

Graduate School of Social Research  
Leadership and Elites in Contemporary Politics  
Class Syllabus – Summer Semester 2018

**Course:** Politics, Elites and Democracy  
**Time:** June 2018  
**Location:** GSSR – Summer

**Instructor:** Jan Pakulski, MA, PhD  
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### Course Description

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Contemporary politics are dominated by leaders and elites – organized minorities capable of affecting political and policy outcomes of nation-states regularly and seriously. They are key social-political actors in all societies and all political regimes, including modern democracies. Elite characteristics – including their recruitment, structure and orientations – are key determinants of social and political change, as well as the type of political regime and the ‘quality’ of the major political institutions. Elites make and break the key institutions and they shape political order. This course introduces the concepts of ‘power’, ‘politics’, ‘leaders’ and ‘political elites’ together with the key tenets of contemporary ‘elite theory’ and the key methods of elite research and analysis. The course is designed for advanced (postgraduate) students.

### Presenter

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Jan Pakulski, MA (Warsaw), PhD (ANU), is Professor Emeritus at the University of Tasmania, Australia, Professor at Collegium Civitas, Fellow of the Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia, and Affiliate of the Stanford Centre on Poverty and Inequality.

### Course Objectives

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The course is designed for advanced (postgraduate) students. It aims at:

1. introducing a research perspective focusing on power and elites (the ruling minorities) together with an ‘analytic toolbox’ (concepts) for studying power and elites, and a theoretical model of elite politics and social change; and
2. application of this perspective, concepts and theory in contemporary social-political research, especially the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century developments in old and new democracies.

Students are encouraged to learn and examine critically the contemporary elite perspective and theory in classroom discussions, debates and individual in-class presentations, and to apply this perspective and theory in contemporary political analysis and research, including their own research projects.

### **Intended learning outcomes (undergraduate and postgraduate)**

On completion of this unit, the students should be able to:

1. understand and apply the elite perspective in political analysis;
2. understand and apply the key concepts and theories in research;

3. use/apply the elite perspective, concepts and theories to explain contemporary social-political developments covered by the unit; and
4. communicate their ideas in English in written and verbal form.

## Required Texts

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***Required reading comprises a course pack and excerpt from the following books:***

- Putnam, Robert D. 1976. *The Comparative Study of Political Elites*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall. Chs. 1-5
- Higley, John and Michael Burton. 2006. *Elite Foundations of Liberal Democracy*. Lanham, NY, Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield., Chs. 1-3.
- Fukuyama, F. 2014. *Political Order and Political Decay*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux. Chs 1, 31, 36.
- Dogan, Mattei and John Higley, 1998/2012. 'Elites, Crises and Regimes in Comparative Analysis'.
- Higley, J. and J.Pakulski 2000/2012. 'Elite Theory Vs Marxism: The Twentieth Century Verdict'.  
[the last two in Pakulski J., H.Best, V.Best and U.Hoffmann-Lange (eds). 2012. *Elite Foundations of Social Theory and Politics*. Special Issue of *Historical Social Research (HSR)*, vol. 37(1), 2012.]; and
- Pakulski J. and A. Korosenyi. 2013. *Toward Leader Democracy*. London: Anthem. Chapters 1-2.
- Pakulski Jan. 2015. 'Global Elite: A Myth or a Reality', mimeo.

***Recommended reading (non-compulsory):***

- Fukuyama, F. 2014. *Political Order and Political Decay*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Weber Max. 1976. *The Protestant Ethics and the Spirit of Capitalism*. NY: Harper Collins. Introduction (by A.Giddens) and Chapter 1.

## Outline

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The course/unit consists of 10 (workshops), each session consisting of a 1-hour lecture and a discussion (including short presentations by students). Pedagogical aims are briefly summarized

below each summary. General objectives and expected attributes are listed below the course/unit description.

## Grading

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The final course grade will be determined based on the following:

- Participation and discussions (including individual presentations): 10%
- Research Essay (see writing guidelines): 90%

## Final Paper

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The course is assessed by a major research essay (final paper), 3,000 words maximum, reflecting students understanding and guided research. Essay topics will be discussed

## Class Participation

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The main requirements are: attendance of sessions/workshops, active engagement in all in-class discussions plus an individual presentation, submission of the major essay (final paper). These are vital for earning a satisfactory grade in the course.

