
Guest Editorial

Theoretical and methodological pathways for research on elites

Bruno Cousin¹, Shamus Khan^{2,*} and Ashley Mears³

¹Sciences Po, Department of Sociology and Centre for European Studies and Comparative Politics (CEE), France; ²Department of Sociology, Columbia University, New York, NY, USA; ³Department of Sociology, Boston University, Boston, MA, USA

*Correspondence: sk2905@columbia.edu

Abstract

In this introductory essay to our special issue on elites, we outline some of the major challenges to research in this area and propose a series of theoretical and methodological pathways to address them. Theoretically we make four recommendations: (a) greater attentiveness to and specificity about the relationship between elites and power; (b) a clearer articulation of the relationships between elites and the varieties of capitalism; (c) far more attention to diversity within elites and the use of elites to understand forms of domination like white supremacy and masculine domination and (d) expanding beyond the orthodox form of Bourdieusian theoretical frameworks. Methodologically we outline how research using survey instruments, social network analysis (SNA) (and multiple correspondence analysis), interviews, ethnographic observation, experiments, archival research, administrative data and content analysis can each be deployed, built upon or redirected to help bring elites into greater focus.

Key words: elites, power, sociology, theory, methodology, interdisciplinarity

JEL classification: P10 Capitalist systems; P51 Comparative analysis of economic systems; Z13 Economic sociology - Social and Economic Stratification

We write in the aftermath of Donald Trump's first year in office, not long after both Britain's vote to exit the European Union and a series of European elections that may shepherd in a new political and economic era for the continent. All of these transformations are strongly influenced by right-wing ethno-cultural nationalism, which catch up the spirit of a much broader moment of authoritarian backlash in some of the largest democracies in the world (India, Brazil, the Philippines, Turkey, Thailand and Poland). Trump has already undertaken a series of quite terrifying actions, including integrating white nationalists into

the White House, implementing several measures that will have a particularly negative impact on minorities, retreating from major global economic and environmental treaties, entering into a series of protectionist policies likely to arrest the growth of the national economy and passing a tax reform that will increase even further the already fast-growing levels of inequality in the USA and likely be used as a justification to cut the nation's already paltry social support system (Piketty, 2014; Alvaredo *et al.*, 2018). Yet, while we might identify Trump and the associated right-wing movements as 'populist' revivals of the Jacksonian anti-elite ideological legacy (Khan, 2017), we cannot forget that he was born into a major fortune, part of a powerful East Coast elite family (his paternal uncle was a MIT professor and his older sister would become a federal judge in the US Court of Appeals for the Third Circuit) and that he is among the wealthiest men in the world.

In this sense Trump is a reflection of some set of broad tendencies within the global economic and political moment; yet describing what, exactly, he reflects is no easy task. The curiosity of his rise—something which shocked political scientists, pollsters and even some of the authors of this article—points to the failure of elite research to make sense of some of the most important political and economic developments of the current moment. Despite the number of scholars working now extensively in the area of the sociology of elites, it is not clear what elite scholarship can tell us exactly about this moment. While we are excited about the rich and fast-growing terrain of this research area,¹ we are concerned that what we know from this literature gives us little capacity to make sense of the ways in which elites are influencing our world. We worry, to some extent, that the sociology of elites presently is close to what American sociology was like in the 1960s—dominated by theories of Parsonian models of social reproduction (Parsons and Smelser, 1956) in a context of enormous social ferment.

In the current capitalist world-system, there is often a strong tie between the interests of the elites and the implementation of neoliberal and pro-globalization policies, but—as many have pointed out—these recent developments could hardly be described in those terms. Indeed, if populist movements are based in a critique of elites (and highbrow cultural markers), fractions of the elites have in fact played a central role in reviving ethno-cultural nationalisms. Yet, elite theory is almost silent on the issue of race and nation, as well as the

1 There are dozens of new edited volumes and special issues on elites, including but not limited to: "Elites and Power after Financialization" (special issue of *Theory, Culture and Society*, 2017), "Sociology of India's Economic Elites" (special issue of *South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal*, 2017), "The Upcoming New Elite among Children of Immigrants: A Cross-country and Cross-sector Comparison" (special issue of *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 2017), "Elite Discourse: The Rhetorics of Status, Privilege and Power" (special issue of *Social Semiotics*, 2017), "Quand les classes supérieures s'arrangent avec le droit" (special issue of *Sociétés contemporaines*, 2017), "Knowledge, Skills and Dispositions. The Socialisation and 'Training' of Elites" (special issue of *Journal of Education and Work*, 2017), "La formation des élites" (special issue of *L'Année Sociologique*, 2016), "Sociologies of Class: Elites (GBCS) and Critiques" (special issue of *The Sociological Review*, 2015), "New Directions for Research on Elites and Elite Education: Methodological Challenges and Possibilities" (special issue of *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 2015), "New Sociologies of Elite Schooling: Theoretical, Methodological and Empirical Explorations" (special issue of *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 2014); as well as Korsnes *et al.* (2018), Maxwell *et al.* (2017), Van Zanten *et al.* (2015), Birtchnell and Caletrio (2013), Abbink and Salverda (2012).

importance of white supremacy to understanding elites within the West; it is similarly silent on the issue of masculine domination and (anti-)feminism, without which we cannot explain the rise of Trump, nor more generally the actual experience and position of elites (Gordon, 2017). Thus, elite scholarship suffers from two blind spots concerning diversity. Because it often suggests the existence of one unified 'elite', underplaying its internal divisions and the competition between f(r)actions; and because it rarely addresses gender and race issues. Therefore, in this article and throughout the collection of articles gathered within this volume, we try to articulate a pathway for elite research to be better positioned to fashion answers to these problems—answers that might help guide us as we think through explanations of the present and anticipations of our future. In doing so, we will highlight alternatively two kinds of theoretical developments within the sociology of elites: those that exist and already facilitate our understanding, and those that are neglected and whose absence is hindering the development of the field. We then move to some methodological considerations and the ways new research designs could help us gather further empirical data on elites, and thereby help the field minimize its myopia.

The necessity to analyze diversity within the elites is linked with the fact that we need to better understand the ways in which social structures work upon them. Studying how and why institutions can work both for and against elites helps recognize that there is generally not one self-conscious, cohesive and conspiring elite (to say it with the words of Meisel (1958, p. 361)). Instead, there are elites who may be in conflict, may have the possibilities of coordination but do not always use them or even know how to use them and who can work differently within an institutional environment or a specific field to realize different ends. This is why elite(s) groupness should be cautiously assessed and described, and not assumed (Brubaker, 2004; Khan, 2016). Combined, these two considerations suggest that various social structures work on varieties of elites differently, and thereby present and enable elites with a range of action environments.

