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# Elite Research in Germany

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## Introduction

Elite research is a well-established field in Germany. This is mainly due to German history. After World War II, many intellectuals, politicians, and social scientists argued that the inability of German elites to accommodate the deep sociopolitical cleavages in German society had been a major factor in the failure of the first German democracy. Political scientists, sociologists, and historians have therefore analyzed German elites from a variety of perspectives.

At the same time, however, the term *elite* fell into disrepute because it was associated with a belief in genetic differences and with the *Führerkult* around Adolf Hitler's person. It was not until the first comprehensive German elite study was published by Zapf (1965) that the term was again used in public discourse. This also explains why Germans have been reluctant to embrace an elite concept that defines elites as the powerful in society. Even today, many German social scientists prefer to use alternative terms such as leadership groups, top position-holders, or political class when dealing with elites. And I believe that in no other country have social scientists and intellectuals devoted more effort to discussing the meaning of the elite concept. A concept of elites as individuals epitomizing the basic values of society (*Werteliten*) still looms large in German intellectual discourse and even many social scientists embrace this particular notion of elites, denouncing the actual holders of socio-economic and political power (*Machteliten*) as a class of individuals collectively failing to conform to such high standards. I will return to this discourse at the end of the paper.

Research on German elites has been carried out by sociologists, political scientists, and increasingly also historians. These three fields can be roughly associated with different methodological approaches, i.e. longitudinal social background studies, cross-sectional studies on career patterns and political attitudes, and historical case studies. In the following, I discuss the research objectives and the main results of studies done in each of these fields.

## Longitudinal Social Background Studies of German Elites before 1945

Social background studies of elites are frequently based on the assumption that social class background is associated with political attitudes and that social cohesion is a prerequisite of elite integration. While this may be true for traditional societies with limited social mobility, numerous studies have shown

that in modern democracies social class background and political attitudes of elites are not, or only indirectly (through educational opportunities and career choices), related (cf. Edinger and Searing, 1967; Schleth, 1971; Hoffmann-Lange, 1992). Still, social background studies are the most common type of elite research because of the easy availability of social background data and because they may also be the only data available, i.e. for historical elites or for elites which are otherwise not accessible for interviews. However, the irrelevance of social origins for elite political attitudes and behavior should not detract from their descriptive value as indicators of social opportunity structures and of the degree of openness of elites, as well as a measure of socioeconomic similarity among different elite groups and elite sectors.

While quite a few cross-sectional studies have dealt with the social backgrounds of political and other elites in Germany, there are only two truly longitudinal studies on changes over time. The best known is still Wolfgang Zapf's (1965) study on elite transformation in (West) Germany from 1919 to 1961. Zapf's study encompassed data on 258 elite positions from a broad spectrum of sectors, including politics, public administration, military, business, business associations, labor unions, churches, and the media (1965, pp. 74ff.). Zapf studied both circulation in these elite positions and the composition of West German elites at three different points in time (1925, 1940, 1955) with respect to their regional origins, family backgrounds, religious affiliations, and education. In addition to his data analysis, Zapf also provided general information on political developments and described typical individual career patterns.

The second major longitudinal study is Heinrich Best's study of German parliamentary elites for the period 1867 to 1933 (Best, 1988, 1989). Starting from modernization theory and focussing on social class backgrounds, education, previous occupation, and administrative as well as executive positions, Best compared the social composition of different party groups in the German Reichstag. According to his analysis, the Reichstag deputies became a decidedly modern group during the period he studied in the sense that many deputies came from urban backgrounds and were former journalists or functionaries of business, labor or professional interest associations.

During the German Empire and again during the later years of the Weimar Republic, the data show an increasing dissociation in the social backgrounds of the public administration elite and the political executive on one hand, and the Reichstag members on the other. This dissociation deviates considerably from the strong representation of public servants in the first national assembly of 1848–1849, the Paulskirche. Nearly 20% of the deputies to the Paulskirche assembly had been public servants in state administrations, another 16% in teaching (including university professors), and 18% had held a position in the judiciary (Best, 1990, p. 59). Best explains the reluctance of public servants to run for office in the Imperial Reichstag by its low prestige. During the German Empire, the powers of the German Reichstag were severely limited. Moreover, with the introduction of general suffrage in 1870, political parties controlled the nomination process which required those running for office to be active party members, and political parties were seen as representing particularistic interests while public servants were supposed to represent the state above the parties.

