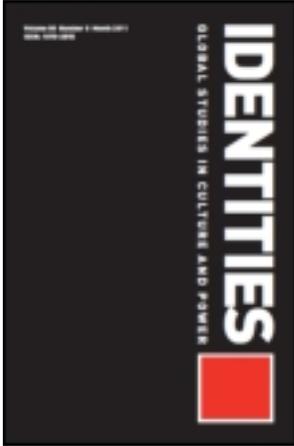


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Elite identities

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Elite identities

Shamus Rahman Khan

(Received 18 July 2012)

Elites have changed. They are now more open and meritocratic. They are also the engines of inequality. In this article, I argue that elites have embraced the rhetoric of the rights movements of the past decades, becoming champions of the notion that it is individual capacities that matter, not ascriptive characteristics. This stance embraces a new efficiency of our world, that of the market. The earnest deployment of these ideas by the elite has resulted in a world with less equality, less mobility and a more empowered elite. I reflect on how this came to be, and how such elite identities might be challenged in the service of the public welfare.

Keywords: elites; inequality; culture; meritocracy; identity; sociology

Introduction

Who are the elites? how do we understand them? and how do they understand themselves? As an American sociologist, I inhabit a field where such questions used to be popular. I like to think I am a part of the esteemed tradition of Thorstein Veblen, C. Wright Mills and E. Digby Baltzell. But others might point out that this tradition is largely dead. Today it is hard to find answers to the questions about the elite because so few of us are working on this group.

In some ways, it is hardly surprising that we lost sight of elites. A particular kind of scientisation of those disciplines that study social phenomena meant we began to worship at the altar of a narrow kind of generalisability. What could we learn from a small group, and worse still, a small group that does not show up on our gold-standard survey instruments? Of course, were Americans less parochial in their scholarship, perhaps I would be less likely to say we had lost sight of elites; certainly the French tradition never quite died, and significant scholarship in England and throughout Europe has been very active over the last 40 years.

Yet, there are intellectual reasons beyond a knowledge turn in American social science that led to a relative silence about our elite. The most obvious explanation might be the rise of rights movements in the 1960s. Our attention for many years has been on those whom we had ignored for much of the first half of the century. What would happen to societies as those excluded began to be integrated or included? How were such movements possible, successful, stillborn, stifled or failures? Our theoretical frameworks moved away from social reproduction, which many identified as fostering a kind of myopia that left many social scientists unable

to see so much of the population (women, non-Whites, etc.) and unprepared to make sense of the insurgencies of these identities and interests in the post-war era.

This might be an elaborate way to say that social scientists are rather faddish, and the elite fad has waxed and waned. And over the last 5 years, the fad is back, and I am one of its cheerleaders. Again, social movements have played a role, particularly those oriented around the protest of elite domination of economic and political processes. So too have empirical findings caused a re-orientation, particularly because of the work of economists that has shown how much wealth and not poverty has been driving inequality over the past 40 years (Piketty and Saez 2003, 2006). Such rises might not be so exceptional (Kopczuk and Saez 2004), indeed perhaps the exceptional period was in the post-war era, when mobility was relatively high and inequality somewhat constrained (Kopczuk *et al.* 2010). In addition to these empirical insights, Bourdieuan social theory provided a framework of social reproduction less hampered by the intellectual shackles of structural functionalism.

In this piece, I will not cover this revival thoroughly, or its multiple traditions. Scholars interested in the gritty details of elite scholarship, particularly in the United States, should look to another recent review of this work (Khan 2012). Instead, inspired to use this venue as more of a thought piece, I will write something more akin to an article filled with more personal thoughts and reflections than with scholarly references. I will begin by talking about ‘the elite problem’, move into some answers to that problem and end by reflecting upon where elite scholarship might go. Consistent with the theme of this journal, elite identities is the driving interest of my reflection.

