

TEXAS PAPERS ON LATIN AMERICA

Pre-publication working papers of the
Institute of Latin American Studies
University of Texas at Austin
ISSN 0892-3507

Revision of a paper presented at the American Sociological Association Meetings, New York City, August 30-September 3, 1986. Work on this paper was facilitated by a National Endowment for the Humanities Summer Stipend (No. FT-26396-85) awarded to Burton in 1985, and by a Loyola College Summer Research grant to Burton in 1986.

Elite Settlements

Michael G. Burton
Loyola College in Maryland
and

John Higley
University of Texas at Austin

Paper No. 87-01

ELITE SETTLEMENTS*

Michael G. Burton
Loyola College in Maryland

John Higley
University of Texas at Austin

*Address correspondence to Michael G. Burton, Department of Sociology, Loyola College in Maryland, 4501 N. Charles St., Baltimore, MD 21210.

Revision of a paper presented at the American Sociological Association Meetings, New York City, August 30-September 3, 1986. Work on this paper was facilitated by a National Endowment for the Humanities Summer Stipend (No. FT-26396-85) awarded to Burton in 1985, and by a Loyola College Summer Research grant to Burton in 1986. We thank Joan K. Burton, Moshe Czudnowski, G. William Domhoff, Jack Goldstone, Richard Gunther, G. Lowell Field, and Clarence Stone for their comments on an earlier version of this paper.

ELITE SETTLEMENTS

ABSTRACT

Following the classical elite theorists' injunction to study variations in elite structure, we examine the elite settlement as a major, yet largely overlooked, form of political change. Elite settlements consist of broad compromises among previously warring elite factions, resulting in political stability and thus providing a necessary precondition for representative democracy. To identify the common features of elite settlements, we draw upon four historic cases: England in 1688-1689, Sweden in 1809, Colombia in 1957-1958, and Venezuela in 1958. We conclude by arguing for the extraction of elite settlements from their current embeddedness in such concepts as "bourgeois revolutions" and "democratic transitions," and we advocate greater attention to the elite paradigm in efforts to explain macropolitical outcomes.

ELITE SETTLEMENTS

Understanding how nations become politically stable and democratic is a central goal of political sociology and a matter of obvious concern to policymakers around the world. Current scholarly opinion on the subject differs markedly from the once-dominant "modernization" perspective, which saw stable democracy as a happy by-product of social, economic, and cultural development. Many scholars now see the establishment and maintenance of democratic institutions as decidedly political acts. These scholars divide broadly into two camps: adherents of the class or Marxian paradigm, and those working within the elite or managerial paradigm (Alford and Friedland 1985). The currently more influential class paradigm, despite many intricate nuances, essentially interprets stable democracy as established and maintained by the bourgeoisie, primarily for the bourgeoisie. This paradigm has customarily explained the exercise of bourgeois power through the democratic state in terms of basic economic processes. Responding to the limitations of such economic determinism, however, a number of Marxian scholars have recently stressed the "relative autonomy" of political actors, typically aggregated as "the state."

This latter trend has brought Marxian theorists closer to the elite paradigm's core contention about the

independence and centrality of explicitly political actors, or elites. But how does the elite paradigm explain the origins of stable democracy? We submit that readers will be hard-pressed to formulate an answer that reflects any consensus on this question among scholars working within the elite paradigm. Although a good deal of valuable work on the relationship between elites and democracy has been done (for useful overviews see Putnam 1976, pp.129-32; Peeler 1985, pp. 4-41), hardly anyone has located this work explicitly within the elite paradigm. Consequently, the paradigm has not been elaborated in this direction and, not surprisingly, research on the role of elites in the origins of democracy has not been especially cumulative.

Working explicitly within the elite paradigm, we hope to attack this problem by drawing on pertinent literature and on an examination of the origins of stable democracy in several countries to develop the concept of "elite settlements" as one route to stable democracy. Elite settlements are relatively rare events in which warring national elite factions suddenly and deliberately reorganize their relations by negotiating compromises on their most basic disagreements. Elite settlements have two main consequences: they create patterns of open but peaceful competition, based on the "norm of restrained partisanship" (Manley 1965; Di Palma 1973), among all major elite factions; and they transform unstable political regimes, in

which irregular seizures of government executive power by force are frequent or widely expected occurrences, into stable regimes, in which forcible power seizures no longer occur and are not widely expected. These changes in elite behavior and regime operation pave the way for, though they do not guarantee, the emergence of democratic politics.