In accordance with the logic of a parliamentary system, during the early years of the Weimar Republic, most of the ministers were recruited from the

Reichstag. Later on, however, the dissociation between parliamentary and executive elites again increased, indicating that the parliamentary institutions had ceased to function properly.

### Historical Case Studies

Historical case studies have dealt with various elite groups in different periods. These studies are valuable contributions to our systematic knowledge of German elites until 1945 and on elite continuity in West Germany after 1945. Among the studies dealing with German elites before 1945, those on cabinet members during the German Empire (Knight, 1952), on the Nazi elite (Lerner, 1951), and on the SS-Führerkorps (Ziegler, 1989) deserve mention. Also, parts of Reinhard Bendix' voluminous study *Kings or People* deal with Prussia and provide information on the Prussian bureaucracy and military, although Bendix (1978) reports only a few exact figures mainly for illustrative purposes. All of these studies confirm the exclusive social nature of the Prussian-dominated German military, bureaucratic, and executive elite on one hand, and the much broader social basis of the National Socialist movement on the other.

Additionally, two recent studies by Hartmut Berghoff (Berghoff and Möller, 1993; Berghoff, 1995) provide valuable comparative information on business elites in Germany and Britain during the late 19th century. One of these studies is based on biographical information on 1328 English and 1324 German industrialists in two major industrial regions, Bristol and the Ruhr area. With respect to the political role of business elites, probably the most important result of this study is the near total political abstention of German business elites, less than 5% of whom were members of a political party, whereas about half of the business elites in England were party members (Berghoff and Möller, 1993, p. 379). Also, nobilitation of business leaders was much more frequent in England than in Germany where wealth and nobility remained separate spheres (Berghoff and Möller, 1993, pp. 373ff.). In another study, Berghoff shows that the private life of the wealthy class in Germany tended to center around the house and the family, while in Britain social life outside the house (attending public events, sending the offspring to boarding schools) was much more important (Berghoff, 1995, pp. 294ff.). These studies confirm common historical knowledge, albeit on a systematic, quantitative basis. They support observations by Dahrendorf and others, i.e. that the political activity of the German industrial class before 1914 was limited to protecting its economic interests, while refraining from further political involvement and from pressing for general political influence.

Another recent publication (Loth and Rusinek, 1998) deals with elite continuity in West Germany after 1945. In his contribution to this edited book, Ulrich Herbert presents evidence showing a rather high degree of continuity and concludes that former National Socialist elite played an important role in the West German elite throughout the 1950s and the 1960s. Even though his contribution is not based on systematic data, Herbert provides a wealth of information on former national socialist party officials and higher public servants who rose to elite positions in the Federal Republic. However, his examples mainly support the relevance of vertical elite reproduction (cf. Gergs and Pohlmann, 1999) and of elite conversion from political to economic

careers, rather than straightforward elite continuity. Herbert himself emphasizes that, apart from a few exceptions, former national socialist top elites were effectively barred from holding any relevant positions in West German politics and the West German public administration after 1945 (Herbert, 1998, p. 109). But his analysis confirms a high degree of continuity in the basic patterns of elite recruitment in West Germany. Herbert also argues that in exchange for the opportunity to continue their careers, the National Socialist sub-elites who were permitted to return to their positions were required to be loyal to the new West German democracy and were thus politically neutralized. He concludes that many of them later changed their attitudes and became real democrats (1998, p. 115).

Herbert's findings of a high degree of elite continuity are confirmed by a study of the higher public service in southwestern Germany by Michael Ruck (1996, 1998). Ruck argues that the traditional culture of the German public service made it possible for higher public servants to loyally serve various political regimes, and that this tradition also allowed them to adapt easily to democratic conditions after 1945 (1998, pp. 140f.). Ruck also shows that at the same time differences in public service traditions and generational differences explain differences in the individual reactions of public servants towards National Socialism in the two southwestern German provinces. Liberal traditions in Baden fostered stronger resistance while 90% of the higher public servants in Württemberg had joined the National Socialist party by 1933. Also, younger public servants who hoped that the National Socialist take-over would improve their career opportunities were more prone to join the party early on while most of the political resistance came from members of the older generation.

