

Intellectual controversies on Spanish elites*

Controversias intelectuales sobre las élites españolas

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Abstract

The objective of this article is to analyze the intellectual and academic controversies surrounding Spanish elites since the last third of the 19th century. To this end, a review of the relevant scientific literature and primary sources is conducted. The controversies concerning the elites will be examined in three historical periods: the last third of the 19th century and the early years of the 20th century, during the Francoist dictatorship, and finally, from the transition to democracy to the present day. In these periods, the analysis will focus on the debates regarding their composition on one hand, and their character on the other. The article concludes by demonstrating that recent debates have predominantly centered on their character rather than their composition, and highlights the limited role attributed to women.

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Keywords

Conservatism, elites, intellectual controversies, progressivism.

Resumen

El objetivo de este artículo es analizar las controversias intelectuales y académicas en torno a las élites españolas desde el último tercio del siglo XIX. Para ello, se realiza una revisión de la literatura científica al respecto, así como de las fuentes primarias. Las controversias en torno a las élites ser revisarán en tres periodos históricos: el último tercio del siglo XIX y los primeros años del siglo XX, durante la dictadura franquista y, por último, desde la transición a la democracia hasta la actualidad. En ellos se analiza, de un lado, las polémicas en torno a su composición y, de otro, sobre su carácter. El artículo concluye mostrando que los debates hasta tiempos recientes se han centrado sobre todo en su carácter y no tanto en su composición, y también el escaso papel que se le ha conferido a la mujer.

Palabras clave

Conservadurismo, controversias intelectuales, élites, progresismo.

I belong to a stratum of society full of pride, full of haughtiness, arrogance, and pretentiousness (...). The most pleasant thing is that we are a very small, very select club, the aristocracy. Almost more than a club, a big family, since endogamy ends up making all of us relatives.

Iñigo Ramírez de Haro, Marquis de Cazaza, 2022

1. Introduction

Throughout history, the endeavor to deepen our understanding of elite formation, to analyze the characteristics and behaviors of contemporary elites, and to investigate the potential existence of global elites has garnered sustained interest across a range of academic disciplines, including sociology, historiography, political science, and economics. Scholarly engagement with these themes tends to intensify in contexts marked by profound historical transformations. Such is the case with the subject of this study: the elite in Spain. Spain represents a particularly compelling case, having undergone a succession of political regimes, each of which has significantly reshaped the country's social structure.

Debates concerning elites are frequent and often heated across different societies, and Spanish society is no exception in this regard. The aim of this article is to provide a schematic overview of the main debates surrounding the role, structure, and recruitment mechanisms of elites in Spain. To achieve this, a methodology grounded in a socio-historical synthesis based on secondary data is employed. The approach seeks to frame these debates within the *longue durée*, aiming to identify both continuities and transformations that have occurred within the controversy surrounding elites. Furthermore, this article forms part of a broader research project on Spanish elites, part of which has already been published (Martín-Cabello, Matarín & Pérez-Redondo, 2025).

The study of elites has always held a place within sociology, although its prominence has varied depending on the shifting interests of the academic world. At present, this interest appears to be on the rise, as evidenced by a series of significant theoretical and empirical studies (e.g., Abbink & Salverda, 2013; Bühlmann et al., 2017; Denord *et al.*, 2020; Domínguez Benavente, 2017; Hartmann, 2006; Millner, 2015; Naudet & Jodhka, 2019). Theoretically, the debates on elites are situated within the gradual process of modernization that, throughout the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries, has transformed the structure of Spanish society. These debates are closely linked to discussions on the reproduction and circulation of elites, which are viewed as inherently conflictual processes and, consequently, as sources of intellectual contention. Traditional elites, technocratic elites tied to the economy, and bureaucratic elites associated with the state are at the center of these controversies, exhibiting both significant continuities and notable gaps in terms of their study and evaluation.

Ultimately, this article examines the intellectual controversies surrounding the role of elites in Spain. To this end, the debates are divided into three historical periods: from the late nineteenth century to the Spanish Civil War, during General Franco's dictatorship, and from the democratic transition to the present day. In each period, the main positions within the debate are identified, with particular emphasis on the most representative authors of each perspective. Special attention is also given to the controversies concerning the role of women within the elites.

