

## Totalizing power Grids: Using elite theory in *Player Piano*

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### Abstract

This article entitled "Totalizing Power Grids: Using Elite Theory in *Player Piano*" is an expository study of elite influence in the world politics and how the elites occupy a superior position in their society. In every nation there are presences of elites who influence the government in policy making. The dystopian novel *Player Piano* by the American novelist Kurt Vonnegut, takes place in a post-third world war setting, in which factory workers have been replaced by machines. Vonnegut's main concern is with the price humanity will have to pay with the ever increasing rates of mechanization and automation.

In the introductory chapter a brief summary of the novel is provided. Kurt Vonnegut in his *Player Piano* paints a future America where a technocratic oligarchy has established a corporate command economy. The first chapter briefly presents the cardinal tenets of "elite theory" of Gaetano Mosca which analyzes rule by organised minority. It also provides a short biography of Mosca. The second chapter illustrates how the organised minority of elites grow and how they possess enormous authority over not just governmental, but financial, educational, social, civic, and cultural institutions as well. The third chapter shows how elites intrude into the national matters.

**Keywords:** oligarchy, utopia, McCarthyism, eastern bloc, nomenklatura, hegemony, parasites

### 1. Introduction

Who controls the world? The age old question has been asked over and over again. In 2011, it was reported that out of 43,000 multi-national corporations, most of the wealth rests in the hands of certain entities and are further controlled by wealthy elites. These funds serve as a medium hiding the true ownership as they participate on the geopolitical stage. While oligarchies are defined as power structures run by a small group, they are understood to be governments run by the wealthy. Jeffrey Winters, contemporary philosopher and author of the book *Oligarchy*, defines it as "the politics of wealth defense by materially endowed actors" (Winters 53). Viewed in this way in an oligarchy wealthy or elite controls power, even if they are not having governmental positions.

Kurt Vonnegut in his *Player Piano* paints a future America where a technocratic oligarchy has established their corporate commands. The leaders think they have created a utopia but the common people disagree. Here too there is a revolt that fails. Vonnegut in his *Player Piano* draws his experience as a young executive at GE (General Electric). He satirizes the elite's drive to climb the corporate ladder. The novel also shows how automation increases, putting even executives out of work. *Player Piano* is an opposition to "McCarthyism" which Vonnegut portrays through "Ghost Shirts", the revolutionary organization in which Paul the protagonist penetrates and eventually leads.

### 2. Mosca and Elite Theory

The theory of the political class is considered to be the major contribution brought by Gaetano Mosca. Gaetano Mosca in his *Elementi di scienza politica* (1896) translated as *The Ruling Class* explains his "Elite Theory" in which he asserts that, "contrary to theories of majority rule, societies are necessarily governed by minorities" (Mosca 62). The minority might be a military, clergy, oligarchy or an aristocracy of wealth or of

merit. In Mosca's conception, elites were not hereditary in nature, and people from any class of society could theoretically become elite. He also says that elites were in constant competition with each other where one elite group replaces another repeatedly over time. German Sociologist Robert Michels in his book *Political Parties* brings the theory of the "iron law of oligarchy" which states:

All forms of social and political organization, regardless of how democratic they may be at the start, will eventually and inevitably develop oligarchic tendencies, thus making true democracy practically and theoretically impossible, especially in large groups and complex organizations (Michels 226).

Mosca finds superior organizational skills in the modern elites. These organizational skills were especially useful in gaining political power in the modern bureaucratic society.

Gaetano Mosca (1858 –1941) was an Italian political scientist, journalist and public servant. He is credited with developing the Elite Theory and the doctrine of the Political Class and is one of the three members constituting the Italian School of Elitists together with Vilfredo Pareto and Robert Michels. Gaetano Mosca was born on 1 April 1858 in Palermo, Sicily, which was part of the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies before Italian unification in 1861.

