

Elites as Status Groups in Democratic Societies

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Abstract

This article makes the case for conceptualizing elites as upper status groups – that is, as groups whom others perceive as having superior value in one respect or another. This conceptualization accounts for dominant definitions of elites as groups with disproportionate access to valuable resources and as groups with superior power, while acknowledging that many resource-rich or powerful groups can hardly be referred to as elites. Most importantly, seeing elites as upper status groups delineates an original research agenda for the study of elites in democratic societies premised on the reduction of status asymmetries between individuals. In such societies, I argue, elites owe their existence to social processes that affirm or reaffirm, against a backdrop of democratic ideals, the idea that people come in greater or lesser degrees of value. Studying these processes means advancing a sociology of elites that goes beyond the description of elite personnel or of the attributes of elite status and instead charts, social domain after social domain, the emergence and cultivation of beliefs in the existence of worthiness hierarchies among individuals. To illustrate what such a sociology might look like, the article revisits two empirical cases showing how a cultural and an academic elite, respectively, were made possible by (1) the emergence of collective beliefs in the existence of a hierarchy of cultural tastes in the Gilded United States and (2) the rise of collective beliefs in the existence of a hierarchy of intelligence in the wake of the French and American democratic revolutions.

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Introduction

It may sometimes feel hard to remember, but many of us live in democratic societies. By this I do not mean that we live in societies where individuals elect their leaders, or where they consent to their government through a form of social contract as long as this government guarantees a series of individual rights – what one could describe as the liberal view of democracy. Nor do I mean that we live in societies where individuals enjoy roughly equal

resources, or opportunities to access these resources – a desirable horizon for democracy, perhaps, but one that is hardly a definition of it. What I have in mind instead is that we live in societies premised on the reduction of asymmetrical status relations between individuals, and on the advancement instead of relations grounded in “democratic equality” (Anderson 1999, p. 289). This, I shall argue, can be referred to as the anti-hierarchical view of democracy, and it is largely the one that has been bequeathed to us by early egalitarian social movements, eighteenth-century democratic revolutions, and in many places by decades of social democratic developments.¹

The central contention of this article is that there is a fundamental tension between a society’s democratic character thus understood and the fact that it has elites. The reason for this tension, I shall argue, is that elites are at core *upper status groups* – that is, groups of individuals whom society regards as having superior value to others in one respect or another. Put differently, it is a defining feature of elites that they occupy superior positions in hierarchies of status or perceived worthiness. If, as recent social and political philosophy reminds us, the chief pursuit of democracy is the erosion of status hierarchies and the promotion instead of democratic or status equality, then it becomes clear that the very existence of elites does not sit well with a society’s democratic ideals.

Foregrounding the tension between a society’s democratic character and the fact that it has elites is valuable because it raises research questions that are seldom asked in the sociology of elites. Democratic societies’ ideals of status equality notwithstanding, there is no denying that these societies *have* elites. With that in mind, the tension I started outlining invites us to reflect on *what it takes* for democratic societies to have elites. Specifically, it suggests that, for elites to emerge and perpetuate themselves in these societies, it is not enough that they should persuade others of their superior value in one domain or another. Against a backdrop of democratic ideals, they must also institute or reinstitute the very idea that people come in greater or lesser degrees of value. This step is not necessary in aristocratic societies, where

¹ On early egalitarian movements as anti-hierarchical, see Anderson (2017, p. 1-36). On how the American and French revolutions fostered a democratic society in the sense I refer to here, see Wood (1991, p. 229-243), Rosanvallon (2013, p. 12-73). On social democracy as the culmination of this vision of democracy, see Anderson (2023, p. 225-252).

the existence of worthiness hierarchies is taken for granted, and in fact forms the foundation of the social order. In democratic societies premised on the leveling of differences in perceived worthiness, by contrast, affirming or reaffirming the existence of worthiness hierarchies is a prerequisite for the emergence of elites, and an integral part of their legitimacy.²

This line of thinking has considerable heuristic power for sociologists, as it directs our attention to a class of social processes whose outcome it is to institute collective beliefs in the existence of hierarchies of worthiness among individuals. Exploring these processes offers an original research agenda for elite studies: it means going beyond the description of elite personnel or of the attributes of elite status and instead examining, social domain after social domain, how social groups learn to turn a hierarchical gaze on their members, thereby recreating a form of aristocratic thinking in otherwise democratic environments. In short, it means developing a sociology of elitism, or of the conditions of possibility for upper status groups in societies otherwise committed to the erosion of status asymmetries between people.

