Review

Elites, Non-Elites, and Political Realism by John Higley

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INTRODUCTION

John Higley's book *Elites, Non-Elites, and Political Realism* is not (and is not intended to be) a book suitable for sectorial, specific, quantitative empirical analysis. Nor is it a book about statistical techniques applied to social science. Higley distances himself from behaviourism and political science based on surveys and variables (2021, p. 136). Rather, he has written a wide-ranging social and political theory book which is designed to provide the reader with insight into political phenomena from a historical perspective and through the lens of political realism.

The perspective Higley proposes to the reader is undoubtedly based on conflict as an ineliminable aspect of politics, and is clearly influenced by the classic scholars of Italian Elite Theory—in particular, Vilfredo Pareto and Robert Michels. Politics is understood as a constant attempt by elites to contain social conflicting interests which otherwise could not but explode: politics "arise out of, and only out of, rationally irreconcilable conflicts of interest among people. […] Where conflicts of interest are not rationally reconcilable, politics are the alternative to civil warfare" (p. xiv). The central question is, however, how effective is this attempt? That is, to what extent and under what conditions are different social groups willing to accept the mediating function of politics? By what means do politicians successfully carry out their tasks, and what are the reasons why they not infrequently "undermine their own basis" (p. xvi)?

From a realist perspective—whose premises, although quite solid, are less grounded in some areas—Higley aims to answer such questions. Throughout the book he stresses the need for scholars to shift the focus from "non-elites" (regarding whom the academic world seems to show excessive concern) onto elites and their central role for general stability. This is, perhaps, the central challenge Higley's book poses to American political thought, which "has never been hospitable to frankly expressed ideas about the inescapable centrality and importance of elites in politics" (p. 131).

ELITES AND STABILITY

Throughout the book, but especially in Chapter 1, the concept that underpins Higley's approach is that of "stability". Elites fundamentally exist to ensure stability. Higley assumes that there is no common interest in collective life so great as to remove the possibility of conflict. A higher authority is needed to perform a peace-making function: in "broad arenas of social action, common interest is minimal

and must always be supplemented by authoritative decisions that dissenters and opponents dare not or find it inexpedient to resist" (p. 3).

The first condition for the existence of such an authority is organization, without which no decision-making power is possible. Although Higley's approach here definitely looks similar to that of Robert Michels (2015), on one point he distances himself from the Italian-German scholar: organization does not immediately mean oligarchy, which has "specific structural and processual characteristics" (p. 4). The second condition is that elites effectively hold power—defined, in a very Weberian way, as "the ability to make offers and threats that are likely to alter the motivations of persons other than the power wielder"—and can exercise it regularly (p. 5).

According to Higley, stability consists in the absence of irregular seizures of power. Thus, "stability" exists as long as there is fundamental agreement regarding the existing political order. This agreement consists in an "artificial product of shrewd decisions made by those who are influential and politically active. In essence, this shrewdness consists of suppressing, distorting or otherwise manipulating issues that, if expressed and acted on openly and widely, would result in disastrous conflict" (p. 10).

Here, then, is the reason for the centrality of elites and politics. However, in order to accomplish such a task—and this is a central point in all of Higley's work, including that of earlier years (Higley and Burton 2006)—elites must cooperate; that is, they need to present a certain degree of "cohesion" or "unity". Although "elite members and factions disagree and oppose each other in limited political struggles, power is distributed so that all or most can have an impact on outcomes sufficient to deter them from translating their struggles into attempts to seize power by force. Political institutions are, accordingly, stable so long as the elite consensus and implicit rules underlying it persist" (p. 12).

INSTABILITY AND REVOLUTION

The last part of Chapter 1 as well as Chapter 2 analyze instability and, thus, the reversal of the established political order. Although Higley seriously considers the role of non-elites and of the general socio-economic environment, it is clear to the reader that the actual conditions of instability are attributed to the elites and their (in)ability to cooperate: "[s]pecific workforce configurations prevent specific kinds of actions by elites in different socioeconomic stages, but they do not determine what elites will do in each stage" (p. 34). Thus, there is certainly a bond of mutual dependence between elites, non-elites, and contextual socio-economic factors. However, it is ultimately the configuration and the concrete actions of the elites that mostly contribute to determining the course of events: where elites dramatically fail to fulfil their duties, politics collapse. Where there are "serious political miscalculations by ruling elites", the door for revolution is open (p. 42)—revolution is intended as "an upheaval that begins when normal governmental authority, most manifest in disciplined military and police forces, suddenly and dramatically collapses" (p. 39).

In order to strengthen his perspective, Higley analyzes several historical cases, of which the most interesting are perhaps the Russian Revolution, the rise of Fascism in Italy, and National Socialism in Germany. The thesis he arrives at is as follows: "revolution only occurs when deep elite disunity intersects with a pre-industrial or industrial non-elite configuration. Even then, its occurrence requires an extraordinary political crisis or gross ineptitude by ruling elites". Societies in which elites are consensually unified, Higley writes, "and/or have postindustrial non-elite configurations are immune to revolution" (p. 64).