2. The Spanish elites as a “problem”

The initial period under study primarily encompasses the Restoration (1874-1931). During this time, reflections on elites were notably speculative and dogmatic (Larraza Micheltorena, 2002). However, no empirical research was conducted on them. Broadly, two principal perspectives on the Spanish elites emerged: a liberal and a conservative or reactionary one. The “Regenerationist” intellectuals championed the former. In this context, Joaquín Costa delivered a renowned report at the Madrid Athenaeum in 1901 titled *Oligarchy and Caciquism as the Current Form of Government in Spain*, positing that the oligarchic system operated on three tiers: the Madrid oligarchy, the pinnacle of decision-making; the local “caciques” overseeing national territory; and the civil governors, liaisons between the oligarchs and caciques. This structure fostered a governance of the least capable, counter to the so-called “natural aristocracy”, and induced public passivity. Similarly, Costa stated that the oligarchy used the nation for its own benefit (Costa, 2021). Costa's remedy was political regeneration, enabling elites to fulfill their true role in advancing the nation. This school of thought also encompassed figures like the republican Manuel Azaña and the socialist Luis Araquistáin (Rivera García, 2009: 1026).

Perhaps the most distinguished advocate of this view was philosopher José Ortega y Gasset. Spain, he argued, began from the 17th century onwards to withdraw into itself, concerned only with its own affairs, and to isolate itself from the rest of the world (Ortega y Gasset, 1965: 120 ff.). He termed this process “Tibetanisation”. As a result of this isolation, a social structure emerged that was “strictly the reverse of the normal one in the other great nations of Europe” (Ortega y Gasset, 1962: 141). In this context, the elites became a significant problem. Already in 1921, in his renowned work *España Invertebrada (Invertebrate Spain)*, he sought to “underline one of the most serious and permanent defects of our race: the absence of a select minority, sufficient in number and quality”. He contended that “while the history of France or England is a history made mainly by minorities, everything here has been made by the masses, directly or through their virtual condensation in public, political, or ecclesiastical power” (Ortega y Gasset,

1947: 119 and 110). Therefore, in Spain, there is an absence of true elites since the existing ones are incapable of distinguishing themselves from the mediocrity of the masses. They would be, in any case, low-quality elites. And the masses, he would later assert in his best-known work *La Rebelión de las Masas (The Revolt of the Masses)*, “are incapable of leadership in any order” (1994: 120). Thus, he depicted Spain as a nation with deficient elites and an ungovernable populace.

From the liberal standpoint, the lack of enlightened elites in Spain stemmed from the absence of genuine middle classes, whose influence was stifled by the uneducated lower classes and the aristocratic upper classes, indifferent to national progress (Fuentes, 1992; Moreno-Luzón, 2002).

Conversely, conservative and Catholic intellectuals believed the elites had faltered by forsaking authentic Spanish values for foreign philosophies. To remedy this, they advocated a return to Spain’s historical traditions. Perhaps the leading representative of this second school of thought was Marcelino Menéndez Pelayo. He acknowledged the reality of Spain’s decadence, although his interpretation of it was diametrically opposed to that of the Regenerationists. He viewed it as the product of the pernicious influence of foreign ideas, which undermined the traditional and Catholic essence of Spanish culture. Openness, far from bringing progress, led to further cultural decadence. The solution was to rebuild an elite culture that would return to the national essence –an isolationist stance (Santoveña, 1998). However, his ideas for the creation of such cultural elites were largely ignored by the political and economic elites of the time.

Miguel de Unamuno also stands out in this respect. After an initial stage in his philosophy in which he sought regeneration in Europe, he changed his mind and decided that the solution to the country’s problems lay in its essence, in its *intrahistoria* (inner history), that is, in a kind of romantic *volkgeist* (Leguina, 2014). Indeed, both he and Ángel Ganivet favored a “Spanishization of Spain” and even a “Spanishization of Europe” (Ochoa de Michelena, 2007: 205). He believed in a centralized and hierarchical government that, advised by an intellectual elite, would contribute to the enlightenment of the people (Barriuso, 2009). As a true Romantic, Unamuno argued for a role for the elites as codifiers of the national culture that resided in the people, but which should be unveiled by the intellectuals.