The remainder of this article lays the groundwork for this research agenda. The first two sections make the case for understanding elites as upper status groups, on the one hand, and democracy as the pursuit of status equality among individuals, on the other. This poses in sharp relief the tension between a society's democratic ideals and the existence of elites in that society. The third and final section showcases the kind of empirical accounts that might arise from a sociology taking this tension seriously and investigating the emergence of collective beliefs in the existence of worthiness hierarchies as a condition for the emergence of elites in democratic societies. By revisiting two historical cases, it shows how a cultural and an academic elite, respectively, were made possible by (1) the rise of collective beliefs in the existence of a hierarchy of cultural tastes in Gilded Age America and (2) the emergence of collective beliefs in the existence of a hierarchy of intelligence in France and in the United States following their eighteenth-century democratic revolutions.

² It should go without saying that I do not mean to essentialize societies as being either "aristocratic" or "democratic," and that this language is shorthand for describing the ideals of political organization these societies are based upon.

Elites as Upper Status Groups

Of Max Weber's ([1922] 1968) three dimensions of social stratification – class, status, and power – status has long been, if not the poor relation, certainly the more poorly understood. At the root of this poor understanding is the fundamental difference that sets status aside from its two conceptual counterparts, namely the fact that, unlike wealth or power, status cannot be unilaterally seized (Ridgeway 1984). Instead, an actor's social status, or the value others accord her in a given social context, lies entirely in the way this actor is regarded by others (Ridgeway and Walker 1995; Sørensen 2001; Ollivier 2004; Magee and Galinsky 2008). In that sense, status is essentially a symbolic quantity: it is in the eye of the beholder, and while it may make sense to say that someone has power or wealth without others' knowledge, "it makes no sense to say that someone has [status] even though nobody realizes it" (Gould 2003, p. 7; see also Accominotti 2024).

This article proposes to conceptualize elites as *upper status groups* – that is, as groups of individuals whom society regards as having superior value to others in one respect or another. This conceptualization, I shall argue, accounts for dominant definitions of elites as groups with privileged access to valuable resources and as groups enjoying superior power, yet it also acknowledges that many resource-rich or powerful groups can hardly be referred to as elites. More fundamentally, this conceptualization adds clarity to how we designate the groups occupying upper positions in Weber's three dimensions of social stratification: while groups at the top of the class distribution have long been referred to as *upper classes* and those at the top of the power dimension as *ruling classes*, it is analytically useful to be able to refer to those at the top of the status dimension as *elites*.

One of the two major ways of thinking about elites in contemporary scholarship defines them as groups with disproportionate access to valuable resources such as economic, cultural, or social capital – a definition most prominently advocated by Shamus Khan (2012; see also Cousin, Khan, and Mears 2018). In a recent article, Khan (Khan et al. 2024) reflects back on the origins of this definition by observing that, in the Marxist tradition, privileged access to economic resources has commonly defined a society's *upper class*. This, he suggests,

justifies the need for a different concept – elites – to designate groups whose privileged access extends to other kinds of resources, such as cultural or social capital (Khan et al. 2024). While recognizing the meaningfulness of this reasoning, here I wish to offer that, in the Weberian framework I outlined above, the type of resource a group has disproportionate access to is irrelevant to the concept one should want to use to refer to that group, and that as long as the group’s key characteristic is its disproportionate access to a valuable resource, analytical parsimony suggests sticking to the concept of upper class.³

If the category of elites describes something analytically distinct from the category of upper class, I instead propose that it is because elites have the specificity of being *looked up to*. Weber ([1922] 2004, p. 189) himself was not saying anything different when he defined elites as characterized by their “beauty and excellence,” two qualities that are most clearly attributed by admiring others. Stratification scholar E. Digby Baltzell (1966, p. 173) makes a similar point in a seemingly prosaic but illuminating discussion of upper-group directories: in modern, merit-oriented societies, he argues, elites are those regarded by others as having achieved the greatest accomplishments in their respective fields. Upper classes, by contrast, are social groups that hoard disproportionate amounts of resources and tend to pass them on to the next generation. To Baltzell, this means that an index such as *Who’s Who*, whose listees are included on the basis of their perceived achievement, is a repertoire of elites, while an index such as the *Social Register*, whose members are listed following their cooptation by earlier members – that is, based on their social capital – is an index of the upper class. Following in these footsteps, I suggest defining elites as upper status groups, or as groups of individuals whom others see as having superior value – whether because of their excellence, beauty, merit, achievement, or of any other valued characteristic.⁴

The second dominant understanding of elites in recent scholarship defines them as groups wielding superior power (Mills 1956; Domhoff 1967; Scott 2008; Mizruchi 2013; Savage

³ I should quickly note that, in this Weberian framework, neither status nor power are *resources* in the way economic, cultural, or social capital are. This is because the possession of power and status depend on the actions of others, to an extent that the possession of economic, cultural, or social capital do not (Tilly 1998).

