minority and governed majority is valid. This was one of the reasons why Mosca set a goal to prove democratic theory wrong. He considered J. J. Rousseau to be the author of this theory, since he insisted that people ought to exercise political power directly. According to concept of natural state, individuals were supposed to be free and equal. However, unlike Rousseau, Mosca was able to find ruling minority in democratic concepts of society as well. He found them primarily among the minority of influential oligarchs and the rich, who effectively use democratic principles in order to hide unchanging element of social law, which is rule of minority. According to him, rule of minority is in effect regardless of democracy, form of government or level of development of given society.⁶ The minority, ruling over the majority, became known by the term “ruling class”. According to him, ruling class is a label for the elite, which he understands as political elite – significant group of people with power and influence. Every society is divided into ruling class and governed masses and while the ruling class is a cohesive social element or a group within society, since its members share values and goals, the masses are not. Another difference between them is that governed masses miss the element of organization since they are composed solely of unorganized individuals. Among the most significant attributes of members of the ruling class, Mosca mentioned intellect, wealth and character, which was supposed to be mainly strong will, shrewdness and intuition. These qualities were according to him the most important in order to be able to control individuals within ruled majority.

Based on his work on elite theory, he reached conclusion, that members of the ruling class need a justification that would grant their rule needed legitimacy – the political formula. It is a doctrine aiming to justify the rule of minority. Ruling minority uses the political formula as moral and legal basis of its rule, which serves the ruling minority as a mean to realization of government and control of the masses. In order to achieve the goal of the political formula, it can not be applied in any random way and there are three conditions that need to be met in order to reach successful outcome. Political formula needs to be in tune with the given historical moment, it also has to satisfy maximal amount of human needs, feelings and inclinations and there also needs to be a well organized and unified center of control. The most important precondition within application of the political formula is its capacity to convince the governed majority that it is being governed because of a higher moral principle. Exactly for this reason, so that given applied formula would not loose this ability, it necessarily needs to change during the course of history. In the modern times, the political formula appeared in the form of a religion and in the form of democracy, socialism, or nationalism.

Concerning the significance and the role of individual, we can say that Mosca characterized them as egoistic beings, which are motivated in their actions by the greed for power and material gain. In this sense, we can characterize his view of individual as an egoist. Because of this it is in sharp contrast to the understanding of an individual according to the conception of J. J. Rousseau, who saw individual as naturally good. In the end of characterization of the theory according to Mosca, we ought to mention his significant critique of Marxism, which understands a man as naturally good and it is only the social institutions, that are corrupting this naturally good nature. The basis of egoism is not seen within human character, but in private property and once private property is put away, the human egoism is going to disappear as well. Marxist ideas might win in some societies, however, they are completely Utopian. According to Mosca, Marxism is merely a mean (political formula) to gain power and liquidation of private property. According to his theory, the Marxist society will also be subject to unchanging law of society, which predicts division of people into ruling minority and governed majority. He predicts that within Marxist societies there will be even greater suppression than elsewhere because there will be lack of legal protection.

The conception of legal protection can be considered a key notion within elite theory according to Mosca. The idea of legal protection is based on assumption that political power within society is under legal control of the society. Members of the ruling class have to exercise power in accordance with law and moral norms, which is only possible in a society, where one social force or political idea does not have complete dominance. In order to protect any individual from arbitrary decisions of the holders of power, it is necessary that different political principles balancing each other out, participate on power. Mosca strongly linked the concept of legal protection with the principle of balance of social forces, these are left without detailed formulation, however. It is useful to state, that under given concept can fall any human activity, that is significant for the society.

Mosca wrote his most important work, *The Ruling Class*, trying to disprove the theory of democracy. His negative attitude towards principles of liberal democracy was caused by sharp differences between theory and

⁵JODL, Miroslav (1994): *Teorie elity a problém elity*. Victoria Publishing: Praha, s. 25

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social reality. Under the influence of political turbulence of 1917 (Bolshevik revolution in Russia) and the ascent of fascism in Italy and Germany, he completely changed his previous negative opinion of liberal democracy. The most obvious element in recognizing Liberal democracy as an alternative to rule of minority was the fact, that there is free competition of social forces within liberal democracy. He maintained his concept of ruling minority and governed majority, however, since there is a minority of influential and affluent ruling in liberal democracy as well.

3 Vilfredo Pareto – irrationality, residues, the circulation of elites

He studied and graduated at Polytechnic University of Turin, worked as a manager at Italian railroads and later as a general manager of Italian Iron Works company. He was known for his democratic and republican values. In economic area, he advocated liberal principles and criticized protectionist policies and state interventions in economy, which were characteristic for the era after 1876, when a left-wing government took office. After unsuccessful candidacy to Italian Parliament, he took a post of professor of economy in Lausanne and became a sharp critic of democratic and humanist ideas.⁷

