REINTRODUCING...

ROUTLEDGE

Reintroducing Vilfredo Pareto

Giovanni de Ghantuz Cubbe



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REINTRODUCING VILFREDO PARETO

This book offers a reappraisal of the central themes and problems animating the work of Vilfredo Pareto, reconsidering their place within contemporary social and political inquiry.

Emphasising the breadth and complexity of his thought, the book adopts a cross-cutting approach that brings its different dimensions into dialogue. Rather than offering a conventional introduction, it revisits Pareto through a critical engagement with established interpretations and contemporary debates. Moving beyond both celebratory and dismissive readings, it shows how Pareto's reflections continue to illuminate central tensions and contradictions of modern political life, demonstrating their continuing relevance to contemporary social and political sciences.

By reopening exegetical questions, sketching possible directions for future research, and moving across disciplinary boundaries, *Reintroducing Vilfredo Pareto* will appeal to scholars and students of sociology, political sociology, political theory, and the history of political thought.

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Michels, *L’ascesa del fascismo in Italia e altri scritti tedeschi (1919–1928)* (2026).

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Reintroducing...

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Giovanni de Ghantuz Cubbe

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To my parents
and my grandparents

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PREFACE

In a study devoted to Vilfredo Pareto, the Italian sociologist Alessandro Pizzorno observed that a classic

> may be read in a historical key, aiming at discovering the relation between the questions that a certain socio-cultural context posed for the author and the answer he came up with. Or a classic may be read in order to see how certain parts and certain links of its theoretical construction can help us in the task of constructing present theories.[1]

In this book, I attempt to bring these two modes of reading together. In doing so, I have sought to strike a balance between outlining key elements of Pareto's thought and reconsidering them in light of contemporary concerns. I hope that, in this way – without straying too far from Pareto's own intentions – I have fulfilled the task assigned to me: to *reintroduce* Vilfredo Pareto.

Taking the notion of *reintroduction* seriously, this book is not intended as an *introduction* to Pareto. It does not seek to guide the reader through his life and thought, whether along a chronological trajectory or across thematic domains. While it takes into account the context in which Pareto lived, it does not pursue a historical analysis, nor does it seek to situate him systematically within the intellectual debates of his time. This book would add little were it to follow such a course, in comparison, for instance, with the monumental *Intellectual Biography* by Fiorenzo Mornati or the recent *Introduction* by Giovanni Barbieri. Rather, it seeks to reconsider Pareto's significance by reopening his interpretation, engaging critically with

received readings, and restoring him (where appropriate) to contemporary debate. This is by no means an unproblematic task: it requires evaluating the possibility of revisiting Pareto in contemporary terms, while challenging a series of reinterpretations outside scholarly debate (and, regrettably, some within it) that increasingly associate him with antidemocratic positions and the intellectual heritage of the New Right.[2] Such an undertaking also necessarily requires coming to terms with those aspects of Pareto's thought that are, in effect, openly dismissive of democracy. I am persuaded that another Pareto is possible: certainly not a steadfast defender of democracy, yet neither an unequivocal enemy of it.

The book proceeds from a perspective that is at once centred on Pareto as a political sociologist and transversal in scope. These two vantage points are not in tension. A survey of the literature on Pareto discloses a persistent tendency to look for a "true" Pareto – namely, the "sociologist of ideologies", the "sociologist of emotions", the "sociologist of politics", and so forth. In this book, Pareto as a political sociologist and as a thinker both drawn to and repelled by politics opens up the rest of his work. Methodologically, the focus on politics is therefore not narrowing, but constitutes the very basis for a transversal approach which, given the breadth and complexity of Pareto's legacy, ought not to be mistaken for a comprehensive account.

In seeking to bring together different levels of Pareto's thought, the book emphasises a degree of continuity and coherence in his *oeuvre*. Accordingly, rather than foregrounding the differences among the various strands of interpretation, it focuses on identifying their points of convergence. At the same time, however, it draws attention to some central misunderstandings that have led to misleading interpretations. The book addresses five distinct yet interrelated sets of relations: the social and the political, the real and the ideal, stasis and dynamism, "the few" and "the many", and politics and the economy. The reader will note, however, that particular attention is devoted to *elites* throughout the book. This is not only because elites occupy such a central place in Pareto's reflection, but also

because debates over elites remain among the most contentious in contemporary democracies.

There is a well-known Latin maxim, *Coram iudice et in alto mari sumus in manu Dei*. It is usually rendered in English as: *Before the judge and on the high seas, we are in* God's hands. In its common interpretation, the maxim refers to the uncertainty inherent in court proceedings. Yet, the original Latin formulation speaks not of a court, but of a *judge* – a distinction far from trivial. From an elite-centred perspective, the maxim may be (re)read as pointing to the distance between those individuals and groups (or professional categories) who exercise decisive authority and those subject to their decisions, who in most cases have little power to resist them. Proverbs of this kind – and the sentiments they express – are not confined to Latin. In German, there is a well-known expression according to which physicians are described as *Halbgötter in Weiß* – "demigods in white". The phrase refers, critically, to physicians as almost "untouchable'" figures, wielding near-unquestioned authority. Is this merely a piece of populist rhetoric? Or does it capture something real – for instance, certain intra-elite dynamics that may, in many cases, enable physicians to shield one another in judicial disputes with patients? Not to mention political elites, whose selection criteria, openness, responsiveness, accountability, and overall quality within democratic systems are endlessly debated and remain central for understanding political processes. Underlying the interpretation of Pareto's thought advanced in this book is the concern – perhaps itself of a Paretian cast – that, notwithstanding the mechanisms of restraint and the checks built into contemporary democracies, the power of elites – whether political, economic, medical, judicial or otherwise – is markedly disproportionate to the functions they perform, or ought to perform. Such disproportion is eroding both their own legitimacy and the democratic ideal at its very foundations, and at a pace difficult to ignore. If this diagnosis is correct, might a critical theory of elites prove capable of shedding some light?

Notes

1. Pizzorno, Alessandro. 1973. “Vilfredo Pareto and the Crisis of Nineteenth Century Science”. *Social Science Quarterly* 54 (3): 480–490. ⏎
2. On this topic, see the brief comments by Bellamy, Richard. 1990. “From Ethical to Economic Liberalism – the Sociology of Pareto’s Politics”. *International Journal of Human Resource Management* 19 (4): 431–455. ⏎

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INTRODUCTION

Pareto Rediscovered

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Why Pareto?

If tomorrow the lecture theatres of social sciences in the major European or North American universities – indeed, why not those of other countries as well – were filled with textbooks centred on Vilfredo Pareto; if students were systematically studying his work; if a significant number of academics identified themselves as "Paretian scholars"; in other words, if we had a *new* "Paretian vogue", a "renaissance" of his work (Adair-Toteff 2026), what would this actually mean? On what grounds would those scholars define themselves as "disciples" of Pareto? Would they adhere to his sociological theory as a tool for understanding social complexity (see Mornati 2014)? Would they instead select certain components of his thought while setting others aside? Would they attempt to "operationalise" Pareto, employing some of his concepts within complex explanatory models? Or would they draw upon him primarily for theoretical purposes? A famous example of a group of Pareto-inspired scholars can be found in the "Harvard Circle" (Piano 2023; Volpe 2015, 133–134), but it is unlikely that a new circle of this kind would take the same form today. Sure, Pareto's influence may be traced across a wide range of disciplines and fields of research, from economics through psychology and the sociology of emotions to political sociology (Barbieri 2025, 125 ff). This, however, is far too little to justify speaking of "Paretian disciples", a "Paretian approach",

or a “Paretian school” (Mongardini 1989). Perhaps with the sole exception of economics (see, for example, Fossati 2010), we do not really know what those lecture theatres would be like.

This brief thought experiment, however trivial it may appear at first sight, in fact touches upon some crucial questions regarding Pareto’s reception and points to the need to clarify the aims of any proposed *reintroduction* of his work.

To summarise just a few key points briefly, scholarly engagement with Pareto has for many years centred on a number of recurring issues, such as Paretian equilibrium, the Paretian theory of action (and its comparison with Weber’s), Pareto’s critique of theories, doctrines, beliefs, and ideologies, his elite theory, and the broader question of the political character of his thought – especially with regard to his proximity to Italian Fascism (Bach 2004; Barbieri 2003; 2024; Bouvier 2012; Somaini 2017). Equally significant has been the debate concerning whether Pareto’s theoretical system should be understood as conceptually indivisible, or whether single components may legitimately be isolated and considered independently (see, for example, Kroll 2023 on Pareto’s reception in Germany). Over time, moreover, Pareto has increasingly come to be regarded as a classic (Barbieri 2023a) and, as such, has been approached from the perspective of the history of sociology – within which Giovanni Busino’s contribution has been pivotal – and the history of political thought. Nevertheless, a careful examination of Pareto’s reception reveals that only a limited number of scholars can plausibly be regarded as “Paretian” – or have regarded themselves as such.

What, then, would it mean to call oneself Paretian, or more generally to engage seriously with his thought? To deal with Pareto, indeed, does not simply mean confronting the thinker himself, but also grappling with the broader constellation of ideas, issues, and controversies that his name inevitably evokes. From the 1940s onwards – most notably with James Burnham’s *The Machiavellians: Defenders of Freedom* (1943), but later also in Raymond Aron’s writings – the study of Pareto became increasingly intertwined with debates on Machiavellianism (Bronzuoli 2010; Drochon

2019; Campbell 1986; Susca 2015; Stuart Hughes 1959; Tuccari 2014). Scholars have also frequently approached Pareto within the framework of Italian Elitism, situating him alongside Gaetano Mosca and Robert Michels (Ripepe 1974; Piano 2025; Sola 2000). More complex still is the relationship between Pareto and Italian Fascism (Barbieri 2003; Montini 1974; Susca 2010; among the assessments offered by Pareto's contemporaries, see especially Michels 1924), which concerns not only his own interest in Fascism, but also the attention he received within Fascist intellectual circles. Thus, Pareto's name has come to be associated with at least three major conceptual domains: Machiavellianism, Elitism, and Fascism – and the list could easily be extended.

Pareto and his controversial legacy (see Adair-Tofeff 2023) continue to attract scholarly attention. The recent establishment of a *Paretian Network* (https://fabiotest.ddns.net/paretiannetwork/), which brings together scholars from a wide range of disciplines and diverse intellectual profiles, is particularly indicative in this regard. Notably, although its members share a common interest in Pareto, interdisciplinary heterogeneity prevails. This circumstance can certainly be seen as productive (on interdisciplinarity, see Busino 2000, 12): to borrow the title of a well-known book, Pareto extends "beyond disciplinary boundaries" (Femia and Marshall 2012). Yet, this plurality has also contributed to the fragmentation of approaches to Pareto and has seldom resulted in a comprehensive and systematic reassessment of his *oeuvre*, or in a (re)evaluation of its significance for contemporary social sciences. Only two major contributions may be mentioned in this regard: one focusing directly on Pareto and the other on the so-called "Italian school of elitism" (Marshall 2025; Piano 2025).

More than a century after his death, and despite the recent proliferation of studies devoted to him, Vilfredo Pareto may still be said to "have a problem" (Adair-Toteff 2022). Few would dispute his stature as a major social theorist. Some scholars contend that his writings even continue to offer conceptual instruments of striking originality and analytical force, capable of illuminating enduring features of social life and human action (Susca 2023, 9). Though, Pareto's position within social sciences remains

marked by a peculiar ambivalence. He is regularly cited and readily acknowledged, but only partially appreciated. Present in name, yet insufficiently grasped in substance, recognised as indispensable, yet rarely engaged with in a manner commensurate with his theoretical complexity, Pareto occupies a position at once canonical and marginal.

What, then, does it mean to reintroduce Pareto, and how does a *reintroduction* differ from an *introduction* (see, for example, Barbieri 2025)? Biographical studies are already available, foremost among them the monumental biography by Fiorenzo Mornati, originally written in Italian and subsequently translated into English (Mornati 2018a; 2018b; 2020). Pareto's theory of residues and derivations and his theory of action has been the object of extensive scholarly attention (Bach 2004; 2026; Marchetti 2020; Rutigliano 1994; Susca 2023). His relationship with Fascism has been examined in recent years, notably through the work of Giovanni Barbieri (2003; 2024, see also Susca 2010). Nor is there any shortage of literature on Pareto's theory of democracy and demagogic plutocracy (Barbieri 2023b; Femia 1995; Finer 1968; Mongardini 1981; Tuccari 2018), or of analyses of his reception (Eisermann 1975; Mongardini 1989; Kroll 2023; Piano 2023).

Yet, the scope of a series devoted to the reintroduction of classics entails something different. An introduction, in the conventional sense, would aim to provide an "overview" and to guide the reader through Pareto's principal concepts and themes. The present volume pursues a different goal: It engages critically with Pareto, identifying a set of broader sociological and political-theoretical questions that emerge from his legacy and in relation to which he may still retain relevance for contemporary social sciences. To reintroduce Pareto, in this sense, means returning to its thought as an *object of critical inquiry* – one maybe capable of illuminating problems that remain central to the social sciences today.

Since, as noted above, Pareto's intellectual production cuts across disciplinary boundaries, this book deliberately refrains from situating itself within the confines of any single, clearly demarcated discipline. For historians of political thought, it will be evident that this is not a work of

biographical and philological reconstruction nor of intellectual history, even though the historical dimension is taken into account and Pareto's ideas are consistently situated within their context. To sociologists, it will be clear that this book does not aspire to a systematic exposition of Pareto's sociology. Its discussion of Pareto's theory of action is selective and oriented toward concerns other than sociological analysis in the strict sense, while methodological questions central to sociological inquiry are for the most part left aside. Political sociologists will recognise that Pareto is examined here as a stimulating source for the study of socio-political relations, social dynamics, and intergroup conflict; they will not, however, find in this book a new model for investigating political behaviour, interest organisations, social movements, or citizens' attitudes. Political scientists, for their part, will find that the approach adopted here does not conform to the prevailing methodological canons of the discipline: the book neither advances testable hypotheses nor seeks to elaborate operationalisable models for the analysis of political processes. The book does, however, address in many of its parts issues of direct relevance to political science, such as political power, institutional change, and political elites; moreover, the focus on Pareto's political theory is maintained throughout.

At most, and only by way of a broadly indicative characterisation, the perspective adopted here may be situated within a sociologically oriented conception of political science – one that extends beyond description and empirical inquiry and remains centrally concerned with political power. With regard to the scholarly literature as well, the book draws upon a range of different readings, seeking to reconcile them within a broader integrative framework. While taking into account the Italian, French, German, and Anglo-American literature on Pareto, particular emphasis is placed on a distinct "Roman" line of interpretation associated above all with Carlo Mongardini. This interpretative tradition has been attentive to Pareto as a political thinker and as a *pensatore della decadenza* (thinker of decline), to the problem of power, to the relationship between the real and the ideal in politics, and to that between politics and the economy. The present study is

partly informed by this approach, while also engaging with it critically and situating it within the wider international debate.

The book consists of five chapters and a conclusion. Each chapter follows the same structure and is divided into two subsections (with the exception of *Chapter 4*, which comprises four). The first subsection advances one or more theses addressing a specific set of issues in Pareto's thought. The second examines his continuing significance – or outdatedness – and evaluates the related theoretical and methodological, and, in some cases, also political implications. The conclusion returns to the arguments developed in the second subsection of each chapter (the fourth in the case of *Chapter 4*) and draws together the principal findings. The central premises and theses developed in the first subsection of each chapter (and in the first three subsections of *Chapter 4*) are summarised below.

Chapter 1: The Social and the Political

It has been suggested that politics occupies a central and enduring place within Pareto's thought, constituting neither merely a late outcome of his scientific production nor an incidental concern (Mongardini 1981, 303; Schumpeter 1949). On this reading, Pareto's political reflection does not emerge only in the last years of his life – as argued by, among others, Busino (1970, IX) and Freund (1974, 139). Rather, it develops alongside his early involvement in public affairs and resurfaces with renewed intensity in his later years, when the political arrangements underpinning Italian politics during the Giolittian period were undergoing profound transformation (Mongardini 1981, 303; see also Bellamy 1987). This thesis carries a number of interpretative implications. First, it accords with a widely accepted premise in the scholarly literature: namely, that despite Pareto's declared aspiration to construct a value-neutral theoretical system, his intellectual engagement was from the outset shaped by his political orientations, which, however, partly shifted over time (Bellamy 1987; Mornati 2018b; 2020). Second, it points to a certain continuity between Pareto's writings prior to the *Trattato di sociologia generale* (hereafter *Trattato*; TSG in bibliographical references) and his later work. Third, and most importantly, this perspective challenges a long-standing assumption – often implicit, yet remarkably resilient – according to which in Pareto political analysis appears as a by-product of pre-established sociological premises. What is suggested here, by contrast, is that – since the political and the social are intrinsically interrelated – political reflection in Pareto is already woven into sociological inquiry itself, if not, in certain respects, antecedent to it. For even where Pareto does not explicitly address political questions, his sociology remains, as Schumpeter perceptively observed, a political sociology:

> The born thinker that he was must have been struck by the impotence of the rational argument, and the question must have intruded upon him of what it really is that determines political action and the fate of

> states and civilizations. Again, it is quite understandable that, so soon as he had settled down to a life of thought, this question should have emerged from the sphere of easy and superficial answers that all of us are prone to give when immersed in our daily work, and that he should have attempted to raise it to the plane of scientific analysis. This amounts to saying that primarily and fundamentally his sociology was a sociology of the political process.
>
> (Schumpeter 1949, 168)

Schumpeter further clarifies that, within Pareto's analysis of the social system, politics figures as only one dimension among others, but the decisive one: the political process is "a special case. But it was this special case which fascinated Pareto and for the sake of which he erected and adorned a much larger structure" (Schumpeter 1949, 168). Consider, for example, the relation between Pareto's classification of residues and his typology of elites. For Pareto, the fox-like elite is notably characterised by the predominance of residues of the first class (*instinct of combinations*), whereas the lion-like elite corresponds to the prevalence of residues of the second class (*persistence of aggregates*). It would be misleading to assume that Pareto first undertakes an abstract analysis of residues and only subsequently derives from it the distinction between foxes and lions. There is no prior sociological taxonomy that only subsequently acquires political-theoretical relevance.

Chapter 2: Derivations and Ideologies

A derivation is a justification, an a posteriori pseudo-logical rationalisation of non-rational motives (Maniscalco 1984, 148; see also Pareto TSG § 180 and § 1397). As Femia (2006, 36) puts it, a "residue is a psychic state; a 'derivation' is a 'non-logical' argument, explanation, assertion, appeal to authority, or association of ideas or sentiments in words. It is called a derivation because it derives from a particular mental state". As is well known, the concept of derivation is closely linked to one of the most important aspects of Paretian theory: the analysis of beliefs, theories, doctrines, and ideologies, which in turn rests on the distinction between subjective and objective perspectives (Mongardini 1984, 43). From a subjective standpoint, the majority of human actions appear to be logical. This is particularly evident in actions motivated by religious convictions, where conduct is experienced by the actor as coherent, meaningful, and internally justified:

> If a person is convinced that to be sure of a good voyage he must sacrifice to Poseidon and sail in a ship that does not leak, he will perform the sacrifice and caulk his seams in exactly the same spirit.
>
> (Pareto TSG § 319)

However, when examined from an objective standpoint – that is, from the standpoint of the external observer (Mongardini 1984, 43) – it becomes apparent that actions "that use means appropriate to ends and which logically link means with ends" (Pareto TSG § 150) constitute only a minority when compared with non-logical actions.

Derivations, in themselves, are neither good nor bad, nor can it be simply affirmed that Pareto regarded them as invariably "false" (Susca 2023, 92). Rather, they represent an ineliminable feature of human conduct and are tied to the need for rationalisation (Portinaro 2017, 51). As Pareto himself maintains, there exists a "marked tendency" among human beings "to transform non-logical actions into logical ones" (Pareto TSG § 162)

through recourse to moral, religious, or similar beliefs (Mongardini 1984, 44). Such transformations are often unstable and subject to rapid variation and, as Pareto writes in a letter to Maffeo Pantaleoni (24 September 1909), they constitute the “garments of sentiments”. Pausing over this metaphor, it is essential to emphasise that a garment is not a mask. Deception and dissimulation, understood in the sense of ideological mystification, do not coincide directly with derivation (contrary to what is suggested, more or less explicitly, by Raymond Aron 1974, 142):

> We find ourselves in the situation of a man who sees objects in a curved mirror: part of their proportions is altered. Now, it must be noted that very often it is precisely this subjective phenomenon – that is, the objective phenomenon in a distorted form – that is the only one known to us, either directly through an inquiry into the state of mind of those who witnessed an event, or indirectly through the testimony of a historian who has carried out such an inquiry. The problem that historical criticism must therefore resolve is far from being merely that of textual criticism; it consists primarily, given the distorted image of the object, in reconstructing the object itself. This is a difficult and delicate operation, made even more arduous by a singular circumstance. Very often men are not conscious of the forces that drive them to act; they attribute to their actions imaginary causes, very different from the real causes. It is a mistake to believe that the man who thus deceives others is always acting in bad faith; on the contrary, this is a very rare case: most often this man has begun by deceiving himself, and it is with the utmost sincerity that he believes in the existence of these imaginary causes and presents them as having determined his actions.
>
> (Pareto 1902, 16–18)

Chapter 3: Equilibrium and Dynamism

Within Paretian thought, equilibrium is marked by a tension between, on the one hand, the conception of the system as a whole, treated at a hypothetical- theoretical level as immobile, and, on the other, the complex analysis of the system's constituent elements, which are anything but static and display a pronounced tendency towards change (Maniscalco 1984, 73). *Static equilibrium* pertains to the former, at the level of pure theoretical abstraction. Indeed, Pareto (1921, tr. 1984, 26) explicitly affirms that "[s]ocial order is never perfectly still: it is in perpetual motion". Equilibrium is thus a theoretical condition, a tool for studying the social system *rebus sic stantibus* (Mongardini 1981, 311–312). On the contrary, *dynamic equilibrium* is best understood as an ongoing balancing emerging from the interaction between forces of transformation and forces of conservation as well as between dynamics of consent and conflict. Crucially, equilibrium does not denote the *absence of tension*, nor does it imply the possibility of a fully integrated and harmonious social order characterised by a definitive alignment of competing interests.

Pareto originally formulated the notion of equilibrium for the analysis of economic phenomena and only subsequently extended it to sociological and political inquiry (Mongardini 1973; Ferrarotti 1965; Susca 2023, 25). Yet, it is precisely the political nature of the relationship between stability and change that most interests him. The circulation of elites constitutes the process *par excellence* through which the dynamic interplay between the elements of the system becomes visible (Bobbio 2005, 48). At the same time, elite circulation is a genuinely political and power-related process, which is inextricably linked to the attempt of social groups to modify to their own advantage the distribution of limited means necessary for the satisfaction of unlimited needs (Mongardini 1984, 68).

In short, if the circulation process presents a harmony between persistence and change, the social system stands at a stage where the different forces in play are "dynamically balanced". If, on the other hand, a "defect" or a "delay" arises in the circulation process (Bobbio 1973, 26; de

Ghantuz Cubbe 2024; Fiorot 1969, 189), and, in particular, if the governing class persists too long in power, then the resulting stasis ends up causing dramatic and radical transformations. Consider, for example, Pareto's diagnosis of the social and political transformations occurring in Italy (and in Europe) at his time. First, he diagnosed the absence of a political class equal to the historical moment, that is, lacking the discernment and governing capacities required for effective political leadership. Second, he identified a progressive erosion of the central state as the *locus* of political power (see Pareto 1921, tr. 1984). In his eyes, these symptoms were rooted in a deeper crisis of liberal governing elites (Portinaro 1977, 119; Portinaro 2023, 30–32). Such a condition of decline had, in Pareto's view, two long-term interrelated reasons: first, the profound social *transformations* unfolding at the turn of the 20th century – most notably the growing political and social weight of the "popular" element (the masses) in relation to the well-to-do classes (Pareto 1921, tr. 1984, 71); second, the *failure* of the bourgeois ruling elites to *adapt* to the demands of a new historical phase that those transformations had initiated (Somaini 2017). In the short term, Pareto regarded the Italian and European social and economic crisis of his time as a contingent episode within the "infinite and incessant oscillations" of social phenomena. However, he admitted that the crisis "we are witnessing is of exceptional magnitude", since it ultimately gave rise to an accelerated circulation of elites, after a war that had already hastened an impending *transformation of the existing social order* (Pareto 1920a, in SSM, 996; 1920b, in SSM, 1006; see also Barbieri 2003, 87). Among the possible outcomes of this condition, Pareto included the reconfiguration of the balance between competing social forces, the rise of a new aristocracy, and, more specifically, the emergence of a strong and decisive elite capable of restoring internal economic and political order, thereby inaugurating a "new era" (Montini 1974, 183).

Chapter 4: The “Few” and the “Many”

Paretian elite theory cannot be reduced to the mere concept of *circulation*. It also provides a systematic account of the *composition* of elites and non-elites (the “few” and the “many”, Urbinati 2020), of their modes of *interaction*, and of the integrative and disintegrative potentials inherent in their coexistence. These potentials shape how the social system holds together or breaks down, and are closely connected both to stability and decline, as well as to the balance (or imbalance) between consent and conflict (Maniscalco 1984). As will be shown, in phases of stability the relationship between elites and non-elites is characterised by a degree of systemic integration and consent, although conflict never disappears; it is, by contrast, in phases of deep transformation that the conflictual dimension intensifies, and disintegrative processes multiply. In every case, the relationship between these two “macro-groups” is not conceived by Pareto in dichotomous terms or through any rigid dualism. Pareto distinguishes a series of “subgroups” and displays a complex understanding of their interaction (Sola 2000, 87). In particular, when addressing elites, Pareto draws a clear distinction between a group capable of effectively exercising power and a declining group no longer endowed with the requisite governing capacities. At the same time, the non-elites are not a homogeneous mass but contain emerging minorities capable of ascending into elite positions, thereby sustaining the circulation. When elites lose their functional capacity, fail to incorporate new elements, and rely instead on co-optation and entrenchment, the balance between consent and conflict breaks down. Under such conditions, centrifugal forces intensify, and the system moves toward crisis. On this point, setting aside the temptation of over-elaborate theoretical constructions, it is worth recalling a simple – almost self-evident – observation that nonetheless points to an ultimately irresolvable problem: elites must perform their functions effectively. Problems of efficiency lead to a loss of legitimacy (Vorländer 2010, 99). If elites cease to function properly, yet nonetheless contrive to remain in power, the long-term consequences may be catastrophic (see Higley 2021).

Chapter 5: Sociology and Economism

The relationship between economics and sociology in Pareto's thought is usually treated as a preliminary issue, introduced as a way of explaining how Pareto "the economist" eventually came to write the *Trattato*. I argue, however, that this relationship is also directly related to the Paretian analysis of the interplay between politics and the economy, as well as to his critique of demagogic plutocracy.

The question of Pareto's "shift" from economics to sociology has been widely debated and cannot be addressed here in detail (Busino 1973; Malandrino and Marchionatti 2000; Marchionatti and Mornati 2017; Mongardini 1973). As recent literature shows, Pareto's increasing engagement with sociology is inseparable from the growing centrality of the non-logical dimension of human action in his thought; nevertheless, this development should not be interpreted as an abandonment of economics (Marchionatti and Mornati 2017, 12–13) or as a definitive loss of interest in rationality and logical action. The "shift" from economics to sociology does not mark a rupture, but rather a reordering of analytical *priorities*. Economics and sociology are not opposed as alternative explanatory frameworks; instead, they are articulated within an asymmetrical relationship. For Pareto, sociology provides the broader horizon within which economics itself is ultimately situated (Susca 2023, 20).

A further point, however, has received insufficient attention in the literature. The incorporation of economics into the broader domain of sociology constitutes an attempt to *circumscribe the scope of abstract economic rationality*. As will be shown, the problem of the "over-extension" of abstract economic rationality has, for Pareto, concrete political consequences. It is precisely through the extension of "the notions of pure economics to the social 'needs' of a people" that, behind the veil of science, the state assumes responsibility for responding to those needs (Pareto TSG § 2271). The employment of (pseudo-)scientific-economic reasoning serves no other purpose than allowing "the governing class, or a

class aspiring to power" to justify "its control and [to have] it more readily accepted by the subject class" (Pareto TSG § 2272).

The picture is completed when one takes into account the interpenetration, in Pareto's demagogic plutocracy, of economic and political forces, whose alliance rests upon a specific form of instrumental, calculative rationality grounded in interest, negotiation and exchange (of resources, favours, positions, and so forth). Cunning, patronage, deception, and usurpation are among the characteristic features of demagogic plutocracy. Thus, at the core of Paretian thinking on demagogic plutocracy is the "patron-client relationship, a relationship based for the most part on material interests" (Femia 1995, 378), in which, as Piano (2019, 527) suggests, the "liberal government has become plutocracy's handmaiden".

Viewed from this perspective, Pareto may provide valuable insight for the contemporary analysis (and critique) of *economisation* and *economism* (Mongardini 1997), especially insofar as these phenomena involve: (i) the overextension and misuse of abstract economic rationality; (ii) the reconfiguration of the relationship between politics and the economy to the advantage of the latter; (iii) the reduction of political action to the mere pursuit of interests through exchange and negotiation; and (iv) the pseudo-scientific concealment of these dynamics or their naturalisation as necessary, objective, and value-neutral.

Editorial Note

References to Pareto's writings included in the *Scritti Sociologici Minori* (edited by Giovanni Busino, 1980, Turin, UTET) are cited by indicating the original year of publication followed by the abbreviation SSM. The same convention is adopted for the *Scritti politici*, published in two volumes (edited by Giovanni Busino, 1974, Turin, UTET) and cited as SP, vol. I or vol. II. References to writings drawn from the *Œuvres complètes* (edited by Piet Tommissen and Giovanni Busino, Genève, Droz) follow the same criterion and are indicated by the abbreviation OC, followed by the relevant volume number. Quotations taken from Pareto's *Trattato di sociologia generale* are indicated with the abbreviation TSG, followed by the relevant

paragraph number. Unless otherwise specified, English translations of passages from the *Trattato* are taken from the 1935 edition, *Mind and Society* (edited and translated by Arthur Livingston). All translations from French and Italian of Pareto's writings for which no other English version is available are my own.

