

### John Higley's work an elite foundations of social theory and politics

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# Introduction: John Higley's Work on Elite Foundations of Social Theory and Politics

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**Abstract:** »*Elitetheoretische Grundlagen sozialwissenschaftlicher Theoriebildung und politischer Analyse*«. John Higley's work traverses the boundaries of sociology, history and politics in the best tradition of classical social theory, and it has inspired countless scholars across Europe, North America, Australia and Asia. This inspiration has worked on three fronts: paradigmatic, theoretical and empirical. Higley and his colleagues revived the "elite paradigm" focusing on top national power-holders, where elites are seen as the key social actors and agents of social and political change. An interest in elite theory was also stimulated by his work, especially with respect to the relationship between the key characteristics of national elites, such as their integration and consensus, and the nature (democratic or otherwise) of political regimes. This theoretical work inspired numerous critical analyses of elite transformations that precipitated the post-WWII "halcyon years" of stability and growth in Europe and North America, the liberal-democratic transformations in post-communist Europe, as well as the recent turbulences: the financial crisis and a prolonged economic slowdown. The work of Higley and colleagues also continues to inspire a revival of macro-theoretical interests, especially in the European social theory, social-historical research, and theoretically informed political analysis.

**Keywords:** elite, elite paradigm, elite theory.

This volume celebrates the work of John Higley and presents contributions from fourteen authors who have collaborated with him over the past decades. Higley's work, which traverses the boundaries of sociology, history and politics in the best tradition of classical social theory, has inspired countless scholars across Europe, North America, Australia and Asia, and there is little doubt that he was responsible for reviving the "elite paradigm" after its long eclipse following the collapse of European democracies in the 1920s-30s (paradoxically, the very development anticipated by classical elite theorists).

This recovery cum reappraisal, which took "elitism" or the "elite perspective" as a meta-theoretical paradigm focusing on top national power-holders, where elites are seen as the key social actors and agents of social and political change, started with a "manifesto" of the elite perspective written with Field in the early 1970s (Field and Higley 1973). This was followed by the influential

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*Elitism* (Field and Higley 1980) and by contributions on elite integration, settlement and transition (Burton and Higley 1987; Higley and Burton 1989; Higley et al. 1991; Field, Higley and Burton 1990). It also included influential “regional applications” of the elite paradigm in Latin America, Southern Europe and newly liberated Central Eastern Europe (CEE) countries (e.g., Higley and Gunther 1992; Higley, Pakulski and Wesolowski 1998; Dogan and Higley 1998; Higley and Pakulski 2000). A major re-statement of the elitist framework, *Elite Foundations of Liberal Democracy*, was published in 2006 in collaboration with Michael Burton. Finally, Higley recently co-edited a number of critical reappraisals of the paradigm of democratic elitism (Best and Higley 2009; Best and Higley 2010). In their focus, Higley’s publications combine theoretical reflection – mainly inspired by European classical elite theorists – and empirical research, in which he has been involved for half a century.

Elitism’s core tenets are deceptively simple. Due to their strategic positions and resources under their control, elites – that is, small groups of “persons who are able, by virtue of their strategic positions in powerful organizations and movements, to affect political outcomes regularly and substantially” (Higley and Burton 2006, 7) – have the power that the majority of people or non-elites lack, and they make systematic use of their power in both democratic and non-democratic polities. However, while power is portrayed by elitists as concentrated in elite hands and exercised in the top-down manner, even in the modern democratic regimes, the elite perspective does not dismiss non-elites as inconsequential or powerless. This is because elites are always constrained by non-elite orientations and preferences, which they – the elite members – have to shape and cultivate to sustain their rule, even if they act in an autonomous way. As Higley and Burton (2006, 27) remind us, the power-holders must cultivate mass support and “frame their appeals to accord with the interests and political orientations of non-elites”.

While focusing in empirical studies on the variation in national elite characteristics, the consequences of this variation for the nature of regimes, and on the historical patterns of elite change, Higley and his colleagues have also further elaborated the elitist paradigm, especially its “democratic” version (originally outlined by Weber and Schumpeter) that reconciles elitism with democracy (e.g., Best and Higley 2009; 2010). Elites, according to “democratic elitism” are the key builders and defenders (but also destroyers) of democratic regimes. Those national elites that reach a ruling consensus and respect open electoral competition for the executive leadership in the state are able to sustain democracy. Moreover, as demonstrated by the “third wave” of democratisation, especially in CEE following the collapse of Soviet communism, elites can “craft” and “consolidate” democratic regimes, even under very difficult conditions of social conflicts, political instability and economic woes (e.g., Higley, Pakulski and Wesolowski 1998; Higley, Kullberg and Pakulski 1996; Higley and Lengyel 2000).