⁴ In fact, “elites” derives from the Latin for “to elect,” which is typically done by others to those they see as having superior value.

2025). This understanding is usually traced back to early Italian political social science (Mosca 1939; Pareto [1897] 1964; Michels [1911] 1962), although it should be said that, with the exception of Vilfredo Pareto, early Italian scholars typically refer to groups wielding superior power as “ruling classes,” “political classes” (Mosca 1939), or “oligarchies” (Michels [1911] 1962).⁵ These scholars’ central insight was the simple, almost obvious observation that all organized societies consist of a vast majority without any political power and a small minority of powerholders (Hirschman 1991). Importantly, they also theorized how ruling classes often legitimate their power by cultivating ideologies that portray them as being of superior moral, intellectual, or political worth. Whether these ideologies, which Gaetano Mosca calls “political formulas,” suggest that powerholders derive their position from divine will, from superior competence, or from a people’s mandate, they contribute to turn them into more than a powerful group – and into an upper status group or elite indeed. Hence, classical theorists themselves drew a clear analytical distinction between what they envisioned as ruling classes, or groups with superior power, and elites, or groups with superior status, which ruling classes could, but did not have to be.

Sociologists have similarly theorized how upper classes tend to become upper status groups: Weber ([1922] 1968) famously observed that after securing disproportionate control of a resource, upper classes commonly look to cement their position of privilege by fostering collective beliefs in their superior worth (see also Tilly 1998). In contemporary social science, this argument is most recognizable in the work of Pierre Bourdieu (1973, 1984), who maintains that widespread beliefs in the higher cultural tastes or superior academic talent of the economically dominant work to entrench their position of privilege by making it look like the deserved outcome of greater innate worth.⁶

⁵ Weber’s ([1922] 1968, p. 938) own preferred term for designating groups whose goal is to gain superior power is “political parties.”

⁶ Building on this argument, one might speculate that, in societies that value academic ability, the growing association of class with education in contemporary stratification structures (Massey 2007) and cultural perceptions (Kozlowski, Taddy, and Evans 2019) means that larger swaths of upper classes are now also upper status groups, making sociologists more likely to designate upper classes as “elites.”

While upper and ruling classes are therefore likely to become elites, status research conversely shows that elites, understood as upper status groups, are also likely to enjoy outsized power and privileged access to important resources. The status characteristics literature thus stresses how, across a virtually endless range of social contexts, individuals with more of what a society values wield greater influence and garner more favorable outcomes relative to those with less (Correll and Ridgeway 2003; Ridgeway 2014, 2019). Organizational scholarship likewise shows that valuable resources flow disproportionately to actors in higher status positions (Merton 1968; Sauder, Lynn, and Podolny 2012).

It comes as no surprise, then, that recent scholarship on elites would have described them alternatively as groups with superior resources and as groups with superior power: in fact, elites and upper and ruling classes are bound to overlap empirically (figure 1). Yet this should not make us lose sight of the fact that they are analytically distinct entities, lest we forgo the ability to recognize that some elites are not upper classes, or that some power-wielding groups are not elites. There is ample evidence, for example, that in contemporary societies bankers, CEOs, or politicians – the kind of people who might enjoy executive power – are not necessarily those who command the highest status. While this observation has led some to call for a return to the concept of power to ground a definition of elites (Savage 2025), it is easily accounted for in the classical framework I have rearticulated here, wherein elites are upper status groups and power can unproblematically be wielded by a status-less ruling class.

