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SELECTED THEORETICAL CONCEPTS OF THE SOCIAL ELITE

This paper deals with issues related to theoretical concepts of the elite. The concept of the elite emphasizes the hierarchical nature of the diversity of society and the importance of dividing societies into two groups: the ruling elite and the ruled masses. By elite, one generally means a social stratum, a social group, or a category of people that are perceived to be superior in some respect to the rest of the social whole. The issue of the elite is extremely interesting for many researchers, as it is related to the question of who has real influence in the political and social life of the country. The present paper systematizes the concepts of the elite and presents an essential definition. For this purpose, a comparative method was applied. A full understanding of the mechanisms of distinguishing elites in society will allow people who really influence the lives of citizens to be identified.

Keywords: social elite, the ruling class, elite theory.

The term "elite" derives from the French *élite* (*choice, delicious*) and Latin *eligere* (*making a choice*). This source indicates that the elite are selected from among a certain group of people, individuals particularly skilled in the highest abilities in their field of activity (Antoszewski, Herbut, 2004).

This concept has changed its meaning over the years. Originally, the elite referred to material value, selected military units, as well as the highest social strata of "well-born people". Only at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries this term was associated with social sciences, and it was then that the elite began to be defined as "a group of people distinguished or privileged in relation to the rest of society due to having certain qualities or goods valued socially" (Pawłowska, 1998) The term elite quoted above, although referred to in sociological and political science literature, is rather associated with colloquial language. The professional term used by science defines the elite as "leadership groups that stand out among the masses of people of a given society, from among which these groups are selected through various social selections, such as competitions, elections, plebiscites and the like" (Sztumski, 2003).

In the literature on the subject there are many definitions and theoretical approaches to elites. One can notice that despite many discrepancies, the elite is always a minority and stands out from the rest of society. The theoretical foundation in the theory of elitism is the view that any form of political social organization determines the hierarchy of its structure.

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Its shape is most often compared to a geometric figure of a triangle or a pyramid, and the minority that forms the apex or the peak of such a structure is more politically empowered than the majority that forms its base. Such a situation always implies a division into the elite and the masses. From this point of view, each society has its own elites, regardless of the forms of class-layer divisions existing within it (Nocoń, 2004).

The theoretical concepts of elites in literature are described in various ways. The dominant trend is to present the concept from a historical perspective. In Polish literature, M. Stefaniuk in *The Teoria elit by Vilfred Paret* (Stefaniuk, 2001) makes a holistic review of the theory of the elite, and shows that already in ancient times pioneering elitist doctrines can be found.

The second approach to present the theory of the elite is the division into the classical, conflicting and functional interpretation of the elite. Gaetano Moska and Vilfredo Pareto are believed to be the founders of the classical theory of elites. The very concept of the elite was introduced into sociology by Pareto. Moska believed that the term elite brought with it an evaluative element unnecessary in science, which is why in his works he used the term ruling class or political coffers (Pawłowska, 1998). He also claimed that

in all societies, from the least developed, which have not yet developed the threshold of civilization, to the most developed and powerful ones, two classes of people appear: the ruling class and the class which is ruled. The first of these classes, the less numerous, always performs all political functions, monopolizes power and enjoys the benefits that power brings, while the second, more numerous, is directed and controlled by the first in a more or less lawful, less legal way, or more arbitrary and brutal. It is the class which provides the former, at least seemingly, with material livelihoods and instruments conditioning the vitality of the entire political organism (Żyromski 1996).

As Moska continues, "individuals making up the ruling class are distinguished from the ruled mass by having certain features that give them a certain material, intellectual or moral superiority" (Żyromski 1996). These qualities include bravery, wealth and origin, and personal abilities.

V. Pareto divided society into two strata: lower (non-elite) and higher (elite). He, in turn, divided the elite into the ruling elite and the non-ruling elite. He included people who achieve the highest indicators in a given field (Pawłowska 1998). He called the elite those who directly or indirectly play a role in ruling (Stefaniuk, 2001). Belonging to the elite also depended on having individual features, i.e. residuals that were not equally distributed in society and of varying intensity. The residuals mentioned by Pareto include, among others, showing feelings through external actions and the integrity of an individual with what is subject to them.

Pareto argued that

the ruling class employs people of the ruled class to maintain its power. The ruled class can be divided into two categories that correspond to the two principal means of exercising power. The first category consists of soldiers, police officers, mercenary thugs – in the old days; the second category uses cleverness and consists of it from the Roman times to the present day, the clientele of politicians (Pawłowska, 1998).

