

# Pareto's Theory of Elites: Circulation or Circularity?

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**RESUMEN:** We argue that Pareto's sociology is inseparable from his economics, with special attention to his celebrated theory of elites. His theory of monopolistic markets requires extra-economic factors to be determinate, hence necessitates a sociological theory of elites. His general sociological theory of elites is shown to be vacuous, since the class of elites is found to be coextensive with the total population. This theory is meaningful only for economic elites in non-competitive markets

**PALABRAS CLAVE:**

- Elite theory
- general sociology
- monopolistic markets
- *petitio principii*
- Vilfredo Pareto

## Teoría de las Élites de Pareto: ¿Circulación o Circularidad?

**ABSTRACT:** La sociología de Pareto es inseparable de su perspectiva económica, en especial su célebre teoría de las élites. Su teoría de los mercados monopólicos requiere factores extra-económicos, por lo tanto, construyó una teoría sociológica de las élites. Aquí se demuestra que su teoría sociológica general de las élites es vacua, ya que la clase de las elites es co-extensiva respecto de la población total. Esta teoría es significativa sólo para las élites económicas en mercados no competitivos.

**KEYWORDS:**

- teoría de las élites
- sociología general
- mercados monopólicos
- *petitio principii*
- Vilfredo Pareto

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## Introduction

This essay addresses the relationship between sociology and economics within Pareto's social theory, in particular how that relation bears on his theory of elites. Ours is not an interdisciplinary study – our concern is neither with what is called socio-economics nor with economic sociology. In an important sense, both of those interdisciplinary studies presuppose the established relationship between sociology proper and economics proper. We begin by considering several possible relationships between the disciplines.

## The Relation Between Sociology and Economics

The relationship between a social theorist's economics and his sociology has been frequently remarked. Sometimes the relationship is understood as succession, as in the case of Charles Horton Cooley, Vilfredo Pareto or Talcott Parsons. Initially the theorist engages in economic research, publishes economic studies, etc. and later shifts his attention to sociological topics as he comes to recognize the limitations of economics. Cooley, for instance, conducted research on the economics of transportation for the US Bureau of Census, and published his *Theory of Transportation* under the auspices of the American Economic Association;<sup>1</sup> only later did he publish his *Social Organization* (1909) and other properly sociological studies. Likewise Pareto lectured on economics at Lausanne, published his *Manuel d'économie*

*politique* in 1909,<sup>2</sup> and then published his *Traité de Sociologie générale* in 1917.<sup>3</sup> Parsons began his academic career as an assistant professor in the Economics Department at Harvard, and his early articles appeared in such economic journals as *The Journal of Political Economy* and the *Quarterly Journal of Economics*. Almost a decade later, he closed his *Structure of Social Action* by acknowledging that an economic analysis was inherently inadequate. "Any atomistic system that deals only with the properties identifiable in the unit act [such as that of the economists, will be] indeterminate as applied to complex systems".<sup>4</sup> Thereupon Parsons began the fully sociological researches which would eventuate in *The Social System*,<sup>5</sup> and he began to publish in such sociological journals as the *American Sociological Review*. It was in *The Social System* that Parsons recognized that for the analysis of those more complex social systems; "it is convenient to make use of a higher-order unit than the [unit] act, namely the status-role".<sup>6</sup> Thus we find the theorist's economic phase being succeeded by the sociological phase of his career.

But the relationship between the theorist's economics and sociology frequently proves to be much more complex than simple succession. Max Weber, to cite another instance, also began his academic career as an economist; he later focussed his energies on the emerging discipline of sociology. Throughout Weber's work, however, there is a complex interconnectedness of Weber's economics and his sociology. In his *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*, he distinguishes four types of social action: instrumentally rational, value rational, affectual, and traditional action.<sup>7</sup> At first glance, all these types seem to be independent.<sup>8</sup> Of these types, instrumental rationality would seem to be the economic type, while the others would seem to be various non-economic types of social action. But Weber does not preserve the independence of the types in his theorizing; this leads to an interdependence between the types whereby the relationship between the sociological and the economic becomes impossibly complex.

For instance, Weber maintains that all affectual action can be scientifically considered as merely *deviations* from a "pure type of rational action".<sup>9</sup> Finally, the universal tendency to "rationalization" finds traditional action replaced throughout the social system by rational action.<sup>10</sup> But the rational types – even if they are ultimately to prevail – are not themselves homogeneously economic types for Weber. From the standpoint of instrumentally rational action, value rational action is, according to Weber, "always irrational".<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, instrumentally rational action itself is not homogeneously economic – because the instrumental meaning of the action may be "purely technical" for Weber – and he distinguishes technical questions from economic questions.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Charles Cooley, *The Theory of Transportation*, vol. 9, Publications of the American Economic Association, 1894.

<sup>2</sup> Vilfredo Pareto, *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. VII, Librairie Droz, Geneva, 1964, ff.

