

## Gaetano Mosca and the Theory of the Ruling Class<sup>(1)</sup>

1. Gaetano Mosca's fame is based on his theory of the ruling class (\*\*). This fame is certainly not on the wane, to judge from the attention paid to this concept by a distinguished American scholar, James H. Meisel (1), in a recent work which, next to the book by the Italian writer Delle Piane, is the most complete survey of the question.

Mosca remained true to the theory of the ruling class all his life. He enunciated it in his first work of any importance which was written when he was twenty-six, *Sulla teorica dei governi e*

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(\*) Gaetano Mosca was born at Palermo on April 1, 1858, and from 1898 taught as Professor of constitutional law at the University of Turin. He was transferred in 1923 to the University of Rome where he lectured on the history of political theories, and stayed there until his retirement in 1933. He was elected to Parliament in 1908, was Undersecretary for the Colonies from 1914 to 1916, and was made a Senator in 1919. He died in Rome on 8 November, 1941.

He attained fame at a very early age with a scathing criticism on the working of the Italian parliamentary system: *Sulla teorica dei governi e sul governo parlamentare* (1884). This made a great stir. Later he wrote a number of essays on constitutional law, the most important of which is *Le costituzioni moderne* (1887). He then published, in 1896, his major work — the *Elementi di scienza politica* which he revised and expanded in the second edition (1923). This work gives a complete exposé of his political thinking and of his interpretations of history. His last work *Storia delle dottrine politiche*, the definitive edition of which came out in 1937, is a book for students and is comprised of the lectures given by him at the University of Rome. The volume appearing after his death *Partiti e sindacati nella crisi del regime parlamentare* (1949) contains various essays of which the most interesting are *Il principio aristocratico e democratico* (1903) and *Lo stato-città antico e lo stato rappresentativo moderno* (1924). A large number of his minor writings, including the *Teorica*, have recently been brought out in the commemorative volume entitled *Ciò che la storia potrebbe insegnare* (1958). Of his writings on current politics, a collection of articles attacking the war in Libya is particularly interesting. It is called *Italia e Libia, Considerazioni politiche* (1912).

(\*\*) Note by translator: The Italian expression "classe politica", has been translated by "ruling class".

(1) *The Myth of the Ruling Class, Gaetano Mosca and the Elite*, Ann Arbor, the University of Michigan Press, 1958.

sul governo parlamentare (1884) (2); he worked out the theory more fully in a book of his later period, the *Elementi di scienza politica* (1896). He corrected and completed it in the *Parte Seconda* which he added to the *Elementi* in the second edition (1923) (3). And he gave a telling summing up of it in his last work, the *Storia delle dottrine politiche* (1937) (4). Pareto had formulated a similar theory of the *élites*, first in an article in 1900, and later in his *Systèmes socialistes*. Mosca insisted with some feeling on having been the first to make the discovery (5). But, despite his long meditation on this subject and subsequent revisions, Mosca never provided a systematic, properly articulated exposé of his doctrine, in which the various components were logically arranged and examined from all points of view. He dealt with it on various occasions. He made no distinction, except casually and incompletely, between the various headings under which methodical investigations of the subject could have been carried out, and contented himself with an elementary classification. It was only when he discussed it for the last time that he made a clear distinction between two types of problems, those regarding the *recruitment* of the ruling class and those regarding its *organization* (6). But he did not feel

(2) I quote this work from the version in the recent collection of Mosca's writings, *Ciò che la storia potrebbe insegnare (What history could teach us)*, *Scritti di scienza politica*, Milan, Giuffrè, 1958 (from now on referred to as *Teorica*). On the ruling class, cf. pp. 31-56.

(3) I quote from the fourth edition in two volumes (Bari, Laterza, 1953) (henceforth referred to as *Elementi*). On the ruling class, cf. especially I, pp. 78-155; II, pp. 1-15; 95-146.

(4) This work is a revised and corrected edition of the *Lezioni di storia delle istituzioni e delle dottrine politiche*, Rome, Castellani, 1932 (henceforth referred to as *Storia*). Cf. M. DELLE PIANE, *Bibliografia di Gaetano Mosca*, Siena, Circolo giuridico dell'Università, 1949, Nos. 72 and 77. On the ruling class, cf. pp. 339-353.

(5) We will not revert again to the famous controversy between Mosca and Pareto about the latter's denial of Mosca's priority and Mosca's accusation of plagiarism. I refer to the exhaustive and balanced treatment in Meisel's work already quoted, pp. 170-183, and to the notes by T. GIACALONE MONACO, *Pareto e Sorel*, Padua, Cedam, 1960, I, pp. 24-27. At most it may be added that it is clear from the recent publication of the *Lettere a Maffeo Pantaleoni* that Pareto detested Mosca and had no esteem for him even, before the latter launched out on the "minor war of words" and publicly regretted, in his introductory address in 1902 *Il principio aristocratico e il democratico*, the "strange lapse of memory" of the "distinguished professor of the University of Lausanne" (in *Partiti e sindacati nella crisi del regime parlamentare*, Bari, Laterza, 1949, p. 11). In a letter of 23 July 1900, Pareto writes to Pantaleoni: "How naive of you to believe that an article can do any good! Mosca has no doubt his own reasons for speaking ill of mathematics, probably because he knows none. If he is the one who writes about *politics*, he is a balloon full of hot air" (*Lettere a Maffeo Pantaleoni*, Rome, Banca Nazionale del Lavoro, 1960, II, p. 324).

