INTRODUCTION:
DEMOCRATIC ELITISM REAPPRAISED

Heinrich Best and John Higley*

Early in the twentieth century Gaetano Mosca, Vilfredo Pareto, Robert Michels and Max Weber highlighted the disjunction between political elites and democracy. Emphasizing the inescapability and autonomy of elites, they contended that efforts to achieve government by the people are futile; an elite-dominated “democracy” is the most that is possible (Burnham 1943; Femia 2001:67). In such a democracy there are elected parliaments and other elected offices, but voters do not really choose their representatives and key office holders. Rather, career politicians and assorted political interlopers impose themselves on voters. According to Mosca (1923/1939) and Michels (1915/1962), democracies can never be more than intra-elite competitions entailing the systematic manipulation of voters’ choices and interests (see Linz 2006).

Regarding politics as driven always by “the principle of small numbers,” Weber hoped that a distinctive “leader democracy,” marked by a charismatic leader’s domination over parliamentary careerists, party machines, and state bureaucracies, might nonetheless emerge (1920/1978:41–71,1111–55,1414,1459–60). Pareto was less hopeful. There can be a “demagogic plutocracy,” in which an alliance of fox-like politicians and profit-seeking capitalists (“speculators”) rules through deception, demagogy and the bribing of diverse interests. But because such elite maneuvers involve allocating instead of creating wealth, a demagogic plutocracy gradually “kills the goose that lays the golden eggs” (1902/1966:142). When the goose is effectively dead – when the demagogic plutocracy is hollowed out economically – a leonine elite prepared to reverse economic decline and social decay by force displaces the vulpine elite. The demagogic plutocracy is transformed into a military plutocracy. Eventually, however, the leonine elite over-reaches

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in its “warlike activities” and is unseated by a new fox-like elite that creates another demagogic plutocracy, thus starting the “plutocratic cycle” over (Pareto 1921/1984:55–62; Femia 2006:100–123). Attempts to break the cycle are pointless.

The four early theorists of elites depicted popular sovereignty and egalitarian socialism as rhetorical façades and political formulas that merely mask rule by elites. They regarded the surging communist and fascist movements of their time as vehicles on which illiberal and leonine elites would ride to power, with Weber warning that a “polar night of icy darkness and hardness” might well occur in post-World War I Germany (quoted by Antonio 1995:1370). Their premonitions were largely realized during the 1920s and 1930s, though as a consequence, theories about elites came to be seen as better at accounting for the rise of authoritarian and totalitarian regimes than elucidating democracy (e.g. Lasswell and Lerner 1965). In ideological formulations and popular outlooks after World War II, the cohabitation of democracy and elites was viewed as awkward and uneasy (Mills 1956; Kornhauser 1959; Bottomore 1964; Porter 1965). It was widely believed that finding ways to restrict elite autonomy and prevent arbitrary elite action is essential if democracy is to have meaning.

Joseph Schumpeter’s theory of competitive democracy, which is often labeled “democratic elitism” – a label Schumpeter himself never used – was the most important effort to reconcile democracy with the existence of elites. In his seminal book *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, Schumpeter contended that democracy is a method or institutional arrangement “for arriving at political decisions in which individuals [political leaders and elites] acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people’s vote” (1942:269). Democracy, in other words, combines governance by leaders and elites with time-limited mandates to govern issued by the demos. But Schumpeter’s theory was ambiguous and somewhat contradictory. It assumed that leaders and elites are competitive but also restrained; it depended upon unspecified conditions that underlie peaceful competitions for votes; and it tried to merge two antagonistic principles, democracy and elitism.

For these and other reasons we will discuss, democratic elitism is an overly simplistic rendition of how democracies, especially today’s democracies, work. Though a “competitive struggle for the people’s vote” occurs, political leaders and elites orchestrate this struggle. Indeed, democracies may be morphing into Weber’s leader democracy, with