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An Invitation to a Four-Network Theory of Power: A New Viewpoint Compatible with Elite Theory

G. William Domhoff*

Abstract: »Einladung zu einer Netzwerktheorie von Macht: Ein neuer Ansatz zur Verbindung von Machttheorie und Elitetheorie«. Starting with the multi-network theories advocated by C. Wright Mills, Michael Mann and Richard Lachmann, and drawing on work by specialists in anthropology and social psychology, this article presents a history of social power from hunting and gathering societies to the present. Collective power, based on cooperation, came first in human history, with distributive power coming much later. With the rise of permanent hierarchical organizations at the dawn of civilization, the issue of distributive power became paramount, making it necessary to resolve distributive power conflicts among leaders before collective power could expand any further. At this point the rank-and-file lost their ability to replace organizational leaders, who then became “political elites” or “power elites.” The result was the kind of top-down societies analyzed by John Higley and Michael Burton in *Elite Foundations of Liberal Democracy*, which provides a provocative new challenge to traditional theories of democracy.

Keywords: power, power network, elite theory.

Introduction

In this essay I want to honour John Higley for his many contributions to political sociology over four decades, and for *Elite Foundations of Liberal Democracy* (2006) in particular, which is a fitting capstone to a magnificent career. I also want to thank him for his willingness to engage with researchers from the parallel, but slightly different, power structure research tradition (Domhoff 2007; Domhoff 2010). I do so by presenting my take on the history of social power, which starts with the multi-network theories of power used by C. Wright Mills (1956; 1962), Michael Mann (1986b), and Richard Lachmann (2010), but which also has some overlap with the modern-day version of elite theory that Higley and Michael Burton have elaborated and applied to great effect over the past twenty-five years (Burton and Higley 1987; Higley and Burton 2006).

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Drawing on work by specialists in anthropology, social psychology, and history, the analysis I present is a general one that concerns power in human societies from small hunting and gathering groups to the development of large nation-states in Western history. Starting with the paradoxical fact that human beings lived in relatively egalitarian societies for most of their history, my aim is to uncover the origins and development of the four main networks of power underlying the organizations that provide the top modern-day leaders called “political elites” in elite theory (Higley and Burton 2006, 7). There is not enough space for a full presentation of my argument and evidence, but there is enough for readers to decide if it might provide a useful underpinning for elite theorists to think about how human beings ended up in very hierarchical societies.

Following Bertrand Russell (1938) and Dennis Wrong (1995), I define power as the ability to achieve desired social outcomes. This highly abstract definition is useful because of the range of power configurations it allows for and also because it does not assume that power is always at bottom coercive, as many definitions do. Furthermore, I agree with the many theorists who say that power has two intertwined dimensions. First, there is “collective power,” the overall capacity of a group, class, or nation to be effective and productive, which concerns the combination of technological resources, organizational forms, and social morale necessary to achieve shared goals. Second, and also a familiar point, the concept of power includes the ability of a group, class, or nation to be successful in conflicts with other groups, classes, or nations on issues of concern to it. Here the stress is on “power over,” or “distributive power.” In my view, collective and distributive power are not only intertwined, but there is good reason to believe collective power, based on cooperation, came first, and that distributive power in any large and hierarchical sense came much later. Going one step further, my claim is that at a certain stage in the development of social power the issue of distributive power becomes paramount, making it necessary to resolve distributive conflicts among rival leaders before collective power can be expanded. So it is only with the development of large-scale organizations – and most elite theorists probably concur – that collective and distributive power became fully enmeshed in what might be described as a deadly embrace.

Organizations are basically sets of rules and roles that human beings develop so they can accomplish a particular purpose; they provide ways in which people do something together in a routine fashion. For example, religious organizations develop shared routines (“ceremonies”) to cope with the varying mixtures of anxiety, anger, and guilt that inevitably accompany momentous events, such as birth, puberty, marriage, and death. Routines become “rituals” in the realm of religion because they have to be done in exactly the right ways to bind and dissipate the emotions they attempt to control. These rituals, along with the beliefs that explain and justify them, become the basis for the organi-

zations called sacred huts, primitive secret societies, churches, mosques, and synagogues. Or, to take another quick example, the established routines for face-to-face economic exchanges become one basis for the more complex economic system of markets, which then lead to agreed-upon mediums of exchange, such as money, as well as the agreements and contracts that make a chunk of land or a factory into “private property.”

