Not Much Class

There is an extraordinary contrast between the confident, optimistic tone at the beginning of this book and the confusion and uncertainty at the end. The editors’ introduction presents a comprehensive pattern of élites and régimes and sums up the entire political development of Eastern Europe and Russia from the late 1980s to the late-1990s. A large part of the conclusion, it is true, follows this up by arguing that élite theory has eclipsed Marxism as a credible explanation of political change (p. 238). Actually, this boils down to little more than saying that the term ‘élite’ has become fashionable for the second time in a century, but the voluntary confessions which the authors themselves then make are much more damaging to their cause. The widespread use of the word ‘élite’, they admit, has not been the result of any revival or development of ideas about élites. On the contrary, there is ‘something like a theory void’. In other words, this is a theory which lacks any widely-accepted system of basic terms and concepts even among its own adherents. It is therefore extremely difficult to test and not much use as a criteria by which to select data.

The essays in this anthology do, however, share certain basic attitudes: elitism, for example. On the very first page, the editors put forward as the premise of the entire volume the view that the prospects for stability and democracy are crucially dependent on the ‘extent to which elites trust and cooperate with one another’ (p. 1). This is echoed in the chapter on Slovakia, while the chapter on Poland declares: ‘After state socialism in East Central Europe, politics have become what the majority of politicians, or at least the dominant politicians, do’ (p. 87). The contributors do not develop thought-out arguments to substantiate such points or support them with evidence, they are simply asserted. Another common attitude favours description rather than analysis. For instance, in the Introduction, the editors mention that in their model, reproduction (the occupation of élite positions in the new régime by the same type of people as in the old) ‘is associated with fragmented élites’ (p. 11). However, they do not attempt an explanation as to why this should be so. In his essay on Serbia, which, while muddled, is a degree more thoughtful than the others, Mladen Lazić characterises élite theory as ‘trivial, descriptive, and nonanalytical at the abstract level,
though it has often spawned compelling empirical research’ (p. 126). I thought this really hit the nail on the head when I first read it; however, upon further consideration, I found it over-generous. In my experience of the literature on Russia, it is more often the case that interesting research on élites dabs itself here and there with a touch of something fashionable from the world of ideas: it might be a touch of élite theory, or a hint of democratisation theory, or a soupçon of globalisation theory; it might not have much to do with the rest of the outfit.¹

Then there is the light-minded attitude to issues of evidence and data. The essay on the Czech Republic claims that ‘an almost complete circulation of the political élite’ has taken place. However, the reader is referred to other publications for details of the research on which this claim is based. The authors of the essay confess in an aside that ‘methodological problems of sample selection and representativeness were substantial’. But there is no hint here of what these problems were. The last research exercise cited in the chapter appears to have been conducted in 1994, six years before this anthology was published (pp. 28–9, 36). The chapter on Poland is rather more forthcoming, so we know that it is based on interviews in 1996 with 215 parliamentary deputies and with 61 runners-up. As the authors make clear, their research was about ‘political élite perceptions of how politics were being played and what the élite’s own roles were in Poland during the mid-1990s’: just the stated perceptions of politicians, nothing else. This is not uninteresting, but is clearly of limited significance and not a very firm basis for a confident prediction that there is little danger of ‘explosive political conflict . . . because conflicting élite perceptions . . . are substantially undercut by the common conviction . . . about the overriding importance of continuing market reform and keeping democracy stable’ (pp. 88–9, 101). The essay on East Germany, which argues that there has been an extensive circulation of the political élite, is based on a 1995 survey – again published elsewhere (pp. 113–15, 120, fn. 12). The nature of the élite samples in the essay on Serbia is not made clear. Nevertheless, they are interpreted to support the argument that the country has an entirely new class structure (pp. 130, 133–5). The essay on business élites in four East European countries in 1993, seven years before this anthology was published, is very sketchy about methods, samples and some of its results (pp. 220, 222).

It is important to understand that such attitudes are not confined to this particular work. They are integral to élite theory and go right back to the founding fathers. The terms ‘élite theory’ and ‘élitist theory’ have been used interchangeably, and no wonder:² élitism sought to justify a prejudice as an idea and was fundamental to the intellectual reaction against Marxism. The originators of élite theory were predisposed to overestimate the innate abilities of élites who succeeded in remaining – or who came out

² See, for example, Meisel 1958, p. 10.