The situation of the elites was analyzed by Spanish intellectuals based on a common assumption but with conflicting conclusions. The common assumption was the low quality of the elites and their limited contribution to the country’s progress. Remarkably, the debate in Spain often centered not on the existence of the elites or the degree of oppression they exerted over the subordinate classes, but on the “quality” of these elites. It was understood that in other countries the elites were equally oppressive, but at least they were composed of individuals with special characteristics: intellectual, business, or political management skills, which made them worthy of such a position by contributing more significantly to societal advancement. In Spain, it was argued, they formed an extractive structure that also blocked the country’s advancement and modernization.

However, the reasons for this were different for liberal and secular intellectuals compared to traditionalist and Catholic intellectuals. The former believed that the situation of the elites was due, on the one hand, to their ties with pre-modern society and, on the other, to their lack of openness to European currents of thought. The latter argued that the problem lay precisely in the neglect of national traditions and the uncritical acceptance of modern philosophical and scientific trends.

This debate, contrary to what has been maintained from nationalist positions, is not uniquely Spanish. It occurred with varying intensity and with different nuances in various countries. As Norbert Elias stated, “During the nineteenth century, the general

chorus of the time was composed of the semi-chorus of those who praised a better past and the semi-chorus of those who praised a better future” (2009: 22). On one side were the pre-industrial elites and a large part of the peasant and artisan population, who longed for a return to an idyllic and stable past. On the other side were the liberal bourgeois elites and the urban proletariat, who sought new ways of governing society.

Meanwhile, the working-class parties and trade unions had a limited impact on the debate. The largest mass party with a significant organization in the country was the PSOE (Socialist Party), along with the trade unions UGT and CNT. Until the Civil War, the PSOE broadly aligned with certain ideas of the regenerationist movement, although without a full ideological identification, as its political project was rooted in a class-based perspective. It posited that the monarchy, the oligarchy, and the Catholic Church were responsible for Spain’s decadence. The PSOE intellectuals thought that only socialism would change this situation and address the country’s longstanding problems (Martín Bataller, 2021: 130). The PSOE (founded in 1879) originated as a workers’ party that prioritized the interests of the labour movement above any other social concern. In fact, within Spanish socialism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, there was a deep prejudice against elitism, and the formation of intellectual elites within the party was rejected (Aubert, 1993: 129-132; Aubert, 2008: 130-131). PSOE leaders from working-class backgrounds generally distrusted intellectuals, however “organic” they might be, and believed that it was the worker who should emancipate the worker¹. In any case, the discourse on elites was more a creation of liberal and conservative intellectuals than of those with socialist or anarchist backgrounds. These did not place the elites at the center of political decision-making but the people or the working class.

In this regard, these positions engaged in discussions about the qualities that members of the elite should possess, but not about who ought to comprise it. In other words, the necessity of an elite was accepted, and the focus was placed on improving its quality, while its existence and the methods of recruitment were not subject to debate.

Notably, the role of women in the elite was not even a topic at this time, as it was assumed that the elite were (and should have been) composed of men. To provide historical context, it is essential to underscore that the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen (1789), a foundational document of the French Revolution, explicitly excluded women from the rights of citizenship. It was not until 1848 that the first international convention advocating for women’s rights was convened –the Seneca Falls Conference– which is widely regarded as the inception of modern feminism. This seminal event was closely intertwined with the abolitionist movement, from which women themselves had been largely marginalized.

Throughout the 19th century and well into the 20th, access to education –and its connection as a pathway to cultural and professional elites– was largely restricted for women (Ballarín, 1989). Krausism and the “Institución Libre de Enseñanza” (Free Institute of Education) played an influential, albeit limited, role in promoting regeneration. While there was an aspiration to grant women greater prominence, the emerging approach did not align with the enhancement of women’s roles as autonomous subjects, but rather as mothers and wives. The establishment of institutions such as the “Asociación para la Enseñanza de la Mujer” (Association for the Education of Women) and the “Escuela de Institutoras” (School for Governesses) facilitated certain improvements and fostered ideological debate on women’s education, within which three distinct positions were articulated. First, the conservative stance, which held that

¹This controversy was not just peculiar to Spanish socialism but was present in most European socialist parties. See Michels (2008, vol. 2: 111-123).

education should conform to moral standards and domestic responsibilities. Second, the regenerationist view, which advocated for the training of educated mothers. And third, the feminist position, which called for equal education and access to all professions.