The elite problem

It is important for us to note that the ‘elite problem’ is relatively new. This is not to say that elites have not been problems in people’s lives until recently. I am sure if I had a chance to talk to a fourteenth-century Polish peasant, she would have plenty to say about the ‘elite problem’. Instead, what I mean is that for our tribe – intellectuals – the question of elites is rather recent. Indeed, for much of the history of the written word, which is to say, elites’ history of themselves, there has been an astonishing and near overwhelming consensus that it is necessary for a small group of people to rule the rest. What is more, the stability of that group – its capacity to reproduce itself – was seen as paramount to its effective rule. The ‘elite problem’ for most of intellectual history was a question of how to build the best elite possible. It was not to question the existence of an elite.

Few would adhere to this view today. We could point to many reasons for the change. It would be easiest to point to ‘modernity’ – but such an idea is too amorphous to mean much. Instead, we could point to the population explosions that began around 1650, where more people meant more questions about the distribution of rule and administrative challenges to absolutist regimes. We could point to intellectual traditions such as social contract theory and Lockean liberalism which

shifted discussions from rule by right to rule by consent, empowering the ruled over the rulers insofar as natural rights shifted towards the former. We could, by contrast, point to the more familiar process (at least to my sociological brethren) of the division of labour. I would be naive to argue that elites were unitary in earlier periods of social history. But nonetheless, the divisions of society into multiple spheres with distinct and potentially independent bases of social power meant that 'the elite' became 'elites'. Such a transformation need not result in any increased equality, but can lead to inter-elite contention thereby creating different conditions of possibility; inter-elite coordination becomes a problem to be solved and elite/non-elite alliances become more important. In radical instances, elites themselves can be considerably destabilised.

Regardless of how we explain the phenomenon, there remains 'the elite problem'. That problem is really two problems. The first one is how to explain the relative resilience of elites in the light of structural changes (new political institutions, economic relations, family structures, etc.) that seem to make their persistence unlikely. The second 'elite problem' returns to our Polish peasant and asks more seriously about the problems that elites create in the world.

How do elites persevere? What kinds of social problems does this create?

For the purpose of this article, I am going to concentrate on the cultural aspects of elite identity that have facilitated their perseverance and even thriving under the conditions that might, at first, seem to undermine their position.

Those conditions are the tremendous opening of social institutions in much of the West over the past 40 or so years. We cannot underestimate these radical changes to society – access to opportunities that the majority of the population were once excluded from (women, minorities) is more than just window dressing. I make no claim here that this opening has meant anything close to equality. In the United States, for example, while institutions like my own elite university have opened up to Black students – going from 0.8% of the student body 40 years ago to about 13% today – so too have other institutions opened their doors. Black men flow into prisons at rates that climb to unimaginable heights (Alexander 2012).

And yet, this is a part of the point. We often associate social closure with inequality. In both theoretical and lay conceptualisations, we suggest that inequality emerges because of disparate access: some groups have greater access to certain advantaging institutions (Whites to elite schools) and others have greater access to those that are punitive (Blacks to prisons). As I am interested in the elite, it is the former case that receives the bulk of my attention. And by almost every measure, access to elite institutions by those formerly excluded has increased over the past 40 years. So too has inequality. How can this be?

One simple answer is that so too has access to punitive institutions. And that access to and support for state redistribution has declined markedly. It is of interest that as minority groups were able to gain legitimacy in their demands to be

equal recipients for state programmes, the generosity of, and commitment to, such programmes collapsed. But while this is a phenomenon that requires more attention, it is not the subject of my gaze. Instead, I demand that we look within the elite.

The reason is simple enough. Elite institutions are those that seem to have most forcefully embraced the language of openness. In the United States, we can point to the Ivy League's tremendous commitment to affirmative action; or if you visit the website of any major corporation, all will have statements of their 'diversity initiatives'. And when such programmes are subject to legal challenge – as affirmative action programmes have been in the elite public university system – a powerful *amicus curae* brief in favour of these policies was written by that most sacred of American institutions: its military.