<sup>3</sup> *Op. cit.*, vol. XII; Raymond Aron, *Main Currents in Sociological Thought*, Vol. II, Doubleday Anchor, Garden City, NY, 1970, p. 124; H. Stuart Hughes, *Consciousness and Society*, Random House Vintage, NY, 1961, p. 261; Elena Osipova, "The Sociological System of Vilfredo Pareto", in Igor Kon (ed.), *A History of Classical Sociology*, Chap. 12, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1989, p. 312.

<sup>4</sup> Talcott Parsons, *The Structure of Social Action*, McGraw Hill, NY, 1937, pp. 748-749.

<sup>5</sup> Talcott Parsons, *The Social System*, Free Press, NY, 1951.

<sup>6</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 25. See also Ralph Turner, "Role Taking", in A. Rose (ed.), *Human Behavior and Social Process*, Houghton Mifflin, Boston, 1962, p. 24.

<sup>7</sup> Max Weber, *Economy and Society*, NY: Bedminster Press, pp. 24-25.

<sup>8</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 26.

<sup>9</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 6; see also Talcott Parsons, *op. cit.*, 1937, p. 648.

<sup>10</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 30.

<sup>11</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 26.

<sup>12</sup> *Op. cit.*, pp. 65-66.

Weber explicitly does not intend that all social action is economic action and vice versa. Indeed, he cautions us that economic action needs not be social,<sup>13</sup> and that social action needs not be economic action – since the latter must, in its “main impulse,” be oriented towards economic ends.<sup>14</sup> Still, Weber continues, “every type of action may be economically oriented” – which includes “all primarily non-economic action and all non-peaceful action which is still influenced by economic considerations”.<sup>15</sup>

Thus we realize that one risks seriously misunderstanding the social theorist if one seeks to separate Weber's sociological analysis from his economics – that of the late Nineteenth Century neo-classical marginal utility school.

### The Relationship Between Sociology and Economics for Pareto

The same point must be made about Vilfredo Pareto's economics and sociology. His sociological theorizing must be viewed, not only as succeeding his economic studies, which it clearly did, but as remaining intimately intertwined with his political economics – indeed as being inextricably interrelated.<sup>16</sup> We shall argue that point in this essay. Thus the title: we are as concerned to consider whether Pareto's theorizing about elites is importantly and even fundamentally circular, as we are to consider whether it entails a “circulation of elites”. By circular, we mean that Pareto assumes in the premises of his argument (e.g. about the elite) what he seeks to establish in his conclusion – he commits the logical fallacy of *petitio principii* on a grand scale. And we are concerned to show that it was the exigences of Pareto's political economy which led to the circularity of his theorizing about elites. Since Pareto's theory of elites is the centerpiece of his sociology,<sup>17</sup> we will find that this cannot be separated from his economics.

According to Pareto, humans are primarily acquisitive beings. They express their “interests” as they enhance their means to appropriate services and, most importantly, material goods.<sup>18</sup> Further, they express their “tastes” as they choose this particular material good over that particular good.<sup>19</sup> Of course Pareto recognized that humans did not always pursue material goods through “logical” action, i.e. employing means appropriate to the ends.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, during Pareto's lifetime his theorizing increasingly acknowledged that humans engaged in what he labeled “non-logical” action, where means were not “linked” to the desired end.<sup>21</sup> He contrasted this to the “logical” action involved in the pursuit of material goods. As John Scott has pointed out, these two are the “building blocks of his social theories; “logical” actions are strategic or instrumental, while “non-logical” actions are expressive or committed”.<sup>22</sup> For Pareto, this non-logical action – not to be confused with illogical

action – was not related to logical action in Weberian fashion as deviations related to a norm.<sup>23</sup> The two types were clearly independent for Pareto.<sup>24</sup>

Pareto's greatest works, the *Manuel* and the *Treatise*, recognize this bifurcation and in fact represent somewhat of a division of labor reflecting that bifurcation.<sup>25</sup> The *Manuel* indicates its “principal object” is the study of logical action.<sup>26</sup> The *Treatise*, by contrast, suggests that it will focus on non-logical action,<sup>27</sup> and devotes little space to logical action.<sup>28</sup> This division of labor traces out the development of Pareto's theorizing, as we have already noted.

This bifurcation could not, however, be left as it was, because the theoretical implication would be that all humans – whether in the sphere of the individual or that of the collectivity – were profoundly schizophrenic. Regardless of Pareto's cynicism – and he was renowned for his caustic view of human affairs – he still supposed that the human mind, whether individual<sup>29</sup> or in collective settings,<sup>30</sup> tended towards intrapersonal integrity.<sup>31</sup>

Pareto was methodologically a radical positivist. He held that the premises of a theory were tentative, subject to empirical (what he called “experimental and observational”) testing.<sup>32</sup> But he held that logic

<sup>13</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 22.

<sup>14</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 63.

<sup>15</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 64.

<sup>16</sup> Charles Powers, “Sociopolitical Determinants of Economic Cycles”, in *Social Science Quarterly*, Vol. 65, 1984.

<sup>17</sup> H. Stuart Hughes, *op. cit.*, p. 268.

<sup>18</sup> Vilfredo Pareto, *op. cit.*, vol. XII, § 2009.

