

Chapter 12

How Should Historians Approach Elites?



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Introduction

In the summer of 2010, in that odd little interspace between my submitting a PhD and defending it, my partner and I spent a month teaching English at a private school nestled 1300 metres above sea level in the Swiss Alps. Penniless and underemployed, we knew little of the summer school we had signed up to. It turned out to be no ordinary school, and these were no ordinary students. The name of this institution was Beau Soleil, and in terms of elite status, expense, and exclusivity it was then second only to La Rosey in Switzerland – the country that is now widely acknowledged as a global leader in elite boarding schools, then and now. Fees for a final year boarder could soar above €100 k (Bertron 2019).

I had spent the previous 4 years writing a PhD on the education of transnational elite groups of Catholics in the nineteenth century, educated across a matrix of schools in Ireland, Britain, and Europe. I was interested in the cosmopolitan cultural capital they acquired from this transnational mode of education, and the schools I had studied had one thing in common: they featured a diversity of student origin, but a commonality of class and wealth. Their students came from the sugar colonies of South America, from the White Settler Empire, from Ireland, from Continental Europe, from Britain. Ecuadorians were educated next to Russians, Irish beside Prussians. It was the same at Beau Soleil. In the class that sat in front of me for that month in Switzerland I had two Spanish, two Russians, one Turkish, one Turkmenistanian, an Italian, a Swiss, and several more from across the Middle East. Their inherited wealth and privilege stemmed from a broad range of parental occupations in industry (petrochemicals), government, or finance. The effect on me as a professional historian was considerable. I found myself immersed in a contemporary version of a past world I had studied, and was confronted with my own

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positionality as a researcher. There were some methodological and theoretical revelations to be considered as a result.

Inspired by this need to think of the historian and their present(s), this brief chapter is broken up into three main sections. The first section advocates for a less nation-centric and more global and transnational approach to the study of historical elite groups. A second section will draw on the author's own experiences of research on nineteenth century patterns of elite education across several regions. The third section will ask: how historians can approach schools and schooling for elites better in future?

Historians, Theory, and the Nation State

Histories of elite formations have been gradually moving toward more global and transnational surveys of elite groups. Recent studies have observed either globalizing forms of education modelled on, say, English Public schools like Eton, or else they have traced and tracked particular elite or sub-elite groups across networks of schools that cater for their confessional or geo-political proclivities (Maxwell and Aggleton 2015; O'Neill 2014; Hatfield and O'Neill 2018; Hatfield 2019). The result is an exciting de-nationalizing of the history of elite education, a field formerly confined to studies tracing the production of various national elite groups. Since the 1970s no single scholar may be more responsible for this *nationalizing* tendency in the literature as Pierre Bourdieu, whose work on the French state nobility inspired many similar works of historical sociology across Europe. Conversely, the work of Bourdieu in developing concepts such as cultural capital and social capital may also be at the root of the newer, de-nationalizing impulse of recent work. Terms such as cultural capital, cosmopolitanism, and social capital are ones that can be said to work very well in transnational or global studies.

In a recent essay on the theoretical underpinnings of global history Juergen Osterhammel argues that most historians, even those interested in the relatively undervalued fields of global or historical sociology, seek to employ 'usable theory' or 'empirical social theory', when writing history (Osterhammel 2016). In doing so they prove themselves willing to borrow from more heavily theorized fields such as sociology or anthropology, but run the risk of being accused of dilution, cynical cherry-picking, or even scholarly subterfuge when doing so. In the interdisciplinary field of elite studies a mingling of the historical and sociological is inevitable, indeed it was considered inextricable by many of its mid-century practitioners such as Viktor Karady and Pierre Bourdieu, even if the latter sometimes referred to historians dismissively as 'masters of their little monopoly' who were likely to be 'extremely irritated by theorization' (Bourdieu 2018). Proving elite reproduction and systemic bias is something that can only be achieved over the longer term, and thus historians and sociologists have much to talk about when it comes to theory and concept.