But at the same time that elites have embraced openness, they have also been the engines of inequality. And they have been wilfully blind to problems of increased inequality (Jencks 2002), and hostile to programmes that might help alleviate it. It has been the growth of wages of those at the top that has resulted in the rise of inequality in most of the Western world (Atkinson and Piketty 2007, 2010). How is it, then, that the democratic embrace among the elite has been accompanied by a similar rise in their fortunes? And how has the increase in access and inequality been simultaneously read as 'good' or 'justified'?

There are many explanations to the rise of inequality, from the declines in unionisation (Western and Rosenfeld 2011) to the financialisation of the economy (Tomaskovic-Devey and Lin 2011), to the increased capacity for managers to determine their own wages (Godechot 2008) and leapfrog one another (DiPrete *et al.* 2010, but see also Gabaix and Landier 2009). I point mostly to the American literature, but there is disturbing evidence that we are leading the way, that our present may well be Europe's future (Atkinson and Piketty 2010). Underplayed in this literature, and of particular interest to me, are the cultural rhetorics that have facilitated these processes: the rise of the talented, deserving, meritorious individual.

We have seen this rhetoric deployed in our popular media. After banks led nations to perilous collapse, the men who ran them were framed as 'invaluable' because of their hard work, their talents and their irreplaceable skills. The culturally important shift in the elite identity has been from being a 'class' to a collection of individuals – the best and the brightest. That is, rather than identifying as a group which is constituted through a set of institutions (families, schools, clubs, a shared cultural–historical legacy, etc.), today's elites consider themselves as constituted by their individual talents. What 'groups' them is the fact that they have worked hard and gotten ahead; they are the cream that has risen to the top. And in embracing this rather than a class narrative, elites think of themselves as meritocrats. Anyone can achieve what they have, provided they work, study, and are disciplined with their talents. Never mind that meritocracy was coined as part of a dystopian vision (Young 1994). It has become the rallying cry of the rich. Of interest is why and the implications of the stance.

In my earlier work (Khan 2011), I have argued that one of the consequences of the collectivist movements of the 1960s has been the triumph of the individual and the death of the collective. Groups gathered together—Blacks, women, gays and immigrants—to argue that the properties that grouped them and were then used to explain or justify their disadvantage should not matter. It should be human capital that matters; we should all have opportunities based on our capacities, not on characteristics ascribed to us.

Yet those who have most vigorously adopted this stance have been the elite. They look more diverse, including some of those they formerly excluded. And while they certainly know that their individual traits, capacities, skills, talents and qualities are cultivated, they suggest that this cultivation is done through hard work, and access is granted through capacity rather than birthright.

If I were to talk about elite culture today, then, I would talk about a culture of ‘individual self-cultivation’. Yet, there is something pernicious about this presentation of self. The narrative of openness and talent obscures the truth of the American experience. Talents are costly to develop, and we increasingly refuse to socialise these costs. State support for public goods has given way to state support for private provision through markets; such markets have exacerbated inequalities.

If we look at who makes up the ‘most talented’ members of society, we see that they are very likely to be the children of the already advantaged. And such trends appear to be getting worse. America has less mobility than almost any other industrial society; one of the best predictors of being an elite today is whether or not your parents were elites (Corcoran 1995, Kopczuk *et al.* 2010, Mazumder 2005, Solon 1992).

We might ask, ‘if the world is a meritocracy of talent, then why are so many of the talented children of the wealthy?’ We could even push this further and wonder, why it is that as elites have more fully embraced the cultural framework of openness and merit, their stranglehold on advantage only increased, both in terms of the likelihood of their children to succeed and the economic rewards they have enjoyed over the past 40 years?

Society has recessed in the minds of the elite; if anything, it is a producer of social problems. What society did was to create the biases of old institutions – racism, sexism and exclusion. The resulting view is one where society must be as benign as possible, sitting in the background as we play out our lives in a flat world. And the result of such a stance is a new efficiency, the market.