<sup>19</sup> Harry Bredemeier, “Exchange Theory”, in T. Bottomore and R. Nisbet (eds.), *History of Sociological Analysis*, Basic Books, NY, 1978, p. 428.

<sup>20</sup> Vilfredo Pareto, *op. cit.*, vol. VII, p. 50.

<sup>21</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 41.

<sup>22</sup> John Scott, “Pareto and the Elite”, in J. Femia and A. Marshall (eds.), *Vilfredo Pareto: Beyond Disciplinary Boundaries*, Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2012, p.13.

<sup>23</sup> Vilfredo Pareto, *op. cit.*, vol. XII, § 146.

<sup>24</sup> Talcott Parsons, *op. cit.*, 1937, p. 201 ff.

<sup>25</sup> Raymond Aron, *op. cit.*, p. 124.

<sup>26</sup> Vilfredo Pareto, *op. cit.*, vol. VII, p. 51.

<sup>27</sup> *Op. cit.*, vol. XII, §§ 249-252.

<sup>28</sup> *Op. cit.*, vol. XII, § 2010.

<sup>29</sup> *Op. cit.*, vol. VII, p. 75.

<sup>30</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 85.

<sup>31</sup> His comment that “a person can as it were divide himself in two” is a reference to a self-conscious methodological tactic, not a pathological state. Vilfredo Pareto, *op. cit.*, vol. XII, § 142.

<sup>32</sup> *Op. cit.*, vol. XII, § 4.

itself was empirical.<sup>33</sup> Thus “relationships should be inferred directly from facts”.<sup>34</sup> And finally, theoretical conclusions are tentative, also subject to empirical testing. While the tentative and empirical nature of premises and conclusions of theory are unexceptional from the standpoint of conventional positivism and the “hypothetico-deductive approach,” the supposition that logic too is tentative—that logic is “subordinate to experience”—places Pareto outside the methodological orthodoxy of logical positivism.<sup>35</sup>

This is not to say that Pareto should be judged by the methodological canon which largely emerged after his time, nor is this to say that the orthodoxy of logical positivism is to be uncritically recommended.<sup>36</sup> But we acknowledge that Pareto’s radical positivism leads to methodological problems. In particular, attempts at the disconfirmation of a theory may be confounded by the conundrum that one faces when one must select between the rejection of the “facts” versus the rejection of the “logic.”

Moreover, Pareto was a methodological individualist.<sup>37</sup> Hence, what was required in the first place was the appearance of intrapersonal integrity across the realms of logical and non-logical action. Thereafter, Pareto could turn his attention to the sphere of the collectivity and to issues of interpersonal integration.

Integrity in the intrapersonal sphere is easily demonstrated, according to Pareto, for several reasons. First, the sense of individual integrity “is among the most powerful sentiments human beings have. It is founded,” continues

Pareto, “in the instinct of self-preservation”.<sup>38</sup> It should be mentioned that this casual, almost dilettantish, use of the term *instinct* had come under severe critique during the second decade of the Twentieth Century.<sup>39</sup> There is a second reason. The defense of one’s current possessions and the acquisition of further possessions tend to merge, holds Pareto, as expressions of one’s “interests”. Moreover, the expression of one’s interests and the development of personality likewise tend to merge. Hence “interests” and integrity (i.e. what Pareto would call Class V Residues) tend to merge as well.<sup>40</sup>

And there is a third reason, involving the distinction that Pareto drew between residues and derivations. Within the realm of non-logical action, there are relatively constant and basic motives of action, which Pareto labeled “residues,” and there are relatively variable motives, which he labeled “derivations.” The latter served as rationalizations of the non-logical and even instinctual “residues” of non-logical action. Even if a given “residue” were incompatible with the pursuit of material goods, there were nonetheless, according to Pareto, “derivations” that made it appear compatible.<sup>41</sup> Thereby non-logical action in the intrapersonal sphere was given the semblance of rationality, hence consistency with logical action. All of this gave the appearance of personal integrity. Little wonder Pareto is frequently classified together with other irrationalist and ‘post-modernist’ psychologists: Nietzsche, Freud, etc.<sup>42</sup>

## The Problem of Interpersonal Integration

Pareto’s argument proceeded along a different route with reference to the problem of interpersonal integration or social consistency. As Parsons put it, “the total complex [in society] does not constitute a single controlling agency as in the case with the individual”.<sup>43</sup> Reflecting the prejudice of late Nineteenth Century neo-classical economic doctrine known as “Say’s Law”, Pareto held that joint logical action of peers tended towards an equilibrium. For example, the competitive market for bread and wine tends to clear at some determinate level of quantity and rate of exchange.<sup>44</sup> But Pareto could provide no like assurance that non-logical action between individuals or groups would tend to a stable resolution. And since non-logical action was not a residual of logical action, he could not assume that erroneous behavior was randomly distributed and would tend, at the limit, to coincide with rational (“logical”) action.

