

Globalized National Elites

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1. Introduction

The world is changing. This change is not only apparent in the economic sector, such as in information technology, transnational companies and global pop culture; but also in the political and social structure of the world system. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War marked the beginning of this change and since then, it has accelerated profusely over time. In the beginning of the 1990s, the existing bipolar world order – affected by the Cold War between communism and capitalism – underwent a change to a unipolar system: the United States have become the only remaining hegemonial super power. The consequences of this fundamental change drastically affected the transformation of every nation in this unipolar international system that resulted into a spill-over in several regional and international conflicts (Huntington 1996; Schörnig 2003: 72). Pandemics like bird or swine flu, international terrorism, climate change and environmental degradation, natural disasters etc. just added to the burden of global threats to the entire international system in the last few years.

The inability of nation states, international institutions, civil societies, and non-governmental organizations from both national and international level to face these problems, has proved that these new and global issues cannot be resolved by local and individual actors single-handed, but rather through global and collective action (Rehbein and Schwengel 2008: 167). However, accepting the fact that there is no global government, almost all realistic and neo-realistic approaches state that the structure of the international system is anarchic and cannot be influenced by actors (Jacobs 2003: 43; Schörnig 2003: 68). On the contrary, we will argue that collective action has to be initiated by individuals on a local level (Olson 2003 [1965]; Ostrom 2008 [1990]), in order to avoid any “Tragedy of the Commons” (cf. Hardin 1968). Consequently, there are two questions that emerge: First, which actors are capable of shaping the global agenda? Second, which actors are desirable to do so? Usually the answer to the first question is: the elites. And to the second: the people. We believe that Globalization can neither work with the lack of justice, resulting from a mere elite ruling, nor with a lack of well organized collective action, resulting from any

kind of grass root democracy on a global level. Accordingly this paper synthesizes both positions.

Consequently, the paper focuses on the role of elites as important and influential individual actors in the new world order, and inquires whether national elites, networks of globalized elites or even a global elite is emerging and how these social groups can be characterized. Elite, originally taken from the Latin *eligere* ("to elect"), describes a hypothetical relatively small sized group that is dominant within a large society and has a privileged status. Being at the top of the social strata almost invariably puts an elite in a position of leadership, whether it be expected or volunteered. Further, holders of elite status are often subjected and at times even pressured to maintain that leadership position as part of their status. As we assume elites to be the preferential actors to deal with global challenges there are three main questions that arise: first, which global structural environments abet elites to be important actors and second, how can elites be defined properly and why are they capable of dealing with global challenges? Third, is it possible to find a consensus between the existence of elites and the democratic shaping of globalization? In the following we primarily address the first question by analyzing the structural determinants of the contemporary international system, especially its changing balance of power. Accordingly, we argue in a second step that elites are the only actors in this system that are capable of acting and reacting adequately to global challenges, depending on the extent of their globalization.

The paper is organized in five sections: Following this introduction, the second section deals with the structure of the international system and global challenges. It can be demonstrated that because of technological developments and global capitalism globalization has changed the world significantly and subsequently, new global challenges have arisen that cannot be solved without collective action. In the third section the current situation of the international system is laid out. In this context it should be taken into account that new powers emerge on the global agenda. These considerations, drawn out in the fourth section, are consequently extended to the research question asking, who are the driving actors that are capable of exerting an influence on international relations. In accordance with present theoretical considerations we suggest that there are globalized national elites shaping the existing global world order. In conclusion, section five summarizes these considerations once more and proposes some very first policy recommendations.

2. Structure of the Contemporary International System and Global Challenges

What emerged as the unipolar system of US hegemony in the 1990s, destroyed, shaped and transformed many nations, cultures,

technologies, and people; the shock of 9/11 in 2001 also marked a new development by shaping the international power structure towards an increasingly multipolar constitution (Langenhove 2010). Most of these changes were critically recognized by social scientists under the term *globalization*.