Since human beings have a vast array of purposes, they have formed an appropriately large number of organizations. But only four of these purposes and organizations weigh heavily in terms of generating societal power: economic organizations, political organizations, military organizations, and religious organizations. All of them enhance the collective power of their members, but at the same time they can quickly become very hierarchical when they begin to grow larger or face an outside threat.

Religious organizations, to which I have already alluded, are concerned with meaning, ethical norms, and ritual practices, but such an abstract statement sounds too benign in that it belies the depth of human terror and irrationality that lie within religion’s purview. The most prominent historical example in Western history is the Catholic Church, the most powerful organization in Europe during the 1000-year period in which that continent was known as “Christendom.” In all cases, however, religious organizations gain loyalty and financial support (“sacrifices,” “tithing”) by providing answers to such universal and existential concerns as the reasons for guilt, the origins of humanity, the meaning of death, and the purpose of life.

The economic network consists of a set of organizations concerned with satisfying material needs through the “extraction, transformation, distribution and consumption of the objects of nature” (Mann 1986b, 24). The economic network gives rise to “classes,” which can be defined as positions in a social structure that are shaped by their relationship to, and power over, the different parts of the economic process. The most powerful economic class, the owners of the key economic organizations, usually is called a “ruling” or “dominant” class if – and only if – it has been successful in subordinating the leaders in the other three networks. As in elite theory, it is not inevitable that owners will become a ruling class. Geographically extensive classes, because they are dependent upon advances in infrastructure, arose very slowly in Western history. For the first 2500 years of Western civilization, for example, economic networks were extremely localized, especially in comparison to the political and military networks discussed shortly.

Economic classes are also social relationships between groups of people who often have different interests in terms of how the economic system is organized and how its output is distributed. The economic network may therefore generate class conflicts, which are disagreements over such matters as wage rates, working conditions, unionization, profit margins, and even the fact of private ownership itself. Class conflicts can manifest themselves in ways

that range from workplace protests and strikes to industry-wide boycotts and collective bargaining and on up to nationwide political actions.

However, class conflict is not inevitable in this theory because both owners and workers, the usual rival classes in recent history, have to have the means to organize themselves over an extended area of social space for conflict to occur. Otherwise, there is simply exploitation and coercion by the dominant class, with occasional rebel uprisings or sporadic violence. For much of Western history, there have been well-organized dominant classes, but class conflict has been important only in certain periods of it, such as in ancient Greece, early Rome, and the present capitalist era. This is because non-owning economic classes usually find it very difficult to organize into a coherent force.

The third major organized power network, the political network, regulates activities within the geographical area for which it is responsible, including the movement of people, economic goods, and weapons in and out of its territory. This network, which is usually called the “government” or the “state,” is separate from the other networks because people in general, and the economic network in particular, desperately depend on the regulatory and judicial services it provides. Groups of people may be in general cooperative, or so I claim, but there are always disagreements that flair up between individuals or families, and there are inevitably a few people who dispute every issue or ignore laws and customs, thereby creating problems for everyone.

In the case of the highly complex economic networks of the capitalist era, competing businesses find it especially difficult to regulate themselves because some of them try to improve their market share or profits by reducing wages, adulterating products, colluding with other companies, or telling half-truths. Thus, it is very difficult if not impossible for an economic network to survive without some degree of market regulation by the political network. Political networks also enforce property and contract rights, and in more recent times they have been given the added duties of creating money and shaping interest rates. Although the United States tried to function without a central bank for much of the 19th century, the problems were so great that after the Panic of 1907 the most powerful bankers of the day realized they had to work together to create the Federal Reserve System in 1913 (Livingston 1986).

The necessary services provided by the political network make it potentially independent from the other networks, including the economic network, and it gains further potential autonomy due to the fact that it interacts with other states, especially through warfare. Leaders in the economic network therefore greatly fear government independence, and constantly rail against it, even though, and maybe precisely because, they need its help in structuring the economy, as seen most dramatically in the United States since at least the 1850s with the gradual rise of large corporations. The bailout of the financiers in 2008 reveals both the need and the fear.

