

A pesquisa sobre elites: uma entrevista com a professora Dra. Ursula Hoffmann-Lange

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O mundo se divide em dois grupos: um menor que controla politicamente um outro maior desorganizado. Baseado nessa constatação Gaetano Mosca, Vilfredo Pareto e Robert Michels desenvolveram a Teoria das Elites. Para Mosca, em todas as sociedades existia duas classes de pessoas: a dos governantes e a dos governados (Mosca, 2007). Em semelhante perspectiva, Pareto entendia a elite como o grupo formado pelos melhores em cada ramo de atividade, no interior dessa elite existe a elite governante, que participa de um governo e a elite não-governante (Pareto, 1984). Posteriormente, influenciado por Mosca e Pareto, Robert Michels estudou a oligarquização em organizações, isto é, o processo em que organizações se dividiam entre uma oligarquia que governa e uma maioria governada (Michels, 1969). Em comum aos três autores a percepção que existe uma elite dominante politicamente.

Partindo das premissas dos autores, a pesquisa sobre elites prosperou e se desenvolveu, assim como sua metodologia. Três métodos básicos de identificação de elites foram amplamente utilizados: o método reputacional, o posicional e o decisional. Foram desenvolvidos para o estudo de *community elites* ou *local elites*. O método reputacional foi utilizado por Floyd Hunter em seu livro *Community Power Structure* (1953), a identificação da elite ocorre

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através de um grupo de líderes que apontam os mais poderosos e influentes na comunidade. A validade depende do conhecimento dos entrevistados e é viável apenas para pesquisa em nível local (Hoffmann-Lange, 2007).

O método decisional consiste em analisar o processo de tomada de decisão em importantes assuntos políticos. O exemplo clássico é o estudo de Robert Dahl sobre New Haven em *Who Governs?* (1961). Segundo o autor, em um dado sistema político, quando ocorre divergência de preferências em uma matéria, se a vontade de um pequeno grupo regularmente prevalecer comprova-se a existência de uma elite governante. Assim, a forma de encontrar uma elite dominante se dá analisando decisões concretas e produzindo provas que um determinado grupo sempre consegue fazer sua vontade acontecer. (Dahl, 1958). Várias críticas foram feitas ao método decisional, alegando que ele apreende apenas parte do processo de tomada de decisão, já que a não-tomada de decisão também importa (Bachrach e Baratz, 2011).

Por fim, o método posicional foi desenvolvido por Wright Mills em seu livro *A Elite do Poder* (1956). Ao contrário dos dois anteriores, pode ser usado tanto para encontrar elites nacionais como também em estudos de menor abrangência. Parte do pressuposto que poder e influência se relaciona com posição de liderança em instituições públicas e organizações privadas nacionais. Nesse sentido, importantes setores de determinada sociedade são definidos, bem como as mais relevantes instituições, organizações e seus líderes.

Inserido nesse debate dos estudos de elites, a revista Agenda Política apresenta o dossiê temático 'Elites e Poder' em formato de entrevista com a professora Emérita de Ciência Política Ursula Hoffmann-Lange, da Universidade de Bamberg - Alemanha. Hoffmann-Lange é autora de importantes trabalhos sobre elites como *Social and Political Structures in West Germany: From Authoritarianism to Postindustrial Democracy* (1991) e *Elite Foundations of*

Social Theory and Politics (2012). A entrevista com seis perguntas aborda questões sobre metodologia e futuras perspectivas para área.

Arruda: First of all, I have a question about how the three basic methods of elite identification (the reputational, the decisional and the positional methods). The positional method is commonly used for studying national elites and considering individuals who occupied positions of leadership in public organizations or private organizations. It is not possible that individuals whom not have those strategic positions be part of elite? Especially in societies with personal structures of power. How disclose these power relations? Nowadays, researchers count with better methods to identify elites?

Hoffmann-Lange: We know that position is never perfectly correlated with actual power and influence. Having decision-making authority based on a formal position is a crucial precondition for influencing important policy decisions. In politics, however, influence does not only derive from formal political decision-making authority, but is also based on anticipated veto power (e.g. being able to credibly threaten to take an issue to the constitutional court, to mobilizing public opinion or an important organization against a decision) and on a reputation for being knowledgeable about the subject-matter even if someone does not belong to the group of top-decision-makers. Since policy decisions usually involve long and protracted negotiations among large groups of decision-makers and influentials, a large number of people are involved whose formal power positions vary considerably. The informal policy networks studied by Laumann, Knoke (1986) and others show that these networks are made up of representatives of public institutions, political parties and large private organizations. The most important precondition is to have access to

these networks. This implies that policy decisions are not just a matter of formal position, but are also contingent on the dynamics of the negotiation process and the participants in this process.