Some readers might think: 'of course elites are varied, and of course institutions and structures matter for elites'. But it is unfortunately not the starting point for the vast majority of elite research. Sociologists tend to reserve structure for poverty, and culture and agency for elites. That is to say that there is a general reticence to deploying explanations of poverty that rest upon the cultural traits of poor people or the kinds of action pathways they are likely to take (for a presentation of the conceptual tools that contemporary cultural sociology does however use to analyze poverty, see Lamont and Small (2008) and Small *et al.* (2010)). Instead, structural constraints are of primary interest. Elites, by contrast, are often thought of *a priori* as existing as a kind of organized cabal—one might think of C. Wright Mills' 'Power Elite' (1956)—whose disproportionate concentration of power allows them to realize their interests through their coordinated activity. In some cases, especially in fictional works, but not only, they are even seen as totally controlling the backstage of the 'official' social world and thus pulling the strings behind the (instituted) reality itself (Boltanski, 2014). As we shall see, many of the papers in this issue challenge these positions, pushing for epistemological diversity in the study of elites and providing useful amendments to some of the most stabilized theories and approaches, even within the power elite framework.

Analytically it is perfectly possible that, beyond the relations of interdependence structuring any class system, the causes and origins of, respectively, elite positions and dominated positions would be partially different and independent. If we transcend linear thinking, we see that explanada of oppositional positions, or of the two opposite ends of a spectrum,

need not be the exact inverse of one another. Yet just how structures actually work upon elites is important for us to understand. None of this is to say that power does not enable greater agency; though this is an empirical question, and some theoretical and analytical currents, such as Marxism and Norbert Elias' figurational approach (2012), suggest the ways in which those who are most advantaged by a system are those who are most constrained to obey its logic in order to maintain that advantage (Marx himself, maintains that capitalists are highly constrained by the logic of capital). Our point is that the suggestion that elites are in control of things like culture, politics and/or the economy and thereby always individually able to act more consciously, freely and effectively in their interests, posits a model of human action and agency that we would largely reject in other social contexts.

The sociology of Pierre Bourdieu clears a path through many of these challenges, allowing us to describe and analyze multiple elites who are alternatively contentious and cooperative, in a context shaped by institutions and structures of opportunities. It conceptualizes a field of power as a field of interplay and struggle between holders of different dispositions, legitimacies and conglomerations of capitals, and between different coalitions whose strategies depend on their respective resources and positions within the field. This framework—mobilized in an exemplary manner in this issue by the article of François Denord, Paul Lagneau-Ymonet and Sylvain Thine about the recent evolutions of the French field of power—allows us to think about the structural properties that influence elites, by demanding that we consider the structured set of spaces that elites occupy and move within. But if there is a weakness to the Bourdieusian approach to elites and social domination developed during the 1970s and the 1980s (Bourdieu, 1984, 1988, 1996; Bourdieu and Boltanski, 2008), it is due to its relative inattentiveness to demographics. Before his work on masculine domination, Bourdieu (2002) had little to say on gender and race.² Yet it would be nearly impossible to understand our current moment without attention to these factors. The construction of an ethnic other, the rise of ethno-cultural nationalisms and a brutal masculine domination all happen within contexts of deeply racialized and gendered politics. Thus, we propose amending classical Bourdieusian models to make sense of these relations, and some of the papers in this issue suggest a path for developing a richer theoretical terrain of elite research.

The last decade has seen a major revival in the study of elites. While in the USA until recently this tradition had mostly languished since the 1970s (after the pioneering works of C. Wright Mills, E. Digby Baltzell and William Domhoff), within Europe Marxian materialistic approaches, cultural and institutionalist studies of elites, and network analytic accounts of interlocks were gradually augmented and recombined by what we might now reasonably call the Bourdieusian revolution within this subfield (Savage and Williams, 2008). Empirically, qualitative studies—and in particular a series of remarkable ethnographies and interview-based researches made possible by a strong commitment to fieldwork—have massively enriched this research space; and the combination of computing capacity and access to administrative data such as US tax returns (e.g. Piketty *et al.*, 2016; Chetty *et al.*, 2017a,b) or Scandinavian registry data (e.g. Björklund *et al.*, 2007; Bihagen *et al.*, 2012;

2 Exceptions are his earlier research on colonial Algeria (Bourdieu, 1958; Bourdieu and Sayad, 1964), on the rural communities of Kabylie and Béarn (Bourdieu, 1990, 2007; Poupeau, 2018), and his study of the German intellectual field during the interwar period (Bourdieu, 1991). Yet these works did not systematically impact his overall theoretical framework.

Ljunggren, 2017; Modalsli, 2017; and Maren Toft's article on the Norwegian upper class in this issue) have recently given us capacities to see long-run trends in ways unimaginable just a generation ago.

This special issue of *Socio-Economic Review* represents new directions of elite research, building upon and beyond the classic theoretical approaches and demonstrating the value of a range of methodological techniques to the understanding of elites. The aim is not to present a unified singular view, but instead to represent the rich research space the sociology of elites has become. Previous reviews of the literature focused, somewhat provincially, on the USA (Khan, 2012). In this special issue, we draw upon empirical work from a range of sites, from India and throughout Europe, to the USA. The advantage of such an approach is that, by fostering an international comparative perspective, it brings into relief some of the potential impacts of institutional-level variation. Single-country focused bodies of work often have difficulty identifying national-level effects because of the lack of variation, or conversely might insist excessively on what they see as the quintessential characteristics of a country and/or a culture (Jodhka and Naudet, 2017). A more global sociology of elites allows for the elucidation of how national-level policies may be influencing elite power, and to identify and explain empirically dynamics of transnational convergence or divergence (Cousin and Chauvin, 2015). The question of elite power, or of the various powers of various elites, is the motivating question for our theoretical considerations.

1. Theoretical pathways: power, capitalisms, diversity and Bourdieu

As we review the current theoretical terrain of research on elites we do not suggest a singular theoretic framework, but almost the exact opposite: we propose a range of considerations and approaches that need not be seamlessly combined, yet which are important if research on elites is going to play the crucial role it must to help us understand and navigate our current moment. We have anticipated these theoretical considerations, but let us be clearer about them: (a) we are aiming for a better articulation of the relationship between elites and power (its character and degree), specifically detailing what the understanding of power is and how it is wielded by, influences, or works through elites; (b) we call for a clearer understanding of the relationship between elites and global capitalism, specifically under conditions where elites do not act like capitalists, nor act in capital's interest; (c) we aspire for a fuller understanding of the diversity within elites, as well as the relationship between elites and racial/masculine/etc. domination, and of their differences in terms of social positions, pragmatic dispositions, symbolic legitimacy and modes of organization; therefore, (d) though we certainly do not reject Bourdieu, we suggest the importance of either amending or moving beyond what is generally seen as the orthodox Bourdieusian framework.