(6) Cf. especially the concluding chapter of the *Storia*, pp. 339 *et seq.*

the need to gather together the scattered members of his theories into an organic whole.

For this reason, an exposé of Mosca's theory should begin by arranging the material in proper order. If only to avoid interpretations which are either oversimple or oversubtle, I have felt it useful to group this material in a sequence of subjects which may serve to give the reader an immediate and fairly precise idea both of the complexity of the research, that is, of the various levels involved, and of the gaps in it, that is, of the unfinished state in which the author left it. The aspects of the ruling class which I propose to illustrate by passages drawn freely from his various works are as follows: 1) composition and formation; 2) extension; 3) renewal and replacement; 4) organization and means of exercising power. I need hardly say that the line of demarcation between these aspects is not always sharp, but this is an observation which will undoubtedly occur to the reader himself.

2. A few observations on terminology are called for. Right from his first book, Mosca chose the expression "ruling class" to indicate the phenomenon with which he was so much concerned. In the *Teorica*, after having described the phenomenon of the ruling minority, he concludes: "This special class will from now on be referred to as the ruling class" (7). Although the expression "élite" used by Pareto finally prevailed (with the result that the expression "theory of the élites" was used in such a wide sense as to include Mosca's theories of the ruling class as well), the expression "ruling class", as Mosca himself rightly observed in the *Parte Seconda* of the *Elementi*, has the advantage over "élite" that it does not imply a positive judgment on the members of that class (8). "Elite" in common parlance is a value expression and, as such, unsuitable for scientific language, in which preference should be given to

(7) *Teorica*, p. 35.

(8) Having said that the ruling class comprises those people best suited to govern, "which does not mean that they are the best intellectually or, even more, morally", Mosca commented in a footnote: "It is for this reason that we feel that the expression 'élite' adopted by Pareto is the wrong one for what we had termed 'ruling class' some years back". (*Elementi*, II, p. 177). The problem of the value to be assigned to the term "élite" was discussed on several occasions at the IVth World Congress of Sociology (September 1959). The relevant texts are given in the volume *Le élites politiques*, Bari, Laterza, 1961, especially in the papers by Catlin, Lavau, and Sartori.

neutral expressions such as "ruling class". The expression "ruling class" is used nowadays in everyday language and by historians (we cannot yet speak of a language of political science in Italy, as there is no tradition of studies in this field), not so much in the sense of an organized minority group as of the total of those who habitually engage in politics. It refers not so much to the phenomenon, which is specially stressed by the theory of the élite, of the ruling minorities, as to the phenomenon, equally important and deserving of study, of the professional or almost professional nature of politics in modern parliamentary systems.

Although Mosca adopted right from the start the expression "ruling class", he often liked to use synonymous expressions without giving too much thought to the need to define them clearly. This may be regarded as a first sign of the rather rough state in which Mosca left his theory, even though he returned to it on a number of occasions. In the *Teorica* we find "dominating or ruling class" (page 36). Elsewhere he uses "upper classes" (*Elementi*, I, p. 49, 153); "governing class" (*Elementi*, I, p. 94, 153); "the ruling clique" (*Elementi*, I, 78); "organized minority" (*Teorica*, p. 34; *Elementi*, I, p. 80); "governing minority" (*Elementi*, I, p. 83). One's immediate reaction to a concept to which so many different names are indiscriminately applied is that it has not yet been very strictly defined, but the use of expressions other than "ruling class" is usually to be explained by Mosca's need of two antithetical expressions to define the basic distinction in any society between those who govern and those who are governed. Whereas the expression "ruling class" does not enable him to define the rest of the population by antithesis, the other expressions lent themselves to a description of that section as "dominated, directed, lower or governed class" or as the "unorganized or governed majority".

3. The first point which I have termed the composition of the ruling class includes the study of the qualities which members of a given social group possess or should possess in order to belong (or aspire to belong) to the ruling class. By studying this question, we can say whether there are qualities which distinguish those forming the ruling class, and what they are.

Mosca's reply to the first question is in the affirmative. "The ruling minorities are usually formed in such a way that the indi-

viduals composing them can be distinguished from the mass of the governed by certain qualities which give them a certain material and intellectual or even moral superiority...; in other words, they must have some prerequisites, real or apparent, which are highly respected and can be effectively applied in the society in which they live" (9). These qualities are not always the same ones; they may change with history. As a result, it is possible to distinguish various types of ruling classes according to the different qualities which characterize their members. Replying to the second question, Mosca distinguishes, both in the *Teorica* and in the *Elementi* (10), three qualities which, in varying degrees, give access in different societies to the ruling class — martial ability, wealth, membership of the priesthood. From these qualities or status flow the three forms — military, money and priestly aristocracy. Less prominent among the characteristic qualities of a ruling class, according to Mosca, is culture. To be precise, he makes two reservations to this statement: 1) culture may become an important political force "only in a very advanced stage of civilization"; 2) what has political value "is not so much knowledge in itself as the practical applications which may be made of it to the general advantage" (11). However, when Mosca took off his scientific hat and put on his political and moralizing one, he expressed a longing for a society in which culture would prevail over the other qualities in the composition of the ruling class to the point of regarding the ideal scientific policy as one which could obviously be worked out only by a class of scientific politicians working hand in hand with experts on politics (12).

