

**The social immobility of the European power elite  
A comparative analysis**

**Carlo Carboni**

*Università Politecnica delle Marche*

**Gianluca Busilacchi**

*Università di Macerata*

**Mariateresa Ciommi**

*Università Politecnica delle Marche*

**Rossella Di Federico**

*Università degli Studi di Teramo*

**Francesco Orazi**

*Università Politecnica delle Marche*

**Federico Sofritti**

*Università di Macerata*

**Daniele Roscioli**

*Università Politecnica delle Marche*

**Abstract**

In the current complex socio-economic and political situation, it is important to understand the future of the European Union, which cannot be separated from an analysis of its elites. This paper investigates the socio-demographic, educational and professional features of European power elite members (henceforth international top leaders) in the political, cultural and economic fields. Quantitative research was carried out examining the profiles of 9,000 Europeans contained in The International Who's Who 2021 (2020). A descriptive analysis of elite members and a categorical principal components analysis is provided. The study highlights that top European leaders are mainly male and quite old. In this regard, a sort of 'longue durée' of male dominance and gerontocracy can be observed, which suggests that for European elite members systematic generational and gender turnover seems to be very difficult. Second, educational pathways and professions are crucial variables. These factors are very important even though significant heterogeneity can be observed at the national level. Despite several national differences, nationality does not seem to weigh heavily in qualifying top leaders.

**Keywords:** European power elite, age, gender, territorial distribution

**Riassunto.** L'immobilità sociale dell'élite del potere europeo. Un'analisi comparativa

Nell'attuale complessa situazione socio-economica e politica, la comprensione del futuro dell'Unione Europea non può essere separata dall'analisi delle sue élite. Questo articolo indaga le caratteristiche socio-demografiche, educative e professionali dei membri delle élite di potere europee (top leaders internazionali) in campo politico, culturale ed economico. È stata condotta una ricerca quantitativa esaminando i profili di 9.000 europei contenuti in The International Who's Who 2021 (2020). Viene fornita un'analisi descrittiva dei membri dell'élite e un'analisi categorica delle componenti principali. Lo studio evidenzia che i leader europei sono prevalentemente uomini e piuttosto anziani. A questo proposito, si osserva una sorta di "longue durée" di dominanza maschile e gerontocrazia, il che suggerisce un ricambio sistematico generazionale e di genere molto difficile. In secondo luogo, i percorsi formativi e le professioni sono variabili cruciali con una significativa eterogeneità a livello nazionale. Nonostante le numerose differenze nazionali, la nazionalità non sembra avere un peso significativo nella qualificazione dei leader.

**Parole chiave:** élite europea, età, genere, distribuzione territoriale

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## **1. Introduction**

The topic of the elite has been extensively treated from a theoretical point of view (Russell, 1938; Lasswell, 1948; Lasswell and Kaplan, 1952; Hunter, 1953; Wright Mills, 1956; Bell, 1976; Bourdieu, 1982; 1989; Popitz, 2017; Scott, 1990; Thompson, 1998; Mann, 2013). The most widely used sociological definition of the elite as ruling class is the one provided by Gaetano Mosca in the Elements of Political Science (1896) according to which in all societies there exist two classes of people: that of the rulers and that of the governed. According to Mosca, the former is an organized minority, while the latter is divided, inarticulate, dispersed (Bobbio 1990). Pareto (1902) called the upperclass aristocracy or elite, i.e. the individuals who occupy the upper ranks in wealth and power. However, there is a lack of empirical investigations of this issue. This is for two reasons: first, the difficulty in identifying suitable research methodologies to analyse the power elite; and second, a lack of reliable sources (Uhlin and Arvidson, 2022).

Regarding these problems, the contribution that the paper intends to offer is an “empirical” anchoring to personal, social, educational, and professional profiles of elites and leaders of internationally renowned European countries. For this purpose, a wide database and multivariate statistical analysis on socio-professional dynamics inherent to the power elite are made available. On a theoretical interpretive level, the work seeks to combine the two classic dimensions on which elite theory is structured: the sociological and the political one. We will use the term “power elite” extensively to provide a representation of apical power that holds together both the structural aspects (social stratifications of inequalities) and the degree of concentration of resources whose possession and/or control ensures power.

In the sociological perspective, elites constitute a plurality of restricted groups, identifiable by different types of activities, degree of concentration of resources, and the level of individual capabilities. From this perspective, studies aim to assess whether there is congruence between the qualities of individuals and the positions they occupy in the social hierarchy, that is, whether there is correspondence between the abilities and the “tags”

which everyone is identified with and set in the pyramid of inequality (Pareto, 1916).

In political science, investigations mainly focus on the distribution of political power defined as the capacity to impose decisions upon the community even by force (Mosca, 1923). Within this perspective, the elite is a restricted and heterogeneous category of people, generally identified with the upper stratum that holds the most significant shares of economic, ideological and political power, whose degree of concentration and control allows to secure margins of power (Sola, 2000).

This paper aims to provide an identikit of globally known top European leaders, belonging to various economic, cultural and political professional fields<sup>1</sup>. For this purpose, the socio-demographic, educational and professional profiles of 9,000 European personalities were examined. It is evident that it is compelling to deepen the theme of the European power elite to understand the future of the European Union, considering the need to not only have a European institutional elite but also cultural, economic and financial ones able to relate to each other and propose themselves as a supranational ruling class. The initial hypothesis that led to investigating the top European leaders is the following. Despite the gradual progress and the lobbying positions of various European interests around the Union's palaces of power, an impervious work of integration is needed, even from the identity point of view. National political elite members have either surrendered some national sovereignty to themselves or have entrusted the representation of national interests at the European level to their respective executive powers and national heads of government. European sociology has highlighted the limitations and collateral problems related to the maintenance of the centrality of national elite members even during the transformation processes (Fabbrini, 2019; Beck, 2013; Morin and Ceruti, 2013; Micossi and Tosato, 2008). These factors are at the root of further European weaknesses in the international context in terms of military and technological sovereignty. On the other hand, the EU is not equivalent to Europe, which is much wider to the east and to the north and includes a leading country like the UK. For this reason, the paper aims to provide an

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<sup>1</sup> In the Bourdieusian perspective, a field is considered as a field of forces within which agents occupy positions that statistically determine their positions on the same field of forces. These positions aim both to preserve and to transform the structure of the relationships of the forces constituting the camp.

overview of some socio-demographic, professional and nationality traits of the main world-renowned European leaders.

