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The meritocracy or “responsibility elite”? An evangelical approach to the issue of social elites*

Abstract

The notion of meritocracy is among the keywords used to describe the contemporary world. Increasingly, it has become a central concept of an order with globalization and the impact of free-market philosophy on society and culture as the main factors. The concept of meritocracy examines the nature of elites. On the one hand, meritocratic elites come from groups selected for their merits and competences; on the other hand, they avoid their responsibility towards society and culture. Amongst many counterproposals, it seems worthwhile to present the evangelical concept of elites embedded in evangelical social teaching. Evangelical theology introduces the idea of responsibility elites in its social discourse. According to evangelical theologians, in order to overcome the growing social, economic and cultural crisis of today, it might be necessary to rehabilitate the notion of the common good. Considered from a sociological and a theological standpoint, responsibility elites play a significant role in spreading the concept of the common good.

The article presents theological guidelines for evangelical teachings on elites as well as evangelical proposals concerning the subject matter, collating them with a comprehensive assessment of meritocratic elites.

Keywords: meritocracy, elite, evangelical, church, Protestant Reformation

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1. Introduction

In the context of transformations brought by postmodernity or late modernity (as Anthony Giddens maintains), the topic of elites is essentially connected with the blurring of “rigid” social categories, with the weakening of what is social, what is related to a community. Split into an infinite number of groups and individuals, the society is disintegrating in the conflict of particular interests. The pace of changes that each individual experiences keeps postmodern people feeling lost and torn; they “flounder through the mismatched fragments of sensations, experiences and adventures, which they unavailingly try (if has not given up hope yet) to piece together into a meaningful image of life with its ‘purpose’ and ‘direction’” (Bauman, 1994, p. 38).

As the group to which an average individual looks up to, and which defines and represents the ways and styles of life that are rooted in specific values and norms, the elite takes on a special role in this reality. What is also characteristic of the postmodern era is the fact that the specificity of the individualistic culture of “liquid reality” relates to them as well. Elites withdraw from their role of being a guide and a leader. They are not preoccupied with conducting any social mission.

Such an attitude of the modern world elite became the subject of criticism made from the standpoint of evangelical theology. The key word of this criticism is responsibility, or rather lack of it, in the groups that make up the modern elite. In the view of the Evangelical Church, theology must formulate and present the concept of the elite and present it to the masses.

2. The meritocratic elite of the globalized world

The article *Repairing the Rungs on the Ladder*, published on February 9, 2013, in “The Economist”, contains a short but clear-cut analysis of social changes associated with the rise of the new world elite. In order to illustrate how it functions, the author of the article recalls the concept of meritocracy, a term coined and forwarded by a sociologist and a member of the British Labour party, Michael Young in 1958, in *The Rise of the Meritocracy*. Young describes a society in which the elite class based on the Competence Principle is replacing the elite by birth. The birth hierarchy gives way to the hierarchy of talents. In a meritocracy, social position depends on one’s intelligence and education verified according to objective measures. Nonetheless, Young asserts that meritocracy is not the key to building a just and a happy society, but rather a way of replacing one elite with another, separating themselves from the masses and laying down the criteria for inclusion in, and, exclusion from their circles. However, unlike the old elite based on birth, the new meritocratic elite lacks a system of specific values.

As stated by the author of the article published in *The Economist*, “the world is starting to look a bit like Young’s nightmare vision.” The new meritocratic elite of the world gains power and profits, primarily owing to globalization and the ever-expanding global economy.

The top 1% have seen their incomes soar because of the premium that a globalised high-tech economy places on brainy people. Business-school-educated elite whose members marry one another and spend their money wisely on Mandarin lessons and Economist subscriptions for their children are replacing the aristocracy that gambled its money away on “wine, women and song”.

Repeatedly, statistics point to a constant trend: the gap between the rich and the poor is becoming wider. The financial crisis that broke out in 2008 with the bankruptcy of Lehman Brothers and the collapse of the mortgage market revealed the scale of profits that financial institutions shared. Largely, these institutions sought to achieve the biggest profits possible; disregarding the rules that until that point had given the credibility to the financial institutions. The slogan that drove the market was, “greed is good”. The economic stratification of societies occurs on both internal and international levels, and the inequalities grow on a global scale, as defined in the North-South scheme.

