Democratic Elitism: The Founding Myth of American Political Science. By Natasha Piano. Harvard University Press, 2025. xi; 256 pp. $39.95.

The history of political science is the history of its gradual disentanglement from neighboring disciplines such as history and law, in favor of a more empirical and, as was hoped in the 1950s and 1960s, unified approach to the study of politics. Yet this trajectory varied dramatically across countries, as did the focus of research, as the questions being asked—and the phenomena being studied—shifted in response to the interests, sensibilities, and necessities of different national contexts.

Quite surprisingly, in the United States during the second postwar period, a group of Italian (and German) scholars attracted the attention of American political theorists. These thinkers were seen as both foundational to a distinct empirical turn in political science and as representatives of a theoretical framework—*elitism*—that, even when contested, proved critical for the analysis of democratic systems. This group includes Gaetano Mosca, Vilfredo Pareto, Robert Michels, and, to a different extent, the Austrian Joseph Schumpeter. Pareto and Schumpeter are well-known figures in the history of economics, and their contributions to sociological and political theory are widely recognized (though Pareto's *Trattato di sociologia generale* may be seldom read today, Schumpeter's *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy* certainly remains influential). Mosca and Michels are perhaps less familiar names, despite the fact that—particularly in Mosca's case—connections to contemporary economic research existed (Mosca was, in fact, a participant in the renowned political economy seminar of Salvatore Cognetti de Martiis in Turin).

In the mainstream interpretation, these three authors—along with Schumpeter, albeit with some differences—analyzed political life as being persistently dominated by a small, ruling minority: the *Elites* (or, in Mosca's terms, *la Classe Politica*, the Ruling Class). Though the specific members of this elite may change, the structure of political authority remains concentrated. Michels's famous "Iron Law of Oligarchy" represents the most radical articulation of this view, asserting that oligarchy is an unavoidable feature of any organized society. Given this realist stance, coupled with their perceived proximity to Italian Fascism, these authors have often been associated with the antidemocratic tradition of European political thought that flourished from the late nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth. Their theories sought to displace democratic idealism by asserting that rulers, often drawn from the same social circles, would always emerge, regardless of formal institutions.

Despite this seemingly authoritarian outlook, their ideas found fertile ground in American political science, thanks to the mediation of Schumpeter's work, which provided a gateway to developing a minimal definition of democracy centered on electoral competition. This minimalist definition became a cornerstone of postwar political science.

Natasha Piano's *Democratic Elitism* boldly reinterprets this established narrative. She challenges the conventional reading by suggesting that we ought to view these thinkers not as "elite theorists of democracy" but rather as "democratic theorists of elitism" (x). This distinction is crucial: It highlights that Pareto, Mosca, and Michels

were actually addressing "plutocratic infiltration of representative government" (7) rather than promoting distrust of mass participation. As she writes, they were "methodologically driven to combat plutocracy by exposing the myth that electoral outcomes express popular sovereignty, and therefore facilitate democracy" (7). The conventional genealogy, from elite theory to modern democratic theory, is, in her view, rooted in a fundamental misunderstanding of what the Italians were really saying.

This misunderstanding, according to Piano, stems from the vastly different environments in which the original theories and their American translations emerged. Postwar American political science, shaped by the Cold War and the legacy of World War II, was more preoccupied with totalitarianism than with the structural economic inequalities that were of central concern in postunification Italy (1870–1922).

While the Italians observed the corrosive effects of elite collusion and plutocracy on liberal democracy, American scholars focused on institutional stability and the threats posed by authoritarian regimes.

Piano further grounds her reinterpretation in the Italians' pessimism regarding the future of European liberalism. To reveal the depth and complexity of this pessimism, she "propose[s] a mode of reading that focuses on . . . literary 'sensibility' or 'disposition' within a particular historical-intellectual context," namely, "to a rhetorical tone and nuance clearly detectable within a text." This should alert the reader to "such sensibilities so that one may find in texts something critical that otherwise seems dispassionate or prescriptive, as was the case with the Italians and Schumpeter; or conversely, something that seems ambivalent but should be considered resigned or sanguine" (15). American readers, she argues, failed to detect these tonal cues and thus replaced them with a complacent optimism.