And so we have a seemingly ingenious move. We can blame social problems on the processes whereby we thought in terms of collectivities. With such barriers removed, market equality can take over. We live the results of this triumph today, and it has been a world with less equality, less mobility and a more empowered elite.

Meritocracy is a social arrangement like any other: it is a loose set of rules that can be adapted in order to obscure advantages, all the while justifying them on the basis of shared values. Markets allow elites to limit investments in all by undermining public goods and shared, socialised resource allocations. This allows them

to increase their own advantage by deploying their economic spoils in markets; they receive returns to these investments, those without resources to invest are left behind. The result is less equality and more immobility. The elite story about the triumph of the individual with diverse talents is a myth. In suggesting that it is their work and not their wealth, and that it is their talents and not their lineage, elites effectively blame inequality on those whom our democratic promise has failed. The elite have used the image of a flat world to their tremendous advantage and the rest of us have suffered.

Where might we go from here?

I am a believer. You might even call me a naive one. For I believe in scholarship, and its capacity to reveal the ruse of elite rhetoric and identity for what it is: a lie. But there are some important challenges along the way. I will end with three of them.

The first is the diversification of the elite. This has many elements. We could think in terms of our new ‘global’ world, where fewer of the extremely rich are from America and more from emerging nations. These elite bring with them a different culture and sensibility, but a shared commitment to the economic relations that have empowered them. Within national elites, there has also been a rise of women and non-White super rich. The opening of opportunities to these groups has not created a rise in equality, but it has created opportunities for a few who would not have enjoyed them before. Such changes are important, in part, because of the rhetorical cover they provide the elite (‘Look how much we’ve changed!’), but also for the fact that these new elites may operate under different sensibilities. We must know more about this more diverse and more dominant elite.

The second challenge is the romanticism of the post-war era. This is particularly the case in the United States. We Americans often read our nation through the lens of 1945–1970, when the ‘promise of America’ was fulfilled. We had low inequality and high mobility. Such romanticism often ignores the majority of Americans who were severely disadvantaged during this era (women, non-Whites, etc.). And sometimes these groups are blamed for the collapse of this idealised moment, which was hardly ideal for them. The challenge here is tremendous: to understand how it was that this moment occurred, to question if it was an outlier, to ask if we are now returning to ‘normalcy’ with the rise of our elite, and to think through whether the equality and mobility of that era was conditional on exclusion. These are hard questions. But they will tell us a lot about the conditions of possibility for the elite.

The final challenge is the recognition that challenging the elite may result in empowering elites. One of the stories I have told in this article draws out this exact point: how elites seized upon the rights movements as a rhetorical opportunity and manipulated the cultural sensibilities of these movements to their own advantage. Another story, however, is less cynical, perhaps more hopeful and no doubt more naive.

Early in this article, I began with the idea that the rise of ‘multiple elites’ under the division of labour created multiple bases of social power. I will end here. Part of the story I have told has been the story of a return to elite dominance, where a somewhat singular cultural rhetoric has gained prominence: that of markets and economics. Where are the cultural elite to mediate this influence? In many ways, they have been sold to the highest bidder. To be on the board of a major New York cultural institution, you must donate some \$10 million. These cultural institutions were often at the mercy of money. But today, money is merciless in its expression of power. As economic logics and economic elites dominate others (political, social, cultural, etc.), elite power consolidates, becoming more relentless and it seems, less stable.

My position may make me seem like a simple-minded Dahlian pluralist – that power is least powerful when it is diffused across a population – but it is a position worth exploring. Has the basis of social power consolidated and has such consolidation led to greater power and deeper social problems? It seems to me that the answer to these questions is ‘yes’. And the implication – that perhaps to challenge the elite we must empower multiple elites certainly is a more conservative position than I wish to take. But the elite problem has become so acute that I would be happy to be proven wrong by those scholars who take up the mantle of elite scholarship.

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