
The study of elites seems more than ever relevant in the context of global corporate (mis)management, the contested actions of presumptuous political leaders, and new, self-appointed religious elite groups and ‘charismatic’ leaders. Elites are, of course, universal – no known society has existed without them – but opportunities and claims to elite status in the contemporary world keep on morphing and diverging into new configurations, despite widespread social movements demanding equality and fairness. So in-depth social science study of new elite formations is required.

Milner, a sociologist, has written a very interesting and accessible book which puts the whole gamut of elite studies again on the research agenda and significantly advances theorizing. He pleads for an integrated approach to unite social, economic, and political factors in a new model of analysis that also pays attention to cultural factors or competences of groups, notably regarding ‘status elites’ (the Weberian aspect). Any study of elites must address how they come to be and maintain themselves, so must explain how they emerge from and relate to ‘non-elites’. This book does that, devoting important sections to the interrelation between these two categories, based as they are on a combination of either consent, respect, or force. Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute (N.S.) 21, 688-713 C 2015 Royal Anthropological Institute Book reviews 709

The main focus is on studying the relationship between different types of elites and non-elites so as to see patterns across societies and assess their relation to key social changes. The author argues that a new theory of elites should specifically address the patterns of conflict and co-operation between the various elites and non-elites (p. 3), rather than primarily be focused on more empirical questions such as where and how (elite) power is concentrated. This focus on presenting a model implies also that readers will not find an extensive survey of the literature on elite studies here. The author’s model is a new heuristic-analytical perspective, and indeed I think it yields an excellent starting-point for elite studies. The model is then illustrated and elaborated using three quite dissimilar cases – traditional India (the varna scheme), ancient Greece, and the United States during the last thirty years – the comparison of which initially may be puzzling, but which serve well to elucidate the general model proposed.

The book has eight chapters, with chapter 2 offering the new general model, and taking as points of departure the theoretical traditions of Marx, Pareto (and ‘elite theory’ approach inspired by him),
Weber, and Bourdieu. In the introductory chapter an excellent methodical assessment of the pros and cons of these four traditions is made, yielding elements to build the model in chapter 2. In chapters 3 to 6 the three historical cases of India, Greece, and the United States are presented, with Chapter 7 specifically devoted to the 2008 global financial crisis – an example, one might say, of abusive elite behaviour par excellence.

The model has four basic ingredients or variables (p. 27): making a distinction between elites and non-elites; differentiating elites in terms of either political, economic, or status power; differentiation within non-elites, and within each type of elite, and analyzing the strains inherent in their type of power; and a cross-cutting variable, namely the scope of the social system or arena in which both elites and non-elites operate. In Milner’s analysis, a constant element is to properly assess the scope and impact of the internal differentiation and/or segmentation of elites and non-elites, an often underestimated phenomenon in other studies. The model schematized on p. 39 summarizes the elites versus non-elites structure in a heuristic rather than explanatory fashion. As the author says, it is primarily a ‘checklist’ (p. 149), not a predictive model into which to feed empirical data and then wait for the outcome. As such, it does a good job, as is evident in the fascinating analysis of elites in the case studies of ancient Greece, classical India, and the present-day United States.

The book is well argued and convincingly written. However, it’s a pity that so much interesting material is relegated to the very extensive notes section (on pp. 149-75) instead of in the main text. Few books on elites have the scope and ambition of this one. It offers a compact and workable ‘model’ that can serve as a good heuristic device for elite studies. While some essential references on recent elite studies were missed or excluded in this book (e.g. work by Chris Shore and Stephen Nugent or Jean-Pascal Daloz), it is an excellent introduction to research on the subject, providing an inspiring range of ideas and questions. Its theoretical aspects, its reassessment of the role of status elites (authors, intellectuals, performers, religious leaders, artists – i.e. cultural aspects), and its broad comparative range make it, I would say, also a must-read for anthropologists.

Jon Abbink Leiden University

Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute (N.S.) 21, 688-713 © 2015 Royal Anthropological Institute