

Introduction: Anxiety at the Top

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At first sight, it might appear surprising that elites and other privileged groups are anxious about too much public attention. Their suspicion of, for example, media exposure and their efforts to shield much of their lives – professional and private – from the outside world is telling, however.¹ This tendency to control media exposure and to avoid speaking to journalists, researchers and other non-insiders seems to contradict our notion of powerful and privileged groups as being full of confidence and conviction. Why would they be concerned about “unwanted” exposure? We believe they bother because they are aware of the limits of their power, i.e. they are aware that too much exposure of their position may evoke opposition, which potentially jeopardizes their privileges.²

John Scott (2008: 38) argues that “[o]ne of the errors made in much elite analysis . . . has been to assume, or at the very least to imply, that elites are all-powerful and that organizationally dominant groups will hold all the other power resources of a society.” Public relations and press officers increasingly controlling media relationships of private and public institutions of power such as banks and governments, as well as elites withdrawing into gated communities, appear to confirm Scott’s analysis that elites are as a matter of fact less powerful than we might believe. They try to manage potential resentment, as they appear aware that they will have difficulties in controlling an outbreak of popular disapproval. As Lisa Douglass (1992: 37) argues, “[p]eople

1 It should be noted that certain functional elites, especially in the media and film industry, rely very much on media exposure for the maintenance of their status. To a certain extent they need to be talked about to generate an income.

2 Secrecy, it should be noted, can also relate to controlling information – and the power that flows from information.

in positions of power may fear that information about them might be used against them by their critics.”

At closer inspection this should not come as a surprise. Groups at the top of the social hierarchy, such as elites, privileged groups and upperclasses, after all, are by definition small, making them vulnerable to the moods and ambitions of other (more numerous) social groups. In a variety of ways, minorities at the top often share an underlying fear of larger groups that could pose a threat to their positions. This is not a new phenomenon as, for example, the French revolution highlighted the vulnerability of established powers, while the Haitian slave revolution evoked anxiety among colonial elites elsewhere in the world. Nevertheless, there seems to be a growing sense among elites that they are dependent on the public opinion – with a public, moreover, that has much greater access to information. As the PR and press officers indicate, elites not simply rule but also have to manage and uphold a certain image vis-à-vis the outside world. This, in our opinion, has resulted in the reinforcing of feelings of anxiety and insecurity among elites.

In this special issue we would like to argue that for a better and deeper understanding of the practices of elites and other privileged groups we also need to address their anxieties, feelings of insecurity, uncertainty and perceptions of loss.³ Only by incorporating these aspects into our analyses and thus also by focusing on the limits of power, can we grasp the complexities of power relations and balances that are part of people in positions of power and in privileged social worlds.

The different articles do not limit themselves exclusively to elites. To start with, “elite” is a term that, as Bert Schijf (2013) illustrates, has been defined differently over the years. As he rightly argues the term became extended, referring to positions of power but also to status and social mobility. Scott argues that “at the height of its popularity almost any powerful, advantaged, qualified, privileged, or superior group or category might be described as elite . . . It was applied to such diverse groups as politicians, bishops, intelligent people, aristocrats, lawyers and successful criminals” (2008: 27). Scott’s suggestion is to reserve the term elite for collectivities in positions of command only. The possession of power, then, distinguishes an elite from privileged or advantaged groups (Scott 2003). In line with Schijf, we argue that this is a too narrow definition of elites. The term elite should not be limited to a group in actual

3 In this special issue we will not analyze emotions in a psychological sense, but as part of social and cultural processes. Within anthropology, for example, emotions are viewed as not solely individual, but as socially shaped and constructed within specific social contexts (e.g. Lutz and White 1986; Leavitt 1996; Milton and Svasek 2005).

possession and exercise of commanding positions only, as “those in command are linked to a wider group that does not only directly exercise command but also *shares a way of life* and a variety of interests arising from *similarities*” (Salverda and Abbink 2012: 6). Hence, an elite tends to include more than just those in positions of control. Younger generations, partners and families may have influence on the persons in command, for example. In this special issue, then, elite is both about power and about social status.

We agree with Scott, nevertheless, that we should be careful not to apply the term elite to every powerful, qualified, or privileged group. Firstly, we have to realize that not every elite is the same. Elites, after all, tend to have power and/or status in certain domains and accordingly distinctions can be drawn between, for example, economic elites, political elites, professional elites and cultural elites. A characteristic they share, however, is that they are always limited in number. Even though we stretch the term elite beyond the ones in command only, we are of the opinion – in line with Suzanne Keller (1963) – that the term should only apply to “strategic elites”, i.e. elites whose power, decisions, and control over resources have consequences for many members of society. In furthering our understanding of the influence of anxiety and uncertainty we should nevertheless be cautious to limit ourselves to these elites only.