There are three possibilities here. First, in the case where non-logical action was guided by instinct, Pareto made grudging recourse to “the Darwinian solution,” concluding that “people have instincts more or less adapted to their modes of life”.<sup>45</sup> Regarding natural processes,

<sup>33</sup> *Op. cit.*, vol. VII, p. 29, note.

<sup>34</sup> Vilfredo Pareto, *op. cit.*, vol. XII, § 4.

<sup>35</sup> Morris Cohen, *Reason and Nature*, Free Press, NY, 1953, p. 343.

<sup>36</sup> András Gedő, *Crisis Consciousness in Contemporary Philosophy*, Chap. 2, MEP Press, Minneapolis, 1982.

<sup>37</sup> Vilfredo Pareto, *op. cit.*, vol. XII, § 65; See also Steven Lukes, *Individualism*, Harper and Row, NY, 1973, p. 112.

<sup>38</sup> Vilfredo Pareto, *op. cit.*, vol. XII, § 1240.

<sup>39</sup> See Luther Bernard, “Misuse of Instinct in the Social Sciences”, in *Psychological Review*, Vol. 28, 1921, pp. 96-119. And Zing Kuo, “Giving up Instincts in Psychology”, in *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 18, 1921, pp. 645-664.

<sup>40</sup> Vilfredo Pareto, *op. cit.*, vol. XII, § 1207.

<sup>41</sup> *Op. cit.*, vol. XII, §§ 1737-8. See also vol. VII, p. 468.

<sup>42</sup> H. Stuart Hughes, *op. cit.*, p. 262; Lewis Mumford, *The Condition of Man*, Harcourt, Brace, NY, 1944; on “irrationalism”, see György Lukács, *El asalto a la razón*, Barcelona: Grijalbo, 1968.

<sup>43</sup> Talcott Parsons, *op. cit.*, 1937, p. 236.

<sup>44</sup> Vilfredo Pareto, *op. cit.*, vol. VII, p. 168-17; vol. XII, § 2069.

<sup>45</sup> *Op. cit.*, vol. XII, § 1770; §§ 2141-2142.



Pareto wholeheartedly endorsed the Darwinian analysis, even supposing this validated human warfare<sup>46</sup> –although warfare is a cultural practice rather than heritable. But he only equivocally endorsed natural selection as it pertained to social processes.<sup>47</sup> In that case, he held that one typically is in error because one regards the adaptation as perfect.<sup>48</sup> Notice that it isn't the non-logical action that assures the stable resolution of joint action; it is the guidance provided by instincts –i.e. the domain of nature– and then only approximately.

Second, in the non-competitive (monopolistic) market, a few traders act according to what Pareto called “type II considerations”, while the vast majority of the traders act according to “type I considerations”. Type I is the set of considerations that accepts the conditions of the market (rates of exchange and other norms) as given. Traders who act according to type I considerations are *price takers*. Type II is the set of considerations that would modify market conditions for one's own purposes.<sup>49</sup> Traders who act on these considerations are *price makers*.<sup>50</sup> Pareto introduced the distinction between types I and II considerations in his *Cours* in 1896. He indicated in his subsequent works that the distinction had much more generality.<sup>51</sup>

It follows directly from Pareto's definition of the bifurcated kinds of action that *All traders acting in a non-competitive market according to type I considerations are engaging in non-logical action*.<sup>52</sup> This kind of market can reach a stable resolution, but it depends upon the monopolists (or the monopsonists, for that matter) retaining their extra-market domination over the majority of the traders, viz. those acting according to type I considerations.<sup>53</sup> Again, it is not the non-logical action that leads to resolution; contrary to the fantasies of the neo-liberals, it is the *hegemony* that the monopolists' logical action exercises over the other traders' non-logical action. Thus it is the exigence of Pareto's theory of markets that calls for a theory of elites, whereby monopolistic markets can be deterministically treated.

And this possibility can be generalized.<sup>54</sup> Thirdly, then, the non-logical action of one individual or group tends to be dominated by that of another. Thus human interaction in the sphere of logical behavior tends to be egalitarian and even pacific. Traders in competitive markets tend to be peers, according to Pareto. The outcome of logical action tends to be evolutionary.<sup>55</sup> Interaction in the sphere of non-logical action, by contrast, tends to be hierarchical and unstable. Any persons who act outside of competitive markets – that is, the vast majority of humans for most of their lives – tend to be either *elites* or else *subordinates*. The outcome of non-logical action tends toward violent and episodic resolution, leading to a perpetual “circulation of elites”.<sup>56</sup> To the extent there is resolution, there will also tend to be revolution.