Both of these studies confirm Edinger's earlier results based on a systematic study of West German elites in the mid-1950s (Edinger, 1960) that showed a combination of elite discontinuity in politics and the media sector on one hand and elite continuity in other sectors on the other.

### **Cross-sectional Studies of West German Elites after 1945**

Replicative cross-sectional elite studies (Edinger, 1961; von Beyme, 1971; Enke, 1974; Herzog, 1975; Hoffmann-Lange *et al.*, 1985; Bürklin *et al.*, 1997; Hoffmann-Lange and Bürklin, 1998) provide a rather consistent portrayal of changes in social class backgrounds, religious affiliations, educational credentials, and career patterns of West German elites since 1945. Due to differences in the composition of the elite positions included in the various studies, however, it is not possible to quantify these changes exactly. These studies show that until the 1950s social democratic politicians and labor union leaders were social outsiders in the German elite in the sense that they included substantial numbers of individuals from lower-class backgrounds with only basic education, while the members of the other elite groups came from more prestigious family backgrounds and overwhelmingly had higher educational credentials. Throughout the 20th century, however, German elites became more middle-class (cf. Zapf, 1965, p. 181). Likewise, the proportion of the elites belonging to the nobility, that had steadily declined even before 1945, but had remained substantial in the foreign service and the military, dwindled to insignificant numbers after 1945.

The changes in social class background and education proceeded gradually

in general. But as Zapf and—based on his data—Dahrendorf (1965) noted in the mid-1960s, National Socialism unintentionally contributed to a marked modernization in elite recruitment in Germany. Compared to the leadership of the conservative and liberal parties, the NSDAP leaders came on average from less prestigious social backgrounds (cf. Zapf, 1965, p. 179). Both in terms of its electorate and its membership, the National Socialist party was the first party in Germany that drew support from all walks of life.

Certainly the most dramatic recent change is the fact that the SPD leadership has become very similar to the bourgeois parties in its social class backgrounds and educational level. This *embourgeoisment* of the SPD is also paralleled by the trend towards a growing similarity among the party electorates of the two major parties.

Today, the great majority of German elites come from an upper middle-class background. The proportion of elites from families owning a business or in which the father was self-employed has declined, and the proportion of elites whose father belonged to the higher service class has increased over time.

During the same period, the proportion of elites with higher education, which had already been fairly high from the outset, has increased even further. A high school degree is now virtually a universal precondition for ascent to elite positions. Moreover, the importance of a university degree has continued to rise during the last 30 years, from 59% possessing a degree in 1968 to 76% in 1995 (Zapf, 1965, pp. 176ff.; Hoffmann-Lange and Bürklin, 1999, p. 168). Today, only the labor union elites are lagging this trend towards academization. Only one-third of the labor union leaders have completed high school and only one-fourth have a university degree. But even in this group, higher education is on the rise and is likely to increase further.

Studies of elite career patterns show that the traditional pattern of sector-specific careers still prevails in Germany (cf. Hoffmann-Lange, 1992, pp. 144ff.; Rebenstorf, 1997). While there is a lot of inter-sectoral movement at early career stages, German elites typically move up the career ladder in a single sector. Cross-over at later career stages is infrequent, with the exception of movements to the political sector. But even here, recruitment to political top positions from other sectors and vice versa, is the exception rather than the rule, prominent exceptions like the current minister of economics, Werner Müller, notwithstanding.

Moreover, Dietrich Herzog's studies on political careers have revealed a trend toward a professionalization even in the political sector. Traditionally, politicians started their political careers as a second career while still continuing their professional careers in another sector. They switched to politics as a full-time profession only after they had reached some higher-level political position, i.e. that of parliamentarian in a state legislature or in the Bundestag. Until the 1970s, only about 1 in 10 started a full-time political career right after leaving university. In recent years, however, the latter pattern has become more frequent and quite a few of the younger politicians have never made a living outside of politics (Herzog, 1990, pp. 40f.). This development has come under severe criticism by some observers, most notably the well-known sociologist Erwin K. Scheuch, who advocates that politicians should have been gainfully employed outside of politics for at least 10 years before they are allowed to take over a political mandate at the state or national level, and that they should be forced to retire from politics after two terms (Scheuch and Scheuch, 1992).