“The term globalization is generally used to describe an increasing internationalisation of markets for goods and services, the means of production, financial systems, competition, corporations, technology and industries. Amongst other things this gives rise to increased mobility of capital, faster propagation of technological innovations and an increasing interdependency and uniformity of national markets.” (OECD 2002: 170)

Globalization became a common expression in recent years. Moreover, globalization functions as the dominant buzzword for the perception of today’s politics, culture, media and technology since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War.¹ Lately, some authors have argued that today’s impact of globalization is not a new phenomenon at all. In the first decade of the 20th century the global interdependence between nation states was already as strong as it is today, before the two world wars triggered a period of de-globalization (Borchardt 2001: 6). Although there were always phases of globalization and de-globalization throughout history, we have to acknowledge that since the 1970s, there is a new quantity and quality in the contemporary phase of globalization and that these new aspects characterize the global challenges the world currently must face. Spurred by revolutionary technological developments, especially concerning information and transportation technology as well as the shift from state mercantilism to open, free-trading global capitalism, globalization truly has a new face today (McNeill 1992: 93ff.; Hopkins 2002: 13ff.). Nevertheless, the historic perspective highlights that the current globalization is a powerful development which creates great conflict as well as chance, but is under no circumstances irreversible or natural (Wendt 1992). On the contrary, it is a truly social development, which is the reason why it depends strongly on acting individuals and has to be a subject of change.

In principle, we agree with the diagnosis presented by the Royal Institute for International Relations (Egmont) that the international system is mainly characterized by three facts: it is getting increasingly *globalized*, *multipolar* and *interdependent*. Although this conclusion sounds quite simple, its implications are nonetheless meaningful. Thomas Renard called this combination “*comprehensive interdependence*” which can be characterized as “global, existential and

¹ For a general definition about globalization see Nederveen Pieterse (2004).

complex. It is global because it connects actors from the entire world; it is existential because the future of the system and its components is critically threatened (...) and it is complex because of the different types of interdependences [that] (...) co-exist on different levels between different actors" (Renard 2009: 15). For instance, Europe and Russia are interdependent because of energy issues; China and the US are tightly connected through the financial markets; and many West African states are interdependent with China through resources and development etc.

Thus the *global challenges* of the future have to be described by these characteristics. The events of the year 2009 gave a foretaste of the different sections in which these future problems are likely to emerge in. It might happen in the matters of population (pandemics like bird or swine flu), security issues (terrorist attacks in several countries), economical problems (the Asian crisis in 1997 or the global financial crisis in 2009) or systemic questions of sustainability (as climate change). Last but not least, even the volcanic eruption in Iceland in April 2010 showed the interdependence concerning international transportation.

Therefore, there are global issues that will exist, even if the international system experiences a phase of de-globalization, as the problems are partially caused by globalization and consequently will not disappear if the period of globalization comes to an end. In fact, most of these challenges would simply escalate because the only way to keep them down is through coordinated collective action on a global level. However, a co-operation of this dimension cannot take place in the existing international system, as we are already confronted with global challenges as mentioned above. Although similar events took place in all times of human history, the events of 2009 are new in dimension and possess a special kind of interdependency. Today's interdependence is global, existential, and not only economic but also functional and systemic (Renard 2009: 15; Wilde 1991). This parallelism of different kinds of interconnectedness appears manifestly in contemporary foreign affairs. Therefore they constitute a serious threat to the world and international relations.

As pointed out before, it is assumed that these challenges cannot be solved by any local individual actor, neither states; nor institutions; organizations, or regimes. Although some political or economic actors are very powerful on local levels, their influence is quite limited on the global sphere. Regarding the actual global challenges, no existing nation state or transnational organisation is able to develop adequate policy instruments to solve these issues. Therefore a new need for collective action arises (see Sandler 1992; Ostrom 2008 [1990]). Naturally, essential questions come to the forefront: who can be the main actors pursuing collective actions regarding today's global and

complex power relations? What are the relevant working properties enabling collective global actions and how can collective action be enforced and secured on a global level?