It is possible to belong to a ruling class not only because of one's qualities but also of one's birth and because one is born into a family in which those qualities were possessed by one's forebears.

(9) *Elementi*, I, p. 83. In the *Teorica*: "Any individual who belongs to the ruling class should have, and in some cases is presumed to have, merits and qualities to which, in the society in which he lives, most men attach great importance and which are not possessed by everybody" (p. 42).

(10) *Teorica*, pp. 42-46; *Elementi*, I, pp. 83-94.

(11) *Elementi*, I, pp. 92-93. In the *Teorica*, he had, perhaps even more naively, also considered personal merit among the "considerations governing the recruitment" of the ruling class. Merit was also constituted of "the different kinds of special knowledge" which make an individual "more or less suited for the various offices of a country's public life" (p. 49).

(12) I drew attention to this idea of Mosca's in the essay *Gaetano Mosca e la scienza politica*, Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, Issue No. 46, 1960, pp. 14 et seq.

Indeed, where hereditary castes have been formed, Mosca observes, birth is the only criterion which governs entry into a class or exclusion from it (13). Here, the problem of the composition of the ruling class converges with that of its formation and transformation. For the time being, we need only ask what is the relation between membership of a ruling class as a result of birth and the possession of the allegedly superior qualities. Mosca rules out the more extreme theory which links the two factors so closely as to imply that anyone born into the ruling class thereby automatically possesses superior qualities. In this connection, he quotes the theories of Gobineau and Gumplowicz, but it is only to reject them. However, he admits that members of an aristocracy possess certain special qualities peculiar to the ruling classes to a greater extent even if they have obtained these qualities not through blood but through upbringing, which tends to develop certain intellectual and moral gifts rather than others.

4. It would seem that Mosca never attributed great importance to the problem of how far the ruling class extended. He merely repeated that the ruling class constituted a minority, but he did not and could not go beyond vague references to this minority, as for example when he spoke of "those few dozen people who control the levers of the state machine" (14). But there are minorities and minorities. Even in a democratic state, the ruling class is a minority, but it is a bigger minority than that in an autocratic regime, and we may well ask whether in such a case the difference of quantity does not also imply a difference of quality. The size of the minority in a democratic system depends on various factors: 1) the existence of several political classes in mutual competition, with the result that, side by side with an existing élite, there is always a potential or reserve élite; 2) the multiplication of the organs of the central authority (parliament as well as the privy council, two chambers instead of one, etc.); 3) the creation of local government bodies side by side with those of the central government.

(13) The problem is dealt with in the *Teorica*, pp. 46-48; and in *Elementi*, I, pp. 94-100.

(14) *Elementi*, II, p. 111. Elsewhere he writes: "Moreover the formation of a group of persons which, depending on the circumstances, may include two or three dozen or even a hundred individuals... is something that is to be found in all autocracies, indeed in all forms of political regime" (*Elementi*, II, p. 108).

What attracted Mosca's attention in his later period was another phenomenon. As the state extended its territory in the transition from the small city state of ancient times to the large Roman State, or else strengthened its structure in the transition from the medieval feudal State to the modern bureaucratic one, the "few dozen persons" became insufficient to win and retain power. This observation led Mosca to widen his approach and study the ruling class's auxiliaries, what he called the second most numerous stratum of the governing class, or the middle class (15), and he termed it "the backbone of all the great political organizations" (16). In primitive autocratic regimes, this second stratum is almost always formed of priests and warriors. In organized autocratic regimes, it is formed by the bureaucracy (hence the identification between streamlined autocracy and bureaucratized autocracy); in electoral regimes, it is identified, or rather should be identified, with the electorate. (At this point, Mosca passes from a scientific observation to a political proposal).

This recognition of the existence of a second stratum of the governing class should have impelled Mosca to work out a more precise definition of the concept of ruling class in the strict sense of the word and of the relations between the first and second stratum. It may be asked whether the discovery of the second stratum embracing the whole of the middle class in the widest sense of the word does not end up by distorting the real significance of the theory of the ruling minorities? It does not seem that Mosca was concerned about this difficulty. On the contrary, in the only section in which he dwells on the nature of the relation between these two strata (17), he gives the impression, in the examples cited, that the ruling class in a narrow sense of the word, has now, in order to make way for the second stratum, shrunk so far as to be synonymous with the one supreme head (the Roman Emperors, George III of England, Louis XIV and so on). The second stratum thus includes the first, or at least cannot easily be distinguished from it.

5. Any ruling class has a different life-span. Heredity, election and cooption are the normal procedures by which it perpetuates

(15) *Elementi*, II, pp. 110 et seq.

(16) *Elementi*, II, p. 122.

(17) *Elementi*, II, pp. 147-152.

itself and renews itself (it can perpetuate itself without renewing itself or it perpetuates itself by renewing itself or renews itself purely and simply).