The next section describes the theoretical and interpretative approach to which the work refers. The third section of the paper presents a review of the literature on the power elite. The fourth section describes the research methodology adopted to investigate top European leaders. The fourth section highlights the socio-demographic, educational and professional profiles of the European elite members. The last section discusses the results obtained, acknowledges the limitations of the study and makes suggestions for future research in the field.

## **2. Theoretical and interpretative approach**

The elite can be represented with concentric circles arranged vertically (Wright Mills, 1956; Carboni, 2007a; 2015). The functional elite belong to the largest and most numerous circle. Their power stems from a positional advantage linked to the roles they play in specific professional fields. In a smaller less numerous circle is the driving elite, who benefit from the prestigious roles or leadership they exercise in one or more social field (Carboni e Soccia, 2007b). Even smaller is the circle of the power elite with national notoriety. Finally, in the smallest and least numerous circle is the power elite with international reputations, henceforth top leaders. When we observe the narrow circles of power, we must take into account the fact that the quantities are relative and vary within the fields they belong to (Bourdieu, 1996) and therefore in relation to their sources of power (Carboni, 2007a; 2015). It should be emphasised that authority, richness and prestige are circular, shared and intertwined with notoriety, which is, however, the primary source of the café society of power, i.e. celebrities from the world of culture and entertainment (Wright Mills, 1956).

The proposed interpretative scheme refers to a diversified theoretical corpus of which Bourdieu's thought represents an important reference. According to the French sociologist

(1992), the field is a space in society that concentrates economic and power resources, access to which is mediated by cultural factors. These symbolic apparatuses are the normative fabric with which rules are established: each individual and group must master to operate in a field. Individuals learn and implement them through the recursive interaction of their habitus with the symbolic meanings of the fields. Habitus are the primary dispositions that everyone internalizes during the cycle of his childhood, socializing in the family, community, educational institutions and peer groups.

Both mass and the reflexive society push individuals and groups to interact in numerous social fields. This also applies to the fields of power where the actions of the elite are concentrated. Acting in multiple fields means having to adapt and negotiate habitus in reference to multiple symbolic skills, some of which collide with primary dispositions. Symbolic violence is the process (both coercive and negotiated) through which the symbolic rules of a field break the resistance of the primary dispositions of the habitus. Those who least tolerate this stress are individuals and groups socially displaced by the affirmation of new meanings and rules of engagement within one or more social fields. In this sense, the relationship between habitus and field is positional.

The position in the field concentrates economic and power resources in the hands of individuals and groups, those who master the symbolic rules in the most adequate way, hold central and command positions. In this way, the interactions and negotiations of the habitus in the fields draw a map of the inequalities in accessing power resources, an aspect that the proposed concentric circle methodology tries to represent.

This approach can partially reconcile the two interpretative models that characterize the study of elites, the “elitist” and the “pluralist elitist”. The first describes the power elite, underlining the contrast between the dominant few and the subordinate mass. That is, the elite would be a unique, homogeneous and cohesive minority. The second instead underlines the process of mutual interdependence and conditioning that binds, at least in Western democracies, the few to the many, configuring the elite as the set of a plurality of heterogeneous and discordant minorities.

In the above concentric circle scheme, two points of reconciliation can be identified. The

first is the negotiating mechanism through which the actors' habitus must deal with when operating in multiple fields of power. The second is the role of notoriety as a collective marker of belonging to the elite. On the one hand, it expresses concentration of symbolic power within restricted circles of the apical powers; on the other, the need for these same actors to consider the social base feedback., i.e. notoriety, a symbolic "commodity" that circulates in mass society as a continuous cycle of negotiations and recognitions.

This does not mean denying the divergences between Wright Mills' power elite and Dahl's pluralist elitism, especially in terms of power operation. The former links power to the control of resources, underlining its cumulative nature which configures it as power over people, therefore generally antagonistic, coercive and unidirectional. Pluralist elitists consider power in relational terms and, therefore, it involves an incessant negotiation in the command-obedience relationship and a constant recourse to consensus practices. These aspects are well captured both by the Bourdesian negotiation of the habitus and processes of symbolic violence to which they are subjected, and by the social identifier of notoriety, associated to mass consensus and recognition.

The different research and analysis perspectives of the elites, rather than in terms of their undoubted differences, can also be taken into consideration for their "family resemblances" (Wittgenstein, 2009), especially if the center of the analysis is the dynamic composition of the fields of power and the negotiate the nature with which the rules of engagement are established.

In this sense, even if Mills is an author who conflicts with the "canons" of pluralism, we can recognize, in his way of considering circulation, a similarity with the fluidity that the pluralistic approach underlines the composition of elite. Ultimately, the interpretative orientation of the paper is to break barriers that often risk underestimating the complexity of the phenomenon of the elites.

### **3. Literature review: the state of the art and possible perspectives on the sociology of the elite**

Over the last decade the sociological literature and research on elite members have boomed (among others, see Abbink e Salverda, 2012; Carboni, 2015; Cousin, Khan and Mears, 2018; Khan, 2012; Korsnes *et al.*, 2018; Mangset, Maxwell and van Zanten, 2017; Maxwell, 2018; Savage and Hjellbrekke, 2021).

It is possible to identify four reasons for the revival of interest in the sociology of elite members. First, the increasing inequality in Western countries, in terms of both income and assets, goes hand in hand with the growth of the super-rich. The concentration of wealth in the first percentile of the population is confirmed by several studies conducted in both Europe and the USA (Atkinson, Piketty and Saez, 2011; Piketty and Saez, 2006). A very interesting point to explore might be whether this phenomenon ‘only’ depends on economics – like the financialization of the economy, which pays back huge rewards to the CEOs of main companies – or instead is a result of interlocks among different forms of assets and resources (economic, political, cultural) available to the elite. Another point to be taken into consideration is whether the elite played a causal role in building up increasing inequality or if they have been the effect of it.

Second, the globalised economy sheds light on the potential emergence of a new super-elite, which is characterised by the specific feature of its internationalisation. Future research must verify if this global super-elite exists or not, but the contemporary elite are certainly playing in an international field more than before, and research on the elite is expanding internationally (Cousin and Chauvin, 2021). As for the specific interest of this paper, it has been argued that a European elite exists, bureaucracy at high levels, which plays in the field of the European Union and finds forms of European capital, resources and relationships (Georgakakis and Rowell, 2013).