1.1 Elites and power

While much of the sociology of elites has been framed around questions of inequality, as highlighted by the recent rise of the category of the 'super-rich' in the literature, this view is somewhat narrow. That is because the attention to inequalities tends to highlight a particular set of relationships—mainly economic ones—and the conversion of other forms of capital (cultural, social, symbolic, etc.) into economic resources. Yet the core two questions we must ask about elites always orbit around the issue of power. The first question about power is that of its character: what are the personal, relational, organizational, institutional and

cultural contexts, which allow some individuals and groups to dominate others? The second question of power is that of its reach and degree: what is the extent of this domination, which is to posit how unified is it and how strong is it? These questions can, of course, address economic elites, but they also point to a range of other power relationships which require development within elite scholarship.

While we define elites as those with vastly disproportionate access to or control over power (Khan, 2012), we rarely articulate how power is worked on, by, or through elites. All elite theories posit a strong relation between elites and power; few articulate clearly what this means, how such power is conceptualized or what the implications are for such a position (for a recent exception, see Graeber and Sahlins (2017)). If we define elites as playing a central and/or critical role in the fashioning of the flow of life into a common and established reality which the majority has to submit to, to accept or consider as self-evident, the study of such elites needs to move beyond the focus on inequality and social reproduction. This is not to say that such an emphasis is unimportant, only that it is insufficient for making sense of elites. It also needs to move beyond the long-outdated scientific opposition between structuralism and constructivism, and to explore the routines, the processes of institutionalization, the justifications or critiques and the forms of violence which may stabilize or transform—but always constrain—the world in a shape that best serves the interests of the few, and especially of the ones who control the format of the main tests and contentions (Boltanski, 2011). From this perspective, we should thus analyze not only the cases of permanence and stability, but also the ones when elites, and oligarchic or plutocratic courses of action, struggle or fail to perpetuate themselves, or collapse; without forgetting the cases of what Italians, drawing from one of their most famous novels (Tomasi di Lampedusa, 1960), call ‘gattopardismo’, that is the capacity of an elite social group to evolve their modes of access to or control over power to maintain their dominant position.

We are suggesting the pursuit of a far greater analytic specification while addressing the field of power (either nationally or at the international level), or studying any figuration of interrelations between different kinds of elites. Of course, with the development of sociology as an academic discipline often divided in many specialized domains of research (sociology of religion, political sociology, sociology of management and organizations, sociology of sciences, etc.), we have a substantial body of work on elites within disparate sectors of investigation. The connections between these different sectors have largely been described and modeled through network analysis, or in research on settings and professions explicitly in charge of facilitating and coordinating the material and symbolic interactions between two or more sectorial elites: like public–private negotiations (Woll, 2014), lobbying (Laurens, 2018), corporate lawyers involved in public affairs (France and Vauchez, 2017), think tanks (Medvetz, 2012), some art market brokers (Beckert and Rössel, 2013) and, in this issue, the association of rich transnational donors to the Louvre Museum studied by Anne Monier. Yet both intra-field and inter-fields relations need to be analyzed even further, articulating the source(s) and display(s) of power, and placing them within a framework that posits who the other actors are and how they are struggling against, joining with, or simply playing a different game than the elites. The sociology of contemporary societies—compared, for instance, with the one of the less diversified and more autocratic court society (Elias, 2005)—generally invites us to analyze the particular combination of autonomy, complementarity and antagonism which nowadays characterizes the relations of the different fields with one another (especially in democratic regimes). As if Machiavelli’s advice to divide and rule

had been applied—by the division of labor and the autonomization of fields—to the ruling class itself, it is the sociologist's work to analyze how this process can either participate in the dilution and concealment of the sources of power, or conversely reinforce logics of cross-legitimization and check-and-balance.

To advance such a project, we need a truly interdisciplinary approach combining anthropology, sociology, economics, history and political science, since the latter two are generally more attentive to explaining social and political change than the other disciplines (and have of course a longer and solid tradition of focusing on elites). We also need a lot more novel and well-organized empirical data, thick descriptions and empirically based analysis, while avoiding theoretical developments that are mainly speculative. Conversely, it would be a mistake to become a kind of 'court stenographers'—mere chroniclers of the powerful and the high society. The line between the two might be thin and sometimes difficult to walk, but we do not really have much choice: paradigm revolutions do not happen by decree, and rarely by being directly chased after (Kuhn, 1962).

1.2 Elites and capitalism

The need for theoretical precision and attention to the various forms of power relations calls also for an accurate characterization of the different processes directly structuring hierarchies and inequalities within economies and societies, including capitalist societies. Coercion, oppression, exploitation, appropriation, discrimination, domination, etc. are too often confounded with each other. Yet, they are different phenomena well-defined by social sciences. Some analytical approaches focus more specifically on one of them, like Wright (2005) improving our understanding of exploitation by refining the Marxian materialistic perspective or Bruno Latour's recent conceptualization of 'geo-social' classes defined by their ecological footprint and vulnerability (Latour, 2018), and others address combinations and possible modalities of embeddedness between these different power relations. Different kinds of capitalism are likely to generate different kinds of elites. If we are to believe that social structures influence social entities (and vice versa), then placing elites within the context of the variety of capitalism they participate in and articulating the relation between such elites and the macro-evolutions of capitalism must be a more central project within research on elites. It would also be a way to link such research with the renewal of political economy (Hall and Soskice, 2001), and to explore the space and role of elites within the continuum between liberal egalitarian democracies and authoritarian kleptocracies.

Classical accounts of industrial capitalism generally describe contexts where elite managers lived in close physical proximity to their workers—Beckert (2001), for example, reminds us how the founder of Steinway & Sons, Heinrich Steinweg, would walk out of the back of his home, across a yard, and into his factory in Lower Manhattan (on France, see Boltanski, 1987). Yet, as the instruments of capitalism and the organization of production of goods and services have transformed—with increased financialization, automation, offshoring and owners of company stock that may not even be cognizant of what is within their portfolios—so too have the relations between the owners of capital and the labor force. After having successfully dismantled unions in many contexts and massively undermined the basis of worker power (Mizruchi, 2013), and living today more and more often in self-segregated urban settings reducing the occasions of face-to-face interactions with other social groups, elites seem less interested in the working class, rarely articulating the need to draw symbolic boundaries against them or the unmediated desire to dominate or oppress

them (Paugam *et al.*, 2017). This is not to say that their sense of fairness and their policy preferences are aligned with the interests of workers, or that they are empathetic to them. The persistence or increase of inequalities is still supported by a multiform rhetoric of reaction (Hirschman, 1991). But in several countries the kind of hostility between classes has transformed from the days where workers had to face the physical violence of the Pinkerton Agency, while robber barons and political elites were the targets of the Propaganda by the deed. As capitalism has transformed—shifting both the composition and the experience of ‘owners’ and their upper service class and redefining more generally the meaning of work (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2006)—the study of the relevant actors, antagonisms, alignments and orientations requires fresh perspectives. In short, we need a clearer sense of the new ways elites are influenced by particular economic relations, and the ways they impact capitalism in return.