Secondly, then, we focus in this issue on a variety of groups at the top of the social hierarchy. The term elite appears dominant, but we also look at, for example, upperclasses. One characteristic they share, after all, is that due to their power and/or privileges they are minorities with regards to much larger social groups. Besides, whether they have power, privileges and/or status, they are hardly ever associated with feelings of anxiety and uncertainty. It is important to acknowledge these similarities, while at the same time not ignoring the differences.

Power

Regarding the understanding of the vulnerability of the position of people at the top, we have to realize the limits of (elite) power. Power is not one sided, indeed, and can shift from one group to another: “[p]ossessions of power by one agent are always potentially able to be *countered*. This means that there are ways in which subordinate agents can seek to achieve power over the dominant agent that would allow them to counter this power” (Wartenberg 1990: 173). The implication, we show, is that in many cases we have to re-conceptualize the notion that elites and other power-holders only pro-actively apply their power. They frequently react to threats of opponents and apply their power not

pro-actively but defensively, i.e. they use their power in opposition to external challenges that (may) jeopardize the status quo (Salverda 2010). This can also be observed in power relations more generally, such as in the military context. Once soldiers, who can certainly be categorized as clear power holders, feel their power dwindling, they react in defense, showing their anxieties about their position (Grassiani 2013). This does not mean, however, that these same elites and power holders not also apply their power pro-actively, as different forms of power can occur more or less simultaneously.

Following up on the limits of power, it is important to take into consideration Steven Lukes' remarks about one's opponents' capacity to utilize force or violence (Lukes [1974] 2005: 12). This capacity may never be actualized, but it is relevant to realize that power holders may fear the potential use of force and violence by subaltern groups. And with good reason, as there are many examples of – more or less successful – regime changes, from the French revolution, to the fall of the Berlin wall, and recently the Arab uprisings. This shows that wielding power and prestige is inherently risky, and more than is often realized this makes people at the top insecure. They focus on reducing risk and insecurity as much as they can. Hence, it is not surprising, that, as Abner Cohen (1981: xvi) noted, in liberal societies adhering to the principle of equality of opportunity (usually upheld by their constitutions) elites often secretly pursue their particular interests. They seem perfectly aware of the potential drawbacks of publically exposing certain information about the way they live, make political decisions, do business, and maintain relationships. The many ways of marking elite distinctions (e.g. Daloz 2010) serves them well in this respect, as symbols of elite superiority facilitate the maintenance of exclusive environments – although, when the tide turns these symbols can also draw unwanted attention.

Fear for Change

Regime change may be just one example of the limits of power for those who are perceived to be in control. It clearly indicates, that from their comfortable positions at the top change is suspect because it may jeopardize status and privilege: “[t]he highest classes, as everyone knows, are the most conservative. . . . No change can bring them additional power, and every change can give them something to fear, but nothing to hope for” (Simmel 1957: 555).

Notwithstanding the elites' fears of change, it is debatable to what extent regime changes jeopardize the positions of power holders. As Mattei Dogan

(2003: 13) notes “in the case of abrupt regime changes, an analogy has been noticed across countries: the economic and administrative elites resist better the upheaval than the political and military elites.” After the fall of the communist regimes in Eastern Europe, for instance, many of the elites just “swapped functions” which enabled them to maintain their esteemed positions. Former communists were rather successful in obtaining and maintaining top positions in the countries’ newly established private sector, although the enormous expansion of the private sector created opportunities for the emergence of new elites as well (e.g. Böröcz and Róna-Tas 1995, Bozoki 2003, Dogan and Higley 1998, Szelényi and Szelényi 1995).

Whether or not ruling powers “survive” regime changes and whether their feelings of anxiety and uncertainty are real or (in hindsight) only perceived as such, should not distract us from the reality that these feelings may shape practices. Besides, feelings of anxiety and insecurity may also have inward consequences and reinforce a sense of solidarity and distinction among elites and this can help them in their aim to maintain power. It may even be that sentiments of anxiety reinforce the identity of groups among particular, often rigid, lines. Members of elites or privileged groups with different opinions and lifestyles may consequently be placed outside the norm.