Perhaps the major theoretical contribution made by John Higley – or at least the one most closely associated with his name – is encapsulated in the now widely known claim on the relationship between the key characteristics of national elites, such as their integration and consensus on the nature (democratic or otherwise) of political regimes. His books and articles are widely acclaimed not only as “manifestos” of elitism, but also as theoretical milestones offering a historically sweeping but well substantiated vision of modern liberal democracy as a product of broadly integrated and consensually united national elites (e.g., Higley, Deacon and Smart 1979). Such elites formed initially only in Western Europe and North America, though they were subsequently emulated worldwide. Equally influential has been Higley’s (and his collaborators) work on the transition to democracy and market economy in post-communist Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), including Russia. This transition was preceded by crises and intense elite circulation, and directed by reformist elites that embarked upon a risky path of negotiations and compromises with their opponents. These negotiations, popularly known as “roundtables”, paved the way for gradual and (largely) peaceful transformations. Diverse outcome of these processes, according to Higley’s widely accepted proposition, reflect diverse paths of elite transformation to democracy. Above all, they reflect diverse patterns of elite integration and outlook. Liberal democratic regimes and market economies took root and were consolidated in societies where national elites achieved wide integration and broad ruling consensus about the rules of political engagement. Divisions and conflicts within national elites, by contrast, harbingered political instability combined with the formation of non-democratic and/or illiberal regimes. Such divisions, Higley suggested, paralysed political and economic reforms, thus hindering democratisation and European integration. In the USA and Australia, Higley’s theoretical work inspired numerous critical analyses of century-long elite transformations that precipitated both the post-WWII “halcyon years” of stability and growth, as well as the recent turbulences: the financial crisis and a prolonged economic slowdown. Above all, Higley’s scholarship inspired a refreshing revival of macro-theoretical interests, especially in European social theory, social-historical research, and theoretically informed political analysis (e.g. Higley and Pakulski 2007; Best and Higley 2010; Higley and Pakulski 2012).

Finally, dozens of empirical studies of elites – their backgrounds, recruitment, structure, orientations, circulation and change – carry a clear imprint of Higley’s inspiration. He defined elites in an operational manner as incumbents of key power positions (e.g. Higley, Deacon and Smart 1979), thus opening the way for a reliable empirical identification of elites through a combination of positional, reputational and decisional method. His studies of elites in Norway and Australia formed a template for dozens of empirical investigations of national elites.

Indeed, this volume is a testimony to John Higley's wide-ranging influence and inspiration. All contributors to this volume utilize the elite perspective in their analyses and address a mixture of theoretical and empirical questions about elites and social-political change. The volume opens with G. William Domhoff's "bird's eye" view of modern elite theory. In its Higley-Burton rendition, it is seen as a "parallel power structure research tradition" and as a theoretical partner-supplement to the "four-networks" (or "power networks") analytic framework theory of power developed by Michael Mann and applied to the United States by Domhoff (e.g. 2009). The "four-networks" theory is seen not only as compatible with the modern elite framework, but also as providing a more specific historical supplement cum theoretical specification to the general power network framework. In a laudatory manner, Domhoff highlights the theoretical value of the Higley-Burton claims about the dynamics of elite transformation, especially those historical transformation paths that led to the formation of first democratic regimes: the "post-colonial elite formation and consensus-building", elite "pacts and settlements" that followed prolonged violent confrontations and divisions, and "elite convergences" that allowed internal splits and divisions to be overcome. These claims form a platform for a theoretical reconciliation not only between elite theory and democratic theory, but also between elitism and the "power networks" perspective.

Domhoff's paper is followed by an overview by Jan Pakulski of elite theories that are a legacy of Max Weber's analyses of modern elite formation and dynamics. These are seen by as an important and frequently overlooked inspiration for modern elite theorising, especially that of John Higley and his colleagues. Pakulski argues that both the "classical" Italian (Pareto, Mosca) and German (Weber, Michels) theoretical inspiration underlie Higley's work. Weber's (1978) analyses of modern political elite, particularly its structure and specific dynamics, inspired further analyses of contemporary elite theorists, especially those that highlighted the importance of elite integration and "ruling consensus", as well as the crucial role played by political leaders and core executive groups ("central circles"). While most contemporary elite scholars are aware of Weber's theoretical affinities with the elitist camp, Weber's comments on the centrality of political leaders, on the importance of elite integration and on the crucial role of intra-elite cohesion for sustaining a democratic political competition are less well known. These, Pakulski argues, need re-emphasising, if only to highlight both the theoretical continuities and important reformulations proposed by Higley and his collaborators.