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THE SOCIAL AND THE POLITICAL

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Pareto and the Role of Politics

Can Joseph Schumpeter's claim (1949, 168) that Pareto's sociology ultimately amounts to a sociology of political processes be defended? Can the thesis that much of Pareto's thought was fundamentally informed by a concern with politics be sustained? Schumpeter (1949, 152) observed, for example, that Pareto was *anti-étatiste*, "but for political reasons rather than for purely economic ones: unlike the English classics, he did not fight against government activity per se but against the governments of parliamentary democracy". The idea of Pareto as a sociologist of politics was subsequently reinforced by Raymond Aron. Not only did Aron engage with Pareto primarily within the domains of political sociology and political theory, particularly in the study of elites, power, and even in the analysis of 20th-century dictatorships, he also regarded his theoretical framework as intrinsically bound up with political inquiry: "Pareto's theory of derivations is a contribution to […the] psychology of interpersonal and intergroup relations, especially in the field of politics" (Aron 1974, 145). Yet, this reading cannot be ascribed to these two towering intellectuals alone. It has found expression, more or less explicitly, within a wider body of scholarship that has engaged with Pareto as a theorist of political phenomena.

Within the Italian scholarly debate, the position of Norberto Bobbio (2005) was pivotal in establishing the view of Pareto – together with Gaetano Mosca – as a founder of political science in Italy (see also Mongardini 1981, 101). Dino Fiorot's extensive study (1969) of Pareto's political realism has likewise long occupied an influential position. Throughout his book, Fiorot foregrounds what he terms Pareto's "empirical theory of politics" and highlights both Pareto's personal engagement in politics and his scientific interest in political phenomena. Carlo Mongardini, too, emphasised that the most consequential part of Pareto's *œuvre* lies in his political writings, going so far as to suggest – provocatively – that even if the *Trattato* had never been written, the core of Paretian thought would nonetheless have remained intact. Pareto's enduring relevance, Mongardini argues, resides above all in his study of power, in his critique of ideologies, and in his complex understanding of democracy (Mongardini 1981, 1984, 21).

An exhaustive appraisal of Pareto's political analysis and position can be found in the second volume of Fiorenzo Mornati's intellectual biography. Here, however, the focus shifts to biographical and intellectual contextualisation: Mornati shows that, already in the closing years of the 19th century, Pareto had begun to articulate the idea that every society necessarily requires a form of political organisation, had developed a strong interest in political elites, and was able to initiate a political reflection that would take a more systematic form in the following years (Mornati 2018, see in particular the chapters "Pareto as Observer of the Italian and Swiss Political Scenes" and "Further General Reflections on Politics").

In the Anglophone literature, Richard Bellamy (1987, 12) argues that Pareto's "disappointment with Italian politics is indeed the key to his sociological thought". Accordingly, Bellamy discerns a clear line of continuity linking Pareto's early writings to his later work, the interests and ideals of the young man providing the intellectual "background to his later criticism". Joseph Femia's book (2006) on *Pareto and Political Theory* relates Pareto's "Science of Politics" to his theory of residues and derivations. In a manner akin to Aron, Femia thus places "Paretian

psychology" in a direct and systematic relation to politics. Finally, Alasdair J. Marshall's *Re-Reading Pareto on Elite Power and Societal Bipolarisation* links his own "metapolitical" reflection to Pareto's elite theory and offers a distinctive interpretation of the "growing division" between "relatively liberal elites" and "relatively conservative non-elites" in contemporary societies (Marshall 2025, 21). In so doing, Marshall contributes to elucidating some possible political-theoretical implications underlying Paretian sociology, even with explicit reference to the present.

That Pareto harboured a strong interest in political matters is beyond dispute. He entered the intellectual arena as a thinker animated by political concerns and, despite the many changes his thought underwent, he left it in much the same posture (see Bellamy 1987; Mongardini 1981). His first political writings date back to the 1870s, while his final work assumes the form of a political "testament" (Barbieri 2023; Pareto 1923, in SP, vol. II). It is, however, quite another matter to claim that politics occupied a central and constant role throughout his intellectual development. This chapter suggests that political phenomena – and Italian politics above all, which Pareto followed with acuity – prompted a set of questions that both predated and helped to shape the systematic elaboration of his sociology of action. While his sociology ultimately presents itself as a comprehensive account of the social system, it is, from its very inception, permeated by a persistent concern with politics. Underlying this perspective is the idea that, in Pareto's vision, the social and the political are inextricably intertwined.

The chapter aims to substantiate this claim despite two potential difficulties. The first concerns the uneasy distinction between Pareto's scientific engagement with politics and his own political stance. The second concerns the absence, in Pareto's thought, of an explicit definition of politics and, more broadly, of "the political" itself. What can be stated with certainty is that Pareto does not conceive of political phenomena in a narrow sense. Rather, he situates them within a complex web of sociological relations, thereby rendering them inseparable from the social domain itself, of which they constitute – if not the most significant – then certainly one of the most influential elements.

To begin with, it is necessary to address, from the outset, the elephant in the room: what is the role, in the reading advanced here, of Pareto's major work, the *Trattato*? Published in 1916, it represents the culmination of a long and exacting intellectual labour, to which Pareto devoted himself over many years and which, for a time, appeared to him as a task of uncertain viability. In his correspondence with Maffeo Pantaleoni, Pareto repeatedly expresses doubts about the very possibility of the enterprise, thereby revealing the depth of the difficulties he confronted.

> As for the Sociology, it will take years before I publish it. One must first reflect, work, gather documents, and so forth, and so forth.
>
> (Letter to Maffeo Pantaleoni, 14 June 1897)

> …I do not know whether I shall live long enough to accomplish the work.
>
> (Letter to Maffeo Pantaleoni, 11 November 1897)

Pareto's concerns are hardly surprising given the scope and complexity of the *Trattato*, which has often been characterised as "monstrous" (Bobbio 1964, XVI; Femia 2006, 1). Interestingly, a close examination of its internal structure shows that the social system becomes the explicit object of analysis only in the final two chapters (*Chapter XII* and *Chapter XIII*). The bulk of the *Trattato* is closer to what might be described as "social psychology" (Bobbio 1964, XVIII) and is organised around the study of logical and non-logical actions and the theory of residues and derivations. The final two chapters are also those in which political phenomena come most clearly to the fore. Especially in *Chapter XII* (and in a short section of *Chapter XI*), Pareto addresses issues such as the problem of political rule, demagogic plutocracy, and the distinction between elected and non-elected classes, systematically applying his theory of residues and derivations. However, taken in isolation, the *Trattato* cannot suffice to establish the centrality of politics for Pareto. Nor is Bobbio's argument that the *Trattato*

is essentially a vast book on (political) ideologies (Bobbio 1964, XXXIII) sufficient to warrant such a conclusion.

The picture changes when one considers the development of Pareto's thought over time. Political concerns are already discernible as early as 1872 and persist in the years that follow, as Pareto delivers speeches and produces a body of writings that may properly be regarded as political in character. Only two years after completing his degree in engineering, and more than four decades before the publication of the *Trattato*, he was already reflecting on questions concerning the functions and tasks of government, the meaning of political representation, and the nature of power. Notably, several concepts that would later recur throughout his work already make their appearance at this stage, including those of *force* and *deception* (Pareto 1872a, in SP, vol. I, 37). During this early phase, Pareto also articulates clear positions on universal suffrage, on the problem of voters' political competence, and on the nature of the vote itself – whether it should be understood as a universally conferred right or as an instrument reserved for a qualified minority in the interest of effective government (Pareto 1872b, in SP, vol. I; see also Fiorot 1969, 12).

It is also well known that Pareto conducted an intense free-trade campaign, pursued, among other venues, through a series of contributions to leading journals such as the *Revue des deux mondes*, the *Journal des Économistes*, *Le Monde économique*, and the *Giornale degli economisti* (Mornati 2018, 41). For some years, he also actively entered the political arena, an involvement he would soon abandon after a series of disillusionments (Fiorot 1969, 15). In a letter to his friend Pantaleoni, who had invited him to participate in the forthcoming political elections, Pareto expresses himself in unambiguous terms:

> Your idea that I should present myself as a candidate made me laugh. My friend, these things are not for me. It is likely that I shall never return to Italy. I shall remain here [in Lausanne], where I am comfortable, and I no longer wish to concern myself with anything other than the study of science, without bothering to straighten the legs

> of those who have them crooked. You, who see things in a more favourable light, would do well to put yourself forward. I hope you succeed – not for your own sake, since it is hardly an honour to go and sit among those rascals, but because perhaps you might manage to do something beneficial to the country. I say perhaps, because with all that scoundrelly lot there is always the possibility that you will be preaching in the desert.
>
> (Letter to Maffeo Pantaleoni, 20 May 1896)

As has been observed, Pareto's early political experiences proved decisive in shaping his understanding of politics as a concrete exercise of power, and of power itself as something intrinsically malign (Busino 1987, 10). This outlook emerges in his recurrent allusions to "rascals", to the "scoundrelly lot", to politicians "united in a sort of medieval confraternity" (quoted in Mornati 2018, 277), and even to the "most influential electors" – that is, those local power brokers whose electoral influence perpetuates entrenched forms of clientelism (Pareto 1892a, 1892b, 1892c, in OC, vol. 16). Such language shows that Pareto's approach to politics is framed less in terms of political systems or institutional arrangements than in terms of the concrete *individuals* and *groups* who operate within them. The same considerations apply to Pareto's analysis of crises and imbalances in economic growth, which he partially attributes to the "intrigues" of the *consorteria* (Busino 1987, 21). It is, in his view, deal-makers and social climbers who inflict damage on the economy – and, ultimately, on the functioning of the state itself. This is why, in a note written in 1894 to a group of young Milanese republicans, in which Pareto reflects on the condition of Italy and its possible future trajectories, he affirms:

> Esteemed Gentlemen,
>
> I was pleased to see that your circle expressed words of disapproval regarding the outrages of which the Italian people are victims; and since on many matters I am in agreement with you, I write to you, moved by the desire to state in Italy what I shall shortly publish

> abroad. Once before, Giuseppe Mazzini, exiled in foreign lands to escape the *misgovernment* of kings and their henchmen, branded with words that will remain eternal those who *exploited* Italy; and the example of so great a master assures me that an Italian does not err who publishes, wherever he can, the *crimes* that are now being committed to the *detriment* of the people. The condition of our fatherland has now come to this: that every liberty has been extinguished except that of *theft* for the politicanti, and that everything is done to extinguish in the popular conscience every upright and honest sentiment. We have sunk to such depths of ignominy that those who ought to see to the enforcement of the laws are the first to violate them; and in judicial proceedings sentences take their rule not from the conscience of magistrates but from the will of ministers. […]. Truly, our times recall those in which Gladstone said that the government of the Bourbons was the negation of God; and yet under that government the Sicilian peasants were no worse off than they are today. The revolution has indeed made Mr Crispi a minister, but what relief has it brought to those wretches*? Our politicanti have stripped themselves of all modesty, of all shame, and like prostitutes they take pride in their sordid conduct* […].
>
> (Pareto 1894a, in SP, vol. I, 711–712, emphasis added)

Such criticism, initially directed against the old reactionary bourgeoisie and later reformulated to denounce the collusion of socialism with the ruling elites (Bellamy 1987, 21; Fiorot 1969, 62, n. 56), constitutes an essential starting point for understanding Pareto's political reflection; all the more so in that they are directed at concrete actors, thereby manifesting what would remain a constant feature of the Paretian approach, namely the rejection of abstract categories (Susca 2023, 17 and 48ff; see also Pizzorno 1973). Pareto conceives of the "state", for example, as merely "an abstract word". In concrete terms, he insists, "we are concerned only with governments, and it is of these alone that one can meaningfully speak if one wishes to remain within the bounds of reality" (Pareto 1894b, in SP, vol. I, 748; see also

Mornati 2018, 274). A similar stance emerges in his brief critique of the French sociologist Louis Wuarin, in which he rejects the various abstract "expressions" used to describe the state – expressions that "we unfortunately fail to comprehend"; "where is this thing that Wuarin calls the state? It is a mere abstraction. In reality we know only men who are governed and other men who govern" (Pareto 1895, in SP, vol. I, 937–938).

Against this background, Pareto develops a broader reflection on the characterisation of power holders, the functions they perform, and the extent to which they may prove beneficial or harmful to society (Pareto 1895, in SP, vol. I, 938). Pursuing this line of inquiry further, while also introducing a critical note with regard to socialism, he asks how a relatively small political and economic group can secure power and establish its dominance over others. Here, one may already discern some of the central themes that would later inform his theory of elites:

> A problem that is far from resolved in economic history is that of understanding how a class – often composed of a relatively small number of individuals – can impose its dominance over an entire country. In the past, such facts were commonly attributed solely to the use of force; any exploitation of a people was regarded as tyrannical. From this, it was inferred that a free people could never be despoiled by those who govern it. After all, this is precisely the principle that underlies every socialist doctrine. By entrusting the government with the task of organising the production and distribution of wealth, one assumes as a *postulate* that it will not abuse the immense power thus placed in its hands.
>
> (Pareto 1894c, 4)

In the years that followed, Pareto's focus on ruling elites, the crisis of the bourgeoisie, and the promises of emerging socialism increasingly led economic and political analysis to converge within an ever more systematic sociological framework. Building on the methodological innovations introduced in the *Cours d'économie politique* (Pareto 1896–1897), Pareto's

thinking grew in complexity and depth, while his writings outlined themes that would later be developed more fully and systematically in the *Trattato* (Portinaro 2012). This is the case, for instance, of "Un'applicazione di teorie sociologiche", published in the *Rivista italiana di sociologia* (Pareto 1900, in SSM), *Les systèmes socialistes* (1902), the *Manuale di economia politica* (1906), and "Rentiers et spéculateurs", published in *L'Indépendance* (Pareto 1911a, in SSM; for a detailed discussion of the "development of Pareto's sociological thought", see Mongardini 1984, 14ff.). In the latter, Pareto gives a political inflection to the distinction between the economic categories of rentiers and speculators, associating the former with conservative and nationalist orientations and the latter with progressive and internationalist tendencies. He also draws out the broader political implications of their relationship for the functioning of society as a whole:

> From an abstract and scientific point of view, one may distinguish between "the saver," who lives solely on the interest from his savings, and "the entrepreneur", who offers on the market both the services of savings and other forms of capital, as well as the labour of workers. These are the two categories on which we shall focus […]. In every age their existence has been observed, yet insufficient attention has been paid to the social importance they possess. The first category is largely conservative, hostile to novelty, always somewhat fearful of it, patriotic, nationalist. The second category, by contrast, is innovative, constantly on the lookout everywhere for opportunities to carry out profitable operations, internationalist, since it is able to exercise its activity everywhere and, for it, money ultimately has no homeland. In the first category are found the "rooted," in the second the "uprooted." Literature has described at length the extreme types of these two categories. On the one hand, the petty bourgeoisie – shopkeeping, small-owning – rooted in its locality like an oyster to its shell, with narrow ideas and tenacious prejudices. On the other hand, the inhabitant of *Cosmopolis*, who everywhere considers himself at home,

> broad-minded, ironically smiling at prejudices – whether religious ideas or the idea of the fatherland – very often perceiving in men nothing more than means for making a fortune or instruments of influence.
>
> (Pareto 1911a, in SSM, 416-417)

> The first category is that which gives stability to nations; it is the ballast of the ship. The second category is that which imparts movement and progress; [This category constitutes the] sails of the vessel.
>
> (Pareto 1911a, in SSM, 417)

> The countries that are most prosperous economically and politically are those in which the two categories exist in a certain proportion.
>
> (Pareto 1911a, in SSM, 419)

Pareto's critique of pseudo-scientific theories and political ideologies likewise predates the sociological treatment elaborated in the *Trattato*. As Portinaro (2012, n.p.) recalls, Pareto's reflection was shaped to a considerable extent by his growing disenchantment with the ideology that had been hegemonic among the "innovative social forces of the 19th century" – namely liberalism. With *Les Systèmes socialistes* – which Portinaro describes as "the original laboratory of Pareto's sociology" – the target of critique shifts toward socialism, leading Pareto to reflect on the opposition between rationality and rationalisation, associated with liberalism, and faith and sentiment, associated with socialism (Portinaro 2012, n.p.). Busino (1987, 14) likewise suggests that, in *Les Systèmes socialistes*, liberalism appears as a doctrine grounded in reason, whereas socialism draws its strength from its capacity to mobilise sentiments through myths and narratives that give expression to humanity's aspiration to transcend its own condition. In other words, liberalism is no less an ideology than socialism and, as such, neither amounts to more than a pseudo-logical construction. At the same time, however, the different types

of ideology they represent recall the distinction between the logical and the non-logical, with liberalism standing closer to the former and socialism to the latter. Consequently, socialism possesses a far greater mobilising potential than liberalism, just as non-logical actions are more numerous, powerful, and influential than logical ones (Busino 1987, 14). If this interpretation is correct, it not only reveals Pareto's lucidity in distinguishing the two ideologies on the basis of their capacity for mobilisation, but also demonstrates the early intersection, in Pareto's thought, between the analysis of human behaviour and political ideology.

A few years after *Les Systèmes socialistes*, Pareto returned to his critique of ideologies in *Le Mythe vertuiste et la littérature immorale* (Pareto 1911b). Here, his reflection takes on a demystifying function with regard to "moralistic hypocrisy" (Portinaro 2012, n.p.), while emphasising – as will be seen in *Chapter 2* – the role assumed by virtuosity in phases of systemic crisis. In these years, the contours of Pareto as a "thinker of decline" (Portinaro 2023a) came into sharper focus – the Pareto who would later devote his full attention to the exhaustion of the plutocratic cycle and to the terminal phases of demagogic plutocracy. What gradually takes shape is the profile of an intellectual keenly attuned to processes of social change (Busino 1987, 18ff; Mongardini 1981, 104), and above all to moments of crisis, rupture, and radical transformation.

Upon closer examination, this sensitivity appears closely bound up with the historical context in which Pareto lived (Bellamy 1987, 20–21; see also Barbieri 2025). Before his eyes stood the Italy of the unrest of 1898 and its repression, which contributed to a deepening strain of pessimism (Busino 1987, 9–10; Fiorot 1969, 28). It is the Italy of the first organised mass movements; the Italy of a succession of governments that proved unable to fulfil the functions of a ruling class confronted with the challenges of the age, in which the "social foundation of the oligarchic state of the old ruling classes had become too weak" (Mongardini 1990, 70). In *De liberté économique et les événements d'Italie* (Pareto 1898), Pareto offers a penetrating diagnosis of the socio-economic and psychological causes of the "malaise afflicting Italian society" (Busino 1987, 12). Among the

principal causes of Italy's troubles, he includes protectionism and militarism. Again, however, the focus is on the individuals and groups holding the reins of power. There are industries, says Pareto, "that survive only by despoiling taxpayers, thanks to the complicity of *politicians*. Wealth is no longer sought through honest labour, but through intrigue and corruption within the public authorities" (Pareto 1898, 1–2, emphasis added). Long before his conceptualisation of plutocratic demagogy, Pareto thus highlights the collusion between political and economic actors (see *Chapter 5*), going so far as to assert that "one does not become a deputy, nor govern the country, except by promising posts – many posts – to the electors. The state provides the greater part"; enterprises subsidised by the state "provide the rest" (Pareto 1898, 2).

No deterministic continuity should be posited between the young Pareto and the thinker of his later years. However, the analogies cannot be minimised. His agent-centred perspective remains constant, although he introduces central references to more structural phenomena such as the erosion of state sovereignty. The theme of social and political decline becomes progressively more prominent, and both in the *Trattato* and in his later writings, demagogic plutocracy comes to describe a specific condition of liberal and parliamentary orders in which effective power is shared among restricted political and economic groups in instrumental alliance with the working class (Pareto 1921, tr. 1984). The correspondence from his final years abounds in reflections on politics, as well as in doubts, preoccupations concerning the future of the state, and meditations on both the impending exhaustion of the historical cycle Pareto believes to have discerned and the emergence of a "new aristocracy" destined to assume leadership in the transition towards the "new order". As Malandrino (2013, n.p.) emphasises, Pareto's political positions vary across different phases. They evolve from initial liberal-pacifist sympathies and an interest in socialism, viewed as a possible expression of a new elite, to a firm critique of socialism and the post-unification liberal ruling class. This critique continues into the post-war crisis, as Pareto looks with interest upon early Fascism, interpreting it as a reaction to the instability of liberal elites and to

socialist inadequacy. Yet what ultimately imparts continuity to his intellectual biography is the enduring effort to grasp the political, which constitutes the “true impulse” animating his studies from “his earliest interest in economics” onward (Mongardini 1990, 107), and which, over time, evolves in response to the social, political, and economic transformations that he witnesses.

The Intersection of Sociology and Political Theory

Once the centrality of the political dimension within Pareto's intellectual development is recognised, his work may be approached not merely as a contribution to sociology in general, but also as a substantial contribution to political thought. At the same time, however, Pareto remains a sociologist and a theorist of human action, and his political analysis remains embedded within a broader sociological framework. This, in turn, invites a careful inquiry into the points of convergence between social and political theory. The aim here is not to engage directly with specific aspects of Pareto's work – addressed in the following chapters – but rather to identify some of the core features of his sociological and political-theoretical outlook.

A crucial point concerns *political action* as a special kind of social action (Fiorot 1969, 347; Sola 2005, 64). Admittedly, Pareto does not elaborate a theory of political action comparable to that developed, for example, by Raymond Aron (1973; 1997). Nevertheless, as Schumpeter observes (1949, 167–168, emphasis added), one of his central interests is to understand "what it really is that determines *political action* and the *fate* of states and civilizations". By linking these two elements, Schumpeter highlights the decisive role of political agency in historical development – a theme that runs through both Pareto's work and Aron's, the latter explicitly connecting the analysis of historical causality to that of political action (see, above all, Aron 1990). History unfolds largely through human action and through the *meanings* individuals and groups attribute to it. This perspective, at once realist and actor-centred, certainly *does not imply a wholly unconstrained political agency* – Pareto's theory, of course, contains significant deterministic elements. However, it stands in marked contrast to historical materialism, which locates the driving force of historical development in the ownership of the means of production – namely, in an "impersonal socio-economic fact" (Mongardini 2011, 208). By directing attention to the individuals and groups who exercise power or strive to obtain it, Pareto's point of view also departs from the classical typology of regimes – e.g. monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy – on the premise that every political

order is ultimately governed by a minority (von Beyme 1992, 220). Political society is structured around hierarchical relations of power, and it is the psycho-social disposition of those who rule that shapes the form of the political regime. Pareto can be regarded as a theorist of the *homo politicus*, who is engaged in power-oriented conduct while simultaneously generating political meanings (Mongardini 2000). He conceptualises political behaviour as arising from the interaction of non-logical dispositions, interests, and ideological constructions (see *Chapter 2* and *Chapter 5*), in a manner that continues to surpass contemporary strictly rationalistic accounts of political agency.

A second key element lies in the fact that Pareto's conception of politics presupposes a plurality of levels of analysis. On the one hand, although Pareto does not explicitly frame it in these terms, politics may be understood as designating a distinct "sector" of the social system. It constitutes the *locus* of specific groups occupying a privileged position vis-à-vis the rest of society and of the exercise of political power, understood both as the capacity to impose decisions (Sola 2006, 91) and as a resource to be acquired and maintained (Sola 2005, 68). At the same time, it also points to the potential degeneration of that capacity into forms of abuse, usurpation, and corruption (Belligni 2000). In other words, politics appears as the "domain" of the *politicanti*, as an affair of the upper classes (see, for example, Pareto TSG § 1499; § 2033; § 2584), closely tied to the institutions – such as Parliament and government – through which they participate in the production of collectively binding decisions (Bobbio 2016, 713). In more contemporary terms, politics may be understood as coinciding with the political-institutional sphere and with the realm of (professional) politicians, as well as factions and cliques (Mongardini 2004, 32). This sphere is characterised by distinct levels of openness and closure: one may gain access to it, yet one may equally remain excluded from it (as will be argued in *Chapter 5*, one of its defining features lies for Pareto in its relationship with the economic sphere). On the other hand, it should be emphasised that, rather than developing a theory of political institutions, Pareto elaborates a theory of *political society* (Freund 1974, 141). In this

respect, politics is not confined to any distinct sphere, but refers instead to a broad and complex set of relations (Mongardini 2011). More specifically, it emerges in the relations between elites and non-elites, as well as in intra-elite dynamics. Power is once again conceived as a resource to be acquired and maintained, yet one that is diffused among multiple social forces within a context of social heterogeneity (Giovannini 2017). Accordingly, the very concept of power comes to encompass specific psychological and sociological components (Mongardini 2004, 30), including the structure and composition of social and political groups, the relational and interactional dynamics characterising them, processes of political (de)legitimation, processes of internalisation (or rejection) of authority, and so forth. In this respect, the Paretian approach is distinguished by its capacity to connect *social theory*, which "focuses on the nature of society and/or human sociality" (Helliwell and Hindess 2006, 811), with political theory.

A third aspect concerns *political realism*, with Pareto standing as one of its most authoritative representatives in 20th-century Italian and European thought. As is widely recognised, Pareto's reflection centres upon "factual reality"; in particular, the question of power emerges as one of the central problems of his political analysis, placing him in clear contrast to ideal political theory (Femia 2013). Pareto's focus on the distribution of power, the modes of its exercise, its transformation, and the conflicts surrounding it justifies his portrayal as one of the pioneers of modern political science, at least insofar as the latter may be defined as "the study of the shaping and sharing of power" (Lasswell and Kaplan 1950, XIV; see also Goodin 2009, 6). Within this framework, Pareto displays – much like Machiavelli before him – a keen sensitivity to the distinction between "things as they are" and "things as they appear", the latter being endowed with a distinctive potential for mobilisation and manipulation:

> If someone who desires or who wishes to reform a state in a city wishes it to be accepted and capable of being maintained to the satisfaction of everyone, he is under the necessity of retaining at least the shadow of its ancient modes so that it may not appear to the

> peoples to have changed its order even if in fact the new orders are altogether alien to the past ones. For the generality of men feed on what appears as much as on what is; indeed, many times they are moved more by things that appear than by things that are.
>
> (Machiavelli 1996, 60)

Yet the matter proves to be more complex than this. The specificity of Pareto's realism lies in its refusal to fully subordinate the ideal and the ideological to the concrete reality of power; rather, it considers them as expressions of a persistent human need for rationalisation (see *Chapter 2*). Pareto acknowledges the inevitability – and, in certain respects, the utility – of a *political imaginary* rooted in pre-political human needs. Especially in its ideological form, imagined reality may also "act back" upon those needs (Maniscalco 1994, 150), thereby reshaping the very conditions from which it originates. This has prompted some scholars to ask whether Pareto's political-realist paradigm incorporates elements that may be described as social constructivist in orientation (Bach 2026). Such an interpretation may at first appear unconventional; yet there are, in fact, good reasons to support it. Political realism "is not a banal positivism of factuality". Its "cognitive strategy" is grounded in the "dialectic between reality and appearance" (Portinaro 2023b, 14). As Portinaro recalls, by confronting the real with the apparent, political realism reveals the "hidden" and "secret" dimensions of politics. What makes the difference is precisely how the "hidden" is understood. Pareto's sociological orientation accords a central role to imagination in social and political life, treating it not only as something to be demystified, but also as a constitutive dimension of human action. Although, then, the usual comparisons with Karl Marx's theory of ideology are undoubtedly of interest (see, for example, Farias 1977; Susca 2023), Pareto offers a broader and original contribution to the study of the relationship between the real and the ideal, situating itself both within the framework of political realism and extending beyond it. In this regard, his theory lends itself to comparison with Gaetano Mosca's distinction between the two "orders of things" in human history – the intellectual and moral, on

the one hand, and the material, on the other (Mosca 1962); with Alexis de Tocqueville's reflections on the *croyances dogmatiques*; and with Jeremy Bentham's reflection on *political fallacies* (Portinaro 2017).

In view of the considerations advanced thus far, the Paretian approach to political phenomena may be seen as opening horizons that remain only partially explored and that may prove relevant for contemporary political analysis, particularly insofar as the latter is sociologically informed. Pareto's agent-oriented focus restores attention to concrete actors – leaders, elites, and organised groups. In contrast to approaches grounded in impersonal determining factors, such as those associated with Marxism, this perspective allows for a more nuanced appreciation of the role played by subjective factors in shaping political life, and at the same time embeds them within a broader sociological understanding of social and political behaviour. Since Pareto takes the non-rational dimension of political action so seriously, it may also be worth considering whether a Paretian standpoint can help explain why individuals sometimes act in ways that appear to run counter to their material interests, as is often observed, for example, in electoral behaviour. This does not imply that voters act irrationally; rather, it suggests that *non*-rational factors of a cultural, symbolic, emotional, or identitarian character may at times prevail over narrowly material considerations. The complex relationship between voters' political orientations and their material interests has been widely debated, most notably following the publication of *What's the Matter with Kansas?* (Frank 2004). In Kansas, segments of the working-class electorate shifted toward the Republican Party despite its support for economic policies that often conflicted with their material interests, as cultural and social issues helped redirect political attention away from economic concerns. A comparable dynamic can be observed in Germany, where the far-right party Alternative für Deutschland partially attracts support among less advantaged groups, despite the weak alignment between their material interests and the party's economic programme (Diermeier 2020). One of the most significant examples, however, concerns the Brexit referendum, in which several areas that had strongly benefited from European structural funds voted in favour

of leaving the European Union. Studies show that economically disadvantaged regions dependent on EU funding, such as Cornwall, expressed strong support for the Leave campaign. The literature suggests that this choice was not primarily driven by an evaluation of the European Union as such, but rather by a widespread sense of economic uncertainty, social insecurity, and frustration with political decision-making and the distribution of resources (Willett et al. 2019).