In many ways, elite settlements are as consequential as social revolutions, yet they have not been systematically studied as a discrete class of events. There is some relevant literature, however, that stresses the importance of elite unification or "accommodation" in transitions to democracy (e.g., Rustow 1970; Levine 1978; Wilde 1978; Linz 1978; Karl 1981; Huntington 1984; Peeler 1985). We intend to build on this literature by focusing on elite settlements as one especially important mode of elite unification, thereby shifting attention from the establishment of democratic institutions to the empirically distinct, causally prior, circumstances and actions of elites. First, we want to locate the concept of an elite settlement within a broader set of concepts and assumptions about how elite structures vary and with what consequences for major political outcomes. Second, we want to draw on four especially dramatic and seminal elite settlements--England in 1688-1689, Sweden in 1809, and Colombia and Venezuela in the late 1950s--to specify their common features. Third, we want to discuss certain implications that the focus on elite

settlements has for theories of political change.

ELITES, POLITICAL STABILITY AND DEMOCRACY

The concept of elite settlements comprises an extension and modification of classical elite theory as developed by Mosca (1939) and Pareto (1935). At the heart of the theory was the contention of elite variability. That is, that elite structure and behavior vary significantly among societies and within them over time; that these variations occur independently of social, economic, and cultural forces; and that elite variations have important determinate effects for the character of political regimes. As Mosca put it (1939, p.51), "The varying structure of ruling classes has a preponderant importance in determining the political type, and also the level of civilization, of the different peoples." Pareto (1935, esp. paras. 2274-77) was similarly concerned with specifying variations among elites according to the mix of nonlogical "sentiments" that ostensibly guide their thinking and behavior, and he tied such variations to different kinds of political regimes. But neither theorist got far in developing the contention of elite variability, and certainly neither focused on elite settlements as one of the most important instances of it. The variability contention, therefore, constitutes the point of departure for examining elite settlements, but in most other respects one must start anew.

First, to what does the elite concept itself refer? In line with prevailing definitions of elites (Burton and Higley 1987), we avoid assumptions about their talents, moral qualities, degrees of consciousness and cohesion, or other properties. Elites are simply people who are able, through their positions in powerful organizations, to affect national political outcomes individually, regularly, and seriously. Elites thus constitute a nation's top leadership in all sectors--politics, government, business, trade unions, the military, the media, religion, the intellectual--including both "establishment" and "counterelite" factions. A national elite can be said to encompass "all those persons capable, if they wish, of making substantial political trouble for high officials (i.e., other elite persons who happen to be incumbents of authoritative positions) without being promptly repressed" (Field and Higley 1973, p. 8).

Although the subject of elite variation merits much more careful examination than it has received, there is loose scholarly agreement that national elite structures take three basic forms in the modern world. By "structure" we mean the amalgam of attitudes, values, and interpersonal relations among factions making up the elite. One form or type of elite structure, variously labeled "divided" (Beck and Malloy 1964), "competitive" (Putnam 1976), or "disunified" (Field and Higley 1985), is characterized by

ruthless, often violent, interelite conflicts. Elite factions deeply distrust each other, interpersonal relations do not extend across factional lines, and factions do not cooperate to contain societal divisions or to avoid political crises. A second type, termed "totalitarian" (Dahrendorf 1969), "monocratic" (Fleron 1969), or "ideologically unified" (Field and Higley 1985), is characterized by the outward appearance of nearly complete unity in that all elite factions publicly profess the same ideology and publicly support the same major policies. Moreover, all or nearly all elite persons are members of the same party or movement and their interpersonal relations are sharply centralized in this party or movement. The third type of elite structure, called "pluralistic" (Fleron 1969), "competitive-coalescent" (Putnam 1976), or "consensually unified" (Field and Higley 1985), displays substantial, but much less than monolithic, unity. Elite factions regularly take opposing ideological and policy stances in public, but they consistently refrain from pushing their disagreements to the point of violent conflict. Although they inveigh against each other on policy questions, they apparently share a tacit commitment to abide by common codes of political conduct centering on the norm of restrained partisanship, and there is an extensive web of interpersonal relationships that encompasses all factions and provides satisfactory access to key decisionmakers (Higley and Moore,

1981).