Students are free to adopt a critical perspective and disagree with the instructor and their classmates as long as the discussion is conducted in a respectful and scholarly manner.

## Academic Honesty

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Academic dishonesty will not be tolerated. Each of the following will be considered as plagiarism:

- Copying directly from a source without quotations and source citation;
- Paraphrasing or summarizing another's idea without attribution;
- Changing a sentence's structure but copying words;
- Changing a sentence's words but copying its basic structure;
- Using media sources without acknowledgement;
- Submitting a paper written by another student and claiming it as your own;
- Using information obtained through interviewing an expert without attribution;
- Purchasing or downloading a paper and claiming it as your own;
- Collaborating excessively on an essay with another person;
- Submitting an essay that was previously written for another class.

## Course and Topical Outline

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### 1. What is politics? Who are 'Political Elites' and Why they Matter – Power, Politics, Elites and Non-Elites.

The first session will be in two parts. The first part is structured as a debate: Are the Institutional Explanations (e.g. by Fukuyama) of Politics Sufficient and Satisfactory?

The second part will be organizational: distribution of presentation topics and essay topics.

#### **The key concepts:**

**Power** = general capacity to direct peoples' conduct (control, authority)

**Social and political order** = stable and persisting patterns of social relations

**Politics** = the main method of sustaining social and political order through resolution of (mostly distributional) conflicts through negotiation, compromises and – ultimately – authoritative decisions (who gets what, how and why)

**Political elites** (elites, power elites) = the ruling minorities, the most powerful groups and individuals in the nation, the 'top decision-makers', incumbents of top executive positions in the largest and most resource rich organizations (primarily the nation-state) and movements.

**Non-elites** = the rest, persons with little or no power

**Institution** = a well-established and structured pattern of behavior or of relationships that is accepted as a fundamental part of a culture or politics, e.g. the state, rule of law, democracy.

- The conceptual pair 'political elite(s) vs non-elites' is a trademark of elite analysis, elite theory, and elite perspective. In the eighteenth century, the word 'elite' applied to high quality or exclusive goods; in the nineteenth century it became a synonym for social groups claiming both power *and* excellence ('*la crème de la société*', the aristocracy). Vilfredo Pareto defined 'elite(s)' in two ways: as individuals 'of excellence', superior in any aspect of human endeavor (intellectual, martial, political, etc.), and as those who occupy the top positions of power and influence – both hierarchies always overlapping closely (but never completely).
- Contemporary students of power and politics, like C.W. Mills, treat 'elites' as a synonym for 'political elites', 'power elites' or the 'top decision-makers', and they identify members of national elites as incumbents of top executive positions in the largest and most resource rich organizations (primarily the state) and movements. The most sophisticated studies combine the positional, reputational and decisional method of identification, supplementing them by 'snowballing' and socio-metric 'checks'.

Reading: Putnam, Robert D. 1976. *The Comparative Study of Political Elites*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall. Chapters 1-3.

#### 1. Classical and Contemporary Elite Theory

An elite-centered approach to studying politics and society was initiated by Vilfredo Pareto, Gaetano Mosca, Robert Michels, Max Weber, Joseph Schumpeter and José Ortega y Gasset

in the early twentieth century. The best known contemporary students of 'power elites' are C.W. Mills, Robert Dahl, Robert Putnam, Giovanni Sartori and John Higley.

- The advocates of 'elite perspective' (or 'elitism')— a meta-theoretical standpoint that focus on top national power-holders, the elites, seen as the key social actors and agents of social and political change –portray 'power elites' as an inevitable feature of all organized societies, and of all regimes, democratic and non-democratic. Similarly, power is portrayed as concentrated in elite hands and exercised in the top-down manner. Political elites as the key political actors, the key agents of change.
- Elite theory explains variations in elite recruitment, composition, type, structure, orientations and dynamics on the one hand, and important political outcomes (including democratic and/or non-democratic regimes) on the other. Liberal democracies emerge as an accomplishment of widely integrated (inclusive) consensually united elites. Contemporary elite theorists also portray elite integration/ interaction and elite unity (its nature and strength) as highly variable, and see these variations as reflected in the range of key 'political outcomes', such as political effectiveness, elite dynamics (circulation and change) and the nature of political regimes. Modern liberal democracies are formed (and sustained) by 'consensual elites' that compete programmatically but share the norms that regulate their competition. Fragmented elites experience difficulties in maintaining stable social order – as well as peaceful rules of the game and competitive leadership changes. Divided elites form autocratic-authoritarian regimes.