Moving beyond a number of elite surveys with fairly small samples, in 1968 Rudolf Wildenmann (1975) started a tradition of carrying out large elite surveys using conventional survey research methods and interviewing large numbers of elite respondents with standardized questionnaires. Follow-up studies were carried out in 1972, 1981, and the most recent one in 1995. The latter included for the first time elites in East Germany.

These studies provide data on a wide range of topics, i.e. social backgrounds, career patterns, value orientations, political issue attitudes as well as organizational and policy-related contacts with other elites. The results have been published in several books (Enke, 1974; Roth, 1976; Hoffmann-Lange *et al.*, 1985; Hoffmann-Lange, 1992; Bürklin *et al.*, 1997). Apart from the changes in social backgrounds already mentioned, these studies show that German elites are unified by a broad consensus on democratic procedures, although the 1968 elite survey still revealed the persistence of pre-democratic orientations in some sectors, most notably among older business leaders. One-third of the political elites (33.1%) and more than two-fifths (44.2%) of the elites in the non-political sectors at that time still thought that leadership positions should be limited to individuals with academic training. Likewise, in 1968 one-fifth of the political elites (21.8%) and nearly one-third (31.8%) of the other elites supported a statement that the votes of well-educated citizens should count more in general elections.

The policy attitudes of the elites are divided along party lines. With the exception of the socioeconomic conflict in which the labor union elites and business elites are the most deeply divided, the policy positions taken by the party elites usually define the end points of the political spectrum, while the attitudes of the other elites are more moderate. In most elite sectors—with the exception of business elites and journalistic elites in the privately owned press and broadcasting media—there are also very high numbers of party members, going up to more than 80% among top civil servants, and to more than one half among the top position-holders in the public broadcasting corporations. This confirms references to Germany as a party state.

Overall, in the decades between 1945 and the early 1970s the West German elite developed into a consensually unified elite which no longer differed from its counterparts in other established democracies. Given the fact that the Federal Republic was not only much larger in population, but also much more affluent than the GDR, it was inevitable that the merger of the two Germanies in 1990 would not challenge the basic structures that had developed in West Germany over more than 40 years. However, in order to understand how the former GDR and its elites were integrated into the West German institutional system and its elite structure, we have to take a closer look at elite development in the GDR.

### **Studies of GDR Elites**

A number of studies provide information on various aspects of the GDR elite and developments at the elite level from the early 1950s to 1989 (Ludz, 1968; Alt, 1987; Meyer, 1991; Schneider, 1994; Bauerkämper *et al.*, 1997; Hornbostel, 1999). The most comprehensive study data-wise is by Schneider who collected background data on 644 members of the United Socialist Party's (SED) Central Committee from 1946 to 1989 and whose book also provides an overview of the results of previous studies.

Even though no systematic analysis of elites in the GDR is available, numerous historical studies and biographical accounts have provided information on the fundamental transformation that took place in East Germany, replacing the National Socialist leadership and the remains of the traditional German elite who had not emigrated to the West at the end of the war. With the forced merger of the Communist and the Social Democratic parties and the formation of the SED in 1946, the communist leadership first monopolized political leadership positions and then established party dominance in the other sectors of society. This process of subjugating the entire East German society under SED control proceeded swiftly, but was not completed until the early 1970s when Erich Honecker achieved the full nationalization of the economic sector, after having forced Walther Ulbricht, the first party chairman, into retirement.

The SED leadership was an elite formation implanted from above and not accepted as legitimate by the East German populace. The party hierarchy constituted the only relevant recruitment channel to elite posts. Internal differentiation by generation or sector played only a subordinate role. While other parties had been formed in 1945 and were permitted to be active until 1989, they were forced to join the SED-dominated National Front which decided on the joint candidate lists for elections and pre-determined the shares of each party and mass organization on the lists.

In the mid-1960s, Peter Christian Ludz, a West German sociologist, claimed that the illegal and conspiratorial background of the post-1945 East German leadership had fostered the formation of a closed inner elite circle (*strategische Clique*) whose power rested entirely on the military power of the Soviet Union and whose members felt insecure of their own power positions (Ludz, 1968). Its internal coherence derived from the common loyalty towards the Communist party. According to Higley and Burton (2000), this elite formation can be called an *ideocratic elite*.