A. Pawłowska, when comparing the theories of Paret and Mosca, lists common features of these theories. One of them is to emphasize that the elite is not a detached enclave from society. The relationship between society and the elite is mediated by a sub-elite made up of middle-class members. The sub-elite provides the elite with new members, and is also a condition for its stabilization (Pawłowska, 1998).

The conflicting theories of the elites are based on the belief that the interests of the elite and the rest of society are opposing, and that the masses cannot control the elite. The very fact of the existence of elites is a source of social conflict as it is an expression of depriving the rest of society of values that are important to it. The conflict takes place both on the material and axiological levels, while the masses prefer the implementation of egalitarian values, the elites implement anti-egalitarian values (Pawłowska, 1998).

Representatives of the conflict's interpretation of the elite included Robert Michels, James Burnham and Charles W. Mills, among others.

R. Michels interpreted history as a series of rivalries between new and old elites. For Michels, the constant struggles between aristocracy and democracy were the struggles of the old minority, which tried to defend its rule against a new and greedy minority that wanted to mix with the old minority or even get rid of it. Any class changes that take place are merely a substitution of a ruling minority over another. The position of the elite is ensured by the organization that gives rise to the dominance of the elect over the elect over the represented (Szcupaczyński, 1995). According to Michels, organizations are oligarchies, so they will be the owners of power and will pursue their goals under the guise of equality (Stefaniuk, 2001).

J. Burnham sees the elite in the group of managers, and claims that the capitalist system is in decline and with the scattered ownership of the means of production and the inability to control the economy by numerous owners, it will be politically and economically dominated by this group. The complexity of economic management issues requires specialist knowledge and experience that only this social group may have. Thus, the resulting managerial elite is, in Burnham's interpretation, an elite distinguished on the basis of relatively rare skills in managing the means of production. Thanks to these exclusive qualities, the managerial class controls not only the market, but also the sphere of politics, placing its people in strategic positions and thus creating the power elite (Pawłowska, 1998).

C. W. Mills showed that the ruling elite consisted of people who held positions that enabled them to rise above the ordinary environment of ordinary people. This enabled them to make decisions with great consequences. Whether or not they made such decisions was less important than the mere fact that they occupied these key positions. The determinant of belonging to the power elite were institutional affiliations and without them it would not be possible to make significant decisions on a national scale (Mills, 1961).

The elites, according to Mills, are concentrated around three types of economic, political and military institutions. At the very tops of these institutions, prestige and power accumulate. The political elite is not only a group with an ability to make decisions, it is also a social class at the top of the social hierarchy. In addition, there are social and professional ties, often family ties, and above all common interests (Pawłowska, 1998).

Functional elite theories refer to the basic assumptions of functionalism, which, among various theoretical and methodological paradigms used in political science, created one of the well-established visions of the political world (Szacki, 2003). In general, the purpose of

analytical papers in this trend is primarily to study individual segments of the social system in terms of their impact on the satisfaction of the needs of the entire system, as well as to determine the functions of individual elements of the social structure.

Society in functional terms is an integrated unity based on a catalog of universal needs of individuals and groups that make up it. A structure is formed in society, whose elements are functionally oriented towards meeting the needs and maintaining the stability of a given structure. As a consequence, the functions performed by individual elements of the social structure are positive components of the system and, as such, are necessary for its existence (Wróbel, 1997). The roles and status of individual elements of the structure are functionally determined. From this perspective, functional approaches assume that the elite and social masses are complementary and coherent elements of the political system which, mutually conditioning each other, co-define the nature of tasks performed in the social system. The existence of a political elite is justified by the sphere of its influence, defined as functions. Their implementation is an essential element of the stabilization and development of the social system, not only in its political dimension.

In theory and practice of the elite, functionalists look for elements that stabilize the social structure. From the functionalists' point of view, it is important to find a consensus between the principles of representative democracy and the existence of political elites. Functionalists are generally elitists, i.e. supporters of the view that elites are inalienable in the historical process and their causative nature (Pawłowska, 1998).

Representatives of the functional trend, among others, were Karl Mannheim, Harold Lasswell, John Higley, G. Lowell Field, and Talcott Parsons.

Functionalists, guarding the assumption that the elites are inalienable, focus on the relationship between the needs and interests of social groups and the actions of the elite. It is in this trend that K. Mannheim distinguished the main types of elites, i.e. political, organizational, intellectual, artistic, moral and religious elites. He believed that the main goal of the political elite was to "integrate a great number of political aspirations" (Mannheim, 1974).