**Reading:** Putnam, Robert D. 1976. *The Comparative Study of Political Elites*. Chap. 4; Higley and Burton 2006. Chapters 1-2.

### 3.Theoretical Rivalry in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century: Elitism, Marxism and Democratic Theory

This session will include a debate between the supporters of Marxist (class-centred) explanations and elitist (elite-centred) explanations of social and political change

- Marxism and elitism remained the major theoretical rivals throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. They have always pointed toward starkly different - one may say mutually incompatible and fundamentally opposed – paradigmatic views and theories of politics and social change.
- In the Marxist paradigm, class membership influences all aspects of social and political life, with class divisions articulating themselves in social disparities and in conflicting norms, solidarities, identities, and political allegiances. Arising from fundamental economic relationships, classes are the principal actors on history's stage, with all major social and political changes propelled by their struggles. This explanatory focus is supplemented by an attractive vision that sees class conflicts as moving history toward a classless and stateless end point involving a free, equal, and prosperous condition for all.
- In the elite paradigm, by contrast, tiny but powerful minorities constitute autonomous and ubiquitous social and political actors. Elites are seen as interested primarily in maintaining and enhancing their power, so that their power struggles are not reducible to classes or other collectivities. By holding that it is elite choices and power competitions, rather than economics and class-like collectivities, that shape political and to some extent wider social orders, format political and many social divisions, and enflame or contain major conflicts, the elite paradigm reverses Marxism's causal thrust. As for eschatology,

the Marxist classless society is replaced by a somber projection of continuous elite circulation and power struggles.

- Radical democrats offer another – though less popular today – explanation of politics and social change. They suggest the nearly-universal evolution of contemporary societies in an egalitarian-democratic direction, and the equally universal change of democratic government in the direction of participatory-populist forms that result in ‘government by, for and of the people’. This perspective is ideological and utopian, as well as predominantly normative in its focus.
- In the third quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, another theoretical contender emerged: institutional approach and theory. It formed a major stream in analyses of contemporary politics, especially in the United States. It sees politics as institutionalized game, and analyses both, political development and decay.

Reading: Higley, J. and J.Pakulski. 2000/2012. ‘Elite Theory Vs Marxism: The Twentieth Century Verdict’ in in Pakulski J., H.Best, V.Best and U.Hoffmann-Lange (eds). 2012. *Elite Foundations of Social Theory and Politics*. Special Issue of *Historical Social Research (HSR)*, vol. 37(1), 2012.

Fukuyama, F. 2014. *Political Order and Political Decay*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux. (ch.1, 36)

#### 4. Contemporary Revival of Elite Perspective and The New Applications of Elite Theory

A revival of elite perspective and theory at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century coincided with the eclipse of its rivals: the predictive failures of Marxism (that followed the fate of Soviet socialism) and the dwindling ideological appeal of participatory democracy.

- The apparent inability of Marxist regimes to form egalitarian and stateless societies, as well as the failures of participatory democrats to construct self-governing democracy, revealed the utopian-illusory character of these rival visions. By contrast, the persistence of hierarchical social organization, continuous power concentration, representative democracy and the survival of elites – even in the most advanced and egalitarian democracies – accorded with the skeptical-realistic elite perspective and theory.
- The post-Maoist reforms in China (after 1978) Gorbachev’s reforms in the SU (after 1985), the unexpected liberal-democratic transitions in Portugal and Spain (and later in Taiwan and South Korea) in the 1980s, and the peaceful revolutions in CEE in the early 1990s – in which elites played a prominent role as the key champions and architects of new liberal-democratic regimes – boosted interest in the role of small ‘ruling minorities’ as key agents of democratization. Similarly, the integration and expansion of the EU turned attention to the role of political leaders and elites as the key social-political actors. Also the failures of ‘color revolutions’ of the early 2000s, and the failure of the ‘Arab spring’ a decade later also highlighted the crucial importance of ‘elite variables’ in determining social and political outcomes. While the successful ‘peaceful revolutions’ in CEE, as well as the expansion of the EU, involved effective elite actions, negotiations, compromises and settlements, the attempts at reforms in Central Asia, the Middle East and North Africa seldom involved such negotiated settlements and successful reforms. Instead, they deepened and widened elite divisions that herald thwarted reforms.