Based on reform initiatives taken at the beginning of the 1960s, Ludz assumed that the generation of the prewar communist leadership would gradually be replaced by a group of younger, more technocratically oriented elites whom he called an *institutionalized counter-elite* (*institutionalisierte Gegenelite*). He predicted that this generational replacement would lead to a more pragmatic and successful economic policy and that the totalitarian system of state socialism would give way to what he called a *consultative authoritarianism*.

In fact, however, the old communist leadership held on to power and the reform policies were soon abandoned. The East German elite renewed itself only marginally over the next 30 years. Accordingly, the average age of the GDR elite increased considerably over the years. As the more recent elite studies by Meyer and Schneider show, for the members of the SED Central Committee, it went up from 46 in the 1960s to 61 in the late 1980s, and among the members of the Politburo from 52 to 65. Even the average age of the candidates for the Central Committee increased at the same rate (cf. Meyer, 1991, pp. 151ff.; Schneider, 1994, pp. 78f.). Some members of the first generation such as Erich Honecker, Willi Stoph, Erich Mielke, Kurt Hager, and Horst Sindermann were still in power in 1989. Even Egon Krenz (born 1937), the designated successor to Erich Honecker, had already reached his fifties in 1989.

The one respect in which the GDR elite changed over time is its educational level. Due to the SED leadership's claim that socialist government was based



on scientific principles and that academic qualification of the leadership was essential for the development of GDR socialism, old as well as new leaders had to undergo continuing education at regular intervals, mostly at the party academy which specialized in teaching *scientific Marxism–Leninism*. Younger members of the GDR elite who had received their primary education after 1945 increasingly also studied at normal universities and completed degrees mostly in economics and engineering, thereby confirming Ludz' thesis of an increasing emphasis on technological expertise. However, Ludz fundamentally misunderstood the nature of the SED regime that never ceded any real power to technocratically oriented experts and continued its tight control of the recruitment process that reserved access to the central positions of power to individuals whose loyalty to the party ideology was beyond any doubt.

In a recent account of the structure of the GDR elite and the transformation of the East German elite after 1989, Hornbostel (1999, 2000) argued that in order to understand the character of the GDR elite, it is necessary to extend the analysis to the second level elites. He claims that the political leadership in the provinces and communities as well as the higher managers in the GDR economy were mainly preoccupied with the immediate task of pragmatically solving the problems created by the pervasive shortage of machinery and materials, and that they operated largely independent of party directives, sometimes even on the borderline of illegality, without, however, seriously questioning the leading role of the party leadership. Hornbostel also claims that despite the extensive elite replacement in East Germany after 1945, there had been considerable elite continuity at this second level in the GDR, too, and that even many former National Socialist fellow-travellers had been able to remain in their positions. He argues that the higher service class in fact survived the establishment of the SED regime and managed to preserve its privileges until the very end of the GDR. This claim of elite continuity in the GDR is very similar to Ulrich Herbert's account of elite continuity in West Germany. It is based on the general observation that in totalitarian regimes, which do not tolerate independent centers of power, most members of the higher service class, in order to preserve their social privileges, tend to be loyal to the regime and even join the ruling party.

### **Elite Transformation in Eastern Germany and the New German Elite**

Compared to the elite transformation that took place in West Germany after 1945, the one in East Germany after 1989 was more far-reaching. This was partly inevitable given the age structure of the SED elite and the near-total SED control of organizational life. Private business had been nearly wiped out during several waves of nationalization. The so-called 'bloc parties' had enjoyed only formal independence and were in fact closely affiliated with the SED. Similarly, there were no independent voluntary associations, but only the mass organizations created by the SED for the purpose of a comprehensive mobilization of society, e.g. the trade union federation (*Allgemeiner Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund*, ADGB), cultural organizations (*Kulturbund*, *Schriftstellerverband*), the youth organization FDJ and the women's organization. The bloc parties as well as the other organizations had officially acknowledged the leading role of the SED. In elections, all candidates were included on joint candidate lists (*Einheitslisten*) and the distribution of seats among them had

been determined beforehand. The only organizations that had been able to retain at least a certain degree of autonomy were the Protestant and the Catholic churches. But since the majority of the East Germans are without religious affiliation, church influence was limited.