2.1. The global economy

The formation of the meritocratic elite coincides with globalization processes. Manuel Castells, author of *The Network Society* – a key position in the field of Internet sociology, depicts a global economy that, with the spread of the Internet, is developing at a constantly increasing pace (2007, p. 107). Importantly, Castells stresses that the global economy is not the same as the world economy since it is not the sum of individual national economies, but a supra-national structure characterized by the ability to operate as a whole in real time or in a particular timeframe on a planetary scale. As it is growing and spreading, economies of individual countries are more and more dependent on the achievements of the “globalized core”. In Castells’ opinion, this core encompasses financial markets, international trade, transnational production, science and technology as well as the specialized workforce (2007, p. 108).

The meritocratic elite that influences the functioning of societies is a product of the specialized workforce. Castells writes about such specialized workforce not only with regard to its highly qualified members but also to those who are increasingly in demand and who, therefore, do not fall under normal regulations on immigration laws, payment terms and working conditions. Everyone who can create and add and unusual benefit, in any given market, has a chance to explore markets globally.

The global economy is typified by a fundamental asymmetry between countries, which is determined by their level of integration, competitiveness potential and share of benefits from economic development. The asymmetry also extends to

regions within countries. It results in the progressive economic stratification of the world population, which ultimately sets a global trend of increased inequalities and social exclusion.

The stratification is twofold: on the one hand, valuable segments of territories and groups of people are included in the global networks of value creation and appropriation of wealth; on the other hand, everything and everyone who, from the perspective of these networks, are deprived of value or loses value is separated from these networks and eventually, left to themselves. Since the positions within the networks can change, countries, regions and populations are in constant motion, which entails structurally induced instability.

2.2. The meritocratic elite

The global economy creates the meritocratic elite, who continues to set new boundaries and establishes new mechanisms of including or excluding people from its ranks. The ideology of the free market, which applies the principles of valuation in terms of profitability, as well as unbridled consumerism, favour the formation of the meritocratic elite: they take the responsibility for the world off its members' shoulders and offer the masses a possibility of consumption in which fixed categories are lost, transforming living into collecting sensations.

Young's vision is materializing. It is enough to take a trip to the modern agora, i.e. Internet forums: a big part of expressed opinions is grounded in dogmatic thinking in terms of "economicism" and a free market. Alain Touraine writes about the dominant interpretive discourse, applying it to the political sphere (2007, p. 16). His concept explains the judgement that is widespread in numerous countries, expressed in a simple phrase: "if you are poor, you are stupid", where stupid is not so much about being "unresourceful" as being "untalented, unintelligent". Predispositions and specialized education became another criterion that explained increasing social differences, while the astronomical bonuses that the financiers of the City of London awarded to themselves can be regarded a symbol of a growing split in societies. The meritocratic discourse, at times full of contempt for the people who did not manage to obtain education that brings high salaries and respect in the society, frequently ascribes the contribution to state revenue solely to specialist from the elites and, consequently, perceives the rest of people as a burden weighing down the arithmetic bars of GDP. This discourse is one of the factors brutalizing the public space and atomising the society.

Vilfredo Pareto and Gaetano Mosca, who sparked off a debate about the elites in sociology, were basing it on the assumption that:

in every society there is, and must be, a minority that rules over the rest of society; this minority—the "political class" or "governing elite", composed of those who occupy the posts of political command and, more vaguely, those who can directly influence political decisions. (Bottomore, 1964, p. 105)

The composition of elites changes over time due to a recruitment of new members from lower social classes, an inclusion of new groups, and sometimes a complete replacement of one elite with the other during a revolution. Pareto and Mosca, however, differed on how they analysed the essence of the process that they referred to as “circulation of elites”. Pareto insisted on making a sharp distinction between rulers and ruled, not recognizing the specificity of democracy in this aspect. Mosca took into account the heterogeneity of elites (Bottomore, 1964, p. 106). He believed that there was a difference between a modern democracy and other types of political systems; rather than direct domination, recognising an interaction between elites and the ruled ones. He anticipated the emergence of new elites through the representation of new interests, e.g. economic or technological. In a democracy, elites can form freely, and the political system presupposes regulated competition for power between them. In Pareto’s approach, the notion of elite can have two meanings. In a broader sense, elite is a group that gained an advantage over other groups in some field. In its narrow sense, elite is a group of people governing a given political organism—the power elite.