- Contemporary elite theorists acknowledge progressive functional differentiation among elites, the complexity of the power structure, and the important role of local elites (the 'lattice of leadership'). They also recognize the increasing role of 'supra-national' power centers (e.g., the 'Eurocrats') in shaping power relations. The most important change, though, is in theoretical understandings of the autonomy of elites. While most classical theorists – and some contemporary students of 'oligarchies' – have warned against excessive elite autonomy, many students of elites today see elite autonomy as too restricted. They link elite failures and resulting crises to populism and the 'takeover' of policy domains by special interests and social movements. Contemporary elite theorists also point to the increasing elite differentiation and specialization ('strategic' character of elites), divisions between elite segments (political, business, media), as well as the progressive concentration of executive ('decisional') power' within state executives (the 'elite inner cores' and the 'top leadership'). Contemporary elites are seen as complex and constantly evolving 'power networks' that are internally differentiated and stratified. Both elite integration/ interaction and elite unity are portrayed today as highly variable, and these variations are reflected in the range of key 'political outcomes', such as political effectiveness, elite dynamics (circulation and change) and the nature of political regimes. Modern liberal democracies are formed (and sustained) by 'consensual elites' that emerge under rare historical conditions, compete for leadership, but share the norms that regulate their power competition.

Reading: Higley, J. and M. G. Burton. 1989/2012. 'The Elite Variable in Democratic Transitions and Breakdowns' in Pakulski J., H.Best, V.Best and U.Hoffmann-Lange (eds). 2012. *Elite Foundations of Social Theory and Politics*. Special Issue of *Historical Social Research (HSR)*, vol. 37(1), 2012.];

### 5. Elite Power Games, Democratic Transitions and Consolidation – United Elites and Political Development

This session will include a discussion around the issue: Are Power Elites Friends or Foes of Democracy? What are the key 'elite conditions' of political development?

- Elites have always played the dominant role in the process of democratization, especially during the '3<sup>rd</sup> wave' (Huntington) of democratization in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Elite agreements and pacts also played the crucial role in securing a non-violent form of regime change, transition to democracy, and 'democratic consolidation'. The process of democratization involves the formation of elites that are consensually united, and therefore responsible and accountable, as well as sensitive to the reactions of peers and voters. Such elites are the key ingredient of consolidated democracies, and successes of consolidation depend upon their perpetuation. Students of consolidated democracies too often ignore or downplay the role of elites in ensuring that democratic politics are continuous, effective, and meaningful. It is suggested that the emergence of a widely integrated and consensually united national elite is the single critical determinant of consolidated (and sustainable) democracy. It is important to stress that the cohesion of such an elite involves not only commitment to general democratic norms, values and procedures, but also partisan restraint and elite self-legitimation, in the sense of a mutual and reciprocal recognition by elites of their ruling mandate and the responsibilities arising from it.

- Elite theory and research, especially the more recent research on the relationship between the key characteristics of national elites and the major political outcomes, inspires numerous critical analyses of social and political transformations, including the liberal-democratic transformations in post-communist Europe.
- Three modal elite configurations and consequent regime types in CEE are: (1) consensual elites operating stable, increasingly consolidated democratic regimes (e.g., the Czech Republic, Poland, Slovakia, Hungary); (2) fragmented elites operating unconsolidated and unstable democratic regimes (e.g., Bulgaria, Romania, Serbia, Croatia); and (3) divided elites operating superficially democratic but increasingly authoritarian regimes (Belarus, Russia, Ukraine before 2014).
- The process of European integration continued largely ‘from above’ and with skillful elite use of political persuasion that allowed nationalistic sentiments dominant in European populations to be neutralized, especially in post-communist CEE. The main role in this process was played by consensual elites (entrenched in Western-Central Europe, and emergent in the ‘accessing’ states), in particular the economic segments of these elites, backed by exceptionally strong pro-EU leaders.

