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IDEOLOGICAL CONTRIBUTION TO THE
STUDY OF POLITICAL ELITES**

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The Elitism. Theoretical and Ideological Contribution to the Study of Political Elites

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Abstract

Ciprian Iftimoaei opts for democratic elitism as applicable theoretical approach in solving the controversy between the theory of elites and the theory of democracy, portrayed political elites as "guardians of democracy". In other words, democratic elitism is considered a socio-political approach to (re)reconcile regulatory requirements of democracy (democracy as it should be) with the empirical evidence of the existence of a functioning democracy in elite competitions for exercising political power (democracy as it is).

Keywords: *elitism, theoretic, ideological contribution, political elites.*

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The book *Elitism. Theoretical and Ideological Contributions to the Study of Political Elites*, wrote by Ciprian Iftimoaci, is a part of a series of relatively recent concerns in the area of political sciences dedicated to political elites in Post-Communist Romania. The author brings together classic and contemporary approaches of the elitist phenomenon which are grouped into four socio-political schools of thought: classical elitism (V. Pareto, G. Mosca, R. Michels), radical elitism (Th. Veblen, C. Wright Mills, W.G. Domhoff), pluralist elitism (K. Mannheim, A. Schumpeter, R. Aron, R.A. Dahl) and democratic elitism (J. Higley, H. Best, J. Borchet, A. Körösenyi, Fr. Engelstad). According to the author, elitism is defined as an approach of history and politics which, in a systematic formulation, supports the idea according to which societies are ruled by a minority of individuals (the elite) that takes major (“strategic”) decisions.

The author discusses about the classical theories about elites (classical elitism) which were formulated at the end of the XIXth century and in the first half of the XXth century by sociologists Vilfredo Pareto (1848-1923), Gaetano Mosca (1858-1941) and Robert Michels (1876-1936). The works of these classics of political sociology have in common the idea according to which society is inevitably ruled by a minority of people that we can call “governmental elite”, “ruling class”, “political class”, “political elite”. Classical elitism postulated the inevitability of society being led by elite: “governmental elite” (Pareto), “the ruling class” (Mosca) and “oligarchy” (Michels). Classical elitism was to a large extent a reply given to Marxism. In this sense, classical theorists of elites argue that a socialist society that is based on the equality of all individuals is a utopia. The three classics of elite theory justly noticed the inadequacy of the democratic ideal to the political reality of the time when they wrote their works. The way in which democracy functioned in Italy at the end of the XIXth century and the beginning of the XXth century disappointed because of its incompetence and the inefficiency of the ones elected to rule over peoples’ destinies.

After the Second World War, the works of the classics of elite theory crossed the Atlantic and entered in the American intellectual university space. If in Europe elitism developed by reference to the Marxist theory on the social classes, which inspired and ideologically motivated the action of the labour movement, in the United States we can’t speak about a true socialist movement. While classic elitism gave the masses a rather decorative role in history, radical elitism reinstates the “elite-masses” ratio formulating strong criticism of the way in which the “power elites” rules society in

favour of their own interests, while the masses support the consequences of the actions of those who govern. The way in which elites are formed, operate and transform is a problem of the capitalist society. The representatives of radical elitism state that huge powers are concentrated in the hands of a few people, but this is not an unavoidable consequence of human society development. Elite leadership is neither necessary nor desirable, as elitism classics argued.

In the author's view, the pluralist elitism is theoretically a bridge between the previously mentioned schools of elite thought – classic elitism and radical elitism – and democratic elitism. The novelty brought by this political school is the pluralist methodology itself (in opposition with the monism of the previous schools) applied in studying the structure of power in democratic regimes. As we shall see, in Robert Dahl's view, power has a polyarchical structure, meaning that it is organized in a multitude of centers of power, specialized on different fields of activity. Democratic pluralism values the theoretical acquisitions of participative democracy and completes them with Joseph Schumpeter's "competitive theory of democracy". Heinrich Best and John Higley appreciate that Schumpeter's theory of democracy does not deepen the aspects regarding the quality of the political leaders and elites. In spite of all criticism, Schumpeter's contribution to the development of the theory of democracy and elite pluralism is an essential reference for all researchers in the field of sociology and political science. From the elite theory point of view, it is pretty difficult to say Schumpeter belongs to one school of thought or another. Some authors place him next to R. Aron, D. Truman and R. Dahl in the school of elite pluralism (pluralist elitism), while other authors consider him one of the first democratic elitism theorists.

Democratic elitism is a political science approach that tries to accommodate the elite theory with the theory of democracy and to solve the contradiction between "dominant minority governing" (R. Dahl) and "governing of the people, by the people, for the people" (A. Lincoln). The theoretic link between theory of elites and theory of democracy is represented by Joseph A. Schumpeter's work, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*. Democratic elitism is synonymous with the idea of competition between the political elites that takes place in a democratic environment that encourages "participation and opposition". The stakes of the competition between elites is to obtain the electoral and political support of the majority with the purpose of exercising governance. In short, democratic elitism

means that all political elites agree to the idea that democracy is the only institutional formula that allows the expression, representation and competition of divergent interests in society so that no political elite that governs can have absolute power.

Ciprian Ifțimoaei opts for democratic elitism as applicable theoretical approach in solving the controversy between the theory of elites and the theory of democracy, portrayed political elites as "guardians of democracy". In other words, democratic elitism is considered a socio-political approach to (re)reconcile normative requirements of democracy (*democracy as it should be*) with the empirical evidence of a functioning democracy as a framework of elite competitions for power (*democracy as it is*).

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Biodata

Anton Carpinschi is *Professor Emeritus* of "Al.I. Cuza" University of Iasi, where he teaches courses in political science and political philosophy. He was a visiting professor at the universities of Toulouse, Hague, Liege, Konstanz, Rovaniemi, Lille, Chisinau. Published books: *Contemporary Political Doctrines. A Typological Synthesis* (1991); *Current Ideological Orientation. Trends and Meanings* (1991); *Contemporary Political Doctrines. Typologies, Dynamics, Perspectives* (1992); *Opening and Direction in Political Thought* (1995); *The Science of Politics. Treaty*, Vol. I (1998, with C. Bocancea); *Recognition Culture* (2008); *International organizations* (2011, with D. Margarit).