The reappraisal of the non-rational motives appears equally fruitful in the domain of *policy*. In the conventional distinction between polity, politics, and policy, the latter is usually associated with a more "procedural" or "technical" dimension, encompassing governmental choices, the formulation of public policies, and the procedures and outcomes of decision-making (Mongardini 2011, 33; Sola 2005, 50). From a Paretian standpoint, one may question whether an overly rationalistic understanding of policy risks abstracting decision-making from the actors who enact it and from their broader sociological and political context. To some extent, it may be argued that the general understanding of policy has moved beyond such limitations, and that "references to 'rationalist' policymaking are part of a needless 'strawman' argument to boost new approaches" (Cairney 2023, 1821). However, the issue is far from negligible, particularly in light of the persistent attempt by both "scientists and policymakers" to ground public decisions in scientific knowledge, thereby producing a form of *scientism* that may prove both problematic and harmful (Cairney 2023, 1821–1822). Critical scholarship of policymaking emphasises that decision-making processes are deeply embedded in political contexts and shaped by competing interests and values. Accordingly, scientific tools such as cost-benefit analysis cannot neutralise the inherently political dimension of decision-making. This constitutes a central point which, as will be shown in *Chapter 5*, connects directly with Pareto's analysis of fiscal policy.

Finally, there remains the question of political realism. Aron criticised the "Machiavellians", among whom he included Pareto, for their reductive cynicism. In his view, they focused exclusively on the struggle for power, resting on the "great illusion" that the human aspiration to legitimate

authority and to a form of power recognised as rightful can simply be ignored or dismissed: “The great illusion of cynical thought, obsessed by the struggle for power, consists in neglecting another aspect of reality; the search for legitimate power, for recognized authority, for the *best* regime” (Aron 1968, 24). Aron rightly identifies cynicism as a possible drift within political realism. Yet, in Pareto’s case, this judgement risks being misleading. Pareto does not disregard the role of ideas; rather, he seeks to explain them as inherent elements of political action. For this reason, Pareto’s political realism – enriched by his sociological perspective – remains particularly well-suited to a more refined understanding of contemporary politics, including the role played by political ideas.

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2

DERIVATIONS AND IDEOLOGIES

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Analysis and Critique

It is widely recognised that a significant component of Pareto's thought can be understood as a critique of ideologies (see Bach 2004, 18; Bobbio 2005, 69; Lombardinilo 2021). Indeed, his political sociology is certainly characterised by a demystifying orientation: ideologies are not interpreted in terms of their internal rational coherence, but are instead traced back to the non-logical factors that constitute their effective foundations. In this respect, the occasional comparison of Pareto with Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Sigmund Freud as "masters of suspicion" (Ricoeur 1965; see, for example, Busino 1980) is instructive. It highlights a shared critical interest in ideological constructions, viewed in light of the "realities'" they tend to conceal. In other words, as suggested in *Chapter 1*, Pareto may be interpreted as a demystifier whose aim is to uncover the "hidden dimension" of politics. His critique is particularly noteworthy for its breadth: it does not single out any one ideology as its privileged target, but extends with comparable force to socialism, liberalism, and democracy, while also subjecting other central concepts of the modern political lexicon – such as "representation" and "the people" – to a rigorous scrutiny. In the following pages, I argue that interpreting Pareto as a critic of ideology is certainly justified, yet ultimately insufficient: his account of ideologies

extends beyond mere critique. I shall then attempt to delineate the contours of a contemporary Paretian theory of ideology.

The first question is how Pareto's *intentions* ought to be interpreted. His critique of ideologies has, on one influential reading, been interpreted as a critique of power and of its recurrent attempts at self-concealment (Bobbio 2005; Ziegler 1927; see also Lopreato and Ness 1966, 32). From this perspective, Pareto's thought may be situated in proximity not only to Marx's theory of ideologies, but also to Gaetano Mosca's *formula politica*, as well as to Robert Michels's analysis of oligarchies (prior to his adherence to Fascism) and their recurrent tendency to cloak power in moral legitimation (Michels 1908, 1911; Mosca 1923). An alternative line of interpretation – one that takes into account, and at times overemphasises, Pareto's interest in Fascism during the final years of his life – attributes a more specific political valence to his attack on democracy, liberalism, and parliamentarism. Pareto's critique, together with his theses concerning the necessity of force (on force, cunning, and deceit, see Adair-Toteff 2025, 3ff; see also Arendt 1970, 65–72), has led many commentators to portray him as an anti-democrat and a proto-fascist (Borkenau 1936; Faris 1936; von Wiese 1936; on Raymond Aron's interpretation see Campbell 1986). On this reading, Pareto may be situated in closer proximity to Michels in the 1920s, as the latter progressively gravitated towards Fascism (Michels 1924, 2026; see also de Ghantuz Cubbe 2026). It is difficult to deny that Pareto showed little concern about whether his critique of democracy might be invoked as a point of reference for Fascism. On the contrary, the "Fascist upheaval", he wrote, had contributed to "liberating" the country from "democratic and demagogic ideology" (Pareto 1923a, in SSM, 1157; see also Barbieri 2003, 2024).

And yet it is necessary to take a step back and clarify what is meant by *ideology*, as well as by *critique*. A central difficulty confronting any scholar of Pareto lies in the fact that he himself rarely employs the word ideology. Moreover, a persistent degree of terminological and conceptual indeterminacy characterises the interpretation of his writings: indeed, distinct notions have often been treated as interchangeable – among them

beliefs, pseudo-scientific theories, doctrines, ideologies, and, most importantly, derivations. In this respect, some clarifications are in order:

1. Derivations, in sociological terms, represent a form of *sense-making* that Pareto does not subject to critique, but rather describes and analyses as a constitutive element of human conduct. They are not, as such, to be "demystified". The task of the social scientist is to identify them and move beyond them – toward the underlying residues to which they are connected.
2. Sense-making may "crystallise" into beliefs as well as into more specific and structured systems of thought, which can assume a pseudo-scientific character and take the form of pseudo-theories.
3. Some forms of sense-making acquire the features of political ideologies, including the formulation of political goals, the selection of means for their attainment, and the fulfilment of a mobilising function.
4. Both pseudo-theories and political ideologies are characterised by a strong communicative-rhetorical element. This element, in the case of political ideologies, becomes structured around specific political aims and around struggles to acquire or maintain power.
5. Pseudo-theories, political ideologies, and the communicative-rhetorical element that accompanies them do not, in themselves, constitute deliberate or fully conscious forms of deception. Rather, they involve forms of self-deception, comparable to the way in which faith diverts the believer's attention from the empirical demonstration of what is believed. Pareto's critique is *not* directed at this aspect.
6. They assume the character of deliberate and conscious deception when they claim not only to define the ends of action, but also to provide a scientific account of reality, to present those ends as legitimised by that account, and to maintain that they are capable of full realisation.
7. Finally, deception reaches its clearest expression when elites cloak their own interests in the language of "sentimentalism", humanitarianism, and moralism.

8. It is in these last two cases (*f.* and *g.*) that Pareto assumes the role of a critic of ideologies.

Derivations are forms of (pseudo-)logical explanation (Pareto TSG § 939) applied to non-logical actions. Pareto observes: “Where there is no explaining there is no derivation; but the moment an explanation is given or sought, a derivation comes into play” (Pareto TSG § 1400). Derivations cloak residues with a veneer of rationality – though certainly not of a scientific kind – and confer upon the *subjective* dimension of action a semblance of logical coherence. This form of rationality, while lacking *objective* validity, nonetheless provides meaning to those who employ it. To clarify more precisely what derivations are, one may consider the concrete example provided by Pareto of what he calls the “alteration of integrity”. “Among many peoples non-logical feeling makes a unit of the family, which continues to figure as a unit in logical or pseudo-logical derivations” (Pareto TSG § 1231). Whenever the integrity of the family is perceived to have been disrupted, specific discourses, ideas, or ideologies may emerge with the aim of restoring it. Derivations should not be equated with any of these things; rather, they consist in the pseudo-logical *explanatory* and *justificatory* frameworks centred upon the family as a unity and the necessity of restoring its integrity. They constitute, in other words, the underlying basis of those discourses, ideas, and ideologies. Many passages in which Pareto addresses derivations confirm this analytical distinction (see also Femia 2006, 42). A clear example is found in the *Trattato*, where Pareto states that derivations “account for the *production* and *acceptance* of certain theories” (Pareto TSG § 1397, emphasis added); they are therefore not the theories themselves. Even clearer on this point is TSG §1401:

> The residues are manifestations of sentiments. The derivations comprise logical reasonings, unsound reasonings, and manifestations of sentiments used for purposes of derivation: they are manifestations of the human being’s hunger for thinking. If that hunger were satisfied by logico-experimental reasoning only, there would be no derivations;

> instead of them we should have logico-experimental theories. But the human hunger for thinking is satisfied in any number of ways: by pseudo-experimental reasonings, by words that stir the sentiments, by fatuous, inconclusive "talk." Thus derivations come into being.

Most importantly, derivations function as *socially shared* explanations. They provide the basis for a common language – a kind of "code" that enables shared processes of sense-making (on this topic, see Millefiorini 2017) and, consequently, mutual understanding among individuals and groups with regard to social action and its ends (Bobbio 1961, 381; Pareto TSG § 1747). This constitutes their intrinsic verbal-communicative significance: Derivations "are discursive in character, oriented toward verbal communication, for the most part interpersonal in nature" (Bach 2004, 12, my translation; see also Maniscalco 1994, 149). Yet, derivations do not merely provide explanations but also perform a persuasive function. They are deeply rooted in their underlying "residual" dimension, which they both *reinforce* and *sustain*. This connection is crucial, for as they lose contact with residues, their social effectiveness tends to decline. Indeed, to be effective, derivations must themselves, in a sense, be transformed into residues.

> A derivation which merely satisfies that hankering for logic which the human being feels, and which neither is transmuted into sentiments nor re-enforces sentiments, has slight if any effect on the social equilibrium. It is just a superfluity: it satisfies certain sentiments, and that is all. Briefly, but not in strict exactness, one may say that in order to influence society, theories have to be transmuted into sentiments, derivations into residues.
>
> (Pareto TSG § 1746)

In this passage, Pareto emphasises the quasi-"mobilising" capacity of derivations. Their multiple functions – explanatory, communicative, and at the same time persuasive and mobilising – lie at the core of his analysis of

beliefs, theories, and ideologies. Drawing on his well-known distinction between *truth*, *utility*, and *efficacy*, Pareto consistently maintains, across different phases of his life, that beliefs, theories, and ideologies are in themselves neither good nor bad. He accordingly approaches them from a descriptive standpoint, while also acknowledging their social function:

> The theories and the beliefs of men are the garments of sentiments.
>
> (Letter to Maffeo Pantaleoni, 24 September 1909)

> Sorel has shown very clearly the fundamental importance of myth in the life of peoples. It is the ideal, manifesting itself in the form of myth, that inspires them, carries them along, sustains them, and renders them capable of great historical action. A people that no longer has either ideals or myths merely vegetates and tends to disappear.
>
> (Pareto 1911, 127)

> Why deprive those who believe that Jupiter holds human destinies in his hands, or that holy democracy governs them, of their faith? Faith is pleasant; it can be useful; therefore, let us respect it.
>
> (Letter to Vittore Pansini, 26 June 1919)

> Reasonings too are facts, and as such they are judged by experience. Like all other objects, in order to study them it is useful to describe and classify them. This is done in part by ordinary logic; for the purposes of sociology, however, it is necessary to add other descriptions and classifications. Among these, the principal one is the distinction between logical-experimental reasonings and those that are not such. For the sake of brevity, we have designated the latter by the name of derivations. Observation shows us that certain paths lead to results that agree with the facts, while others lead to results that are in disagreement with them. Therefore, whoever desires the former ought to follow the former paths; whoever does not fear the latter may follow the latter. Yet whoever aims to persuade others, to move men, will often find it easier to profit from the latter than from the former. To

> discover geometrical relations, an Euclid is worth more than a Saint Paul; to convert men and move them, a Saint Paul is worth more than an Euclid. To know the movements of the heavenly bodies, a Laplace is worth more than a Danton; to inflame the multitudes, a Danton is worth more than a Laplace. Logical-experimental reasonings are useful for discovering relations among social facts; derivations are useful for bringing them about.
>
> (Pareto 1920, in SSM, 861–862)

Raymond Boudon (1984, 92) rightly argues that, for Pareto, the ideological phenomenon constitutes a normal component of social action. Boudon also maintains that Pareto's reflection on ideologies displays significant affinities with Max Weber's sociology of religion. Weber develops his sociology of religion in deliberate opposition to earlier theories that dismiss religion as a mere perversion of thought – an "opium of the people". Rather than reducing religious phenomena to mere illusions, he seeks to understand the meanings they acquire within the social contexts in which they are produced. Similarly, Pareto formulates his analysis of beliefs and ideologies in contrast to approaches that interpret ideologies merely as instruments of domination, manipulation, or distortion of reality (Boudon 1984, 92). Pareto's methodological starting point lies in the distinction between knowledge and concrete action (for which Pareto uses the Italian term *operare*):

> At length, in my *Sociology*, I set forth the principle that seems to me fundamental in that science, namely the usefulness of beliefs for action, and the harm they may cause for the knowledge of experimental truth. One must not, therefore, oppose faith to scientific scepticism, as is usually done, since both are *equally beneficial*, depending on the aim one pursues.
>
> (Pareto 1920, in SSM, 855, emphasis added)

Even at the cost of proceeding somewhat schematically, the central issue may be summarised with Maniscalco (1994, 151) as follows. Knowledge is linked to scientific reason, that is, to logical-experimental thinking. Action, where it is not driven by scientific knowledge, is connected with the *logic of sentiments*. Scientific reason is analytical, in the etymological sense of the term: it tends to decompose phenomena in order to understand them. The logic of sentiments, by contrast, is synthetic and tends to produce "global representations". From this, there follows a corresponding distinction between *doubt* and *faith*: science is relativistic, whereas faith is absolute. Once again, Pareto does not think in evaluative terms. It is not a matter of judging science to be good and faith to be bad, since, as noted in the quotation above, they serve different ends. On the basis of a detailed analysis of the various modes of conviction, as Bach explains, Pareto instead develops a theory of *persuasive rhetoric* centred on the question of *how* individuals can be induced – by others or by themselves – to believe in certain ideas and to carry out particular actions (Bach 2004, 315). Pareto may thus be understood as a scholar concerned with explaining the "roots" of beliefs:

> When people feel themselves carried along by a certain religious, moral, or humanitarian movement, they believe – and almost all of them in perfectly good faith – that their convictions have been formed through a series of rigorous syllogisms starting from real and indisputable facts. We shall be careful not to share this illusion, and we shall make every effort to uncover its sources.
>
> (Pareto 1902, 26)

And yet Pareto's approach to beliefs and ideologies can hardly be portrayed as wholly detached or value-neutral. Any interpretation neglecting the critical dimension of his thought, would prove entirely untenable. Indeed, his scientific stance is marked by a certain ambivalence. On the one hand, science is tasked with uncovering the "sources" of beliefs; on the other, Pareto seeks to impart a sharp lesson to the ideologues of his time,

endowing his science with the demystifying character for which it is known. What, then, induces Pareto to move from one position to the other? Given their connection with sentiments rather than with scientific rationality, beliefs tend to display a certain "impermeability" to processes of verification that expose the fallacy of logical procedures (Maniscalco 1994, 152). Accordingly, science and logical argument have limited scope when confronted with them: logical reasoning is ill-suited to calling beliefs into question. Moreover, derivations are, as an inevitable component of human conduct, "undefeatable". As Pareto observes,

> in an unscientific reasoning, if one form of derivation is demolished, another immediately is brought forward. If it is shown that the reasoning which connects a given residue with a given conclusion (the purpose) is unsound, the only result as a rule is that a new derivation takes the place of the old one which has been overthrown.
>
> (Pareto TSG § 1416)

Up to this point, once again, there is no critique. *The task of science is not to penetrate the realm of beliefs in order to demystify them*. On the contrary, Pareto argues that one shall refrain from engaging with them. For Pareto, this is a matter of priorities, but also of method and of epistemological relevance: it is of little use to dwell on the language and indefinite codes of ideologies; their analysis proves fruitful only insofar as it investigates what underlies them. Consider, for example, his attitude toward the abstract concept of democracy:

> the objective investigations that we are trying to make require an objective terminology, whereas the subjective discussions that are commonly conducted can get along with the subjective terminology of ordinary parlance. Everyone recognizes that in our day "democracy" is tending to become the political system of all civilized peoples. But what is the exact meaning of the term "democracy"? It is even more

> vague than that vaguest of terms, “religion.” We must therefore leave it to one side and turn to the facts that it covers.
>
> (Pareto TSG § 2240)

It bears emphasising that this does not entail either neglecting the range of meanings democracy may hold (Mongardini 1990, 116), nor can Pareto’s pespective be construed as a basis for diminishing democracy in favour of any purportedly “better” ideology. Pareto on several occasions exhibits a marked scepticism towards democracy, both as an abstract concept and in its concrete manifestations: in 1905, criticising the protectionist outcomes of popular referendums in Switzerland, he remarks that “democracy is the worst enemy of liberty” (Letter to Tullio Martello, 17 February 1905); in 1923, he observes that “government by the people is of little worth, and even less so that of their representatives” (Pareto 1923b, in SP, vol. II, 797). The core of Pareto’s argument is, however, not directed against the idea of democracy itself, but rather against the pseudo-scientific debates that crystallise around it. Pareto’s critique is directed at those who have taken part in such debates and, in doing so, have contributed to the construction of pseudo-theories of democracy detached from concrete social and political dynamics. *The sociologist is called upon to step in precisely when ideology seeks to intrude into the realm of science*. The problem, for Pareto, arises when ideology, through its claims, seeks to present political thinking as having moved “from utopia to science”, that is, when it attempts to transform itself into a form of “scientific politics” (Farias 1977, 117). It is at this juncture that Pareto intervenes more forcefully, since the distinction between political reality and its ideological representation is thereby dangerously obscured (Mongardini 1981, 312–313). The problem identified by Pareto, which ultimately leads back to the broader question of the relationship between science and ideology (a vast and intricate theme that would later engage thinkers of the stature of Karl Popper, Hannah Arendt, and Raymond Aron – on *scientism*, see *Chapter 5*) is applicable to virtually every political idea once it forms part of a school of thought, is incorporated into abstract argumentation and theoretical elaboration, or simply enters

public discussion through essays, books, and other writings of political and cultural relevance. It is extremely difficult to determine the point at which ideology acquires a pseudo-scientific character. Concretely, one may, for example, believe in the idea of the will of the majority or, within Marxist doctrine, in the idea of the proletariat. The problem arises when pseudo-scientific theories purport to demonstrate scientifically that the majority truly governs, or that the dictatorship of the proletariat in fact coincides with the rule of the entire organised working class. Similar arguments may apply to the notion of equality. Here Pareto directs his critique at both European and American democracy, in a way that appears strikingly topical:

> Both European and American democracies profess to be founded on principles of thorough-going equality between human beings. But the equality is strictly for men, not for women. “One man, one vote,” cry our fanatics; and they hide their faces in holy horror if someone remarks that the vote of the educated man should not be equal to the vote of the illiterate, the vote of the delinquent to the vote of the honest citizen, the vote of the ne’er-do-well to the vote of the useful citizen. There must be perfect equality, because all human beings are equal. But that fine principle is forgotten when it is a question of women. By a neat trick of sleight-of-hand, equality of human beings becomes equality of males, nay, of certain males. The very persons who regard the principle of universal suffrage as a dogma above discussion, superior to every consideration of expediency or convenience, deny suffrage to women on grounds of expediency and convenience; because, they say, votes for women would strengthen clerical or conservative parties.
>
> (Pareto TSG § 1225)

A further central element in Pareto’s thought, highlighted by Maniscalco (1983) yet only marginally explored in the broader literature, concerns the *circulation of ideologies*. Ideologies, much like elites (to be discussed in *Chapter 3* and *Chapter 4*), are not static; they circulate (Maniscalco 1983,

121–122). Each ideology is linked to a specific social group of reference (Bonabello 2000, 147) and tends to be bound to the trajectory of that group. An ideology may first assert itself in a latent form and develop even before its reference group attains power, thereby anticipating its rise (Maniscalco 1983, 122).

> At present, patriotic theology and proletarian theology, although absolutely hostile to one another, may be preparing the same result, namely the replacement of the present elite by another elite. Whether such a change will be beneficial or harmful to society as a whole, we do not know.
>
> (Pareto, *Diario*, in SP, vol. II, 879)

Conversely, social groups may come to power without yet possessing a fully articulated ideology, which then takes shape only subsequently, following their political consolidation (Maniscalco 1983, 122). Ideologies may also display varying degrees of "intensity" and effectiveness, depending on the conditions of the social group to which they are linked. Accordingly, a certain ideology will tend to spread and gain strength insofar as the group that sustains it succeeds in asserting itself and will weaken when that group enters its final phase. This path will in turn give rise to other ideological forms, such as *humanitarianism*, which Pareto explicitly associates with phases of decline (Crippen and Lopreato 1989, 80). Ideologies are therefore closely connected to the "dynamics of the formation, transformation, and decay of elites" (Maniscalco 1983, 122). For Pareto, the critique of ideologies assumes particular importance in relation to declining elites. It is essential to examine this aspect more closely.

Ideologies may perform an integrative function and contribute to the formation of consent (Bonabello 2000, 145, 148; Farias 1977, 408–409), thereby strengthening the relationship between rulers and ruled and providing those in power with a basis of legitimacy. In this sense, they can become a pillar of authority, entrusted with advancing a specific social and political order, while also facilitating communication between elites and

non-elites. To this end, the action of elites is crucial: they must know how to "make use of existing sentiments", seeking consent and employing techniques of persuasion, yet without attempting to "violently alter" those sentiments: "[p]olicies of governments are the more effective, the more adept they are at utilizing existing residues, the less effective, less skilful, and in general total failures when they set out to change residues by force" (Pareto TSG § 2247). This is the reason why Pareto warns against those who use government to impose their own sentiments on others (Pareto 1923b, in SSM, 796). At the same time, ideologies may foster *conflict* (Maniscalco 1983, 121). However dominant an ideology may appear in a given historical phase, a *plurality* of ideologies is always present. They may enter into dialogue, but they may also stand in opposition, often culminating in open conflict.

In this respect, Pareto underlines the centrality of the derivation of the "collective interest", which belongs to the third class of derivations (see Femia 2006, 43–45). Through it, specific claims and interests are justified and reinforced in the name of the common good (Maniscalco 1983, 126). This type of derivation can be used by all parties in conflict: it may serve emerging groups opposed to a dominant elite (the proletariat invoking revolution in the name of all), as well as the dominant elites seeking to justify their power and defend their position:

> This type of derivation is very generally used by people who want something and pretend to be asking for it not for themselves but in behalf of the community. A certain number of politicians want something for themselves. They ask for it in the name of party, city, country. Certain factory-hands want better conditions. What they demand is a betterment in the conditions of the "proletariat" or the "working-classes". A group of manufacturers want a favour from the government for their particular industry. They ask for it as a help to business in general or as a benefit to the working-classes. For more than a half-century past, "speculators" […] have been astute enough to win favour after favour from our various governments, and bigger and

> bigger ones, by asking for them in the interests of the labouring classes or even in the "public interest" (Pareto TSG § 1498).

Especially during "ascendant" phases, emerging elites take on the task of pursuing central social and political goals in the name of the entire collectivity, while, displaying a marked willingness to resort to force in order to achieve them. Once the acute phase of conflict has come to an end, the very same elites, now in power, seek to consolidate and maintain consent. Yet, inexorably, faith in the once ascending ideology wanes, and true believers are replaced by mere opportunists (Maniscalco 1983, 122). The elites lose contact with the masses and come, in turn, to lose faith in their own ideology, while emerging groups with alternative ideologies aspire to power. Gradually, conflict intensifies again.

The growing erosion of the governing elites' legitimacy deepens the perceived divide between those "who have" (power, resources, and so forth) and those "who do not have", that is, between "the privileged" and the "non-privileged". On the one hand, the lower strata increasingly come to see the governing elites as no longer possessing a legitimate claim to power, and they grow convinced that the struggle to replace them is carried out in the name of the general interest (Maniscalco 1983, 127–128). On the other hand, the governing elites are compelled to devise ways of compensating for the weakening of their ideological basis and justifying their privileged position. In this phase, humanitarian and egalitarian sentiments, rooted in the residues of the fourth class (*sociability*), play a central role.

Within the fourth class, Pareto places humanitarianism in the subclass of residues of *pity*, and more specifically of *self-pity extended to others* (Pareto TSG § 1138; § 1139). His line of reasoning is as follows. Some individuals or social groups tend to attribute their unprivileged condition to society. By analogy, they infer that other individuals or groups are likewise victims of the same social conditions. In reality, however, even when acting in good faith, these individuals and groups pursue their own interests and needs, which they then generalise through pseudo-logical reasoning (Pareto TSG § 1141). The potential of these sentiments is clear: they may "drive

individuals to rebellion and murder" (Pareto TSG § 1140). Accordingly, they may easily be directed against the "privileged", who are the first to be held responsible for the condition of the "non-privileged". One may consider the example Pareto offers of intellectuals (Pareto TSG § 1139). Intellectuals are convinced that they do not occupy a sufficiently prominent position within the social hierarchy and harbour resentment towards the wealthy and the broader high society. They may thus come to believe that the poor and the marginalised are also victims of the "privileged" and may regard them as allies. Socialism, too, in turn, is linked to the emergence of sentiments of pity and to the attempt to alleviate the suffering that gives rise to them, thereby encouraging the lower strata to engage in claims-making and contentious action (Maniscalco 1983, 127). For these reasons, pity and humanitarianism provoke an alteration within the various subclasses of the residues of sociability: they alter the *sentiments of hierarchy*, as well as those associated with *superiors and inferiors*, because they call into question the legitimacy of existing hierarchical distinctions. At the same time, they produce a kind of "suicide" of the governing elites, who come to contribute to the delegitimation of their own position through egalitarian logics, bind themselves to abstract principles (egalitarianism, the myth of progress, and so forth), and lose sight of the concrete conditions of society (Maniscalco 1983, 129).

Although Pareto's line of argument may at times appear intricate, his intention remains clear: to demonstrate how the mobilisation of humanitarian sentiments comes, for the governing elites, to approximate a form of self-dissolution (Maniscalco 1983, 127; Susca 2023, 75). That said, Pareto's aim is not to underscore social hierarchy as such, nor to offer a kind of "handbook" for the defence of ruling elites. Rather, the central point is that humanitarianism, sentimentalism, and similar ideologies perform little, if any, (integrative) function within the social system (Pareto TSG § 1859) and, above all, constitute forms of deception against which Pareto pointedly cautions. It is the case of

> those who condemn wars of whatever description. They dwell chiefly on the sufferings of the killed and the wounded, never stopping to consider the advantages a war may have won. But not a few such sentimentalists of this type readily forget their declamations when other sentiments gain the upper hand. The sufferings of the killed and the wounded are important only so long as it suits the convenience of the pacifist.
>
> (Pareto TSG § 1143)

In the name of abstract humanitarian principles, the rulers lose energy, firmness, and combative spirit (Finer 1968, 449; Scott 2012, 16) and begin to devalue and denigrate the very social order they themselves once helped to build. Thus, they develop a self-mocking and self-destructive attitude. They take pleasure in ridiculing their own values, their own institutions, and their own dignity; they support and applaud those who denigrate them; and they mistake self-denigration for "refinement" or a "critical spirit", whereas, in Pareto's view, it is nothing more than a pathological symptom of disintegration.

> One feels a bitter pleasure in lowering oneself, in degrading oneself, in mocking the class to which one belongs, in ridiculing everything that had until then been considered respectable.
>
> (Pareto 1911, 66)

> …it is the perverse pleasure of seeing dragged through the mud all that had until that moment been respected, of seeing the foundations of social order shaken. The trivialities of the theatre have once again become the principal concern of a degenerate society that has lost all dignity.
>
> (Pareto 1911, 67)

> The weakening, in the upper classes, of every spirit of resistance and, even more, the persistent efforts they make, without being aware of it,

> to hasten their own ruin, is one of the most interesting phenomena of our time.
>
> (Pareto 1911, 73)

At the same time, a minority segment of society reacts in a strictly traditionalist and reactionary manner (Pareto TSG § 2521; § 2522). Pareto does not view such reactions as beneficial. In periods of decadence, he observes that some small groups react to the weakening of the dominant ideology and to the decay of the ruling elites by seeking remedies in custom, tradition, and similar resources, in an effort to counteract social disintegration. Yet, those groups only tend to slow innovation and to rigidify a society already in distress. Pareto's most famous example concerns the resurgence of the "sex religion".

> When a society is weakening through lack of Class II residues, through humanitarianism, as a result of a failing in the energies that encourage the resort to force, a reaction often occurs in a part – it may be a small part – of that society. But it is interesting to note that instead of tending to stimulate residues that would contribute to reinvigorating the society, as would be the case if it were a logical reaction, the reaction is chiefly manifest in an intensification of residues that have no bearing, or very little, on the preservation of the society, and it so betrays its non-logical origins. Among the residues so stimulated nearly always observable are the residues of the sex religion, which are the ones least beneficial to society and indeed may be called altogether useless.
>
> (Pareto TSG § 2521)

This phase marks the terminal moment not only of the governing elites but also of the ideologies that underpin them, which can no longer sustain even the semblance of social integration. Pareto's critique reveals the reductiveness of unreservedly characterising him as a conservative thinker. His central concern lies precisely in demonstrating that the preservation of

ideological forms that have become obsolete is bound up with a phase of acute decline, in which any obstinate attachment to the existing order serves merely to exacerbate the crisis.