Mosca deals at length with and devotes particular attention to the first of these processes. He singles out two tendencies. On the one hand, all ruling classes have a tendency to become, *de facto* if not *de jure*, hereditary. So much so that, when a certain *de jure* state has been consolidated, it has certainly been preceded by a *de facto* state (18). On the other hand, there are always new forces tending to replace the old ones. According to whether the first or the second tendency prevails, the ruling class becomes closed and rigid or renews itself with varying degrees of rapidity (19). In the second volume of the *Elementi*, Mosca calls the first tendency aristocratic and the second one democratic (20), and examines at length the value and advantages of both possibilities. He is opposed both to the pure aristocratic tendency (perpetuation without renewal) and to the revolutionary democratic tendency (renewal without perpetuation). Both are extreme cases. He repeatedly expressed his sympathy with the type of society in which there is a certain equilibrium between the two tendencies. He recognizes the need for the ruling class to have a certain stability and not to have to be "substantially renewed with each new generation" (21), but he also sees that it would benefit by drawing new blood from the lower classes, provided this does not take place too rapidly and too extensively (22). As between the two fundamental tendencies, Mosca showed clearly that he considered the former the most important of the two, at least to make possible a correct understanding of the course of history. The latter was merely a useful corrective.

He never speaks explicitly or in detail about cooption (23), but from his ideas as a whole it is clear that he regarded it as the normal method (and the most useful one socially) for the renewal of the ruling classes. On several occasions, he returns to the ques-

(18) *Elementi*, I, p. 96. Cf. in particular the article *Il principio aristocratico e il democratico* (1902), in *Partiti e sindacati nella crisi del regime parlamentare*, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

(19) *Elementi*, I, p. 102.

(20) *Elementi*, II, p. 97.

(21) *Elementi*, II, p. 139.

(22) *Elementi*, II, p. 140.

(23) But one can find expressions in his work of this kind: "... The initial training of the governing nucleus for a new political or religious doctrine takes place through spontaneous cooption" (*Elementi*, I, p. 270).

tion of the continuity of the aristocracy and of its decadence (24) as a result of its gradual isolation from the other classes and also its gradual transformation into a closed caste. Hence his positive judgment on those aristocracies which have been able to renew themselves by drawing fresh energy from the lower classes. In putting forward ideas for reforms which will correct the main defects of the parliamentary system (the interference of members of parliament in civil service matters), he proposes that new men be coopted from outside the official circles. These men must not "expect to be confirmed in their appointment by begging for votes, by obtaining the approval of a committee or of an electoral boss" (25).

On the other hand, Mosca does discuss the electoral method in several passages not only of his works on political science but also of his writings on constitutional law and militant politics. But he discusses it in connection not so much with the problem of the renewal of the ruling class as with that of its organization, and hence we will defer consideration of it to the next section.

6. Of all the problems regarding the ruling class, the one to which Mosca reverts most often is that of its organization. Right from the start, as we have already observed, he regarded the ruling class as "an organized minority". He thought that, although it was a minority, it was in a position to keep in power only because it was organized. "A hundred people who always act in harmony with each other will be triumphant over a thousand individuals who cannot reach agreement among themselves. And at the same time it will be much easier for the former to act in harmony and to reach an understanding because they are a hundred and not a thousand" (26). By "organization" he meant the sum total of the arrangements made by the upper class in order to maintain its cohesion and to exercise its power. This enabled him to distinguish between the various forms of the state according to the different ways in which the different political classes in different times and places had organized themselves and hence exercised their power. Having abandoned the old distinction of governments into

(24) *Elementi*, I, pp. 101 *et seq.*; pp. 144 *et seq.*

(25) *Elementi*, I, p. 388.

(26) *Elementi*, I, p. 83.

monarchies aristocracies and democracies, he regarded four forms of political organization as specially characteristic, from classical antiquity down to our own time — the city state of Greece and of the oldest part of Roman history; the bureaucratic state, of which the Roman Empire was an early example, and which was represented by the absolute monarchies of the 17th and 18th centuries; the feudal state peculiar to the barbarian societies of the middle ages; and the modern parliamentary state born in 17th century England and then transplanted with varying success to the Continent (27).

In a later synthesis, Mosca thought he could identify two basic principles in the welter of historical forms of government. These he called the autocratic and liberal principles according to whether authority was transmitted from above down to the lower officials or whether on the contrary it was delegated from below to higher authority. In the modern parliamentary state which was derived from the grafting of the liberal principle on the bureaucratic state of the absolute monarchies, both principles were present in a blend which was not always completely successful. It should be noted that this distinction between the two typical forms of political organization or of the transmission and exercise of power by the ruling class must not be confused with the distinction, set out in the previous section, between two methods of renewing the ruling class. The combination of the two distinctions may thus give rise to four ideal types of state: 1) aristocratic-autocratic; 2) aristocratic-liberal; 3) democratic-autocratic; 4) democratic-liberal.