In our own work on the white former colonial elite of Mauritius, the Franco-Mauritians, we show how the perception of change has an impact on the reconfiguration of geographies – in terms of absolute wealth, the Franco-Mauritians have faced changes relatively easily. An elite experiencing losing control of “their” spaces in the face of change typically aims for new patterns of exclusion and segregation (Salverda and Hay 2013). This pattern is confirmed in the growing number of gated communities around the world, which in itself appears to reinforce anxieties: withdrawal into gated-communities by elites often exacerbates fear and anxiety about other people entering their exclusive domains (Grassiani 2010, Low 2011: 398). In light of these observations, an interesting question could be posed: does the possession of the financial means to shape exclusive environments – and the ability to avoid crowded places, like public transport – actually engender anxiety about the (unknown) other?

External and Internal Threats

In our explorations to understand the impact of elites and privileged groups’ feelings of anxiety, insecurity and uncertainty we do not focus on the clinical aspect of these emotions. Our concern lies with forms of socially and culturally

informed emotional responses to a perceived threat, fear of loss, or uncertainty. It concerns the socio-cultural logics at the top of the social hierarchy, even though there most certainly are elite members suffering from extreme and/or clinical forms of anxiety.

With regime changes and the toppling of elites as extreme examples in mind, feelings of anxiety seem intrinsic. People at the top, after all, have plenty to lose – although in some cases we could argue that their worries are more relative than absolute. Their worries often relate to external threats, though it should be noted that internal workings of perceptions and (status) anxieties can equally shape practices and there often is a correlation between the two.

The different papers in this issue address the origins of elite anxiety in socio-cultural and context specific terms. How, for example, does anxiety about the potential of more populous parts of society to apply force play out in the relationships between different sides? Wesley W. Widmaier (2010) shows that elite fears of populist emotionalism and loss of cognitive control can have an impact on such relationships. He argues that elites are themselves prone to emotional pathologies, of which the consequence is that their “technocratic repression” of emotions actually exacerbates populist tendencies to paranoia rather than diminish it: “elite anxieties that rational debate can be overwhelmed by emotional excesses might ironically engender in self-fulfilling fashion the very mass of populist resentments that they are meant to avoid” (Widmaier 2010: 135). This confirms Mattei Dogan and John Higley’s (1998: 23–24) argument that elites often create crises themselves, in this case as a result of elite feelings of anxiety. Hence, Widmaier argues that his analysis “directs attention to the theoretical need to more explicitly examine interplay of emotional, cognitive and material forces that shape state and societal interests” (Widmaier 2010: 143).

Themes

As the above indicates, elites’ feelings of anxiety and uncertainty are expressed in a number of different circumstances, both externally and internally reinforced. We observe a number of themes that evoke these feelings in particular. One of the most striking examples that has reinforced elite feelings of anxiety and uncertainty, though one of gradual kind and therefore maybe less illustrative, is the emancipation of society’s largest social groups. This is in particular a trend of the twentieth century with its democratization, decolonization and the collapse of communist regimes. With the advent of modern communica-

tion technologies and media access witnessed during the last decades, the empowerment of these groups seems to have further increased. The public relations and press officers we already referred to are in our opinion a result of this trend. In addition, also an increasingly higher educated population reshapes the position of elites and the privileged.

Laura Alamillo-Martinez' and Justine Rogers' contributions to this issue illustrate the impact of this trend. Alamillo-Martinez' contribution on anxieties among upper-middle class students in a high school in Spain shows how worries about maintaining an educational advantage shape elite behavior. The result of the focus on obtaining the right degrees, is that a feeling of anxiety is already engrained at a young age among the privileged. What she clearly illustrates is how these fears shape the conception of failure as a lack of individual motivation and the ways this impacts the worldviews of this privileged group.

Justine Rogers' contribution on the Bar in the UK shows that internal anxieties are influenced by how professional elites perceive their place in society. As a result of the its historical legacy the Bar is partly perceived as relic of the past, while at the same time many insiders feel pressured by the internal logics of the Bar. Anxiety and insecurity, however, are not only to elite's disadvantage. As Rogers illustrates, these feelings at the same time reinforce professional identity and solidarity.

In the cases of Alamillo-Martinez and Rogers feelings of anxiety and uncertainty are already engrained at an early stage in life or career. Rogers, who studies the professional formation years during the period of pupilage, illustrates how these feelings affect practices and perceptions during later stages of the career. Alamillo-Martinez does not discuss what happens to the students in their professional life, yet she argues that feelings they experience as students are bound to have an impact later in life. In that sense, both argue that to understand professional elites and upper-classes feelings of anxiety and uncertainty need to be analytically addressed.

