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УДК 321.02

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Феномен политических элит: путь становления в классических и современных теориях, проблемы исследования и перспективы развития

DOI: 10.33979/2587-7534-2024-3-184-193

В статье рассматривается процесс возникновения и становления феномена политических элит. Особое внимание уделяется проблемам, встающим на пути у исследователей элит. Преодоление этих проблем способствует более качественному наполнению содержанием исследуемого феномена. Автором рассматриваются возможные перспективы дальнейшего развития элитарных исследований. Цель статьи – изучение феномена политических элит через призму классических и современных теорий, а также определение ключевых проблем и перспектив дальнейшего развития. Делается вывод, что понимание действий и степени влияния политических элит на политическую систему способствует глубинному осмыслению структуры властных отношений общества.

Ключевые слова: *элита; политическая элита; теории элит; особенности элит; роль элит.*

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The phenomenon of political elites: the path of formation in classical and modern theories, research problems and development prospects

The article examines the process of the emergence and formation of the phenomenon of political elites. Special attention is paid to the problems that stand in the way of elite researchers. Overcoming these problems contributes to a better content filling of the phenomenon under study. The author considers possible prospects for further development of elite studies. The purpose of the article is to study the phenomenon of political elites through the prism of classical and modern theories, as well as to identify key problems and prospects for further development. It is concluded that understanding the actions and degree of influence of political elites on the political system contributes to a deep understanding of the structure of power relations in society.

Keywords: *elite; political elite; theories of elites; features of elites; the role of elites.*

Political elites play an important role in the life of society. They participate in the formation and implementation of political strategies and key political decisions. The research of political elites allows to study the structure and dynamics of political power, identify trends and make possible forecasts of changes in the political life of society. Moreover, considering the formation of the phenomenon of the political elite allows makes it possible to analyze the historical roots of the emergence of power, helps to reveal the role of elites in various types of societies. Therefore, the study of political elites is relevant for understanding the deep foundations of modern politics.

There are a number of reasons and factors that determine scientific interest in the phenomenon under study. Firstly, these are historical events that can stimulate interest in the study of elites and their role in society. For example, in connection with the change of the ruling elite during the revolution. Secondly, these are social changes taking place in society, which can also attract the attention of elite researchers. For example, the increase in inequality in society and the response of political elites aimed at reducing inequality. Thirdly, it is technological progress that contributes to greater accessibility of data and to some extent facilitates the process of analyzing the activities of political elites. In addition, the formation of scientific interest in the phenomenon of political elites is facilitated by the specificity and complexity of the topic itself, which requires an interdisciplinary approach and analysis of a large amount of information.

Turning to the etymology of the term “elite”, one can find that it is formed from the Latin “eligere” – to choose, and the French “elite” – the best, the chosen [Duka, 2009: 143]. Until the end of the 19th century, this term was not widely spread in scientific literature. Initially, the term “elite” was used to refer to the best animals or plants in breeding. However, later they began to call a group of people whose representatives achieved high positions in the social hierarchy of society. For example, in economics or politics, culture or sports, etc.

Considering the phenomenon under study, the following interpretations can be found: the political elite is “a special group of people occupying a privileged position in the structures of political state and political non-state power and directly exercising

the function of directing power relations” [Konovalov, 2010], as well as “individuals whose strategic positions in important and government organizations and movements give them the opportunity to directly, sustainably and regularly influence political decision-making process” [Duka, 2008: 50].

The phenomenon of political elites has gone a long way in its development and formation. Ideas about the differentiation of people according to their role in the life of society originated in the era of Antiquity. It is impossible not to mention such outstanding thinkers as Plato and Aristotle. Plato believed that the government of the state should be handled by wise philosophers, who make up a very small part of the entire population [Platon, no date]. Aristotle endowed people holding senior positions with special qualities – great abilities to perform the duties assigned to them [Aristotel', no date].

The next period in the development of the phenomenon under study is the Renaissance and one of its representatives is N. Machiavelli. This stage is characterized by the emergence of a tradition of elite research through observation of real events in society, in contrast to the purely theoretical conclusions of philosophers of the Antiquity era. In particular, N. Machiavelli is known for his classification of political elites into “lions” and “foxes”. Lions are rather tough rulers, relying on forceful methods of government. Foxes are characterized as nimble, flexible rulers with a penchant for compromise [Machiavelli, no date].