Part of this means looking at the range of relations (e.g. gender, race) that make up capitalism, not just at the socio-economic ones like ‘class’ or at the supposedly general spread of individualism fostered by the neoliberal ideology and practices. In the USA, the violence of the Pinkertons against white workers may well have been replaced by the one of the state against Black men (which of course is also the result of the long history of race in the country): a state violence which is validated by countless local and national elites. The issues of *Socio-Economic Review* are rich with descriptions of the changing nature of capitalisms—their historical contingencies, local instantiations and global dynamics—yet such work is rarely reflected within ‘elite research’, which similarly rarely integrates insights from such research. Historical sociology, which has been crucial in the study of capitalism during the past decades, and the sociology of elites could be better integrated with each other.

This emphasis on the relationship between elites and different kinds of capitalism points also to the essential expansion of elite research into different geographic regions. While we know a lot about elites and (some) European nations, as well as elites and the USA, the forms of capitalism within these contexts does not reflect its forms in others. As several recent works suggest (Mendras, 2012; Filiiu, 2018; Chauvin *et al.*, 2018), elite research would benefit from expanding internationally. Such international variation would provide three things. First, it would develop further our capacity to evaluate institutional dimensions related to elite positions and power, and to identify relations of causality, insofar as there would be increased institutional variation for comparison. Secondly, it would make clearer the parameters for theoretical frameworks of elites—allowing us to better understand the conditionality of some of our generalizations, primarily generated by particular case studies (e.g. Bourdieu’s *Distinction* and *State Nobility* reflect a specific moment in time and place, and some of their implications may be limited to that context or exist elsewhere in another variant). Finally, international comparison would greatly enrich our general knowledge of the world, in a descriptive way (Besbris and Khan 2017), giving us a sense of the vast array of configurations of the relationship between elites and capitalism which coexist globally at a given moment.

This last point is also linked with the analysis of the transnational dynamics currently affecting elites all around the world and with the question of the possible emergence of a global super-bourgeoisie. The argument of the ongoing formation of such a globalized class is generally sustained by the analysis of four main processes: the fact that the last decades have allowed the economic elites of many countries to achieve increasingly exceptional levels of wealth; the growing of interconnections and cross-holdings between national (and

regional) economies (Heemskerk and Takes, 2016); the development of shared cultural and ideological references, stemming from increasingly similar socializations and the common valuing of international openness (Wagner, 2007) and the role of several organizations in facilitating the political and/or economic coordination between elites across borders, either in name of the common good, like, for instance, when they meet in Davos for the World Economic Forum, or in defense of some particular interest (Harrington, 2016). The study of the varieties of capitalisms is an invitation to consider, not only the possible convergence between different national elites, but their geopolitical and geoeconomic complementarity, which allows us to resituate their roles in the current world-system.

Finally, on the relationship between elites and capitalism, we point to both a substantive and methodological challenge. Elite research, in general, can commit the fundamental attribution error—which is to say we often rely too much on the attributes or agency of people within a category to explain that category. While scholars are careful not to overemphasize the traits of poor people when explaining poverty, they are less so when looking at elites and wealth. In particular, people who are successful under capitalism should not be thought of as necessarily *doing things* that explain such success. In addition, while most capitalists spend some time competing within markets, their main pursuit is often state supported protections from markets—which is to say they act in ways opposed to the idealized neoliberal logic of capitalism. Those who are most advantaged by capitalism may actually be very bad ‘capitalists’, in the sense that their aims are often to limit competition, augment their own governmental support and limit the potential free actions of workers (and this could potentially explain their advantages). These lessons are known well to socio-economic scholars: that capitalism is not the same thing as market liberalism or market fundamentalism. Similarly, elite scholars have pointed out, time and again, that liberalism may well be a discursive form rather than an elite practice (Khan and Jerolmack, 2013). These two assessments need to be combined and pushed further within elite scholarship. The implication is that while elite research needs a clearer articulation of the relationship between elites and varieties of capitalism, such an impulse should not result in strictly using elites to explain such capitalisms.

1.3 Difference and diversity within economic elites

Both of our previous two points—that we need to think more clearly about the relationship between elites and power and that we need to better consider the relationship between elites and capitalism—push us toward our third consideration concerning the elite literature. We begin with a rather simple point: elites, particularly in the West, are overwhelmingly white and male. While some might draw the implication that there is little to say about race and gender in relationship to elites, our position is the exact opposite: because they generally occupy dominant and often unmarked gender and racial positions, sharing the same epistemological privilege, elites make for an ideal space within which to understand particular race and gender dynamics, specifically white supremacy and masculine domination. Elites tell us a lot about race and gender, just not in relationship to disadvantage.

Whereas race scholars have long been attentive to white supremacy, particularly under conditions where such racial domination was anticipated to be declining, they typically do so by exploring the conditions of the dominated. However, while elite spaces tend to lack diversity, this does not mean they also lack race (or gender). And while important aspects of domination can only be understood by studying the dominated, the dominant are also an

essential and perhaps even more important part of these relations; they thereby require far more empirical study. When race scholars turn their attention to privileged classes, for instance, historical accounts of African American elites, they have found distinct hierarchies and competition dynamics based on ancestry and skin color. But ultimately the black bourgeoisie in the USA was and remains dominated within all areas and institutions of the field of power, by anxiously exclusionary whites (Gatewood, 1990; see also Frazier, 1957 and Graham, 2000). As a whole, elite theories have been surprisingly and, we might say, embarrassingly silent on this issue of white supremacy, which is all the more surprising because this is exactly one of the spaces wherein we can best observe such domination. Within the halls of power are walls of whiteness (see Jones, 2017).

On gender, scholars of elites have had slightly more to say, though feminist analyses of power at the top of the class hierarchy are scant when compared to analyses of working-class masculinity. Research on women in the upper classes has identified their prominent role in the domestic realm as they reproduce their social position through educating and socializing their children, as well as in symbolically charged arenas like elite charity, philanthropy (Ostrander 1984; Kendall 2002) and leisurely VIP clubs (Mears, 2015a). In each of these settings, women produce and gain symbolic and social capital, but financial and economic power largely remains in the hands of men, prompting Collins (1992) to observe that women are to status as men are to class. And because of institutionalized racial discrimination, Black and Hispanic elite women are largely excluded from the more visible and prestigious world of white philanthropy, forming instead a separate world of nonwhite elite philanthropy with a parallel circuit of exclusionary competitions for status. In all of these feminized elite worlds, it remains unclear to which extent women's social networks can be converted into lasting positions of power or fungible assets, like those of their masculine counterparts. It is also unclear why economic and political power remains so centrally concentrated among men: which mechanisms exactly still relegate women to realms of status competition while men accumulate class resources? While this question has been partly taken up in the strong research agenda on gender discrimination in work and occupations, especially in elite professions and upper management (Rennes, 2007), it would surely advance were scholars to consider the more general and largely invisible puzzle of masculine domination among the elites. In particular, there is a need, following the work of Adams (2005), to examine in a more detailed way the modern actualizations of patrimonialism within many social organizations, and the mutations and persistence of the original relation between patrimonialism and patriarchy: see, for instance, the article of Megan Tobias Neely in this issue.