There is a dialectical complementarity that exists between these realms of action, of course. The evolutionary development precipitated by logical action forever transforms the social system, whereupon Pareto concludes that “history does not repeat itself”.<sup>57</sup> But the revolutionary change brought about by non-logical contestations inevitably results in the perpetuation of elites of one sort or another.<sup>58</sup> As Pareto stated “it is always an oligarchy which governs”.<sup>59</sup>

## Pareto's Definition of “Elite”

There is an intriguing equivocation in Pareto's theory of elites, however, an equivocation that may perhaps prove fatal. For ambiguity and equivocation, Pareto tells us – while the essence of everyday discourse – are deadly in social theorizing.<sup>60</sup>

Pareto begins by providing a definition of the concept of *elite*. In his early writings on elites, for example in his *Cours* of 1896-1897, Pareto observed the difficulties of defining the term “aristocracy” (i.e. what he would call the “elite”), and linking this group to the ruling class.<sup>61</sup> A few years later, in *Les Systèmes socialistes*, he acknowledged that the holders of influence and political and social power tend to be the holders of great wealth as well. And, Pareto continued, “these classes make up an elite, an

<sup>46</sup> *Op. cit.*, vol. VII, p. 424.

<sup>47</sup> *Op. cit.*, vol. VII, p. 132 ff; Talcott Parsons, *op. cit.*, 1937, p. 219 ff.

<sup>48</sup> Vilfredo Pareto, *op. cit.*, vol. XII, § 1770; vol. VII, p. 97.

<sup>49</sup> *Op. cit.*, vol. I, § 46 and §§ 140 ff; vol. VII, pp. 163-164 and vol. VII, pp. 431-434.

<sup>50</sup> In the theory of social roles, these Paretian types of considerations would be understood in terms of *role-taking* (type I) and *role-making* (type II); Ralph Turner, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

<sup>51</sup> Vilfredo Pareto, *op. cit.*, vol. VII, p. 486.

<sup>52</sup> *Op. cit.*, vol. I, § 149; Pareto makes the following point about “restrictive measures” such as monopolistic practices: “this matter properly belongs to the theory of non-logical actions”. Vilfredo Pareto, *op. cit.*, vol. VII, p. 505; Geraint Parry, *Political Elites*, ECPR Press, 2005, pp. 40-41.

<sup>53</sup> Talcott Parsons, *op. cit.*, 1937, p. 235.

<sup>54</sup> Vilfredo Pareto, *op. cit.*, vol. VII, p. 484-486.

<sup>55</sup> *Op. cit.*, vol. XII, §§ 2392-3.

<sup>56</sup> *Op. cit.*, vol. XII, §§ 2056-7; vol. VII, pp. 428-429.

<sup>57</sup> *Op. cit.*, vol. XII, § 2553.

<sup>58</sup> *Op. cit.*, vol. XII, §§ 1153; *op. cit.*, vol. XII, pp. 2178-9.

<sup>59</sup> *Op. cit.*, vol. XII, § 2183; *op. cit.*, vol. VII, pp. 129, 380, 423-425.

<sup>60</sup> *Op. cit.*, vol. XII, §§ 69, 108, 115.

<sup>61</sup> *Op. cit.*, vol. I, §996, 1001; *op. cit.*, vol. VII, p. 168 on “capacities”.

*aristocracy*".<sup>62</sup> But he was worried that a definition of "elite" or of "aristocracy" would be merely etymological, a dictionary definition rather than a theoretical definition<sup>63</sup> – and he questioned whether such an approach was truly scientific, or rather indicative of the proto-scientific stage of intellectual development in the social sciences.<sup>64</sup> Indeed, in his early writings on elites, he merely *assumed* that elites have "power" and "honor," that elites always govern, etc. That may have been acceptable insofar as Pareto's topic in these early writings was a description of the *circulation of elites*, not the theorization of elites *per se*. But this was surely less acceptable when the topic of elites was to be theorized in a general sociology.

Indeed, Pareto characterizes the conceptualization of "elite" given in his *Treatise* as an "exact theoretical definition." He proposes that each individual should be given a set of indices that range between zero and ten, that represent his or her abilities in "every branch of human activity".<sup>65</sup> Formally, the individual "I" will have a list of predicates

$$P_1(I), P_2(I), P_3(I), \dots P_n(I),$$

with each predicate being an index of ability such that

$$0 \leq P_j \leq 10.$$

Pareto continues that a *proper subset* of the set of all humans can then be constructed that includes every

individual who has been rated as 'ten' in some branch of activity, and the members of that subset will be named the "elite".<sup>66</sup> It is characteristic of a proper subset that some individuals will *not* be included in that subset.

There are two key questions that must be addressed at this point. First, are the indices included in the list of predicates taken to be additively or multiplicatively related? If they are assumed to be additive, then low ratings on most indices and a high rating on one or a few indices will ensure a high ranking. If they are assumed to be multiplicative, then only high ratings on many indices will ensure a high rank.<sup>67</sup> Evidently Pareto has opted for the additive assumption, but gives no theoretical argument for his position.

A second key question remains. How many "branches of human activity" are there, according to Pareto? In his terms, to each of these 'branches' – such as the legal profession, prostitution, chess, etc., and these are Pareto's examples – there corresponds a "social group" – such as lawyers, prostitutes, chess players, etc.<sup>68</sup> Formally, how many predicates pertain to each individual; how large is  $n$ ?