At the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, the theory of elites was fully scientifically formulated. This period is associated with the works of such scientists as G. Mosca, V. Pareto and R. Michels. They are considered the classic authors of elitology. The main achievement of G. Mosca, a famous Italian sociologist, can be called the theory of the ruling class formulated by him. According to this theory, society is divided into two classes – the governing majority and the governed minority: “In all societies ... there are two classes of people – the ruling class and the governed class. The first, always less numerous, performs all political functions, monopolizes power and enjoys the advantages that power gives, while the second, more numerous class is controlled and controlled by the first...” [Mosca, 1994: 187]. The scientist naturally leads us to the conclusion that the division of members of society into two classes has existed at all times, regardless of the stage of development of society. The researcher also identifies two trends inherent in the ruling class: aristocratic and democratic. With the dominance of the aristocratic tendency, the ruling class tends to transfer power to its successors, which in the future may lead to the degeneration of the elite. With the democratic trend dominating, the best representatives of the class of the governed majority have the opportunity to join the ruling class through democratic procedures.

At about the same time as G. Mosca, another Italian sociologist, V. Pareto, developed the theory of elites. The scientist created a special system of criteria by which it is possible to understand whether an individual belongs to the elite or not: “the best professional specialist is given ten points; the one who failed to find a single client is given one point so that zero points can be given to the one who is a complete idiot... Thus, we will make up a class of those who have the highest indices in their

field of activity, which we will call the chosen class, the elite” [Pareto, 2008: 308]. In addition, among the achievements of V. Pareto is the idea of the “circulation of elites”, formulated by him, according to which the current ruling elite is replenished with the best and worthy representatives of the lower class. As a result, there is a change of different types of elites, which contributes to the preservation of social balance in society.

Another representative of classical theories is the German sociologist R. Michels, who formulated a new social law – the law of “oligarchy as a pre-established form of human community in large unions” [Michels, no date]. Subsequently, this law became known as the “iron law of the oligarchy”. The main idea of this law is that the existence of a ruling class is an inevitable phenomenon in the life of society. The existence of a society without a ruling class becomes simply impossible. The researcher also leads us to the idea that the presence of an elite is also characteristic of political parties. In any organization, over time, a ruling core is formed, which seeks to keep all power in its hands. As a result, an elite is formed with advantages that set it apart from the masses.

Despite the fact that the authors of classical theories formulated historically the first group of scientific elitist concepts, also known as the Machiavellian school, they received their share of criticism. In particular, they were criticized for underestimating the role of the masses in the management process of society. This served as the basis for the formation of a whole range of new elitist concepts, which continued the tradition of developing and filling the phenomenon we are studying.

Value (or meritocratic) theories, which differ in their attitude to the masses, try to eliminate the shortcomings of the theories of the Machiavellian school. So, J. Ortega y Gasset endows the elite with special qualities: moral, intellectual, as well as a sense of responsibility. The “chosen ones”, according to the researcher, are not those “who proudly put themselves above, but those who demand more from themselves, even if the demand on themselves is unbearable” [Ortega-i-Gasset, no date]. The moral character of the ruling elites was also emphasized by W. Ropke: “the elite should serve as a moral example for another part of society and thereby inspire respect for themselves. The elite should not rule, but lead the masses of the people with their voluntary consent, expressed in truly popular and free elections” [Ropke, 1966: 68]. Value theories describe the elite as the group consisting of the most capable and competent members of society. The relationship between the elite and the masses is based on leadership and management.

The main ideas of value theories formed the basis of democratic elitism. One of the representatives of this theory, J. Schumpeter, writes that the elite is a necessity for any society, including a society with democratic principles: “democracy means only that the people have the opportunity to accept or not accept those people who should govern them” [Schumpeter, 1995: 372]. Democracy is manifested here, first of all, in free competition between candidates for elite positions for votes.

A pluralistic (or functional) theory requires a revision of a number of provisions of democratic elitism. The essence of this theory lies in the fact that there is a whole set of elites who are engaged in managerial activities, representing

individual strata of society. For example, R. A. Dahl believes that “instead of a single center of sovereign power, there should be many centers of power, none of which should be completely sovereign. This gives citizens and leaders the opportunity to demonstrate the art of peaceful conflict resolution” [Dahl, 1967: 241]. As a result, power is distributed among the elites. And society consists of competing elite groups, which, in principle, excludes the possibility of concentrating power in one hand.