In the following we argue that the capability of national elites for reacting to global challenges depends mainly upon the exact assessment of the structure of the international system, especially its structural allocation and balance of power. Successful international relations can only succeed if all participating actors adjust their actions to it. However, strategic collective action is merely possible if the actors are clearly defined on one hand and the conditions – defined through the possibilities but also the limitations of a certain field – are well known on the other hand. Therefore, the need arises for a research project clearly working out a concept to provide both requirements: from the perspective of social sciences, the global realm has to be analyzed – which can be basically described by the changing international system – to identify the structural determinants of action within such a structure. Moreover, a profound look at the essential acting individuals and groups – namely the elites – has to be taken. In this context the question is not whether a new kind of collective action is necessary, but rather how it can be ensured?

3. United States, Europe, and Emerging Powers

We take the fact for granted, that since Europe cannot expect to emerge as a hegemonial power, European elites prefer a multilateral world order (Gill 1997). Although multilateralism is often characterized as static and ineffective the 21st century leaves no alternative, because most of the urging questions and challenges cannot be solved unilaterally. Therefore, the multilateralism that is actually developing is not a preference – “it is a shared necessity” (Renard 2009: 37). Apart from evident global challenges there are some more structural determinants, which delineate the global environment. In this regard the discussion about America’s decline and respectively the decline of the West appears on the agenda (Kennedy 1988; Nye 1990). Although some authors stated that the American Age is over (Krauthammer 1991) the underlying question is why hegemonial states are about to lose their power at all (Keohane 1986: 178)? However, there are many indications for the fall of the American Empire (e.g. Renard 2009): some dramatic changes occurred in the actual international system, which deeply affected the world’s balance of power. Not only did the decline of the Soviet Union and the consequential end of the Cold War change the role of the United States but also the ramifications of 9/11. In particular, since 2001 the world is becoming increasingly multipolar, as new actors arise. Thus, 2001 and its important incidents symbolize the end of the American unipolar dominance: today the increasing economic, political and military importance of China, India, South Africa as well as parts of Latin America and Southeast Asia are effectively

challenging the traditional west-bound world order. US president Barack Obama already recognizes the new structure of the international relations and has taken the rise of the *emerging powers* into account by recently stating that the United States and China will shape the 21st century together (BBCnews 2009). However, a bipolar system between China and the US would dramatically affect the status of Europe; subsequently its position would be drastically weakened within the international system (Renard 2009: 41). In this perspective the United States, Russia, and Europe are busy keeping their current status in the world order, while the growth and rise of China, Brazil and India continues irresistibly. While new emerging powers enter the global stage everyone has to avoid being ruled out.

Observing from a more general scope the question arises, which nations have to be considered as emerging powers today? By definition, emerging powers are states which are rising rapidly on the economic, cultural, and military scale (Harris 2005). However, some authors argue that China is the only real emerging superpower today (Overholt 1993; Shambaugh 1995; Murray 1998) and the discussion about the changing international system would end immediately without the impressive rise of the Asian Dragon.

Leading back to Goldman Sachs' analyst James O'Neill, who coined the term BRIC to describe the new emerging economies of Brazil, Russia, India and China (O'Neill 2001), more complex models comprising the change of the world order have been established in the discourse: some years later it was perceived that these countries were not only rising as nation states or market economies but moreover have established working networks recognizing themselves as emerging BRICs (TimesOnline 2008; TimesOnline 2009). In addition, the BRICs started to build networks without Western participation especially in the Global South. While the Western 'Anti-Globalization Movement' – from the Left as well as from the Right – did not really succeed in influencing global institutions, new networks between several rising countries cannot be underestimated regarding their ability of criticizing and delegitimizing international institutions like WTO or IMF and consequently, acting as a voice for the Global South.

This process is essentially based on the globalization of national elites which are not only relevant on a regional level but who are increasingly gaining transnational and global influence. The establishment of so called 'south-south networks' and their global interconnectedness is also raising the international status of the BRICs, especially by leading non-western networks or organizations and gathering media attention (Renard 2009: 19).

Although some critics state that these developments are rather located on a symbolic level while the centres of power are still controlled by the

West, social scientists should not underestimate symbolic power in international relations (Rosecrance 1987). For example, China is using the disreputability of the US among the Global South – where it is primarily recognized as imperialistic – to promote its own, non-interventionist image in order to build so called “south-south networks” (UN 2003).