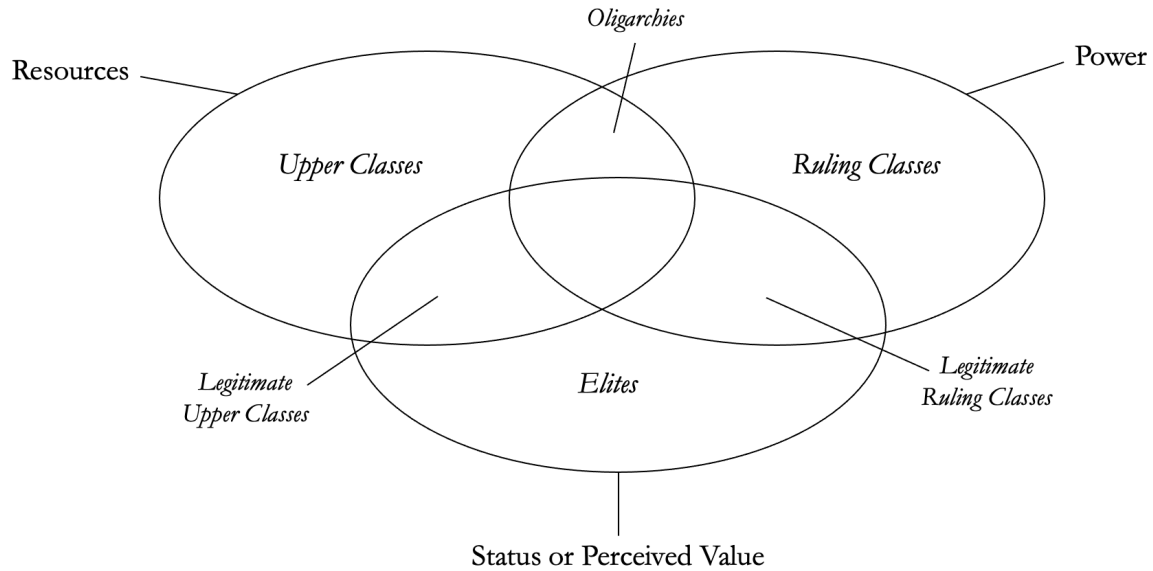


Figure 1. Upper social groups in three elementary dimensions of social stratification: resources, power, and status.

Understanding elites as the incumbents of top positions in hierarchies of perceived worthiness is not just a matter of analytical clarity: it also has considerable heuristic power for sociologists. The next section focuses on how this understanding lays bare the fundamental tension between a society's democratic character and the fact that this society has elites. This tension in turn suggests that, for elites to emerge and perpetuate themselves in democratic societies, they should not just be able to claim superior value in one domain or another. Instead, any such claim should come with the simultaneous assertion or reassertion that it makes sense to see people as coming in unequal degrees of value.

Democracy as the Negation of Status Hierarchies

In recent decades, social and political philosophy has reexamined the nature of the democratic turn characteristic of Western modernity. Through the writings of Elizabeth Anderson (1999, 2017, 2023), Samuel Scheffler (2003; 2010a, 2015), or the later John Rawls (2001), this reexamination argues that the liberal view of democracy – the notion that

individuals should enjoy equal civil and political rights under a government they consent to through some kind of social contract – was far from forming the whole of the modern democratic ideal. Rather, these authors suggest, as early as the beginning of the modern era, underpinning its successive democratic revolutions, and expressed by thinkers as diverse as the English Levellers, Thomas Paine and fellow American Quakers, and later Walt Whitman and John Dewey, it is possible to discern a competing vision of democracy – a vision one might describe as *anti-hierarchical*.⁷

According to this vision, equal rights and a government grounded in consent is not enough to warrant a democracy. Instead, achieving democracy is predicated on the pursuit of “democratic equality” (Anderson 1999, p. 289), or of the erosion of asymmetrical social relations between individuals. In the eyes of modern democratic thinkers, this had both a negative and a positive aspect. Negatively, it meant repudiating hierarchies of perceived human worth based on birth or social identity. Positively, it meant promoting a social order in which individuals would live together in a democratic community – as opposed to a hierarchical one – that is, a community where they would stand before each other as equals in their discussions and interactions (Anderson 1999). As long as this was not the case, individuals would face the possibility that they might be subordinated by others, and a society could not be deemed truly democratic.⁸

To fully understand what this ideal of democratic equality entails, it is useful to contrast it with another notion of equality: that of an *equality of conditions*, delineating a society where resources are allocated, if not necessarily equally among individuals, at least in a way that is not unreasonably lopsided. The idea of an equality of conditions rests on a distributive understanding of equality: it sees equality as a given state of a distribution of resources, and it

⁷ On the Levellers, see Bejan (2022); on Paine, see Anderson (2017); on Whitman and Dewey, see Rorty (1998).

⁸ Spitz (2022) has pointed out how this concern for freedom as lack of subordination was shared with a different tradition in modern political thought: civic republicanism (e.g., Pettit 1999), or “civic humanism” (Rawls 1993, p. 205), the model for which was the republican city of classical antiquity, and which historically animated the vision of the American founders. Although Anderson (2015) also acknowledges the connections between civic republicanism and anti-hierarchical democratic thinking, one should note that the former had a distinctly elitist and anti-democratic character to it, and that, in U.S. history in particular, it was tightly bound to the subordination of marginalized groups, especially women, slaves, and Native Americans (Rana 2010).

regards individuals as equal when they enjoy roughly equivalent amounts of a distributive good (e.g., economic, cultural, or social capital, or opportunities to access these). In the language I have been using here, this means that an equality of conditions largely precludes the kind of disproportionate access to valuable resources that is characteristic of an upper class.