Nowadays, it is apparent that the traditional discourse on elites is becoming somewhat outdated. In *Smooth Modernity*, Zygmunt Bauman offers a vivid description of the elite of the contemporary post-modernist era:

The contemporary global elite is shaped by the pattern of the old-style “absentee landlords”. It can rule without burdening itself with the chores of administration, management, welfare concerns, or, for that matter, with the mission of “bringing light”, “reforming the ways”, morally uplifting, “civilizing” and cultural crusades. Active engagement in the life of subordinate populations is no longer needed (on the contrary, it is actively avoided as unnecessarily costly and ineffective)—and so the “bigger” is not just not better any more, but devoid of rational sense. (Bauman, 2006, p. 23)

Therefore, various social commentators face the task of formulating a new concept of an elite, which would replace the meritocratic ideal and would allow social organisms to function. Individual philanthropic acts performed by world idols of meritocracy, such as Bill Gates or Steve Jobs, are not enough. Meritocratic elites must develop their ethos, going beyond the mere pursuit of wealth and extreme individualism that evades responsibility for the world in which they live. In the post-modern era, in the era of an “orchestra without a conductor”, as Pierre Bourdieu defines the society (Jacyno, 1997, p. 13), if not in the face of “the decline of the social”, as Alain Touraine (2006, p. 118) puts it, this task seems harder but also more urgent than ever before.

3. The concept of an elite in evangelical theology

More and more frequently, Christian churches respond to specific problems that are associated with social changes, stepping into the area of sociological research and employing the language, methods and concepts of sociology. Among various

axiologies and standpoints on which the social commentators base, the Evangelical theology occupies a prominent place. From the very beginning, Evangelicalism of both the Reformed and Lutheran tradition put emphasis on social sciences by placing them in the general structure of theological discourse and by stressing their importance for the Christian life of every believer.

Contemporary evangelical churches uphold the tradition of commenting on social phenomena. The Evangelical Church in Germany plays a crucial role in this respect, mostly owing to its size. Grounding on the evangelical principles of theology and on the sociological reflection, it brings the assumptions of Lutheran social science up to date. In a similar manner, the financial crisis of 2008 and the progressive stratification of Western societies have become the reason for reinterpreting the position and role of elites in society.

As in the case of other studies, evangelical theologians draw attention to a complex of factors that form the context for the topic of elites, namely: globalization, individualism and increasing social inequalities. These factors coincide with the group of other social trends that mark the postmodern era. For this reason, the authors of the document *Evangelische Verantwortungseliten* (Evangelical responsibility elites), which constitutes the main evangelical platform for presenting a contemporary theological interpretation of the position that elites take in the society (2011, p. 14), refer to the phenomenon called *the war for talent*. It contributes to the growth of the meritocratic elite, but at the same time, it exempts the elite from the imperative to take responsibility for the society in which they live. Nonetheless, in the magazine *Wie ein Riss in einer hohen Mauer*, theologians partially agree with the assessments that connect the financial crisis of 2008 to the irresponsible attitude of some of the elite members who “were exercising their liberties only to achieve their own, particular goals” (2009, p. 11). What proves this statement is the fact that the Lutheran interpretation introduced an antinomic perception of the elite through its two faces,

which it showed on different occasions and in different social contexts. On the one hand, the elite is subject to critical judgment in situations involving the status of unearned privileges, reinforcement of social inequalities, arrogance and abuse of power. Such a character of elites is incompatible with the biblical patterns of successful social life. On the other hand, the creation of a human is expressed in people possessing different talents and abilities. Hence, in every social order, there are functional and social differences, which can be limited but not eliminated. (*Evangelische Verantwortungseliten*, 2011, p. 22)

The Evangelical perspective warns against rushing to judgments and emphasizes that we cannot attribute every symptom of the crisis and painful changes to a particular person, thoughtlessly putting the blame on “those above”. As for the profound social transformations, let us recall that responsibility is the keyword in the functioning of each and every society; thus, the discourse on the elites as well as their behaviour have to be responsible.

3.1. The concept of an elite as a function of the universal priesthood doctrine

The Reformed social science was founded on a few basic elements, which include teachings about two kingdoms—worldly and spiritual, which God uses in steering the fate of the world; teachings about the office and vocation; teachings about the universal priesthood. The latter referred to the theological dimension of reality and was related to the Lutheran criticism of monasticism. The theological interpretation encompassed all dimensions of social life and despite a clear division into “secular” and “spiritual”, it was a theological monism in which everything is subordinated to the relationship of God to man. Consequently, the domain of society and the domain of church interpenetrate. The same principle applies to the concept of elites.