Elite theory itself has a long and illustrious history. Pascal Daloz has recently surveyed ‘classical’ approaches to elite distinction from Plato to Weber, and of course nineteenth century historians such as Carlyle, Froude, and Macauley were all exercised by questions of leadership, natural authority, and great men more generally (Daloz 2009). In more recent historiography it is clear that the work of Bourdieu, Karady, and others of the ‘French school’ has been highly influential in historical work on national elites since the 1970s. Broadly speaking, such Bourdieusian studies argue for a progressive secularisation of education, in tandem with democratised access at lower social levels, concomitant with the rise of entrenched middle-class state bureaucracies alongside the progressive marginalization of the nobility from the exercise of political power in the second half of the nineteenth century. If there is a dominant theory in elite studies, this is a contender for the title, and it informs most of the work done on elite education as a result. The twentieth century historiography of elites is therefore a *national* and *state-focused* one, with much fewer studies of smaller groups of super-elites that have a generational connection to the gentry, noble, or imperial elites of the nineteenth century. The interesting quirk, then, is that historians of elite groups often look at elite education from a *national* perspective, even if the school or network of schools are serving multiple elite groups coming from multiple national or regional origins.

There are two literatures in the history of elite education that can already be considered quite ‘globalised’: the first is the study of higher education in relation to elites and intellectual networks (Chartier 1986; Charle 2004; Pietsch 2013; Perreton 2014). The second field that has seen a perceptible growth is that of ‘international’ education, something mostly located from the 1920s onwards and part of the nexus of ‘diplomatic’ space that gave rise to, among other things, the League of Nations, the IMF, and the International Bureau of Education (Gorman 2012; Resnik 2008). Likewise, the comparative approach to studying elites and education remains relatively strong. Of the 15 essays printed in the impressive *World Handbook of Education 2015*, three of the fifteen could be argued to have been comparative in nature, with the rest surveying a more globalised education in one particular national context, be it Chinese, Indian, Brazilian, or American (Van Zanten et al. 2015). What can a transnational approach add to this established field? The question must immediately address the ‘when’ of which we speak. It makes sense if we study the post 1920s world that the field should be so flatly influenced by national policies, but it makes much less sense the further back in time we tread.

In the nineteenth century, for example, the territorial spaces of the Ottoman, Hapsburg, and the British Empire all enabled a degree of transnational migration of elites, education policy, and ideas. Indeed, we cannot speak of a neatly ‘French’ elite education where we find Serbian and Scandinavian intellectuals availing of it, even if their incursion was successfully resisted by the dominant and native elite (Fette 2012). Likewise it is not easy to separate out neatly what an Ottoman, Russian, or British diplomatic or social elite might be when any analysis of them reveals a multi-ethnic and multi-territorial origin for their members (Itkowitz and Mote 1970; Brummett 2015). Neither can we speak of an ‘English’ Public school where we find that many such schools were educating second, third, and fourth generation migrants

alongside up to 20% Irish intake. The Catholic schools of present-day France, Germany, Austria, Poland, and Ukraine all educated a range of regional elite groups, with some of the most prominent and socially exclusive drawing in a near-global customer base. The same can be said of seventeenth century schools such as La Fleche in France, responsible for some of the education of figures such as Rene Descartes, and the site of production for no less a text than David Hume's *Treatise*. If we go back still further we find transnational flow in medieval schools and monasteries as far flung as Cairo, Lindisfarne, and Bobbio (Berkey 2014). How and why should we contain such institutions to a national significance when they are so patently broader in scope? In an historical context the default context for education of elites may be argued to have been transnational, the nationalisation of education is a comparatively recent phenomenon that coincides with the rise of state bureaucracy in the nineteenth century and the democratisation of higher levels of education down from an upper middle class to a lower middle class and, eventually, though hardly comprehensively, to the working classes of the world (Somel 2001; Cohen 1996).

Timothy Reagan has comprehensively surveyed some of the problems associated with the assumption that the relationship between society, culture, and education can be understood and analysed across quite different territories. Jane Kenway and Aaron Koh have likewise argued forcefully for the fallacy of transposing Bourdieusian ideas of capital and power to territories such as Singapore, as has Derek Robbins (2004). As the great age of empires came to a close in the early twentieth century we see a divergence and fragmentation in how various nations approached the issue of elite education. In Turkey, various scholars have argued convincingly that the religiously inflected Islamic elite of the Ottoman empire was replaced by an aggressively secular, Westernized, elite that conformed to the classic model of nationalism and modernisation (Yilmaz 2009; Szyliowicz 1971). The result was a struggle between the traditional educated elite, the men of the *medreses*, and their more modern state bureaucratic competitors. The Turkey of Ataturk was to be defined by its secularism, and by stripping away the religious base of education from its new elite, replacing one dogma with another. The resulting victory and subsequent dominance of the state bureaucratic elite did not entirely wipe the importance of the latter, however, and the rise of a new religiously defined elite is marked in contemporary Turkey (Yilmaz 2009). This is a pattern replicated in other societies to various degrees. The retention of a small group of elite schools serving the social elite is evident in societies as diverse as Sweden, England, Ireland, and Canada. The interplay between local specificities and the global picture will need to include the nation state, but the field stands to gain much insight from de-nationalized studies of regional elites and can learn from contemporary sociological work that takes account of local variations from territory to territory. More recent work on post-socialist elite reproduction point the way for scholars who are interested in continuity after apparent change (Lengyel 2000).

