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The Political-Sociological Chimera: Elite Analysis in Contemporary Brazilian Political Science

A quimera político-sociológica: análises de elite na ciência política brasileira contemporânea

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Abstract:

The paper explores the situation of Elite Analysis in contemporary Brazilian Political Science. We argue that Elite Analysis occupies an ambiguous position because its theoretical basis at the same time approximates and distances itself from the dominant tendencies of contemporary Political Science, like focus and causal autonomy of political institutions, incorporation of orthodox scientific attributes, and predominant masculine authorship. Elite Analysis is largely interested in political institutions but have a tendency to treat them as an order dependent on societal factors. Also, this ambiguity reflects on the formation of the authors. A great deal of them is graduated in programs of "Social Sciences", another in programs of Political Science. Elite Analysis ends up dislocated both in Political Science and in Sociology. This may call for the institutionalization of Political Sociology in Brazil.

Keywords: Elite theory/analysis; Brazilian Political Science; political institutions; theoretical-methodological approaches; disciplinary traditions.

Resumo:

O artigo explora a situação da análise de elites na Ciência Política brasileira contemporânea. Argumenta-se que a abordagem ocupa uma posição ambígua porque sua base teórica ao mesmo tempo a aproxima e a distancia das tendências dominantes da Ciência Política contemporânea, como foco e autonomia causal das instituições políticas, incorporação de atributos científicos ortodoxos e autoria predominantemente masculina. A análise de elites interessa-se em boa medida por instituições políticas, mas tem uma tendência de tratá-las como uma ordem dependente de fatores sociais. Além disso, essa ambiguidade se reflete na formação dos autores. Uma boa parte dele se gradua em programas de Ciências Sociais, outra em programas de Ciência Política. A análise de elites acaba sendo deslocada tanto na Ciência Política e como na Sociologia. Isso pode sugerir a institucionalização da Sociologia Política no Brasil.

Palavras-chaves: teoria/análise de elites; Ciência Política brasileira; instituições políticas; abordagens teórico-metodológicas; tradições disciplinares.

Introduction

Elites are a classical theme in political thought.

That the majority is governed by a selected few is an empirical fact that lays ground to the concept of politics itself. There is no political order without some kind of political domination and, therefore, no political thinking without the acknowledgment of the existence of elites.

Political Sociology was born exploring the social basis of that universal political fact. Since the seminal works of Gaetano Mosca, Vilfredo Pareto and Robert Michels, "elites" became the nucleus of the political-sociological law that the resources of power in all organizations tend to boil down to the hands of a minority – the elite.

That is true not only in political organizations but in all spheres of human activity. Thus, we have economic elites, intellectual elites, religious elites, and so on.

Elite theory focuses political elites but applies to all organizations affected by the iron law of oligarchy.

This composition of Elite theory allocates it in a curious position in the field of an autonomous Political Science.

Contemporary Political Science established itself focusing the State and then institutional politics.

Elite theory studies political actors that belong to institutional politics, such as political parties, candidates, and elected politicians, but their behavior is explained considering societal factors.

That puts it in an odd situation in an academic field composed of an autonomous Political Science combined with a weak or non-existent institutionalized Political Sociology.

In particular, its sociological spirit mixed with political objects may put Elite theory in a curious and almost contradictory position in fields of Political Science still in critical stages of institutional and intellectual autonomization, particularly when dissociating from Sociology. Like a chimera, their contribution to autonomy is put in doubt having on sight its sociological roots, and many would regard it as a branch of Sociology instead. Elite theory would be the interesting fellow dwelling in the neighborhood, but not really at home.

This may be the Brazilian case. In one hand, the approach struggles to be recognized as a legitimate approach of Political Science. On the other, it does not feel comfortable in a sociological field deliberately negligent and even hostile to institutional politics.

In this brief article, we explore the situation of Elite theory with categorical variables pertinent to Brazilian Political Science. With them, we will shed light on institutional and intellectual reasons to the plight of Elite theory in Brazil.

Methods

The main category of the study is theoretical-methodological approaches.