Although the BRICs concept is quite adequate and flexible, the original Goldman Sachs version was only economic (cf. O’Neill 2001). Nevertheless, discussions about Emerging Powers are basically driven by economic arguments. In fact, economic hard facts are impressive and become increasingly apparent in terms of military power as well. Whereas the BRICs held only 7 % of the global GDP in 1995 they represent around 20 % today and contributed about 27 % of the global growth between the year 2000 and 2007 (Harris 2005; Renard 2009: 23). In addition, especially China seemed almost not affected by the financial crisis and despite the worldwide recession in 2009 it still reached its growth rate of 8 % and is expected to outperform EU within the next 30 years (Renard 2009: 29, more detailed O’Neill 2008).

Contrary to those expectations and forecasts about the decline of the West and the rise of the BRIC states, one has to perceive that the United States will remain most likely the only real superpower for at least the next years (Renard 2009: 7). Notwithstanding there are path-breaking choices to be made which will without a doubt have serious implications for the future. Europe’s status as a close partner of the single remaining superpower is different from the situation of other actors and is even more complicated. Although the hegemony of the US cannot be maintained for a long time because other powers are rapidly getting stronger (Renard 2009: 16),² Emerging Powers will not become world powers over night. A common misinterpretation is based on the pure economic analysis of the Emerging Powers. Today, there are a lot of rising states – or better yet, rising markets. In contrast, a real world power is not only economically prevalent but has military, political or cultural powers likewise (Nye 1990).

Apart from the hard power facts like economic and military expenses, it is especially the cultural ‘power of attraction’ like Coca Cola or Hollywood which symbolizes the distribution of power on a global level (Ritzer 1993; Barber 2001). Within this category “Europe is also often described as a champion of soft power for its attractive social model or its developed art scene and cultural industry” (Renard 2009: 28). Nevertheless Asia undertook a lot of efforts in recent years to develop this sector. However the general problem remains that European actors, until now, failed to integrate their power into a superior strategic

² Of course this is only the case if the international system is not described as a ‘zero sum game’.

behaviour or a common comprehensive strategy to use it as a real advantage.

Moreover the important point in this discussion is the future role of Europe: because of the close transatlantic alliance, Europe will continuously be put under pressure in the 21st century. Against the background of the obviously strategically sophisticated foreign policy of China, it is crucial that Europe speaks with one voice as a unique global acting institution. But what is the impact of the rise of the Emerging Powers for the future? In a worst case scenario this fundamental change of the world order caused by the rise of the Emerging Powers could destabilize the entire world system as history showed several times, especially in the first half of the 20th century (Renard 2009: 36). However history also indicated that developments like these are not only determined by historical or structural conditions but also strongly depend upon the action and the behaviour of specific social actors (exemplarily see the discussion about the failure of the German elites during National Socialism in Münkler 2006: 28).

The rise of the Emerging Powers cannot be understood adequately from a limited Eurocentric perspective because the economic booming of the emerging powers is unprecedented from an established and common Western point of view. On the contrary from an Asian perspective, it is a mere returning to historical normality (Knöbl 2007). Accordingly our thesis indicates that European elites do not expect the world to change as we assume because of two reasons: primarily they share a historically Eurocentric perspective and secondly they are placed in comparatively safe social positions – in the dominant classes of their nation states (Bourdieu 2004 [1989]) as well as in the core states of the social structure within the world system (Wallerstein 1983).

4. Global Nationalized Elites – The Actors Influencing International Relations

Hence, European actors can do a lot to support a peaceful change of the international system through globalization, while inaction or incoherent and non-strategical acting are likely to cause serious distribution conflicts. As we argued before, to face these new global challenges in the global environment it is necessary to develop a concept of the main actors structuring the current fundamental changes in the world order, transcending the 'national trap' (Wallerstein 1983: 302; Beck 2002; Stolz 2010: 26). If power is not only conceptualized by objective indicators but also defined by "how actors perceive themselves and are perceived by others" (Renard 2009: 28), one can attain a deeper understanding why European elites lack a realistic appraisal of the contemporary global environment. For example, a Bertelsmann world opinion poll showed that people perceive a strong American decline while China and India are on the rise whereas the majority estimates

the EU as declining, except the Europeans themselves (BertelsmannStiftung 2006: 17).