A number of studies have dealt with elite circulation in East Germany after 1989, i.e. Derlien (1996, 1997), Windolf (1996), Hornbostel (1999, 2000), and Windolf *et al.* (1999). They have revealed that the swift elite transformation was achieved by a considerable *elite transfer* from West Germany plus *vertical elite reproduction*, i.e. career advancements from lower-level to top-level positions. Another important feature is a reduction in the number of elite positions that was due to two different causes. One was the proliferation of elite positions in state socialist countries as compared to Western democracies. The second reason was that the new East German states joined a system in which most national level elite positions had already been taken by West Germans, and that—apart from politics—only a few new positions were created to accommodate the specific interests of the new East German states.

Given the elite vacuum created by the ouster of the GDR elite, it is not surprising that the elite members of East German descent are much younger than their West German counterparts. This is, after all, the typical result of sudden political upheavals resulting in substantial personnel turnover. At the same time, the two groups do not differ with regard to their educational levels.

Aggregate comparisons between East German and West German respondents in the Potsdam elite survey (cf. Bürklin *et al.*, 1997; Welzel, 1997) and Rohrschneider's (1999) survey of Berlin state elites confirm that numerous public opinion surveys showing that the GDR has left its imprints on East German political culture also hold true for the elite level. East German elite members are much more in favor of plebiscitarianism than their West German counterparts. At the same time, they are more conservative as far as libertarian values are concerned. This is due to the fact that East German society was less modern than West German society. Value change toward libertarian value orientations has therefore been less pervasive in East than in West Germany.

### **The Changing Character of the German Elite Since the German Empire**

Germany is particularly suited to studying the relationship between regime change and elite change. A first observation to be made here is that the German higher service class survived even the most pervasive regime changes nearly intact. The main reason for this is the general rule that regime changes take place in a societal environment that cannot be changed at will and does not change as suddenly as a political regime. Even though totalitarian regimes are controlled by idiocratic elites who try to gain legitimacy through extensive politicization of their citizens and by trying to implant their ideology with the help of elaborated programs of ideological education, they are usually pragmatic enough to secure the professional expertise of the higher service class for their purposes, hoping that the members of this class will be sufficiently opportunistic to cooperate.

Even though some historical examples can be cited where the ideological purges of an idiocratic elite resulted in the killing of their own people (e.g. the Khmer Rouge), most idiocratic elites refrain from such an ultimate consequence. Elite circulation will therefore usually be limited to the ouster of the

old top elites. This was true for the two usurpations of power by idiocratic elites that took place in Germany in 1933 and in East Germany in 1945.

A high degree of continuity among second-level elites was also characteristic of the three transitions to democracy in 1919, 1945, and 1989. In 1919 and in 1945, there was even a high degree of elite continuity in top-level positions. In 1919, the creation of the Weimar Republic was achieved without any elite changes beyond the members of the Emperor's cabinet. The emperor himself and his entourage had left the country on their own, and the regime transition implied only a transfer of political power to a new parliamentary cabinet. As was mentioned before, in West Germany after 1945 the top political elites and the top media elites were replaced by individuals who had not been involved with National Socialism, but in other sectors elite continuity prevailed.

After 1989, the breakdown of state socialism created an elite vacuum because most of the top leadership had already reached the retirement age and also because it was possible to recruit new elites from a pool of West German second-level elites who were ready to take over elite positions in East Germany. This is an option, however, that is not usually available after regime transition and makes this case unique.

The above-mentioned peculiarities of the East German transition to democracy in 1989 have led to a considerable under-representation of East Germans within the elite of united Germany. In a recent survey, only 11.9% of respondents are of East German origin, i.e. lived in the GDR before 1989. This proportion is highest within the political elite (32%) and lowest in the military (0%), the business (0.4%), and the civil service (2.5%) elites (Bürklin *et al.*, 1997).

In his analysis of the early FRG elite, Edinger (1960) disputed the expectation that a counter-elite would develop in totalitarian regimes that is ready to take over leadership positions after the fall of the regime. The major reason this fails to occur is not a lack in opponents to the totalitarian regime. However, while those opponents are certainly honorable people, they often lack the expertise that is necessary for taking over leadership positions, an expertise that is more often found among the fellow-travellers. This explains why regime transitions rarely result in completely renewed patterns of elite recruitment. Instead, elite continuity plus vertical elite reproduction are the rule. Even though many observers, especially sociologists and social critics, do not distinguish between these two patterns, it is a crucial difference from an elite theoretical point of view. Vertical reproduction means that the same social type of individuals take over elite positions. These individuals typically held lower-level managerial positions under the old regime but were not personally involved in centralized decision-making. They can therefore dissociate themselves from that regime much more easily and credibly than the old top elites.