Overall, we point to two important questions concerning the relationships between elites and gender and race (one should add, of course, sexuality here, and other dimensions of difference). The first is the importance of taking these relationships seriously *within* elites, asking, 'What are the gendered and racialized relations within elites?' The second is to use findings about elites to expand beyond their case, in short to ask, 'What do elites tell us about race and gender?' The first question helps us better understand elites; the second helps us better understand masculine domination and white supremacy.

1.4 Expanding (beyond) Bourdieu

These three major points lead to our fourth: that we need to refresh our theoretical frameworks in order to accommodate multiple relations of power, to conceptualize elites within

varieties of capitalism, and better account for diversity among elites. Marxian and neo-Marxian frameworks do well with varieties of capitalism as well as placing power at the center of their analysis, but have built into their approach an overdetermination of class relations, thereby largely missing the multiplicity of elites, different forms of power and diversity issues. They focus on exploitation (and, if they adopt a Gramscian perspective, on domination), yet also tend to see *a priori* the top of the social ladder not as a messy ‘network’ of elites or as elite fractions competing with each other (like Marx, 1924), but instead, *à la* Mills (1956) or Domhoff (1967), as a self-conscious ruling class. Followers of this broad framework of class relations were among the first to address the underrepresentation of women and ethno-racial minorities among elites (Zweigenhaft and Domhoff, 1998; though see also Alba and Moore, 1982). But such pioneering work has not been fully taken up by either sociologists researching questions of race—in part because it lacks a developed conceptualization of the latter—and even less so among those working on elites. Veblen, on the other hand, rests on an impoverished view of economic development and class relations, and while it provides a rich terrain and inspirational perspective for the study of elite consumption and for those interested in the intersection of economy, culture and morals (Mears, 2015b), it offers little possibilities for theoretical expansion.

Existing theories are often useful to address and solve specific problems, and we should resist the tendency toward theoretical proliferation when unnecessary (Besbris and Khan, 2017). Yet we would suggest that for the broad area of elite research to more fully develop, a common theoretic language would be an important asset; and at the current moment the work of Pierre Bourdieu still seems the richest terrain to build upon to pursue this task. Of course, we do not advocate the adoption of Bourdieu’s approach and theory in an ultra-orthodox and repetitive way: it requires refinement, expansion and confrontation with new questions, as many have already highlighted. Concerning elites, several of such questions are derived from our earlier points: the necessity to consider national and historical contingency, i.e. to amend a framework based mainly on the French case with greater international breadth; to consider elites and power relations beyond domination and to develop models of economic capital which have, at their core, a clearer articulation of such power’s relationship to capitalism. Happily, amendments are well underway. By insisting on the existence of different ‘regimes of action’ (Boltanski, 2012), French pragmatic sociology has stressed the fact that, while the Bourdieusian concept of habitus is an extremely useful heuristic to explain what happens within a situation of routine, when individual dispositions and expectations are more or less adjusted to a stabilized world, it is less helpful to account for the regimes of controversy and violence, or the dynamics of love (from Cleopatra and Hürrem Sultan to contemporary power couples and dynasties), that so often affect elite groups and transform power relations. Additionally, the pragmatist approach encourages us to identify and analyze more underlying social forms, structures and grammars (see, for instance, De Blic and Lemieux, 2005), instead of relying too systematically on field theory. This kind of approach also helps upon an interactionist perspective which can allow us to more fully understand how power relations are unfolding face-to-face interactions (Sherman, 2007; Latour, 2010; Schnapper, 2010). Finally, during the last years, several authors have been actively working, in various ways, at integrating race and ethnicity with Bourdieu (e.g. Desmond and Emirbayer, 2009; Emirbayer and Desmond, 2012, 2015; Wimmer, 2013; Monk, 2015); this is developed even further within this issue of *Socio-Economic Review*.

More generally, one of the major challenges for the Bourdieusian framework is that—because of often being based on the visualization of the results of multiple correspondence analysis—it tends to overdetermine objects of consideration, suggesting the *objective* necessity of a (mainly) two-dimensional field of power (where there may be far more types of power operative), insisting on the analytic centrality of habitus (which unifies mental structures and embodied dispositions, yet these two are often inconsistent), and mobilizing a capital(s) paradigm that limits the capacity to explain important relations (it is difficult e.g. to think of race or gender strictly in terms of a kind of ‘capital’). We find such problems particularly acute in a terrain where descriptive work is less fully developed: there is so much we do not know about elites and we should be cautious about imposing frameworks which overdetermine our observations. Therefore, for all our attention to refining the Bourdieusian framework—or at least integrating a fuller sense of power, diversity and relations to capitalism within our research—we maintain that at this point in the development of elite research, describing extensively and accurately what is the case remains invaluable. To develop such a rich descriptive realm of research requires attention not simply to theory, but also to the kinds of methods that allow us to better know elites.

2. Methodological pathways: current terrain, new data sources and approaches

There are both objective and subjective challenges to studying elites: a small population, not evenly distributed across places, organizations or institutions, heavily resourced, typically highly educated, used to developing sophisticated discourses about itself, often elusive and difficult to reach and (by definition) powerful. Some of these challenges are because of structural qualities of the population, but others are tied to the relationship between researcher and subject. Elites may sometimes wield symbolic and cultural capital greater than credentialed researchers, putting the scholar of inequality in a dominated and sometimes unfamiliar position. While researchers’ reflexivity in analysis and writing can turn such confrontations into data, this is, nonetheless, an uncomfortable position to willingly put oneself into (Ortner, 2010). In this section, we review the ways in which a wide range of methods—survey research, network analysis, interviews, ethnographic observation, experiments, archival work, use of administrative data and content analysis—can help bring elites into focus.