H. Lasswell distinguished the elite on the basis of the criterion of access to multiple goods and understood by it those who "receive the most of what is available. The available values can be classified as prestige, security income. Those who receive the most are the elite, the rest are the masses". By the power elite he meant holders of power in a political system (Pawłowska, 1998). Power holders consist of leaders and social formations from which leaders come and to whom they are responsible at a given moment.

T. Parsons applied leadership to people with influence on the basics and behavior of other people. This influence is a consequence of a specific social status and position. From this point of view, leadership can be defined as the functions of political elites, and the political elite performing leadership functions as one of the elements of the system distinguished due to the primary functional significance for society related to its normative subsystem, serving to achieve the goals of the social system (Nocoń, 2004). There is a certain feedback here, the political system has a decisive influence on the shape and structure of the elite, through the nature of institutions and political solutions, while the elite participates in shaping the structure and character of the state organization, social and political forces.

In the concepts of J. Higley and G. L. Field, elites are people who occupy strategic positions in public and private bureaucratic organizations (e.g. in state administration, political parties, production companies, trade unions, mass media, religious and educational

institutions, organized protest groups). When we are interested in the general social elite, we take into account those organizations which, due to their size or otherwise defined importance, enable the people who run them to exert an individual, regular and significant influence on macro-social decisions (Pałeczki, 2007). Political elites dominate in the process of making sovereign decisions, but they are limited in the actions taken by the social majority. In order to push through a particular type of political endeavor, the elite must develop a sufficient degree of public support that is necessary for its implementation. This dependence, in a sense, results in the development of a social consensus (Szczupaczyński, 1993). According to J. Higley and G. L. Field, the elites always need the support of various social groups. To obtain, even minimal, this support must be consistent with the basic and dominant orientation of societies (Halamska, 2001). Higley and Field believe that the elite can be analyzed in two aspects: in terms of the degree of structural integration, i.e. the formal and informal links existing within the elite, and in terms of the agreement on political values, the principles on which political life is organized. Taking these two criteria into account, they developed a typology of political elites:

- Fragmented elites – are characterized by a minimal degree of structural integration and a lack of agreement as to the rules of conducting the political game. As a result, the strict ruling elite is unstable, and is subject to frequent personnel changes, which can even be done by force. This has a disastrous effect on a political system whose functioning is unpredictable.
- Ideologically integrated elites – are characterized by a high degree of structural integration and unlimited agreement as to the principles of the course of political life. They operate on the basis of a broad social movement whose *raison d'être* is the lack of other social movements (due to deliberate elimination). Therefore, the cohesiveness of this movement is achieved thanks to the universal acceptance of a single ideology that defines not only the principles of political life, but also all manifestations of social life. The political system does not allow the existence of opposition groups. Power in the hands of one political group is not subject to succession, although the composition of the elite is changing, the power is still exercised by people from the same ideological circle.
- Normatively integrated elites – are characterized by a high degree of integration. However, there is a high degree of agreement as to the rules of conducting the political game. The political system is characterized by a multitude of political groupings that compete with each other for gaining power, but agree on a certain canon of rules regulating social life – these are the principles of democratism in political life and liberalism in economic life. The rules of power succession are fixed and inviolable (e.g. general elections), which guarantees the stability of the system. The normatively integrated elite is an element that constitutes the democratic order (Szczupaczyński, 1993).

Functional elitism rejects particularism, typical of a conflicting approach to politics or the class model of society. The elites, which are the product of constantly taking place processes of social selection, reflect the aspirations, priorities and development trends of the entire social system (Nocoń, 2004). J. Sztumski emphasizes that "the elites are an emanation of the entire society, not just some class or some social classes" (Sztumski, 2003).

To sum up, it can be stated that in all the approaches presented, most definitions of the concept of elite found in the literature have certain common features. M. Simlat distinguished three of them that make up this concept:

1. Limited population of the elite – the elite is a small group,
2. Members of the elite occupy a high position in the institutional structures of the social and political system,
3. A possibility of elite influence on politics (Simlat, 1997).

Summing up these features, it is possible to quote the concept of the elite, following Szczupaczyński (1995), that the elite is a set of individuals who, thanks to their strategic position in key social organizations, are able to shape decision-making processes on a regular and substantial basis. The elite consists of the main decision makers of the largest and richest in sources political, government, military, professional, economic, communication and cultural organizations and movements.

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