How to Conduct a Research Project About Elites

Historians in search of educational elites will usually consult several key sources, and compile their research in one of several fairly predictable methodologies. The sources are the easy part: these will be school registers, national biographical dictionaries, city directories, 'Who's Who' compendiums, land registries, political records, and so on. In short, anything that will give us a reliable starting point for identifying the key men (for it will usually be men) in positions of power and influence in historical society. We will cross-reference these and try to make some sense of the data. Here we will make the usual distinction of the sociologist between wealth and power, and try to think as sensitively as possible about the necessary gradations. The methodology, however, is where we lose all coherence. Most historians will construct some sort of rudimentary prosopography or database of names and mini-biographies. Some will conceive of this in terms of social class, others in terms of power elites. Others will factor in anomalies and differences of race, religion, age, and gender, and this is the point at which we must say, if we are honest, that all consensus among historians of elite groups begins to fragment.

Ideas of 'reputational' elites have begun to surface and point to new ways of conceptualizing the importance of visibility in elite reproduction (Pål 2014). The inscription and re-inscription of "Who is Who" in society on an annual basis took place across societies right across the literate world and this form of list-making remains prevalent right up to the present day with the creation of monumental dictionaries of national biography (Ferrarotti et al. 1990; Vössing 2005; Carvalho 2003). The capacity for these biographical summaries to be exploited by the educational historian are legion. They very often contain details of schools attended, for example, and it would easily be possible to reconstruct a sample, however imperfect, of a multinational student body attending a school in Paris, for example, with reference to the various national biographies. Such shortcuts would allow a speedy and quite complete database covering years of interest, as well as allowing the researcher to sort and categorize student achievement and social mobility relative to their parents, and sometimes their children. This type of analysis allows the historian to extrapolate transnational trends and effects of elite education across borders and transregionally and transnationally. The idea, too, that the advertisement of educational attainment and prestige through such authorised and 'national' texts helped to elongate and promote some forms of educational inequality over a long period of time is also of interest to many historians working in this area (Priest 1982).

Prosopography has become one standard way through which historians feel comfortable uniting grand theory with historical specificity. A focus on aggregated biography allows the historian to anchor any study of elite reproduction and mobility in specific detail, relating to specific lives. We can trace a renewed interest in this classic historical approach in the late 1960s and early 1970s (Nicolet 1970). In his seminal 1971 article on prosopography in *Daedalus*, Lawrence Stone provided his readers with a rationale that he would later take to its extreme in an influential monograph co-written with Jean Fawtier Stone in the early 1980s, *An Open Elite*:

England 1540–1800? (Stone 1971). Stone was a digital pioneer before the term had any currency. His technique made use of emerging computing technologies, explained ad nauseum in the unabridged version of the text. Responding to Stone in 1973 TF Carney made the distinction between prosopographers who were interested in the masses and those who were interested in the elite (Carney 1973). This differentiation no longer exists. We have prosopographies of almost every substratum in between (Keats-Rohan 2007).

Other historians and sociologists have made close studies of the new mogul families, arguing for powerhouses such as the Rothschilds, Agnellis, and Rockefellers as a new dynastic power (Landes 2008). Broadly speaking we can see a similarity in style between this type of elite study, and that of royal dynasties such as the recent global history of dynastic power by Jeroen Duindam (Duindam 2015). Studies of nineteenth century elites tend instead to emphasise state bureaucracies, educational strategies, and professional monopoly as routes to and from elite status. As a result, it is much harder for grand theory to apply here, and a historian that wishes to capture a broad perspective across these various 'pillars' must necessarily depend on a synthesis of smaller works (LeDonne 1991). Nevertheless, something of the educational world of dynastic or merchant-elite families will emerge from these types of studies. The problem for a historian of elite groups is that they are necessarily limited in scope and horizon.