Finally, and obviously, the military network is rooted in organized physical violence. It is based on the ability to generate direct and immediate coercion that leads to death, surrender, or enslavement. Surprisingly to the modern eye, military networks had a greater range throughout most of Western history than either economic or political networks. Historically, many armies fought for the benefit of their own leaders, who created “empires of domination” by taking over newly arisen civilizations that were based on the religious, economic, and political networks. In more recent centuries, the military is usually part of the government, but the frequent emergence of guerrilla armies and terrorist organizations shows that organized violence can still arise separately from government.

Although military power is usually theorized as one aspect of government, there are at least three reasons for distinguishing political and military power. First, most historical states have not controlled all the military forces within the territory they claim to regulate. Second, there are historical instances of conquest undertaken by armies that were not controlled by governments. Third, even in modern-day nation-states, the military is often set apart from other government institutions, which facilitates the in-group morale, sense of separateness, and independent hierarchical structure that makes it possible for ambitious military leaders to overthrow governmental leaders, especially in times when these leaders appear to be weak in the face of economic problems or threats from other countries.

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, rival social theorists argued that one or two of the four basic power networks were more “basic” or “primary” than the others, leading to longstanding disagreements. For example, many theorists claimed that the economic network was the most basic because people cannot live without food and shelter, but contrary to that claim, it also can be argued that human beings would not have survived for very long if they had not developed the religious beliefs and practices that allow them to deal with the anxieties and fears that can paralyze day-to-day work efforts. The hunters in pre-agricultural societies believed they had to be on good terms with the spirit world to be successful, and early agriculturalists believed their fields had to be blessed to be fertile, which gave an important role to shamans from the outset. In other words, it may be that shamans and religious leaders carry out the rituals that make it possible for other people to go about their daily business, which implies that religious networks are necessary for economic networks to function smoothly.

After the decades of endless disputation and counterarguments that never seem to be resolved, with many sociology graduate programs still starting with the inculcation of the Holy Trinity of Marx, Weber, and Durkheim, with an occasional nod to Spencer and militarism, it seems more likely to me (on the basis of the full sweep of the anthropological and historical record that has been compiled by numerous brilliant specialists over the past one hundred

years) that no one network came first or is somehow more basic than the others. Each network always has presupposed the existence of the others from the beginning of human history.

Furthermore, one kind of organizational power can be turned into any one of the others. Economic power can be turned into political power, as seen in the United States and many other Western nations. Religious power can generate military power, as suggested in the case of the Iranian revolution in 1979. Military power can conquer political power. Thus, power is similar to the concept of “energy” in the natural sciences: it cannot be reduced to one primary form (Russell 1938). This complexity is one of the main reasons why it is necessary to do detailed historical and sociological studies to understand the power structure in any social group. Generalizations from society to society or historical epoch to historical epoch are risky if not impossible.

But how did these power networks arise?

The Early Origins of Social Power

The early outlines of the four main networks of power and their interdependence can already be seen in small hunting and gathering societies when hunting parties are organized (economic organization, with meat shared equally among all members of the society), when communal gatherings are called in an attempt to defuse interpersonal disputes that threaten to rip apart the whole group (political organization, which involves the regulation of human interactions within a specific territory), when the men band together to do battle with rival groups or clans (military organization), and when rituals to deal with anxiety, guilt, and the fear of death are performed (religious organization).

More speculatively, and with all the attendant risks of going back six million years in evolutionary history, I think we see glimmers of three of these four networks in chimpanzee social groups. As demonstrated and synthesized in the work of several primatologists (e.g., De Waal 1982/1998; Goodall 1986; Wrangham and Peterson 1996), two or three chimpanzee males sometimes cooperate in catching small animals (the hunt) and small bands of male chimps patrol the borders of their group’s territory, killing any males that happen to stray into it; these actions have all the earmarks of militarism. Then, too, chimp bands usually have a powerful male who takes on the “control role,” that is, he is responsible for breaking up fights that have the potential to escalate into larger mayhem. This role fits with the idea of the political network having the function of “regulating behaviour” with a given territory. It is also interesting that the most powerful chimps are not invariably doing the regulating and that members of the group, including females, help determine which high-ranking male assumes the control role.