ELITES, DEMOCRACY, LIBERALISM, POPULISM

Chapter 3 and Chapter 4 aim to approach (the relationship between) democracy and liberalism through the lens of political realism, and to define the role of elites as well as their relationship with non-elites. Higley's main purpose here is to deconstruct democracy as "a concept and term in Western political discourse" (p. 70). The influence of the Italian school is strong, although Higley does not mention it; indeed, one is reminded of Pareto and his critique of ideologies while reading (Maniscalco 1983; Pareto 1916). By contrast,

the reference to Joseph Schumpeter (1942), which Higley uses to advert to democracy as a method and/or as "instrumental value" (p. 98), is explicit. For Higley, modern liberal thought has made the mistake of largely failing to acknowledge such a value. On the contrary, it has considered democracy as a purpose. If it is true, Higley writes, that "the ultimate liberal value" is to achieve a society where people are free and equal (p. 92), the central problem is that "one cannot make unequal persons equal merely by declaring them equally qualified to vote and participate in formal politics, as in democracy" (p. 95).

The concept of "equality", in the meantime, is taken over by populism, for which Higley offers a predominantly socio-economic interpretation: populist leaders "profess to believe that a society characterized by a rough equality is possible and that most persons will ultimately agree about its worth" (p. 87). In Higley's analysis, populism appears as a reaction to a widespread "demoralization" among "working- and middle-class non-elites" and "among underclasses" (p. 78). However, once again, socio-economic conditions and the role of non-elites merely provide the background. Here, a realist perspective can only stress the importance of elites:

> [e]xplanations of contemporary populism that center on non-elites are not wrong, but more attention should be given to elite and leadership agency. What explanations emphasizing the conditions and attitudes of non-elites fail to consider is that, once they acquire significant amounts of prominence and power, populist leaders deliberately exacerbate the societal divisions and grievances that underlay their rise. To a considerable extent, they act autogenously, that is, independently of non-elite influence or aid (p. 83).

POLITICAL REALIST ANALYSIS IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

In the last two chapters of his book, Higley conducts a crude analysis of the "democratization" advocated by Western powers vis-à-vis autocratic states (Higley's main example is the Arab Spring, to which all of Chapter 5 is devoted). The purpose is to show that merely removing ruling elites often does not lead to new stable democratic institutions: "[e]liminating ruling elites […] seldom brings political improvement; chaos, during which many innocent bystanders perish, is more likely" (p. 111). In this context, Higley reframes the importance often attributed to non-elites in achieving stable democratic arrangements: "[r]ising mass participation in politics, which is said to be a consequence of economic development and 'modernization', is believed to lead, at least in the proverbial long run, to democratic institutions" (p. 112). However, the Arab Spring (with a partial exception in Tunisia) has shown exactly the opposite: "non-elite mobilizations to 'choose democracy' led to deep divisions that made stable democracy most unlikely" (p. 99).

What, then, are the prospects? Higley stands by his initial premise, that politics is about limiting conflict and achieving "a minimal amount of organized peace" (p. 113). The democratic institutions that exist in Western countries are the result of such organized peace. They are the consequence of a specific configuration of political elites (here Higley speaks of "the elite basis of stable representative government", p. 118); this is a configuration that is not easily found in other parts of the globe. The conclusion the reader comes to is that of a general incommunicability with unstable non-Western countries: "[t]here is little or nothing that Western governments can do diplomatically or though loans and subventions that will alter the unstable character of regimes in countries with disunified elites" (p. 123).

The central goal seems to be the following: to focus on the protection of achievements obtained in (and by) the West. Referring to the U.S. example, Higley concludes: "Fissures within elites and between them and segments of non-elites are fraught, and they portend considerable social disorder and political incivility. In the United States, failure to contain these challenges might swing the political pendulum back toward Donald Trump or someone aping him. It cannot be said with confidence that American elite consensus and unity would survive a second Trump presidency or that of a Trump clone" (p. 129).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Higley's book is a book to be read. And not just once, but twice. It raises important questions that are often insufficiently addressed in contemporary academic debate. The author distinguishes his approach from much of the contemporary literature with solid arguments.

The realist perspective coherently guides the whole work. The focus on elites provides an important perspective in a scholarly context that has been monopolized by the urge to decant the role of the non-elites within democratic regimes. However, it is questionable whether Higley does not fall prey to the temptation to give non-elites less importance than they perhaps deserve.

The definition of stability as a fundamental agreement among elites regarding the political order is solid, but perhaps limiting; it tends to marginalize all those forms of (minor) political instability that can occur even without the political order being challenged. The historical examples are numerous and contribute largely to enriching the entire work and reinforcing the theses expressed by the author, even if in some places the historical narrative is only partly clearly connected to the theoretical reflection.

The analysis of the foreign policy of Western countries as well as the conclusions expressed in the Epilogue oscillate between scientific analysis and political dictum. However, the author is extremely transparent in his stances.

Given the breadth of topics covered and the relevance of Higley's analysis to both domestic and foreign policy, Elites, Non-Elites, and Political Realism is an indispensable book for the social and political scientist.

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