### 3. Elites: The Nomenklatura of Modern Society

The Oligarchic tendencies of the elites on politics and society was emerged early in the twentieth century. Majority rule according to them is impossible. Every society is comprised of those who rule and those who are ruled. The superiority of a group is not merely based on birth and wealth but also on individual merit and skill.

The “nomenklatura” were a category of people within the Soviet Union and other Eastern Bloc countries who held various key administrative positions in the bureaucracy. They enjoyed special powers running through all spheres of those countries' activity: government, industry, agriculture, education, etc. The novel *Player Piano* by Kurt Vonnegut portrays a similar “society run by a small, elite corps of engineers and managers” (Marvin 26). This group enjoys the maximum powers. Vonnegut's oligarchs are not capitalists but engineers. Dr. George Proteus, Paul's famous father, had talked “engineers, managers, and scientists were an elite” (82). In the future as he foreshadows, the machines have completed their triumph, isolating not only the manual labourers but the white collars too. In *Player Piano*, he creates a warning to 1950s America about the perils of technology and progress. Although details like computers running on vacuum tubes are familiar to the contemporary readers, “Vonnegut's indictment of our unquestioning faith in science and technology is more relevant than ever in the twenty first century” (Marvin 26). Consequently the highly trained individuals from the minority who design and control the machines are the only people who have anything to do. Other people, the great majority, can either go into the “Reconstruction and Reclamation Corps” (20), who are devoted to wastefulness. They have no real function in a machine-dominated society.

This elite business, this assurance of superiority, this sense of rightness about the hierarchy topped by managers and engineers—this was instilled in all college graduates, and there was no bones about it. (8)

The logic of the ruling class, for Mosca, is simple: “The ability to be organized easily and effectively” (Mosca 60). Minority is always organized and therefore they have the ability to overcome the majority. In *Player Piano*, Engineers like Dr Shepherd and Dr Garth suppress the revolution of Ghost Shirt Society, the revolutionary group of “The Homestead”.

People of Ilium, lay down your arms!... This is an ultimatum: surrender your false leaders and lay down your arms within the next six hours, or suffer in the ruins of your own making for the next six months, cut off from the rest of the world (308).

The influence of oligarchy has resemblance with the concept of Hegemony. Hegemony is the social or cultural predominance by one group within a society. Associated with Antonio Gramsci, in hegemony the ruling class manipulates the value system and mores of a society and thus their view becomes the world view. In Terry Eagleton's words, “Gramsci normally uses the word hegemony to mean the ways in which a governing power wins consent to its rule from those it subjugates” (Eagleton 18). Similarly the comforts given to the citizens by the oligarchs make them act according to the power of the elites even though they express their discomforts. After the crush of revolution by the engineers in Vonnegut's novel the citizenry, used to the comforts of the system, begin to rebuild the machines of their own volition.

But around one machine a group had gathered. The people were crowding one another excitedly, as though a great

wonder were in their midst...The crowd was drifting over to encourage them in their new enterprise (323).

Greed is the privilege of the American elites. Their behavior was described by political scientist Harold Lasswell. He said a society's leadership class consists of those whose “private motives are displaced onto public objects and rationalized in terms of public interest” (Lasswell 298). Vonnegut probes a similar America in his novel. *Player Piano* is set in the near future after a third world war. While most Americans were fighting overseas, the nation's managers and engineers developed ingenious automated systems that allowed the factories to operate with only a few workers. The novel begins about ten years after the war, when most factory workers are replaced by machines. In Ilium, Dr George Proteus was the first “National, Industrial, Commercial Communications, Foodstuffs and Resources Director” (2). He had almost complete control over the nation's economy and was more powerful than the President of the United States. Vonnegut's narrator states that “the President of the United States of America, Jonathan Lynn, would dedicate to a happier, more efficient tomorrow, EPICAC XIV” (112). Jeffrey Winters in his book *Oligarchy* situates the political power of today's oligarchs. Oligarchs according to him are “Actors who command and control massive concentrations of material resources that can be deployed to defend or enhance their personal wealth or exclusive social position” (Winters 6). The engineers of Vonnegut's Ilium, as per the notion of Mosca, were the perfect example for “ruling class”. They are the organized minority of post war America who controlled and maintained the people of Ilium who lived in the south of New York. The roles of the oligarchs were in a form of decentered sovereignty, meaning that their role was exercised through a network of state officials, other oligarchs and the mafia. In Ilium each engineer is given specific roles to perform. Dr. Paul Proteus is the manger of the Ilium Works, though only thirty five; Dr. Katherine Finch, his secretary; Doctor Bud Calhoun is the manger of the petroleum terminal in Ilium and so on. Only the brass-plant managers and people holding higher positions had secretaries.