In light of the above, it can be concluded that the female elite during this period functioned as transmitters rather than creators. That is, upper-class women acted as 'mediators' of social capital without having real access to cultural or intellectual power. Consequently, the female elite lacked institutional agency. The aforementioned institutions selected and trained women under an elitist and patriarchal logic, and unlike men, their access to the liberal professions was conditioned by a moral image associated with purity, motherhood, or religiosity. In this way, the exclusion of women served as a means of controlling symbolic elites, by constructing an ideal of womanhood as the guarantor of moral order.

3. Debates on elites under Franco's dictatorship

During the dictatorship, normative analyses of the elites were, unsurprisingly, focused on the victorious faction. The Falangists, having inherited from José Antonio Primo de Rivera –the principal founder of the Falange– a profound interest in forming a ruling elite, were poised to fulfill this vision. Primo de Rivera asserted, “A disciplined and religious minority will become the impeccable axis of Spanish life” (in del Rio Cisneros, 1974: 416). Influenced by the philosophers Ortega y Gasset and Eugenio d’Ors, the founder of the Falange aspired to establish a social aristocracy and a ruling elite to steer Spanish society (Carbajosa and Carbajosa, 2003: 75). The Falange was thus summoned to assume this role. Falangist discourse advocated for transcending the “aristocracy of blood” and instituting an elite derived from labor and political activism. In this sense,

It should be remembered that the *Falange*, as a fascist-inspired political party, had an elitist conception of politics. Eugenio d’Ors had written, back in the founding moments: “The people must be saved against themselves”. The nation had to be redeemed and the organ called upon for this task was the state. Now, the State is carried out by authority, but also by education and selection (...) José Antonio, a convinced elitist himself, had interpreted the July uprising as an act aimed at saving Spain, an act in which the Falangists were called upon to play a leading role. And, in the hour of peace, it fell to the Falange to educate and prepare the leaders (Jerez Mir, 1982: 69).

These elites were fundamentally masculine. In fact, the discourses pronounced by the most prominent members of the Falange are replete with references to the “virility” of the “Spanish race”. Even the “Sección Femenina” (Women's Section of the Falange) subscribed to this worldview. Pilar Primo de Rivera, sister of José Antonio Primo de Rivera and one of the few women who played a significant political role during the Franco dictatorship, stated at the Fifth National Council of the Women's Section held in Madrid in 1940:

Once the war is over and the Sección Femenina has attended with exemplary self-sacrifice to the most pressing services of the struggle, our most difficult work begins that of the total training of women. And we need leaders who can carry out this task which Spain has placed in our hands. This education, which will be complete, we want to direct mainly towards the training of women as mothers.

Years later, she continued to defend these ideas. She wrote in 1963 that: “Man is the King; woman, children, aids, the necessary complements for man to reach his fullness” (in Preston, 1999: 179).

Furthermore, organizations close to the Catholic Church also maintained an important discourse on the fundamental role of the elites in the structuring of Spanish society. The “Asociación Católica Nacional de Propagandistas” (National Catholic Association of Propagandists, ACNdP) was initiated by Father Ángel Ayala and, in particular, by Angel Herrera Oria. Regarding its foundations, Herrera commented that what Father Ángel Ayala envisioned was the creation of Catholic elites who would shape Spanish society: “He clearly perceived that any new idea, in order to succeed socially, had to be embodied in minorities of select men” (in Gutiérrez García, 2010: 41).

This concept guided the organization throughout its history. In 1939, just after the end of the Civil War, Juan Contreras y López de Ayala, Marquis of Lozoya and the first rector of the CEU, a university institution of the ACNdP, argued at the inaugural session of the new academic year that the sectarianism and anti-Spanish sentiment of the “Institución Libre de Enseñanza” had to be surmounted. The objective of the Catholic universities was to educate the elites who would transcend the pre-war liberal culture. Thus, “from these Catholic Universities will emerge the men who will elevate Spain to the pinnacle of the Empire, guided by the designs of Divine Providence and by the hand of the undefeated Caudillo Franco” (Barreiro Gordillo, 2010: 136). Father Ángel Ayala himself published *Formación de selectos (Training of Selected People)* in 1940, in which he formalized these ideas:

The apostolate must affect everyone, the common and the select. But it is evident that the cultivation of these is of extraordinary importance. In the same space of time a stone can be cut, and a diamond can be cut; the result will be very different. Between the education of a king and that of a peasant, there is an enormous difference in the effect of the educative action. This does not mean that the masses are despised; on the contrary, the select ones are educated for them (...) The select ones are those subjects who, by their qualities, are called upon to exert a powerful social influence. To educate the select ones is the fundamental problem of the world. If a people have good rulers, it will be a great people. If an army has great generals, it will cover itself with glory. Any work will be whatever its leader is (Ayala, 2019: 51).