In his contribution, András Körösiényi complements this theoretical reflection by highlighting the influence of another prominent elite theorist, Joseph Schumpeter. Körösiényi's paper explores the links between elite theory and democratic theory through the lens of Schumpeterian "competitive theory of democracy" subsequently absorbed within the broader "elite perspective". This theory, Körösiényi argues, lays foundations for democratic elitism as elaborated

and promoted by Higley and his colleagues (e.g., Best and Higley 2010, Pakulski and Körösiényi 2012). In Schumpeter's interpretation, economic and political competition is necessarily monopolistic and destroys "political balance/equilibrium". The major implication of this inevitable "monopolistic competition" is the blurring of distinction between procedural democracy and a non-democratic ("authoritarian") regime. This is very much in line with the critical and "demo-sceptic" tone of elite analyses, especially those immersed in the classical elite perspective. Today, it may be seen as a timely warning that political outcomes do not follow the optimistic scenarios of the "end of history" and a "triumph of democracy". Rather, they are always open, although critically dependent on the "key elite characteristics" and actions. This seems to be one of the key elements of the elite perspective and one of the main general formulations of contemporary elite theory that stresses the importance of elite normative consensus.

The theme of elite consensus is also explored by Heinrich Best, this time in relation to the "state socialist" or (as Higley and colleagues preferred to call it) "ideocratic" regime in the communist German Democratic Republic (GDR). This is a combination of theoretical reflection on elite social "reproduction" with a fascinating empirical analysis of some unique data-records left by the East German regime. The East German "ideocratic elites" legitimised their regime by the egalitarian Marxist ideology. Yet, the power structure they erected in East Germany was hierarchical, stratified, highly centralised and exclusive, with the top personnel enjoying power and privileges similar to Western elites. The persistence of this hierarchy, exclusion and privilege supports the claim of elite theorists that social and political hierarchies inevitably continue, even after the abolition of capitalism. This persistence caused embarrassment for Marxist-Leninist elites and led to them denying the existence of any form of elitism, denouncing such a concept as "part of the reactionary wing of bourgeois ideology". As Best notes, even the term "elite" was regarded as improper and replaced by multiple synonyms, such as *avant-garde*, cadres, leaders, and functionaries. Yet, the disparity between the reality and the ideological "ruling formula" was quite apparent, as the East German data reveal. The gender gap was wide, and career opportunities varied according to social backgrounds, with some variations between elite sectors. While those who believed in the egalitarian credentials of the East German elites would be surprised by the scope and pattern of inequalities revealed by Best (especially the impact on political careers of a pre-1945 involvement in National Socialist activities), elite theorists would find the picture familiar, confirming Mosca's and Pareto's anticipations. Moreover, the apparent continuity in backgrounds and career patterns of German industrial elites also confirms the observations of Higley and his colleagues about "elite continuities" amidst dramatic social change that followed the "velvet revolutions" (e.g. Higley; Kullberg and Pakul-

ski 1996). These continuities, as Best suggests, helped in re-building elite consensus and assisted in negotiating the regime change in a peaceful manner.

The theme of elite consensus is continued in the article by Tom Baylis – this time in the broader context of the democratisation processes that followed the collapse of Soviet-based communist regimes in Hungary, Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia and (East) Germany. Baylis subjects both the concept of elite consensus and the accompanied theoretical claims formulated by Higley and Burton to critical re-examination. In so doing, he focuses on the central claim that the emergence of national elite consensus about the rules of political engagement (norms of legitimacy and procedures for resolving political differences, disagreements and conflicts) is pivotal for the formation of stable and liberal-democratic political regimes, and that such consensus, when reached through elite agreements, proves self-perpetuating. Baylis examines the role played by “round table elite negotiations” and points to the problematic – perhaps even fickle – nature of their outcomes: the alleged elite consensus. While observing the bumpy road to democracy in post-communist Europe, Baylis concludes sceptically that the

level of disagreement among elites over the legitimacy of the political institutions introduced in 1989, and the ferocity of attacks on the right of opposing elites even to participate in public life at all, offer a suggestive guide to the presence or absence of elite consensus in the new democracies of Central and East Central Europe.

Elite procedural consensus, in other words, especially a lasting ruling consensus, cannot be assumed to be an inevitable outcome of “roundtables”. Rather, it is to be ascertained and carefully scoped through nation-specific elite studies.