#### 4. Indeterminate Masses: An after effect of Elite parasitism

The elite theories approached power as dichotomous and therefore assumed a clear distinction between elites and nonelites (or masses). The differentiation between elites and nonelites in the present society recalls the comment in *Animal Farm*, “All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others” (Orwell 112).

There is a big difference between elite and mass. The elites lead certainly a rich life in the present and it has ambitions for the future. It wants to keep its power and wealth, wants to earn more than the masses and it wants to transfer its privileged position to its generation. They work for their existence as a closed group of leaders. The masses have no future, they try to survive in the present. They stay as indeterminate masses without any representation in policy making. Though they are given voting rights in democracy, the elected government does not rule in favour of the masses but for the elites. In most countries the candidates for contesting election are not selected according to the wish of citizen but elites, for whom the candidates stay firm. So citizen's participation in government and policy making has

now been limited. The control of their destinies has fallen into the lap of the power elite.

Vonnegut's main concern in his *Player Piano* is with the price humanity will have to pay with ever increasing rates of mechanization and centralized planning. The engineers and managers of Ilium, New York, have transformed their land into automation. Thus the masses there lost their jobs and were separated from the main lands. The high rates of mechanization and centralized planning has made the people, on both the sides of Ilium, Irrational. The narrator in the novel comments, "Not many people on either side have reasons other than curiosity for crossing" (1).

Elites are the parasites of modern society. The word parasite brings to mind nasty little creatures such as lice or tapeworms, living in others and giving nothing in return. Today, the word might also bring to mind humans acting in a similar manner, trying to get more out of society than they give back. From this we can conclude that parasites either in animal or human shape is a useless creature whose only contribution is destruction, draining the health of its host organism. "In some cases the outcome of this unequal relationship might only be a minor loss of energy to the host, in others it will be its death, devoured by its sponging guest" (Zimmer15). Elites, like the parasites slowly consuming the hosts, consume the masses and ultimately dominate them.

The parasite is an exciter. Far from transforming a system, changing its nature, its form, its elements, its relations and its pathways the parasite makes it change states differentially. It inclines it. It makes the equilibrium of the energetic distribution fluctuate. It dopes it. It irritates it. It inflames it. Often this inclination has no effect. But it can produce gigantic ones by chain reactions or reproduction. (Serres 191)

In *Homo Sacer*, Agamben concerns with the state of society today, and the place of the individual within it. He delineates the problem of pure possibility, potentiality, and power in a context where the individual has lost its previous religious, metaphysical, and cultural grounding. *Homo Sacer*,

Has been excluded from the religious community and from all political life: he cannot participate in the rites of his gens, nor [...] can he perform any juridically valid act. What is more, his entire existence is reduced to a bare life stripped of every right by virtue of the fact that anyone can kill him without committing homicide; he can save himself only in perpetual flight or a foreign land. (Agamben 183).