An approach refers to (i) a set of ideas regarding an object, (ii) the procedures used to study it and (iii) the attributes, factors or variables that the analyst assumes, deduces or infers by studying the object.

Approaches are frequently brought to consciousness and classified, often in *isms*, identifying positions in the intellectual structure of the field. A culturalist approach, for example, may study the political culture of a nation or a specific group, the behavior of voters or of elected politicians, the political opinions of civil groups, media phenomena, etc. Affinities between the definition and the approach to the object create patterns, allowing the abstraction of recurring properties and thus the formulation of *nominal approaches*: "neo-institutionalism", "Marxism", "pluralism", and so on (Leite *in press*).

The universe of analysis is comprised of 23 renowned national journals listed by Qualis¹. The last classification available at the time of writing was used as reference, published in 2013. The analysis spans the three-year period of 2010-2012, corresponding to the last triennial of CAPES evaluation of graduate programs, making for a universe of 567 articles.

As most of the journals are interdisciplinary, not all articles were analyzed.

Without resorting to an arbitrary definition of political science, the filtering adhered to the following criteria: *(i)* institutional link: to be linked to a graduate program in the political science field, according to CAPES; *(ii)* subjective identification: to include political science as an area of expertise in the Lattes national CV database; *(iii)* participation in the ABCP Meeting; *(iv)* participation on a doctoral board in political science. The reference is the first author of the article.

To be included, the article had to comply with at least one of these conditions. Literature reviews, introductions, presentations, summaries, opinions, interviews, tributes, critiques, and the like were not considered (Leite 2015, p. 6).

The criteria for selection are based on the influence exerted on the field of production through institutionalized means.

They allow us to comprise topics of border zones, involving more unorthodox forms of political science - which, nevertheless, are objectively part of the field and have symbolic efficacy over it.

It is the political scientists themselves that mark the borders: either by subjective identification or institutional affiliation or by legitimacy granted to the author, to disseminate ideas or exert power over the production field upon accepting it at the ABCP Meeting or on doctoral boards.

These parameters make up the following universe (Table 1):

¹ CAPES is the federal agency responsible for setting the rules for evaluating graduate programs. The important part of the evaluation refers to the quantity and quality of the publications. The quality of the publications is measured using a journal assessment system, called the Qualis System, in which each area of expertise categorizes national and international journals into the following strata: A1, A2, B1-B5 and C. For some time, qualified production in political science has been defined as that published exclusively in A1, A2 and B1 journals.

Table 1. Journals Examined

Journal	Volumes	Issues	Total (articles)	Articles Selected	% of PC articles in the journal
Dados	3	6	83	45	54,2
Revista Brasileira de Ciências Sociais	-	9	85	29	34,1
Opinião Pública	3	6	59	59	100
Brazilian Political Science Review	3	6	30	26 ^a	86,6
Revista de Sociologia e Política	3	10	124	86	69,3
Lua Nova	-	9	66	31	59,1
Revista de Economia Política	3	12	128	10	7,8
Novos Estudos	-	9	78	25	32
Revista Brasileira de Ciência Política	-	8	81	74	91,3
Caderno CRH	3	11	124	27	21,7
Cadernos de Pesquisa	3	8	109	14	12,8
Cadernos Pagu	-	6	72	3	4,1
Ciência e Saúde Coletiva	3	33	782	52	6,6
Estudos Históricos	3	6	53	13	24,5
História (São Paulo)	3	6	102	7	6,8
Religião e Sociedade	3	6	56	9	16
Revista Estudos Feministas	3	9	127	16	12,6
Saúde e Sociedade	3	15	270	3	1,1
Sociedade e Estado	3	9	79	14	17,7
Sociologias	3	8	72	12	16,6
Estudos Avançados	3	9	199	3	1,5
Tempo Social	3	6	65	1	1,5
Ambiente e Sociedade	3	6	75	8	10,6
Total			2 919	567	19,4

Note: The remaining four articles refer to International Relations.

Source: The author.

We describe the situation of the approach in contemporary Brazilian Political Science in relation to what we believe are general tendencies of the discipline.