**Reading:** Higley, J. and M.Burton. 2006. *Elite Foundations of Liberal Democracy*. Lanham, NY, Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield., Chs. 1-3; and

Higley, J. and J. Pakulski. 1999/2012. ‘Elite Power Games and Democratic Consolidation in CEE’ in Pakulski J., H.Best, V.Best and U.Hoffmann-Lange (eds). 2012. *Elite Foundations of Social Theory and Politics*. Special Issue of *Historical Social Research (HSR)*, vol. 37(1), 2012.]

## 6. From Dictatorship to Dictatorship – Failed Transitions, Divided Elites and Political decay

Elites are treated as key actors of the major transformations, including the cycles of elite strengthening and decline, swings between ‘tough’ and ‘cunning’ elites, as well as revolutionary and reformist elites.

- Two regularities, in particular, prompted theoretical re-thinking and reformulations in this area. The first was the intense but gradual (non-revolutionary) circulation that accompanied the ‘velvet revolutions’ (non-violent revolutions through reforms) in CEE, and the collapse of the Soviet Union. The success of these ‘revolutions’ proved highly dependent on a specific pattern of elite circulation: gradual but deep and wide. Similarly, the peaceful collapse of the Soviet Union reflected the key role played by the top leadership. The Soviet Union was dismantled by an ‘avant-garde’ of the Soviet partocratic elite, but the ‘reformers’ were then promptly replaced by ‘stabilizers’. The second regularity was observed during the ‘Trans-Atlantic Crisis’ accompanied everywhere by intensifying elite circulation. It has been particularly intense among the political segments of elites forced to bear the brunt of public fears and frustrations. This intensifying ‘crisis circulation’ has also brought into elite ranks a growing number of political ‘populists-outsiders’ with limited experience and no vocational commitment. There is no agreement among contemporary students of elites and politics as to the overall dynamics of elite change: whether or not it is cyclical, as suggested by Pareto, Mosca and Weber.
- The unsuccessful ‘color revolutions’ and the failed ‘Arab Spring’ involved mass mobilizations by competing segments of elites, ineffective elite negotiations, failed settlements, and thwarted attempts at reforms. The reforms were thwarted by persisting

elite divisions and conflicts. Warring elite factions fanned social unrest that, in turn, paralyzed all attempt at reforms – or resulted in a collapse of the state and elite warfare – a condition described as ‘failed state’. Russia represents another variant of failed – or rather arrested – transition. It emerged from the 1988-91 transition as a democratic regime. However, the restructured Putin’s elite (*siloviki*) restricted political competition for leadership to such an extent, that the Russian regime lost its democratic character and liberal reforms were arrested (if not reversed). Ukraine emerged from the transition with a divided elite. Its regime oscillates between democratic and non-democratic forms.

Reading: Higley, J. and M. G. Burton. 1989/2012. ‘The Elite Variable in Democratic Transitions and Breakdowns’ in Pakulski J., H.Best, V.Best and U.Hoffmann-Lange (eds). 2012. *Elite Foundations of Social Theory and Politics*. Special Issue of *Historical Social Research (HSR)*, vol. 37(1), 2012.]

## 7. Contemporary Electoral Competitions – Towards Leader Democracy

This session will be structured around a debate about the transformations of democracy under the conditions of demagogic populism