The ideology disseminated to these elites, and to the rest of the population during the dictatorship, was the so-called national-Catholicism (Pérez-Agote, 2003; Sopena Monsalve, 1995), an ideological amalgam of Spanish nationalism and the Catholic religion, reinterpreting Spanish history in a messianic light. Franco and his regime were depicted as divinely appointed saviors sent to redeem the Spanish people. Therefore, the elites were the chosen ones to assist Franco and the Spanish state in this mission of salvation (Illustration 1).

Opus Dei emerged with the intent of creating similar elites and with an approach aligned with the ideology of national-Catholicism. It has been stated that from the outset, José María Escrivá de Balaguer aimed to establish this ruling elite: “Escrivá’s intuition about the future project of lay organization consisted of creating dependent and secret nuclei of laypeople, ultimately with the aim of cultivating intellectual elites to dominate culture, politics, business...” (Ynfante, 1970: 88).

In the 1941 Regulations of Opus Dei as a Pious Union, it is stated: “The spirit of the Work is that its male members should occupy official positions and, in general,

positions of leadership” and “in order to reach positions of leadership, our members need a solid scientific prestige. Therefore, members should not neglect their professional training” (V. Spirit, 28 and 29). This was coupled with a profoundly conservative view of society. In Escrivá de Balaguer's best-known work, *Camino (The Way)*, he employed an organic metaphor to articulate his societal vision: “What eagerness there is in the world to move out of its place! What would happen if every bone, every muscle in the body wanted to occupy a place other than the one it belongs to” (maxim 832)².

Illustration 1. A poster displayed at a bus stop by the ACdP (currently without the adjective “Nacional”) in 2024



Source: Antonio Martín-Cabello.

The poster proclaims: “Ignored. Rejected. Cancelled. Saint? Isabel the Catholic. A female role model for the 21st century as well”. The historical referents of the national-Catholic ideology have remained largely consistent since its inception, including the Catholic Monarchs, Felipe II, the Spanish Empire, and the National Hispanic Heritage.

In summary, these positions were predicated on a reactionary ideology that perceived the Spanish populace as minors, not yet mature political subjects due to their alleged backwardness and ignorance. Consequently, they required guidance from a select few egregious elites who purportedly understood their needs and desires. Essentially, this was a resurgence of Enlightenment despotism, emblematic of the old, stratified society that was hesitant to depart from Spain's historical narrative. Moreover, these ruling elites were predominantly male, relegating women to a supportive role for male endeavors, rather than as active agents.

²In Mexico, an organization emerged in the 1950s that was very similar in structural terms to Opus Dei: The Legionaries of Christ, created by Father Marcial Maciel, which proposed a similar emphasis on the formation of Catholic elites (Ávila García, 2021).

Toward the end of the period, specifically the final years of the dictatorship and the transition to democracy, a new type of research emerged that sought to empirically analyze the role of the elites. The gradual relaxation and liberalization of the regime, coupled with the integration of new generations into the academic and intellectual sphere, catalyzed this shift. These studies typically adopted a more empirical and less normative approach to examining the elites, aligning with the social sciences of the era (Beltrán Villalva, 1977; Moya, 1975; de Miguel, 1975; del Campo *et al.*, 1982; Díaz Plaja, 1973; García Madarúa and Baena del Alcázar, 1979; Linz and de Miguel, 1965, 1968; López Navarro and Domínguez, 1967; Rodríguez Zúñiga, 1973, 1976; San Miguel, 1965; Tuñón de Lara, 1973; Viver Pi-Sunyer, 1978).

This body of research fostered a critical examination of the elites' role during Franco's regime, often from liberal or left-wing perspectives that had been sidelined by the official narrative. Thus, these studies represented an initial effort to challenge the elite rhetoric promulgated by the dictatorship's principal intellectual entities. The perception of the elites transitioned from being viewed as the aristocracy of thought and society's vanguard to being seen as an oligarchy primarily concerned with safeguarding their status and privileges.