The liberal principle is characterized by the relatively perfect organization of an electoral system. But a distinction must be made between the case in which the electorate coincides roughly with the ruling class (as in the Republic of Venice and in that of seventeenth-century Poland) and the case where the electorate is greater than that class. In the former case, the elective method is not used to achieve the renovation of the ruling class but to provide an internal

(27) For the distinction between the various forms of political organization, cf. especially *Elementi*, I, pp. 123-132; II, chapters 2 and 3; and the introductory address *Lo stato-città antico e lo stato rappresentativo moderno* (1924), in *Partiti e sindacati*, pp. 37-60. In the *Storia*, he distinguishes between only three types — the feudal state, the bureaucratic state and the city-state. The modern parliamentary state could be considered as produced by grafting the characteristic features of the city-state on to the modern bureaucratic state.

rotation (and hence it does not work in favour of the democratic tendency but in favour of the aristocratic one). In the second case, it might be useful for the renewal of the ruling class if the class holding powers of direction and compulsion did not have at its disposal a variety of means of coercing the electors. In other words, where the electoral method may be useful it does not contribute to renovation, and where it might help renovation it is at most a pretence. In Mosca's study of the electoral principle, it is never possible to distinguish clearly between scientific judgments and political appreciations. He used to repeat that it was not the electors who chose the members of parliament but the members who got themselves chosen. It is hard to say whether this observation, which he regarded as strictly scientific, fortified his anti-democratic attitude or whether his firmly rooted conservative instinct induced him to dwell on the negative aspects of the electoral system.

7. True, it has often been objected that Mosca's theory is an ideology and more precisely that it is an ideology masquerading as a scientific theory. We all know that Mosca had his own political ideas, those of an incorrigible conservative. And he himself never made any bones about it. He had the conservative historian's bitter realization of human vices and wretchedness. He was, or he claimed to be, a realist, a man who has no faith in the power of ideals in history and who regards history only as a perpetual clash of ambitions, interests and passions. And yet, if one takes a closer look at the matter, the theory of the ruling class represents the beginning, or, if one prefers, the first outline of modern political science conceived of as objective research into political phenomena.

Political science could not be born except from a realistic attitude (the fact that a realistic attitude is usually linked with a conservative ideology is a point which we need not go into here). By "real" we mean the opposite of "ideal" and "apparent". In the antithesis between "real" and "ideal", historical realism means the devaluation of ideals as propellant forces in history, and the concentration of attention solely on what men *are* instead of what they *believe* they are. In the antithesis between "real" and "apparent", historical realism means the devaluation of the great figures and of the institutional forms as significant historical data, and the search for the collective forces which move beneath the surface.

In order to assert itself, political science needed to discover some constant in the evolution of political societies which would provide a broad initial generalization, however provisional. The existence of a ruling class, composed of an organized minority which holds power against the unorganized majority appeared to satisfy this need more than any other datum which had been ascertained until then. There are frequent passages in which Mosca draws attention to the value and scientific interest of his discovery, and implies that only by basing itself on the study of the ruling class can research clear the ground of the deeply rooted prejudices which had hitherto hampered the development of politics as a science. In the very first pages of the early *Teorica*, he put forward the new theory as the correction of a "scientific error". (*i.e.*, the traditional distinction between the forms of government) (28). In the first volume of the *Elementi* he recognized explicitly the superiority of the ruling class as a "basis for scientific research" (29). In the second volume, he talked of a "new doctrine", the novelty of which consisted in scholars concentrating on an enquiry into the formation and organization of the various ruling classes (30). The ruling class for Mosca was a firm starting point for the development of political science because, unlike other theories which had been irrefutably disproved by the progress of historical studies, this concept was not deduced from *a priori* principles but was derived exclusively from an unprejudiced and ruthless observation of the facts. Criticizing the distinction made by Spencer between military and industrial states, he reiterated the proposition that this distinction rested "on utterly *a priori* suppositions which did not stand up to a realistic examination" (31). The theory of the ruling class, having met this test, could be adopted as the first chapter of a scientific study of politics.

8. The concept of the ruling class was not only the expression of an ideology but the core of a scientific theory of politics. This is confirmed by the fact that, as has been repeatedly observed, it was accepted as a useful tool for historical analysis and doctrinal adjustments even by democratic and progressive writers. The dif-

(28) *Teorica*, p. 33.

(29) *Elementi*, I, p. 80.

(30) *Elementi*, II, p. 159.

(31) *Elementi*, I, p. 230.

ference between a conservative attitude and a progressive one does not consist in the acceptance or rejection of the concept of the ruling class, but in the different way of solving the problems regarding the four points to which we have reduced the analysis of Mosca's thought, that is, the composition, extension, replacement and organization of the ruling class.