- For the last 30–40 years, we observe and experience in almost all advanced democracies an ever more pronounced centrality of, and increasing focus on, political leaders. This increasing leader-centeredness is detectable in both parliamentary and presidential systems. It is reflected in the centralisation of authority in leaders’ hands; in more firm, often unilateral, actions taken by leaders (and applauded by the mass publics); in a widening media exposure given to leaders, especially in election campaigns; in the proliferation of ‘leader parties’, and in the mass expectation and approval of ‘firm leadership’. All these leader-centric developments reinforce each other and change the physiognomy of contemporary liberal democracies by moving them toward ‘leader democracies’, that is, mass democracies in which the central role in generating mass confidence, in integrating political elites, and in cultivating the link between political elites and the masses, is played by political leaders who regularly compete for electoral mandate-authorisation. Prominent or central (high profile) leaders vary in their quality and success. Some (e.g. Thatcher, Blair, Kohl, Merkel) prove very successful; others (e.g. Berlusconi, Bush, Sarkozy) prove less successful in terms of performance and outcomes. Regardless of their performance and outcomes, though, they share the ‘3Ps’- prominence, power and publicity – that make them and the leadership groups they head into key political actors.
- The shift towards leader-centric democracy – reinforced by a decline of mass ideological parties and aided by the mass mediated political communication – should be seen as a part/aspect of general processes of political modernisation, rather than an anomaly or a decline of democracy. Leader-centric democracy belongs to a family of modern *representative* democracy, the latter seen as most compatible with conditions of mass democracy and social complexity. The theoretical foundations for ‘leader democracy’ were laid a century ago by Max Weber and Joseph Schumpeter. This Weberian-Schumpeterian theoretical framework needs more systematic elaboration and updating: identifying the key causes of leader-centric trends, the conditions reinforcing

leader-centrism, and articulating the key dimensions of ‘leader democracy’. The updated model is more consistent, descriptively more accurate and, above all, more realistic, that is, closer to, and more compatible with the actual developments than the rival theoretical visions of democracy (the ‘deliberative-participatory’, and ‘neo-classical’). The model of ‘leader democracy’ also fulfils the key normative criteria and expectations of democracy, though in a way that may differ from typical anticipations of contemporary theorists of democracy.

Reading: Pakulski J. and A. Korosenyi. 2013. *Toward Leader Democracy*. London: Anthem. Chapters 1-2.

## 8. National and Trans-National Elites – the EU Project and its Problems

This session will include a debate on: Transnational Elites: A Myth or A Reality?

- The concept of ‘global/transnational elite’ and the accompanying four arguments about the alleged ‘global elite’ formation are critically assessed in terms of conceptual clarity, theoretical consistency and the adequacy of empirical support. The advocates argue that globalization coincides with the emergence of a new ‘global’ or ‘transnational’ elite ‘without a country’, that is, a new ‘power actor’ no longer anchored within national power structures of nation-states. These arguments are found problematic, even in relation to the emergent ‘Eurocracy’. The concept of ‘global elite’ has weak theoretical foundations, and the accompanied claims about its formation are premature, though globalization is real, and it results in increasing contacts, coordination and collaborative links among *national* elites. The current wave of globalization does not necessarily weaken the major nation states, but it definitely increases interdependence among these states, thus forcing national elites into widened, more intense and more regular contacts, cooperation and competition. Thus what current globalization *does* change is the way power is *exercised*. In the globalizing (that is, increasingly interdependent) world, elites face more uncertainty and risk. Their control over the outcomes of decisions is reduced by increasing complexity of the interconnected world, by the growing number of ‘power stakeholders’ – those who can influence the outcomes, often through disruption – and by a sheer novelty of rapidly changing power arrangements. In order to reduce the risks, elite groups contact and consult each other more widely and more regularly. They coordinate their steps, form alliances, build protective political cartels and cooperate in executing policies.
- The seizing up of financial institutions and credit flows, initially most acute in the United States and United Kingdom during the latter half of 2008, ushered in an economic-political ‘Great Recession’ in the trans-Atlantic world (the USA and the EU) unmatched in severity since the Great Depression. Many observers, especially those of neo-liberal persuasion, chalk the crisis up to trans-Atlantic publics ‘living beyond their means’ and politicians who recklessly encouraged this. The elite perspective sees the crisis as a top-down disaster. Policies leading to it were much less responses to mass pressures than catastrophic misjudgments and blunders by political, state administrative, economic, media and other leadership groups pursuing fanciful ideas about self-regulating financial markets and a currency union without a fiscal union.