Foundations of a Paretian Theory of Ideologies

Pareto's theory of ideologies is situated between two broad traditions in the study of ideology (Bonabello 2000, 145; Stråth 2013). The first is associated with a neutral or descriptive conception, according to which ideology refers to systems of ideas that provide meaning, orientation, and normative direction for social action (Buchanan 2024, 143). In this sense, all societies, groups, and even historical periods generate ideologies, that is, shared interpretations of the world and common justifications for collective goals. The second is a critical conception, according to which ideology denotes a form of false consciousness, a representation of reality that must be unmasked, denounced, and demystified, because it conceals underlying relations of power and domination. On the one hand, Pareto's theory of derivations clearly aligns with the neutral conception. It shows that the production of explanatory and justificatory constructions is an inescapable (and even useful) feature of social life. Ideologies, understood as *elaborated systems of derivations*, are thus at once ubiquitous and functionally indispensable. On the other hand, Pareto's insistence on the fallacy of pseudo-scientific claims and on mystification places him within the critical tradition. Thus, Pareto provides a conceptual framework in which ideology is at once necessary and illusory, functional yet misleading, useful yet potentially dangerous.

This complex positioning becomes clearer when Pareto is compared with Marx's theory of ideology (Bobbio 2005, 102–103; Susca 2023, 90ff). Put very briefly, within the classical Marxist account ideology serves to naturalise existing relations of production, to present historically specific forms of domination as universal and inevitable, and to secure the reproduction of class domination. Pareto's approach is different. First, as suggested by Raymond Boudon (1984, 123), for Pareto there is no need to "postulate a determinism of social structures over ideas", or of "structures"

over “superstructures”; derivations, and thus ideologies as well, are certainly connected to relations of force or domination, but they do not necessarily presuppose class domination. Second, since derivations are a universal feature of human conduct, a dominant ideology may certainly exist at a given moment and within a given society, but this does not exhaust the full range of ideological production. As is widely recognised today, ideologies “emerge at all levels of social articulation” (Freeden 2013, 116). Subordinate groups, for example, can elaborate ideologies that express resentment, hope, demands for justice, and visions of alternative orders. It follows that ideology is not only a tool of domination; it is also a resource of contestation (Buchanan 2024). One of the most convincing aspects of Pareto’s account lies precisely in the fact that it embeds ideology within the framework of social heterogeneity and offers a finely differentiated sociological account of ideological production. For this reason, it would be worthwhile to explore the points of convergence and divergence between Pareto and subsequent approaches within the social sciences, beginning with Karl Mannheim’s *Wissenssoziologie* (Mannheim 1936). One of Mannheim’s central insights consists in recognising that ideologies, knowledge, and systems of thought are related to different social groups and to their position within society (Stråth 2013, 10). The relative scarcity of comparative studies on Pareto and Mannheim (Bach 2004, 285–286; Berger 1967) is somewhat surprising, insofar as, despite important epistemological and methodological differences, both authors stress the socially differentiated character of ideological production.

This differentiated character, however, does not alter the fact that, for Pareto, ideological production is never directly carried out by “the many” but rather by minorities. In line with Machiavelli (1996, 60), Pareto proceeds from a broader distinction between *factual reality* and *imagined reality*. He regards elites as those capable of coming to terms with “the real world”, while non-elites remain largely oriented towards “imagination” (Mongardini 1968, 11–12; see also Femia 2023, 10). Aware of the power of imagination to stir sentiments, elites recognise its potential as an instrument of mobilisation. Although they cannot fully shape the imaginary, nor

“create” sentiments themselves, they can nonetheless channel them. This holds true not only for governing elites, but also, as noted above, for other social groups, within which emerging elites play a central role in the circulation of ideas and ideologies. Today, the assumption underlying this framework – namely, a certain degree of passivity on the part of non-elites – can no longer be unproblematically accepted. It remains true, however, that not all individuals or groups are directly involved in processes of ideological production, and that there exists a difference between those who represent or claim to embody an ideology (e.g. political leaders) and those who adhere to it. The elites play a crucial role in formulating, systematising, and disseminating ideologies: as complex systems of derivations, ideologies must be organised. Accordingly, “the many”, the “masses”, or the non-elites – however designated – occupy, for Pareto, an asymmetrical position *vis-à-vis* the elites. Yet, in a deeper sense, they determine the underlying conditions of ideological production, to which elites must in turn adjust. Pushing somewhat further a point that remains only implicit in Pareto, it may be argued that ideologies resonate because they give form and expression to sentiments already present – albeit vaguely and inchoately – within broader segments of the population. One can therefore speak of a *collective supply* and a *collective demand* for ideologies (see again Boudon 1984, 92–93, 123). An ideology that fails to resonate, that no longer connects with prevailing sentiments, is ineffective or even harmful. Conversely, when an ideology successfully channels widely shared emotions and expectations, it can rapidly acquire enormous mobilising power.

This account is certainly too schematic, particularly in relation to contemporary societies. The role of the “many” cannot be reduced to that of mere “demand”; individuals and groups participate, to varying degrees, in the co-production, and transformation of meanings, while reproducing, reinterpreting, and reworking ideological frameworks in everyday contexts, increasingly including digitally mediated spaces. Likewise, elites do not exercise complete and unidirectional control over ideologies.

Yet, on closer inspection, Pareto's thought lends itself to productive dialogue with more recent lines of inquiry, particularly with regard to the constructed character of consent and conflict, as well as to the subtle boundary separating persuasion from manipulation. The starting point is the already cited observation that capable elites must know how to "make use of existing sentiments", seeking consent and employing techniques of persuasion, yet without attempting to "violently alter" those sentiments (Pareto TSG § 2247). In the pursuit of consent, therefore, elites do not merely respond to pre-existing needs; they also seek to persuade. More precisely, elites attempt to convince non-elites that their ideological articulations genuinely correspond to prevailing social needs. Their goal, then, is precisely to sustain the conviction that the paths and solutions they advance are indeed those required by the social body. Elites, however, may also engage in active manipulation. In such instances, through *political voluntarism*, they seek directly to *shape* those needs and subsequently claim to represent them (Mongardini 2011, 22, 61). In more contemporary terms, it can be argued that the manipulative dimension of the pursuit of consent arises when "public support" is merely "the product of the political process" and not of some "bottom-up aggregation of pre-existing interests and views" (Higley and Pakulski 2012, 340). Similar considerations apply to ideologies fostering conflict. Conflict, in itself, is an essential element of social and political life. However, when it is fully constructed and radicalised by political groups, becoming disconnected from its concrete social basis, it takes on a pathological character. In conclusion, the problem arises when the *imagined reality* constructed by political actors becomes detached from *factual reality* – namely, from the concrete and existing dynamics of social integration and conflict.

If these considerations contribute to reopening the discussion on a revised – and perpetually revisable – Paretian theory of ideologies, they also invite a critical engagement with its scope and its possible political implications for the present day. Giovanni Sartori maintains that Pareto's theory of the circulation of elites is neither democratic nor anti-democratic (Sartori 1993, 37). Precisely for this reason, however, it can be read in

radically divergent ways. The same may be said of his theory of ideologies, which lends itself to profoundly divergent interpretations. I briefly outline two of them below.

As already indicated, Pareto's critique of democracy does not coincide with a simple rejection of democratic institutions as such, nor with a nostalgic defence of pre-modern hierarchies. Rather, he distances himself from concepts such as popular sovereignty, the general will, or majority rule. When these concepts become literal descriptions of reality, when the ideology of democracy is absolutised, then a dangerous confusion emerges: an attempt is made to impose upon reality an ideal that resists translation into concrete terms. Pareto's perspective, in an age in which populism invokes the power of the "pure people" and condemns every elite as corrupt, calls for a critical stance towards all claims to "moral purity" and to discourses concerning the "real democracy" yet to come (Sartori 1987, 58ff; 1993, 35). It invites an inquiry into the actual interests of emerging groups that craft slogans in the name of democracy or the "common good", and above all to recognise that, behind such slogans, there persists the "principle of minority rule", whereby it is always minorities that govern. The experience of populists in power – who have often done little more than replace old minorities with new ones, or become intertwined with them – clearly attests to this (de Ghantuz Cubbe 2023; on the distinction between *populism in opposition* and *populism in government*, see especially Anselmi et al. 2018). In this regard, when confronted with the challenge of populism, Pareto's theory of ideologies may – unexpectedly – perform a preservative function for contemporary liberal democracies by demystifying populist promises.

Yet, it is equally true that Pareto can be mobilised to criticise contemporary representative liberal democracies as well. Pareto explicitly speaks of representation as a fiction (Pareto TSG § 2244; see also Michels 1924), and his thought is well suited to illuminating the defects inherent in representative systems. On the one hand, there is scope to revisit and reassess Pareto's critique of democracy and representation from a scientific standpoint. Piano (2025), for example, has recently done so by placing

emphasis on the reductive "equation" of democracy with "free elections" and on the "plutocratic capture" of representative institutions (see *Chapter 5*). In Piano's reading, Pareto – and Italian elitism more generally – may function as an intellectual antidote to this very form of capture. On the other hand, Pareto's critique may readily lend itself to political appropriation in support of calls for a "new aristocracy" endowed with a purportedly superior ethos against the "decadence" of representative liberal. This is the case with the German New Right. The extremist journal *Sezession*, for example, devoted a celebrative article to Pareto on the centenary of his death. In addition to lamenting the lack of German translations of Pareto's writings, the journal offers a brief portrait, outlining both his theory of residues and his theory of elites (Knörzer 2023). Relying on an overly simplistic distinction, the journal characterises Pareto as partly left-wing, inasmuch as he "ruthlessly exposes the machinations of the ruling classes and their exploitation of the people"; at the same time, Pareto is presented as a thinker of the right, because he "despises the weakness of hyper-civilised decadents, who shrink from any use of force, and mocks humanitarian hypocrisy" (Knörzer 2023, 51, my translation). Within the journal, Pareto's presence recurs across several contributions, alongside a renewed interest in the concept of elites, reflections on their circulation, diagnoses of decadence, critiques of Marxism, and broader polemics against the "utopias" of the "left" (see Boßdorf 2005; Waßner 2013; Weißmann 2009).

I argue that another Pareto is possible. His theory of ideologies may be used to articulate a more realistic and pragmatically grounded conception of democracy: one that treats its guiding ideals not as literal descriptions of reality, but as regulative orientations, while explicitly recognising the constraints and tensions that shape their concrete realisation. To develop this insight further would mean advancing the most constructive aspect of Pareto's reflection on ideologies and pursuing a balance between normative aspiration and sociological and political realism. A purely negative critique directed at ideologies can become (unnecessarily) corrosive (see Portinaro 2023, 149). If every ideology is reduced to mere mystification, and all

political language is treated as nothing more than a disguise for naked interests, then the whole symbolic dimension of politics is itself delegitimised. This may give rise to a sterile scepticism that undermines the very possibility of collective orientation and commitment. A Pareto-inspired theory of ideologies must therefore balance demystification with the recognition of *the ideal*. As has been aptly observed, even the political realist remains fully aware that "desire and hope constitute a powerful motor of historical transformation", and that, in politics, "the possible" cannot be attained without first daring "the impossible" (Portinaro 2023, 148).

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3

EQUILIBRIUM AND DYNAMISM

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The Social System between Persistence and Change

Earlier scholarship tended to regard equilibrium as both the central premise and the final horizon of Pareto's theoretical edifice (Henderson 1935; for a more extensive discussion of this point, see Piano 2023) – so much so that equilibrium itself was treated as a *Weltanschauung*, a comprehensive worldview structuring his entire thought (Rabot 1984, 117). The influence of this interpretation has been so lasting that distinguished scholarship can still remark that, if "the name Vilfredo Pareto is remembered at all today, it is probably because of his theory of economic equilibrium" (Adair-Toteff 2021, 31). Readings centred on equilibrium have now largely been abandoned, or at least reformulated in more theoretically defensible terms, as exemplified by the claim that the *Trattato* is, at its core, a work centred on the concept of equilibrium (Barbieri 2025, 6). However, the debate on Paretian equilibrium is far from settled, and a number of misunderstandings persist and require clarification. First and foremost it is necessary to stress that the historical conjuncture in which Pareto wrote confronted him far more urgently with processes of profound *change* than with a state of immobility (Mongardini 1990, 69 ff). Second, equilibrium is not synonymous with stasis. Rather, it is closely tied to two intertwined problems: on the one hand, the dense network of relations and

interdependencies constituting the social system; on the other hand, the complex relationship between the preservation and the transformation of the social system over time (Maniscalco 1999, 124–125).

At the turn of the 20th century, Italy was undergoing a far-reaching process of social and political change (see Baldoli 2023, 5ff). The final decades of the 19th century were marked by accelerated industrialisation in parts of the North, the politicisation of the working classes, and increasing strain on the liberal state, as new forms of mass mobilisation emerged (Barbieri 2025, 92–93). The foundation of the Italian Socialist Party in the 1890s gave organisational expression to social demands that had previously remained fragmented, while the violent unrest of 1898, triggered by rising living costs and culminating in harsh repression, revealed the depth of social distress underlying the surface of parliamentary order (Mongardini 1990, 69 ff.). In this context, the extension of suffrage on the eve of the First World War had already begun to reshape the representative order, broadening political participation and unsettling established balances within Italy's liberal institutions (D'Addio 1999; Lyttelton 2004, 7ff.; for an analysis of the Italian intelligentsia's interpretations of the "masses" at the turn of the 20th century, see Cavazza 2026). It was, however, the war that decisively accelerated these transformations. The unprecedented mobilisation (and subsequent demobilisation) of human and material resources sharply intensified collective expectations and rendered pre-war political arrangements progressively untenable (Barbieri 2025, 93; D'Addio 1999, 511). Accordingly, the immediate post-war years were characterised by acute social conflict (Baldoli 2023, 10). Industrial workers demanded wage increases and greater control within the factories; agricultural labourers sought improved conditions; segments of the middle classes, impoverished by inflation, feared social descent; nationalist groups denounced the outcome of the peace settlement as inadequate (Barbieri 2025, 94). Strikes multiplied, and factories were taken over by workers' organisations. At the same time, paramilitary violence spread, while the liberal ruling elites, divided and uncertain, struggled to reassert their authority.

Now, it has been argued that, in an initial phase of his intellectual development, Pareto was primarily concerned with the concept of equilibrium, and that only later did he "abandon" it, or at least relegate it to the background, in favour of a more explicit focus on social processes and political transformation (Maniscalco 1999, 236; Mongardini 1981, 312). Such a shift is generally located between the late 1910s (especially after the publication of the *Trattato*) and the early 1920s, above all in connection with his analysis of the "transformations of democracy" and "demagogic plutocracy". Interpreting his own time as the closing phase of the plutocratic cycle (Pareto 1922a, in SSM), Pareto concentrated on the waning vitality of the bourgeois elite, while expressing scepticism as to whether the emergent elites possessed sufficient force to inaugurate a new phase. It is certainly true that, over time, Pareto rendered the dynamic dimension of his theory increasingly explicit and conceptually refined. However, the assumption that he initially devoted himself to equilibrium and ultimately "surpassed" it by introducing, as a new and distinct problematic, the analysis of change and transformation is misleading. It risks obscuring the importance of his earlier political writings and relegating to the background the social and political transformations he had already been observing in Italy well before his engagement with the notion of demagogic plutocracy.

A close reading of the concept of equilibrium offers no compelling grounds for the claim that the question of change – whether as a theoretical problem or as a distinct object of empirical inquiry – emerged only at a later stage. Julien Freund (1974, 118) is correct in maintaining that Pareto addresses equilibrium in both its static and its dynamic dimensions, and that any adequate interpretation of his thought must take both into account. It is precisely this *dynamism* – whether understood as internal to the system or as pertaining to the system itself as it changes over time – that invites further reflection. Two central questions arise:

1. can equilibrium be regarded as the core of Pareto's theory?

2. Can the *Trattato* plausibly be interpreted as a "manual for maintaining the balance of social and political systems" (Barbieri 2025, 40)?

I suggest that the answer to the first question is negative. For Pareto, equilibrium is a hypothetical construct designed to render intelligible the *oscillations* within and of the social system. More explicitly, equilibrium is conceived as a conceptual instrument for understanding such oscillations. Its explanatory function lies in clarifying the processes through which social and political forms are reproduced, transformed, and at times destabilised, as well as the origins and development of crises (Maniscalco 1999, 232). Such a reading, as will be argued below, is more convincing from an exegetical standpoint and offers a more coherent account of both Pareto's engagement with the political transformations of his time and his relationship to Fascism.

The second question may be answered in the affirmative, albeit with two qualifications. The *Trattato* may be understood as a "manual for maintaining the balance of social and political systems", insofar as it elucidates the concrete conditions required for their internal adjustment. This corresponds to *internal systemic equilibrium*. However, equilibrium consists not only in internal adjustment, but also in *a general dynamic balance* between *transformation* and *preservation.* Especially, when a phase of decline intervenes – characterised by the exhaustion of ruling elites – Pareto's focus shifts: his framework foregrounds circulation, replacement, and reconfiguration. In this sense, too, the *Trattato* may be understood as a manual for maintaining balance, albeit with greater weight accorded to transformative processes (Mongardini 1981, 297–298). In other words, maintaining a system in equilibrium requires that conservation and transformation remain closely intertwined and mutually conditioning.

The centrality of dynamism is also evident in the nexus between Pareto's understanding of equilibrium and his account of historical change (see Ferrarotti 1965, 362; Rabot 1984, 122). Equilibrium does not presuppose the existence of a unifying "balance point" in which interests converge and conflicts are resolved. On the contrary, it results from the very interplay of

divergent forces whose opposition, friction, and competition generate compensatory effects (Freund 1974, 118). Equilibrium – never fully attainable – thus denotes not concord, but the *provisional stabilisation of discord* (Maniscalco 1999, 235; for a different interpretation, see Talcott Parsons' "cooperative understanding of Paretian equilibrium", Piano 2023, 184–185). Precisely because it rests upon dynamic countervailing forces, this stabilisation is never static and instead allows for *gradual change*. When it does not function properly, and the disequilibrium among the various elements of the social system surpasses a certain threshold, all compensatory mechanisms fail, and the reconfiguration of the system assumes a radical character (Pareto TSG § 2179). In sum, the gradual alteration of the *status quo* corresponds to *evolutionary* phases of historical development, whereas the breakdown of compensatory mechanisms culminates in *revolutionary* rupture and the emergence of a new configuration of social and political forces. A more precise reconstruction of the concept of equilibrium in Pareto's thought may help to clarify the issue.

If one returns to Pareto's definition of economic equilibrium in his *Cours d'Économie politique* (Pareto 1896–1897 § 40) – a system is in equilibrium when a variation in one of its conditions generates countervailing variations that produce an exactly opposing effect – two fundamental features of his conception immediately become clear, together with the source of a recurring misunderstanding. The first feature concerns the *systemic* nature of equilibrium (Lidz and Staubmann 2024, 141); the second, the strict *interdependence* of the elements composing the system. The misunderstanding arises from a reductive interpretation of this definition. If every movement is met by an equivalent counter-movement, it may seem that, at the systemic level, nothing of real consequence has occurred (on Lawrence Henderson's interpretation see Piano 2023, 182). The system, observed from the outside, seems identical to itself. Individual elements may have shifted, yet their reciprocal compensation produces the appearance of immobility or, at the very least, of a return to the *status quo ante*. Such a reading mistakes adjustment for fixity. Pareto himself corrects any possible misreading (Barbieri 2025, 21) when he observes that,

> in reality, equilibrium is never reached, since, to the extent that one attempts to address it, it is continually modified because the technical and economic conditions of production change. The real state is thus one of continuous oscillations around a central point of equilibrium, which itself shifts.
>
> (Pareto 1896–1897 § 101)

To elucidate this ambivalent dimension of equilibrium more rigorously, it is useful to turn to two metaphors of the social system employed by Pareto, which he explicitly presents as neither contradictory nor mutually exclusive (Pareto 1896–1897 § 620): the *mechanistic* and the *organismic*. Scholars have argued that Pareto "shifts" from the former metaphor to the latter. This shift, in turn, has been interpreted as evidence that Pareto recognised the limits of his mechanistic framework and sought to compensate for them by drawing upon alternative models (Ferrarotti 1965, 333). However, I contend that the coexistence of the two metaphors does not signal theoretical wavering, but rather reflects distinct perspectives from which Pareto examines the social system (Lidz and Staubmann 2024, 141). It is clear that the organismic metaphor allows Pareto to address certain weaknesses of the mechanistic model; yet this does not entail that he thereby abandons, invalidates, or theoretically supersedes the latter. Rather, the two metaphors operate at different levels of abstraction and serve complementary functions.

Through the mechanistic metaphor, Pareto describes the social system as though it were "photographed" at a given moment. Here, the analogy between a mechanical apparatus and the social system is most explicit. The observer's task is to identify and analyse the various components of the "machine", to examine the manner of their interaction, and to specify the functions they perform within the total configuration. Through their reciprocal relations, these components determine the form assumed by the system at that moment. Here, Pareto's formation in economics, mathematics, and engineering is clearly discernible, and his thought also exhibits certain affinities with later functionalist approaches (Lopreato

1964; Ferrarotti 1965, 340; on Pareto and Parsons, see Piano 2023 and Lidz and Staubmann 2024). Each element is conceived as simultaneously a cause and an effect within a structured network of reciprocal determination.

In the second metaphor, Pareto likens the social system to a living organism:

> The comparison with a living organism is *the most appropriate when one seeks to form an idea of the evolution of societies*. Mechanical systems shed very little light on the growth and development of social organisms. They offer no examples of differentiation comparable to those provided by living organisms and by social organisms themselves.
>
> (Pareto 1896–1897 § 620, emphasis added)

The organismic metaphor thus pertains to *change*. A few lines later, Pareto refers to slight and occasional disturbances of equilibrium which, as in a biological organism, tend to be reabsorbed over time. At first glance, this formulation might seem contradictory and may reinforce the impression that, once equilibrium is restored, nothing of substance has changed. Yet, the dynamic character of the metaphor is, in fact, unmistakable. Consider the process of ageing in a living body. On the one hand, the organism continuously strives to preserve its internal equilibrium – that is, the functional coordination among its various organs and processes. On the other hand, it undergoes gradual transformation: it develops, ages, and renews itself at the level of its very constituents. Its elements – cells, tissues, organic functions – are in a state of constant reconfiguration (Lyttelton 1973, 72). Equilibrium, in this perspective, presupposes a regulated process of ongoing transformation.

Pareto therefore appeals to mechanics to conceptualise static equilibrium, while invoking the metaphor of the living organism to articulate dynamic equilibrium.

In its essential features, Pareto's approach remains largely unaltered in the *Trattato*, while becoming more complex, more refined, and more

systematically articulated, incorporating economic equilibrium within the broader framework of social equilibrium. As is well known, given the immense number and complexity of the elements composing the social system, as well as of the factors contributing to processes of change, Pareto proceeds by means of successive approximations, focusing on the variables he considers most significant (Barbieri 2025, 22; Maniscalco 1999, 225). He distinguishes, in this respect, between internal and external elements. The latter refer to the broader context within which the system exists, including factors such as climate or the availability of raw materials. Among the principal forces shaping the system from within, Pareto includes residues, interests, derivations, social heterogeneity, and the circulation of its various components. A detailed examination of these factors need not be repeated, as it has already been thoroughly developed in the existing literature (Mornati 2020, 117 ff); what matters here, rather, is to clarify more fully the different temporal perspectives from which they may be considered.

First, it is possible to consider the system and its elements in their reciprocal interdependence at a specific moment, deliberately bracketing processes of transformation. Second, it is possible to distinguish between the short term, the long term, and the very long term (Pareto TSG § 2338). In each case, Pareto employs the term “oscillations” to refer to the movements traversing the system (see, for example, Pareto TSG § 2387–§ 2392). These oscillations may be transient and accidental, that is, the manifestation of *temporary forces*. At other times, however, they assume a more durable and structurally significant character. In the short term, under normal circumstances, the effects of movements within or upon the system are compensated for by opposing movements and may therefore be treated as negligible (Maniscalco 1999, 232). Over longer temporal spans, however, oscillations generate cumulative effects, progressively reconfiguring the system and potentially becoming sources of lasting influence (Ferrarotti 1965, 342). In this perspective, the problem of *change* comes to occupy the centre of the analysis.

The problem of change is, ultimately, bound up with Pareto's *search for uniformities*. Without some notion of "balance", and without the assumption that, in the face of change, there exists a certain compensatory tendency, there would be no possibility of observing social phenomena (Maniscalco 1999, 232). Moreover, without a minimal degree of compensation, no form of organisation, institution, or system could be sustained. Pareto states this explicitly:

> If we intend to reason at all strictly, our first obligation is to fix upon the state in which we are choosing to consider the social system, which is constantly changing in form. The real state, be it static or dynamic, of the system is determined by its conditions. Let us imagine that some modification in its form is induced artificially […]. At once a reaction will take place, tending to restore the changing form to its original state as modified by normal change. If that were not the case, the form, with its normal changes, would not be determined but would be a mere matter of chance.
>
> (Pareto TSG § 2067)

Pareto thus introduces the concept of equilibrium in order to understand the modalities through which certain uniformities effectively persist within historical variability. Yet, the argument may be entirely reversed: Pareto introduces the concept of equilibrium in order to understand how, despite the persistence of certain uniformities, historical processes nevertheless unfold. The distinctive (and only apparently paradoxical) character of Pareto's approach to equilibrium lies in the fact that his search for uniformities is rooted in his interest in processes of change, social and political decline, and crisis; equilibrium is therefore not an end in itself, nor does it serve, as in many structural-functionalist interpretations, to "preserve" uniformities, but rather to clarify the relationship between transformation and conservation, between uniformity and variation.

It is crucial to underline, even if only briefly, that the problem of the relationship between transformation and the conservation of social and

political forms occupies a central place in sociology at the turn of the 20th century. Owing to limitations of space, the following remarks can only proceed in a tentative and illustrative fashion, by way of a few examples. One may consider, for instance, Werner Sombart. Notwithstanding their profound differences, Sombart and Pareto display notable convergences in their analyses of crises – not only economic, but also social and political – as well as in their shared concern with the problem of progress and historical change (Iannone 2024). Affinities likewise emerge with Robert Michels, who dedicates specific attention to the "concept of conservation in politics" (Michels 1933), and for whom the issue of the foundation, transformation, and conservation of political order constitutes a central concern (de Ghantuz Cubbe 2026; see also Messeri 1975). Also intriguing is the comparison with an author only rarely associated with Pareto: Georg Simmel (Fornari 2017; Mongardini 1976). Though no exhaustive comparison between Pareto and Simmel is possible here, and straightforward analogies remain difficult to establish, a few tentative remarks may nevertheless help identify meaningful affinities between them (see, in particular, Simmel 1918; 1976). For Simmel, life objectifies itself in relatively stable forms that secure continuity; yet, these very forms, in the process of consolidation, tend to harden and enter into friction with the creative energy that originally brought them into being. They provide durability, but at the same time prepare the conditions for their overcoming (Mongardini 1976, CXI). In Pareto, equilibrium designates a state constantly exposed to disturbance, displacement, partial recomposition, and, finally, *self-destruction* (Maniscalco 1984, 73). Distinct premises, then, and different approaches. Yet, for both Pareto and Simmel, the decisive issue lies in the *temporary* configuration of the forces in play: a kind of dynamic stability that never ceases to remain traversed by tension.

Within this complex relationship between transformation and conservation, the question inevitably arises as to whether Pareto ultimately takes sides. Should he be regarded as a theorist of conservation in the face of processes of change? Or does his reflection instead reveal a transformative orientation? These questions are anything but secondary,

since, as is well known, Pareto has been interpreted both as a theorist of equilibrium understood in static terms and as a critic – and, at times, an outright destroyer – of the *status quo.*

Given the centrality of tension and conflict in his thought, it should be evident that Pareto not only rejects the ideal of a stabilised and harmonised social order, but further regards the very aspiration to translate it into historical reality as grounded in a profound misunderstanding of social and political life. The idea of a final reconciliation of the elements of the social system appears to him not simply impracticable, but conceptually misconceived. This is very clear in his *Cours d'économie politique*. In his study of economic phenomena, Pareto distinguishes between two stages of inquiry: a first phase in which basic assumptions are established, and a second in which a higher degree of complexity is introduced into the analysis.

> We began by supposing the molecules of the economic aggregate to be in equilibrium; we then considered certain movements of these molecules; we finally arrive at the conception of an aggregate that is wholly in motion and vibration. […] we have thus come to represent phenomena that are extremely varied and complex. In the same way, the astronomer, beginning from the very simple notion of universal gravitation, arrives at a representation of the varied and complex movements of a planetary system.
>
> (Pareto 1896–1897 § 927)

This aggregate is marked by continuous vibrations which, as Pareto himself emphasises, arise both from "objective causes" and from the "very nature of man" (see also Susca 2023, 35). The latter point is decisive: the continuous oscillatory movement characterising economic life ultimately reflects the intrinsic dynamism of human nature. In this respect, it is particularly significant that Pareto does not treat the economy itself as the ultimate cause of cyclical crises. Rather, the roots of crises lie elsewhere:

> The manifestations of human activity do not at all exhibit a continuous course; they generally assume the form of a wavy curve. It should be noted, moreover, that man rarely stops at the proper mean; he always exaggerates somewhat on one side or the other. He passes from hope to fear, from an excess of confidence to an excess of distrust. Success exalts him; failure discourages him. Our economic organisation gives form, but not substance, to crises.
>
> (Pareto 1896–1897 § 927)

The most immediate consequence of these assumptions is that crises are unavoidable. At the political level, this implies a decisive rejection of the belief that the advent of any social order to come – such as socialism – would abolish them. If their ultimate source lies in human nature itself, then no transformation of economic arrangements can eradicate them; they would, as Pareto insists, "continue to occur" even within a "socialist State" (Pareto 1896–1897 § 927). From a broader perspective, Pareto maintains that even if it were possible to prevent crises, doing so would not necessarily be desirable. Within the economy, there exists a rhythmic "movement" that constitutes one of the conditions of economic progress and that manifests itself precisely through crises (Pareto 1896–1897 § 949; Susca 2023, 35). Similar reflections can be found in the *Manuel d'économie politique*, where the argument is extended beyond the strictly economic sphere (Freund 1974, 130):

> Crisis is but a particular case of the great law of rhythm that governs all social phenomena. The social order gives form to crises; it does not determine their substance, which is rooted in human nature and in the nature of economic problems.
>
> (Pareto 1906, cap. 9 § 75)

A comparable line of reasoning appears in the *Systèmes socialistes*, where the argument becomes even more complex. Pareto maintains that, for causes

> that are partly known and partly unknown, but some of which appear to be rooted in the psychological nature of human beings, moral and religious movements are rhythmic, just as economic movements are. The rhythm of the latter gives rise to economic crises, which, in our time, have been carefully studied and are now fairly well understood. The rhythm of the former movement, on the contrary, has often gone unnoticed; yet it suffices to survey history in order to recognize it very clearly.
>
> (Pareto 1902, 30–31)

A Theory of Social and Political Change

Throughout his life, Pareto remains committed to his model of equilibrium. Yet, the distinction he draws from the outset between hypothetical and real conditions allows him to incorporate dynamism into his theoretical framework. In this sense, transformative processes are not opposed to equilibrium, but constitute an integral part of it. For Pareto, the central problem of social and political change lies in ensuring *balanced renewal*, which occurs through a fluid circulation among the various elements of the system. At the same time, however, he recognises the inevitability – and, in his eyes, the necessity – of radical change when such circulation is obstructed. From the perspective of political theory, this conception carries significant implications.