Pareto has already provided an answer to this question. He acknowledges that "it is impossible fully to treat the diversity of the multitude of social groups" that moreover interact in "numberless fashions".<sup>69</sup> In somewhat more formal terms, where:

$$n = \text{the number of groups, } n \rightarrow \infty$$

Pareto proposed to "reduce as much as possible the numbers of groups." Likewise he had proposed to place together "those phenomena that seem to be similar in some fashion".<sup>70</sup> But he nowhere indicates how this 'reduction' is to be accomplished in a theoretically appropriate way,<sup>71</sup> other than to acknowledge, in one of his characteristically lengthy footnotes, that "it is necessary to have an idea of the quantitative effect of influences [upon a given phenomenon] and then go on to consider particularly those elements whose influence is considerable".<sup>72</sup> He nowhere indicates how these "influences" are to be assessed or to have their relative significance determined.<sup>73</sup>

On the one hand, the number of social groups might be reduced by some process of random selection, although Pareto does not seem to advocate such a sampling procedure. On the other hand, a systemic criterion might be employed – in which case that criterion must be theorized.

Such a criterion might be Talcott Parson's notion of a social system's "functional prerequisites," that prescribe the "strategic structural significance" of certain roles and groups – and presumably the insignificance of others.<sup>74</sup> Another criterion might be phenomenologically established, as in Kuhn and McPartland's distinction between *consensual*

<sup>62</sup> *Op. cit.*, vol. VI, p. 8.

<sup>63</sup> György Legényel, "Notes on the 'Quality of Elites'", in *Elites in Central-Eastern Europe*, Friedrich Ebert Foundation, Budapest, 2006, pp. 5-12.

<sup>64</sup> Vilfredo Pareto, *op. cit.*, vol. VII, p. 14; *op. cit.*, vol. XII, § 246.

<sup>65</sup> *Op. cit.*, vol. XII, § 2027.

<sup>66</sup> *Op. cit.*, vol. XII, § 2031.

<sup>67</sup> Kaave Svalastoga, "Social Differentiation", in R.E.L. Faris (ed.), *Handbook of Modern Sociology*, Chap. 15, Rand McNally, Chicago, 1964.

<sup>68</sup> Vilfredo Pareto, *op. cit.*, vol. VII, p. 129.

<sup>69</sup> *Op. cit.*, vol. XII, § 2025; Ralph Turner, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

<sup>70</sup> *Op. cit.*, vol. XII, § 2025.

<sup>71</sup> *Op. cit.*, vol. XII, §§ 105, pp. 147-8. See also the theorem in Turner, *op. cit.*, p. 26.

<sup>72</sup> *Op. cit.*, vol. XII, § 2025, note.

<sup>73</sup> Earlier, he had commented that *the elite* is defined by "a set of qualities [i.e. the set  $P_j$ ,  $j = 1, 2, \dots, n$ ] which favor one class' prosperity and domination in the society". Vilfredo Pareto, *op. cit.*, vol. VII, p. 129. Such a criterion would have accomplished the required subsumption – but Pareto did not pursue this lead.

<sup>74</sup> Talcott Parsons, *op. cit.*, 1951, Chap. II.

and *sub-consensual* attitudes about one's self. Among the consensual (i.e. group) references, a ranking can be observed that identifies the relatively more significant groups.<sup>75</sup> And there are of course other systemic criteria that might be theorized, and that would serve to reduce the number of social groups. But Pareto has no such criterion.

## Circularity and Vacuity

Pareto's "exact theoretical definition" is indeed *vacuous*, as we shall now show. We will first argue probabilistically that there is *no* set of elites that makes up a *proper* subset of the total population; it is likely that *every* individual is a member of the elite subset, as defined. Then we will argue on other grounds that *no* individual can be excluded from the elite subset, as defined. Thus Pareto's theory equivocates between "population" and "elite". The conclusion will be that Pareto's formulation is vacuous, because *the set of elites is the same as the total population*.

First, consider constructing the elite subset. We will proceed probabilistically; that accords with Pareto's own method.<sup>76</sup> As Mayhew and Schollaert have correctly pointed out about Pareto's theory of elites, his "statements were probabilistic generalizations".<sup>77</sup> For each individual, the task is to proceed through the list of predicates ( $P_1, P_2, P_3, \dots$ ) until an index of that individual's ability with a value of "ten" is encountered, whereupon that individual is to be included in the elite subset. Let us assume that some if not all human abilities are independently and stochastically distributed; such an assumption would seem to accord with Pareto's belief in "social heterogeneity".<sup>78</sup> Under such assumptions, the likelihood approaches unity that every individual has *at least one* index of ability with value "ten", as the number of predicates becomes "numberless," i.e. as  $n \rightarrow \infty$ . Hence it is very likely that *no* set of elites exists as a *proper* subset of the population, in Pareto's terms.