## 9. The Transatlantic Crisis and the rise of populism (elite deterioration)

The Transatlantic Crisis began during 2008 with the insolvencies of giant US and UK financial institutions and a freezing of credit flows. It metastasized during 2009-10 into an economic-political crisis on both sides of the Atlantic. Chief aspects of it have been:

- GDP contraction in the US and Europe followed by anemic GDP growth in the US and continuing contraction Europe, especially in Southern Europe;
- Real estate bubbles leading to millions of home mortgage defaults, foreclosures, and deep construction industry downturns;
- Vast liquidity injections by central banks and supranational institutions to recapitalize banks, re-start credit flows, and save investors from huge losses – all difficult to stop without a ‘double-dip’ recession;
- Double-digit unemployment rates, especially pronounced among younger people in nearly all countries, but particularly high in southern Europe;
- Gross public debt approaching 100% of GDP in the largest countries and well beyond it in Italy, Spain and most smaller countries;
- Painful austerity programs (especially in Southern Europe) to reduce budget deficits by increasing taxes and cutting public sector employment, unit labor costs and welfare outlays;
- Electoral defeats or reconfigurations of governments in nearly all the countries;
- Strengthening of populist radical right and radical left at the expense of centrist political forces;
- Deep disputes about fiscal and monetary policies, bailouts of countries and financial firms, cross-border fiscal transfers and new regulatory measures – all introduced in the climate of uncertainty, fear and polarization;
- Recession and slowing economic growth in Southern and Western regions of Europe, as well as Germany, France and Belgium.

The crisis coexists with the ‘migration crisis’ and the demographic transition (ageing) in Europe. Both result in an upsurge of (mostly right wing) populism. It is marked by increased elite circulation, proliferation of populist politicians tapping on public hostility toward political elites, national governments and supranational institutions, accompanied by the rise of backlash movements and radical parties on both left and right.

Reading (optional): Fukuyama, F. 2014. *Political Order and Political Decay*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, Ch. 1, 31 and 36.

## 10. Persisting Misconceptions, Confusions and Controversies About Elitism and Elites

Elitism is often confused with arrogant exclusivism, elites are seen as usurping power, and elite theory is confused with rejection of democracy. Moreover, there are numerous controversies. Are we dealing with a single (national) elite, or multiple (plural) elites? Are state-based elites more powerful than corporate elites? Are national elites overshadowed by ‘global elites’?

- ‘Elites’ should not be misunderstood as socially exclusive power usurpers, and ‘elitism’ should not be confused with an attitude of arrogant superiority. Nor should elitism be seen as an unconditional and servile apology for ‘the powers that be’. By the same token,

‘elite qualities’ should not be confused with the social graces and cultural refinements typical of traditional establishments and aristocracies, and they should not be seen as synonymous with mere intellectual sophistication, wisdom, moral rectitude or virtuous character traits. Rather, elite qualities are those attributes that contribute to the *effective exercise of power*, and they are contingent on circumstances.

- Moreover, elitism is neither affirmative nor critical of elites; it simply accepts the inevitability of their existence, and invites reflection on the reasons why some elites succeed and other fail. Elitism also provides a normative framework for evaluation of elite failure and success. The fact that elitism has generated mainly *critical* analyses of elites (their shortcomings and failures) is indicative of its critical-skeptical angle and foundations. Elitism and elite theory do not overlook the ‘non-elites’, and they do not ignore the social structures and institutions in which elites are embedded. All elitists see elite power as socially grounded, embedded, institutionalized, anchored in major organizations, and as ‘resting upon’ elite-mass alliances. Most elitists also recognize the importance of these alliances for effective ruling in democratic and non-democratic regimes alike.
- There is, however, a distinctive elitist angle in political analyses, sometimes describes as a ‘top down’ perspective on power combined with a view of the centrality of elite actors and actions. While the composition and structure of elites changes constantly in the process of ‘elite circulation’ (changes *in* elite), more profound change *of* elites are rare. Such changes of elite character and identity are brought about by momentous events, such as sudden replacements or revolutions. They typically follow failures of preceding elites, are accompanied by deep crises, and coincide with alterations to elite structure and strategy. Thus the 1989 negotiated ‘refolutions’ in CEE in 1989-91 constituted ‘changes of elite structure and type’. So did the revolutionary coup in Iran in 1979-80 – it was a case of a violent, Bolshevik-type revolutionary elite replacement. Regular changes of government and ruling parties, by contrast, do not constitute changes of elites, though they typically coincide with some changes within ruling minorities.

Reading (optional): Pakulski, J. 2016. ‘Misconceptions about elites and elitism’, Mimeo.