As argued above, Pareto conceives the social system in terms of its constituent elements and their reciprocal interdependence. Even if certain uniformities and constants can be identified within this network of relations, the possible configurations those elements may assume remain potentially unlimited. Accordingly, individuals and groups may enter into cooperation or conflict, orient themselves towards conservation or transformation, and foster processes of integration or, conversely, disintegration. Within this complex and shifting field, the circulation of elites constitutes the process *par excellence* through which both the interaction among social elements and the transformation of the system itself can be observed (Bobbio 2005, 48). In short, a fluid circulation of elites prevents internal systemic

disruption and maintains a balance between continuity and change; society thereby remains in a state of dynamic equilibrium. If, however, a *delay* (Bobbio 1973, 26; Fiorot 1969, 189) arises in the circulation process – if, for example, the governing elites remain in power too long and gradual change is obstructed – the resulting stasis ultimately gives rise to profound and radical transformations.

Elite circulation is inseparably linked to the efforts of both governing and emergent elites to reshape the distribution of power in their own favour, in a context where limited means are constantly confronted with unlimited human needs (Mongardini 1984, 68). The transformations affecting elites thus overlap with the transformations affecting the distribution of power, thereby exerting a profound influence on political institutions. In the Italian case, for example, Pareto argued on the basis of his theory of elites that the bourgeois state of his time was faltering and that its power was progressively disintegrating: this amounted to a terminal clash between declining and ascending forms of power (Pareto 1921, tr. 1984; Tuccari 2018, 96).

To grasp fully the close connection between equilibrium, the circulation of elites, power, crisis, and decline, it is instructive to consider Pareto's stance towards Fascism. What follows does not attempt an exhaustive reconstruction of his position; rather, it highlights certain aspects that are particularly relevant to our analysis, such as the problem of *oscillations* and the distinction between *temporary* and *longer-term* transformative forces. In order to clarify the role of Fascism within the Italian context of his time, Pareto first sought to determine its general significance: he asked whether it should be classified among the category of "transitory phenomena", and thus regarded as of merely "temporary importance", or whether it instead constituted a "sign" of deeper transformations attributable to the "great factors of social evolution" outlined in the *Trattato* (Pareto 1922b, in SSM, 1089). Less than two months after the establishment of Benito Mussolini's government, Pareto wrote in the pages of the fascist journal "Gerarchia" that "social phenomena display oscillations – small, medium, large, very large. It would be important to know to which category Fascism belongs"

(Pareto 1923a, in SSM, 1160). It is worth recalling that Pareto remained cautious about the actual capacity of the emerging Fascist "aristocracy" to lead Italy into a "new time". Only a few months before his death, he observed:

> at present all Europe is struggling with […] difficulties, and its ruling classes are unable to find solutions to the distressing problems that exist. In Italy, Fascism is attempting to find one of these solutions by replacing the existing ruling class with a new one, given that the former had shown itself to be utterly incapable of governing. […] The future will tell us whether a new era has thus begun, or whether we shall return to the old errors that were leading us towards an anarchy similar to that which the world had already known in the Middle Ages.
>
> (Pareto 1923b, in SSM, 1171)

This does not mean that Pareto failed to recognise that Fascism was already producing significant transformations. Describing the phase immediately preceding the Fascist seizure of power, marked by the decline of the liberal aristocracy and the instability it had engendered, Pareto remarked that, in one way or another, the country was destined to overcome its state of transience:

> such a state of affairs is essentially transitory, especially among the more civilised peoples, for whom order is absolutely necessary. Sooner or later, the old government – or, in the event of its failure, a new government – assumes the function temporarily abandoned to private initiative.
>
> (Pareto 1923b, in SSM, 1169)

For Pareto, it was Fascism that assumed this function. Yet numerous challenges remained before the transition could be regarded as complete and the "new order" could finally shed its provisional character:

> in domestic politics any definitive judgement would be premature. One can only say that the beginnings are good and open up the hope of a fortunate future. Yet we are navigating waters strewn with reefs. Sooner or later it will be necessary to emerge from the provisional and resolve extremely serious constitutional problems – something that, moreover, will not be possible except through a stroke of genius. This is one of the greatest dangers threatening the new regime and, more generally, the new order.
>
> (Pareto 1923b, in SSM, 1173)

In Pareto's approach to the advent of Fascism, three distinct levels of analysis can be identified, all linked to the relationship between transformation and conservation, and to the dynamics of oscillations: first, the level of the long-term future and of the form the new order was to assume; second, the level of short- and medium-term transformations, that is, the phase of dismantling the old political order and instituting the new; and third, the level concerning the problem of provisionality (I have explored these aspects through a systematic comparison with Robert Michels' approach to Fascism in de Ghantuz Cubbe 2026, 40ff.). Given Pareto's death in 1923 and the consequent impossibility of his adopting a definitive position on Fascism, considerable debate has arisen concerning the political significance of his work, and in particular of his theory of the circulation of elites. However, I contend that this debate has partially obscured the fact that Pareto's analysis of developments in Italy during the early 1920s rests upon a specific *theory of social and political change*, and more specifically of *political transition*. What is most distinctive about this theory is its capacity to bring into view different ways of understanding *transformation*, *conservation*, *transition*, and *crisis*.

What, then, does this theory consist of, and what insights may it still offer today? And what, if anything, might it have to contribute to contemporary democratic theory? As Bobbio (2014) observes, the condition of being in transformation is normal for democracy (see also Schmitter and Karl 1991, 87). Consequently, the study of change is indispensable for

anyone concerned with the study of democracy. What ultimately differentiates analytical perspectives, however, is both the focus adopted (e.g. political institutions, political actors, international influences, internal factors, and so forth) and the way in which the relationship between conservation and transformation is conceived.

In terms of focus, Pareto accords a central role to actors – a choice that, both in his time and in ours, is far from self-evident. Within contemporary political sociology and political science, actor-centred approaches constitute a well-established yet still contested perspective. Some strands of scholarship continue to privilege impersonal and structural explanations. Other scholars conceptualise actors as relationally embedded within social, institutional, and discursive contexts that both constrain and enable action. Accordingly, the relationship between agency and structure remains a central theoretical and methodological concern across disciplines (see, for example, Emmenegger 2021; Mahoney and Thelen 2010). In this respect, the relevant literature offers virtually inexhaustible examples; nonetheless, it may be worthwhile to consider at least one particularly relevant to the problem of change, and more specifically to *political change*. Drawing on an analogy between market and politics, De Vries and Hobolt (2020) develop their theory around the concepts of dominance and innovation, considering the underlying dynamics of change as ultimately driven by concrete political actors:

> Dominance refers to the market power of the dominant players, which they aim to protect. Innovation is brought about by challengers, and is the process through which these political entrepreneurs introduce a new or previously ignored issue and use it, along with anti-establishment rhetoric, to discredit rival parties. Political change is the outcome of the tug-of-war between these two forces.
>
> (De Vries and Hobolt 2020, 42)

In doing so, the authors also distinguish between two perspectives on party competition. The first focuses on the "demand-driven aspects of

political change" (De Vries and Hobolt 2020, 44) and is characterised by a *bottom-up logic*, which treats "objective" factors (e.g. *class structure*) as determining and views political parties as having "limited flexibility in responding to new issues that arise on the political agenda" (De Vries and Hobolt 2020, 44). The second approach "stresses the importance of supply-driven change"; it emphasises that political parties themselves actively shape changes in demand and conceives of them as "organizations that actively structure and determine the content of societal conflict" (De Vries and Hobolt 2020, 45). This way of thinking operates according to a *top-down logic* (on the distinction between *bottom-up* and *top-down* logics, especially with regard to party competition within Cleavage Theory, see de Ghantuz Cubbe 2025, 38–40). Without entering here into the specific relationship and sub-distinctions between these two perspectives, what proves decisive is the tension between agency and impersonal factors, whether socio-economic, organisational, institutional, or otherwise (Mongardini 2011, 208). If the role of actors is neglected, one runs the risk of falling prey to an "objectivist superstition" (Sartori 1968, 23). At the same time, however, an excessive emphasis on the role of actors in the face of structural constraints risks lapsing into an overly voluntaristic understanding of political action.

As already noted in *Chapter 1*, Pareto's thought develops in tension between an emphasis on political actors and the determinism inherent in his systemic conception. Actors are certainly capable of influencing the course of events; yet their action remains constrained both by their own psycho-social motives and by the complexity of the system itself, which renders the consequences of action only partially foreseeable (see *Chapter 4* and *Chapter 5*). Although this tension should not be interpreted as anticipating the contemporary agency–structure debate in any strict sense, it nevertheless raises important questions concerning the relationship between action, its constraints, and systemic interdependence. Pareto may still offer stimulating insights, especially with regard to the psycho-social factors conditioning the actors involved, the predictability of their behaviour, and the problem of their positioning within complex organisational contexts;

moreover, the focus on the system and its internal articulations may provide fertile ground for a complex analysis of the interdependencies between actors and structures.

With regard to the relationship between conservation and transformation, I contend that Pareto not only provides a general framework that remains highly relevant, but also helps to clarify how different conceptions of *crisis* and *transformation* (see, in particular, Nevola 2025) reflect distinct normative and even political positions concerning democracy. Depending on how crisis and transformation are conceived, specific strategies for responding to them may be proposed, either aimed at preserving the *status quo* or at overcoming it, thereby favouring certain political actors or groups to the detriment of others. Accordingly, a democratic order undergoing transformation should not be prematurely diagnosed as being in crisis; nor should an actual crisis be reinterpreted as a mere phase of transformation. Pareto's attention to the different kinds of "oscillations" calls for caution against both simplifications. The very invocation of crisis decisively alters the terms of the debate, since situations perceived or declared as emergencies reshape the internal equilibrium of democratic systems (see Boin et al. 2016): executive power tends to acquire exceptional prerogatives, restrictive measures affecting individual and collective rights and liberties may be introduced, and public narratives centred upon the possibility of a breakdown of the social, political, or institutional order progressively consolidate themselves. Crisis, therefore, does not merely function as a descriptive category; it also operates as a political and juridical dispositif capable of reshaping the legitimation of public decisions, extending the reach of state power, and redefining the boundaries of ordinary democratic functioning. As regards the relationship between the forces in play more specifically, when a crisis occurs, conservative forces tend to harden into defensive, and eventually violent, forms of entrenchment; governing elites seek to defend their position and preserve their hold on power. Transformative forces intensify beyond the bounds of adaptive change and assume increasingly destabilising or destructive trajectories. To conflate crisis with processes of transformation is

misleading. It generates mobilising narratives in which some factors are strategically amplified in order to support specific political choices.

Animated by a keen awareness of the intrinsic dynamism of social and political processes, Pareto exhibits a marked suspicion towards stagnation and prolonged phases of systemic inertia. His insistence on the exhaustion of ruling elites reveals an underlying predisposition towards renewal rather than preservation. It is in this light that both his reflections on the "productive function" of crisis and his interest in Fascism should be understood. Pareto adopts a "transformative" stance whose political implications, however, remain far from univocal. When adopted at an early stage – before a crisis fully unfolds – a transformative stance may prove politically constructive. It enables a more lucid identification of emerging tensions, clarifies the extent to which governing elites have lost legitimacy, and facilitates intervention before conflicts harden into rupture. An early emphasis on change thus becomes crucial for mitigating the social costs of transformation, containing polarisation, and sustaining the adaptive capacity of democratic institutions. The same stance, however, assumes a radically different character once a crisis is already underway. Where mechanisms of reciprocal adjustment have ceased to function and the relationship among the different social and political forces has deteriorated beyond recovery, an unqualified commitment to transformation risks accelerating disintegration rather than fostering renewal. The Paretian idea that phases of decline must simply be overcome through intensified transformation may legitimise strategies of rupture whose cumulative effect is the partial or total dismantling of the existing order. In such circumstances, the transformative posture ceases to be corrective and becomes catalytic.

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4

THE “FEW” AND THE “MANY”

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Elites, Non-Elites, and “Subgroups”

The Paretian social system is not conceived as a homogeneous aggregate of equivalent individuals (Giovannini 2017, 186), but rather as a differentiated system composed of unequally endowed actors, whose capacities, energies, and psychological dispositions vary significantly:

> The economic system is made up of certain molecules set in motion by tastes and subject to ties (checks) in the form of obstacles to the acquisition of economic values. The social system is much more complicated, and even if we try to simplify it as far as we possibly can without falling into serious errors, we at least have to think of it as made up of certain molecules harbouring residues, derivations, interests, and proclivities, and which perform, subject to numerous ties, logical and non-logical actions.
>
> (Pareto TSG § 2079)

> Let us consider the molecules of the social system, in other words, individuals who are possessed of certain sentiments manifested by residues – which, for the sake of brevity, we shall designate simply as residues. We may say that present in individuals are mixtures of groups

> of residues that are analogous to the mixtures of chemical compounds found in nature, the groups of residues themselves being analogous to chemical compounds.
>
> (Pareto TSG § 2080).

Accordingly, the social system is structured hierarchically. Pareto repeatedly emphasises the inevitability of inequality, initially with reference to the distribution of wealth, but soon extending the argument to the general form of society (see Barbieri 2025, 70–71; Susca 2023, 38ff). His approach thus implies that hierarchy permeates every sector of the social system, since in every domain – whether politics, science, or commerce – there exist a few individuals who occupy "superior" positions (minoritarian "elected groups", that is, "the few") and others ("the many") who are situated in "inferior" ones (Scott 2012, 10–11; Susca 2023, 38). Moreover, and crucially, heterogeneity and hierarchy extend *within* elites and non-elites. Elites are internally differentiated (Scott 2012, 11–12; Wasner 2004, 47) into what one may call *subgroups* and are subject to processes of internal stratification. With regard to the non-elites, similar considerations apply, although Pareto, as will be shown below, adopts a more ambivalent position.

Pareto's framework carries two political(-economic) implications: it implies a critique of socialism (Susca 2023, 39) and, more broadly, of egalitarian ideals (see *Chapter 2*). Moreover, his thought also carries a distinctly economic-liberal inflection: Pareto regards as futile and fallacious any attempt to reduce economic disparities through artificial reforms and institutional engineering, since inequality is directly connected to human nature (Giovannini 2017, 186–187), and only *free competition* represents a genuine mechanism for the selection of individuals within the social hierarchy (Ripepe 1974, 340). Both within elites and in the relationship between elites and non-elites, competition is pervasive, and actors must come to terms with the existence of winners and losers, as well as with hierarchy itself. Yet while hierarchy is ineliminable, the concrete relations of dominance are never simply given and therefore require some form of

justification (Maniscalco 1983). A persistent tension thus emerges between acceptance and refusal of existing disparities on the part of those who do not occupy the highest positions. This tension becomes most visible in the political relationship between rulers and ruled, and turns destabilising when conflict sharpens between governing elites that have lost their functional capacity and emerging elites rising from the "inferior strata" (Scott 2012, 12). In this dynamic – unintelligible without reference to the role of elite *subgroups* – the crucial issue lies in the prolonged persistence of elites in power and their resulting entrenchment (Barbieri 2025, 86), which temporarily obstruct competitive dynamics (Ripepe 1974, 343) and slow the ascent of emerging elites.

Delving more specifically into definitions, Pareto's most widely cited formulation describes elites as composed of those individuals who possess the highest index of achievement in the sector in which they are active (Pareto TSG § 2031). On this basis, as will be discussed below, a degree of inconsistency emerges between three distinct criteria for defining the elite: first, the reference to presumed personal qualities; second, meritocratic and performance-based criteria; and, finally, a sociological-descriptive approach that identifies elites on the basis of external markers – such as positions, titles, and formal recognitions – irrespective of whether these correspond to individual capacities. Among the various elites (e.g. political, economic, and intellectual – see Bobbio 1973, 25), political and economic ones assume particular prominence within the Paretian framework. In his *Systèmes socialistes*, Pareto devotes special attention to the distinction between elites and non-elites from the standpoint of wealth distribution, initially maintaining the assumption that "superior" groups tend to be the wealthiest as well (Pareto 1902, 8). Over time, however, he recognises that access to elite status may also be facilitated by knowledge, social networks, or other factors (Barbieri 2025, 71; Pareto TSG § 2036). In the political sphere, Pareto further distinguishes between *governing elites* and *non-governing elites* (Pareto TSG § 2032). The former is internally divided between a subgroup capable of maintaining power and another composed of

non-functional elements who do not have the qualities to govern. This distinction is crucial.

Pareto's concept of elites – partly owing to his own "etymological" definition (ces classes représentent une élite, une aristocratie (au sens étymologique: *ἄριστος* = "le meilleur"), Pareto 1902, 8) – has come to be associated with *aristocracy*, with "the best", or with individuals possessing superior abilities (see Azzolini 2017; Sartori 1961; Sola 1993). According to the most widespread interpretation, at a certain stage, this group of the "best" enters into decline, thereby *becoming* a declining elite. This reading may be misleading. Pareto recognises from the outset the possibility (even in non-decadent phases) that elites are composed of elements that are anything but "the best". Given that the modes of access to elite positions are diverse – at times including, for example, the inheritance of wealth (Pareto TSG § 2036) – there is no assurance that those who gain entry into the elites are the most capable (see also Barbieri 2025, 84; Femia 2006, 71).

Pareto (TSG § 2035) argues that there is no reliable way to directly assess individual ability, and therefore it is necessary, in order to "identify" the elite, to rely on external markers such as titles, professions, and offices. These markers are inherently imperfect, since individuals may hold them without possessing the corresponding competence. This is true of both professional roles (e.g. lawyers) and positions within government. However, in fields like law, medicine, or engineering, such markers tend to be more closely connected to individual effort and skill, so cases of incompetence are relatively limited (Pareto TSG § 2036). By contrast, within the governing elite, titles are more often determined by inheritance, wealth, and social connections. Consequently, the discrepancy between formal status and actual capacity is significantly greater in the political sphere:

> In the concrete, there are no examinations whereby each person is assigned to his proper place in these various classes. That deficiency is made up for by other means, by various sorts of labels that serve the purpose after a fashion. Such labels are the rule even where there are

> examinations. The label “lawyer” is affixed to a man who is supposed to know something about the law and often does, though sometimes again he is an ignoramus. So, the governing elite contains individuals who wear labels appropriate to political offices of a certain altitude – ministers, Senators, Deputies, chief justices, generals, colonels, and so on – making the apposite exceptions for those who have found their way into that exalted company without possessing qualities corresponding to the labels they wear.
>
> (Pareto TSG § 2035)

> Such exceptions are much more numerous than the exceptions among lawyers, physicians, engineers, millionaires (who have made their own money), artists of distinction, and so on.
>
> (Pareto TSG § 2036)

> …an individual who has inherited a sizable patrimony can easily be named Senator in certain countries, or can get himself elected to the parliament by buying votes or, on occasion, by wheedling voters with assurances that he is a democrat of democrats, a Socialist, an Anarchist. Wealth, family, or social connexions also help in many other cases to win the label of the elite in general, or of the governing elite in particular, for persons who otherwise hold no claim upon it.
>
> (Pareto TSG § 2036)

Accordingly, one of the most central, conceptually dense, and analytically fertile parts of Pareto’s Elite Theory concerns “*non-functional” political elites*. In the *Trattato*, this theme is naturally developed in a strictly sociological sense; however, the problem of the “quality” of political elites has in Pareto’s thought a far wider and more multifaceted significance. It may perhaps be argued that Pareto’s sociological reflection on the quality of political elites constitutes a mature and theoretically elaborated development of his earlier aversion to Italian parliamentary elites. As shown in *Chapter 1*, Pareto maintains throughout his life a sharply critical stance

towards the “defects” of political elites – a stance which, particularly in his youth, was partly consonant with his liberal and anti-statist convictions. His scepticism was directed against the degeneration of ruling groups into closed and self-serving formations. A political writing from 1893 already offers a particularly severe assessment. Pareto describes a political class organised around a system of patronage that effectively precludes the emergence of genuine opposition and entrenches a logic of mutual accommodation among those in power. He notes that those who govern possess an “almost unlimited power” to favour their allies and damage their adversaries, but they refrain in practice from using it fully. This restraint, he explains, stems from calculated self-interest. Political actors who alternate in power tend to respect one another’s networks of supporters: “the minister of today spares the partisans of his predecessor” in order that his own partisans may later be spared by his successor. At the same time, Pareto insists that this moderation is strictly limited to those who do not pose a danger to the established networks of favour-exchange. While competition for access to reciprocal favour is tolerated – even expected – any attempt to challenge the system as a whole is met with immediate repression. Any attempt to alter the distribution of state benefits altogether is treated as a subversive act deserving punishment. Political elites also make use of exclusion as a mechanism of control: the individual who refuses to participate in networks of patronage, in order to preserve his independence, is effectively excluded from social, economic, and even intellectual life. Pareto describes such a figure as analogous to a Hindoo without caste – isolated, vulnerable, and deprived of all opportunities – until the moment at which the authorities deem him dangerous and contrive to prosecute him on fabricated charges (Pareto 1893, 704–705). Such polemical interventions abound throughout Pareto’s political writings, varying both in content and in angle of focus, at times even reaching – especially in his private correspondence – forms of pure outbursts of contempt. A thorough evaluation of his critique of political elites would require a systematic examination; the scope of the present inquiry permits only a selective treatment, certainly not exhaustive, but at least illustrative:

> You know perfectly well that parliamentarians are the product of intrigue and corruption. Do not try to persuade me that they represent the country.
>
> (Letter to Maffeo Pantaleoni, 14 August 1892)

> The way in which the good Italian people are governed is peculiar. In Rome certain persons assemble who are called senators and deputies. They speak a great deal and conclude little, at least in public. Behind the scenes, they conclude far more, but there are those who say that they strangely mix private interests with public ones.
>
> (Pareto 1899, in SP, vol. II, 306)

> As for the declining bourgeois, their way of acting depends not on logic but on sentiment, and it also reflects the hypocritical cowardice of those who believe they can avoid harm by crawling before the powerful… .
>
> (Pareto 1904, in SP, vol. II, 442)

> …Thus many politicanti, eager to gain the favour of the public, strive each day to devise some new restriction to impose upon others… .
>
> (Pareto 1905, in SP, vol. II, 404–405)

Complementary to this critical stance toward non-functional elites is Pareto's search for a renewal of elites through circulation (see *Chapter 3*), whereby unproductive and declining elements are replaced by new actors drawn "from below". Turning thus to the non-elites, Pareto offers a plurality of characterisations that do not cohere into a fully consistent account. He provides no univocal definition, except in negative terms (Pareto TSG § 2034). The non-elites comprise all individuals who do not excel in any branch of social activity; in other words, they correspond to the totality of the population minus those who qualify as the "best", as well as those who, even without the appropriate capacities, have nonetheless managed to enter the elected classes. The non-elites encompass the "popular part" or "popular force" (Pareto 1921, 108–109, tr. 1984, 70–71), the "masses" (Pareto 1891,

in OC, vol. IV, 82; TSG § 2255), in which non-logic conduct prevails, as well as the less privileged sectors of society, the "have-nots" (Pareto 1921, 74–75 tr. 1984, 55–56) or the "inferior classes" (Pareto 1906, cap. 2 § 57; TSG § 2054). Pareto's conception of "the many" (on Pareto and "crowd psychology", see Curti 2021) must therefore be reconstructed exegetically from a dispersed set of references.

In an attempt to formulate an articulated definition, I would argue that Pareto conceives of the non-elites as *the majority of the population that does not exercise directive functions, displays ordinary levels of capacity across different social domains, together with a predominance of non-logical conduct, and forms the reservoir from which the elite is continually renewed*. This characterisation of the non-elites brings into focus an apparently paradoxical aspect: how is it possible that "the best" are replenished from "the many", who are only moderately capable and inclined towards non-logical conduct? The answer emerges once a strictly dichotomous reading of Pareto's distinction between elites and non-elites is set aside in favour of a more differentiated perspective.

On the one hand, says Pareto, "history teaches us that it is not reasoning that leads and moves large masses of men, but rather emotion" (Pareto 1891, in OC, vol. IV, 82). He also insists that "men are accustomed to making all their actions depend upon a small number of rules of conduct, in which they place an almost religious faith" (Pareto 1902, 27). For Pareto, such a tendency is inevitable, since "the great mass of men does not possess the character or the intelligence required to connect these actions with their real causes". Interestingly, Pareto goes on to argue that "even the most intelligent men are compelled to condense their rules of conduct into a small number of axioms". Even these individuals rely on habits or established practices in order to reduce the burden of reasoning, since "when one must act, one does not really have the time to devote oneself to long and subtle theoretical considerations". This distinction clearly entails a corresponding difference in the capacity for action between elites and non-elites. Elites require rules of conduct not because of any deficiency of intelligence, but in order to orient their behaviour more efficiently when

circumstances demand rapid decision. For them, habits or established practices serve as instruments of practical coordination.

On the other hand, internal differentiation is decisive: within the non-elites, it is possible to discern an "emerging aristocracy" – a minority endowed with the qualities, energies, and ambitions that may enable it to rise (see Barbieri 2025, 85). Pareto does not provide a clear account of how this emerging elites concretely form. It is certainly possible to invoke the theory of residues and, in particular, the idea that, during phases of decline, the residues of force progressively "shift" from the governing elites to the "lower classes" (see, for example, Pareto 1921, tr. 1984). Such an explanation remains partial, insofar as it does not fully explain the concrete processes through which emerging elites take shape, develop internal cohesion, organise themselves, and ultimately acquire political efficacy. Nonetheless, with the identification of this non-elite *subgroup*, Pareto is able to:

1. recognise (even if only indirectly) the central role of "the many" in social and political processes, insofar as they constitute the pool from which new elites are continuously recruited;
2. provide a concrete counterweight to established elites, thereby analytically configuring a situation of competition.

Against this background, it is necessary to distinguish once again between a static and a dynamic perspective (see *Chapter 3*). From a static standpoint, Pareto observes the social system at a given moment: he identifies elites and non-elites, examines their internal differentiation, and clarifies the modalities of their relationship. This entails, in particular, an analysis of the *allocation* and *distribution* of power. From a dynamic perspective, by contrast, Pareto focuses on the factors that drive elite circulation and, under certain conditions, the emergence of crisis and revolutionary rupture. The focus is not on the distribution of power as such, but on its *rearticulation* over time.

The discussion that follows elaborates on these aspects, focusing in particular on the following issues:

1. the dynamics of consent and conflict between the rulers and the ruled;
2. the weakening of centripetal forces, which are no longer capable of maintaining power within its centre (for Pareto, the central state);
3. the strengthening of centrifugal forces, which disperse power and generate conditions of semi-anarchy;
4. the transformation of the governing elites' ordinary maintenance of power into forms of entrenchment;
5. the erosion of the justificatory basis of the rulers' power in the eyes of the ruled;
6. the emergence of new ideological narratives capable of sustaining the ascent of a new elite.

Although several of the considerations that follow apply to Pareto's social system as a whole, they are, unless otherwise specified, here referred specifically to political relationships. First, the focus lies on the *general* configuration of the relationship between rulers and ruled; the analysis then turns to the *differentiated* role of subgroups, particularly in the context of elite circulation.

The General Configuration of Political Relationships

In the relationship between the rulers and the ruled, which is hierarchically ordered (Curti 2021, 224; Giovannini 2017), power is asymmetrical, with decision-making processes concentrated in the hands of the few. To clarify what this actually means, it is necessary to distinguish between different levels of analysis. Pareto's social model is complex and, as noted above, he recognises a multiplicity of elites, thereby anticipating later theories of *elite pluralism* (see Pareto TSG § 2254; Krais 2001, 12; Wasner 2004, 45; see *contra* Hoffmann-Lange 2003). Therefore, unlike in the case of Gaetano Mosca (Wasner 2004, 40–41), I contend that the metaphor of the pyramid, often used to describe the structure of the social system, does not, in itself,

fully capture the Paretian conception. However, Pareto employs this image in his study of income distribution, and alternates it with that of the "spinning top" (see Barbieri 2025, 72). Accordingly, it may be more appropriate to ask whether each domain or sector of the social system gives rise to its own pyramidal or "spinning-top" configuration, organised around the distinction between the few at the apex and the many at the base. Politics represents no exception. Under normal circumstances, political power is concentrated within clearly defined politico-institutional *loci*: the state, parliament, and government (see *Chapter 1*). Those who occupy them are able to take decisions for the whole society (Giovannini 2017, 187) and to enjoy, in an exclusive fashion, the advantages inseparably inherent in holding power (Fiorot 1969, 199; Sola 1993). They have control over strategic resources – wealth, force, knowledge, relational networks – that constitute the material basis of political domination (Fiorot 1969, 200). The ruled depend upon the rulers' decisions and their capacity to influence central choices remains minimal. In this respect, the metaphor of the pyramid is particularly meaningful: political relationships are organised along the axis of command and obedience, while the masses are not integrated into the centres of decision-making.