This new reading opens possibilities to "conceptualize democracy as a 'people' power that must be erected through majoritarian practices—popular, anti-plutocratic, and pluralist mechanisms that are ultimately responsible for inhibiting elite collusion, thereby creating the groundwork for productive elite competition and the productive use of the representative mechanisms of good government" (188).

The first chapter of the volume is devoted to Pareto. For readers who know Pareto only through his antidemocratic positions as a "quasi-fascist" figure, this chapter compellingly analyzes his "ruthless critique of the plutocratic exploitation" (49) he observed in Italian parliamentary politics, showing how this critique intensified over time.

The second chapter focuses on Mosca. Mosca has always been considered the most conservative of the trio (even if he was the only one to actively oppose the Fascist regime in the 1920s and 1930s: Pareto died in 1923 and Michels became a strong supporter of Mussolini). Yet Piano offers an original and provocative reading. While Mosca opposed Marxism and socialism, she argues that "instead of aiming to undermine the Marxist conception of class struggle in order to encourage resignation to elite rule in electoral government," Mosca was motivated by the "desire to expose the prevalence of elite rule in electoral governments in order to stem the growth of plutocracy amid *regional* and economic inequality" (52). Born in Southern Italy, Mosca was acutely aware of the enduring underdevelopment of the South—*la Questione*

Meridionale—and the unfulfilled promises of Italian unification. The alliance between Northern industrialists and Southern landowners, he believed, perpetuated elite domination. His theory of the Ruling Class, then, can be understood as "a heuristic device that facilitates a defensive posture against the constant encroachment of elite power" (53). This also explains his opposition to suffrage expansion: Under conditions of electoral corruption, further enfranchisement could, paradoxically, undermine democracy itself (60–61).

Chapters 3 and 4 examine Michels and Schumpeter, respectively—the two authors who, in Piano's reconstruction, began corrupting Italian elitist theory by conflating democracy with elections, paving the way for American misinterpretations. However, they shared Mosca's and Pareto's pessimism about liberal institutions' ability to combat plutocracy. Schumpeter particularly lacked faith in the elites' ability to organize politics for the future (143).

The final chapter traces the reception of the Italian school (and Schumpeter's political theory) among postwar American political scientists and democratic theorists such as C. Wright Mills, Robert Dahl, Peter Bachrach, Carole Pateman, and Adam Przeworski. Piano argues that this reception, shaped by Cold War concerns and mediated by Schumpeter, gave rise to the "founding myth" of American political science: the redefinition of democracy with electoral processes.

Regarding the book's style, it should be noted that this is primarily a work of political theory rather than a comprehensive history of ideas. Readers should not expect an exhaustive biographical or historical account of the Italian authors. Rather, Piano offers an interpretive analysis—deeply contextualized, but interpretive nonetheless. For those already familiar with the figures discussed, her arguments will prove thought-provoking and challenging, even if they do not fully accept her conclusions. However, for newcomers to realist political theory or the Italian elitist school, the prose may be difficult, the arguments dense, and the terminology occasionally obscure. This is not a criticism, merely a caveat.

A few additional points are worth noting. One concerns the use of the term *plutocracy*. While the general meaning is familiar, and the term appears in the writings of the Italian theorists, its definition is only briefly treated (96). Given its centrality to the argument, a clearer articulation of what plutocracy meant for these authors, and for her, would have been helpful—especially considering how the term has entered the rhetorical arsenal of twentieth-century totalitarian regimes.

A smaller point concerns the portrayal of Pareto. Readers familiar with his work may not find his occasional support for socialist policies on social or economic issues as surprising as Piano suggests, especially given that many Italian socialists favored anticustoms and free trade policies (a thing she rightly mentions [23]). Piano correctly observes that Pareto's stance on free trade was not absolute—he supported tariffs at certain developmental stages. (His position actually seems more complex and original than Piano's interpretation suggests, though this was not her focus [Pareto 1935: secs. 2208–9].) It is less clear how this undermines his classification as a laissez-faire liberal (19). Certainly, if we caricature the nineteenth-century liberals as "severe laissez-faire types, typical of the nineteenth century, who excoriated

government intervention of all types" (18–19), Pareto does not fit, as seen. But many nineteenth-century radical liberals held similarly nuanced views on trade, imperialism, and war.