There is also loose scholarly agreement that each of these major forms of elite structure is closely associated with a distinctive type of political regime. Thus, divided or disunified elites operate unstable regimes in which coups, uprisings, revolutions, and other forcible seizures of government power occur frequently or are widely expected. Although representative democratic politics may be practiced intermittently in such unstable regimes, it usually breaks down in the face of a political crisis. Totalitarian or ideologically unified elites, on the other hand, operate stable, politically unrepresentative regimes in which overt coups or other forcible power seizures do not occur, and public conflicts of interest and opinion are consistently repressed in favor of some official ideology. Though institutional functioning may be formally democratic, elections and other representative processes are not seriously competitive or determinative of government personnel and policies. Finally, pluralistic or consensually unified elites operate stable, politically representative regimes in which the incumbency of top government positions passes peacefully among different persons and factions according to representative principles and processes, most notably periodic, competitive, and binding elections. However, the precise degree of political representation differs according to the extent of regional,

ethnic, religious, or other subnational conflicts, the (non)existence of external threats, and the extent of economic prosperity or other facilitative conditions. Thus two of the three elite types--the ideologically unified and the consensually unified--are associated with stable regimes. But only regimes operated by a consensually unified elite involve important degrees of sustained representative democratic politics.

Insofar as these associations between elite type and regime type appear to be widespread both in history and the contemporary world (Field and Higley 1980, 1985), one can say that a consensually unified elite is a precondition for, but not a guarantee of, stable democratic politics. The origins of this type of national elite are therefore highly relevant to assessing the likelihood of democratic transitions: Without a basic change to a consensually unified elite there can be no lasting transition from an unstable and, at best, only intermittently democratic regime, or from a stable but politically unrepresentative regime, to a stable regime in which the sustained practice of representative democracy is a real possibility. In what circumstances, then, do consensually unified elites originate?

Except where a country has been defeated in international warfare (e.g., Germany, Italy, and Austria in World War II), no ideologically unified elite has ever been

transformed into a consensually unified elite. The effects of international warfare aside, ideologically unified elites and the stable, unrepresentative regimes they operate appear to be reliably self-perpetuating (e.g., Bialer 1980). So the origins of consensually unified elites and stable, representative regimes must be sought in other circumstances. Colonial experience is the most obvious and most widely discussed of these (Rustow 1970; Huntington 1984). Consensually unified elites have most frequently originated in the habituation of major elite factions to open but peaceful competition while their society is still a colony or territorial dependency. By operating representative political institutions under some form of "home rule," or by keeping a large and complex independence movement intact politically, or both, national elites in a significant minority of former colonies emerged as consensually unified upon attaining independence. An early example is the elites of Holland and certain other Dutch provinces when they emerged from Spanish domination toward the end of the sixteenth century. Other examples are the United States, Canada, New Zealand, Australia, Ireland, India, and Malaysia, all former colonies of Britain, as well as, from the French colonial empire, Tunisia, the Ivory Coast, and possibly Senegal. More or less immediately after these countries became independent, the existence of consensually unified elites operating stable political

regimes permitted important degrees of sustained representative democratic politics.

A second, less frequent, origin of this elite type appears to involve the gradual attenuation of radical, antisystem stances among one or more major factions in a disunified national elite. Over a period of two or three decades, more specifically, radical elite factions discover there is nothing approaching majority support for their programs and no real chance of taking power forcibly. As in the cases of the once-radical Social Democratic elite factions in Denmark and Norway earlier in this century, and of the until recently intransigent Communist and Socialist elite factions in Italy, France, and Japan, doctrines and programs that hamper the mobilization of electoral majorities are progressively abandoned and replaced by promises to defend existing political institutions and to abide by existing rules of the political game. With this moderation of radical left factions, right-wing factions "relax," feeling increasingly certain that their basic interests are no longer threatened. In such cases, the national elite gradually becomes consensually unified so that, where representative democratic politics was at best a precarious tradition, it becomes a secure one.

Neither of these two origins of elite consensus and unity, and thus routes to democratic politics, appears likely or even possible in many contemporary countries,