The chosen variables describe these tendencies: gender, graduate area, subjective affiliation, disciplinary tradition, and scientificity.

We present the proportions (%) to each category and supply measures of association such as the chi-square, Phi or Cramer's V. The results are interpreted comparing Elites with the rest of Political Science.

Gender

Gender is a frequently overlooked variable in studies of academic disciplines. This may be particularly an issue in Political Science. We believe it is a masculine discipline that replicates traditional gender roles that distance women from politics, both as activity and as an object of interest – therefore, of study.

This social fact is echoed in Political Science.

Table 2. Gender division in Political Science (%)²

Approach	Gender	
	Male	Female
Elite Analysis	82,60	17,40
Feminism	18,50	81,50
Political Science	61,80	38,40

$\chi^2 = 74.046$ | Sig = .001 | Cramer's V = .362.

Source: The author.

First, we detect a significant association between gender and theoretical-methodological approaches: there is a division of intellectual labor in function of gender.

Second, we confirm the notion that Political Science is a predominantly masculine discipline: 61,8% of the authors are male and 38,4% are female.

But Elite Analysis is a particularly masculine approach: a staggering 82,6% of the authors employing it are male and only 17,4% are female – the third most masculine approach of the discipline.

As expected, Feminism is the most feminine of all main approaches, with 81,5% of female authors, inverting Elite's values.

Masculine approaches compose the mainstream of the discipline. Concerning gender, Elite Analysis amplifies the masculine-oriented tendency of Brazilian Political Science.

Graduate area

Influenced by the traditional French model, human sciences are not as specialized in Brazil as they are in the United States.

"Social Sciences" postgraduate programs follow the tradition of a mixed discipline of the former, although centered around Sociology. Indeed, "Social Sciences" use to follow the French 'Comtian-Durkheimian' vision of Sociology as the "unifying discipline" of the human affairs, what some refer to as "sociological imperialism". In the 1950s and the 1960s it were usually used as a synonym for Sociology itself, although without incorporating the objects of its close neighbors – critical for Political Science was the noteworthy despise for political institutions.

This globalizing attire without being really all that inclusive gave ground to the rise of Political Science, Anthropology, and other human sciences. Meanwhile, in the 1970s, with the domination of Marxism, the "Social Sciences" centered around societal approaches which dealt with a *lato sensu* conception of power, such as class domination. We have, thus, power being studied outside Political Science in the broad scope and "global" approach of "Social Sciences".

The interaction between disciplines may be grasped considering the area of graduation within the question: does the members of discipline x are graduates of discipline x, or y, z, etc.?

² Notes: Association measures refer to all of the approaches of the study. Percentage values of non-Elite approaches were then aggregated into "Political Science".

Analogously, the relation of a specific approach to the discipline is also reflected in the graduation area of their authors.

Table 3. Graduate area of the authors by theoretical-methodological approach (%)³

Approach	Area of Graduation		
	Political Science	Sociology	Social Sciences
Elite Analysis	52,4	19,0	28,6
Political Science	57,2	27,0	15,8

$\chi^2 = 56.831$ | Sig = .000 | Cramer's V = .360.

Note: The middle line represents the cut-line of the distribution, above and below the totals.

Source: The author.

Elite approach is entangled in this complex disciplinary interaction.

It has the forth greater contingent of authors formed in "Social Sciences" and it has fewer authors graduated in Political Science postgraduate programs than the other approaches, 52,4% against 57,5, respectively.

It is the only mainstream approach in this situation.

Why? People studying political actors inscribed in institutional politics tend to enroll in programs of Political Science. Elite studies do that, but they carry its sociological roots. This arch median position echoes the contradictory interaction between "Social Sciences" and political objects, and the trajectory from graduation in "Social Sciences" to affiliation to departments of Political Science.

It seems that a majority of authors of Elite Analysis are trying to *be* political scientists rather than social scientists.

Subjective affiliation

This becomes clearer when we take into account the subjective affiliation of the authors to Political Science.

The affiliation was measured using a precious information found in the *currículo lattes*, a mandatory digital platform where Brazilian academics fill in information about their academic career.