The doctrine of the universal priesthood presupposed that the Church is formed on the equality of all baptized people and rejected the ontological distinctness of those who were ordained. Yet, in society as well as in the Church community, the doctrine of universal priesthood recognized a variety of offices and functions without introducing any absolute unification. Therefore, in the Church, it assumes the variety of ministries, which nowadays can be expressed as a varying degree of commitment. The functions people serve in the Christian community can be their main occupation, additional ministry or a remunerated service. The central element in this scheme is the theological principle of equal participation of all Christians in the priesthood as well as the common task, which is to “help people live by faith and die in faith”. This theological nature and a common goal of the Christian community are the foundation of equality. Theologians point out that in Lutheranism, the ecclesiastical system proves the universal priesthood principle with its criterion of selecting a governing body of the Church. Representatives of the clergy and lay people, who either fulfil their professional duties in the Church or are not, employed by the Church, lead the ecclesial community—“it is contained within the pool of various talents and functions.”

Yet, when it comes to the quality of diversity, a clerical function occupies a special place in the Church. In section XIV of the Augsburg Confession, Philip Melancthon writes:

Of Ecclesiastical Order, they teach that no one should publicly teach in the Church or administer the Sacraments unless he be regularly called. (*Księgi Wyznaniowe...*, 1999, p. 146)

In the section VIII of the Confession, the Church is defined as the “congregation of saints, in which the Gospel is faithfully taught, and the sacraments are rightly administered” (*Księgi Wyznaniowe...*, 1999, p. 145). It means that to carry out these specific acts, one must hold an appropriate office in the Church, which does not involve achieving any special spiritual status that would entail an irreversible imprint. Rather, it consists of a particular responsibility, which is related to the held office and specific competences.

3.2. The concept of an elite as a function of the Lutheran social science

The ecclesial system, which in its unity of purpose and essence assumed a functional diversity, is reflected in Lutheran social science. The Lutheran Reformation depicted society as a system of estates and offices, in which everyone performs their function pursuing their calling. In line with this interpretation, the State, like the Church, was to fulfil the function of managing society in accordance with the principles of the Gospel. It was portrayed in Luther's two kingdoms doctrine. Thus, the social science assumed differences between members of society, in keeping with appointed office and competences that correspond to an individual vocation. Nonetheless, in the context of the basic purpose of the existence of a hierarchical social structure, which was God's rule in the world, it recognized the equality of all its members.

The necessity for an office of priesthood within the Church, which is associated with serving specific functions and bearing special responsibilities, leads to an analogous conclusion in relation to society and the state. The reformers quickly realized that the Reformation could not occur without the support of the social elites. In the theological equality of all the baptized, the social theory of Lutheranism had to take into account inequalities, which were ascribed to functions. In this way, the Lutheran Reformation extended, to a certain degree, the existence of a social hierarchy model, dividing society members into estates made up of Christians, equal before God.

The concepts of estate and office must be completed with the concept of vocation, which in Lutheranism is connected with a specific theological and ethical dimension. To have a calling is to acknowledge one's estate as determined by God and to perform the related duties following God's commandment. It leads to identifying the duties that arise from the fact of coexisting in society with those that stem from the fact of being a Christian. The Lutheran ethics of vocation was developing in the process of criticizing monasticism and "deeds of false piety" and affirming "secular deeds". Every vocation and every estate was a place where the Christian life of "reasonable service" (Rom 12: 1) to others before God was fulfilled. The consequence of such ethics was not an escape from the world but an involvement in the world, "the inner world life", as written by the famous Lutheran theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer (Kopiec, 2008, p. 235).

The elements of the Lutheran concept still exist in the structure of German society, despite a number of factors that drained it, as well as its state and even the Church from various components of Reformed theology. Evangelicalism is also present in the life of German society nowadays, and because of the institutions that determined its shape after the Second World War, the expression "Protestant mafia" come into common use Lutheran theologians also draw attention to an "evangelical face" of the changes in Germany in 1989 (*Evangelische Verantwortungseliten*, 2011, p. 15).

4. Modern elites from the evangelical standpoint

The assessment of the crisis of elites, referring both to their internal condition and to the perception of elites by society, as well as the theological interpretation of their place in society result in constructing an evangelical model of an elite. In this construct, not only the critique of a contemporary society, but also the increasingly apparent anthropological crisis are reflected.