My own solution to some of these problems was to look at a variety of *schools* in an attempt to counteract some of the blind spots in work on educational elites. Furthermore I tried to select schools that I knew to be serving either regional or global elites. This allowed me to reconstruct a school experience as it may have been experienced by a cosmopolitan and well travelled elite class – in my case mostly European (or at least Europhile) Catholic networks (O'Neill 2014). Other historians have done similar work, but most look from a particular national lens, as in fact I did. Comparative work such as that emerging from scholars such as Charlotte Bennett, whose work compared elite schools in New Zealand and Ireland, or that of Christina De Bellaigue on French and English schooling, are moving us in the right sort of directions (Bennett 2018; De Bellaigue 2007).

One of the most important changes to my own practice back in 2010, when I found myself teaching a group of (very much alive and real) children of elite families, was the need to factor in the female half of elite families more directly. Realising just how limited my definition of elite membership had been, focusing as I had on professional or social affiliations, land ownership, and income, I worked hard to correct this imbalance, adding a whole chapter that had been absent from my PhD and that ended up in the book that emerged from that. But more than that, my experience at Beau Soleil allowed me to get some sense of what conflict might have been experienced at the heart of an elite school even while at the peak of its powers. The agency and autonomy of students, staff, and management alike were flat and two-dimensional to me before that summer. Being immersed helped me to understand the rituals of boarding school life, or elite culture, and it is something that historians seldom tend to think about or prioritize in their practice.

Futures

The current trajectory of the history of elites is that it is becoming more global, and more *longue durée* in style. Historians of elites are moving away from a national or institutional approach, and instead looking at cross-border mobilities, and at patterns over centuries rather than decades. This mirrors a larger shift in historiography, as noted by many recent surveys (Iriye 2012; Armitage and Guldi 2014). But exciting opportunities abound, not just in the potential for elites studies to stretch out over borders in time and space.

The definition of education itself will broaden out to include intra and inter-family education, sibling tuition, and other forms of child-rearing inside the home and in the wider community of individuals surrounding children as they grow up. Another curiously under-researched aspect of elite reproduction is its relationship to various imperial projects. Imperial elites tend to be explored by historians writing imperial biographies of certain important figures and their careers, both male and female, or else those interested in small cadres of diplomatic networks. A truly broad survey of elite movement across the various empires of the modern world is likely to show us that those empires were managed by a phalanx of nationalities and challenge ideas of a 'British' empire or Austro-Hungarian empire, at least in ethnic terms. An imperial approach will likely produce some interesting studies of the answering and mimicking that was commonplace from core to periphery. Petter Sandgren's work is instructive here, as it charts the 'globalisation of an elite institution like the English Public School as far away as Asia, India, Australia and North America' (Sandgren 2017; Sandgren and O'Neill 2019).

Female elite groups have proven the most resistant to historical analysis, something that is also evident in contemporary elite studies (Benjamin 2010; Maxwell and Aggleton 2014). Women were absent from the foundational work of the classical elite theorists: Mosca XE "Mosca, G.", Pareto, and Michels, as well as by the various schools of sociologists interested in power elites. (Burawoy 2008). Likewise, though feminist critiques of power have always focused on oppressor/oppressed, the sympathy and focus of those writing either 'classical' feminist tracts since the 1970s, or within the field of intersectionality, or black feminism, have always been for the oppressed category (Hancock 2016; Bilge 2013). When applied to history this leaves us with an uneven literature, where for once those at the bottom of the power hierarchy have more space devoted to them than their opposites (Chambers 2005; Adkins 2003). For the historian of elite groups, however, there may be much to learn from feminist theory in the future.

Conclusion

Back in Beau Soleil, as I surveyed my teenage elite class, I was forced to confront the class biases and positionality with which I had begun my research project some years previous. It was as clear to me as it was to my class that I was not from the same background as they were. My lesson plans began to slowly reflect this, beginning with apparently generic topics on which to build English vocabulary, only to find that I had missed the mark spectacularly. One lesson was on domestic chores, and the balance of who might be expected to complete them. This was met with much hilarity as my students broke the news to me that domestic chores were something done by servants. A class on pets elicited surprising information from my partner's class. One boy had a pet lynx. In a colleague's class there was a boy with a pet tiger, and another a pet white tiger, proving at last that no matter how wealthy you are somebody will always have a cooler toy. A Russian girl, let's call her Anna, informed me that 'women shop, men work' when I built a class around their future careers. As the month wore on our teaching became more misguided and experimental. We had a class on global income inequality, where I asked my students to estimate how much money their parents spent on them annually. The answer was a tonic to a historian of elites. The biggest single expense was education.

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