They are asked to declare their *área de atuação*, that is, to which discipline they feel affiliated to. More than one can be specified. Thus, we build an ordinal scale, from the greatest to the smallest degree of affiliation to Political Science: (0) Political Science is not declared, (1) is one of the areas declared (x), (2) the first of the declared (y), and (3) the only one declared (z).

The scale was then used to calculate the *affiliation index*, that is equal to $[(z * 3) + (y * 2) + (x)] / 3$.

³ Notes: Association measures refer to all of the approaches of the study. Percentage values of non-Elite approaches were then aggregated into "Political Science".

Table 4. Subjective affiliation of the authors by approach (%)⁴

Approach	Affiliation to Political Science				Affiliation Index
	Only one declared	First one declared	One of the declared	Not declared	
Elite Analysis	34,8	30,4	8,7	26,1	0,58
Political Science	30,8	20,4	18,5	30,3	0,50

$\chi^2 = 141.397$ | Sig = .000 | Cramer's V = .341.

Source: The author.

Elite Analysis polarizes between authors who affiliate themselves only to Political Science and not at all. Yet, in general their affiliation index is greater than other approaches and than Political Science in general.

Elite Analysis inclines to Political Science, but there is still a significant amount of it identified with Sociology, whose authors define themselves as social scientists. In general, however, Elite Analysis is closer to the political frontier of the intersection between Political Science and Sociology.

Disciplinary traditions

This ambiguity in Elite's situation is due to a gap between its intellectual properties, such as its ambit, and how the disciplinary traditions were institutionalized in the field, forming an autonomous field of Political Science in whose structure that properties do not neatly fit: Elite Analysis end up something in between the Social and the Political.

This may be verified if we consider the disciplinary tradition to which the approach is more related.

A *tradition* is a more or less coherent set of historically persistent ideas and thinking habits. It is a mindset that provides general parameters of interpretation. Disciplinary traditions are related to the object of study and the means mobilized to analyze it. They manifest in the intellectual production, such as in thematic areas and theoretical-methodological approaches.

- "Politological" means to make institutional politics the object of scrutiny.
- "Societal" means to study power phenomena outside institutional politics, such as social hierarchies, inequality or relations of power between classes or groups.
- "Societalist" means to treat institutional politics dependent on societal factors, such as class origin.
- "Statal" means to study an organization, agency, or other institutions related to the formal structure of the Nation State, such as the public bureaucracy, a policy, the army, etc.

⁴ Notes: Association measures refer to all of the approaches of the study. Percentage values of non-Elite approaches were then aggregated into "Political Science".

These are the main traditions of present Brazilian Political Science. Besides them, we have “economic”, which deals with economic phenomena somehow connected to political power, “economicist” treats institutional politics as dependent on economic factors, such as commodity’s prices, and “linguistic-ideal”, which are mental constructs, without constituting theoretical terms. Thus, for example, the conception of “nation” in 19th Century Brazilian literature is a linguistic object, but the concept of “nation” in Kantian political philosophy is a theoretical term pertaining to the Statal tradition.

Table 5. Disciplinary tradition by approach

Approach	Disciplinary Tradition						
	Politological	Statal	Societal	Societalism	Economic	Economicism	Linguistic-ideal
Elite Analysis	26,1	30,4	13,0	30,4			
Political Science	32,0	20,3	30,3	6,5	2,1	2,6	6,2

$\chi^2 = 643.723$ | Sig = .000 | Cramer's V = .428.

Source: The author.

Elite Analysis is a polarized approach.

In one hand, it is highly interested in institutional politics: it dealt with it 56,5% of the cases. But in 30,4% of them institutional politics depended on societal factors (*societalism*). This is noteworthy since it is the 6th approach which deals with politics the most – but it is the one that treats it as a heteronomous order the most.

To the contrary, while being significantly societal, Brazilian Political Science is averse to societalism. The State is also more focused in Elite Analysis (30,4%), especially bureaucracy and the Judiciary. Noteworthy is the few works that deal with societal objects (13%), way less than Political Science in general.

Therefore, the predominant object of inquiry is strict Political Science, but the stance is mainly societal. It is a very specific approach in this sense.