Now an elitist like the ancient Greek elegist Theognis could reply that *no* human capacities are independent and stochastically distributed, that their distribution is instead correlated so that an individual who ranks highly on index  $j$  also tends to rank highly on index  $k$ . Under such conditions, it would be very likely that a set of elites *would* exist as a proper subset of the population. On the one hand, however, it is not possible to correlate a "numberless" set of indices. On the other hand, and more telling, Pareto explicitly denied such a correlation: "The same individuals do not occupy the same positions" in terms of different predicates.<sup>79</sup> Hence, it is highly probable on Pareto's own terms that *every* individual is a member of the "elite" in some branch of human activity or other. Thus the truth of Mayhew and Schollaert's qualification that their conception

of an "economic elite" cannot be generalized to Pareto's theory of elites.<sup>80</sup> They deduce that an "economic elite" – that is an elite in terms of income or wealth – will tend to be a minority in a given population; on Pareto's own argument, by contrast, an *elite in general* will constitute the majority if not the totality of a population.

Let us now turn to a second consideration. Suppose (contrary to Pareto) that the indices of capacity *are* correlated. Then the process of moving through the list of predicates for each individual will include some persons in the elite subset while others will remain excluded. In a society such as the United States with its proliferation of voluntary associations, these very individuals who tend to be excluded are candidates for membership in "counter-groups" such as the Losers Club, the Procrastinators Club, the Yuffies [Young Urban Failures], the Dorks, etc. Indeed, these social groups must also be "vastly numerous". Such groups and the (counter-) capacities they represent must be included in our deliberations, since Pareto has explicitly set aside any considerations of the morality, utility, or other merits of the abilities under examination.<sup>81</sup>

Given the assumed correlation of the indices of abilities, precisely those individuals who had been hitherto excluded from the elite subset will tend to have at least one index of "counter capacity" with value "ten". But these individuals will thereby be no less "elite," in Pareto's terms.<sup>82</sup> They will be accomplished in the futility of their existence.

<sup>75</sup> Manford Kuhn and T. S. McPartland, "An Empirical Investigation of Self-Attitudes", *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 19, 1954.

<sup>76</sup> Vilfredo Pareto, *op. cit.*, vol. XII, §§ 69, 97, 2074.

<sup>77</sup> It is evident that Pareto's is a *frequency* (*a posteriori* or empiricist) conception of probability, while Mayhew and Schollaert's is a *logical* (or *a priori*) conception. Mayhew and P. Schollaert, "Social Morphology of Pareto's Economic Elite", in *Social Forces*, Vol. 51, 1980, p. 25. Their equivocation appears to violate Hempel's principle of *syntactical determinacy*. Carl Hempel, "Fundamentals of Concept Formation in Empirical Science", in O. Neurath (ed.) *International Encyclopedia of Unified Science*, University of Chicago Press, Vol. II, No. 7, Chicago, 1952. See Carl Hempel, *op. cit.*, pp. 12-14. In particular, what they call the "Pareto elite" (P) would more correctly be called the "Mayhew-Schollaert elite", "based, as they correctly observe, on "ecological" considerations. Bruce Mayhew and P. Schollaert, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

<sup>78</sup> Vilfredo Pareto, *op. cit.*, vol. XII, § 2025.

<sup>79</sup> *Op. cit.*, vol. V[i], p. 8.

<sup>80</sup> Bruce Mayhew and P. Schollaert, *op. cit.*, p. 41.

<sup>81</sup> Vilfredo Pareto, *op. cit.*, vol XII, § 2026; see also Turner on the difference between a "leader" and a "dissenter". Ralph Turner, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

<sup>82</sup> Recall the case of Vaclav Havel, the "dissident playwright" who emerged from jail in 1989 to become the President of Czechoslovakia in 1990.

Hence we conclude that *no* individual will be excluded from the elite subset; that subset cannot be a *proper* subset of the total population; Pareto's formulation is vacuous. In terms of his theorizing, this means that the characteristics of the *elite* cannot be deduced within Pareto's theoretical framework.<sup>83</sup> Those characteristics – e.g. that elites always rule, that elites circulate, etc. – must otherwise be inserted into the premises of Pareto's theoretical argument. And that is the fallacy of *petitio principii*. Since every population tends in its entirety to be an elite, these propositions about elites become trivially true.

### From “Elite” to “Governors”

As Pareto continues, he further divides the elite into two groups: a *governmental* elite and a *non-governmental* elite.<sup>84</sup> This distinction might not in itself be vacuous, even if the elite set is the same as the population, insofar as the proposed distinction would actually divide the entire population into two strata. But Pareto merely indicates that the governmental elite “directly or indirectly plays a notable role in government,” while the other stratum doesn't. That is a tautology: those who govern play a part in government, and those who don't, don't.<sup>85</sup> There is no attempt to theorize the relationship between indices of ability ( $P_j$ ) and membership in the governmental elite.<sup>86</sup>

In fact, Pareto had earlier pointed out that “those who govern, *whether being low or high on the scale*, [...differ from...] those who are governed”.<sup>87</sup> The term *scale* (*échelle*)

apparently places “into the higher places those who possess these qualities [of governor] in the highest degree, and into lower places those who possess [the] qualities only in a slight degree”,<sup>88</sup> which is to say there is a “non-elite” among Pareto's own “governmental elite”. He continues “countless circumstances can place men who have the same qualities of intelligence and character differently in the social hierarchy”.<sup>89</sup>

Then he shifts his discussion from that of the “scientific analysis” of indices, etc. to the folk-wisdom of “certain labels [*etiquettes*] which replace indices more or less adequately”.<sup>90</sup> He sets aside his own strictures against ambiguity.<sup>91</sup> In these folk terms, he points out that the *achieved status* of some elite members must be distinguished from the ascribed status of others.<sup>92</sup> An elite contains various proportions of achieved- versus ascribed-status members, and an elite with a *higher* proportion of ascribed-status members is less stable.<sup>93</sup> Hence the relative proportions have revolutionary implications, according to Pareto.