In literature, political action on an international level has always been regarded as the domain of nation states, sometimes in addition with international institutions or organizations (Take 2003: 254). Nation states – as the primary actors within the international system – were often viewed as black boxes which social sciences cannot access, but assumed to be similar units (Waltz 1996: 54). However, to analyze collective global political action it is necessary to take a look behind the ‘black box’ of the nation state. Consequently, our thesis is that the most important actors in this place are elites.

For a very long time concept and term of ‘elite’ has been very unpopular in social sciences because it was tightly connected to an elitism with a strong contempt for the masses, and as such an antagonistic concept to democracy (Hartmann 2004b: 9).³ However, in times of globalization it is slowly striking off its negative image by the fact that the idea of powerful elites is associated with the promise, that there might be at least one single actor capable of controlling and shaping globalization and to cope with contemporary global challenges as climate change, terrorism, global financial crises or pandemics. Nevertheless the stress-ratio between the existence of powerful elites and the requirement of managing globalization more democratically was not solved within the nation state and will certainly not disappear on the global level.

Starting after World War II, interest in the failure of elites during World War II rose and a few empirical studies as well as a lot of theoretical discussions emerged (Dahrendorf 1961; 1962; 1965; Dreitzel 1962; Keller 1963; Zapf 1965b; Zapf 1965a; Bottomore 1966; Köser 1975; Röhrich 1975; Aron 1975 [1950]; Field and Higley 1983). Since the early 1970s the main conflict between conflict theory and functionalist theory dominated the scientific discussion (Lenger and Schumacher 2009).⁴ Today, two approaches to the question of elites can be identified: starting with the observation that the action of some actors – or better: some groups of actors – can influence the condition of globalization on the global as well as local levels, some authors argue that there is a “global elite” or a “transnational capitalist class” emerging which is increasingly independent from nation states and can be classified as the predominant winner of globalization (Schwengel 2004; Sklair 2001; Sklair 2002). On the contrary this paper argues that there is no empirical evidence for this concept of global elites at all

³ In addition, the instrumentalization of a certain concept of elite by National Socialism in Germany contributed to discredit the concept after World War II.

⁴ This project is based on the thesis that a merely functionalist approach is insufficient to analyze elites on global scale. Nevertheless it is assumed that there are different elites in different social structural fields, i. e. political elites, scientific elites, economic elites, cultural elites, etc. on a national as well as on a transnational level.

because elites are per definition nationally rooted by the allocation of social structural positions by the education system (Bourdieu and Passeron 1971; Bourdieu 1977; Bourdieu, Boltanski et al. 1981; Bourdieu 1982 [1979]; 1985; Hartmann 1996; 1997a; 1997b; 2001; 2004a). Furthermore, an additional fundamental argument against the existence of a global elite is the lack of a shared common education, language, culture, and most importantly a shared common habitus (Hartmann 2004b; Mann 1997; 1998).

However, all theories of *global elites* share the common assumption that there are winners and losers of globalization (Kanter 1997; Sklair 2001; 2002; Schwengel 2004), and that global elites are groups which are able to adapt to the demands of globalization (like flexibility, mobility, cosmopolitanism, language skills etc.) much better than others: "Elites are cosmopolitan, people are local." (Castells 1998: 415) In addition, global elites can be characterized by a common education, lifestyle and habitus. Last but not least some authors even argue that these groups also share similar interests, that is to say global capitalism (Kanter 1997; Sklair 2001, 2002).