Evolutionary speculations aside, the claim that the four networks of collective power already provide the basis for the exercise of distributive power in

hunting and gathering societies is supported by the fact that even in these small-scale societies the men often use them to exclude or subjugate women. The secretive men's huts in which religion is practiced often exclude women on pain of gang rape or death, and men will band together to kill women who resist changes in the social order (Gregor 1985; Sanday 1981). Although women's power can vary from non-existent to significant within the economic network in varying societies at different times in history, they have had little or no power in the other three networks in most societies until the last 200 years in Western Europe and North America, and what economic power they had was usually "discounted," or rendered far less important, by machinations within the political network (Blumberg 1984). It is therefore safe to conclude that male dominance is the first and most pervasive form of a power structure in human history. The importance of the four networks in understanding the subjugation of women is also seen in Mann's (1986a) work on women's gradually increasing power since the sixteenth century in Europe, which demonstrates that changes in the four networks since that time help to explain why and how women have been able to challenge patriarchy to an increasing degree.

Generally speaking, however, these nascent and temporary forms of power organization do not become the basis for distributive power in hunting and gathering or tribal-level societies, even though some of the leaders in some of these activities, who are more or less selected or agreed to by the group, try to take advantage of their positions. Anthropologist Christopher Boehm (1999, 83), who has carried out a detailed analysis of hundreds of the ethnographies compiled by anthropologists over the past 150 years, makes this point through the example of a shaman who said he probably could stop a violent snowstorm that was causing great concern, but that he "needed to have sexual intercourse with two girls" in order to do so. The father of one girl agreed to it, but the husband of the second refused permission and the snowstorm continued. However, any attempts by would-be dominators (leaders in the hunt, religious specialists, military warriors, and trusted mediators and adjudicators) to take advantage of their positions are usually not successful, at least not for very long. Collective power is still ascendant because the "rank-and-file" members of those societies are able to be surprisingly and subtly vigilant against those who attempt to take advantage of their positions. They are controlled through gossip, chastisement, shunning, and if necessary, assassination. Contrary to the image of these societies as lacking a power structure, an image that is embodied in the Christian idea of the Garden of Eden and the Marxist idea of primitive communism, it seems more likely, based on Boehm's (1999) comparative studies of ethnographic accounts, that these small-scale societies have an "inverted power structure" in which people are able to maintain an egalitarian (but in most ways male-dominated) social structure through the kinds of collective

actions against potential dominators that range from criticism to ostracism to murder.

With a few exceptions, this egalitarianism continues with the development of tribal societies (those that have domesticated plants and animals), which often have thousands of members, not just the several hundred for hunting and gathering groups (Boehm 1999, 90). The members of the tribe remain vigilant against potential tyrants, but they often allow for informal leaders, whose biggest role is in settling disputes, which from my angle signals a rise in the importance of the political network due to an increase in likely personal and familial disputes in a larger group. What is striking, however, is that these “chiefs” are self-effacing and are praised for their kindness, generosity, and even temperaments (Boehm 1999, 33). This lack of a fixed hierarchy remains true even for those tribes that enter into warfare with nearby tribes, or for confederations of tribes that join together to fight rival confederations (Boehm 1999, 94-94).

As with the hunting and gathering societies, the tribal societies have ways to maintain their egalitarianism. For example, members who go out to earn money in nearby hierarchical societies, or who make money as traders and merchants in dealings with other societies, and thereby become “big men,” have to give away a considerable portion of their earnings as gifts, or enter into gambling games in which money is likely to be redistributed through the workings of chance. At the same time, criticism, ostracism, and assassination are still used if necessary (Boehm 1999, 110-122).

Nevertheless, the very fact that informal leaders, chiefs, and big men may try to take advantage of their positions is probably indicative of the tendency within human beings that is captured by the famous idea that power tends to corrupt, with absolute power corrupting absolutely. That is, people enjoy being in charge and bossing other people around, often for their own pleasure and advantage. This possibility receives support in psychology experiments with college students in which the power of the randomly chosen members of a small group is subtly manipulated by the experimenters. In these situations, the perceptions and actions of those who have been given more power begin to change very quickly. They soon fail to understand how less powerful people perceive and feel about the situation, are more likely to condemn cheating while cheating more often themselves, and come to believe they have more control over events than they in fact do (e.g. Fast, Gruenfeld, Sivanathan and Galinsky 2009; Galinsky et al. 2006; Lammers, Stapel and Galinsky 2010). They also tend to distance themselves from others, to think more abstractly, and to objectify others as instruments for personal gain, whereas those who lack power in experimental situations become more deferential, inhibit the expression of their actual attitudes, and suffer from impairments in their thinking abilities even though they were as capable as other participants before the studies began (Keltner, Gruenfeld, Galinsky, and Kraus 2010; Smith 2006;

Smith, Jostmann, Galinsky, and Dijk 2008). I think these studies tell us how attitudes of superiority and inferiority can develop and then be exploited, even though they arise from seemingly small and benign starting points.