During this time, Spain witnessed the first sustained critique of the underlying concept of elite theory: the mass society. Salvador Giner (1971, 1979) contended that the mass society theory was reactionary, even when formulated by progressive or left-wing political elites. The preference for elites, the “best” or the intellectual aristocracy, concealed a profound mistrust of the popular classes, deemed “dangerous”. Hence, it was an anti-popular and anti-democratic theory. The resolution to societal issues, therefore, could not be located within a few refined elites but in the participation of all society's members. As Manuel Tuñón de Lara posited:

The essential difference for the history of Spanish culture (...) was between the conception which held that the system of ideas in use, the proposed solutions, etc., were the affair of a select minority and the conception of the primacy of simple men, as the agents of history (1973: 137).

Indeed, during the dictatorship, the ideology of Spanish socialism in exile also confronted the pre-Civil War dominant elite theory. The socialist intellectual Luis Araquistáin, for instance, argued that Ortega y Gasset had championed an anti-democratic elitism and that, disregarding the notion of selecting the best, the faction that rebelled against the Second Republic had chosen the worst of Spanish society to govern the country (Andrade, 2019: 120).

4. Current debates about Spanish elites

During the democratic period, interest in elites has surged, manifesting in both sociological and normative analyses. The sociological, historical, and political examination of elites has engendered a substantial body of academic research. Notable contributions include, but are not limited to, works by Baena del Alcázar (1999); Coller *et al.* (2016); García de León (1982, 1994); Genieys (2004); Jerez Mir (1982); Parrado Díez (1996); Santos Castroviejo (2013, 2014); and Villena Oliver (2017, 2019). Additionally, current affairs journalism has produced books on elites, underscoring their role in the public democratic discourse (e.g., Calderón, 1992; Galiacho, 2007; Heras, 1990; Janer Boet, 2003; Pérez Henares, 1994; Ramírez, 1978; Rivasés, 1988; Sánchez, 2003, 2007, 2024; Sánchez Bardón, 1997; Sánchez Soler, 2003, 2005, 2007; Tijeras, 1998; Ynfante, 1998).

Historical debates concerning elites, rather than abating, recur in public discussions and academic forums. Particularly, discussions about the role of elites intensify during periods of crisis and transition. Post the 2008 economic crisis, there has been a surge in elite-focused publications coinciding with the rise of new political entities following the 15M movement in 2011, which advocated for enhanced democratization and opposed traditional parties. On the political left, *Podemos* emerged in 2014, while on the liberal front, *Ciudadanos* transitioned from a regional to a national party in the same year. Concurrently, *Vox* emerged on the far-right spectrum at the end of 2013. Each party embodies an ideology and sensibility that resonate with the analysis and critique of the elites' role in Spanish politics, economy, and society.

The liberal critique of Spanish elites harks back to the regenerationist movement of the late 19th century. This critique aligns with the analysis by economists Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson (2014), who posit that a country's economic success is contingent upon its institutional framework. They delineate two primary institution types: inclusive institutions, where elites distribute economic opportunities across society, and extractive institutions, where elites siphon wealth without societal redistribution. Inclusive institutions foster centralized governance that ensures property rights, law enforcement, and economic security while maintaining pluralism to prevent elite monopolization of power and profits. Conversely, extractive institutions are characterized by a rejection of pluralism and low centralization.

Following this line of argument, Spain's problem lies in the fact that the elites continue to be excessively extractive. The economist Luis Garicano (2014; see also de Zulueta, 2023; Lapuente, 2022; Sánchez, 2024; Santiso, 2013; Velázquez-Gaztelu, 2015), from a liberal position, assumed Acemoglu and Robinson's assumptions, arguing that one of Spain's main problems is the so-called “crony capitalism”. That is, a capitalism in which the networks of the elite and their connections with the state determine economic benefits. Whereas in other capitalisms it is the ability to innovate and open new markets that makes the difference.