As we reflect back through this chain of reasoning, however, we cannot fail to observe that if the indices are “numberless,” then the “labels” should be expected to be no less numerous. By the same argument we advanced above, it is highly probable that every individual who bears an “hereditary label” will be a member of some achieved-status elite as well. And *vice versa*, for that matter. Hence Pareto's discussion of the ‘achieved status’ of some elite versus the ‘ascribed status’ of others only serves to acknowledge the complications that render the task of theorizing the “governmental elite” (or “governmental non-elite,” as the case may be) more difficult.<sup>94</sup>

Most likely, Pareto has introduced his distinction between elites of achieved-status versus those of ascribed-status in order ultimately to explain the circulation of elites.<sup>95</sup> But vacuity does not make for an explanation. Thereafter he discards the distinction between governing and non-governmental elites in favor of a simple bifurcation of society into a “higher stratum, which usually contains the governors,” and a “lower stratum, which usually contains the governed.” And this final bifurcation is not theorized at all, Pareto merely claiming that this “is a fact which is obvious to the most casual observation”.<sup>96</sup> Of course we must ask Why do science at all? if this is so obvious. As Runciman has put it “does it amount to very much?”<sup>97</sup>

### Conclusion

At this point, we are confronted with two alternatives regarding Pareto's theory of elites. First, we can acknowledge that this theory is not vacuous insofar as it pertains

<sup>83</sup> As Dahrendorf has pointed out, the characteristics of the non-elite cannot be ascertained either. Ralph Dahrendorf, *Class and Class Conflict in Industrial Society*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1959, p. 199.

<sup>84</sup> Vilfredo Pareto, *op. cit.*, vol. XII, § 2032.

<sup>85</sup> W. G. Runciman, *Social Science and Political Theory*, Cambridge, University Press, Cambridge, 1969, p. 69.

<sup>86</sup> Vilfredo Pareto, *op. cit.*, vol. XII, § 2033.

<sup>87</sup> *Op. cit.*, vol. VII, p. 73; emphasis added.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>89</sup> *Op. cit.*, vol. VII, p. 74.

<sup>90</sup> *Op. cit.*, vol. XII, § 2035.

<sup>91</sup> *Op. cit.*, vol. XII, § 69. etc.

<sup>92</sup> *Op. cit.*, vol. XII, §§ 2036 2037.

<sup>93</sup> *Op. cit.*, vol. XII, § 2040.

<sup>94</sup> *Op. cit.*, vol. XII, §§ 2035-6.

<sup>95</sup> *Op. cit.*, vol. XII, § 2042.

<sup>96</sup> *Op. cit.*, vol. XII, § 2047.

<sup>97</sup> W. G. Runciman, *op. cit.*, p. 69.



to types of economic markets; in other words, Pareto's theory of elites is simply a theory of *economic* elites. It characterizes the relationship between monopolists and other traders under type II market considerations. But this is a severely restricted theory, both in time and space. Such a theory pertains to very little of human history, since most humans lived in pre-capitalist, and even pre-commercial, societies. Also, such a theory would focus attention on an "economic basis" of societal processes, which is a concession many sociologists would not approve.<sup>98</sup> In any case, the theory of markets necessitates a theory of elites; Pareto's economics cannot be separated from his sociology.

Second, we can acknowledge that this theory is *vacuous* insofar as it pertains to the general social system; it has the appearance of substance *only* insofar as it is *circular*. Pareto characterizes the place of elites in human history only by *assuming* the nature and role of elites in

his theoretical premises. Of course such a theory may yet have considerable ideological or polemical weight. Consider an illustration. No less an authority than the political scientist, Alfred Meyer, has reminded us that "most studies of the Communist world [have] described Communist states in the crudest Paretian terms as the rule of self-appointed elites striving to perpetuate themselves and structuring the entire system to this purpose".<sup>99</sup> The events of 1989 have perhaps disconfirmed such crude theorizing of which Meyer complains. But it was Pareto himself who flailed out against pseudo-scientific explanations in his *Treatise*.

Regardless of which alternative we choose, it should be evident that – as in the case of Weber, so in the case of Pareto – that it is not possible to separate this social theorist's sociology from his economics, without seriously misrepresenting him and his theory of elites.

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<sup>98</sup> Charles Powers, "Sociopolitical Determinants of Economic Cycles", in *Social Science Quarterly*, Vol. 65, 1984, p. 989.

<sup>99</sup> Alfred Meyer, "The Comparative Study of Communist Political Systems", in *Slavic Review*, Vol. 26, 1967, p. 27.

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