Put in a theoretically more confrontational way, these studies show us that the social psychology that shapes those who have leadership positions is most likely the primary issue in understanding how organizations based in cooperative efforts to achieve shared purposes become power structures. We do not have to start with the hypothesis that the dominators are alpha males, power-hungry personalities, or psychopathic personalities in order to understand how an egalitarian (albeit cantankerous and combative) branch of the *homo* genus came to live in hierarchies controlled by corruptible, and often deeply self-serving, dominators. There are many such negative personality types, and they may rise to the top in some cases, assuming they can control the anti-social tendencies that are usually part of their personal make-up, but studies of informal leadership in groups ranging from children to young adults suggest that those who initially emerge as leaders are people who like to engage socially with others – that is, they are people who score high on extraversion on personality scales (Keltner, Van Kleef, Chen, and Kraus 2008). It's at that point that social psychology takes over and leaders tend to lose perspective and become self-important.

But another factor has to be added as well. Once there are permanent hierarchical organizations, it may be that all the negative effects of being powerful – or powerless – are magnified.

The Origins of Hierarchical Societies

Although potential dominators could be thwarted in the small-scale societies that characterized the first 95 percent of cognitively modern *homo sapiens'* 100,000-year history, this was no longer the case when societies become larger and more complex. When the level of organization reaches a large enough scale over a long enough period of time, a permanent division of labour develops that can further increase an organization's collective power due to a specialization of function at all of its levels. Since this division of labour makes sense in terms of collective power, it clearly increases the ability of a society to grow larger and to defend itself when necessary. But, and here is the starting point for distributive power and elite theory, the division of labour also contains the potential for a sustained hierarchical distribution of power because “those who occupy supervisory and coordinating positions have an immense organizational superiority over the others” (Mann 1986b, 6-7).

In other words, even though the members sometimes choose the leaders of nascent organizations because they seem to be natural leaders, these leaders often turn into dominators for the social-psychological reasons discussed in the previous section. As many theorists of varying persuasions have noted, includ-

ing Higley and Burton (2006, 5), this transformation is possible because those at the top can turn the organization into their own power base due to the information and material resources they control, their ability to reshape the structure of the organization, their power to hire and fire underlings, and their opportunities to make alliances with other organizational leaders. Using the bland language of organizational sociology to talk about a charged issue, the assembled leaders create “interorganizational” alliances that generate a power structure in which the leaders (“the political elite” for elite theorists, “the power elite” for Mills) use their combined organizational resources to develop barriers that make it more and more difficult for people outside or on the bottom of these organizations to participate in the governance of the society in general, while at the same time entering into the constant rivalries that are noted by elite theory (Burton and Higley 1987).

Moreover, the people who lack power suffer more than the inability to participate. As suggested in the discussion of experiments on the effects of power differences in small groups, the powerless are more likely to think more narrowly and suffer from small defects in their thinking than those who are made to feel powerful, an outcome that in the real world has been used by dominators the world over as proof that those who are subjugated are intellectually inferior. The self-serving rationale that “we are better than they are, and that’s why we are powerful,” is still with us today, of course, in the minds of many whites, neoconservative intellectuals, those who have been able to use their socioeconomic advantages to gain advanced degrees, and those politicians who have used their charm and verbal skills to gain the confidence of large campaign donors.

In addition, those who are dominated are affected by the chronic stress that follows from a lack of power and causes a wide range of negative consequences. Most specifically, there are numerous epidemiological investigations showing that people on the lower rungs of the social ladder die younger and develop more physical and mental illnesses, even in the case of those who make a comfortable living and are not materially deprived in any way (e.g. Adler et al. 2008). The fact that the issue is first and foremost a lack of power, not material deprivations, can be seen most clearly in an ongoing longitudinal study of well-educated and financially secure British civil servants, where there is even a difference on mortality and health factors between those in charge and those just below them. As one summary of the findings in that study puts it, “Most striking was the significant difference in mortality between high-level civil servants who were well-paid professionals and those one level above them at the very top” (Adler 2009, 664).