Third, the prominence of the new financial elite questions the different features of the varieties of capitalism and therefore the possible different processes of forming an elite in different models of capitalism, because «different kinds of capitalism are likely to generate

different kinds of elites» (Cousin, Khan and Mears, 2018, p. 231). In this regard, it could be interesting to assess their potential complementarity or conflictuality at the global level. However, scholars agree on several points: first, elite members are now more self-made than in the past, when the weight of dynasties impacted more on the distribution of wealth (Edlund and Kopczuck, 2009; Khan, 2012); second, as in the past the elite still consists predominantly of male and white people. In other respects, however, there is a lack of knowledge of how varieties of capitalism and national policies might influence elite power, and of the factors that explain convergence or divergence in the structuring and features of elites (Carboni, 2008; Cousin and Chauvin, 2015).

Fourth, the explosion of populistic movements in all Western countries in the last decade has represented a new political phenomenon that might hide an anti-elite ideological legacy (Cousin, Khan and Mears, 2018; Khan, 2012). Moreover, it may represent a fracture between the power of the cultural and economic features of the elite and the political elite formation process. Therefore, nowadays it is worth exploring the relationship between political resources and representativeness and the other traditional resources that elite members have at their disposal.

This renewed interest in the elite and the research questions suggested above make it possible both to review the classical theoretical contribution on the sociology of the elite and identify the emergence of new research fields.

As for the former, some of the roots of the sociology of the elite can be found in the relationship between the organisational malfunctioning of democracies and its effect on the unequal distribution of rights and access to resources.

While Michels (1962) considered this causal process to be a sign of anti-democracy in contemporary societies, Veblen (1899) argued that this “tribal” mechanism between classes has always determined social structures producing winners and losers. Pareto (1916), on the other hand, claimed that the lack of «circulation of the elite» and the renewal of society through its best talents is behind the «natural tendency toward decay» of democracies. Domhoff (1979) instead had a more optimistic view, considering that the rise in the level of education might increase social mobility and renew the formation of elite members.

The influence of Bourdieu in the elite literature is wide and probably represents the richest theoretical terrain for these studies. We find three different cornerstones of his thought that are useful for contemporary research on elite members, especially studies with a macro-perspective based on structural analysis.

First the concept of “field” as a «structured and hierarchical space» (Bourdieu, 1996, p. 186) has influenced the positional approach of elite studies, especially Marxist ones. In this understanding, elite members are considered subjects who occupy a dominant position and have disproportionate control of resources (Khan, 2012), and who struggle for power to gain control over resources considered important in their field (Thompson, 2012). More generally, in this perspective elite members are viewed as people who think that career trajectories and the logic of actions, including cooperation and competition between different elite members, depend on the positions occupied by actors in the field (Uhlin and Arvidson, 2022).

Second, the concept of social capital developed by Bourdieu has influenced the “relational approach” in elite studies that have focused on the importance of the position of elite members in social relations. In this respect, the example of (golf) clubs is meaningful (Bourdieu, 1979). These are seen as rooms and institutions for elite members to recognise themselves, exclude others and consolidate a shared culture through social ties that reinforce their “habitus”, as Bourdieu terms it, playing a central role in building up a cohesive elite (Domhoff, 1974) with the specific trait of isomorphism, especially in terms of behaviour.

Third, and very much connected with the above, a central role in the elite literature is played by the concept of elite members’ unequal and biased access to different forms of capital and resources, which directly recalls the notion of «multiple capitals» (Bourdieu, 1986) and their convertibility.

In fact, we can even review the notion of the “power elite” with this theoretical framework. Even if Wright Mills’s work (1956) was specifically related to corporate, military and political elites in dominant countries, the concentration of power in these upper-class castes was facilitated by mutual reliance and multiple power relations like the core concept itself of the elite. In particular, elite members use their distinctive “habitus”,

cultural institutions and consumptions to define themselves and exclude others, as was mentioned above, even in terms of «cultural distinction» (Friedman and Reeves, 2020). In addition, they convert their cultural capital into other forms of capital, like economic capital, through college attendance and selecting partners and friends, «interlocking corporate boards», using mutual recognition to increase their capital and coordinating with others instead of competing with them (Khan, 2012). Even in this case it would be worth investigating the functioning of these ties and the mechanisms they generate.

Therefore, in what seems to be a very open space for sociological research on the elite there is a combination of micro and macro analysis. As has been pointed out, «sociologists tend to reserve structure for poverty, and culture and agency for elite members» (Cousin, Khan and Mears, 2018, p. 227). While there is much literature that explains poverty models as being embedded in social structures (Paugam, 2015), explanation of the elite is based on the attributes of single individuals.

It might be very interesting indeed to fill this gap by applying a social mechanism perspective to this field of research, also to better understand the mechanism that reproduces the elite. Structural constraints are indeed of primary interest, like the legacy of private property, prestige, profession, notoriety. Also, the role of (educational, cultural, political) institutions is a structural constraint which can differ across countries. In the following pages we concentrate on the case of European countries and assess similarities and differences among them.

#### **4. Materials and Methods**

Scientific research on the ruling class is characterised by three main empirical methodologies (Carboni, 2015, pp. 210-221):

1. the positional method allows an overview, a sort of photograph of the elites and their professional fields, providing information about who and how many they are (Domhoff, 1979);

2. the reputational method relies on who is reputed to be part of the elites. It draws on the perceptions of different audiences about the popularity of top leaders (Hunter, 1953);
3. network analysis aims to reconstruct the relational networks created by the actions top leaders decide on (Cook *et al.*, 1983; Dahl, 1998).

Our research employs the first method and the analysis of the curricula of top leaders examines qualitative data. Furthermore, we plan to carry out in-depth interviews with top European leaders in the coming months. We are aware that, from Harold Lasswell's research up to now, the focus is no longer on the study of elite members, but on the quality of the relationship between them and the citizens. With spontaneous subjection (subjugation) to power by the governed, argues Lasswell (1948), physical power detaches itself from the concrete possibility of the social subjected to trace the real elements of domination and inequality (Carboni, 2015, p. 63).

While the first method is congruent with the concept of the elite (whoever is at the top is a VIP, but not necessarily a protagonist of the leading groups), the third concerns the relationships that occur in the decision-making process and elite actions that can be evaluated. Reputational methodology is more likely to involve perceptions of the elites among the population (Hunter, 1953). These three main lines of empirical research attempt to keep slippery concepts such as the elite and the ruling class tied to an empirical dimension. Alongside them, numerous historical-documentary and ethnographic methodologies are available.