An equality of conditions thus conceived is largely orthogonal to democratic equality. For one thing, equal conditions do not rule out the existence of asymmetrical social relations rooted in perceptions of unequal worth by race, gender, or other social identities. For another, a situation where individuals stand as equals before each other in their social relations be achieved without a full equalization of conditions (Anderson 2018).⁹ Democratic equality, that is, should not be defined as a distributive outcome, but instead as a form of relationship between individuals engaged in collective life. Most specifically, proponents of a democratic understanding of equality argue that individuals are equals if they submit to the obligation of justifying their actions through principles that others cannot legitimately reject, and if they admit that such principles can only be determined by a consultation where all recognize others as having a value equal to their own (Anderson 1999; also see Scheffler 2010a; Lippert-Rasmussen 2020).

At the heart of the modern ideal of democracy, then, is a quest for a social order in which individuals are recognized *equal value* when it comes to their discussions and interactions. In the language I have used here, this means that democratic societies strive for the negation of hierarchies of perceived value among individuals.¹⁰ By

⁹ In fact, even severe inequalities of conditions do not necessarily result in the situations of subordination that an anti-hierarchical ideal of democracy aims to keep in check. If ten people lived independently on ten separate islands and enjoyed vastly unequal amounts of resources, the inequality between them would not violate ideals of non-subordination. In less hypothetical circumstances, however, a more balanced distribution of resources might still be desirable for achieving democratic equality: as I discussed earlier, sociologists (Weber [1922] 1968; Tilly 1998; Ridgeway et al. 1998) have long argued that unequal access to resources tends to quickly congeal in unequal levels of perceived worthiness, and therefore in asymmetrical social relations.

¹⁰ In that respect, the democratic egalitarian ideal also departs starkly from a third notion of equality: that of an *equality of opportunity*, according to which one should neutralize the the impact on individuals' life chances of arbitrary factors such as family origins or racial and ethnic identity (see Anderson 2010; Scheffler 2010b). While

implication, this means that, just as distributive equality is at odds with the existence of upper classes, democratic equality is at odds with the existence of elites: insofar as elites are upper status groups defined by others' recognition of their superior value in one domain or another, and hence that they are bound to wield outsize power and influence in their interactions with others – at least when it comes to that domain – their very existence is in tension with modern societies' democratic character.¹¹

The fingerprints of this quest for status equality are all over the democratic upheavals of the modern era and, later, all over the social democratic enterprise. They explain why the stigmatization of aristocracy played as important a role in the American as in the French Revolution, even though colonial America had no nobility and none of the legal status distinctions that existed in the Old World: as Gordon Wood (1976) has shown, American colonial society was in fact fairly hierarchical, with a strong sense of social rank and deference, particularly in New England, and although Federalist notables long believed in the need for an “aristocracy of the virtuous,” the idea of democratic equality soon became the rallying cry of popular protest. In colonies North and South, people voiced disgust with “airs of wisdom and superiority” and associated “affectations of politeness” (Wood 1976, p. 74). In Pennsylvania especially, the American Revolution was perceived as a movement to eradicate the “aristocracy.” “Blessed State which brings all so nearly on a level,” said ordinary people exasperated by those whom they characterized as “gentlemen” (Wood 1976, p. 122). In 1786, representatives of the state formally declared that “a democratic government like ours admits no form of superiority” (Wood, 1991, p. 341). This directly echoed Abbé Sieyès's attack on privilege in *What Is the Third Estate?* – a pamphlet that epitomized the spirit of the 1789 French Revolution and quickly became its political manifesto – which aimed at more than just legal and tax exemptions for the nobility. His critiques included a much

equal opportunity involves an equalization of life chances on the starting line, its outcome is highly status hierarchical, as the unequal positions individuals end up occupying now appear as the deserved consequences of their unequal inner worth (Young 1958; Fourcade and Healy 2024).

¹¹ Commenting on Dewey's vision of democracy, Rorty (1998, p. 30) thus notes that a democratic country “will take nothing as authoritative save free consensus between as diverse a variety of citizens as can possibly be produced. Such a country cannot contain castes or classes, because the kind of self-respect that is needed for free participation in democratic deliberation is incompatible with such social divisions.”

broad range of claims to social superiority and distinction: in his view, the “privileged” included all those who believed that “they were not made to be confounded, to rub shoulders, to be together” with the rest (Sieyès [1788] 1982, p. 10).