The old German saying that “life is like a chicken coop ladder,” used as the title of a book on culture by folklorist Alan Dundes (1984), goes too far as a general characterization of human society because of the many opportunities for cooperation, love, and autonomy that exist at the various levels of the peck-

ing order. It also ignores those moments when there is a more collective sense of “we-ness” that transcends class and hierarchy, such as during patriotic holidays, festivals, and religious observances. However, the graphic imagery of one’s standing on a chicken-coop ladder reminds us of the fact that power structures have adverse effects, often fatal, which go far beyond issues of material needs because of the many negative effects of the chronic stress that is generated by a lack of power.

Once the leaders of ongoing large-scale organizations are further organized into a general power structure, which may take many centuries to fully develop, as the archaeological record shows, ordinary members of the society are organizationally outflanked, no longer able to maintain the more informal inverted power structures that kept pre-civilized societies largely egalitarian (Boehm 1999). People become trapped in the form of society called “civilization.” However, as Boehm (1999, 145) also notes, the new dominators still have “significant conflict-resolution duties,” which to me suggests that the political network is usually at the centre of a society’s power structure, even though its leader or leaders draw upon the power they have gained through dominating the other organizational networks. One thing is certain: the egalitarian ethos has been replaced. Hierarchy becomes “the way things are,” even if many people resent it and others organize themselves to try to win control of top positions from the current rulers.

Western History in Four Paragraphs

However, it goes too far to say that states are inevitably at the centre of power networks, as seen in the case of early European history after the fall of the Roman Empire, the largest empire of domination from ancient times. The institution of private property developed in the context of a system of numerous small, weak states that struggled along in the territory previously dominated by the militarized Roman state. This economic development was made possible by the “normative pacification” provided by the Catholic Church and by the predominance of military techniques that rendered armoured knights on horseback ascendant over serfs and peasants (Mann 1986b, 376-8, 390-1). Due to this turn of events, feudal lords did not need states to protect their private property and increase the exploitation of the peasantry. Moreover, the weakness of the many small states allowed the system of private property to take deeper root without the danger of state appropriation, and for an independent merchant class to develop. The result was a growing independence for the economic network in general: “By the time trade was really buoyant (1150 to 1250 A.D.),” claims Mann (1986b, 397), “it was accompanied by merchant and artisan institutions with an autonomy unparalleled in other civilizations.”

This weak-state power configuration began to change in the 12th and 13th centuries. As markets grew, there was more and more need for state regulation,

and as merchants increased the scope of their trade into bigger and bigger territories, they needed more protection against bandits and the petty rulers of small territories (Mann 1986b, 423-4, 431-2). Richer merchants accumulated assets that made them worthwhile allies for political elites. The combination of coercion and capital overwhelmed the localized strengths of feudal nobles and clerics (Tilly 1990). Merchants also developed an interest in aggressive wars that would widen the territory in which they could operate: "From now on commercial motivations, the conquest of markets as well as land, were to play a part in wars" (Mann 1986b, 432). Merchants thus quietly encouraged the growth of the state, lending it the money necessary to raise a larger army. New developments in the military network also triggered changes in the relationship between private property and the state. The sudden emergence of the disciplined military phalanx, that is, spear-armed infantry in close formation, quickly led to the defeat of nobles on horseback in a series of battles between 1302 and 1315, so the nobility had to turn increasingly to the state to raise a standing army of full-time foot soldiers to protect its land (Mann 1986b, 18-9, 428). There soon followed a series of technological innovations that added up to a military revolution, so the arms race among states was on. Only states with large armies could survive, and only states that could gain the loyalty of lords and merchants could afford large armies.

From the 16th century onward, the first genuinely powerful states in history began to play a larger and larger role, as Lachmann (2010) shows in his creative synthesis and extension of our knowledge of states and power. States developed a very real potential for autonomy, but also the potential to be of greater use to economic elites. Capitalism and the nation-state gradually grew powerful together because they needed and aided each other. As the alliance between these two power networks solidified, they subordinated the previously independent religious and military realms. States now began to fit the usual sociological definition: the organization that controls the military and police within a given geographical area. And when a state extended its regulatory powers over a new territory, so too did capitalism diffuse more fully into that territory. Contrary to the oft-expressed view that classes and states are antagonistic, they became closely intertwined in Western history.