A slightly different view of some provisions of the elitist theory is presented with left-liberal concepts. The main representative of which is C.W. Mills and his theory of the ruling elite. Using the example of the United States, Mills tried to show that all power is concentrated in the hands of one elite group. The elite holds strategic command positions in the most important institutions such as the state, the corporation and the army. The ruling elite itself “consists of people who occupy positions that give them the opportunity to rise above the environment of ordinary people and make decisions with the greatest consequences” [Mills, 1959: 24]. There is a close relationship between the political elite, economic leaders and the military elite, ensuring the internal cohesion of the elite. There are deep differences between the elite and the masses, which limits the influx of new members into the elite.

Due to the scientific and technological revolution, technocratic theories of the elites became widespread in the second half of the twentieth century. Claims that people who create science and technology are gaining more and more political influence are gaining popularity. So, J. Galbraith claims that the modern elite is presented by technocrats who have replaced the old elite. The field of power goes beyond the boundaries of representatives of management structures, falling into the hands of those who have some kind of knowledge unique in nature [Gelbrejt, 2008: 75].

The technocratic theories of the elites are complemented by scientism. Among its representatives is D. Bell, who believes that there has been a shift in the center of power towards representatives of science and technology. Due to the growing importance of science, technology and knowledge, it is scientists who make up the elite of modern society, being part of the political elite. However, one cannot assume that society is run by scientists alone: “in a postindustrial society, the elite is the elite of knowledgeable people. Such an elite has the power within the institutions associated with intellectual activity – research organizations, universities, etc. – but in the world of big politics, it has no more than influence. ... the “elite of knowledge” can pose problems, initiate new questions and propose technical solutions ... but it does not have the power to say yes or no” [Bell, no date].

In the 1990s, within the framework of neo-elitism, criticism of the pluralistic theory of elites began. As a result, the very fact that an individual can influence politics comes into question. At the same time, the presence of a powerful elite in society is not the result of the thirst for power of certain individuals, it is the need of society itself to manage. According to S. Keller, elites perform important strategic functions in society [Keller, 1991: 198].

Exploring the path of formation and development of the phenomenon of political elites, it is impossible not to touch upon the achievements of domestic

authors, who also contributed to the active development of elitology. In the late 1980s, Professor G.K. Ashin introduced the term “elitology” into scientific use, defining it as the science “about the elites, about the highest stratum in the system of socio-political stratification” [Ashin, 2010: 11]. He is the founding father of Russian elitology. Many modern Russian scientists in the field of elite research are increasingly starting from the analysis of the activities of representatives of the political elite. One of the most authoritative scientists in this field is O.V. Gaman-Golutvina, who for the first time in the history of Russian elitology conducted a large-scale study of the ruling elite of Russia. She demonstrated the difference between the Russian model of elite formation from the Western one, noting that the Russian state was formed in conditions of lagging behind, the presence of external aggression, and a huge territory [Gaman-Golutvina, 2006: 32]. Professor E.B. Shestopal, who created the school of political psychology, deserves special attention. Exploring the psychological characteristics of the Russian political elite, she notes the presence of a powerful personal potential [Shestopal, 2015: 7].

Therefore, elitist theories can be blamed for a certain simplification of political reality, in presenting it through the prism of dominant groups and individuals. Indeed, elite political theories do not always take into account the complexity of political processes and the influence of various structures and institutions on key political decision-making. In addition, the theories of the elites can also be accused of underestimating the importance of civil society, in the secondary role assigned to it. Nevertheless, theories of political elites are useful for analyzing political dynamics, but they should not be considered as the only true explanation of political power and influence in the state and society.

Having analyzed the long path of formation and development of the phenomenon of political elites, a number of very controversial issues or problems that researchers face today arise. Firstly, it should be noted that the term “elite” is very ambiguous. At first glance, this category seems to be well-established, but various researchers criticize it for the redundancy of semantic and meaningful options. All this contributes to the emergence of terminological confusion. For example, G.K. Ashin gives several dozen meanings of the concept of “elite”, which are used in political science [Ashin, 2005: 26]. Definitions of the term “elite” in academic research are extremely broad and equally contested [Higgins, Kunz]. The problems associated with the ambiguity of the term under study are caused by the following factors: the inconsistency of the phenomenon of political elites itself; the difficulty of formulating objective grounds for identifying a real political elite; the inability to avoid value judgments [Ryabkova, 2019: 2].