In the United States, this anti-elitist streak may have enjoyed a high point in the Jacksonian era, when democracy increasingly came to be seen not just as a political regime, but as a form of society – a “society of semblables” in which (White and male) citizens “prized their democratic attitudes toward one another,” and where “expressions of mutual respect, ease of contact, [the] absence of condescension in discussion, and naturalness and simplicity of manners were the most immediate manifestations of the idea of equality” (Rosanvallon 2013, p. 62-63). Such a “democracy of consideration” (*ibid*, p. 64) may feel like a distant memory. It would be difficult to overstate, however, the extent to which this same ideal of eroding status hierarchies remains alive today in the social democratic project (Anderson 2023). At its core indeed, social democracy envisions the equalization of conditions as a means toward the erosion of perceived differences in value across individuals, and therefore toward the achievement of true democracy. Rawls (2001, p. 131) puts this point compellingly when discussing the conditions of a social order in which individuals stand before each other as equals: “Significant political and economic inequalities are often associated with inequalities of social status that encourage those of lower status to be viewed both by themselves and by others as inferior. This may arouse widespread attitudes of deference and servility, on one side, and a will to dominate and arrogance on the other. These effects of social and economic inequalities can be serious evils” when it comes to the construction and preservation of a genuine democracy.

Integral to the modern vision of democracy, therefore, is a pursuit of status equality that cannot but frown upon the recognition of value differences among people. This lays bare the tension between a society’s democratic character and the fact that it has elites. If indeed elites are best seen as upper status groups defined by others’ recognition of their superior value in one domain or another, their very existence rubs against modern democratic ideals.

Modern democratic societies obviously have elites. They do regard certain groups as having superior value in a variety of social domains, whether these groups are seen as possessing greater intellectual ability – defining an academic elite –, superior cultural tastes – defining a cultural elite – or more broadly as simply being “the best” in their respective fields. The point of this article is not to say that a society’s democratic character precludes the existence of elites. Rather, it is to suggest that we scrutinize *what it takes* for elites to emerge in societies predicated to the leveling of status differences among individuals. Specifically, democratic societies’ cultural orientation to status equality suggests that for elites to emerge and maintain themselves in these societies, they should not just be able to convince others of their superior value in one domain or another. Against a background of skepticism toward the recognition of any hierarchy of worth among individuals, they also ought to make the case that people *should* be viewed as coming in greater or lesser degrees of value to begin with. Put differently, in democratic societies, any claim to value superiority should come with the simultaneous affirmation or reaffirmation that it makes sense to view people as unequally valuable. This affirmation is not necessary when the existence of worthiness hierarchies is taken for granted, as is the case in aristocratic societies. In democratic societies premised on the negation of these hierarchies, however, it is a condition of possibility for the emergence of elites and a crucial part of their legitimacy.

Practically, this approach raises a class of empirical questions that are seldom asked in the sociology of elites. It suggests that for a cultural elite to emerge based on its claims to superior cultural tastes, there needs to be such a thing as a collective belief in the existence of a hierarchy of cultural tastes. How is this belief produced and maintained in societies committed to the erosion of status asymmetries between individuals? Similarly, for an academic elite to emerge based on claims to higher intellectual ability or intelligence, there needs to be such a thing as a collective belief in the existence of a hierarchy of intelligence. Where does this belief come from, and what are the social operations shielding it from challenges based on the democratic revindication of an equality of intellects? What these questions have in common is that they invite us to go beyond traditional approaches studying the makeup and structure of elite personnel, or the attributes of elite status, to

instead document, social domain after social domain, how social groups learn to turn a “hierarchical gaze” (Accominotti 2021a, p. 200) on their members, thereby reenacting a form of aristocratic thinking in otherwise democratic environments. In other words, it means developing a sociology of elitism, or of the genesis and maintenance of collective beliefs in the existence of worthiness hierarchies – beliefs without which elites are not possible in the first place. In closing this article, let me try to give my reader a sense of what such a sociology may look like, by building partially on two examples from my own research. The first example documents how a cultural elite was made possible in the United States by the construction of a collective belief in a hierarchy of cultural tastes during the Gilded Age. The second example explores the rise of collective beliefs in the existence of a hierarchy of intelligence as a condition for the emergence of academic elites in France and in the United States in the wake of their democratic revolutions.

Although it can be hard to fathom from a contemporary standpoint, in the first few decades of the nineteenth century, the idea of a stark hierarchy of value among cultural genres, and therefore of a stark hierarchy of worth among cultural tastes, was not obvious in the United States. In line with the broader anti-hierarchical democratic spirit that had rapidly supplanted the founders’ elitist ideal of a government of the virtuous as the dominant streak of the American Revolution (Wood 1991), the diverse cultural behaviors of (White and male) Americans were unlikely to endow them with greater or lesser status. This was particularly striking to Europeans who crossed the Atlantic to observe the American experiment first-hand. Of these, Tocqueville ([1831] 2002) is the most celebrated, yet he was not alone. His traveling companion Gustave de Beaumont (1835) also published an account of his impressions, in which he marveled at how – unlike in Europe – in the United States no economy of distinction seemed to regulate relations between individuals: “The reason why Americans are so eminently sociable, he noted, is perhaps also what prevents them from being polite: there are no privileges to arouse envy, but there is also no upper class whose elegance can serve as a model to others” (cited in Rosanvallon 2013, p. 63). As cultural historian Lawrence Levine (1988) has documented, prior to the mid-nineteenth century Americans also experienced a public culture that was not strongly hierarchically organized. As an example, cultural productions were ordinarily consumed in venues offering a mixing of genres – Shakespeare and popular plays, folk songs and Mozart –, denoting a lack of