This general power-configuration is continually shaped by the simultaneous presence of *integration* and *disintegration* (for the Machiavellian roots of Pareto's approach on this aspect, see Portinaro 2023, 28–29). For just as the social system as a whole is traversed by tensions among its elements (see *Chapter 3*), so too the relationship between the rulers and the ruled is marked by conflicts that resist full reconciliation. Although some interpreters emphasise the *conflictual bipolarisation* between elites and non-elites (Marshall 2025), a conflict-centred perspective captures only one side of the coin. In Pareto's thought, consent and conflict are integrated within the model of social equilibrium. Thus, in Pareto, a "theory of consent" and a "theory of conflict" coexist within a unified conceptual framework.

Central to the *integrative moment* is the requirement that (political) elites function effectively. If elites are defined by their qualities, and their

presumed superiority justifies minority rule (Ripepe 1974, 335), then the legitimacy of their position depends upon the *efficacy* and *utility* of their action, as well as their capacity to contain and reduce the "exceptions" represented by their own unqualified elements. Thus, "superiority" must translate into *effective performance*. In concrete terms, however, several problems emerge. Effectiveness must be assessed within a field of constraints, within which elites must navigate, contend, and ultimately sustain themselves. Interestingly, Pareto argues that the complexity of the social system exerts such pervasive influence as to sever the link between political action and its intended outcome. An illuminating example is provided by Pareto's discussion of speculators. Speculators, he writes, "are just people who keep their minds on their business, and being well supplied with Class I residues, take advantage of them to make money, following lines of least-resistance, as after all everybody else does" (Pareto TSG § 2254). The trajectory they follow emerges as the resultant of an "infinitude of minor acts", each determined by "present advantage"; yet, they do not control that infinitude, which may ultimately carry them towards outcomes they would never have deliberately chosen. Furthermore, however "superior" they may be, the individuals who compose the elites are not capable of acting in a perfectly rational manner: "Ruling classes, like other social groups, perform both logical and non-logical actions" (Pareto TSG § 2254).

> [Speculators] will be carried along by the sheer force of the system to which they belong, involuntarily, and indeed against their wills, following the course that is required of the system. Fifty years ago "speculators" had no conception whatever of the state of affairs that prevails today and to which their activities have brought them. The road they have followed has been the resultant of an infinitude of minor acts, each determined by the present advantage. As is the case with all social phenomena, it has been the resultant of certain forces operating in conjunction with certain ties and in the face of certain obstacles. When we say that at the present time our speculators are

> laying the foundations for a war by continually increasing public expenditures, we in no sense mean that they are doing that deliberately – quite to the contrary!
>
> (Pareto TSG § 2254)

The other decisive component of integration is ideology. As seen in *Chapter 2*, within the social system, ideology performs a dual function: it sustains both integration and conflict. It produces consent by providing shared symbolic frameworks, and at the same time organises dissent by furnishing competing groups with ideological instruments of mobilisation. It thus operates both as a mechanism of cohesion and as a medium of political and social struggle. Ideologies, in their integrative dimension, serve to stabilise consent (Bonabello 2000, 145, 148; Farias 1977, 408–409), thereby consolidating the bond between rulers and ruled and underpinning the legitimacy of those in power.

Processes of disintegration intensify when elite dysfunction begins to undermine the system and when the ideological justifications advanced by the rulers no longer suffice to secure consent. For Pareto, this phase is inevitable. Individuals who possess the "best" qualities in a given epoch are those whose dispositions favour the *provisional* balance of forces within the system at that moment (see *Chapter 3*); yet, the very qualities that enable the ascent of an elite do not necessarily coincide with those required for its continued preservation in power. As the equilibrium of the system changes, the capacities that once permitted elites to rise may gradually cease to correspond to the new requirements of the social system. Thus, there emerges a distinction between the conditions that account for the rise of elites and their persistence in power (Ripepe 1974, 340). Although framed in different conceptual terms, Pareto's reflection ultimately revolves around the classical problem of the relationship between the *acquisition* of power and its *conservation*. For Pareto, the indefinite maintenance of power is impossible, just as the onset of decline cannot ultimately be averted; at most, it may be delayed and its destructive effects mitigated. Everything hinges on circulation. Circulation ensures that elites incorporate a sufficient

influx of new elements from emerging strata, permits the gradual renewal of the integrative elements of the system, and thereby limits processes of disintegration. At this point, a crucial distinction must be drawn between the *circulation of elites* proper – whereby dominant elites yield to opposing elites, allowing for a recalibration of the distribution of residues within the social system – and *circulation within the elites* through *co-optation*.

It is at this juncture, that the greatest risk of misreading Pareto's thought as conservative arises. As Portinaro (2023, 28) rightly observes, the final chapter of the *Trattato* contains a series of paragraphs devoted to the conditions under which total disintegration – namely, revolution – may, for a time, be deferred. Pareto even provides a list of the means that "a governing class has at its disposal in order to defend itself by eliminating individuals who might conceivably overthrow it" (Pareto TSG § 2477). Yet, Pareto's intention is not to furnish a practical manual for rulers seeking to preserve their power. Rather, as he himself makes clear, his analysis serves to reveal the very limits of those means and the ultimate failure of declining elites.

This part of the *Trattato* is best understood in conjunction with the above-quoted TSG § 2254, where Pareto observes that the system leads elites (in his example, speculators) towards outcomes different from those they intend. With some differences, he reiterates the same point in TSG § 2480:

> as often happens in social history, measures that are useful in a given direction for a certain length of time eventually come to work in an opposite direction, and so encompass the ruin of governments that place their reliance on them. That has been the case with many aristocracies.

Pareto stresses that governing elites, in attempting to neutralise the threat posed by individuals drawn from emerging elites, tend, particularly in plutocratic demagogy (Portinaro 2023, 28), to absorb them through co-optation; in so doing, however, they fail to generate any genuine circulation

of elites, thereby preparing their own fall. Pareto makes clear that the admission of new individuals into the governing elites through co-optation is conditional upon a decisive requirement: that such individuals "consent to serve" the elites they seek to join. This very condition effectively obstructs circulation and precludes any substantive reconfiguration of the balance of forces within the system. Pareto explicitly refers to the

> *admission to membership in the governing class of any individual potentially dangerous to it, provided he consents to serve it*. The qualification must not be overlooked: "provided he consents to serve it." Take it away and we get a mere description of class-circulation that means nothing else than the admission to the elite of elements extraneous to it, the new members bringing in their opinions, traits, virtues, prejudices. But when such elements change colour and character and turn allies and servants where they had been enemies, we get an entirely different situation in which the essentials of class-circulation are absent.
>
> (Pareto TSG § 2482)

Co-optation presupposes a certain degree of affinity between those who coopt and those who are coopted (Giovannini 2023, 513). As a result, governing elites tend to absorb individuals from emerging strata who, rather than embodying opposing qualities, are those most similar to them. The scenario commanding Pareto's primary attention is the following: governing elites marked by a predominance of Class I residues require the incorporation of individuals endowed with Class II residues. The governing elites of the plutocratic demagogy of his time, saturated with Class I residues and inclined to coopt affine individuals, constitute the principal target of his critique (Portinaro 2023, 29):

> The device [of co-optation] has been resorted to in many countries in many different periods of history. Nowadays it is virtually the only resort of the demagogic plutocracy that controls in our present-day

> societies; and it has demonstrated its effectiveness for maintaining it in power. It is harmful to an elite, as tending to intensify traits that already prevail to excess in it. Furthermore, along with the corruption that is inseparable from it, it debases character and provides an opening for those who have both the will and the power to use violence in shaking off the yoke of the ruling class.
>
> (Pareto TSG § 2483)

> Governing classes that are rich in Class II residues but short in combination-instincts (Class I residues) need new elements in which those proportions are reversed. Such elements would ordinarily be supplied by normal circulation. But if, instead, the governing class opens its doors only to individuals who consent to be like it, and are indeed driven by their ardour as neophytes to exaggerate in that direction, the already harmful predominance of certain residues is carried further still and the road to ruin is thrown open. Conversely, a class, such as our plutocracy, that is woefully lacking in Class II residues and overrich in Class I residues would need to acquire new elements that are weak in Class I and strong in Class II residues. Instead, by opening only to those individuals who betray faith and conscience in order to procure the benefits which the plutocracy so lavishly bestows on those who devote themselves to its service, it acquires elements that in no way serve to supply it with the things it most needs. It does, to be sure, deprive the opposition of a few of its leaders, and that is very helpful to it; but it acquires nothing to replenish its own inner strength. So long as cunning and corruption serve, it is likely to keep winning victories, but it falls very readily if violence and force chance to interpose.
>
> (Pareto TSG § 2484)

The element of force – to which Pareto refers above, and which is central to his thought – is decisive: when emerging elites resort to force, the rulers are no longer able to defend themselves. This is a direct consequence of co-

optation: those individuals most inclined to the use of force, being the least akin to the cunning men of the governing elites, are not cooptated and thus remain within the ranks of the insurgents. Moreover, beyond force, the emerging elite is endowed with a strong ideology, while the rulers, as shown in *Chapter 2*, no longer possess a solid ideological justification. Ideological conflict intensifies, and the struggle for the circulation of elites is waged, to a significant extent, on ideological terrain. This too proves to be a losing battle for the governing elites, given that their ideological constructions are ultimately oriented towards the mere entrenchment of power.

The Concrete Unfolding of the Circulation of Elites and the Role of the Subgroups

As is well known, the circulation of elites is linked to variations in the relative proportions of Class I and Class II residues. When Class I residues – associated with combination, cunning, and innovation – prevail, the elite tends to assume a "fox-like" character, grounded in flexibility and in the continual reworking of the ideological justifications of its dominance. By contrast, when Class II residues – linked to the persistence of aggregates, tradition, and the use of force – predominate, "lion-like" traits emerge, oriented toward stability, the maintenance of order, and the reaffirmation of authority. This distinction, however, constitutes for Pareto a simplification, since in historical reality elites often display mixed characteristics.

A systematic description of Paretian elite circulation is provided by Higley and Pakulski (2012, 115), who distil its cyclical character and bring into sharper focus its internal logic. Elite circulation is a constant process: individuals regularly move from non-elite positions into elite roles and, conversely, descend from positions of prominence. What varies over time is the intensity of this process and the kinds of obstructions or delays that affect it. Higley and Pakulski further argue that elite circulation unfolds in cycles of varying scope. "Broad cycles" concern durable elite configurations – both governing and non-governing – and their beginning or end is accompanied by mass ideological shifts. They involve wide-

ranging economic, cultural, and political transformations, as well as dramatic changes in the distribution of residues within the governing elite: “long cycles begin and end with definitive collapses of governing elites and much of the socioeconomic and sociopolitical orders they have overseen” (Higley and Pakulski 2012, 116). Within these extended cycles, shorter cycles may intervene, either moderating or accelerating the pace of elite decline. Governing elites may, for example, attempt to preserve themselves through co-optation, with varying degrees of success; medium-term adjustments may also occur, such as shifts in alliances with other elites (for example, economic or military elites). External factors, in turn, may accelerate the broader cycle towards decline (for instance, in the case of an economic crisis) or contribute to its postponement (as in periods of short-term economic resurgence). In the schema proposed by Higley and Pakulski, the modes through which degeneration unfolds partly overlap with those outlined above, albeit with two important qualifications. First, governing elites tend to absorb predominantly *mediocre* individuals. As a result, the more capable individuals remain within the emerging elites and begin to *mobilise mass opposition*. Second, the governing elite becomes progressively incapable of innovating in policy terms and of adapting to changing circumstances: *decision-making rigidity* thus progressively erodes governing capacity (Higley and Pakulski 2012, 116).

However, a further clarification may be in order, as most interpretations of Paretian elite theory do not fully acknowledge the distinction between its *general formulation* and its internally *differentiated logic*. This oversight has shaped much of the discussion not only of Pareto, but also of so-called “classical” Italian Elitism. Critics have often targeted what they take to be the “non-pluralist” core of Italian Elitism, arguing that it posits a relatively homogeneous political class opposed to an equally homogeneous and largely unorganised mass (Keller 1963; Hartmann 2007, 19–20; Hoffmann-Lange 2003, 111). Indeed, the very terms “elite” and “mass”, when framed in a binary opposition without further specification, appear today analytically crude (de Ghantuz Cubbe 2026). Contemporary societies display high degrees of functional differentiation, institutional plurality, and

dense networks of parties, movements, interest groups, associations, and informal organisations. From this perspective, a simple elite-mass distinction is reductive and, taken on its own, can no longer serve as an adequate explanatory framework for present-day social and political realities (Mongardini 2011, 215). And yet, the exegetical misunderstanding surrounding Italian elitism and Pareto's theory lies precisely in treating this distinction as though it exhausted the elitist perspective, rather than recognising it as opening onto a broader and more complex inquiry into power relations.

Internal differentiation, shifting alliances, strategic competition, and subgroup dynamics constitute a central part of Pareto's theory. In his *Manuale di economia politica* (Pareto 1906, cap. 2 § 104ff), Pareto sets out a hypothetical model that makes the internal mechanisms of elite circulation transparent. He invites his readers to posit a society as divided into two openly conflicting camps: Group A, which dominates, and Group B, which is subordinated to it. Alongside them stands Group C, which shifts its support between the two principal contenders (see also Lyttelton 1973, 77). Both A and B are internally differentiated into subgroups, and it is at this level that both circulation and political struggle unfold.
Within the dominant bloc (A), Pareto distinguishes:

- Aα: the governing core – the part of the elite that effectively exercises power;
- Aβ: the degenerate stratum – individuals who formally belong to the dominant bloc but lack the qualities necessary to sustain leadership.

Within the subordinate bloc (B), he distinguishes:

- Bα: the emerging elite – that is, the counter-elite that aspires to replace Aα;
- Bβ: the amorphous mass – the "common mob" that constitutes the bulk of human societies.

The decisive contest does not take place between A and B as undifferentiated wholes. It unfolds between Aα (the incumbent elite) and Bα (the aspiring elite), which confront one another as competitors for power. Within this conflict, neither subgroup can openly declare its pursuit of domination. In order to secure allies, each must cloak its ambitions in universal principles: Aα presents itself as the guarantor of order and the common good; Bα does the same, invoking liberty, justice, or equality in opposition to the domination of A.

Pareto's reasoning, at this point, becomes even more complex, as the ideological struggle not only affects the relation between the two camps, but also reverberates within each of them. The most significant example concerns A: the attempt by Aα to defend its position in the name of the common good succeeds, for a time, in securing the consent of Bβ, but produces detrimental effects within Aβ, that is, its own degenerate stratum. Aβ, as Pareto writes, comes to believe in the ideological narratives of Aα, and mistakes for truth

> what is in fact mere fiction, and which can be useful only as fiction. Over time, it may occur that Bβ believes less and less in the narratives of Aα, while Aβ increasingly takes them as a norm for actual conduct.

Once again, therefore, the governing elites are ultimately led in directions they do not intend: as Pareto concludes, "the art employed by Aα turns against it and ultimately does it more harm than good" (Pareto 1906, cap. 2 § 105).

Meanwhile, Bα begins to reap the benefits of the conflict. Members of Aβ – though formally aligned with the dominant bloc, yet effectively excluded from power – gradually converge with Bα. Bβ, which, as noted, no longer believes in the narratives of the governing elites, in turn aligns itself with Bα. Eventually, even C shifts its position. As discussed *in Chapter 2*, Bα's capacity to attract support is rooted in the growing perception that the divide between the privileged and the non-privileged is unjust, a perception Bα mobilises by calling for the abolition of privileges:

> By virtue of such a fiction, it acquires the favour, or at least the benevolent neutrality, of the intermediate part C […]; thereafter, it not only has the greater part of the people on its side, but also obtains the favour of the declining part of the old aristocracy [Aβ], which willingly lulls itself to the sound of so sweet a song.
>
> (Pareto 1906, cap. 2 § 106)

Interestingly, Pareto observes that revolutions are typically initiated by Aβ: frustrated insiders within the governing elites act as the catalysts of upheaval. Here, the centrality of the *descending aspect* of elite circulation becomes evident: those who fall from the established elites do not disappear, but retain a range of resources that allow them to continue influencing the system. Although Aβ consists of declining elements, its members nonetheless possess greater competence, resources, and organisational capacity than Bβ and C. Yet, they do not reap any rewards; on the contrary, they are, as Pareto suggests, "deceived". The ultimate beneficiary is Bα, which defeats Aα by force and assumes control; Aβ, despite having catalysed the rupture, ultimately finds itself marginalised. Bβ and C, for their part, receive only limited and largely symbolic concessions, both during the upheaval and after the transfer of power (Pareto 1906, cap. 2 § 106–107). The sole real winner is the "new aristocracy".

Elite Circulation and the "Tacit Pact of Domination"

The argument developed thus far may be summarised through a set of core propositions:

1. Individuals differ in capacities and dispositions, and their relations are hierarchically ordered.
2. Society is articulated into a plurality of domains, each comprising elites ("the few") and non-elites ("the many"); both are internally differentiated into subgroups.
3. Elites do not necessarily coincide with "the best": the divergence between position and capacity increases over time, giving rise to

processes of degeneration. Central here is the distinction between functional and non-functional governing elites.

4. Even under favourable conditions, elites do not fully control the outcomes of their actions, which are partly shaped by the dynamics of the system.
5. The system is intrinsically dynamic: elites decline and are replaced through circulation; when circulation is obstructed, disintegrations intensifies.
6. Political struggle unfolds among competing subgroups, rather than between undifferentiated macro-groups.
7. Revolutions occur not only thanks to the emerging elites, but also through individuals expelled from the governing elite.

Paretian elite theory presents a number of limitations that warrant, even if only very briefly, explicit acknowledgment. Foremost among these is the assumption of the inevitability of inequality, grounded in a quasi-anthropological conception of differential individual capacities. Today, this conception cannot be sustained. Sociological research shows that social stratification arises from specific socio-economic and cultural configurations, power relations, and historically contingent processes (see, for example, Bourdieu 1984; Tilly 1998; Wright 2015). Pareto's depiction of non-elites as predominantly non-logical masses guided by sentiments, moreover, is rooted in the late 19th-century tradition of crowd psychology (Curti 2021; Middendorf 2016), and appears today both empirically weak and theoretically problematic (Thonhauser 2022). Finally, the notion of a cyclical circulation of elites displays a distinctly deterministic character, insofar as it presupposes an overly mechanical regularity in processes of rise and decline. This account finds little support in comparative analyses, which instead point to multiple trajectories and discontinuities (Mahoney and Thelen 2010).

That said, Pareto captures a number of fundamental dynamics. The question of the relationship between *gradual* and *abrupt* change, for instance, remains fully relevant, even without invoking the notion of

revolution. Lenz (2025) reconstructs the state of the art about *institutional change* – interestingly employing the notion of "equilibrium". He shows that a significant strand of the literature draws on "punctuated equilibrium models that center critical junctures as moments in time when institutional constraints loosen and fundamental change becomes possible"; other scholars, by contrast, "emphasize incremental processes of change that may accumulate to undermine a previous institutional arrangement over time" (Lenz 2025, 1–2). Moreover, much of contemporary scholarship tends to place great emphasis on exogenous shocks that trigger radical institutional reconfigurations, while devoting less attention to endogenous, gradual dynamics of change (Mahoney and Thelen 2010, 2). This tendency is particularly evident in recent debates on contemporary democracies, whereby the focus on external factors has arguably led to an overextension – and at times an imprecise use – of the concept of *crisis* (Nevola 2025). Pareto's approach has the merit of foregrounding endogenous factors, while assigning exogenous influences a secondary role; ultimately, it is the capacity of political elites to respond that determines the effective impact of those influences (on this issue, see Higley 2021).

By offering a conceptual framework that goes beyond abstract accounts of institutional change and remains grounded in concrete political actors, Pareto also captures the crucial relationship between "old elites" and "new elites", which strongly influences the ongoing process of founding, conserving, and eventually dismantling political institutions (Mongardini 2000, 21). Consider a political party operating within a competitive democratic environment. If it remains unchanged over the long term – if it fails to recognise emerging social demands, neglects generational turnover in its leadership, and does not adapt its communicative strategies to shifting cultural codes – it will almost inevitably become obsolete. Its electorate will shrink, its internal cohesion will weaken, and its capacity to interpret social transformations will erode. Conversely, if the same party engages in relentless and indiscriminate transformation – continuously reshuffling its structures, radically altering its agenda, and replacing its personnel without regard for continuity – it risks losing its identity, alienating its core

supporters, and undermining its organisational and strategic coherence (de Ghantuz Cubbe 2024, 88). Verzichelli (2018, 581–582), by explicitly referring to the circulation of elites, suggests a similar line of reasoning:

> elite circulation and elite continuity are inextricably interwoven: if the idea of a necessary alternation among elite groups is at the core of the dominant theories of representative democracy, it is also true that an orderly, smooth degree of elite circulation is also to be considered a fundamental precondition for democratic stability. In other words, studying the longitudinal patterns of elite transformation means keeping an eye on the "normality" of non-turbulent times, marking the differences and accounting for them using a number of political, institutional and cultural variables.

If conservation and transformation become disconnected – if the renewal of political personnel becomes congested – the pressures for change intensify, sometimes to the point of radical rupture. For Pareto, many of these pressures arise "from below", that is, from groups excluded from effective participation in power who aspire to occupy positions previously monopolised by established elites. In today's complex societies, it has become increasingly difficult to draw a clear distinction between "below" and "above". The relationship between "the few" and "the many" is mediated, for instance, by a plurality of intermediary structures (Campati 2022), ranging from political parties to interest groups, consumer associations, and similar organisations. At this point, however, it is necessary to return to the distinction between the general and the differentiated perspective, and bring the former into sharper focus.

Pareto's approach – read in conjunction with later literature – proves capable of capturing some central features of the overall configuration of political relationships, particularly the "tacit pact of domination" between rulers and ruled (Mongardini 2011; Ferrero 1942). This notion also recalls Ralf Dahrendorf's (1965: 245) concept of the *Herrschaftsvertrag*, according to which, in modern societies, those who occupy positions of command

possess the legitimate authority to issue orders, while those in subordinate positions are expected to comply. For Dahrendorf, those who hold authority always tend to some extent to preserve the existing order, whereas those subject to authority tend to seek its transformation. Political relations are therefore underpinned by a persistent conflict. As in Pareto, Dahrendorf's theory also contains an integrative moment: conflict can be institutionalised, regulated, and tensions partially reconciled. These arrangements, however, are never perpetual and the balance between contrasting forces is never stable. When governing groups become excessively self-referential and prioritise the preservation of their own position over responsiveness to societal needs, they assume what Mongardini (2017) calls the physiognomy of a *politico-economic-bureaucratic consorteria*, a tightly knit minority primarily concerned with self-reproduction. This also concerns political parties: Parties have been regarded in the history of representative systems as both the symptom and the product of an ever more comprehensive inclusion of civil society in political life (Oppo 2016, 695). With the emergence of representative democracy, the party becomes an essential instrument in the expression of the electorate; it functions as a "transmission belt of consent" and thus serves as an important link between the societal needs and political decision-making (Mongardini 2011, 140). Nevertheless, it is well known that parties are not always capable of fulfilling such a function – not only because they are constantly exposed to the risk of developing powerful organisational structures and bureaucratic apparatuses that hinder the relationship between the rulers and the ruled, but also because they themselves may exercise excessive influence over the activity of representatives (Mongardini 2011, 185). In particular, there is the persistent danger that representatives may feel more accountable to their party or party apparatus than to those they represent, or that an "imperative mandate from above" – that is, from party hierarchies – may impair the free expression of will in parliament (Mongardini 2011, 256; see also Sartori 1995; de Ghantuz Cubbe 2023, where some of these themes are discussed in greater detail).

Within democratic systems – defined by a condition of permanent transformation (Bobbio 2014) – the self-preservation of dominant groups, together with processes of increasing hierarchisation, progressively obstructs renewal. If, as Higley and Pakulski suggest, governing elites become increasingly closed upon themselves and gradually lose *policy capacity*, their ability to respond to evolving social demands is correspondingly weakened. This represents a crucial problem for many contemporary Western democracies, particularly insofar as they historically constituted themselves as social democracies. If resources that ought to be directed towards the welfare of the ruled are progressively diverted towards the reproduction and preservation of elites, the risk emerges of a "divorce of the 'few' from the social pact on which democracies were built after the Second World War" (Urbinati 2020, 28; see also *Chapter 5*). Under these conditions, thus, two central pacts come to be eroded: the social one, which concerns the concrete living conditions of the ruled and the role of political elites in securing the functioning of fundamental areas such as healthcare, education, and security; and the pact of domination, which sustains the overall configuration of the political order.

Finally, one last problem remains to be addressed. Today, a "disjunction" has emerged between "standard accounts" of the relationships between the rulers and the ruled and an increasingly "complex political terrain" (Urbinati and Warren 2008, 388). Standard accounts are centred primarily on political representation and "territorially based electoral mechanisms". By contrast, the contemporary political terrain is less confined within state territoriality, more pluralised, and increasingly dependent on informal processes of negotiation and deliberation. In light of this "changing political landscape", which also includes new forms of political participation, approaches such as those of Pareto or Dahrendorf may appear, at first glance, outdated and insufficiently attuned to contemporary democratic theory. This impression is reinforced by a long-standing "division of labour" within the academic literature: Elitist or neo-Schumpeterian scholars continue to operate in terms of elites (and non-elites), whereas other strands of democratic theory remain oriented towards the search for

"stronger forms of democracy" (see Urbinati and Warren 2008, 388). Pareto remains viewed with suspicion by the latter and is not always appreciated by the former.

Yet the Paretian framework – and, more broadly, approaches centred on the concept of *domination* in politics – may be particularly well suited to explain precisely that "disjunction". Pareto conceptualises political dynamics as structured by a constitutive tension between forces of centralisation and forces of fragmentation. Where centrifugal tendencies intensify, central power – identified by Pareto with sovereignty – tends "to become a meaningless name", while the effective power of particular actors or groups expands (Pareto 1921, tr. 1984, 41). Pareto's reflection acquires particular relevance when applied to the contemporary disjunction between mechanisms of political aggregation and the plurality of social forces within complex societies (Burns 1999; Pasquino 2009; Schüttemeyer 2019). The contemporary difficulty of aggregating multiple social needs undermines the "tacit pact of domination", without, however, entailing its disappearance. *The old political configuration and the new "terrain" of political relationships coexist, in a configuration that remains, at present, largely indeterminate*. The whole relation between the rulers and the ruled may be understood as unfolding within an "anarcho-constitutive phase" (Mongardini 2007, 110), a transitional condition in which established political channels risk to lose their function, while new configurations of power have yet to stabilise. Power no longer appears as concentrated within a single institutional *locus*, and circulates through a multiplicity of actors, networks, and arenas. The crucial point, however, is that *dispersion* and *recomposition* constitute inseparable moments of a single dynamic process. Power diffuses, but it simultaneously tends towards new forms of concentration. Emergent "centres of power" crystallise in economic, transnational, or hybrid institutional formations. In some cases, the dispersion of power also generates counter-reactions, as exemplified by *sovereignism*, oriented towards the reassertion of state-centred authority. Pareto is instructive with regard to the *intensity* with which such processes unfold. When adaptive mechanisms remain operative, dispersion and

recomposition tend to proceed gradually. By contrast, when demands for transformation encounter rigid resistance and channels of circulation become obstructed, the displacement of power assumes a more discontinuous and conflictual character. Under such conditions, anti-system actors may emerge, institutional constraints weaken, and the capacity of established authorities to regulate conflict diminishes. In extreme cases, this condition may culminate in the diffusion of violence – ranging from episodic unrest to organised insurgency, paramilitary confrontation, or even civil war.

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5

SOCIOLOGY AND ECONOMISM

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Economic Rationality, Political Action, and Demagogic Plutocracy

Considering Pareto's economic liberal orientation, his pronounced resistance to any expansion of the role of the state comes as no surprise (Canavero 1972, 477; Mornati 2005, 11). According to Pareto, the enlargement of the functions of the state entails a process of extensive *bureaucratisation* that undermines individual freedom (Portinaro 2012, n. p.), while also failing to produce meaningful results. This is because Pareto assumes the state's "ineptitude" in the economic domain (Mornati 2005, 11). His critique of socialism follows a similar line. By expanding state control over the economy, socialism produces an inevitably cumbersome and overcentralised state, grounded in principles no less fanciful than the "celestial spirits" of medieval belief (Mornati 2005, 14; Susca 2023, 3). Yet, Pareto's position extends beyond the liberal critique, and encompasses simultaneously his elitist perspective, his theory of residues, and the problem of the relationship between politics and economics.

Among the most recurring themes in Pareto's thought is the proposition that any extension of state functions entails increased costs for the many, coupled with benefits accruing to a select few. This insight underpins his critique of protectionism, of so-called "bourgeois socialism", of democracy

more broadly, and in particular of demagogic plutocracy (Mornati 2018, 158; 2020, 97; Letter to Maffeo Pantaleoni, 23 December 1896; Letter to Francesco Papafava, 20 January 1904, in OC, vol. XXX; Busino 2010). At the core of this perspective lies Pareto's theory of *spoliation*, understood as the "use of power by certain groups in order to secure, even by means of corruption, particular advantages" (Busino 2010, 115). In this respect, much of the literature, including recent contributions, has emphasised the centrality of corruption and of Pareto's critique of plutocracy (see, for example, Finer 1968). Piano (2025, 7), for instance, presents Pareto (and Italian Elitism more broadly) as advancing a theory that exposes the "plutocratic infiltration of representative government".

The merit of Piano's interpretation lies in the *reorientation* of the analytical focus: she shifts attention away from the problem of the extension of state power into the economic sphere towards the *inverse problem*, namely the "capture" of democracy and representative institutions by plutocratic forces. It is precisely this reorientation, I argue, that paves the way for a deeper understanding of Pareto's critique of demagogic plutocracy. However, in Piano's account, this reorientation remains largely implicit, making it difficult to understand how such "capture" is concretely possible. In addition, it is essential to bear in mind that, for Pareto, spoliation – and, more generally, the transfer of wealth from one class to another – constitutes, to a certain extent, an inevitable phenomenon (Belligni 2000, 339; Pareto 1896–1897 § 791; Mingardi 2021). This insight, in turn, necessitates a careful reconstruction of Pareto's reflection in order to clarify the precise meaning of spoliation.