We currently propose this profile study of globally known European top leaders belonging to different economic, cultural, and political professional fields. 9,000 European personalities have been examined. These profiles were processed using a database built by coding the curricula of European top leaders in The International Who's Who 2021 (2020), the only source able to provide information on the most famous and influential people from all over the world<sup>2</sup>. The International Who's Who includes a selection of top leaders in their

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<sup>2</sup> Elite is a category that lacks a unique definition: thus every statistical representativeness of an elite relies on some form of subjective identification. In this framework, Who's Who turns out to be one of the few reliable sources, even if admittedly subjective, especially in consideration of the large number of profiles examined. A confirmation of the reliability of this source is provided among others by an increasing number of influential empirical studies on elite that draw insights from Who's Who (Carboni, 2007a; Carboni and Soccia, 2007b; Friedman and Reeves, 2020;

fields of activity. In particular, the source offers different kinds of data: biographical and socio-graphic data on the leaders' educational and professional pathways with a special emphasis on experiences abroad, current, and past activities, awards, and particular achievements. It is true that this source of information is British/Western, and it probably underestimates influential Eastern leaders, especially Chinese, Indian, and Indonesian ones. Despite these limitations, The International Who's Who constitutes a relevant database in terms of quantity, historical continuity (the first edition was published in 1935) and the publisher's authority, especially for analysing top European leaders. Data were collected and coded so as to create a database with 15 variables<sup>3</sup>.

The analysis consisted of two main steps. First, a descriptive analysis of the data was conducted in order to outline a general profile of the top European leaders (9,000 records) by taking into consideration their sociographic features and fields of activities. Second, a (categorical) principal components analysis (CaPCA) was carried out to confirm the results.

CaPCA allows the dimensionality of a (large) dataset to be reduced by transforming it into a smaller one that still contains most of the information in the original dataset and keeping as much variability (i.e. statistical information) as possible. Despite the small number of variables, the PCA in this case is motivated by the fact that the variables are independent and poorly correlated. Therefore, the PCA is relevant as the dataset consists of a considerable number of cases (9,000) and few variables. To decide the number of components we plot the eigenvalues (y axis) ordered from the largest to the smallest. This is the so-called scree plot and the vertical axis essentially shows the amount of (explained) variation. The correct number of components is the number that appears before the elbow and this is coherent with the so-called Kaiser rule, which suggests taking eigenvalues greater than 1 since in this way the corresponding component explains more variance than a single variable, given that a variable accounts for a unit of variance (Beavers *et al.*, 2013). Therefore, according to the above-mentioned criteria we select three components that allow

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<sup>3</sup> Savage and Hjellbrekk, 2021).

<sup>3</sup> Gender, Age, Civil Status, Sons, Birth nation, Working nation, Residence nation, Education, University, Educational experiences abroad, Professional experiences abroad, Current profession, Second profession, Professional field, International recognitions/awards.

to explain 51% of the accumulated variance, a statistically significant figure.

It is worth emphasizing that the study presents, among others, three limitations, that deal with two aspects: the nature of the source and the features of the database. As for the first, we need to consider that The International Who's Who is a British-Western source: as a result, top leaders from non-Western and emerging countries are likely to be underestimated just as European and British leaders are likely to be overestimated in the dataset.

Secondly, the database refers to a single year; this feature hinders a comparative diachronic analysis of the changes that have involved European top leaders from a historical perspective<sup>4</sup>. An analysis of different years would provide insights into the trends and processes involving top European leaders from a dynamic perspective. However, a historical comparison is not the aim of this paper.

A third limitation has to do with the lack of reliable international sources of information on top leaders, that prevents comparisons with our data.

## 5. Results

This section presents an overview of the main findings showing the features of the top European leaders. As mentioned, it consists of two parts. The first part provides the main results of the descriptive analysis, whereas the second one focuses on the (categorical) principal components analysis (CaPCA).

### 5.1 Descriptive analysis of the top European leaders

The first feature to emphasize about the 9,000 top European leaders is their territorial distribution. To analyze this feature, macro-regional areas were composed in order to avoid

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<sup>4</sup> Similar studies have been carried out in the past adopting a dataset based on Who's Who, with similar analytical dimensions and outcomes (Carboni, 2008).

comparisons between states with different critical masses<sup>5</sup>. A preponderance of British elite members is noted, standing at 35.1%. This result is due to the long British tradition in the European and world power elites as a result of Britain's imperial organization. The second most represented country is France (11.9%), the cradle of European diplomacy. On the other hand, the German data (7.8%) are surprising: Europe's economic locomotive seems to be lagging behind the European elite networks. Italy and Benelux both stand at over 4%, higher than the Spanish value, with only 2.8% of Iberians among the top European elite. Continental-eastern Europe (Austria, Slovenia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland) reaches 11.7% (Figure 1).

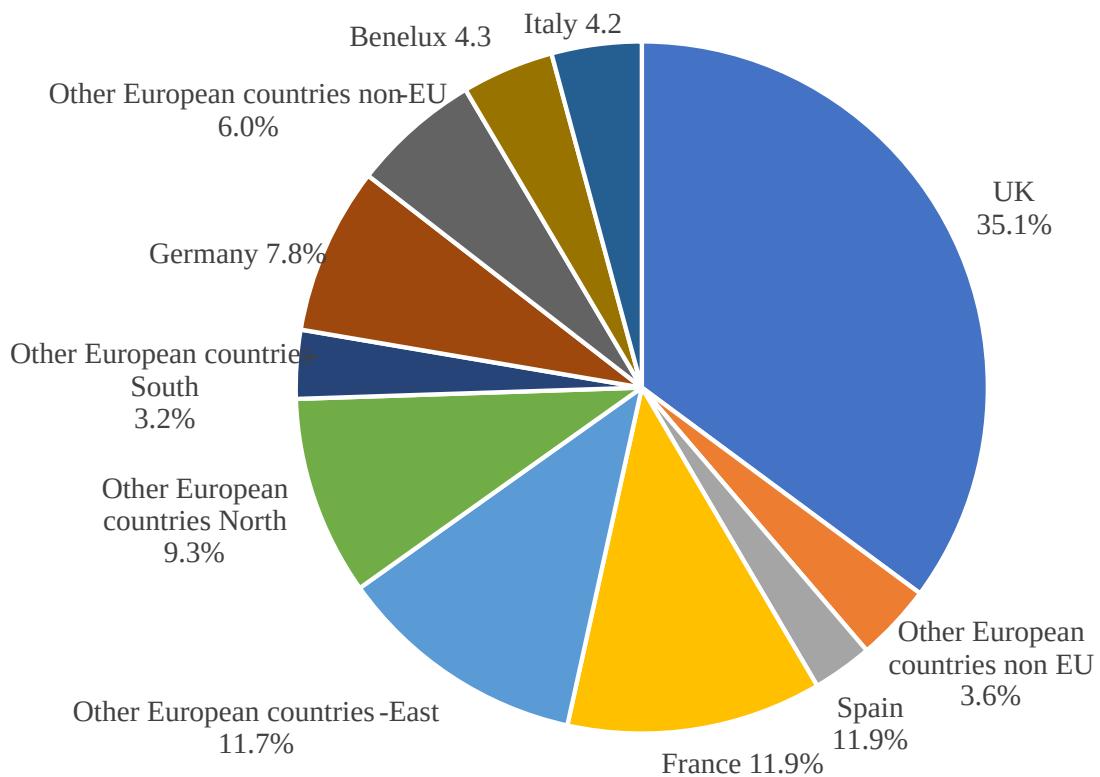


Figure 1 - The geographical distribution of European top leaders (EU+).