perceived boundaries between what we now recognize as “high” and “low” culture. Early nineteenth-century U.S. society, in short, did not have a strong collective belief that there was such a thing as a hierarchy of cultural tastes or behaviors. As a consequence, it was hard for it to have a bona fide cultural elite – that is, a group whose tastes would have been widely regarded as superior to others.

Before such a cultural elite could emerge, two processes unfolded over the course of the Gilded Age that resulted in the development of a shared, hierarchical gaze on cultural tastes. Over the second half of the nineteenth century, first, upper- and working-class cultures were gradually separated from one another both in physical and symbolic spaces (DiMaggio 1982a, 1982b; Levine 1988; Benzecry 2014). Described by Levine as the sacralization of upper-class culture and by DiMaggio as its purification from popular elements, this process affected museums’ collections as well as the repertoires of theaters and orchestras. It meant that by the end of the century, the mixing of “high” and “low” culture had virtually disappeared from cultural organizations. In Boston in particular, this development was made possible by the control of a cohesive upper class over the boards of major cultural institutions (DiMaggio 1982a, 1982b): as early as the 1880s, this upper class had established an art museum (the Boston Museum of Fine Arts) and an orchestra (the Boston Symphony Orchestra) that kept popular culture at bay and affirmed the existence of a radical difference between “high-” and “lowbrow” culture.

As students of culture have observed, however, the separation of upper-class and popular culture is not enough to make the former recognized as *superior* to the latter (Bourdieu 1984). Instead, high culture acquires its cachet of superiority from the fact that non-upper-class groups are also willing to participate into it. This points to the second process that helped cement the idea of a hierarchy of cultural tastes in Gilded Age America: the conspicuous inclusion of non-upper-class groups into the audiences of upper-class-sponsored cultural institutions. By analyzing the changing makeup of audiences to the New York Philharmonic in that era, colleagues and I have shown in particular that the inclusion within the halls of the Philharmonic of audience members hailing from the professional and managerial middle class that was then rising in U.S. cities was instrumental in legitimizing upper-class musical tastes (Accominotti, Khan, and Storer 2018). By publicly endorsing upper-class cultural

tastes and institutions, middle-class patrons overtly signaled that these tastes and institutions had higher cultural currency. Because upper class patrons maintained privileged claims to these tastes and control of these institutions, this endorsement turned them into a genuine cultural elite – a group whose cultural preferences were not just different but recognizably superior – eventually reminding us that elites do not exist without a concurrent supply of participating non-elites.

My second example shows how a sociology of elitism can contribute to an analysis of the rise and maintenance of academic elites in societies otherwise committed to ideals of status equality. Cultural historian John Carson (2007) has laid the groundwork for such an analysis in his study of the reformation of social elites in France and in the United States following the democratic upheavals of the French and American revolutions. Carson puts the problem starkly: “Having toppled aristocratically organized societies in the name of natural rights and people’s sovereignty, he asks, what would be put in their place? How could a new elite be selected and justified within a political ideology also celebrating equality and universal rights?” (*ibid*, p. xiii).

The standard answer to these questions argues that, between the early nineteenth and the mid-twentieth centuries, new national elites emerged whose claim to higher status was based on the perceived superiority of their academic talent or intelligence (Carson 2007). This account is reflected in Michael Young’s (1958) classic diagnosis that old aristocracies of birth have been supplanted by aristocracies of talent in which individuals’ higher positions are justified by their greater academic merit. It also underpins recent scholarship stressing how stratification systems based on academic aptitude threaten societies’ political cohesiveness and ideals of redistributive solidarity (Frank 2016; Sandel 2020; Fourcade 2021).

What this account does not explain, however, is how societies committed to ideals of status equality first came to think of their members as coming in greater or lesser degrees of intelligence. Put differently, it is how a hierarchical gaze on intelligence emerged and was maintained in the face of democratic egalitarian beliefs. In closing I want to show that Carson’s historical narrative offers leads for identifying the social operations that went into

the construction of this gaze – leads that can be prolonged and substantiated by recent sociological work on the construction of beliefs in the existence of worthiness hierarchies.