In the following pages, I argue that Pareto develops both an analysis and a critique of the overextension of abstract economic rationality to political action and of the reduction of the latter to an instrumental, calculative, and merely interest-based action. I further contend that abstract economic rationality is crucial for understanding Pareto's theory of spoliation, "demagogic plutocracy", and, more generally, his critique of the state and state intervention. The argument unfolds in three steps. First, I situate abstract economic rationality within Pareto's thought. Second, I examine

the relationship between abstract economic rationality, instrumental and calculative rationality grounded in interest, and the Paretian theory of residues. In doing so, I address Pareto's critique of plutocratic demagogy. Finally, I situate Pareto within the most recent literature on economic rationality, underscoring the uniqueness of a Paretian perspective. I argue that Pareto may provide valuable insight for the contemporary analysis (and critique) of *economisation* and *economism* (Mongardini 1997), especially insofar as these phenomena involve: (i) the overextension and misuse of abstract economic rationality; (ii) the reconfiguration of the relationship between politics and the economy to the advantage of the latter; (iii) the reduction of political action to the mere pursuit of interests through exchange and negotiation; and (iv) the pseudo-scientific concealment of these dynamics or their naturalisation as necessary, objective, and value-neutral.

As is well known, Pareto's growing engagement with sociology is inseparable from the increasing centrality, within his thought, of the non-logical dimension of human action. It would be untenable, though, to interpret Pareto's sociology as signalling an abandonment of economics (Marchionatti and Mornati 2017, 12–13), just as it would be equally mistaken to view his growing attention to the non-logical as implying a full disinterest in the logical. Moreover, the once influential interpretation advanced by authors such as Talcott Parsons and Raymond Aron – according to which economics, for Pareto, constitutes the study of logical action, whereas sociology is concerned with non-logical action – is today treated within the literature with greater caution (Marchionatti and Mornati 2017, 10). To explore these issues further, one would normally retrace Pareto's "path towards sociology", following the approach most commonly adopted in the scholarly literature. (Portinaro 2012, n.p.). This would involve tracing a reconstructive itinerary, centred on the "emergence" of Pareto as a sociologist and on the relationship between economics and sociology. This itinerary is undoubtedly of considerable interest, but it has already been extensively examined in the literature (Busino 1973; Malandrino and Marchionatti 2000; Marchionatti and Mornati 2017;

Mongardini 1973; Susca 2023). I choose to dwell upon economic rationality and explore its role, for Pareto, within the broader social system. This latter path has been explored less frequently (Segre 2000; Steiner 2000) and, I argue, leads directly to Pareto's critique of demagogic plutocracy.

To begin with, Pareto does not deny the scientific value of abstract economic rationality; he nonetheless remains fully aware that abstract models bear no immediate correspondence to concrete economic action (see Adair-Toteff 2022, 330). Above all, he doubts that economic science – and therefore economists themselves – possesses the capacity to shape the course of events to such an extent as to bring about substantial socio-economic transformation. This is why, for instance, he mocks the work of the Inter-Allied Economic Council, denies his fellow economists the ability to alter "general phenomena", and suggests that their efforts amount to an attempt to "halt the sun" (Letter to Vittore Pansini, 30 November 1919). On another occasion, in criticising a measure aimed at curbing luxury and rejecting his colleagues' predictions about the effects it would have, Pareto observes that the laws of economics may indeed hold, but that they differ markedly from the "dreams of economists" (Letter to Maffeo Pantaleoni, 20 November 1916).

The premise underlying Pareto's critique is that perfect economic rationality does not exist in reality and that the *homo oeconomicus* is a construct. This awareness is already evident in his economic writings, particularly in the distinction between pure and applied economics, and is subsequently refined and reworked in his later sociological works. For Pareto, real economic action is not perfectly logical. He states this explicitly in his *Cours d'économie politique*, and reiterates it some years later in his *Manuale di economia politica* (Bach 2020). Susca (2023, 21) specifically draws attention to two passages of Pareto's argument: "there are no real individuals who act solely on the basis of purely economic motives" (Pareto 1896–1897 § 592, note a); "in consumption, the concrete phenomenon diverges from the abstract one, chiefly because many forms of consumption are determined by custom, and because, even in other cases, man is a highly imperfect instrument for measuring ophelimities" (Pareto 1906, cap. 9 § 2).

To be sure, Pareto never denies that economic action retains a distinctive connection to rationality. As he himself states, “the actions studied by political economy” belong “in very large part” to the class of logical actions (Pareto 1910, in SSM, 347). This is no contradiction, for even when the economic actor errs or acts on the basis of imperfect assumptions and incomplete information, his conduct nonetheless remains tied to a situated and – what we would today describe as – *bounded* form of rationality (see, for example, Ingrao 2000, 223). In particular, economic action retains an instrumental and calculative character grounded in interest (Belligni 2000, 333–334) and differs from other forms of action not by virtue of perfect coherence, but by its persistent reference to ends, means, and conditions of choice (Segre 2000, 75; Faucci 2000, 63).

Abstract economic rationality can, however, be instrumentalised to lend a veneer of scientific logic to imperfect concrete action, and it is above all the elites – particularly the more “fox-like” ones – who make use of it in this way. In other words, they can use abstract economic rationality to present their political choices as “scientific”. Beginning with the “devices by which certain individuals raise prices in order to profit from them”, Pareto discerns a persistent regularity in human history, namely that “human activity unfolds along two paths: the first is directed towards the production or transformation of economic goods; the second towards the appropriation of goods produced by others”. Whereas in antiquity such appropriation took the form of warfare against other peoples, “today it is carried out primarily at the expense of fellow citizens” (Pareto 1906, cap. 9 § 17). Pareto himself observes that “in such a manner, the maximum economic utility for society is not attained” (Pareto 1906, cap. 9 § 19), because the enrichment of certain social groups is necessarily accompanied by the impoverishment of others. At this juncture, the governing classes assume a decisive role. Through targeted interventions – by means of calculated choices (ostensibly oriented towards collective ends) – they may attempt to redress these imbalances. They may impose some “necessary” sacrifices upon particular groups, carefully weighing the prospective advantages and avoiding unnecessary burdens for the population (Pareto

TSG § 2132). Yet, in practice, a more insidious dynamic prevails. By imposing sacrifices upon the governed classes, the governing elites are often able to induce the belief that sacrifices will yield compensatory benefits; in many instances, however, benefits fail to materialise, and the only gains accrue instead to the elites themselves (Pareto, TSG § 2131). Pareto acknowledges that spoliation may, in certain respects, even be considered useful: “it is useful, up to a certain point, to proceed with the spoliation of certain categories of individuals in order to secure advantages for our supporters”. Yet he is equally aware of the indeterminacy of this criterion: “what is this ‘point’? it is a difficult problem” (Pareto, *Diario*, in SP, vol. II, 842–843). It is precisely upon this indeterminacy that the various pseudo-justifications advanced by governing elites are grounded. Among these, economic rationality plays a very specific role.

Pareto first sets out the conventional assumption that the government satisfies “public needs” and, to this end, levies taxes (Pareto TSG § 2269). Drawing on this basic assumption – which can be applied to an indefinite range of social demands – the governing elites make use of a series of derivations, arguments, and theories, in order to “satisfy the need for logical developments” (Pareto TSG § 2270). At this point, a first problem already emerges. The identification of social needs and the selection of the means deemed suitable for their satisfaction are conceived “according to the sentimental principles of one or another of the many social moralities current”. Moreover, the solution advanced is “compatible with the sentiments of the author of the theory and of his followers”, but is not “the solution that best pictures the facts as they are” (Pareto TSG § 2270). In this respect, Pareto places particular emphasis on “a pseudo-scientific variety obtained by extending the notions of pure economics to the social ‘needs’ of a people”. Indeed, governing elites advance specific strategies intended to establish a “certain equilibrium between ‘needs’ and the ‘sacrifices’ required for satisfying them”. Pareto does not exclude that there may be a “formal logic” in the pseudo-reasoning behind those strategies, but he considers it “so far removed from realities as at times to have nothing in common with them” (Pareto TSG § 2271). Beyond the fact that, for Pareto,

the concept of “needs” is entirely indeterminate, the main problem is that the “reasoning based on public ‘needs’ assumes that human beings satisfy them by logical procedures. Now that cannot stand. Non-logical actions figure very largely in the situation” (Pareto TSG § 2271). Pareto goes on to argue that, to a large extent, human beings perform logical actions in the pursuit of economic goods. In the broader social life, however, non-logical conduct prevails, to such an extent that “a theory envisaging nothing but logical conduct fails to yield even a first approximation” (Pareto TSG § 2271). In practice, therefore, the “doctrine” of public needs is useful only

> to the governing class, or a class aspiring to power, as justifying its control and having it more readily accepted by the subject class. Suppose the governing class, A, desires to pass a certain measure, X, which will be all to its own advantage. Evidently, something will be gained by calling X a “social need” and trying to make the subject class, which is to derive no advantage from it, yet is to provide the funds, imagine that it is designed to satisfy one of its “needs.”. If then someone says that he is not conscious of any such need, he is told at once that he “ought” to be.
>
> (Pareto TSG § 2272)

What thus emerges is a complex intertwining of calculative, instrumental rationality – deployed in the pursuit of particular interests – with the pseudo-scientific constructions advanced by the governing classes to mislead the ruled (Pareto 1906, cap. 2 § 91). Pareto’s analysis becomes even more precise and incisive as he turns to a direct critique of “what is called the science of finance”. Within this field, he identifies two types of derivations:

> 1. Derivations that aim at drawing inferences from certain ethical or sentimental principles and which may go far wide of realities. 2. Derivations that aim at giving a theoretical tinge to results which have been arrived at in an entirely different manner.

(Pareto TSG § 2273)

In a letter to Guido Sensini dated 9 April 1905, Pareto emphasises that the citizen-taxpayer is not "aware of many effects of taxation […], of many financial measures; hence his actions are not of the kind of logical actions" (quoted in Farina 2000, 138). Accordingly, the governing elites are already advantaged in their manipulative operations. In order to deploy the taxpayers, they exploit the complexity that characterises financial matters and present their own operations as objective and scientific. The most favourable opportunity for them to exercise such influence arises in special circumstances – e.g. crises or environmental disasters – that require substantial collective efforts and, consequently, significant fiscal extraction (Pareto TSG § 2273). In such cases, the resistance of the ruled is likely to be weaker. Beyond such "optimal" conditions, however, governing elites must operate along the "line of least resistance", identifying targeted strategies that strike, at the appropriate moment and in the appropriate manner, the groups least capable of opposing them. In this sense, the "science of finance" consists precisely in operating effectively along the line of least resistance. Pareto's metaphor, in this respect, is as striking as it is disquieting:

> If one keeps to the naked facts, it is readily apparent that governments try to get all they can out of the public and are never embarrassed by lack of "needs" to satisfy. Their one check is resistance on the part of the taxpayer. The practical financial science of a minister of state in no sense lies, therefore, in a quest for theoretical demonstrations of this or that theorem or for the logical implications of this or that principle. It comes down altogether to finding ways and means for overcoming the taxpayer's resistance, for *plucking the goose without causing too much honking*.
>
> (Pareto TSG § 2273, emphasis added)

For Pareto, such dynamics are already present within democracy, yet find their most pronounced expression in demagogic plutocracy. Phases of decline and contexts marked by a close alliance between political and economic forces, as well as between speculators involved in government and the working class (Barbieri 2025, 98; Piano 2019, 257), constitute the central preconditions for demagogic plutocracy. In such circumstances, Pareto identifies both political and economic forces as being characterised by the predominance of Class I over Class II residues and of cunning over force: the *speculators* "are chiefly entrepreneurs or financial traders adventurous risk-takers, rich in combination instincts. They are adept at winning concessions from *fox-like politicians*, who see them as soul-mates" (Femia 1995, 380). Wealth constitutes the primary basis of power, shaping both access to political decision-making and the orientation of collective choices. Yet, even in demagogic plutocracy, power must be mediated through ideological constructions capable of appealing to broader segments of the population. The language of the general interest, of social justice, or of national prosperity thus becomes an indispensable instrument for securing consent. The governing elites, while pursuing the preservation and expansion of their own advantages, simultaneously present their actions as aligned with the welfare of the many. This also entails a continuous production of pseudo-scientific, economically motivated narratives through which particular interests are translated into ostensibly universal ends, thereby obscuring the asymmetrical distribution of benefits upon which the system ultimately rests (Farina 2000, 139).

At the core of Paretian thinking on plutocratic demagogy are thus both the "patron-client relationship, a relationship based for the most part on material interests" (Femia 1995, 378) and *cunning*, conceived as the capacity to pursue particular ends through indirect, flexible, persuasive or manipulative means. The nexus linking calculative instrumental rationality, Class I residues, cunning, and the concept of interest is not fully explicit in Pareto's work, yet they are closely interconnected. Pareto states that the rule of the "speculators of our time" is one in which *cunning is primarily directed towards interests* (Pareto TSG § 2275). This feature serves to

distinguish the “rule of the speculators” from theocratic forms of government. Pareto is even more explicit where he directly links Class I residues to a group of individuals skilled in economic manoeuvres and capable of “serving the economic interests of the governing classes”:

> Nowadays almost anybody who possesses a good supply of Class I residues and knows how to use his talents in industry, agriculture, commerce, and the arts; in organizing financial enterprises, honest or dishonest; in duping the good-natured producers of savings; in obtaining licence to exploit less clever neighbours by political influence, customs tariffs, or other favours of all sorts and kinds – is certain, unless he has very bad luck indeed, not only to amass wealth but to win honours and power, to become, in a word, a member of the ruling class. The men who get to be leaders of that class (still barring exceptions as, to some extent, in Germany) are those individuals who best manage to serve the economic interests of the ruling class.
>
> (Pareto TSG § 2300)

It is essential to underscore that, for Pareto, the problem is, at least in part, of a “quantitative” nature. Cunning, instrumental rationality, and interest are not, in themselves, objects of critique. The critical juncture arises when a fundamental *disproportion* emerges, whereby they come to constitute the core principles of politics and the economy. Both

> within the socio-economic sphere of trade and professions and within the political arena, the ‘art of combinations’ […] translates into a particular disposition to employ methods of deception, corruption, and clientelism; into a propensity for compromise, negotiation, and mediation; into a tendency to circumvent obstacles rather than confront them directly; into the capacity to act upon interests rather than passions; and into an orientation towards the short term rather than the long term.
>
> (Belligni 2000, 334)

Such disproportions inevitably lead to a general burdening of the social system, resulting from the dissipation of "precious energy and resources to lobbying for protective duties and other gifts from the public" (Femia 1995, 383). More specifically, and building on Belligni (2000), in plutocratic demagogy

1. an increasing number of individuals seek occupations connected with political functions or, more generally, with public employment. The reason is that these positions often prove more attractive thanks to the opportunities they afford for entry into clientelistic networks. A wide range of parasitic occupations thereby emerges, aimed at "appropriating the goods of others by legal or illegal means". Such activities contribute significantly to the impoverishment of the social system by diverting valuable abilities that might otherwise be productively employed (Belligni 2000, 341; Pareto 1896–1897 § 1039; TSG § 2268).
2. As a consequence of point *(a)*, the increasing number of individuals occupying public positions leads to an expansion of the state apparatus (Femia 1995, 383). For Pareto, this entails not only a concrete rise in costs ("a numerous class consumes a greater quantity of wealth than a more restricted one" – Pareto 1896–1897 § 1055), but also a problem of increasing inefficiency, insofar as part of this personnel is recruited not on the basis of merit, but within the framework of clientelistic relations (Belligni 2000, 342).
3. The direct costs of clientelistic relations must also be taken into account. Clients must be remunerated (Pareto TSG § 2262); the resources invested in such relationships are essential not only for personal enrichment, but also for the co-optation of emerging elites (Farina 2000, 138; see also *Chapter 4*).
4. Additional, more diffuse expenditures arise from the need to secure the support of broader segments of the public administration (such as the navy, the judiciary, or organisations connected with public works), including occasional costs associated with corruption and the exchange of favours (Pareto TSG § 2265-2266).

5. In order to secure broader consent (and eventually to "tame" their adversaries), the governing elites are compelled to adopt conciliatory measures: "the governing class sees to appropriating other people's property not only for its own use, but also to share with such members of the subject class as defend it and safeguard its rule" (Pareto TSG § 2267). Pareto does not exclude that, in the short term, the manoeuvres of the governing elites may even prove beneficial (Belligni 2000, 345). Such measures, however, necessarily entail an expansion of *state intervention in the economic sphere*, for example through the establishment of "political prices" – that is, regulated prices – or through public works, which, however, are often of dubious utility (Pareto 1921, tr. 1984, 68).

The Slippery Terrain of Economisation and Economism

A clear set of preconditions paves the way for the plutocratic "capture" of democracy: the concrete intertwining of political and economic actors; the formation of networks of acquaintance, friendship, and patronage; the capacity of individuals to sustain complex clientelistic systems; a specific proportion of residues within political and economic elites; a sufficiently balanced relationship between clique dynamics and the social or redistributive ideologies mobilised to secure consent; the effective use of economic pseudo-scientific narratives, and the effective functioning of a "science" of the state – particularly the science of finance – capable of underpinning the political action of governing elites. Once reconstructed in these terms, Pareto's framework also raises a broader question concerning its possible contemporary relevance. To what extent, if at all, do these conditions characterise the functioning of present-day democratic systems? Drawing on contemporary literature, I seek to develop an analytical framework for understanding the contemporary plutocratic capture of democracy through the concepts of economisation and economism.

Almost a century after Pareto's death, a widely influential scholar of economics – whose positions and general orientation are markedly distant from Pareto's – undertakes a study of the "egalitarian" (social-democratic)

coalitions in the 19th century, their efforts to reduce socio-economic inequalities, the reasons for their subsequent decline, and the conditions under which they might re-emerge in the 21st century. The author is Thomas Piketty (2020, 35). In *Capital and Ideology*, he addresses these issues in a chapter significantly entitled "The Return of Multiple Elites and the Difficulty of Forging an Egalitarian Coalition". As Piketty observes, the effective "size of power" of these "coalitions" "was ideological and intellectual before it was political"; they were accompanied by "a new vision of the state's role", involving the discrediting of "the system of private property and free markets" (Piketty 2020, 36). A few pages later, Piketty turns to the transformations undergone by social-democratic electorates between the 1980s and the 2000s, arguing that the parties representing them evolved into increasingly "elitist" organisations. More specifically, he observes that they came to attract the votes of "the more highly educated (the intellectual and cultural elite)" or "the votes of the wealthiest and also (to some extent) of the highest income group (the commercial and financial elite)". The primary consequence is that "people without either an advanced degree, a large fortune, or a high income began to feel entirely left out" (Piketty 2020, 39).

To be sure, the analogy suggested here does not imply any substantive affinity between Pareto and Piketty. Pareto's framework is neither normatively oriented towards the defence of non-elite strata nor intended to provide a theoretical foundation for redistributive programmes, welfare-state expansion, or critiques of socio-economic inequality grounded in egalitarian principles. Yet, somewhat unexpectedly, Piketty returns to one of the most salient themes in Pareto's (and Robert Michels') thought: the tension between egalitarian ideologies and the elitist character of democratic politics, particularly in contexts marked by a close intertwining of political and economic forces (Michels 1911; Urbinati 2020, 3f).

Contemporary scholarship offers a wide range of analyses and critiques, highly diverse in both their premises and conclusions, that engage with this kind of inquiry. They involve the problem of oligarchy and its "masking" in democracy, the relationship between politics and economics, and the

mechanisms through which elite domination is reproduced. In several cases, these approaches explicitly recall the legacy of Italian Elitism. Drawing on Robert Michels, Nadia Urbinati underscores the paradox inherent in the organisations through which "the many" attempt to challenge "the few". Organisation, she notes, constitutes the only effective instrument available to "the many" in their struggle against "the few". Yet, in Michelsian terms, the paradox resides in the fact that organisation simultaneously becomes the mechanism through which "the few" consolidate their domination over "the many". As a result, "the many" ultimately confront not only the "few" against whom they initially mobilised, but also the "new few" emerging from within the "fighting organisation" itself and crystallising into an oligarchy of their own (Urbinati 2020, 3). The Italian historian Luciano Canfora and the jurist Gustavo Zagrebelsky devote an entire book to the "democratic mask of oligarchy". Already in the opening pages, they write that "the substance of oligarchic politics consists of money and power, and of their reciprocal connection" (Canfora and Zagrebelsky 2014, 8). Natasha Piano, in her book on *Democratic Elitism*, writes of a "demagogic usurpation", and of the "increasingly pernicious impact of plutocracy upon democracies worldwide" (Piano 2025, IX–X, 16). Examples could easily be extended much further (see Azzolini 2017; Bagg 2024; Salvadori 2015; Winters 2011).

At this point, however, it becomes necessary to narrow the field of inquiry. Central importance attaches to the problem of the overextension of economic rationality, which in more recent scholarship has been analysed above all by critics of neoliberalism. Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval (2009), in *La nouvelle raison du monde*, define neoliberalism not simply as an economic doctrine favouring free markets, but as a broader form of rationality that reshapes the entire social order. According to the authors, competition ceases to be confined to the economic sphere and becomes the general principle governing institutions, public policies, social relations, and even individual conduct. Neoliberalism thus produces a specific form of subjectivity: individuals are encouraged to conceive of themselves as enterprises, constantly engaged in processes of optimisation, performance,

and self-competition. In this framework, the state does not disappear. On the contrary, Dardot and Laval insist that neoliberalism requires an interventionist state, which actively establishes and preserves the institutional conditions necessary for competition. Through legal reforms, managerial techniques, and administrative practices, it extends competitive mechanisms into domains traditionally organised according to different principles, such as education, healthcare, and public administration.

In *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution*, Wendy Brown (2015) advances the central thesis that neoliberalism is not merely a set of economic policies, but a specific kind of rationality that extends market logic to every sphere of life, thereby gradually hollowing out democracy from within. Drawing on Foucault's interpretation of neoliberal rationality, Brown shows how the *homo oeconomicus* comes to function as a general anthropological model: individuals, citizens, and institutions alike are understood as bearers of human capital, compelled to invest continuously in themselves and to compete: "In neoliberal reason and in domains governed by it, we are only and everywhere *homo oeconomicus*" (Brown 2015, 10). According to Brown, this way of conceiving the individual spreads across every social domain, as the *homo oeconomicus* is ubiquitously "tasked with improving and leveraging its competitive positioning and with enhancing its (monetary and nonmonetary) portfolio value across all of its endeavours and venues". Perhaps the most revealing point, however, emerges when Brown asks: "What happens when the precepts and principles of democracy are remade by this order of reason and governance?" The result is that neoliberalism "undoes" democracy not through a frontal assault upon its institutions, but through a more insidious transformation of the logic that sustains it: "neoliberal reason, ubiquitous today in statecraft and the workplace, in jurisprudence, education, culture, and a vast range of quotidian activity, is converting the distinctly *political* character, meaning, and operation of democracy's constituent elements into *economic* ones" (Brown 2015, 17).

In *Cannibal Capitalism*, Nancy Fraser proposes a "broad" view of capitalism as an "institutionalized societal order that encompasses not only

‘the economy’ but also those activities, relations, and processes, defined as non-economic, that make the economy possible” (Fraser 2022, 116). Fraser argues that this expanded understanding renders intelligible a crucial issue: the relationship that capitalist societies establish between the economy and what transcends it, including, most importantly, *nature*. She explains that this relationship is inherently contradictory and “prone to crisis”. On the one hand, the capitalist economy is structurally dependent on nature, both as a source of inputs for production and as a repository for waste. On the other hand, capitalism enforces a sharp division between these two domains, framing the economy as a site of value-generating human activity while relegating nature to a passive reservoir of resources, assumed to be endlessly available and devoid of intrinsic worth. A suggestive analogy with Pareto emerges in Fraser’s account of how *progressive ideologies* can legitimise neoliberal policies while obscuring the interests they serve. This is particularly evident when such ideologies are advanced by centre-left parties in alliance with economic powers:

> Progressive neoliberalism tied a finance-centered political economy to a progressive politics of recognition. Grafting neoliberal economics onto mainstream liberal currents of apparently egalitarian social movements, such as feminism, anti-racism, multiculturalism, and LGBTQ rights, it forged a hegemonic bloc that dominated American politics for several decades. Beyond the United States, progressive-neoliberal formations governed many other liberal democracies through center-left parties that made similar deals with bankers and bondholders to gain or maintain power.
>
> (Fraser 2018, n.p.)

In many cases, however, the reference to neoliberalism risks restricting the analytical horizon. Even where neoliberalism is conceptualised in expansive terms, its referents often remain the socio-economic policies adopted by post-war governments, specific ways of conceiving the relationship between state and market, and country-specific variants of neoliberalism.

The risk, then, is that the critique of neoliberalism comes to subsume the study of broader processes of *economisation*. As Laruffa (2022, 133) observes in discussing Michel Foucault (2008), economisation appears precisely as a "defining aspect of neoliberalism". However, processes of economisation also exist independently of neoliberalism and of the neoliberal conception of the state. As Berman (2014, 400) argues, economisation "does not require the belief that a strong but free market-oriented state is the best way to achieve desirable outcomes". Brown herself distinguishes economisation from neoliberalism, even while treating the latter as the historical configuration in which the former assumes its most pervasive form. Economisation, she argues (Brown 2015, 31, emphasis added), "is itself a *broad term*, with no constant content or force across different historical and spatial instantiations of 'economy'": the economisation of society and politics

> could occur through the model of the household, a nation of laborers, a nation of clients or consumers, or a world of human capitals. These are among the possibilities carried by economization in recent histories of state socialism, welfare statism, social democracy, national socialism, and neoliberalism. Indeed, Carl Schmitt argued that liberal democracy was already a form of economizing the state and the political, and for Hannah Arendt and Claude Lefort, the economization of society, politics, and man was a signature of Marxism in theory and practice.

In neoliberalism, on the contrary, the "domain" of economisation becomes more expansive, reaching previously unimaginable levels. Three features are particularly distinctive: the individual is always and everywhere *homo oeconomicus*; he or she is no longer merely an exchanger or consumer, but becomes *human capital*; and life itself is experienced as a *portfolio of investments* (Brown 2015, 32–34). Yet, *pace* Brown, it may be precisely the "broad" conception of economisation that most effectively brings the fundamental issue into view: *economisation as a general problem of modern and of contemporary society and politics* (Mongardini 1997, 2007).

The “-ism” that best captures such a problem is not neoliberalism but *economism*, which, even at the semantic level, retains a more direct connection to the notion of economisation. The terrain is a slippery one, insofar as the term economism is at once dense and vague. Initially associated with the Russian labour movement, it was later employed polemically against Marxism – or at least against certain interpretations of it – for privileging explanations of social phenomena grounded primarily in market dynamics. Subsequently, the term came to be used within the social sciences, often in a relatively unsystematic manner, to designate the tendency to reduce the complexity of social phenomena to their economic dimension alone. In this sense, economism largely overlaps with what is commonly described as economic reductionism. There is, however, a crucial difference between a science that reduces everything to economics and one that takes such reduction itself as an object of inquiry: in the second case economism and economisation are employed as analytical and critical categories to refer to a social order increasingly governed by calculative rationality, in which profit and interest-based calculation emerge as the primary criteria guiding individual action (Luzi 2023, 237; Mongardini 1997, 73; see also, albeit from a different perspective Earle et al. 2017). In particular, the evolution of capitalism in its financial variant (*financialisation*) has profoundly reshaped the organisation of social and economic life. As already described by Georg Simmel (1976), the most fundamental questions pertaining to human existence are reformulated in these terms: “What is it for?”, “How much does it cost?”, “What utility can it produce?”, “At the price of what sacrifices?” (Mongardini 1997, 74). Within the logic of economism, politics too is reduced to the management of agreements and negotiations, often conducted beyond formal institutional channels within informal networks.

It is precisely at this point that the “plutocratic capture” of democracy begins: where power takes on a new form and politics is reconfigured under conditions of economisation. This broader perspective makes a return to Pareto indispensable. His contribution lies precisely in refusing to reduce political phenomena to economic interests. Instead, his framework directs

attention to the changing relations between economic forces, political power, elite formation, and ideology. This makes a Paretian perspective well suited to addressing economisation not simply as the growing influence of economic criteria, but as a general transformation in the organisation and legitimation of power. From this perspective, phenomena such as the rise of new “elitist” parties, the emergence of new forms of social inequality, and the “plutocratic capture” of democracy itself can be examined as interconnected manifestations of a broader reconfiguration of contemporary social and political orders. The distinctive features of a Pareto-inspired approach to economism and economisation may be summarised as follows:

1. Economism and economisation imply the fusion of political and economic elites, giving rise to power blocs that operate simultaneously across both domains.
2. They presuppose that the logic of exchange and negotiation becomes the guiding principle in politics, oriented towards the benefit of a few.
3. Appropriation, while permitting elites to secure advantages, remains to a certain degree compatible with systemic equilibrium. However, when it becomes disproportionate, it generates instability or even systemic rupture.
4. Concrete economic action is not optimising but inherently bounded; however, economic rationalisation may become pervasive across social and political life.
5. In practice, economisation gives rise not to neoliberal policies, but often to their very opposite or at least to hybrid policy configurations, as welfare measures are deployed for securing consent and ultimately for redirecting aggregate gains towards a select few.
6. In this context, political consent assumes a markedly instrumental character, taking the form of “negotiated consent”, that is, an outcome produced above all through the allocation of resources (benefits, favours, targeted policies).

7. Economism, contrary to some interpretations (Brown 2015, 30), elevates the economy to the status of a dominant ideology: a comprehensive and self-legitimating vision of the social and political order. What is ultimately at stake is not merely the extension of economic rationality into social and political life, but also the *legitimation of economic rationality itself* as a principle for organising society. Such legitimation often operates through the use of science, or more precisely, through *scientism*, which presents economic decisions as objective necessities.