<sup>5</sup> Geographical areas are: 'Benelux': Belgium, Holland and Luxembourg; 'Continental Europe – East': Austria, Slovenia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland; 'Other Southern Europe states': Greece, Portugal, Cyprus and Malta; 'Other Northern Europe states': Ireland, Denmark, Sweden, Finland, Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia; 'Other European states – non-EU': Norway, Iceland, Switzerland; 'Other non-EU states – east': Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova, Serbia, Montenegro, Albania, Macedonia and Bosnia.

Concerning gender, European elite members are characterized by a clear prevalence of males (87.1%) compared to females (12.9%), although with some differences between countries. This aspect seems to confirm the main findings of the classical literature on the elite (Bourdieu 1998). The United Kingdom and France have higher proportions of females (15.4% and 15.1%, respectively) than the European average (12.9%). They are less “male” than Germany, which is characterized by the lowest percentage of female elite members (8.4%). Even Benelux, with its high rate of female participation in the labor market and a significant number of women in political-institutional roles, has a much lower proportion of females in its elite members than the European average (9.7%). Italy and Spain are in intermediate positions, both with lower than average results: 11.6% and 12.7% respectively. Finally, “other non-EU European countries” (Norway, Iceland, Switzerland) should be highlighted because they have the largest proportion of females in their elite members (15.9%) (Table 1).

Regarding age, European elite members are distinguished by a marked prevalence of older cohorts: more than 54% of the 9,000 celebrities belong to the age group over 70 years, while about 32% are between 56 and 70 years old. The 36-55 class is poorly represented at 13.1%, while those under 35 (0.5%) are almost insignificant. These research findings confirm what has been highlighted in the literature: power is masculine and gerontocratic (Mills, 1959, Galbraith, 1958, Bachrach e Baratz, 1962; Bachrach, 1967; Bourdieu, 1989; Mann 2013; Scott, 1990, Carboni and Fara 1993; Carboni, 2000). However, there are interesting distinctions between countries and geographical macro-regions. The country with the most gerontocratic structure of its elite members is the United Kingdom: 64.2% of its top leaders are over 70. It is followed by Italy with 60.8%, France (60%) and Germany (59.6%). Generally speaking, all the main European countries present data similar to those of the UK and Italy, with the exception of Spain (52.9%). The least gerontocratic, however, are the countries in the “other non-EU European Countries – East” area. Their share of over 70s (22.3%) is significantly below the European average (54.1%).

	Gender		Age classes			
	F	M	0-35	36-55	56-70	Over 70
Other European countries – North	13.4%	86.6%	0.9%	17.6%	333%	48.2%
Other European countries – South	8.8%	91.2%	0.0%	11.3%	39.1%	49.6%
Other European countries – non-EU	15.9%	84.1%	0.6%	12.0%	37.9%	49.5%
Other European countries non-EU – East	8.1%	91.9%	0.9%	32.8%	44.0%	22.3%
Benelux	9.8%	90.2%	0.3%	8.9%	39.6%	51.2%
France	15.1%	84.9%	0.2%	9.3%	30.5%	60.0%
Germany	8.4%	91.6%	0.6%	7.6%	32.1%	59.6%
Italy	11.6%	88.4%	0.6%	9.4%	29.3%	60.8%
Continental European countries – East	10.2%	89.8%	0.5%	22.1%	39.7%	37.7%
Spain	12.7%	87.3%	0.4%	12.4%	34.3%	52.9%
UK	15.4%	84.6%	0.5%	9.0%	26.3%	64.2%
<b>Total</b>	<b>12.9%</b>	<b>87.1%</b>	<b>0.5%</b>	<b>13.1%</b>	<b>32.3%</b>	<b>54.1%</b>

Table 1 - European top leaders' gender and age by country and geographical area (EU+). Source: Éliteam, 2021.

Regarding education levels, the findings show that master's degree (MA) is the most widespread among European elite members, with an average of 38.3%, above all in humanities. This is followed by PhDs (31.5%) and bachelor's degrees (10.6%), while the share of leaders trained in artistic (10.4%) and military (1.9%) academies is not significant. It is also worth taking into consideration the distribution of education levels among the elite members of the five main European countries (UK, France, Germany, Italy, Spain) (Figure 2).