According to Mosca, negative elements such as corruption and clientelism, became chief characteristic feature of democracy. He considered democracy to be a rule of elite, which intentionally creates false impression, that people are participating on political power. Elite rules in every society. Unlike his fellow Italian thinker Mosca, Pareto understood the term “elite“ in both narrower and broader sense:

a) in broader sense “elite“ represents individuals, that can be characterized by reaching the best results in any area of social activity; these are mainly scientists, academics, athletes, or other important persons,

b) in narrower sense of the word “elite“, it is understood as a ruling group, composed of personalities having qualities and abilities to rule and that stand at the top of the social hierarchy; this elite is the source of political power and is the only one, that is also holding the power; the upper social class is composed of the ruling elite together with so called non-ruling elite, whose members do possess necessary skills to rule, however they can not participate on ruling for some reasons; the lowest strata within the social hierarchy are the masses, that represent the members of society without required abilities and are subject to control and the ruling elite is using them as it pleases.⁸

Every society without exception is divided into the rulers and the ruled, while the former are a minority and the latter are the majority of society. Inequality among individuals in society is caused by different abilities, intelligence and the residue. Pareto characterized residues as certain emotions, instincts and motivating forces, which are present in any social behavior. These in addition are hidden deep within human character and they can only be identified through analysis of social behavior. He found the true meanings of human behavior within residue, which he understood as irrational motives for it. It is logical, that individuals are usually going to deny their irrationality and try to pose their actions as being rational. To this purpose, they use various explanations and justifications and Pareto refers to all of them as derivations. Derivations are according to him various kinds of justifications used by humans to rationalize their behavior. He named socialism and liberal democracy examples of derivations.⁹

According to Pareto there are also two different kinds of circulation of elites. The first kind of replacing the old ruling elite is to infiltrate it with able individuals from the environment of ruled masses. These individuals, possessing necessary qualities, abilities and skills to rule can replace all the members of the old ruling elite. The second way, although much more radical one, is overthrowing the elite through violent revolution. Revolution is a mean to enable rapid fall of the old ruling elite and fast ascend of the new one, however the role of the people ends once the revolution is over. Every revolution is first and foremost a confrontation between two competing elites and a victory of any of them never leads to improvement of the position of the people. The division of society into elite and masses is given by the fact, that distribution of intelligence, abilities, residues among people is not even.¹⁰

Pareto repeatedly advocated using of force in order to maintaining order. According to his opinion, the willingness to use coercion is a characteristic feature of a strong elite. On the other hand an elite that is reluctant to use violence is a weak elite and it is therefore justifiable that it ought to be overthrown as soon as possible. Those elites that specialize in humane gestures and feel for the weak, which can be observed especially among liberal democratic elites, are the weak ones. The ascent of fascism in the 1920s in Italy eventually proved this thesis right, when liberal democratic elite of that time was unable to use force to stop fascism. It was exactly this willingness to use violence to gain and keep power, that inspired his sympathies towards Italian fascism.¹¹

⁷KELLER, Jan (2005): Dějiny klasické sociologie. Sociologické nakladatelství: Praha, s. 293

⁸JODL, Miroslav (1994): Teorie elity a problém elity. Victoria Publishing: Praha, s. 31

⁹KELLER, Jan (2005): Dějiny klasické sociologie. Sociologické nakladatelství: Praha, s. 306

¹⁰KOPEČEK, Lubomír (2007): Elity a demokracie. In: Hloušek, Vít.; Kopeček, Lubomír (eds.): Demokracie: Teorie, modely, osobnosti, podmínky, nepřátelé a perspektivy demokracie. IIPS: Brno. s. 159

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4 Conclusion

This paper took interest in the two most prominent elite theories, which were a theoretical reaction to practical shortcomings of real life democracies. Given theories can be criticized especially from the methodological point of view, since authors tended to compare theory with practical politics in their works, which is logically an approach that had to lead to discovery of very sharp differences. Legitimacy of elite theory is however confirmed by its timelessness. Because it was not just a feature of the era when our authors wrote their works, but doubts concerning true nature of practical democratic politics were repeatedly risen throughout entire history of political thought. Especially today, we can once again point out the significance of elite theory – that is, among continuous fears over return of the economic crisis, currency issues, migration and ascend of far right populist forces. These events are directly linked to ongoing discussions about the nature of political systems. We can therefore be sure that elite theory is going to remain among discussed topics in the future as well.

When comparing the theories created by Mosca and Pareto, we can find more differences than common features. Their thinking about elites differ in the chosen research approach. Mosca, being a law expert, inclined towards historical method, which was among dominant approaches in social research of that time. Pareto, on the other hand chose a psychological approach, which could be considered more interesting from the methodological point of view. Both of them used common (basically Marxist) concept of splitting the society into ruling and ruled part. While Mosca was strict in this division, Pareto made it more complicated by adding the non-ruling class in it. This different methodological approach further influenced overall perception of elites by both authors. Both of them were interested in legitimacy or a way of keeping power, but each of them from different aspect – Mosca was concentrating on understanding the political formula and Pareto used explanation based on the notion of human irrationality, which he further conceptualized into residues and derivations. Their differing study of social and political elites led them to opposing evaluations of Italian fascism. Mosca reacted to it by finally admitting the advantages of liberal democracy, while Pareto sympathized with fascism. It ought to be said though, that Pareto only had a chance to evaluate Italian fascism in its beginnings, because he died already in 1923, one year after the fascist March on Rome.

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