Scientificity

It is known that contemporary Political Science aims to be scientific. Since its institutionalization in the late 1960s, Brazilian Political Science follows this pattern.

The scientificity here at stake is an orthodox one, sometimes called “positivistic”, in the sense that it emulates some central aspects of the Natural Sciences.

We measured the degree of scientificity in these terms using the following variables:

- (1) **Empirical object of study.** If the object of study is an observable or a construct (Kaplan 1964).
- (2) **Nature of the evidence:** (a) quantitative: if the object is numerically measured; (b) qualitative: if the meaning of the object is interpreted; (c) hybrid; (d) bibliographic: if the

author resorts to third-party arguments. We also considered the cases where no evidence were provided.

- (3) **Usage of statistics, discriminated by type:** (a) simple frequency; (b) univariate, like in descriptive data concerning one variable such as measures of central tendency; (c) bivariate, consisted by measures of interaction between two variables; and (d) *General Linear Model* (GLM), comprising techniques such as regression analysis, analysis of variance and the like.
- (4) **Presentation of hypothesis:** if the author explicitly presents a hypothesis.
- (5) **Hypothesis testing:** if the hypothesis presented is tested.
- (6) **Causal argument:** if the argument involves causality.
- (7) **Nomothetic stance:** if the scope of the argument is inclined to generalization.

With these in mind, the approaches are classified from most to least scientific in Table 6:

Table 6. Scientificity measures

	Empirical	Nature of the evidence					Usage of statistics			Hip.	Hip. testing		Causal arg.	Nomot.	
		NA	Quanti	Quali	Hib	Bib	Don't use	Freq.	Uni.	Biv.	GLM				
Elites	91,3	0,0	39,1	26,1	26,1	8,7	31,8	40,9	0,0	4,5	22,7	60,9	85,7	65,2	43,0
Political Science	73,7	0,9	21,7	32,6	17,1	27,7	62,6	20,6	2,5	2,3	12,0	37,7	64,6	50,6	40,9
Traditional Political Science approaches															
Behavioralism	100,0	0,0	100,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	20,0	80,0	90,0	88,9	90,0	30,0
Rational Instit.	94,6	0,0	51,4	10,8	32,4	5,4	18,9	27,0	8,1	0,0	45,9	64,9	91,3	91,9	73,0
Political Culture	90,5	0,0	76,2	9,5	4,8	9,5	19,0	19,0	4,8	14,3	42,9	76,2	80,0	90,5	61,9
Traditional societal approaches															
Marxism	47,8	0,0	13,0	26,1	8,7	52,2	79,2	16,7	0,0	0,0	4,2	33,3	37,5	58,3	54,2
Etnomethodol.	100,0	0,0	0,0	100,0	0,0	0,0	100,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	38,5	40,0	7,7	7,7
Feminism	44,4	0,0	7,4	29,6	7,4	55,6	85,2	11,1	0,0	0,0	3,7	7,4	0,0	7,4	40,0

Source: The author.

Firstly, Elite Analysis is way more scientific than Political Science in general.

Actually, it trails the traditional approaches of Political Science and is by far more scientific than the traditional societal ones.

Approaches more traditionally related to Sociology, such as Marxism, Ethnomethodology, and Feminism rank low in scientificity.

Conclusions

Elite Analysis in Brazilian Political Science incorporates and exalts main tendencies of contemporary Political Science but does that ambiguously.

Like mainstream Political Science, it is a masculine approach. Intellectually, it struggles to be accepted in mainstream Political Science looking to phenomena within institutional politics and resorting to a more scientific stance.

At the same time, its fundamentally societal roots, made manifest in its societalism, distances Elite Analysis from the core of Political Science.

This ambiguity is further identified by its purely societal fraction and the fuzzy trajectory of its authors, something in-between Sociology, Political Science and the inherently ambiguous area of "Social Sciences".

We have an approach estranging from its sociological brothers but not completely at home with its Political Science peers.

This may pose the following question: do we lack an institutionalized subfield of Political Sociology in Brazil? If yes, where should we place it?

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