

Éric Anceau, *Les élites françaises: Des Lumières au grand confinement*, Paris: Passés composés, 2020, 462 pp.

The growing rift and misunderstanding between the elites and the rest of society are all but ever-present in French newspapers headlines. However, the media's broad interest in the matter has so far not been reflected in historiography. It was not until a few months ago that there appeared a study that could be regarded as an in-depth and systematic analysis of the evolution of the relations between French society and its elites over the centuries.

The problem was tackled by Éric Anceau (born in 1966) in *Les élites françaises: Des Lumières au grand confinement*. Associated with the Sorbonne (Sorbonne Université, formerly Paris-Sorbonne IV), Anceau specializes in the social and political history of the nineteenth century, particularly the history of the Second French Empire (1852–70). He is the author of dozens of books and articles, which have brought him recognition and numerous awards, from, among many others, the Académie Française and the Fondation Napoléon. In addition to the Sorbonne, Anceau has also lectured at Sciences-Po. The possibility of lecturing at these two different universities — the former is regarded as having a strictly academic profile, while the latter is famous for being more practical in its teaching — became for him one of the main inspirations to explore the question of the French elites and their relationship with the rest of society.

Anceau defines the elite as a not very large but cohesive group of people who wield influence over society on the local, national, and supranational levels (p. 20). In his study, however, the author focuses mainly on the political elites exerting pressure on French society from the national level. Another issue that should be clarified is the plural form of the noun 'elite' used in the book's title.

Contrary to what might be expected, the author does not analyze with equal attention elites representing various milieus, for example, economic or cultural. In fact, elites other than the political one interest him insofar as they spread to the latter. Yet this does not mean that the term 'elites' has been placed in the title by accident. It draws the readers' attention to the constant change French decision-makers undergo regarding both their origins and values.

Reflections on the evolution of the relations between the French elites and the rest of society also inspire the author to try to answer whether it is possible to rebuild the damaged authority of contemporary French decision-makers. Thus the author's attempt to understand what determines membership in this privileged group, how its relations with society have changed, and whether it has always been blamed for all of the nation's ills and failures turns into a contribution from the sphere of political science and sociology.

Formulating such research questions determines, in some sense, the methods used by the author. Although, at first, the book may seem to be a classic example of an analysis dealing with French political history, it is impossible not to notice the influence on the author of the *Annales* School. Anceau likes to draw on the achievements and methods developed in related sciences: philosophy, political science, or sociology, especially participant observation. Such an interdisciplinary approach is, in a way, demanded by the fact that the analysis concerns 'three hundred years of confrontation and lack of understanding' between the French elites and French society, a period encompassing not just events going back as far as the early eighteenth century, but also contemporary events including the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The book under review refers to several hundred studies and articles relating to historical and social sciences. In archival research, it is hard to speak of any new material that was not used earlier. However, bearing in mind that the author's aim is to analyse specific phenomena over time, such archival research seems neither necessary nor relevant.

The book, which is 400 pages long, comprises 11 thematic chapters. They concern: attempts to expand the French political elite to include wealthy and distinguished individuals under the absolute monarchy in the eighteenth century; calls for valuing merit and talent over class background and for granting equal political rights to women during the French Revolution; attempts in the Napoleonic era to create the so-called 'new nobility' comprising people from noble families and people without the right connections but with merits in various fields; failed attempts to reestablish the old order during the Bourbon Restoration and the eventual acceptance of bankers and merchants among the French decision makers during the July Monarchy period; the introduction of male universal suffrage, which led to the strengthening of bonds between the elites, society and government during the reign of Louis Napoleon (1848–70); attempts to put into practice the ideas of egalitarianism and professionalism of France's political elites during the Third Republic; strong divisions of the elites during the inter-war period; the gap between the expectations of society and the activities of the French political

elites during the Second World War; including women among decision makers and attempts to introduce technocracy in the second half of the twentieth century; the growing misunderstanding between the elites and society, compounded by new forms of media over the last two decades. In addition, at the end of the book, the author adds an unplanned chapter devoted to the COVID-19 crisis. In it, Anceau illustrates society's huge distrust in the Paris decision-makers and sheds light on the growing role of local elites to whom the central government is forced to listen more and more. The book ends with an epilogue which, in addition to conclusions stemming from the analysed material, also contains suggestions concerning possibilities of ending the impasse characterizing the current relations between the elites and society.