Agamben argues that the modern citizen is "a two-faced being, the bearer both of subjection to sovereign power and of individual liberties" (Agamben 125). The people of Homestead in *Player Piano* in this sense are "homosacer", included in the politics in the form of exclusion and a part of unlimited exposure to violation, which does not count as a crime. They were in the totalitarian regime of managers and engineers who controlled the daily life of the masses and the internal affairs of the state. "The greatest part of its mass was undefined: an amalgam of perversions, filth, disease, a galaxy of traits, any one of which would make a man a despicable outcast" (234). The elites of Ilium called the masses "saboteur" and punished them under the anti sabotage laws. "The police are

bright enough to look for people like that, and lock them up under the antisabotage laws" (92). They were not given any advantage of modern life and were seen as "Reeks and Wrecks," while the elites in the northern Ilium enjoyed all the advantages of modernity.

As in industrial society, the society in Ilium also witnessed a shift of importance from blue collar works to white collar ones. Initially its people supported agriculture and were dependent on it. But through the processes of globalization and automation, the value and importance of blue collar and manual labour declined and importance was given to professional workers, presently, for automated machines. "The word had little meaning in the present... In the rich Iroquois Valley in Ilium County, thousands of settlers had once made their living from the soil" (145). Like the divine rights of king, the managers and engineers believed in the "the divine right of machines, efficiency, and organization" (301).

Paul Proteus, the protagonist, brings various arguments against the automation of engineers and managers. His arguments against the oligarchy of elites in Ilium show how the people there were devalued in comparison to machines. According to Paul, "The main business of humanity is to do a good job of being human beings, not to serve as appendages to machines, institutions, and systems" (315). But, automation and replacement of human labour headed by modern elites have injured the sovereignty and liberty of the entire people. By this replacement, the narrator of *Player Piano* states "Maybe the actual jobs weren't being taken from the people, but the sense of participation, the sense of importance was" (301). They are like the "old player piano," portrayed in the Homestead bar. Paul's claims of his American society stand as an analogy for the whole people.

## 5. Conclusion

"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times...it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair...we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way..." (Dickens 1). This is how Dickens explains the eighteenth century in *A Tale of Two Cities*. Similar is the current times when the masses feel doubts about the government policy and growing corporatism. Though Vonnegut's *Player Piano* deals with American elites and their automation in factories, the novel stands as a blue print for the modern world. The influences of elites are felt in most countries, both democratic and undemocratic. Like the protagonist Paul Proteus who shifts role in Ilium, the modern man in present times is without definite shape. They are living according to the fancies of ruling elites. "He has no true identity but changes to suit the circumstances" (Marvin 29).

Elitist theorists by introducing elites and studying their role also made better understanding of the social and political life of societies. The key concept of their research is power and he/she who has the power is the leader of society. For the elitist heredity, wealth, intellect, organizations etc. are the means to get power. Studies on elites have been one of the largest subjects in social sciences particularly in sociology and political science. This emphasis is mostly due to the roles that elites have in both developed and developing societies. In the whole world, this organized minority groups, whether corporate, bankers or any other economically superior ones, have inevitable place in their nation's political and social strata. Since there are writers and literary texts dealing with elites and oligarchic rule, the

Elite Theory propounded by Gaetano Mosca, Vilfredo Pareto and Robert Michels is applicable in literature too.

Vonnegut in *Player Piano* highlights an America of near future where the factory system has taken on control and the dangers perceived in contemporary commercial development. The novel points its attack at industrial technology, and the devotion of managers, engineers, and scientists to the machine. Vonnegut shows how such schemes would restrict ordinary people to live lives free. It is evident that the future America Vonnegut presents in the novel is not the future but his own society. Like many satirists, rather than offering a solution, Vonnegut focuses better at identifying and ridiculing a problem. "*Player Piano* ends on a pessimistic note. That may be because some problems have no solution" (Farrell 274). Vonnegut finds war and industrialization as the main source for the rise of elitism. The third world war made the government to give elites a way to register their power on Ilium. By the process of automation they simultaneously controlled factories and government.

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