As regards the first point, what distinguishes a democratic ideology from a conservative one is the rejection of any form of hereditary transmission of power. The democratic ideal, if taken to its logical extreme, calls for the total exclusion of the so-called privilege of birth from every sector of social life and not only from that of the training of the ruling class. In other words, it is the substitution of the value of merit for that of rank. To be democratic, it is not necessary to disavow the theory of the ruling class. It is sufficient to admit it and to claim that a ruling class may be formed by other than hereditary means. As to the second point, it has already been observed in the fourth section that a democratic society is distinguished from an aristocratic one by the greater number of the people forming the ruling class, even if this expansion will never be sufficient to transform the minority into a majority and to make the definition of democracy as government by the people, by everyone, by the majority, a very convincing one. As to the third point, that is, renewal, Mosca noted two main tendencies on the part of the ruling class. There was either a tendency to seal itself off with a consequent hardening of the arteries, or to open its doors and hence initiate a process of renovation. He called the first one aristocratic and the second democratic. Here the democratic attitude is shown by the desire for a society in which the abolition of the privilege of birth, accompanied by an economic policy which aims at equality of opportunity, facilitates the constant and rapid access of new blood to the ruling class. From the institutional point of view, a democratic regime, according to a common formula, is the one in which the replacement of even the whole of the ruling class can be effected without bloodshed, or, to put the point somewhat less dramatically, without revolutionary upheavals. In other words, the change is effected by the method of legal opposition and by the substitution of a government crisis, which is within the constitution, for a revolutionary break which is outside it. Lastly, as regards the fourth point (the organization of power),

Mosca again recognized two alternatives, which, while retaining the ideal of a ruling class as an organized minority, help to establish another difference between a conservative and a progressive ideology. This minority, which in any regime is always a minority, may justify its power as coming from above (theory of divine right of sovereigns, theory of traditional power or of historical prescription) or as derived from below (contractual theories). One of the most common formulae of democratic ideologies is that of power founded on the general consensus where it appears obvious that the role of the majority is not that of exercising power but of agreeing to others exercising it. At most, it should be added that an occasional consensus is not sufficient to stamp a regime as democratic but that the periodical confirmation by this consensus is essential.

9. I have tried to clarify the point that what distinguishes a conservative ideology from a progressive one is not the acceptance or refusal of the concept of a ruling class but the different attitude towards the problems of its composition, extension, renewal and organization, because this helps us to understand Mosca's political conservatism. For he was not a conservative *qua* theorist of the ruling class but *qua* defender and advocate of conservative ideas in almost all those situations in which it becomes permissible and useful, as we have seen in the previous section, to distinguish between a conservative attitude and a progressive one.

To take the first point first, Mosca's political ideal was certainly not that of a hereditary aristocracy. But, right from his first book, he contrasted the privilege of birth with that of merit and longed for a society in which intelligence and culture would be the basic virtues of the ruling class. But he never went as far as to desire or propose that the privileges of birth should be completely abolished. He realized that this privilege tends to be reconstituted in every society as soon as it rests on a stable basis and as a ruling class has power firmly in its hands. And even the electoral system does not succeed in doing away with privilege (32). He was therefore led to stress the advantages as well as the disadvantages of a hereditary system; the former consisted principally in the fact that the

(32) In the *Teorica* he refers to the "extremely numerous cases in which elective offices have constantly been reserved for the same families" (p. 48).

offspring of the upper classes find it easier to assume attitudes of authority if only because of their upbringing, and are more disposed to produce men willing to dedicate themselves to those disinterested activities on which the cultural and scientific progress of mankind depends. At this point, the concept of ruling class, which is lacking any value connotation, was transformed into that of the aristocracy (or hereditary upper class). And Mosca gravitated from the "scientific" theory (or what purported to be so) of the ruling class, imperceptibly or at least inexplicitly, to a favourable assessment of the function of aristocracies in history which was the reflection of a political ideal.

As regards the extension of the ruling class, Mosca always gave the impression, as pointed out in section 4, that it was formed of a very restricted group, and, even when he came to considering the so-called middle class, especially prominent in bourgeois society and in the democratic state, he considered it as a subsidiary class (or second stratum) or a kind of nursery of the ruling class. But it must at once be added that, when he analysed the problem not as a scientist but as a politician, he fully realized its importance. Among the most infallible remedies against the evils of the parliamentary system he included decentralization, and he regarded it specifically as the best way of enabling citizens to take part in public affairs, who would otherwise have been excluded from them, in short, as a widening of the scope of the ruling class (33). However, he did not concern himself with the other aspect of the problem, that is, the division of the ruling class into two parts — one in power and one in opposition. He continued to conceive of the ruling class as a monolithic group. It was for Dorso to correct the master's doctrine on this point with the observation that, in democratic regimes, the very nature of the political struggle tends to divide the ruling class into two opposite classes, whereas the ruling class as a monolithic group is an institution specifically confined to authoritarian regimes (34).

On the third point, that is, on the renewal of the ruling class, Mosca's conservatism was revealed by his fear of excessively violent upheavals which would ruin the old structure without preparing

(33) *Elementi*, I, pp. 387 *et seq.*

(34) *Dittatura, classe politica e classe dirigente*, Turin, Einaudi, 1949, p. 162.



the ground for the emergence of a better one. As we have seen, a definitely favourable appreciation of the function of aristocracies in history went hand in hand, in his thinking, with a rooted distrust of too abrupt changes in the course of politics. He did not deny the need for renewal. Indeed, he regarded that as necessary in order to avoid the decadence of the ruling class, but he wanted it to be slow, gradual, and controlled from above. He was certainly not an incorrigible *laudator temporis acti*, and he ended up in the second part of his life, notwithstanding many reservations which were by no means unjustified, by accepting the democratic system. But he was and remained all his life a man who refused to capitulate to the advent of the mass regime which would have profoundly renewed the Italian ruling class (as in fact it did) with effects which were not always salutary. He was one of the most unbending of those prophets of doom who could never resist the temptation to see in the extension of political rights to the plebs one of the factors making for the final catastrophe.