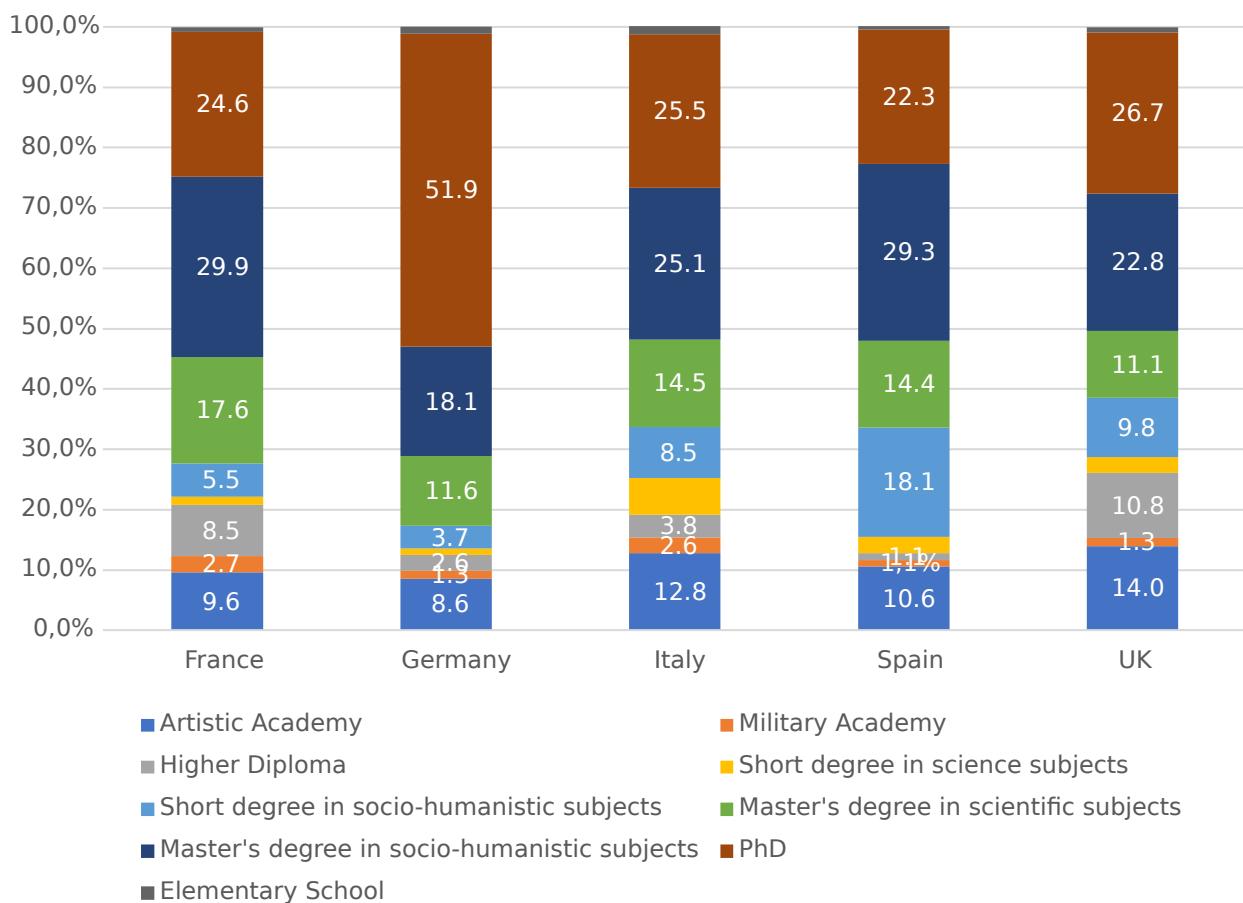


Figure 2 - Education level by country (%). Source: Éliteman, 2021.

A comparison is useful to understand how cultural capital differs among these important nations, especially with regard to higher education degrees. For example, there are significant differences between countries in terms of PhDs. Italy (25.5%), France (24%) and Spain (22.3%) are the countries, in the European area, with the lowest proportions of PhDs, significantly distant from the European average of 31.5%, below which the United Kingdom is also positioned (26.7%). Germany, on the other hand, leads this ranking, with 51.9% of elite members with PhDs, and is followed, at a distance, by Benelux, which has just over 40%. Although, as was highlighted above, the German elite members are fewer in number than those in the UK and France, they appear to be the most educated, thus highlighting Germany's very strong attention to the cultural, technical and scientific quality of its power elite members. The gap becomes much smaller if we consider master's degrees. This confirms that in Germany a PhD allows access to prestigious positions with much higher

probability than in other European countries.

As far as formative experiences are concerned, the European elite members appear localistic. 77.5% did not have training or study experiences outside their national borders. The top French leaders are the least mobile. Only just over 14% did training courses abroad. The British follow with a 13.2% share of “mobile” elite members for study reasons. This is probably due to the fact that many British universities are among the best in the world. Both countries are significantly below the European average (22.5%). More international from a training point of view are the top leaders in the other largest European countries (especially Spain) and in other macro-geographical areas.

Regarding the professional field to which European leaders belong, the political, economic and cultural sectors appear somewhat balanced, although there is a slight prevalence of the cultural field (36.4%) over the political (32.5%) and economic ones (31.1%) (Table 2). It is interesting that in the main European countries, top political leaders show a below average value. Politics is less represented in France (28.6%), Germany (around 24.5%) and the UK (21.1%), where it tends to be far below the average. Latin countries have higher percentages although with strong internal differences: in Italy the percentage is 31.7, while in Spain it is 33.9. In contrast, in some European geographical areas the political sector appears clearly prevalent. In “other non-EU European countries – East” (Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, Serbia, Montenegro, Albania, Macedonia, Bosnia), politics reaches almost 65%, more than the economic (22%) and culture sectors (13%). From a historical-social point of view, these data are consistent with the centrality of the political sphere in the countries in the ex-Soviet area. The politics sphere still seems to be the primary source of prestige and leadership in these territories. As for the economic sector, Germany shows the highest value (almost 40%) and is followed by Benelux (almost 39%), France (36.4%) and Spain (35.5%). Manufacturing and export-oriented Italy has a value of about 2 percentage points lower than Spain, a country less characterised by industrial companies.

	Culture	Economy	Politics
Other European countries – North	29.1%	30.8%	40.1%
Other European countries – South	24.6%	28.9%	46.5%
Other European countries non-EU	28.4%	34.6%	37.0%
Other European countries non-EU – East	13.1%	22.4%	64.5%
Benelux	28.4%	38.9%	32.7%
France	35.1%	36.4%	28.6%
Germany	35.6%	39.9%	24.5%
Italy	35.2%	33.1%	31.7%
Continental European countries – East	27.3%	24.2%	48.6%
Spain	30.7%	35.5%	33.9%
UK	49.3%	29.6%	21.1%
<b>Total</b>	<b>36.4%</b>	<b>31.1%</b>	<b>32.5%</b>

Table 2 - Professional fields by country and geographical area. Source: Éliteman, 2021

Among the macro areas, there is a good representation of the economic sector in “other European countries – non-EU” (34.6%), while all the other macro areas are below the average. As far as culture is concerned, the most important case is the UK, with almost 50% of the top elite. This over-representation can be explained by the undoubted “soft power” of the UK – i.e the music sector and therefore the rock stars – which assumes considerable importance in the definition of culturally influential celebrities at the global level. France, Germany and Italy instead have a cultural representation slightly below the European average (36.4%), and Spain is further down (30.7%). From the macro point of view, the presence of elite members in the cultural sphere is not very relevant in “other non-EU European countries – East” (about 13%). In other macro areas the percentages of top cultural elite members are below the European average, although less markedly than in the Nordic countries.

The research findings show that most elite members’ awards and recognitions are in the cultural sector (almost 74%). About 43% of the celebrities have received awards for economics and about 41% for politics. The marked prevalence of cultural top elite members in possession of awards is probably due to the existence of a greater number of awards in this sector (e.g. literary awards for writers) than in the other two fields. Nonetheless, it should be emphasised – as was highlighted for the British case – that culture represents a soft power of great global importance in an increasingly mediated society.