2.1 Survey research

One of the most classic social science methods, survey research, has not been particularly effective at capturing elite populations. This is in no small part because it is a technique generally used to sample populations in their breadth. But, even if the population of interest includes elites, they are often both difficult to identify and difficult to engage as participants. Moreover, when elites are captured by general survey research, the data tend not to be useful for describing within-group differences. For instance, many US surveys have as their top income category households making over \$250 000 a year. Yet, while (during the last 3 years) such a threshold meant being one of the world’s richest people, and of the top 3% or 4% of American households by revenue, it also delimit a very heterogeneous category of several millions households. Indeed, the percentiles at the top of distributions are often the ones with the highest internal variance, which makes it impossible, within such a category, to distinguish between someone who is barely at the threshold of entering the category

and those who make two, ten, one hundred, and even one thousand times more (in 2016, hedge fund managers James Simons and Ray Dalio earned each respectively 1.6 and 1.4 billion dollars). In general surveys that seek variation between elites and others, and without oversampling the former (which is often difficult), such problems are mostly insurmountable: a social survey with 30 000 respondents will only capture 300 people in the top 1%, further parsing this group for an intra-elites analysis would be largely ineffective.

The major advantage of survey research, therefore, is comparative: to clarify the differences between ‘elites’, circumscribed a certain way and considered as a whole, and other groups. This is a major contribution, particularly as other methods that capture elites are largely unable to provide context of how they might be different in their reported attitudes, actions, experiences or positions from non-elites (Jerolmack and Khan, 2014). Conversely, those interested in doing survey research *within* elite populations face important challenges—in terms of identifying, accessing and engaging elite subjects (see, for instance, Reis and Moore, 2005)—especially if they aim for a controlled sampling procedure. Yet strategies have recently emerged using lists to address these problems (English *et al.*, 2013); this method of drawing upon a growing number of ‘targeted lists’ of elites could build upon targeted (Watters and Biernacki, 1989) and respondent-driven (Heckathorn, 1997) sampling. Such techniques were developed for other hard-to-reach populations (drug injectors and HIV-positive persons), and could be adopted to the benefit of researchers of elites. We would suggest that they are a likely fruitful direction for those seeking either to augment the number of elites within their sample, or design more representative, unbiased samples of elites, regardless of whether they are doing surveys (these strategies may also be adopted by qualitative researchers interested in the generalizability of their results).

2.2 Network analysis and multiple correspondence analysis

SNA is largely unconcerned with sampling, and instead typically looks to population-level data. It is perhaps the strongest long-term tradition in elite studies, dating back to early studies by Lenin (1917), and leading through a fecund series of researches (Van der Pijl, 1984; Davis and Greve, 1997; Burris, 2005; Carroll, 2010) to the recent work of Mark Mizruchi and the discussions around it. While richly descriptive, network analysis has tended, when applied to elites, to focus on the study of ‘interlocks’, which can foster a view of internal cohesion and shared collective culture, as suggested in the singular phrasing of ‘the inner circle’ (Useem, 1984).

Yet there is nothing inherent to SNA that demands such an intellectual orientation. For example, recent work on elite policy networks in the USA suggests no structure of central interlocking, but instead distinct clusters, some with potential brokerage opportunities and others in relative isolation (Fisher *et al.*, 2013; Jasny *et al.*, 2015). The tradition of SNA is well represented and developed within this issue: Christoph Ellersgaard and Anton Larsen’s article on the Danish corporate elite refines and reassesses the approaches of the inner circle. But we also see a gulf, which may well prove an opportunity for scholars: while overly stylized, it is not inaccurate to suggest that SNA often lives on the Western side of the Atlantic, and a parallel tradition of multiple correspondence analysis (MCA)—which allows to quantify and visualize the main structuring dimensions and internal oppositions of a field or a social space—is thriving on the other. Both techniques share an epistemological core hypothesis about the relationality of the social world (and the data used to describe it). They also share some common computational techniques. Therefore, while we are less

sanguine about the capacity for more classic American quantitative analyses to dialogue with MCA, the affinities between SNA and MCA, and the researchers already combining the two methods (e.g. Anheier *et al.*, 1995), suggest a potential cross-fertilization between the two literatures, where techniques might be exchanged further and findings confronted to augment our understanding. For instance, in this issue, the article by Jules Naudet, Adrien Allorant and Mathieu Ferry uses MCA to analyze the space of top business positions in India. This clearly complements another article, about the 2000–2012 evolution of the Indian corporate network, recently published in SER and based on SNA (Naudet and Dubost, 2017). And moreover, of course, some research questions usually answered using these methods can also be addressed differently through qualitative approaches: the recent interview-based work of Davis (2018) on the disintegration of the British establishment largely echoes the analysis of Mark Mizruchi on the American case.

2.3 Interviews and participant observation

Ethnographic and interview-based accounts reveal performative cultures among elites: representations, motivations and justifications, often rife with contradictory worldviews (e.g. Khan, 2010). But to ‘study up’, interviewers and ethnographers frequently cite access issues, and institutional and interpersonal conflicts as they face and have to manage various costs of entry on the field, unavailability, symbolic domination, elaborated strategies of communication, internal social control and/or secrecy among elites and at the top of powerful organizations (Nader, 1972). In what is probably an extreme combination of all these methodological obstacles, Gusterson (1997), reflecting on his difficulty conducting observations from within a nuclear weapons technology laboratory, highlights that ‘participant observation is a research technique that does not travel well up the social structure’ (p. 115).

Studying social actors that already produce sophisticated representations of themselves and tend to consider that such representations are the only accurate or legitimate ones raises both methodological and epistemological issues. Moreover, unlike the majority of other groups, elites generally confront researchers with greater resources, such as legal and institutional power. Harrington (2016), for example, describes an instance of being threatened with legal sanctions by powerful and well-connected wealth managers of the British Virgin Islands, a tax haven and oversea territory of the UK (p. 24). The risk of lawsuits as well as the regulations introduced to avoid it by human subjects boards of universities, especially in the litigious USA, pose additional constraints and limitations (Khan and Katz, 2018).

For all these reasons, many, though certainly not all, scholars working on the upper classes themselves share to some extent an upper or upper-middle-class habitus, or benefit from a personal background and/or connections conferring them, at least partially, insider status. The great chronicler of American elites and source of the term ‘WASP’, E. Digby Baltzell (1915–1996), is a prime and extreme example. Years before spending almost all his life as a professor of sociology at the University of Pennsylvania, he attended the elite boarding school, St. Paul’s, which Khan (2010) would describe some 70 years later; he intimately knew of *Philadelphia Gentlemen* (1958) because he was one of them; his familiarity with the world of Boston Brahmins (1979) and *The Protestant Establishment* (1964) came from his time at New England prep schools, Ivy League universities, exclusive social clubs (he was an active member of the Franklin Inn Club of Philadelphia) and summers spent in his family ‘cottage’ on Cape Cod. Of course, Baltzell’s near-complete insider status is quite rare, but many sociologists of the upper classes are able to build upon, if not affiliation, at least social

proximity with their subject. This is true of this special issue editors as well: Khan had himself been a student at the elite school he studied, which helped in being hired as a teacher to conduct his fieldwork; Mears worked within the high fashion industry for years before researching it and, later, high-end clubs in which fashion models fraternize with business elites (Mears, 2011, 2015b); Cousin's research with Sébastien Chauvin benefited, while studying Milan's social clubs, from his upper-middle-class background, his fluency in Italian and the strong ties between club members and the university professors that helped him set the first interviews (Cousin and Chauvin, 2017), while ethnographic investigation in St. Barts was greatly facilitated because his sister was then living and working on the island (Cousin and Chauvin, 2013).