Perhaps the point where he reveals his ideals most transparently, or perhaps it would be more exact to say his fears as a conservative, was over the organization of the state and the way in which a ruling class exercises its power. This was also the occasion of several of his most memorable political battles. The reason for his concern is simple. He placed no trust in elections, especially in popular elections. He accepted the principle with the greatest reluctance; he accepted the elections themselves, but with great reservations as to the accuracy of their results; he energetically rejected universal suffrage at all stages of his thinking, even in the less polemic ones when he seemed to moderate his anti-parliamentary fury. The great bogey of his life was the elevation to the dignity of a nation of electors of the plebs whom he denounced as ignorant, credulous and easy to corrupt (35).

In combating universal suffrage, he challenged the type of mind, which, so he said, had made it unavoidable. In fact, the democratic mentality which, once the dogma of the sovereignty of the people had been accepted, had been obliged to draw all the consequences thereof. The extension of the franchise had, in his opinion, resulted

(35) *Elementi*, II, pp. 91 *et seq.* Cf. also *Teorica*, pp. 299-300; and the parliamentary speech: "Sulla riforma elettorale politica", in *Ciò che la storia potrebbe insegnare*, pp. 353-367.

in the decline of the ruling class in a period of crisis (his diagnosis of the crisis, at the end of the second edition of the *Elementi*, refers to the post-war period), and a long adjustment (Fascism?) which would lead to a regime even worse than its predecessor.

10. I do not believe that anyone would nowadays be inclined to confuse the theory of the ruling class with the ideal which accompanied it, at least when it was originated. But, once this confusion has been cleared up and the origin of the theory has been brought out, the question remains whether this seed was destined to sprout. What is the place of the theory of the ruling class in contemporary political science? If I were to express a judgment solely on the basis of the recent volume called *Politische Forschung* (36) which contains essays on recent developments in political science in a number of countries, my reply would have to be that the theory of the ruling class can be written off (37). Only one of these essays mentions the "ruling class" as analysed in recent studies. But the reference appears in the article on political science in Italy written, as it happens, by the author of the present article (38). This judgment, however, is decidedly partial. At the last International Congress on Sociology, held at Stresa in September 1959, a special session was devoted to the problems of the élite and elicited intense interest, as was shown by the number of people taking part in it (39), even if they were not all agreed as to the merit and topicality of the theory. Behind that remarkable discussion there loomed, even when not specifically mentioned, Wright Mills' book, *The Power Elite* (1956), which had so strikingly drawn the attention of scholars in different countries to the existence in the classical country of democracy, of a ruling class in the very sense in which it had been conceived by Pareto and Mosca (even if Mosca is quoted only once

(36) Volume 17 of the series published by the *Institut fuer politische Wissenschaft* of the Free University of Berlin, edited by Professor Otto Stammer, Cologne and Opladen, Westdeutscher Verlag, 1960.

(37) A similar conclusion should be drawn from the following mimeographed volume, which reproduces the papers and discussions at the *Konferenz ueber den Stand der politischen Wissenschaft in Europa* (8 and 9 July 1960) organized by the *Institut fuer politische Wissenschaft* of Heidelberg University.

(38) N. BOBBIO, "Politische Theorie und Forschung in Italien", in *Politische Forschung*, pp. 65-80 (Italian version in *Il Politico* XXV, 1961, pp. 215-232).

(39) Papers and debates were published in the volume *Le élites politiques*.

in the whole book). And I will leave aside the particular success in Italy of the theory of the ruling class which calls for a separate essay (40).

If the discussion on the ruling class now seems to have come to a dead end, this is because the main aspects of the theory are now clear to everyone, but it has proved difficult to move on from theory, as a working hypothesis, to field research which alone can verify and correct this hypothesis (41). The aspects of political science which are most assiduously cultivated today and which figure most prominently in the reviews and bibliographies of the last fifteen years are precisely those in which research has pounced in its eagerness for data to collect and classify. The main topic is that of electoral behaviour. True, in order to supply a useful model for research, the theory of the ruling class must get over the hump formed by the difficulty of demarcating its field. Who are the people who belong to the ruling class? Or, more precisely, what is the criterion, which can be reliably and easily controlled, by which those who belong to the ruling class can be distinguished from those who do not? The difficulty in finding a criterion has led some writers to reject this theory outright as a useful hypothesis for research (42). The difficulty exists, even if I do not feel able to draw the conclusion from it, which has, however, been drawn, of the non-existence of a ruling class.

II. As we have seen, Mosca's criterion for determining whether an individual belongs to the ruling class was the possession of certain qualities which varied according to the different historical periods (wealth, valour and so on). A criterion of this kind is obviously too vague to delimit a field of empirical research.

On the contrary, the only criterion that can be used is one which takes account of the exercise of a certain function for a

(40) For a history of the fortunes of the theory of the "élites" see E. PENNATI, *Elementi di sociologia politica*, Milan, Comunità, 1961, in particular, chapter III: "Le élites politiche nelle teorie minoritarie", pp. 105-162.