In this vein, Spain's quandary is attributed to the persistence of extractive elite practices. Economist Luis Garicano (2014), adopting a liberal stance and building upon Acemoglu and Robinson's thesis, contends that Spain grapples with “crony capitalism”, where elite networks and state connections dictate economic advantages. This contrasts with capitalisms where innovation and market expansion are the differentiators. Garicano elucidates:

In Spain, crony capitalism is epitomized by the Bernabéu's football box and Bárcenas' office³. It is a capitalism where wealth accrues not to the most innovative or the one who best addresses a human need, but to those with connections, those acquainted with Bárcenas, those who discreetly curry favor and, in return, receive state-sanctioned largesse in the form of power plants, motorways, or rezoning (Garicano, 2014: 19).

The economic elites, in collusion with political and socio-cultural counterparts, have ostensibly failed to cultivate an innovative and inclusive economic milieu, squandering Spanish society's potential and perpetuating oligarchic vices.

³Luis Bárcenas was the treasurer of the *Partido Popular* between 1990 and 2008. He was at the epicenter of a corruption scheme involving members of the government and major Spanish businessmen. Both he, who was sentenced to prison, and the Popular Party were found guilty by the courts. On the other hand, the boxes of the Santiago Bernabéu stadium have a reputation in Spain as a meeting place for the elite to do or celebrate successful business.

Conversely, the left-wing critique of elites acknowledges their extractive nature but associates it with General Franco's dictatorship. Following the 2008 crisis, both the traditional left and the emergent left from the 15M movement (*Podemos* and later *Sumar*) have decried the elites, attributing their predatory conduct to the political transition to democracy (e.g., Belmonte, 2015; Burgos, 2015; de Diego, 2008; Juste, 2017, 2020; Lardiés Galarreta, 2019; Martínez & Oliveres, 2015; Mir & Cruz, 2012; Montero, 2010). This perspective suggests that the roots of exclusionary and predatory behavior lie in the reactionary ethos of the Spanish elites, who evaded accountability at the dictatorship's end (Ballesteros, 2018; Salellas i Vilar, 2018). The democratic transition was predicated on an elite pact:

The pact can be summarized in these terms: the Francoists transferred part of their power to the democratic opponents in exchange for their commitment to not prosecute the crimes of the *Caudillo's* regime. Over time, the pact was extended, and the democratic parties were ceded their corresponding share of the benefits of corruption (Martínez & Oliveres, 2015: 60).

Overall, these analyses pivot from elite quality to elite conduct, with a primary focus on the role of elites in democracy. This encompasses the elites' attempts to control democracy, ensuring it does not impinge upon their interests (Jones, 2015: 14), and the imperative of democratic elite selection⁴. From this vantage point, some analysts assert that the new elites promulgated neoliberalism to assail the political left, muddle identity politics, and advance their political agenda: “Neoliberalism is the Western elites' endeavor to reclaim their waned political influence and societal standing post-World War II” (Bernabé, 2018: 73). In Spain, these elites purportedly pursued the neoliberal agenda to dominate democracy and steer elite selection, counter to more democratic alternatives that would encompass all citizens.

Finally, the conservative critique of the elites' role in contemporary Spain revives numerous arguments from pre-Civil War Catholic traditionalism, which were prominent during the dictatorship. According to this perspective, the issue with the elites is not their lack of European identity, but rather an excess of it. That is, the national elites have neglected the national spirit and the traditions of the country. A recent exemplar of this viewpoint is found in the work of philologist and medievalist María Elvira Roca Barea. She contends that following the decline of the Spanish empire at the hands of Protestant Europe, intellectuals embraced the Black Legend and a disparaging perception of Spain. Consequently, a significant segment of the Spanish elites developed a “contradictory and schizophrenic, if not overtly unpatriotic, relationship” with their nation (Roca Barea, 2019: 473). Hence, the elites are not critiqued for being insufficiently European or Western, but rather for not being sufficiently Spanish. This sentiment is undoubtedly linked to pre-Civil War Catholic conservatism and the national Catholicism ethos during the dictatorship.

In this context, as recently as 2015, a publication lauding the nobility's role as a societal asset in Spain emerged. Authored by Faustino Menéndez Pidal, it received recognition worthy of publication by the Royal Academy of History and the *Boletín Oficial del Estado* (Official State Bulletin). To illustrate its tenor, consider its concluding paragraph:

⁴A similar analysis of elites, the establishment, the 1%, or the “castes” has emerged in other countries such as England (Jones, 2015), Italy (Rizzo & Stella, 2015) or the United States (McQuaig & Brooks, 2014).