The beauty of Carson’s account lies in the fact that, to explain the rise of intelligence as a new basis for elite status, it goes beyond the commonplace observation that differences in intelligence were easily taken for granted because they appeared to spring from differences in innate personal characteristics (Fischer et al. 1996). Instead, Carson suggests, the success of intelligence partially arose from the development and gradual adoption, over the course of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, of instruments purporting to *measure* intelligence. In the United States, these instruments were primarily IQ tests, and later IQ-inspired tests of scholastic aptitude, which originated in the work of late nineteenth-century French psychologist Alfred Binet but first became widespread as a tool of military personnel management when the U.S. army entered World War I in 1917. As Carson perceptively points out, the originality of the Binet-Simon scale underpinning most early IQ tests was not that it claimed to measure intelligence: it was that it measured it “as a singular entity possessed to different degrees by all human beings” (Carson 2007, p. 144), and therefore as something that could be captured in a single, crisp and clear-cut score.

Sociological work has shown that clear-cut metrics placate observers’ skepticism that the things they measure can be thought of in hierarchical terms (Accominotti 2021a). When observers are exposed to the hierarchies created by clear-cut metrics – hierarchies of intelligence or of academic merit, for example – they do not just see hierarchies: the metrics’ clarity means that they also experience artificial orderliness in the way individuals in these hierarchies rank relative to one another. When intelligence is measured as a crisp and clear-cut score, for example, everyone looks like they can be positioned neatly and unambiguously on a scale of intelligence. As a consequence, research suggests, observers are less inclined to challenge the meaningfulness of ranking on such a scale to begin with (Accominotti and Tadmon 2020). When, by contrast, individuals’ relative positions are fuzzy and equivocal, as when different individuals fare inconsistently on multiple dimensions of intelligence that are not averaged into a single crisp score, observers are more likely to wonder whether it makes sense to rank individuals by intelligence.

Because the readings of intelligence produced by IQ tests and the Binet-Simon scale were so clear-cut, then, they may have done more than offering early twentieth-century Americans measures of their intelligence. They may also have subtly asserted and reasserted that it made sense to see people as coming in unequal degrees of intelligence. In short, they may have helped cement the collective belief that there was such a thing as a hierarchy of intelligence – a condition of possibility for the emergence of an academic elite in a culturally democratic society.

France took a different path to the measurement of intelligence, but the approach it adopted had the potential to institute a similar collective belief. Although IQ tests had been invented there, they never quite caught on in the country. The instrument of choice France instead turned to for identifying intelligence, Carson (2007, p. 230) argues, were the nationwide competitive examinations that since the beginning of the nineteenth century had served as gatekeepers for entry into the nation's most prominent colleges, and that remain a hallmark of the French education system today. While this means that France did not place as much emphasis on clear-cut intelligence scores, sociological work shows that this approach was no less likely to cultivate a hierarchical gaze on intelligence, and hence to pave the way for the emergence in France of a genuine academic elite.

Pierre Bourdieu (1991, p. 118; 1996) has famously analyzed the French college-entry system as a consecration ritual – an act of “social magic” that does not only impart status to admitted students by selecting them, but also by separating the students it deems worthy of academic election from the ones it does not. The efficacy of this ritual, Bourdieu argues, lies in the fact that it draws an arbitrarily sharp divide between the chosen and the rest: there is virtually no difference in ability between the last student to be admitted and the first one to fail, yet the former gets in while the latter does not. Bourdieu remains unclear, however, as to how exactly the sharpness of this divide enhances the status of the selected. As I have argued elsewhere (Accominotti 2021b), this is because he stops short of recognizing that consecration does not enhance the status of the selected by testifying to their *individual* intellectual ability. Rather, by drawing a forceful divide between the selected and others, the ritual asserts that the best can be distinguished from rest, that superior intelligence can be

told from its absence – in short, that there is such a thing as a knowable hierarchy of intelligence.

Conclusion

In this article I have proposed that elites can essentially be regarded as upper status groups, and I have stressed the tension between elites thus conceived and the democratic character of many modern societies. Reminding ourselves of this tension, I have argued, is a heuristic move: it urges us to explore the construction of hierarchical gazes that make the emergence of elites possible in spite of a society's democratic aspirations to status equality. Studying the construction and cultivation of hierarchical gazes should not just concern us as a scholarly enterprise, however. It also matters because these gazes threaten the very belief that forms the bedrock of a truly democratic society – that is, the belief that individuals should stand before each other as equals in their discussions and interactions. The collective recognition that there is such a thing as a hierarchy of cultural tastes, or such a thing as a hierarchy of intelligence, because they suggest that some should wield greater influence than others when it comes to discussing cultural or policy matters, chip away at precisely this belief.

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