There are however also eminent examples of researchers who, building upon their academic legitimacy and a cautious strategy of adaptation and accumulation, have been able to explore exclusive regions of the social world to which they were previously totally foreign. One of the best examples of such an approach is the work of Pinçon and Pinçon-Charlot (1997, 2018), probably France's most famous sociologists of the high bourgeoisie, who—before turning during the last years to a more militant genre of writing—authored in two decades a dozen books analyzing upper-class institutions and logics of social reproduction. Indeed, while researchers surely face access and relationship-management issues to study elite worlds, these are generally not insurmountable, and the timidity scholars display in approaching elites may rest on faulty assumptions that the latter never want to be approached.³ While surely elites are busy, in the sense of both real-time constraints and performing the culture of busyness, they also have far more autonomy over their time than the majority of other social groups. And while academics may assume elites would meet their questions with suspicion and even hostility, especially in a post-Occupy Wall Street era of public scrutiny of the wealthy, they would do well to remember that research professors share with many elites both embodied and institutionalized cultural capital. For instance, as professionals in the knowledge economy, academics share some sensibilities and interaction repertoires with those elites studied in recent ethnographies of hiring in the advanced tertiary sector (Rivera, 2015) and of the organization of fields such as finance (Zaloom 2006; Ho, 2009; Godechot, 2017). And this social proximity is even closer when the researchers are affiliated with academic institutions particularly prestigious and/or where their subjects have been educated (which might explain why a certain concentration of sociologists studying the elites can be observed at 'elite' universities...).

Moreover, in a cultural context where elites rhetorically think of their positions as 'earned' or deserved, scholars can deploy strategies that capitalize on this, suggesting the civic importance of telling their story—a story that can only be told with access. And this research strategy might also be balanced with the occasional more 'confrontational' interviews (Laurens, 2007). While this second approach has been deployed more regularly in the

- 3 More generally, the issue of access might need to be rethought as a whole. The problem may not be that it is 'too hard' to reach elites, but that it is 'too easy' to reach the poor. Fieldworkers often display an entitlement of access to the public and private spaces the poor occupy (which could clearly participate in symbolic violence towards them). While elites are, by contrast, often given a kind of reverence in suggesting their time is very valuable, or that their spaces deserve particular respect. Poverty researchers may wish to apply a similar set of assumptions to their subjects (and could perhaps learn sometimes from elite researchers about how to do so).

French context, Americans in particular, but researchers more generally, tend to be rather deferential in their interviews with elites. They should remember, however, that elites often inhabit rather combative worlds; and that giving a more critical twist to the interaction, especially at the end of a research process or phase, can be very effective in generating new data to evaluate previous responses and observations.

Of course, the first payoff from qualitative research lies in its potential for richly descriptive accounts of elites' lifeworlds, values and the meanings they attribute to practices. A number of papers in this special issue illustrate this. Anne Monier ethnographically portrays the anxiety within the elite world of French philanthropy, when an organization must open its doors to new international donors. Rachel Sherman analyses how rich liberal New Yorkers regulate and morally justify their multi-million dollar consumption practices by arguing the normality of their lifestyle (see also [Sherman, 2017](#)). Finally, by studying Saint-Tropez and Ramatuelle, which are the most exclusive vacation town of the French Riviera, Isabelle Bruno and Gregory Salle show how economic elites both claim and maintain enclaves where the external absurdity of their wealth can become more comfortable, and even mundane.

2.4 Experiments

While ethnographic work is good at capturing processes and social mechanisms, and survey research, SNA and MCA can demonstrate patterns, their capacity to generate unequivocal causal explanations is relatively weak. Yet, somewhat surprisingly, elite research—maybe because it is still in an early and more descriptive phase—has done little experimental or quasi-experimental work to moderate this shortcoming. Experimental research has not been fully included into sociological scholarship about elites, in part because it happens sometimes in political science departments ([Loewen *et al.*, 2010](#)), but more often in psychology departments and business schools, whose scientific production is not always integrated with the rest of social sciences. Our call, then, is that researchers upon elites could also engage more fully with experiments done in management and psychology, and consider experimental methods in earnest as the literature begins to suggest causes that require evaluation.

For example, psychologist Paul Piff has documented the social and emotional consequences of inequality among the wealthy, and how they make sense of their advantages, in a series of laboratory-based studies in which subjects randomized to be 'richer' displayed less prosocial behaviors than their 'poorer' counterparts: the richer were less giving, compassionate and empathetic, and more self-interested, entitled and likely to cheat when the opportunity arose. In addition, field experiments conducted in the USA have documented how drivers of expensive, high-status cars are less likely to stop for pedestrians at crosswalks than drivers of less expensive ones—a robust finding even in states where it is legally required to break for pedestrian crossings ([Piff *et al.*, 2012](#)). While numerous quantitative datasets reveal that the lower classes donate greater shares of their income to charity than the upper classes, such experimental designs can unpack the causal pathways behind what we are increasingly seeing as an 'empathy gap' between economic elites and others.

While experimental work may seem to be subject to the same recruitment problems of other methods, some solutions are readily at hand. There are at least three strategies that can be deployed. First, researchers working at elite universities and other elite educational institutions have access to many upper-class students that might be wanting to enroll in their experiments or make up a nontrivial share of their potential samples. Secondly, elite

positions are relative, and thereby might temporarily be reconstructed within lab settings through manipulations of resource allocations (as is done, for example, in Piff's work). Thirdly, if we take a globally expansive view and keep in consideration that the costs and barriers to research are lower in some parts of the world than others, then we may be able to organize more easily elite experimental research by doing it in these nations.

2.5 Historical/archival research

While the quip 'history is an account of the "winners"' is meant to point to the problems of historical studies which look less at a 'people's history' and at the point of view of the conquered and colonized and more at those who tended to dominate societies, for elite studies this is largely an advantage. Yet similar to experimental research, there is considerable historical work about elites that sociologists of elites tend not to draw upon (despite the illustrious precedents set by Max Weber, Norbert Elias, Robert K. Merton and many others). Our first call, then, is to more actively draw upon the historical accounts of dynamics of accumulation, State formation and transformation, revolutions, and social movements, so as to expand the range of insights from which we generate an understanding of elites. Particularly in a context where historians are breathing new life into the history of capitalism(s) (see e.g. Beckert, 2015), engaging more consciously and systematically with such work will help provide a rich starting point to better understand the relationship between elites and capitalism.