The class system generated by capitalism was segmented into a small number of "class-nations" of roughly equal power that together formed a multi-state system, and from the outset there was constant tension between economic elites and political elites. Feudal lords wanted protection for their lands, and merchants wanted protection and regulation for their goods and markets, but both feared the taxing power of the state elites (Mann 1986b, 433). Conversely, state elites tried to gain as much autonomy as they could. Much of Western history from this time forward is about the lethal bickering between economic and political elites, with an occasional time-out to deal with peasants or artisans or workers who tried to take advantage of the divisions in elite circles.

Hooray for John (and Michael)

Which brings us to modern-day elite theory, with applause for John Higley, and for his equally perceptive co-author, Michael Burton, for their theoretical and empirical contributions, as well as for creating a welcoming scholarly environment for all theorists interested in a problematic and potentially terrifying relationship that can make life miserable, painful and short for billions of people, a relationship that is bloodlessly called “distributional power” in the social sciences. They have sorted through the variety of claims and contentions made by elite theorists of the past, refurbishing some and discarding others, to fashion a viable theory that roots their work in large-scale organizations and the power advantages such organizations confer on their top leaders. They show that the inevitability of elites is not incompatible with social-democratic outcomes and reject Robert Michel’s “dim view of rank-and-file interests and capacities” (Higley and Burton 2006, 6).

In addition, they have dug deeply into and synthesized a vast range of specialized historical studies to make an original and plausible argument: The relatively few occasions on which democracies have arisen and survived involve one or more of three factors, all of which have relevance in understanding the United States. First, the consensually oriented elites necessary for democracy often develop in the context of a colonial society, which gives these elites long experience at self-rule, and then sometimes a common enemy to unite them further, which fits the United States case, as they demonstrate in their discussion of American history through the early 1780s (Higley and Burton 2006, 109-12).

Second, democracies also sometimes arise in the context of relatively sudden elite pacts or “settlements,” usually after years of debilitating and fruitless violent confrontations, or in the face of extreme economic crisis. Although the United States already had a relatively consensual elite due to its colonial origins and war of independence, its Constitution has many elements of an elite pact in that it compromised several issues that rival colonial leaders said were not negotiable, while at the same time making it possible to deal with dangerous rival nations and possible non-elite challengers inside the country (Shay’s Rebellion being the case in point). Most important, Northern wealth holders had to make several concessions to the Southern slave owners to win their agreement to the new constitution. Even in this example, the difficulties of establishing a firm elite consensus, which are emphasized by Higley and Burton (2006, 64-8) in their masterful discussion of the perilous steps to an elite settlement, are tragically demonstrated by the fact that the Southern slaveholders decided to secede from the union and risk the devastating Civil War that soon followed rather than see their way of life gradually eroded by an inability to expand slavery westward.

Finally, democracies sometimes develop when there are “convergences” toward elite consensus and shared political norms in a context in which rival elites have to compete “for support amid economically prosperous electorates that are averse to drastic alterations in the status quo” (Higley and Burton 2006, 4). The United States is not a prime example here, but it seems to me that the country’s booming economic potential once the Civil War ended did play a role in establishing a less public (and basically informal) elite pact between Northern and Southern elites, the Compromise of 1877, as Higley and Burton (2006, 114) rightly note by ending their informative discussion of the American case with the Northern acceptance of the plantation capitalists’ re-subjugation and extreme exploitation of their African American workforce.

I began this thank-you to John Higley for his friendship, and for all I have learned from him over the decades, by saying that I work within a parallel, but slightly different research tradition. So I am pleased to end my appreciation of him and his fine work by saying that the power structure research tradition seems to be in broad agreement with elite theory when it comes to the American case, albeit with the power structure research tradition putting more emphasis on corporate elites and class conflict. Whatever the differences that remain, I think *Elite Foundations of Liberal Democracy* is a signal triumph, an original contribution to the social sciences, and a strong challenge to the traditional theories of democracy that it engages.

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