A theme that is more easily identifiable as a source of elite anxiety is regime change. We have already shown that this is partly a perpetual anxiety, though in recent years there has been a surge in political regime changes. The Arab uprisings are an obvious example, but also recent mass protests elsewhere indicate that rulers and elites face serious troubles when they are confronted with mass protests.

The lack of control elites often experience, or perceive to experience, in the face of change seem to instigate anxiety. Perrine Lachenal, in her contribution on upper-class women in Cairo, illustrates that the 2011 toppling of Hosni Mubarak increased anxiety, notwithstanding that the regime change did not

necessarily affect the absolute wealth of these women. The change reinforced a lack of control and fears for “the other”, not only intensifying social and geographical boundaries but also leading to a huge security market.

In his contribution on Hungarian governing elites, Gyorgy Lengyel analyses how the global impact of the 2007/2008 financial crisis reinforced uncertainty in Hungary. His case differs somewhat from the other cases, as he deals with an elite that is firmly in place. He argues that in order to cope with anti-government mass sentiment and to reduce uncertainty, elites adopt populist arguments, such as a dislike of the European Union. Lengyel shows that to a certain extent, crises actually offer a potential for elite consolidation as the establishment of expert governments during hard time tends to further centralization. In face of anxiety and uncertainty, the elites in charge centralize decision-making, decrease the licenses of the media, and put more control on state institutions in order to combine rather than separate the powers. This indicates that external changes and challenges are not only a threat to elites, but can also work in their favor.

The cases of Lengyel and Lachenal are examples of how worries about populist resentment shape elite practices. They illustrate that especially times of uncertainty heighten elite feelings of anxiety. In light of this observation, we may also need to probe the impact of the 2007/2008 financial crisis on relationships between elites and non-elites. The crisis clearly revealed that these relationships are highly unequal in terms of power as well as in terms of money.

Inequality (in monetary terms) fluctuates throughout history, with the establishment of the social welfare state leading to the decrease of inequality. However, global inequality is on the rise. To a large extent this remains a mere statistical figure, yet the financial crisis has for many made tangible the consequences of this inequality. Wealthy (financial) professional elites seem to take little responsibility for the crisis, while the vast majority is of the opinion that they have hardly played a role in the causes of the crisis yet carry the burden of the economic and social costs. This creates unrest and resentment towards the wealthy, which in return may reinforce anxiety among the latter. How this affects both the wealthy’s internal logics and their relationships with the outside world is a theme that requires further exploration. Or are the wealthy perpetually on their guard, with the latest financial crisis only reinforcing this? Is it a more or less an inherent part of being wealthy, that creates some sort of anxiety towards others – be they non-wealthy or other wealthy?

The different themes, both in their continuous state and/or in their current state of magnification, indicate that elites and the privileged have plenty of worries and often perceive themselves not as all-powerful. We have to better grasp how this affects their behavior. With this special issue we intend to show

that to better understand this, emotions like anxiety are relevant to the understanding of elites and privileged groups. For long there has been a tendency to leave out emotions because they are associated with irrationality: “emotions are treated as material things; they are constituted biologically as facial muscle movements, raised blood pressure, hormonal and neurochemical processes, and as ‘hard-wired’ instincts making up a generic human psyche” (Lutz and White 1986: 407). Rationality and suppressing emotions is considered a virtue, with the distribution of power in a society related to the ideological structuring of emotions (Lutz and White 1986: 421). Minorities at the top of the social hierarchy are often considered most capable of suppressing their emotions.⁴ At the same time, though often implicitly, there are numerous examples of how we associate power with emotional characteristics – even if it is about “suppressing” emotions. Arrogance and rudeness are disliked, yet at the same time people tend to (unconsciously) attribute power to the ones expressing these emotions (Van Kleef et al. 2011). With the different cases presented in this issue we intend to give a glimpse on how responses to a perceived threat, fear of loss, or uncertainty can influence the workings of power and the position of the privileged. The issue does not offer an all-encompassing answer. As a number of authors emphasize, the articles should, apart from offering new insights, also serve as a stimulant for more research on the influence of anxiety on the behavior of people at the top.

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4 In economics, a discipline that strongly relies on the notion of rationality, studying the influence of emotions and cognitive processes appears to be making new inroads. John Maynard Keynes, with his analysis of “animal spirits,” had already highlighted the correlation between market sentiments and emotions. This had been long forgotten, due to the ideology of the economically rational actor. In the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, however, this idea has been revived with behavioural economics now taking centre stage.

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