Lutheran theology was founded on the doctrine of justification of man by God that comes through faith alone. From the perspective of social science, apart from other dimensions, the justification means that human activity can be good, just and useful, regardless of a rank on the social ladder and the prestige associated with the social position. The dictatorship of the success cult stands in deep contradiction to the doctrine of justification. Lutheran theologians remind that the Lutheran doctrine of vocation was subject to criticism by Max Weber, who saw it as the reinforcement of medieval social systems with the rigid assignment of functions within such a system. In his opinion, it led to social stagnation, as personal success and prosperity were not the goals of entering any profession or career path. The theologians, though indirectly, refute Weber’s accusations. In the modern era, each person makes a career choice by themselves, according to the criterion of financial success and social recognition. An individual became responsible for his or her own fate. Yet, Lutheran theologians ask a question whether this responsibility has not become an excuse for society to blame individuals for their professional failures, a lost job or work-related unethical compromise. Is financial success indeed the only criterion that allows evaluating human choices? A human is more than just the sum of results and success. Bauman answers this question in a straightforward way:

In the land of the individual freedom of choice, the option to escape individualization and to refuse participation in the individualizing game is emphatically not on the agenda... The individual’s self-containment and self-sufficiency may be another illusion: that men and women have no one to blame for their frustrations and troubles do not need now to mean, any more than in the past, that they can protect themselves against frustration through using their own domestic appliances or pull themselves out of trouble. (2006, p. 53)

The Reformation has always placed a strong emphasis on education. Luther’s Catechisms were the first documents of this kind in history that were to spread religious knowledge among commoners. Filip Melancton, Luther’s closest collaborator, was conferred the title of *Praeceptor Germaniae* (the teacher of Germany). Failure to provide a child with education was seen as negligence: “You deprive the state, the principality, the city of salvation, comfort, a cornerstone, helpers and saviours”—wrote Luther (*Evangelische Verantwortungseliten*, 2011, p. 27). In the social order determined by the doctrine of vocation, however, education, aspirations and striving for success are means to achieving the overriding goal; it is also because, contrary to the prevailing trends, individual efforts must be supported and must take into account the common good.

Hence, in the context of anthropology conditioned by the doctrine of justification by faith, vocation is a key notion related to the social science, and to its branch dealing with the issue of elites. In light of the discourse that includes the concept of universal priesthood and the theology of office and vocation, it has to be stated that in society, there exists a diversity of talents and competences in true, anthropological equality. Inequalities in the distribution of rewards and privileges, perceived as a mechanism regulating social development, are a response to this diversity. Utopian dreams of egalitarian societies without elites led to the formation of a new, non-functional and irresponsible elite.

Democratic and open societies need talents and efforts, results and creativity, leadership and responsibility in order to secure a bright future for as many as possible, and with it – freedom and prosperity. (*Evangelische Verantwortungseliten*, 2011, p. 25)

Still, rewarding efforts and competences do not mean that the measures against inequalities, unjust divisions and social exclusion are not being implemented. Society cannot be seen as an epiphenomenon of the economy, because then it turns into an unstructured group of competing units.

According to Lutheran theologians, the predicted decline of what is “social” must be prevented by rehabilitating the notion of common good. The image of the Kingdom of God materializing itself has always been strong in the Protestant tradition – in its extreme form presented by the 19th-century liberal theology, it boiled down to identifying the progress of civilization with the arrival of the God’s Kingdom on earth. Nevertheless, the theological view of creation presupposes the pursuit of improving reality. Elites perform a special function in this programme. Their role is fundamental in societies that more and more frequently do not have leaders, just numerous advisers—experts, but lack figures of authority, and in which the mass media floods reality with worthless content, creating – to use the term coined by Jean Baudrillard—a hyperreality. Theologians underline that the life programme of self-improvement, self-fulfilment, career and life success, often used in reference to elite members, must include the care for what is common. The good and development of society rest, primarily, on elites.

For this reason, responsibility is the keyword related to the Lutheran model of the elite. Owing to their position in society and the trust placed in them, elites must be responsible. That is to say, they should not just act in their own interest but also consider others, taking into account the social dimension.

In addition, elites must seek to strengthen the democratic order, which is not simply about a narrowly understood political dimension but about building a free, pluralistic and an open society. In a democracy, people do not become members of elites on a whim and irrevocably; the society gives them the benefit of the doubt. They are to take responsibility for particular tasks in specific areas of activity. It does not mean, however, that such responsibility refers only to specific functions resulting from person’s competences. And so the economic elite cannot limit their

responsibility to ensuring the economic growth, the cultural elite—to development in arts, and the ecclesiastical elite—to the functioning of church institutions. Elites must keep in mind the complementarily understood well-being of society.

5. Conclusions

The Evangelical Church sees its role in implementing the concept of responsibility elite by strengthening the evangelical identity among members of various elites. This function is to consist in updating the notion of vocation, ability and responsibility, explaining what the Evangelical identity and the Evangelical ethos of elite are all about, as well as cooperating with and drawing on the experience and diverse competences of elites. The church should appear as interesting and constantly be learning, addressing the elites in areas of their interest. It must put itself in the vanguard of the process for overcoming social disintegration and to setting an example of taking responsibility for the community.

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