Hungarian elite researchers, György Lengyel and Gabriella Ilonszki, make a similar point. They critically assess the alleged emergence of such a broad elite consensus – as the foundation of liberal-democratic politics might suggest – in the more circumscribed context of Hungarian post-communist politics. Their attention focuses on the norm-breaching conduct of Hungarian political leaders, and the capacity of those leaders to undermine elite consensus, and even going so far as to damage the elite settlements of 1989-90. Their conclusion, though reached from the Higley-inspired elite perspective, is sceptical of Higley’s elite theory, especially its central tenets. Indeed, Lengyel and Ilonszki are quite pessimistic in their assessment of the prospects of democracy in Hungary and argue that the current (Fidesz-dominated) Hungarian political leaders preside over a “simulated” rather than an authentic democracy. Partisan interests closely interwoven with private interests dominate and are combined with a courting of right-wing extremism. Elite consensus is replaced by the ethos of struggle and partisan opportunistic populism, which allows Hungary to be described as a case of pseudo-transformation. The authors conclude that elite settlement has failed in Hungary and that future elite convergence is unlikely,

leading to scepticism about the formation of an authentic, rather than “simulated”, democracy.

Anton Steen also applies the elite theoretical perspective to his general assessment of political developments in the Baltic States (Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia). Instead of looking at elite consensus, though, he analyses the more empirically tangible elite trust/confidence in political and social institutions. In a way that parallels Higley’s claim about elite procedural-political consensus, Steen claims that it is elite confidence in the institutional framework (empirically close to “elite ruling consensus”) that is the key precondition of democratic rule. He examines elite and mass confidence in the parliament, police, private business and the church in three Baltic states following the collapse of communism, and concludes that elite’s confidence in new institutions is much stronger than mass confidence. This highlights the central role of elites in consolidating the democratic order, and is broadly consistent with both, democratic elitism and Higley’s theoretical claims. While this conclusion definitely holds true for all three Baltic cases, Steen is cautious in his generalization and stresses instead the importance of historical contingencies and national peculiarities.

While most analysts treat elite integration, cohesion and consensus as largely unproblematic “elite variables”, Gulbrandsen unravels these variables through a complex analytic and empirical study. He identifies (after Putnam) six “integrative factors” or “dimensions of integration”: social/background homogeneity, common recruitment patterns, personal interaction, value consensus, group solidarity and institutional context. Following Higley, he suggests that value consensus is the most critical aspect of elite integration, the latter seen as national in scope. An elite is well integrated if its members share basic values and derived norms of conduct. Other aspects (factors of integration), however, are also important. This importance is specified in four hypotheses – concerning shared class backgrounds, education, age group/ generation, and elite tenure respectively – and tested through empirical analysis of elite data from Norway. Shared class background emerges as the leading factor strengthening elite ideological cohesion.

Maurizio Cotta explores the similar “Higleyan” theme of elite consensus, but he does this in a more optimistic mode and in the context of, “a new supranational polity and the complex European system of national and supranational elites”. Cotta shifts the theoretical focus from elite relations to more general elite-mass linkages. Elite theory, he argues, pays less attention to these linkages than to intra-elite relations. Yet the elite-mass linkages – their nature and dynamics – must become the key object of elite analysis in order to unravel the mystery of the European integration. This integration has been achieved mainly “from above” – thus underscoring the importance of the elite perspective – but it involved the formation of a specific (though still embryonic) supranational elite and supranational new polity. Elites responsible for founding this polity



benefit politically from the strengthening of political links. This results in a self-reinforcing cycle: the stronger the polity, the firmer the elite positions. However, Cotta warns that such a cycle may easily revert into a de-legitimation cycle, especially under crisis conditions, when elites fall back on national sentiments and identities. Paradoxically, national democratic elites seem more ready to accept the strengthening of a similar elite type, than a type that is very different (in terms of skills, legitimacy, etc.) from their own. He also notes that the central technocratic and bureaucratic elites play a crucial role in building new supranational ties in Europe: national political elites are much more reluctant to embrace pan-European identities and solidarities, especially when it comes to the political legitimation of important policies. This leaves the problem of the legitimacy of the supranational polity and its policies not only unsolved but probably aggravated. More importantly, it also calls for the extension of elite theory to cover the processes of supra-national elite formation.