Secondly, when studying “elites”, another problematic aspect arises – the lack of a clear distinction between people or institutions that fall into the category of “elite”. One of the reasons for this phenomenon is the lack of a generally valid criterion by which membership in the political elite would be determined. There are different approaches to consider elites: structural and functional, value, institutional, resource, reputational, etc. All of them focus on different planes of the phenomenon under study.

Thirdly, when conducting research in the field of political elites, specialists face problems such as the inaccessibility of information about the elites, the lack of transparency in the process of elite formation, as well as very limited access to the elites themselves to conduct research, for example, through interviews. All this only complicates the process of obtaining information for researchers “first hand”. Which may not have a beneficial effect on the research itself.

Fourth, it is worth highlighting such a problem as the lack or underdevelopment of interethnic and interregional studies of political elites. This problem can be solved only through the joint efforts of the Russian and international academic communities [Gel'man, Tarusina, 2000].

Fifth, some researchers are afraid of repeating the mistakes of the past. In particular, we are talking about two trends of the past: when researchers focus on describing the phenomenon under study, rather than explaining it, and when the methods used and data analyses are ahead of our ideas in development [Mizruchi, 2016].

Back in 2000, researchers such as J. Higley and G. Moore concluded: “For the most part, elite researchers are unable to agree on what constitutes the basic elements of the elite, how these elements differ in each state or in each specific historical period” [Higley, Moore, 2001: 179]. This raises a new question: have there been any changes in elite research over the past quarter century? Experts note that there are changes. Firstly, research has reached the level where an equal sign can be placed between the heights of the organizational hierarchy in government structures and the elite. Nevertheless, it is important to make a reservation here – this is possible only in complex societies. Secondly, the theory of political elites is increasingly moving away from normativity. Instead of the opposition or dichotomy of “elite-masses”, the position of “elite – non-elite” comes to the fore. Thirdly, the political elite is no longer studied as a single integral group, the focus is shifting to the dividing lines within the elite itself. Fourthly, recently there has been a certain convergence of elitism with research in the field of political leadership [Alekseeva, Loshkarev, Paren'kov, 2021: 79-80].

It is important to note that scientific revolutions do not happen as often as we would like. Scientific achievements and breakthroughs in research are the result of painstaking and long-term work of scientists. Nevertheless, it is already possible to outline some prospects for further development of the study of the phenomenon of political elites. First of all, it is the development of new methodological approaches focused on the study of modern elites as complex and highly dynamic entities. Next, it is the construction of innovative models not only for theoretical, but also for empirical analysis of elite groups. And, of course, this is a comparative study of the mechanisms and channels of elite recruitment [Gaman-Golutvina, 2016: 66-67].

We must not forget about the impact of globalization, which has a significant impact on the future prospects for the development of research on political elites. In general, globalization has a very contradictory effect on the elites. On the one hand, globalization opens up new sources of influence for the elites, on the other hand, globalization acts as a limiter for the development of the internal activities of the

elites. This is manifested, first of all, in the establishment of rules and norms of international institutions, which exert certain pressure on the activities of elites [Amsen, DiCaprio, Robinson, 2009]. With the constant increase in international relations, researcher's attention will be focused on the influence of political elites on global processes and decisions.

In addition, the further prospect of developing research in the field of the political elites will be to expand interdisciplinary research, since the study of political elites requires an integrated approach. The future of elite research will depend on the increasing involvement of specialists from various fields of science, such as psychology, economics, sociology, etc. The research of elites, including political ones, will continue to play a significant role in understanding political processes in the future, and will continue to improve and develop.

Having considered the long path of formation of the phenomenon of political elites, we can summarize the following results. The existence of elites in society is an inevitable phenomenon. Moreover, elites arise in complexly structured societies. Despite the fact that there are so many different theories, it is possible to identify the key features of the elites. It is believed that the elites are the most competent in matters related to the management of society. Elites, including political ones, have distinctive characteristics, such as the presence of managerial abilities, a specific type of thinking, a certain degree of superiority over the masses, etc. Researchers in the study of elites face a number of problems along the way. However, overcoming these problems contributes to a better development and filling of elite theories with new facts and discoveries. Understanding the actions and the degree of influence of elite groups on the conduct of a political course allows for a more in-depth analysis of the structure of power relations in society. The phenomenon of the political elites will continue to continue its path of development, filling with meanings.

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