As for professions of the top European leaders, the main European countries show an over-representation of artistic elite members, ranging from 12.76% in Spain to 18.34% in the UK, with a European average of 12.88% (Table 3).

	<b>France</b>	<b>Germany</b>	<b>Italy</b>	<b>Spain</b>	<b>UK</b>
Artist/film director	13.7%	9.3%	17.1%	12.4%	18.4%
Banker/financier	3.5%	5.4%	6.7%	4.8%	3.2%
Local government, state institutional positions	5.1%	2.1%	3.2%	6.8%	2.2%
Private / public board member	7.4%	9.9%	6.9%	5.6%	6.4%
Diplomat / international institutional position	5.9%	5.6%	4.0%	8.0%	5.0%
Newspaper editor	0.3%	0.3%	0.5%	0.0%	0.2%
Institutional authority executives (public executive, rector, magistrate, military)	9.7%	7.0%	5.1%	5.6%	5.8%
Ecclesiastical	0.8%	1.7%	9.6%	4.0%	1.2%
Publisher	0.8%	1.0%	0.8%	0.8%	0.9%
Representatives of associations	0.5%	0.3%	1.1%	1.6%	0.3%
Journalist (all media)	2.3%	0.6	2.1%	2.8%	2.9%
Industrial entrepreneur, not industrial and merchant	1.9%	1.3%	1.9%	1.2%	2.1%
Freelance professional (architect, engineer, lawyer)	5.1%	5.4%	3.2%	11.2%	3.5%
Private manager	12.9%	13.0%	12.3%	10.8%	8.9%
Doctor	0.9%	1.1%	0.3%	0.4%	1.4%
Monarch	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.8%	0.3%
National / European parliamentarian or member of the national / European government	4.5%	5.0%	6.4%	4.1%	5.2%
President of the national / international sports association	0.5%	0.7%	0.3%	0.4%	0.3%
Professional, consultant	4.7%	3.7%	1.9%	1.6%	4.1%
University professor	7.4%	15.6%	8.9%	6.0%	12.4%
Representation of interests and politicians without elective office (trade unionist, employers' associations)	1.7%	2.0%	2.1%	2.8%	0.7%
Scientist / researcher	5.6%	5.6%	3.2%	1.2%	7.1%
Writer / poet	3.6%	2.3%	0.8%	4.4%	5.0%
Professional sportsman	1.4%	1.0%	1.9%	3.2%	2.4%

Table 3 - Professions by the main European countries. Source: Éliteam, 2021

University professors are the category most represented after artists. 11.23% of the European elite are academics. Germany is the country with the largest share of university teachers (over 15%) and is followed by the United Kingdom (12.34%). On the other hand, the shares of Italy (8.73%), France (7.68%) and Spain (6.17%) are below the European average, while Benelux is above the average (14.66%), as is the “other European countries –

North” area (13.01%). The third most widespread profession is private managers (a European average of 9%). Surprisingly the data on bankers, who are 4.53% of the European elite, show that the geographical macro-region ‘other southern European countries’ is far above the average (8.18%). Among the large countries, the highest percentage of bankers is represented by Benelux (7.92%), which is followed by Italy (6.61%). German financial power is at 5.48%, while even the United Kingdom and France are positioned well below 4%. These percentages underline the fact that finance represents the top power in Europe, and it is concentrated in the hands of a few leaders as in the case of the French and British financial-banking superpowers. Two classic elite categories, entrepreneurs and clergymen, represent marginal shares of the European elite population: the former is 1.53% of the total and the latter 1.73%. Similarly, journalism (2.03%) and publishing (0.72%) are under-represented domains. The categories of journalists, publishers and newspaper editors (0.18%) do not reach 3% all together. The shares of freelancers and professionals/consultants are few (4.88% and 3.59% respectively) as are those of writers/poets (3.21%) and professional sportsmen (1.86%). The world of representing interests and politicians without elected office is also hardly present (1.98%).

To conclude, it is interesting that almost 60% of the European elite members have had professional experience abroad. Among the large countries, the French power elite shows the lowest propensity to gain professional experience outside the national borders (only 46% of French elites gain professional experience abroad). On the other hand, in Germany (56.8%), Italy (56.6%), Spain (54.2%) and the UK (53%) the top European elite members show greater propensity than France to gain professional experience outside their countries. Compared with educational experience, there is a considerable gap between the tendency to work in other European countries and the tendency to work outside Europe and British elite members are those who have had most professional experience outside Europe (45.5%, compared to 7.9% with experience in other European countries). Looking ahead, this figure is likely to increase, considering the effects of Brexit. Among those who have worked in other European countries, there is a prevalence of Italians (16.7%), who are followed by Germans (15.9%). The elite members who are less likely to have worked outside Europe are

the French ones (32.8%).

## 5.2 The top European leaders: a Principal Components Analysis

This section focuses on a confirmatory analysis of the data carried out with the aim of further deepening the main findings of the descriptive analysis. A categorical principal components analysis (CaTPCA, hereafter PCA) was conducted taking into consideration ten variables (Tab. 4)

It is worth emphasising that PCA relies on the idea that most of the variance in the data can be captured in a lower-dimensional subspace that is spanned by the first principal components. PCA is a delicate form of data analysis since one of its major weaknesses lies in the fact that interpretation of the output is extremely subjective when it comes to interpreting correlation coefficients. In our case, as was mentioned in the methods and materials section, we selected ten variables, from which we chose three principal components. It is worth pointing out that choosing three factors satisfies the condition that the number of factors chosen should be approximately 1/3 of the original variables. The three principal components that emerge further qualify three key features of the European elite members.

Variable	D1	D2	D3
Gender	0.0922	-0.2230	<b>-0.2482</b>
Age	<b>0.4570</b>	0.0539	-0.2622
Civil status	<b>0.8683</b>	-0.0815	0.1467
Children	<b>0.8709</b>	-0.1283	0.1104
State of birth	0.2953	<b>0.4399</b>	0.0421
Education	0.0528	<b>-0.8045</b>	-0.1550
TEA it <sup>6</sup>	-0.0639	-0.1630	<b>-0.6287</b>
Profession	0.0177	<b>-0.8289</b>	-0.1667
EPE it <sup>7</sup>	0.0366	0.2791	<b>-0.7173</b>
Awards	0.2141	<b>0.4480</b>	-0.4429

Table 4 - The three principal components

<sup>6</sup> Training Experience Abroad.

<sup>7</sup> Professional Experience Abroad.