The choice of the method depends – as always – on the research question. Detailed case studies of single policy decisions will probably reveal that sometimes lower-level position-holders or retired elites may have a decisive influence. The advantage of the positional method is that it allows to identify both formal decision-makers and influentials who belong to an inner circle of holders of elite positions who regularly participate in policy decision-making. Outsiders may occasionally play some role, but this is the exception rather than the rule.

Arruda: In your articles (2006, 2007) you point out that elites from different sectors (politics, public administration, business, labor unions, media, military etc.) have access to political decision making. However, researchers usually consider only one elite sector and not take in account others as a social whole. How can we understand the influence of others elites on political decision-making?

Hoffmann-Lange: I have tried to answer this above. Policy decisions usually involve a plurality of elites. Still, studies of single elite groups, e.g. media elites, business elites or even religious elites, are important because they provide information on specific elite career patterns in a single sector, or the specific culture of one elite sector and of the elite networks of the elites of that sector. Again, the research question determines the choice of elite group and the aspects that one considers as theoretically interesting.

Arruda: Some studies provide a variety of aspects of elites (family and regional background, religious affiliation, education etc.), illustrating similarities or differences among them. Nevertheless, according to some researchers, those similarities are promoted by institutions, because of institutions selected individuals with same characteristics. Consequently, characteristics of elite and their background matters less to understand elite formation. In your opinion, how relevant those studies are?

Hoffmann-Lange: Elite research studies existing structures and cannot answer the question how those structures have evolved in the first place. However, structures are never immutable and change over time. This allows to study if recruitment patterns and elite value orientations differ for instance across the members of different generations within an elite at a certain point in time or if they have changed over time. The study on the long-term development of parliamentary recruitment in Europe by Heinrich Best, Maurizio Cotta (2000) and colleagues over the past 150 years shows considerable institutional change and institutional innovation. Moreover, the degree of homogeneity of elite groups varies across different elite groups. So the degree of homogeneity/heterogeneity is worthwhile investigating. I would never assume that things are constant, there is always variation. We should aim at finding theoretically interesting variation across groups and over time.

Arruda: Brazil is a huge country with more than 200 million of people and 26 states, which is a federal republic. Historically, the states were not integrated and struggled with economic and social inequality promote by hierarchical power among states. In this diversity scenario, researchers face difficulties to

conduct a national survey. Considering this, how is the importance of local elite studies and national surveys?

Hoffmann-Lange: Community power studies and studies of regional elites have always been an important part of elite research. Such studies provide important information on the degree of plurality within a nation as well as on the economic and population dynamics (e.g. information on aspiring and declining regions). If one is only interested in national policy-making and if the power structure is highly centralized, regional elites may be of less interest. However, if the interest is in the diversity of a nation and the representation of regional problems at the national level, research on regional elites may inform us about the ability of the national center to respond to regional needs and demands as well as of the diversity of power structures across a nation. Russia for instance has a well-established tradition of research on regional elites.

Arruda: Elites studies received criticism about its descriptive value and that they do not make much contribution in theoretical questions. How comparative and longitudinal studies can refute this and improve new research?

Hoffmann-Lange: The theoretical relevance of any research depends entirely on the research question asked and the interpretation of the results. Empirical research that only provides descriptive information without asking what the results tell us about the elite group under study, may be boring indeed. It is not sufficient to present only percentages without asking what the gender, age, education and career patterns tell us about the character of the elite. It helps to always ask “Why is this so?”, “What does it tell us about the society and the polity of the country?” and “How stable is it over time?”. Therefore, any piece of

descriptive information may become theoretically interesting. However, the empirical data must be collected for the purpose to shed some light on the question they are supposed to answer. Example: The criticism that empirical elite research does not contribute to explain the role of elites in regime change is valid and at the same time trivial because everyone should know that regime change cannot be studied by survey research.

Arruda: To finalize, I would like to know your opinion about elites studies in the present world with Brexit, Trump election and increasingly growth of right wing politicians. In this context, the elites study is still relevant? What need be developed for improvement of this field of research considering the latest political scenario?

Hoffmann-Lange: Elite research can contribute to identifying clashes among elite groups, especially if it tries to include emerging social and political movements and political parties. Modern party systems are very dynamic. The conflict over EU membership in the British elite has increased ever since Britain joined the EU. Likewise, the increasing polarization of the U.S. party system has been evident for a long time. Such processes can be studied e.g. by analyzing the activities of party subgroups (movements, factions) in the established parties over the last 30 to 40 years. Then there are emerging elite groups such as prominent bloggers, independent internet forums, all kinds of new media etc. There is a lot to study out there in these turbulent times. It is obvious that elite change can be observed everywhere. In such times, it is not sufficient to study only established elites.

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