Up to now, the fundamental problem of researching global elites is the lack of empirical data: first elites in general and particularly global elites are very difficult to access for scientific researchers (Hartmann 2008), second elites are no abstract groups but rather concrete individual actors. Following this argument, these individuals do resist the 'flow of time and space' (Castells 1998; Castells 2001; 430) and are locally enrooted at least in their social existence. Assuming that we gain better insights into today's global challenges if we understand why there is no such powerful group existing at the moment, it is our prospective goal to analyse global elites empirically. However, contrary to the common view, we do not share the idea of neither a global elite nor a mere national framework of research. Following Alejandro Pelfini we rather believe that there are competing *national elites* more or less globalized (Pelfini 2009a; Pelfini 2009b). In line with Hartmann (2008) there are four main arguments supporting this perspective: absence of mobility, absence of migration, absence of transnational habitus, and absence of international work experience. First, for the formation of a transnational class mobility without friction and costs would be a necessary requirement. Assuming that such mobility does not exist because of physical constraints (time, health, costs) the class formation of a global elite is very unlikely. Second, empirical evidence about international marriages among managers demonstrate that elites remain within their home countries (see Hartmann 2008: 245). This phenomenon clearly shows that the reproduction of elites takes place within nation states. Third, it has to be acknowledged that the formation of a transnational class only takes place among managers working in the operative businesses that are actually mobile among borders and are able to adopt some kind of transnational habitus. Fourth, Hartmann has

analyzed the managers of the 100 leading companies within the four leading Western industrial powers (Germany, France, United Kingdom, and USA) and has showed that less than 10 % of the CEOs are foreigners and not even 20 % have long term work experience abroad. Consequently, factors like jobs in an international company, cosmopolitan habitus, speaking fluent English or other shared languages, extended border crossing mobility and multinational education come to the front and have to be analyzed.

5. Conclusions

What are the implications of these considerations for policy makers, sociologists and elites? Especially elites need to recognize the changing nature of the international system concerning the balance of power. Starting from the assumption that although elites have access to a wider set of information than the average citizen, it is more difficult for the powerful to perceive such changes because they are generally less affected because of their privileged and safe position due to their social background (Bourdieu 2004 [1989]). For example, the EU needs to be more integrated, especially on questions concerning its foreign policy and strategic behaviour towards the Emerging Powers and their networks. In summary "the EU will not rule the 21st century, but it can still become a major pole, and it must certainly avoid to be ruled out" (Renard 2009: 4).

From a global perspective, all members of the EU are 'small' markets.⁵ The concerted European economy of all 27 member states is the biggest global economy and thus, quite powerful. In addition, it is powerful in terms of population, culture and military potential as well. Therefore it is necessary to develop a more detailed definition of its objectives and interests (Biscop 2009: 37) especially to strategically readjust its objectives and its foreign relations towards the US on the one hand and the Emerging Powers on the other hand.

Although Europe served as the biggest and closest partner of the US for decades, it still has the privileged position to maintain a positive image in many parts of the world (even though Great Britain participated in almost all of the US military engagements of the last years).

However, the biggest deficit of the EU is, that it often fails to act collectively, particularly concerning issues of foreign affairs (e. g. Berlin and Rome still have their own policies towards Moscow). Therefore, the EU cannot be considered a super state, although it has developed many characteristics of a state and this process is likely to continue. Thus, to become a true global power or even a great power, i. e. a major pole in the coming order, the EU will need to develop a more coherent approach and a more integrated strategy" (Renard 2009: 32). European

⁵ If population is regarded as the most important factor to define the importance of a state it is only the EU members Germany, Italy, Great Britain and France that can be found within the 25 most populous states in the world, while there is no single member state within the first 15.

actors too often focus on national issues and only sporadically act as the one unique actor Europe. As we argued before this is mainly because national (European) elites today are too self-involved, socially exclusive and lack a truly global or even European perspective. In the future Europeans and in particular the European national elites will have to pay with their national sovereignty and privileged social positions to deal with the global challenges. There are at least two convincing reasons to believe that such a development is probable and desirable: On the one hand the need of strategic and collective action on a global level makes the existence of elites – under the conditions of a capitalist organized world economy – indispensable. On the other hand the historic shifts of the structural conditions of the international system open a scope for changing the character of these elites and the relationship between elite action and democracy.

We followed the analysis of Bourdieu and Hartmann who present empirical evidence that national elites are members of national ruling classes. Thus the established elites primarily are ruling parts of national societies and so generally focused inwards to the social structure they come from. That is precisely the reason why the existing elites are neither legitimate democratic actors (not on the national levels and much less on the global level) nor that it is very likely in the existing composition that they will resolve the current global challenges

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