What, then, is the significance of this book for the history of economics? First, it bears emphasizing that two of the authors under discussion—Pareto and Schumpeter—are major figures in the development of modern economic thought. More broadly, late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Italy was a vibrant center of economic research: from Italian marginalism to the Scuola Italiana di Scienza delle Finanze (Italian school of public finance) (Barucci 1972; Medema 2005). These developed in the same milieu that fostered the Italian elitist school, and some topics are obviously common between them (think of Maffeo Pantaleoni's antiplutocratic rhetoric, even if this translated, contrary to his friend Pareto, into virulent anti-Semitism (Michelini and Maccabelli 2015).

A less obvious, but no less important, connection lies in the emergence of economic theories of politics in the postwar period, especially rational choice, game theory, social choice, and public choice. These approaches—though not explicitly treated in Piano's work (except partially through Przeworski)—sought to ground political theory in analytical models centered on preferences, utility, and institutional design. Although these theories originated more from methodological concerns than explicit attempts to analyze democracy (as I have argued elsewhere: Damiani 2024), they reinforced a minimalist view of democracy, often due to the recognition of the logical difficulties of aggregating collective preferences—think of social choice theory, or the impossibility of voting equilibria in multidimensional spaces (Riker 1982). Piano's narrative sees the democracy-elections conflation as the way political scientists addressed elite persistence in political regimes, but a seemingly opposite perspective may deserve further exploration.

Finally, another connection may emerge from what Piano writes: "Returning to the Italian School helps us understand why even if we could solve the problems of representation in modern mass government, it would not necessarily lead to more democratic outcomes: elections can never be democratic because by their very structure, they generate plutocratic outcomes as a result of the financial incentives that encourage collusion between different sects of political, economic, and military elites" (180). This insight parallels the skepticism of public choice theorists, and it is no coincidence that James Buchanan was influenced by the Italian public finance school during his Fulbright stay in the 1950s (Buchanan 1960).

In sum, this is a thoughtful, well-researched, and highly original contribution to political theory. It still offers much to historians of economics, both for understanding classical questions in political economy and for exploring the development of modern social sciences. Above all, it reminds us that the transmission of ideas across national and disciplinary boundaries is rarely straightforward or unmediated.

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Modelling Europe: A History of Multi-Country Models at the European Commission (1970–2005). By Antonella Rancan and Francesco Sergi. Palgrave Macmillan, 2024. xvii; 147 pp. $37.99.

This book explores the development and significance of macroeconomic modeling at the Directorate-General for Economic and Financial Affairs (DG II), an economic expertise unit of the European Commission in the European Economic Community (EEC)—the ancestor of the European Union. Extending earlier research (Acosta et al. 2023), Rancan and Sergi delve into the complex task undertaken by DG II since the 1960s: the building of multicountry models—a particular type of macroeconometric model designed to study real, monetary, and financial interactions among several national economies. Such models were also being developed elsewhere at the time, mostly in international organizations (e.g., the IMF and OECD), to study a wide range of macroeconomic issues arising in an increasingly integrated world economy.

Methodologically, the book is rooted in the "practical turn" in historiography, an approach well suited to the study of macroeconometric modeling (Boumans and Duarte 2019). Accordingly, it addresses the influence of multicountry models on the emerging European policymaking institutions, unveiling the role of some "hidden figures" (Paolo Ranuzzi, André Dramais, Alexander Italianer, and Werner Roeger). The authors combine archival research, technical reports, and interviews with key individuals directly involved in DG II's modeling efforts. Their multifaceted approach is particularly effective, as many model improvements (e.g., COMPACT and QUEST) were informal practices outside of formal publications.