Seen from this perspective, Pareto's thought opens up a range of promising avenues for further inquiry. The relationship between politics and the economy is particularly worth exploring, both by situating Pareto in dialogue with other scholarly traditions and by examining how this relationship has been understood by his interpreters. Indeed, if in Pareto the intertwining of political and economic elites emerges as a decisive factor in shaping the dynamics of power, this same relationship can be further clarified by turning to one of his most famous readers, Raymond Aron. Aron explicitly treats the configuration of political and economic power as a key variable in distinguishing political regimes and accounting for their possible transformation. Within his distinction between constitutional-pluralist and monopolistic regimes (see, for example, Aron 1968; Audier 2004; Scott 2011, 160–161), Aron argues that one of the most important defining features of the former is the dissociation of powers and elite groups, and above all, the separation between economic power and political authority. Those who occupy the most influential political positions are distinct from those who hold the leading economic roles. In monopolistic regimes, instead, the political and economic spheres merge, and business leaders are transformed into state officials (Aron 1954, 482; 1965, 17). Party personnel view themselves simultaneously "as the political class", as "managers of the national economy", and as "priests of the secular religion" (Aron 1990, 272). The result is a system in which *politics permeates all aspects of social and economic life* (Aron 1969, 54).

As argued above, Pareto also emphasises the converse movement: the intrusion of economic forces into the political sphere. The question, then, is whether these two perspectives can be brought into convergence today. The rise of leaders emerging from the business world – from Silvio Berlusconi to Donald Trump – represents the "economic colonisation" of politics and the emergence of hybrid forms of elites, in which economic and political power tend to be converted into one another. Yet the economisation of politics is often accompanied by a re-politicisation of the economy, visible, for example, in the return of protectionism. Pareto confronts us with this permanent tension between economisation and politicisation, one that continuously redefines the boundaries and functions of contemporary democracy and may even open the way to regime change.

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CONCLUSION

The Relevance and Limits of a Classic

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Vilfredo Pareto's standing within economics remains so significant that scholars have referred to him as "perhaps the most influential of the great economists born in the 19th century" (Bruni and Montesano 2024, 47). This enduring reputation within economics, in turn, gives rise to a curious experience for scholars of the social sciences: outside academic circles, when they mention his name, they often encounter uncertain recognition; yet, as soon as they invoke the "80/20 principle", their interlocutors almost immediately recognise the association. So yes, there is no doubt: Pareto truly does have a problem, at least in the social sciences (Adair-Toteff 2022).

Paradoxically, he has long been enshrined among the "Olympus of the founding fathers" of sociology (Maniscalco 2000, 274). In this sense, he is undeniably a classic (Barbieri 2023). Such canonical recognition, however, has never corresponded to a full integration of his legacy into the operative core of the social sciences. Pareto cannot simply be set aside; yet the question of how his work is to be approached and employed remains, to a considerable extent, unresolved. His *opus magnum*, the monumental *Trattato di sociologia generale*, continues to provoke both incomprehension and scepticism (Portinaro 2017, 3) – a "monstrous" book (Bobbio 1974) not only in scale but also in the difficulty of fully grasping its theoretical richness.

For any genuine rediscovery to occur in the social sciences, Vilfredo Pareto must confront a number of serious challenges. First, he must contend with the towering figures of classical sociology, foremost among them Max Weber and his theory of social action (Eisermann 1989; Marchetti 2020; Pakulski 2018; Segre 1983). This is not merely a matter of theoretical standing, but also of concrete patterns of reception: it is by no means implausible that Weber's extraordinary influence – particularly within the German-speaking world – contributed to diminishing the prospects of Pareto's theory of social action gaining a comparable foothold (Bach 2026). Second, accusations against Pareto of being an anti-democrat persist, and not without justification; the positions he adopted in the last years of his life – within a context marked by the rise of Italian fascism – have cast a long and persistent shadow over the reception of his thought (Barbieri 2003; Fordahl 2024). Pareto, moreover, must also be measured against the profound transformations that have reshaped the contemporary social sciences: the reconfiguration of methodological paradigms, the growing scepticism towards system-oriented approaches, and the increasingly complex study of pluralistic, highly differentiated societies. Within this new landscape, many key categories of his theoretical framework often appear either inadequate or even resistant to translation into the current scientific vocabulary.

As a result, Pareto today is more often the object of historical reconstruction, theoretical contextualisation within his own time, and philological analysis than of genuine reappraisals. His thought, in other words, has been preserved, but largely at the cost of substantially *neutralising* its force. Where it has been appropriated, adapted, or mobilised, this has often – though certainly not always – given rise to misunderstandings and misinterpretations that have profoundly influenced its broader reception. The consequences are still felt today, and, at least in relation to the North American context, have been insightfully summarised by Piano (2023).

This is not to suggest that serious attempts to reconsider Pareto are entirely lacking (Bianco et al. 2024; Higley and Pakulski 2012; Jackson

2022; Marshall 2025; Piano 2019, 2025); on the contrary, we may in fact be witnessing a phase of renewed interest. It is precisely within this phase that the present work has tried to situate itself. Its aim was neither to provide a definitive synthesis nor to advance a univocal interpretation of Pareto, but rather to redefine the conditions of his possible use. This *Conclusion* entails a dual operation: first, it takes stock of the most significant areas in which Pareto proves inadequate considering contemporary developments in the social sciences; second, it highlights some conceptual *nuclei* that retain their analytical power intact, and are, in certain respects, still underestimated today. In the tension between critical supersession and selective reactivation resides the possibility of restoring Pareto to a "living function" within the ongoing laboratory of the social sciences. It is, of course, not possible here to engage comprehensively with all dimensions of Pareto's legacy; the aim is rather to sketch a framework through which his thought may be reconsidered in light of the findings of this study.

From a methodological and epistemological standpoint, Pareto displays a significant fragility. His theoretical edifice rests to a remarkable extent upon selected historical examples, while the criteria informing their selection remain obscure. Without the vast accumulation of historical digressions it contains (Fiorot 1969), the *Trattato* itself would scarcely have been conceivable. In his use of history, however, Pareto does not sufficiently problematise the relationship between the observer and the object of inquiry: "as rigorous as he was about the procedure that must necessarily bind theories to facts, he completely obliterated the problematization of the concept of the fact, of empirical data" (Riccioni 2024, 1199). He thus appears, at least in part, as a "naive" observer, insufficiently reflexive with regard to his own epistemic position (Bach 2026). However, this weakness is at least partially offset by a relativistic conception of science that stands up remarkably well against the standards of contemporary social inquiry. First, Pareto grounds his epistemology in the recognition that social and political phenomena can never be grasped in the fullness of their complexity (Barbieri 2025); knowledge necessarily works through approximations, rendering science intrinsically provisional

(Pareto TSG § 33 and § 106). Second, he is conscious that scientific propositions possess the status of hypotheses alone, retaining their validity only so long as they withstand empirical refutation (Pareto TSG § 54–62).

A further issue concerns what would today be termed "interdisciplinarity" (see Riccioni 2024, 1198), and more specifically the difficulty of maintaining coherence and reflexive control when combining heterogeneous disciplinary frameworks. Pareto's work ranges from the use of historical materials to "philosophical reflection", from "schematic scientific reasoning" to the elaboration of models and laws of human behaviour; yet it does not explicitly assess the distinct epistemic criteria that allow the legitimate use of such instruments within their respective domains (Riccioni 2024, 1199). Multiple levels of inquiry are brought into conjunction without being fully subsumed under a coherent methodological account, thereby generating a degree of indeterminacy between explanatory, interpretative, and critical registers in the treatment of social and political phenomena (Bouvier 2023).

Pareto's inability to fully extricate himself from a series of "polarities" of his own formulation represents a further problem. Although he consistently acknowledges the gradations that cut across the "poles" he identifies, a fundamentally binary grammar informs his thought: the logical and the non-logical, the "centripetal" and the "centrifugal", speculators and rentiers, foxes, and lions. Such polar configurations – and indeed the very tension between them – still retain a certain analytical value, as argued in *Chapter 4* with particular reference to elites and non-elites. This holds, however, only insofar as they are reconceived as general analytical "coordinates", to be employed with due caution in the face of the far greater complexity of contemporary social and political relations. At the same time, it would be misleading to ascribe to Pareto an unqualified adherence to dichotomous reasoning. A brief example may illustrate the point: As Susca (2023, 85f) has persuasively shown, a substantial part of Pareto's critique of Marxism directly challenges the rigid opposition between proletariat and bourgeoisie; building on Mongardini (1978), Susca suggests that the very

genesis of Paretian Elite Theory may be traced to the refusal of this binary schematisation.

Turning now to the methodological questions surrounding the central categories of his thought, one point appears, at the very least, questionable: although Pareto never endorsed any form of monocausal explanation and consistently grounded his scientific inquiry in relations of interdependence, he assigns a central role to residues (Millefiorini 2017; Susca 2023, 16) as the underlying "root" of human behaviour (Mongardini 1984, 71). However, residues, no less than derivations, remain categories that Pareto only partially defines with precision. The

> terms residues and derivations have a plausible meaning within the theoretical narrative that he builds, but he remarks that their commonsense meanings are of no relevance at all and that they are used simply as a matter of convenience instead of making constant reference to 'A', 'B', or 'C' in quasi-algebraic notation.
>
> (Scott 2012, 14; see also Pareto TSG § 868)

Moreover, the problem of the interdependence between residues and derivations proves especially intricate, and this for at least two reasons. First, derivations are conceived as pseudo-rationalisations of underlying residues. At the same time, however, the existence of those same residues is inferred precisely from the analysis of derivations. In other words, residues are posited as the latent forces determining observable discourses and pseudo-logical justifications, while simultaneously becoming accessible only through the very discourses and justifications they are supposed to determine. Second, as argued in *Chapter 2*, it may be maintained that derivations are capable, under certain conditions, of "converting" into residues or, at the very least, of reshaping the proportions between residues. This is a striking intuition, one that attests to Pareto's sensitivity to the "mobilising" force of human narratives. However, the modalities through which such a "conversion" or mobilisation might occur remain largely indeterminate. In addition, it is unclear "whether derivations intervene at a

stage subsequent to action or whether they may, to some extent, precede it, thereby constituting the value framework that confers meaning upon action itself" (Marchetti 2020, 46).

From a political-theoretical standpoint, Pareto should be located within a largely unresolved tension that characterises much of contemporary political theory. On the one hand, realist and elitist approaches – while fully cognisant of the pathologies and dysfunctions associated with elite rule – nonetheless accept the inevitability of elites and anchor contemporary democracy to the system of political representation (for a more detailed discussion of this issue, see, for example, for example, Best and Higley 2010; Borchert 2009). On the other hand, strands of radical democratic theory adopt a markedly critical stance towards such a view (see, for example, the classical work by Pateman 1970), calling into question the very legitimacy of elites. In this light, the relationship between elites and democracy continues to constitute one of the most sensitive and contested fault lines within contemporary political theory (Borchert 2009; Campati 2022; Piano 2025). Accordingly, the often polemically framed opposition between "elitist" and "anti-elitist" accounts (see Sartori 1978) brings into sharp relief a series of enduring tensions: between minority rule and majority participation, between efficiency and representation, between leadership and democratic self-government.

Now, within the broad and highly differentiated field of research on political participation – encompassing diverse forms of participatory democracy, and the direct involvement of citizens in political and administrative decision-making beyond the mere act of voting (see, for example, Landemore 2020; Putnam 1993; Verba et al. 1995; Warren 2002) – few would raise an eyebrow at the claim that Pareto offers only limited analytical purchase. It may, of course, be conceded that his perspective is attuned to the persistence of power asymmetries and to the irreducible role of elite dynamics – even within ostensibly participatory settings. Yet, such a concession appears, in itself, insufficient to warrant any substantive re-engagement with Pareto in this field. The idea that democracy is not merely a matter for political elites, but also entails the direct involvement of

citizens in shaping public policy – an idea by no means new, but rediscovered and emphasised in the second half of the twentieth century – has given rise to lines of inquiry directed both at the conditions that foster participation – such as access to information – and at the constraints that may hinder it, including social inequalities and educational barriers. Research has consequently been extended to encompass the full constellation of groups and organisations that occupy the intermediary space between the state and the market – cultural associations, NGOs, voluntary organisations, professional bodies, and civic movements. From the work of scholars such as Robert D. Putnam onwards, research has shown that the vitality of civic life is closely associated with the quality of democratic institutions. In this perspective, the sphere of organised civic engagement emerges as a central arena in which trust, cooperation, and capacities for collective action are cultivated. These resources are not merely ancillary to democratic governance; rather, they constitute important foundations for its effective functioning. On the basis of the pioneering work of Jürgen Habermas, democratic legitimacy has come to be understood as resting on the quality of public deliberation; decisions attain a higher degree of legitimacy when they emerge from communicative processes in which arguments can be reciprocally tested, positions critically scrutinised, and orientations towards shared solutions discursively formed. With Charles Tilly and the subsequent literature, attention has shifted towards the dynamics of contentious politics and social movements: civil rights, environmental, feminist, and social justice mobilisations have shown that political transformation may originate beyond institutional arenas, through organised forms of collective action. Accordingly, research has focused both on the conditions that render mobilisation possible – political opportunity structures, organisational resources, and processes of collective identity formation – and on the ways in which such mobilisations interact with, penetrate, and at times reconfigure institutional arrangements and public policies.

The contemporary intellectual landscape, however, is also marked by a growing interest in political realism, both as an object of study and as an

interpretive perspective, accompanied by a renewed engagement with its core paradigms (Achen and Bartels 2016; Arlen and Rossi 2021; Higley 2021; Maloy 2025; Palano 2024; Portinaro 2023). In some cases, this "return" of political realism has given rise to explicit critiques of approaches considered to overstate the role of "the many". Throughout his work on political realism in the 21st century, John Higley systematically argues for a reorientation of analytical attention away from "non-elites" – to whom contemporary scholarship, he argues, devotes disproportionate attention – and back towards elites and their constitutive role in maintaining systemic stability. In doing so, Higley advances a pointed critique of North American political science, which "has never been hospitable to frankly expressed ideas about the inescapable centrality and importance of elites in politics" (Higley 2021, 131).

Higley's example is particularly instructive, because it amounts to an explicit rearticulation of the realist and elitist account of political phenomena, also integrating a comparative orientation with a robust historical grounding. More specifically, the centrality he accords to the "elitist" paradigm serves to underscore how, even in the case of revolutionary rupture, outcomes tend less towards an expansion of participation across the social body than towards a comprehensive reconfiguration of elite constellations, accompanied by a corresponding redefinition of the modalities of exclusion of non-elites. Higley develops an unsparing analysis of the "democratisation" promoted by Western powers vis-à-vis autocratic regimes – his principal case being the Arab Spring. The purpose is to demonstrate that the mere displacement of ruling elites seldom yields stable democratic orders: "[e]liminating ruling elites […] seldom brings political improvement; chaos, during which many innocent bystanders perish, is more likely" (Higley 2021, 111). Within this framework, Higley further problematises the weight conventionally attributed to non-elites in processes of democratic consolidation: "[r]ising mass participation in politics, which is said to be a consequence of economic development and 'modernization', is believed to lead, at least in the proverbial long run, to democratic institutions" (Higley 2021, 112).

However, the Arab Spring (with the partial exception of Tunisia) has shown exactly the opposite: “non-elite mobilizations to ‘choose democracy’ led to deep divisions that made stable democracy most unlikely” (Higley 2021, 99).

Realist-elitist approaches and those emphasising democratic participation undoubtedly pursue different analytical (and normative) objectives, yet they are not intrinsically incompatible (Sartori 1962, 1987). Democracies are characterised *simultaneously* by the persistence of elites and by the active political role of non-elites, as well as by enduring processes of hierarchisation and by recurrent forms of bottom-up mobilisation (Donati 2000; Urbinati 2020). The point, therefore, is not that one perspective must displace the other, but that contemporary democracy can only be understood considering the interaction of these different dimensions. Democratic systems are at once hierarchical and participatory, institutionalised and conflictual, conservative and transformative. Particularly in the present historical conjuncture, moreover, we are undoubtedly situated within a transitional configuration – one that Pareto himself might have interpreted as long-term in nature – in which both the empirical reality and the normative self-understanding of democracy must increasingly reckon with the growing tension between conservation and transformation. *The configuration of social relations is undergoing extraordinarily rapid change, while political systems remain partially crystallised around older institutional forms and mechanisms of representation*. With regard to the political relationship between the rulers and the ruled, this tension becomes most apparent in the opposition between institutionalised representation and pressures to broaden political participation beyond representative mechanisms, as well as between power organised within formal political institutions and its diffusion across extra-institutional arenas (Subirats 2010; Rosanvallon 2011).

Pareto would, in all likelihood, have regarded contemporary normative approaches to democracy as unscientific and illusory – little more than the product of pseudo-logical reasoning; yet he would not have denied their *Daseinsberechtigung*, nor their broader practical utility within social and

political life. As argued in *Chapter 2*, even the political realist remains fully aware that "desire and hope constitute a powerful motor of historical transformation", and that, in politics, "the possible" cannot be attained without first daring "the impossible" (Portinaro 2023, 148). In this regard, a well-known passage from Robert Michels' *Soziologie des Parteiwesens* is particularly instructive: Michels argues that the "iron law of oligarchy" does not imply any renunciation of political struggle in pursuit of the democratic ideal. He states this explicitly, arguing that the *inevitability of oligarchy* in no way relieves democrats of the obligation to resist it. The task of the individual thus comes to resemble that of the man who is told by his dying father of a buried treasure; it is not the treasure, which is never found, but the labour devoted to its search that ultimately renders the field fertile (Michels 1912). In my view, this insight alone would already provide a compelling reason to return to the classical authors of the Italian tradition with fresh eyes and recognise that their work may also help to clarify, and perhaps even alleviate, some of the tensions surrounding contemporary democracy. Pareto's contribution, however, is more specific.

This book has delineated five fundamental dimensions of Pareto's social and political thought. At the same time, each chapter has, where appropriate, brought the continuing relevance of those dimensions more clearly into view. What follows offers some concluding reflections and impulses for further research arising from the insights developed throughout this study.

A *first* major strength of Pareto lies in his sociologically informed and expansive conception of politics. Pareto conceives politics as traversed by a plurality of interrelated dynamics: the allocation, distribution, and transformation of power; the struggles surrounding its acquisition and preservation; the production and circulation of ideas and ideologies; and the concrete forces shaping political and institutional configurations. At the core of this perspective lies a rigorous commitment to interdependence. Pareto resists any attempt to reduce political phenomena to a single determining cause or explanatory principle. This multidimensional approach retains significant value for the interpretation of contemporary

politics, not least because many of its defining tensions cannot readily be traced back to a single source. This is particularly evident in contexts marked by ideological polarisation, identity conflicts, and growing distrust towards institutions. Pareto's attention to elites, power relations, and the non-rational dimension of political action, furthermore, makes it possible to grasp the interaction between interests, beliefs, emotions, and strategic behaviour without collapsing one dimension into another.

A *second* decisive strength of the Paretian framework concerns its interpretation of ideology. In contrast to those theoretical traditions that reduce ideology to a mere superstructure or an instrument of mystification, Pareto attributes to it a more complex meaning. Ideologies are apprehended as specific constructions of an "imagined reality", composed of systems of ideas, justifications, and narratives through which political action is rendered intelligible and socially meaningful. By situating ideology within the broader interplay of power, conflict, and social integration, Pareto also develops a differentiated conception capable of grasping the plurality of functions ideologies may assume in political life. It is precisely through this differentiated perspective that Pareto comes to the conclusion that not only elites circulate, but ideologies as well. Pareto treats ideologies as dynamic variables – subject to displacement, recombination, adaptation, and strategic use – rather than as fixed superstructural elements. From this follows a direct linkage between ideological change and elite reconfiguration: shifts in the composition and balance of elites are accompanied by corresponding transformations in their justificatory repertoires.

A *third* key dimension concerns the manner in which Pareto conceptualises the relationship between transformation and conservation. Political institutions, by their nature, tend to exhibit a certain fixity vis-à-vis ongoing social transformations. Yet, fixity may soon cease to preserve the system and may ultimately generate pressures liable to culminate in rupture. Conversely, transformations that proceed too rapidly or without adequate mediation tend to provoke countervailing reactions aimed at preserving the *status quo* or restoring the *status quo ante*. Within this dynamic, elites assume a decisive function, insofar as it is through their action that the

tension between conservation and transformation can be mediated. Pareto's distinctive contribution lies precisely in underscoring the central role played by elite conduct in mitigating or exacerbating processes of transformation and crisis. Severe miscalculations or dysfunctions within governing elites may pave the way for systemic breakdown and, in extreme cases, revolutionary upheaval (Higley 2021). However, the analysis extends beyond elites alone to encompass non-elites as well. A Paretian perspective emphasises that stability presupposes a continuous and delicate process of adjustment between governing minorities and the wider social body. Where elites become insulated – where their composition and ideological constructions become detached from underlying social dynamics – the tension between conservation and transformation can no longer be effectively contained. Pressure for changes intensify, while conservative forces, in parallel, tend to harden in a defensive manner. The coherence of Pareto's approach lies precisely in this sequence: by grounding political order in a dynamic equilibrium, by identifying its fragility in the difficult mediation between conservation and transformation, and by locating the decisive tension in the dynamic relationship between elites and non-elites, Pareto offers a model capable of accounting for stability, gradual transformation, and systemic rupture (see Mongardini 1979).

Turning to the *fourth* point – the question of elites – the strength of Pareto's theory lies to a considerable extent in its reconstruction of power as internally differentiated and stratified, rather than as compact and homogeneous. This entails moving away from any treatment of elites as a unified category and instead focusing on their internal articulation and the uneven distribution of power within them. It is precisely at this level that Pareto introduces a decisive conceptual innovation by disaggregating the governing minority into distinct components, whose unequal capacities, roles, and degrees of effectiveness shape the political power. In this way, he reduces conceptual indeterminacy and guards against imprecision that arises when excessive weight is assigned to broad categories such as "the ruling class". Moreover, if the elite is no longer conceived as a unified bloc, its reproduction can be understood in terms of the differentiated

mechanisms by which concrete and groups gain entry, advance within, and are excluded from positions of power. Access to elite positions depends on a plurality of channels – economic resources, organisational capacity, and institutional pathways – which operate unevenly and do not ensure any systematic correspondence between formal position and effective competence. Furthermore, rather than presupposing cohesion, Pareto's approach highlights the coexistence of cooperative alignments and competitive struggles among internally differentiated "subgroups". The internal dynamics of the elites thus emerge as the outcome of shifting balances between cooperation and conflict, rather than as the expression of a unitary internal consent. As a result, elites appear as semi-open (or, more pessimistically, semi-closed) groups, characterised by a highly selective permeability: access is neither fully closed nor indiscriminate, but structured in such a way as to favour the incorporation of external elements deemed compatible with the existing *status quo*, while excluding or neutralising those that are likely to intensify internal conflict. In this sense, elites display an inherently *conservative* tendency – not in an ideological sense, but as an inherent disposition to preserve their partial cohesion and stability through controlled processes of adaptation and absorption of external elements. It is precisely at this point that the distinction between circulation (or renewal) and co-optation acquires its full significance. Genuine circulation entails a substantive transformation in the internal composition of the elite through the incorporation of new elements, thereby altering the balance of forces; co-optation, by contrast, involves the selective absorption of individuals under conditions of conformity, producing only an apparent renewal.

Finally, the *fifth* point concerns Pareto's capacity to link the analysis of human rationality and non-rationality to the study of the relationship between economy and politics. For Pareto, the use of abstract economic rationality – entirely legitimate within the domain of pure economic science – as a basis for determining the ends of political action represents an attempt by elites to obscure the complexity of social reality and to deploy pseudo-scientific arguments in the justification of power. The result is a

specific form of economism and scientism, whereby socio-economic questions are recast in technical and ostensibly neutral terms. Especially in demagogic plutocracy, what emerges is a systemic intertwining of economic and political forces. The decisive insight concerns not merely the use of political power to secure (economic) advantage, but the specific modalities through which such advantage is extracted and consolidated. In demagogic plutocracy, appropriation becomes systematised, stabilised, and rendered more effective through economic criteria, often further reinforced by the invocation of science as a source of self-legitimation. Political action is thereby reconfigured as a continuous process of selective allocation, in which advantages are distributed through fiscal instruments, regulatory interventions, and clientelistic arrangements. To be sure, economic rationality does not generate political appropriation *ex novo*; rather, it contributes to its diffusion and enhances its capacity to overcome resistance. Spoliation becomes embedded in ordinary administrative and financial practices, operating through what Pareto describes as the search for ways of "plucking the goose without causing too much honking". Political consent assumes a negotiated form, emerging through the allocation of benefits, concessions, and resources, and stabilised through patron-client relations rooted in material interests. State expansion follows as a direct consequence. The growth of bureaucracy, the multiplication of public functions, and the intensification of fiscal extraction appear as the effects of a system in which political authority is employed to organise and sustain processes of redistribution – both real and apparent.

Deliberately reserved for last is a final issue that moves beyond Pareto to encompass elite research more broadly. Democracy, as we know, is marked by a persistent tension between the democratic ideal and the very existence of elites. There exists, however, a second tension: that between the democratic ideal and the *quality* of the governing minority (Campati 2016, 228; Sartori 1987, 141; see also Bianco 2021, 209). The problem of the quality of rulers may be traced back to Plato. Niccolò Machiavelli, through his concept of *virtù*, likewise occupies a central place within this line of reflection (Pakulski and Tranter 2015, 18). As discussed in *Chapter 4*,

Pareto himself maintains an association between elites and quality. The central difficulty is that the very notion of "quality" resists precise definition. According to which "value parameters" (Sartori 1987, 186), and on the basis of which normative assumptions, should elite quality be evaluated? With regard to political elites in contemporary liberal democracies, issues at stake include questions such as the following:

- *Internal pluralism*: the extent to which elites themselves display social, cultural, professional, and other forms of internal differentiation;
- *Mechanisms of selection and social mobility*: the accessibility of elite positions to individuals originating from different social classes, or social groups;
- *Meritocracy versus co-optation*: the relative weight of merit as opposed to familial, clientelistic, or patrimonial networks;
- *Autonomy from particular interests*: the degree of independence from economic lobbies or other centres of power;
- *General competence*: the capacity to govern complex systems;
- *Responsiveness under crisis conditions:* the capacity to take effective decisions under conditions of stress, incomplete information and temporal pressure;
- *Continuity versus adaptability*: the capacity to reconcile continuity in policymaking with responsiveness to social and political change;
- *Concrete innovative capacity*: the production or adoption of technological, institutional, and organisational innovations.

In recent years, new "elite quality indexes" and "elite monitors" have emerged. More broadly, research centred on the problem of "quality" has expanded significantly (Askim et al. 2025; Dahlström and Wängnerud 2015; Kolvani and Nistotskaya 2025). Yet this research frequently remains only indirectly related to elites themselves, instead being framed through broader concepts such as "the quality of government" (see, for example, the Quality of Government (QoG) Institute). The relationship between rulers and ruled raises a further difficulty, one that is likewise a question of

quality. Their interaction cannot be assumed to be harmonious. As has been observed, “between participation on the one hand and representation on the other there is no original, pre-given harmony, but rather an extremely tension-laden, if not antinomical, relationship” (Weiss 1994, 35). The latter is intrinsically demanding, because it rests simultaneously on the concrete political participation of the ruled – without which no legitimation of power is possible (Mongardini 2011) – and on the responsibility of the rulers (Campati 2016), that is, on their capacity to understand, aggregate, and represent the needs of those they govern (Mongardini 2011, 21). First and foremost, then, the issue is one of *representativeness*. While this does not constitute a sufficient criterion of quality, it nonetheless constitutes a minimal necessary one. Two further central categories are *responsibility* and *accountability*. Legitimacy depends, to a significant extent, on the capacity of the rulers to justify their position and actions: they must be able to explain “what they have done, why, and on what grounds” (Schüttemeyer 2019, n.p., my translation, see also Urbinati and Warren 2008; Pasquino 2009). They are required to demonstrate the legitimacy of decisions that bind the collectivity (Mongardini 2002, 110).

A further problem concerns the study of elite quality beyond those areas already consolidated within elite research (e.g. political, bureaucratic, or economic elites). It would be necessary to strengthen research across specific sectors, particularly in those domains where elites exercise forms of power capable of directly influencing the lives of individuals and social groups, such as the judiciary, the medical profession, police authorities, or large-scale housing proprietors. In the medical field, for instance, a growing body of research has investigated the role of “medical leaders” in healthcare policy and governance, “both in terms of the governance of quality and safety within healthcare organisations, and in broader system-wide governance” (Jones and Fulop 2021, 1). In many cases, this research has produced evidence that medical leadership is associated with healthcare quality. However, according to which criteria should the quality of medical elites be evaluated? Given the importance of the healthcare sector, the quality of medical elites certainly constitutes a serious political matter. Yet,

regrettably, few political scientists would be willing to shift their focus away from parties, parliaments, and governments in order to concern themselves with physicians.

A few final remarks should be devoted to the fact that the question of quality extends to non-elites themselves. To be sure, addressing the quality of non-elites does not imply any return to the mass-sceptical conceptions of the late 19th century; today, we know that the civic qualities of citizens (informed, participative, responsible) is inseparable from the conditions under which they form their judgements – conditions that are largely shaped by elites themselves through the organisation of information, the framing of public discourse, and the selection of what is rendered visible or salient. Where these conditions are degraded – whether through informational asymmetries, distortions, or the systematic circulation of misleading content (e.g. fake news) – the capacity for informed judgement is correspondingly weakened, with direct consequences for the functioning of democracy. This was certainly one of the most sensitive issues during the COVID-19 pandemic. Giovanni Sartori famously observed that democracy is a machine that functions reasonably well; what does not function well are the "machinists", "at all levels" – from the "head of the machine" to the "mini-machinists" (Sartori 2005, n.p.). It is perhaps on this point that Pareto, with all his disquieting lucidity, continues to speak to us most powerfully.

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