The first component emphasises the socio-demographic factors, in particular civil status and parenthood. Age also has explanatory relevance although with lower values (0.4570). This is probably due to the fact that “gerontocracy” is one of the main features of the entire sample and therefore it has less variance. The figure sheds light on a structural characteristic of both the European top leaders and European society. In this respect, the European ruling class reflects the demographic structure of the continent, with an increasing number of elderly people and difficult generational turnover of top leaders.

Regarding the second component, what emerges is the relevance of the “education” and “profession” variables. This shows that the educational and professional pathways are crucial to becoming part of the top leaders. On the one hand, the importance of education confirms the role of the credential system in belonging to the circle of top leaders. On the other hand, the relevance of profession confirms that the activities they carry out are paramount in identifying European elite members. In this regard, top European leaders seem to perform increasingly complex professional functions that are related to innovation and leadership. At the same time, they are decision-makers operating in traditional structures in which multiple levels of decision-making (political, economic, legal etc.) are concentrated. Finally, education and profession are also linked to birth status, even though the figure related to this variable (0.4399) is less significant compared to the other two. The same applies to the “awards” variable.

The third component (international propensity) highlights the importance of training and professional experience carried out abroad, namely the top European leaders’ level of internationalisation. This component mostly emphasises the relation between internationalisation and leadership. As a result, undertaking different experiences and acquiring knowledge and skills within a global frame seems to be paramount to be a top leader.

To provide a synthesis of the main findings that emerge, a sort of ideal-type top leader can be outlined. European leaders tend to be married, have children and to belong to older age cohorts. Despite significant national differences, they also possess higher educational qualifications and their profession plays a driving role in their international leadership

positions. This feature is confirmed by the third component, the importance of international training and professional experience for European elite members. Finally, it is worth noting that, considering the three components, the low significance of the “gender” variable is due to the previously mentioned marked male dominance in the sample. In this respect, age and gender are variables of utmost importance for the analytical qualification of the sample.

## **6. Conclusions**

In the light of the sociological relevance of elite, this paper has aimed to contribute to the renewed interest in international research on global top leaders. Drawing on data collected from The International Who's Who 2021, the analysis has provided an overview of the European elite by identifying the main features of the top European leaders, despite two main limitations. The first limitation is due to the source, as Western and “Eurocentric” patterns emerge from Who's Who. Our data overestimate the presence of European and British leaders, whereas the numbers of elite members from emerging countries are probably underestimated. The second limitation is related to the difficulty in carrying out appropriate international comparisons given the lack of statistically comparable sources of information. However, this limit must be balanced with the need to give empirical, though provisional, support to elite studies.

The study provides a clear, albeit approximate, idea, which allows us to highlight some of the main features of top European leaders. First, they are male and quite old. These factors are in line with both the international literature and with previous analyses carried out by the Éliteman research group in the last three decades on a national and international basis (Carboni, 2000; 2007a; 2007b; 2015; Carboni and Fara, 1993). In this regard, a sort of “longue durée” of male dominance and gerontocracy can be observed, which suggests that for European elite members a systematic generational and gender turnover seems to be very difficult.

Second, educational pathways and professions are crucial variables in top European

leaders' profiles. These factors are very important even though significant heterogeneity can be observed at the national level. A meaningful example is the higher proportion of leaders with a PhD in the German context in comparison with the other countries.

Third, top leaders in economics and finance tend to have a greater impact on the total than top politicians in more advanced European countries. This result is in line with what Michael Mann argued (2013) about Western European history, which has seen conversations and collisions between the two main elites, the political-institutional and the economic ones. If in the sixties and seventies of the last century there was a conversation (between Fordism and the welfare state), in the nineties and until 2008 the economic elite members took over, underlining the financial unsustainability of elephantine welfare systems with low productivity. If in nineteenth-century Europe the economy was largely a prisoner of the localist dimension, for centuries politics, the state and military power were more projected to look outside. Already from the end of the twentieth century, the parties were inverted with today's globalised European economic elite. Our previous surveys show that the population perceived this rise of the economy and its protagonists, while giving less trust and weight to politicians. Furthermore, the percentage of top leaders in culture, communication and science is confirmed as decisive for the creation and exercise of a dominant hegemony in advanced European societies.

Despite several national differences, nationality does not seem to weigh heavily in qualifying a European top leader. This seems to be paradoxical considering that national issues are still crucial when it comes to establishing and implementing European policies by enhancing supranational interests (the national polycentrism of the EU).

This paper has sought to outline a profile of top European top leaders, to contribute to the international debate on the elite and the ruling class by offering some approximate empirical data. Nevertheless, the findings raise new questions and insights in this field and further studies are needed to provide knowledge on the new global super-elite, which is increasingly complex and dynamic. For instance, further studies could aim at providing a more complete profile of top global leaders, especially regarding emerging countries such as China, India and Brazil. In fact, these countries seem to represent not only a variety of

capitalisms but also different socio-economic, political and historical configurations. This particularly applies to China, which still merges the legacy of a highly centralised economy with the logics of globalised market economies. Finally, it would be of interest to highlight the relation between top international leaders and the political frames in which they emerge (e.g. to compare top leaders of countries that rely on different concepts of democracy such as Brazil and India).

Further research could also systematically combine quantitative and qualitative (e.g. in-depth interviews with top leaders) methodologies in order to provide a deeper understanding of the top elite. Above all, there is the need, on the one hand, to improve socioeconomic elite profile databases and on the other, according to Dahl's pluralist and polyarchic vision (1972), to have relational and networking analyses on the elites.

The study also allows some concluding remarks related to the main theoretical perspectives adopted: Bourdieu's field theory and Mann's caging theory. As far as the former is concerned, the three fields taken into consideration (economics, politics, culture) seem to be substantially equivalent in the sample. In a Bourdieusian perspective, however, the prevalence of the political sphere in the countries in the ex-Soviet area is significant. In fact, this can be explained by the persistence of a political habitus of the local elite, a socio-cultural heritage of the soviet tendency to enhance the political control of resources. Drawing on Mann's theory, this pattern reveals that the political sector as a tool of power infrastructure plays a more relevant role in the former Soviet countries than in the Western European countries, where other factors seem to intertwine, even though on different national and historical bases.

In conclusion, our analysis shows clear evidence of the plurality of elites in European countries. Unfortunately, as yet, there is no European elite *stricto sensu*, a true federal European elite, but an intergovernmental regime between European nations. This aspect recalls/calls to mind the more general debate about the European governance at supranational level, even regarding the institutions which have made no new European Treaties reforms since Lisbon 2007. This is a topic that, in addition to being a case study, should be a top priority of the elites of European countries.

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