In addition, while the fact that the majority of historical archives tends to be that of the powerful limits the relationality of the accounts they can provide, it nonetheless results in rich primary sources that can be directly studied by social scientists. For instance, recent work (Accominotti *et al.*, 2018) has drawn upon a range of historical data to address how elite groups were constituted around cultural institutions in Gilded Age New York. Combining records on who attended New York Philharmonic concerts, social register data, housing information, and occupational lists, it provides a portrait of an emerging elite within a time of economic and social transformation. Of course, this research design was possible because elite institutions tend to 'survive' historical upheavals and to keep records of themselves. An understated value of many historical data is their accessibility and availability to everyone wanting to (re)assess them. While research on more contemporary elites is generally confronted with requirements of confidentiality and anonymization to protect the subjects investigated, their privacy and/or their professional secrets (which is also why 'open data' will face enormous challenges in fully penetrating elite studies), most historical data allows researchers to replicate scholastic work.

2.6 Administrative data

In several countries, administrative data are proving to be one of the most important sources for elite studies today, and will likely be even more crucial in the future. Several recent papers, including in this issue, draw upon registry data of unparalleled depth; and, within a range of global contexts, economists have been exploiting tax return data to provide descriptive accounts of income and wealth distributions, concentrations and evolutions (Atkinson *et al.*, 2011; Piketty *et al.*, 2016). In the USA, access to such tax return/social security administration data has given us a highly accurate account of century-long inequality trends and has been a major resource for the emerging field of elite research (Piketty and Saez, 2003). But that's not all: last year, for instance, Raj Chetty and an interdisciplinary team of researchers have used these data to explore mobilities (2017a) and the relationships between

elites and schooling (2017*b*). Thus, in looking to build upon this area of the field, scholars should draw upon calls for the expansion of access to administrative data and its possibilities (Card *et al.*, 2010), as well as outlines of the potential further uses of such data (Connelly *et al.*, 2016).

Yet the richness of much of this work also reveals a limitation, which could well become a hindrance if researchers over-rely upon such data sources. Indeed, their focus is mainly on economic relations, with limited additional information about other social/contextual variables. And so, when seeking to capture elites whose capital is not predominantly economic or explore modes of power beyond the economic, scholars will likely have to look elsewhere for other data sources. Work exploring political actions and donations is particularly promising (Bonica, 2013, 2014; Heerwig, 2018); though it still focuses on economic relations, it suggests potential for a large range of administrative data. We anticipate that many of the major empirical findings within elite research over the next decade will come from these data. Researchers on elites would therefore do well to draw more extensively on these sources, as the latter constitute one of the main ways they can be more integrated into the ‘big data revolution’. Yet such data need not only be quantitative. Administrative records are open to any range of analyses, and qualitative, interpretive work is necessary to help assess the degree to which they are a reflection of a reality or a projection upon it.

2.7 Content analysis

A relatively underutilized data source, and related set of methodological techniques, are text and textual analysis. This area of social research may well hold promise in augmenting our insights from other methods and data sources. It also points to potential combinations (e.g. historical textual analysis). We are optimistic about both qualitative and computational textual analysis, which not only help us capture the rhetorical frameworks employed by elites, but also give us a sense of emerging and transforming matrices of ideas and meaning-making processes, by providing us the conceptual toolkit for a hermeneutic approach based on the detailed analysis of symbolic boundaries, structural oppositions, recurring narratives, institutional scripts and repertoires, etc. (Lamont *et al.*, 2014, 2017).

For example, in his classic account of the American Revolution, Wood (1991) used newspapers, letters and other texts to trace the ways in which elite revolutionaries developed a conceptual framework of liberty and equality that they eventually lost control over—meaning that the founders later attempts to ‘constrain’ the limits of freedom and equality largely failed (though they did preserve slavery). Such textual analysis, however, gave us an important view into the minds of American elites at the moment. More recently, computational scholars like Knight (n.d.) have used sources like the text of the *New York Times* to show how concepts such as ‘corporate personhood’ emerged, advancing elite interests.

Such content analysis can capitalize on a huge amount of available data that has, to date, been underutilized (in ways that generate findings that can be replicated). One can imagine analyzing elite news sources, floor speeches from law-making bodies, using freedom of information requests for government documents, and gathering other transcribed materials—available in part because they were produced by elites within elite institutions. In addition, engagement with textual techniques like natural language processing presents new objects of analysis that can be exploited within this field and would make elite research more engaged with a range of areas across the social sciences—augmenting its impact and increasing the relevancy and precision of its insights.

3. Conclusion

In Western Europe and the USA, the middle part of the 20th century was marked by increased equality, and the flourishing of social movements which expanded the rights afforded by the few to the many. Social scientists developed theoretical frameworks to help explain this great transformation, and methodological tools to study it. In the USA, for example, scholars asked more about how status was ‘attained’ rather than ‘retained.’ And survey techniques and regression analysis favored explanations interested in the ‘fat middle’ rather than the outliers at the top. While there was the hope that this moment reflected a long-run trajectory for the future, the reality of the last 40 years suggests that this drive toward economic and political equality may have been a rather unique episode.

As elite power has increased, and some might say returned, social scientists have reoriented their gaze. We inhabit one of the richest moments for elite research. Yet, as we suggest at the start of this essay, we researchers upon elites are only partially able to make sense of our current economic and political moment. Thus, while our overall suggestions build upon the theoretical and methodological approaches already underway both in elite research and in the academy more generally, we have suggested greater attention to diversity within the elites, and to how the lack of such diversity helps better elucidate white supremacy and masculine domination. Such attention to diversity also points to thinking beyond the American and European cases, adopting an interdisciplinary approach which embraces contingency and historical and geographic variations. Doing so will not only allow us to better understand the extent and limits of ‘global elites’, but also help grasp elite relationships with varieties of capitalisms. The result may well provincialize Europe and the USA and the theoretical frameworks that emerged from their context. Such provincialization looks pointedly to Bourdieu, whom we suggest the field should both rely upon and push beyond. Part of that reliance means expanding beyond the attention to elites and inequality to the (re)production of power and difference. And the focus on difference also points to some of the several amendments we have recommended: from taking race, gender, sexuality, nation, etc. more seriously, to being more open to more inductive, less theoretically determined approaches where new categories of objects are likely to be revealed within the analysis.

The essays within this issue go a long way toward starting the kinds of transformations we have called for. We anticipate that building upon these developments will not only advance research on elites but position such research to help make more general contributions to the social sciences. The ambition of all this work should be to transform the cloud of the present into a kind of clarity which anticipates a better future, or at least shows the path to pursue it.

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