(41) For a general picture of the state of the question in contemporary political science and for a synthesis of the various levels at which empirical research on the ruling class would be possible, I would refer to the book by F. BARBANO, *Sociologia della politica, Concetti, metodi e campo di ricerca*, Milan, Giuffrè, 1961, and in particular to pp. 84-94.

(42) I have drawn attention to this aspect of the problem in my article "Fatti e valori nella teoria delle élites", in *Comunità*, No. 80, 1960, p. 5.

certain period of time, regardless of the personal qualities possessed. In a democratic state, probably the most important functions are those discharged by the members of the government, the upper or lower house, certain consultative bodies at the summit, the administrative bodies of large cities, and so on.

If this criterion is accepted, the starting point for research on the ruling class should be restated as follows: "All those should be regarded as belonging to the 'ruling class' who during the period  $x y z$  have exercised functions  $a b c$ ". It will be understood that we are dealing rather with the class of politicians, that is, the group of individuals which is more and more clearly identified, in states with an increasingly tentacular and rigid organization, with the class of professional politicians, and not the ruling class in the sense of a group of persons who in a specific society exercise the real power. Whether the class as thus defined is the one which really exercises power is another question which would call for further analysis. For one thing, it could be necessary to study (as is now so fashionable) the centres of hidden power (pressure groups) and the relations between those centres and politicians, but, as Sartori rightly observes, "there is only one way of ascertaining whether, and if so to what extent, it is true that an invisible power controls the visible power; that of ascertaining what the visible ruling élite does or does not do, and, to begin with, who belongs to it and does not" (43).

Once an easily applicable criterion has been accepted which can determine whether a person belongs to the ruling class, at least two of the four subjects, into which, for convenience sake, I have divided my description of the theory, may lead to research conducted with the techniques which are now practised by the empirical science of politics. I mean the first subject, that of the composition and formation, and the third, that of renewal. I exclude the second subject, i.e. extension, because this is one rather for historical investigation, and the fourth, i.e. organization, because this is half way between history of institutions and constitutional law. Besides, it is a classical part of the theory of the state (under the heading of forms of government). We must classify partly under the first subject, and partly under the third, the research

(43) G. SARTORI, *Il parlamento, Appunti di una ricerca*, Florence, Sansoni, 1961, p. 11.

already carried out or under way in Italy and elsewhere on members of parliament or of the government in a specific country for a certain historical period chosen to that end (44).

In conclusion, I have no hesitation in saying that the validity of the theory of the ruling class has not yet been undermined. Indeed, it has, if anything, been confirmed by authoritative writers, even if its fertility has not yet been demonstrated for lack of specific research.

However, there is one point in which the theory appears to me to be no longer acceptable. Mosca was constantly of the opinion that every ruling class constituted a very restricted and monolithic group — in contemptuous terms, a clique; and, in expressing this idea, he never omitted to add the adjective “organized” to the noun “minority” (45). The strongly ideological attitude, which continually underlay the working out of the concept, cannot have been extraneous to its origin. This attitude led him to pass a not entirely favourable judgment on the parliamentary regime in his later days. We now know that in the party state (and perhaps even in the one-party state) there are different centres of power,

(44) The comprehensive research carried out by Sartori for the Italian Parliament will appear shortly. This writer has already given the main outlines and some findings in the little volume *Il parlamento* quoted in the previous note. In it, the reader will also find interesting information on the state of research in other countries (pp. 66-71).

(45) In my paper read to the IVth World Congress of Sociology, I tried to make roughly the same point. But I did not put it clearly enough and therefore left a certain ambiguity about the meaning of the word “organization” (especially if my paper is compared with the final observations in *Le élites politiche*, p. 58 and pp. 208-209). My thesis is not correct if it is interpreted, as it could be, to mean that the ruling classes in a democratic regime lacked organization itself and not organizational unity (the so-called “monolithic bloc”). De Caprariis is therefore right when he observes, in an article which came out after this article had been written, that the distinction between a conservative and a democratic ruling class does not lie in the fact that one is organized and the other is not. “Every ruling group”, he writes, “whether in the government or in the opposition, cannot but be organized” (“*Le élites e la democrazia*”, in *Nord e Sud*, IX, New Series, January 1962, p. 27). I am not sure, however, that he is also right in arguing that the distinction between a conservative and a democratic ruling class is to be found in the difference between their political formulae. The political formula for Mosca is the body of doctrines or, depending on the circumstances, of myths with which the class in power tries to justify its own superiority and the need for the others to obey it. Hence, a ruling class may well say one thing, and do another. If we want to know whether a ruling class is conservative or democratic, we must study, not what it says, but what it does, *i.e.* not its political formula, but the way in which power is actually exercised. If the political formula serves the ruling class to maintain power, it is not so useful to the student of politics for the comprehension of the nature of that power. On the contrary, the first thing the student has to do is probably to raise the veil covering the formulae in order to see what lies underneath.

which are at times in alliance, at times in open or concealed hostility. If we may borrow a concept from economic theory, it is an oligopoly rather than a monopoly. The point we are making is that, in addition to the relation between minority and majority which alone roused Mosca's interest, there are no less complex relations between minority and minority. This suggests that only if we go more thoroughly into these new problems will it be possible for the theory of the ruling class to make further progress.

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