



Perspectives on civil society elites. Some points for discussion, April 2019

Håkan Johansson, Lund University



Societal elites and civil society elites

Societal elites in civil
society ('operating from
without')

Civil society elites ('elites
within')

Civil society elites
alongside other
('elites beyond')



Perspectives on civil society

- Civil society research
 - Liberal, Marxist, Foucauldian, Gramscian conceptualizations of civil society.
- A political role for civil society
 - ... a cornerstone for democracy
 - ... bridge between citizens and elected leaders
 - ... as a watchdog, or as a 'counter-elite'
- A social role for civil society
 - Promote social cohesion and integration
 - A sphere of universal solidarity
- From ideal to 'real civil societies'
 - Actors engaged in production and representation of 'the good society'
 - Struggles over definitions, ideas and visions



Perspectives on elites

- Elites as: 'the coordinated minority' (Mosca), 'governing elite' (Pareto), 'an organisational elite' (Michels), 'the power elite' (Mills) or 'polyarchic elites' (Dahl).
- Key elements in elite theory
 - **Resources** – disproportionate control over or access to scarce and valuable resources ('more than affluence')
 - **Hierarchies** – at 'the top' of institutional orders, in 'institutional command posts'
 - **Integration** – thick (social background, shared beliefs...) or thin (social networks)
 - **Small numbers** – elites are not classes, they are the 'few' individuals
 - **Power and influence** – elites actions have substantial effects (over society)



Elite stability and change

- Extensive critique of elite theory
 - Rigid view on institutional orders (Savage, Rees, Wedel)
 - Not one elite, but several elites (Dahl; Khan)
 - Not bound to nation-states, rather transnational elites (Sklair)
 - Command posts and command situations (Scott)
- Highly relevant in relation to studies of civil society elites
 - Civil society not a homogeneous field, with clear hierarchical orders
 - Status, power and prestige as essentially contested
 - Need for perspectives that allows for the struggles that shape civil society elites



Field, capital and elite positions

- An alternative perspective to the study of elites – Bourdieu inspired elite analyses
 - Fields as
 - » ... structured spaces of positions (or posts) whose properties depend on their position within these spaces and which can be analysed independently of the characteristics of their occupants (which are partly determined by them)'.
 - Capital types
 - » Capital allows for domination – what is valued, accumulated and allows traction in the field?

Civil society elites – towards a working definition

- Civil society
 - ... as a field of collective action, separate from, but parallel to the state, market and family, where groups and associations of citizens come together act to promote common interests
- Civil society elites
 - Civil society actors who control or have access to subordinate amounts of (scarce and valuable) resources
- Groups and positions
 - Elite at the top of institutional orders (in top posts) - elite as a positions in a field
- Elite status and recognition formed through competition, contestation and struggles

Discussion

1. Conceptual flexibility, but some overarching conceptual framework
 - Social movement theory, elite theory, civil society theory, field theory and ...
2. Postionality and boundary issues
 - 'Societal elites' in civil society, 'civil society elites' and 'civil society elite' alongside others
3. Heterogeneity, sub-fields and civil society separatism
4. Elite actors, collective (e.g. organizational) and/or individual elite(s)
5. Capital (economic, social, cultural and symbolic) or a particular type of CS capital?