The political crises which serve as dividing lines between the successive chapters in each case led — to a greater or lesser extent — to transformations within the ruling elites and in the relations between them and the rest of society. Yet, despite the violent nature of these external events, the very process of transformation and expansion of the elites should be described as evolutionary and ongoing. It is not without reason that the author begins his analysis with a description of the rule of the absolute Bourbon monarchs, when the French elite, hitherto open only to those bound by blood ties (*noblesse d'épée*), began increasingly to accept wealthy individuals of high merit but without family connections (*noblesse de robe*). These changes were sanctioned by the events of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic period. On the other hand, what can be regarded as a genuine contribution of the events of 1789–1815 is the beginning of a discussion about power-sharing with representatives of the people — not wealthy but of high merit — and women. Another change, which came after defeat in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–71, is the adoption of the concept of the need for people aspiring to join the official and political cadre to have professional education. As we read the book, we may gain the impression that in France, a diploma from a specific university is often a fig leaf for people who are predestined to rule by their family connections but who, under the impact of the revolutionary slogans, need some proof of talent and professionalism in order to take up such positions. In practice, such schools usually remain inaccessible to representatives of groups without the right connections; this means that such a method of selecting the elites comes up against increasing criticism, forcing the decision-makers to create a new formula to expand political elites in France.

The author also examines how the people became more and more involved in the affairs of the state and thus — by becoming interested in matters of national importance — became more demanding and critical when it came to its elites. As in the case of transformations of the elites, these are gradual changes. A turning point in this process came with the organization of plebiscites in the early nineteenth century; from this moment on, France's government came to be legitimized by society's universal consent. The consent subsequently evolved into will, manifested today in general elections, although this method of legitimizing

government seems to be increasingly contested. This phenomenon is associated with the problem of the decline of the ruling elites' authority in society's eyes. As the author notes, while previously a crisis in the form of a revolution or lost war was needed to bring this about, now this happens almost on a daily basis, sometimes even for quite trivial reasons. The main role in this process is played by news and daily gossip sites, which — by publicizing politicians' slip-ups — manage to ridicule them, undermining their right to decide the country's fate, especially in the eyes of people who support opposing political parties.

The author tries to explain the reasons why society used to challenge its elites. As a rule, the reasons fall into one of two categories. The first, with a longer tradition, brings together arguments highlighting the alienation of the elites. Initially, this was symbolized by a lack of family ties going beyond the narrow circle of privileged individuals, then by the representation of economic interests of strictly selected groups. What is regarded as a manifestation of such alienation today is the preferment of European to national affairs. The next category emerges in connection with the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–71. It highlighted the weakness of the elites understood as a lack of practical preparation for governing the country and an inability to make decisions. This was to have been remedied by the opening of schools providing a comprehensive education for future public officials. However, the Second World War revealed a failure of the system when the French decision-makers incompetently tried to hide their lack of values and indecisiveness behind a mask of cold calculation. Nevertheless, after 1945 the concept of professionalizing the cadre was chosen again. This was the basis of the prestigious *École Nationale d'Administration* (ENA), whose diploma today provides a ticket to the French government and regional administration and thus to the country's political elite.

The book under review will certainly bring much insight into the elites and their relations with French society. Presenting the subject matter over such a long period and with the use of methods typical of various scholarly disciplines makes it possible to understand the relations better and to observe the patterns of their evolution. The study is also an excellent example of how to use methods and terminologies typical of sociology or political sciences in historical research without losing sight of the tools of historians. While this has been well known for decades to scholars studying social history, in the case of political history — of which the book under review is an example — an interdisciplinary approach is not very frequent. From the point of view of Polish readers, another asset of the book is that it provides an insight into the mentality of the contemporary French elites and France's political life, introducing such figures as Didier Raoult or Alexandre Benall. In addition, it helps readers understand what institutions like the ENA, an essential element of the political and cultural identity of France's political elites, commonly mean to the French.

Still, some opinions or comparisons seem too simplified, particularly in the chapter discussing contemporary events. An example is the comparison of

the Parisian elites fleeing to their houses in the provinces during the COVID-19 pandemic to the behaviour of the elites during the Second World War. According to the author, in both cases, the elites cared about their own comfort, disregarding the consequences these moves had for people living in the provinces (p. 362). Another issue that may make reading a bit harder is the presence of lengthy sentences of as many as fifteen lines. The same goes for the author's excessive tendency to refer to facts, which sometimes also disrupts the clarity of the message, making it more difficult to follow the evolution of the elites and their relations with society.

Nevertheless, despite minor shortcomings, the book is a fascinating source for discussing and reflecting on historical and contemporary topics. Paraphrasing the words of Marc Bloch, Anceau stresses that it is impossible to understand and write history well without being an attentive observer of modern life. Having read the book, it can be also said that it is impossible to understand well the political life of modern France without having some knowledge of its history.

*Marta Tomczak*  
(Warsaw)

*(Translated by Anna Kijak)*  
*(Proofreading by Jan Czarniecki)*