This also means that in analyzing elite transformation the crucial question is whether the old top elites remain in power or are replaced by new leaders. Since decision-making in totalitarian regimes is so highly centralized, however, elite circulation in top positions may result in a loss of effectiveness since the new leadership lacks the appropriate experience. In his analysis of the early West German elite Edinger correctly identified this dilemma facing new democracies. He concluded that the situation after the fall of a totalitarian regime requires either a replacement of the old elites by elite transfer or

‘extensive socio-economic dislocation’ (Edinger, 1960, p. 80). In East Germany, the second option was chosen after 1945. This resulted in a delayed recovery of the GDR economy and a slow-down in rebuilding an effective public administration. After 1989, the first option played an important role. Since elite transfer is usually not an available option, however, this has to be considered a special case rather than a model for other countries. Normally, the path taken in West Germany after 1945 will be the most effective, involving a high degree of elite circulation in top political positions combined with elite continuity in other sectors. It allowed a rapid economic recovery while also fostering fundamental regime change that resulted in a rapid consolidation of democracy.

A final point regards the question of how to characterize the elite formations in the different periods of German history in the 20th century. Drawing on the terminology developed by Higley and Burton (2000), it seems beyond doubt that both the elites of National Socialist Germany and of the GDR conformed to the idiocratic elite type. The elite of the Weimar Republic, instead, can aptly be characterized as a fragmented elite, since it involved wide elite differentiation and a low degree of elite integration. The elite of the German Empire was also highly fragmented. Finally, there is no doubt that the German elite today conforms to the consensual type.

But how did this consensual type come into existence? Higley and Burton claim that West Germany is an example of elite convergence among fragmented elites that started in the 1940s with the formation and electoral success of the Christian Democratic party and was completed in the late 1950s when ‘a disaffected socialist elite’ began to conclude that unseating the governing coalition through revolutionary means was unlikely (Higley and Burton, 2000, p. 8). In my opinion, this is not an adequate portrayal of what happened because the German Social Democratic party had ceased to be a revolutionary party by the beginning of the 20th century and had in fact been one of the major political forces in creating and supporting the Weimar Republic. Although it is certainly true that it was only with the Godesberg Program of 1959 that the SPD formally dropped its advocacy of far-reaching nationalizations of industry and accepted a modern welfare state based on a free market economy, it is also the case that throughout the years of the Weimar Republic SPD-led governments had never made the slightest attempt to enact any far-reaching economic reforms. In fact, most German historians would agree that the SPD was already a centrist political force at that time. Nevertheless, the Godesberg Program was an important landmark in postwar Germany that made the SPD acceptable to middle-class voters and thus made the party system more competitive, a process that eventually led the SPD to governmental power. But this is something very different and not in accordance with Higley and Burton’s model of *elite convergence*.

Nevertheless, it is appropriate to assume that the consolidation of democracy in West Germany was the result of elite convergence, albeit of a different type. In Weimar Germany, apart from the Communist party, it had mainly been the political Right that was opposed to liberal democracy. And it was not only the far Right, i.e. the National Socialists and other right-wing extremist forces, but also the conservative forces who never accepted the defeat of the Empire and resented democratic institutions because they felt that these gave too much power to the Left. These conservative forces paved Hitler’s

way to power because they expected to manipulate the National Socialist movement for their own objectives, i.e. to keep the Left at bay and to restore their traditional prevalence. Even though conservative forces did not like Hitler's movement, which they considered populist and brutish, they expected to ultimately control the National Socialists. It was only after 1933 that they realized the totalitarian nature of National Socialism and finally came to accept liberal democracy as the only way for Germany to return to political stability. Additionally, the decisive influence of the Western allies for the consolidation of democracy in West Germany should not be underestimated. It was only in the mid-1950s that the occupying powers relinquished most of their prerogatives.