With the expulsion of nobility from society, the influence of its exemplariness, which subtly permeated society through downward imitation, has ceased. The absence of decorum, manners, taste, elegance, courtesy, solemnity, and substance; all that aligns with dignity and distinction, is in perpetual decline. Frivolity, insubstantiality, garishness, vulgarity, poor taste, and incivility prevail... As the authors of the Persian manifesto articulated in 1814, “the exclusion of nobility dismantles the hierarchical structure, strips society of its luster, and robs it of the noble spirits essential for its defense” (Menéndez Pidal, 2015: 391).

In essence, this represents a staunch defense of the role of hereditary elites as a counterpoint to what is perceived as egalitarian and democratic coarseness. Intellectuals endorsing conservative elitism and a nationalist stance maintain their relevance in 21st-century Spain.

Debates regarding the role of women within the elites have evolved throughout the democratic period. The discussion has shifted away from questioning their presence, which has become commonplace. In fact, available data indicate the full incorporation of women into public life and their growing representation in elite positions. Nevertheless, discriminatory patterns persist, resulting in the continued predominance of men in the most influential roles. This is particularly evident in the spheres of the economy and, interestingly, culture, whereas gender parity is more clearly reflected in the regulations governing the political sphere (Martín-Cabello, Matarín & Pérez-Redondo, 2025). Despite notable advancements in gender equality, Spain has yet to witness the appointment of a woman to the office of Prime Minister. These patterns of inclusion and, paradoxically, discrimination have led some scholars to suggest that women within the elites may be referred to as “discriminated elites” (García de León, 1994).

5. Conclusions

Across the three historical phases under consideration, it becomes evident that the concept of elite in Spain has evolved in relation to notions of power, legitimacy, and representation, adapting to shifting political and socio-historical contexts. During the Restoration period, various actors –including regenerationists, liberals, and labor and trade union movements– attributed Spain’s underdevelopment to its elites, who were perceived as a privileged oligarchic caste, disconnected from the social vanguard and thus incapable of fostering societal progress or meaningful transformation.

In contrast, intellectual discourse surrounding elites has traditionally been shaped by liberal and conservative perspectives, which focused on the quality of elites without fundamentally questioning their legitimacy to govern. This discourse transitioned from aristocratic elites, legitimized by birthright, to bourgeois elites, who sought validation through their “productivity” and “contribution” to society. The shift from ascriptive to merit-based legitimacy aimed to enhance elite quality. While liberals advocated for openness to modernity, conservatives emphasized historical continuity and national tradition.

With the advent of Francoism, the legitimacy of elites was not re-evaluated but rather reconfigured. Elites assumed a military, ecclesiastical, and technocratic profile, within which women continued to occupy a subordinate position. This period was marked by a rigidly hierarchical structure, where loyalty to the regime superseded meritocratic principles or professional competence.

It was only from the political left, particularly in the post-Franco era, that the legitimacy of elites was critically interrogated. The debate extended beyond qualifications to question the very entitlement of elites to dominate Spanish society. Discussions encompassed both the necessity of elites and the mechanisms by which individuals are selected for elite roles, should their existence be affirmed. Emphasis was placed on the role of democracy and citizen participation in shaping political, economic, and cultural elites, including the integration of women.

In the 21st century, the legitimacy of Spanish elites has once again come under scrutiny. Growing public disaffection has widened the gap between elites and citizens, a sentiment that has been harnessed by emerging populist movements. These movements have incorporated critiques of elite structures into their rhetoric, advocating for equality and the dismantling of entrenched political and economic hierarchies as a strategy to mobilize electoral support. While elites are increasingly analyzed through the lens of self-interest and their failure to serve the public good, their existence is not fundamentally contested. Unlike previous periods, contemporary debates focus more on the mechanisms of access to power and the accountability of those who occupy elite positions. Consequently, transparency, accountability, and legitimacy have emerged as the central pillars of current discourse on elites in Spain.

Ultimately, the analysis confirms that the concept of elite in Spain is dynamic and has undergone continuous reconfiguration, shaped by political and socio-cultural transformations. From its identification as an impediment to progress during the Restoration, through its structural redefinition under Francoism, to its democratic rearticulation in the present day, elites have remained a subject of persistent scrutiny and debate. Whether future discourse will advocate for the dissolution of elites or their democratization through enhanced mechanisms of control remains an open question, as suggested by prevailing trends.

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