A very similar point, though from a slightly different empirical angle and theoretical perspective, is made by Ursula Hoffmann-Lange. She turns attention to business-corporate elites, and to the claims made by some neo-Marxist and neo-elitist scholars that such elites shift in their form and mode of integration from national to “global”. This is, as the author acknowledges, a contentious claim that requires more theoretical analysis – especially to assess the viability of the very concept of elites to tackle such admittedly alleged entities as “global elite(s)” – as well as empirical research on the power bases and internal cohesion of supra-national elites. If there is solid evidence of “global elite” formation, it would require a serious revision not only of the theoretical foundation of elitism, but also of the key tenets of democratic theory. Hoffmann-Lange highlights the two dimensions of elite and democratic theory that are challenged – or perhaps just made problematic – by the new developments: the vertical responsibility of elites to their mass constituencies (still seen as national in their scope), and the “horizontal” responsibility of elite groups to each other, as outlined by the theory of democratic elite pluralism. The conclusions of this review are sceptical and cautious. Hoffmann-Lange finds only weak (empirical and theoretical) support for the “global elite” thesis: little evidence of “de-nationalisation” of careers and identities of the top power-holders, and even less evidence of any shared trans-national *demos* capable of sustaining any trans-national democratic elite-mass alliance. She concludes that we should not preclude the possibility of future formation of a “global elite”, but we should reserve our judgement for the time-being and focus on a task of gaining more knowledge about elite formation and transformation. The research agenda set by the leading elite researchers, such as Higley and his collaborators, offers the best guide to this knowledge-building.

Appropriately, the last two contributions – one by Jean-Pascal Daloz and one jointly by Gwen Moore and Scott Dolan – go beyond the central “Higleyan” challenge of elite integration, consensus and cohesion, and explore some

broader themes of elite competition. Daloz uses the sociocultural *cum* anthropological framework – the trademark of his studies and inspired by French sociological tradition – to examine the issue of elite social presentation. He presents a subtle, though quite provocative, reflection on elite distinction understood as sociocultural distinction through ostentation and/or understatement. While shifting attention from political to a cultural-symbolic realm, Daloz remains faithful to the key principles of comparative sociological analysis, especially those inspired by Higley and his colleagues. But his concern is with the ways in which conspicuous ostentation and inconspicuous understatement mix in securing and signalling elite status. In many ways, this is an “obverse”, the “other side of the coin” of elite studies focusing on elite power, integration and cohesion. Elite groups, Daloz suggests, must secure and communicate their social superiority, confirmation and affirmation, yet – especially in the modern democratic cultures – they have to avoid looking haughty, pretentious and detached. Faced with these tasks, they resort to diverse and complex strategies of presentation that call for interpretive subtlety and caution against easy (and inevitably problematic) “sociologistic” generalizations.

Moore and Dolan address the gender issue in the American elite. The increasing number of women in American elite raises the inevitable question of attitudinal differences. Are women different to men in their attitudes to conflict and war? Are they less militaristic and pugnacious than men? The answer, based on an analysis of the survey data collected between 1986 and 2004 confirms the largely stereotypical view. Both elite and non-elite women are less militaristic, less supportive of using force than their male counterparts. But in this respect elite women differ less from elite men than their non-elite counterparts. It seems that elite socialisation – as suggested by Higley and his colleagues – over-rides gender differences and produces quite homogeneous attitudes on strategic issues within the ruling minority.

What conclusions can be drawn from these very diverse – in theoretical orientation, empirical focus and research style – contributions? First and foremost, they show the enormous scope of Higley’s influence and inspiration. The elite perspective that he champions has been adopted now on a truly global scale, and the theoretical propositions that he (and his collaborators) formulated generate broad debates. Second, the bulk of the studies in this volume focus on the central “Higleyan” theoretical claims concerning elite integration, consensus/dissensus and the social consequences, and on elite dynamics, especially the patterns of elite continuity and change. This focus is by no means uniformly affirmative – in fact, many authors critically question the neo-elitist theoretical tenets. Yet this very questioning, the systematic critical reassessment of elite theoretical claims, testifies to the strength of Higley’s theoretical inspiration. Only a mature theory and a well-established paradigm can present themselves for broad critical scrutiny, and only open theoretical hypotheses – and not speculations or orthodoxies – can enter the bloodstream of modern sociological

and historical analysis. Higley's hypotheses, and the propositions formulated by his numerous colleagues-collaborators, have become central parts of this bloodstream, as is strongly demonstrated by the contributions to this Festschrift issue of *Historical Social Research*. These contributions stand, however, not just as testament to the work of John Higley, but also as a tribute to the man himself from all his friends, colleagues and collaborators.

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