In their portrayals of the early West German elite, Dahrendorf (1965) and Scheuch (1988) characterized it as essentially defensive in nature, claiming that the different elite groups refrained from open conflict and had instituted a consociational model of accommodation among different interests. Dahrendorf coined the term a '*cartel of anxiety*'. In a similar vein, Scheuch argued that the West German elite of the early 1960s was highly segmented, with elites limiting their claim to power to their own sphere. They refrained from mingling in the affairs of other sectoral elites, and likewise expected that the others would do the same. Scheuch called this prevailing attitude the '*cult of the expert*' and concluded that it was associated with a tendency to redefine conflicts of interest into technical decision-making matters that could be decided on the basis of expertise alone.

While Scheuch's and Dahrendorf's depictions of the basically defensive nature of the West German elite may have been appropriate during the first 20 years after World War II when these elites tried to avoid open conflict in order to avoid reverting to the vicious infighting that had characterized the Weimar Republic, this pattern has given way to a more conflictual one. Once the first generation of West German elites, who had been severely traumatized by the Weimar experience, had been replaced by elites socialized under democratic conditions, the West German elite started to become more like its counterparts in other developed democracies.

### **The New Discourse on Elites**

With the consolidation of (West) German democracy achieved, preoccupation with the character of the German elite vanished from public discourse and other topics started to play a more prominent role, mainly questions of value change and its consequences for citizen participation in political decision-making. Since the 1990s, however, a number of publications have again taken up the topic of elites in Germany. Among these, we have to distinguish contributions in the tradition of the kind of empirical elite research discussed above from what can be called the 'new elite question'.

Among the former are empirical contributions dealing with elite transformation in East Germany and its impact on the structure and nature of the German elite, i.e. various articles by Hans-Ulrich Derlien (1996, 1997), the book on the Potsdam elite survey (Bürklin *et al.*, 1997), and a number of studies on parliamentarians in the East German state legislatures (e.g. Lock, 1998; Rohrschneider, 1999). The historical case studies mentioned above also belong to this category.

Publications of the second type differ from the more traditional studies in that they are no longer preoccupied with the role of elites in the stability of democracy in Germany, but instead deal with the question of the qualification of German elites for governing the country under the conditions of postindustrialism. This discourse has to be seen in the context of value change in modern societies and changing orientations of the German electorate, i.e. what Ronald Inglehart has called the development from *elite-directed* to *elite-challenging* behavior (Inglehart, 1989). This new discourse has renewed the normative focus of the classic elite theorists and is in line with a similar demand raised by Sartori (1987). These new publications cast doubt on the ability of German elites to lead German society in the new millennium. They assume that the elites have become preoccupied with securing their basis of power and protecting the material privileges that come with elite positions rather than facing the challenges of globalization. In particular, a number of authors have claimed that the German elite has increasingly lost touch with developments in society and with the needs of the electorate. Some have even revived Mosca's classical concept of *political class* to underline their assumption of the distinctiveness of that class (Leif *et al.*, 1992; Scheuch and Scheuch, 1992; von Beyme, 1993). In this context we can also see a revival of the older German discourse on *Werteliten*, i.e. the return of the question does elite recruitment in German society bring the most qualified individuals into elite positions or rather those with the best social connections and those who are capable only of echoing the sentiments of the public.

Finally, I would like to mention a recent issue of the *Kursbuch*, a magazine that for many years has been a public platform of the intellectual Left. This issue bears the title *The New Elites*. It includes articles by several social scientists, but also by writers and journalists dealing *inter alia* with the *cyber lifestyle* of the newly rich founders of Internet companies, with the career prospects of women, with the self-styled presumption of German managers to be the true meritocratic elite in Germany, with the problems of finding objective criteria for evaluating the quality of academic research, with the new elite culture of conspicuous consumption, as well as with more traditional topics of elite theory and elite research. Another publication worth mentioning in this context is the book *Prominence* by Birgit Peters (1996) that analyzes the preconditions for attracting media attention and the relationship between media prominence and political power.

While many of these contributions deal with the social upper class rather than with elites in the sense of the politically powerful, they nevertheless have contributed to broadening the perspective of elite research in two respects. First, they point to the importance of second-level elites as a recruitment basis for top elites, and secondly they have shifted the focus from a preoccupation with democratic stability and elite integration to the question of the *vertical integration* of society, i.e. the question of democratic representation and changes in the political feedback process among elites and mass publics under the conditions of postindustrialism.

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