Editorial

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Mass society, mass consumption, mass production, mass movements, mass parties, mass husbandry, mass media, and mass culture are just some of the common expressions in which the term "mass" figures prominently. What is noteworthy in this regard is both the fact that the term is used more frequently in noun-noun compounds than as an independent noun[1] and the range of its reference fields, extending from sociopolitical forms of protest to practices of intensive animal farming. In current dictionaries, the noun "mass" – which in German-speaking countries is used with caution when it designates "collective entities" – does not indicate anything clearly defined. It refers both to an allegedly homogeneous "organic whole" without distinct class or status attributes and to "the many", "the oppressed", or simply to a large number of people sharing similar patterns of behaviour.[2] This conceptual ambiguity renders the notion of mass analytically productive, yet at the same time problematic.

Just as broadly defined is the term that runs counter to "mass": "elite".[3] Its scope of use is also wide-ranging and extends from politics and the economy through culture and the media to art. The term "elite" may denote, on the one hand, a vaguely defined "upper class" or alleged "privileged people" and, on the other hand, in a stricter sense, decision-makers, business executives, or the upper ranks of public administration. Accordingly, it refers to one or several groups that "stand out from the majority of a social entity" and whose actions are considered "disproportionately effective".[4] Thus, by contrasting "mass" with

1 Cf. Timm Genett, Vom Zivilisierungsagenten zur Gefolgschaft – Die Masse im politischen Denken Robert Michels'. In: Ansgar Klein/Frank Nullmeier (eds.), Masse – Macht – Emotionen, Opladen 1999, pp. 116–136, here 116.

2 Cf. Masse. In: Duden (https://www.duden.de/rechtschreibung/Masse; 11.12.2025). For English see Mass (noun2). In: Oxford English Dictionary, most of all II.8.a, II.8.b, II.9.a (https://www.oed.com/dictionary/mass_n2; 11.12.2025); for Italian: Massa. In: Treccani (vocabolario online) (https://www.treccani.it/vocabolario/massa/; 11.12.2025). Still indispensable for any thorough discussion of the term "mass" is the entry by Reinhart Koselleck/Fritz Gschnitzer/Karl Ferdinand Werner/Bernd Schönemann, Volk, Nation, Nationalismus, Masse. In: Otto Brunner/Werner Conze/Reinhart Koselleck (eds.), Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe. Historisches Lexikon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland, Vol. 7: Verw–Z, Stuttgart 1992, pp. 141–431.

3 "'Mass' refers critically or approvingly to 'elite'" See Koselleck/Gschnitzer/Werner/Schönemann, Volk, Nation, p. 416.

4 Elite. In: Duden (https://www.duden.de/rechtschreibung/Elite; 11.12.2025); Elite (noun2). In: Oxford English Dictionary (https://www.oed.com/dictionary/elite_n2; 11.12.2025); Elite. In: Treccani (vocabolario online) (https://www.treccani.it/vocabolario/elite/; 11.12.2025); Quotation: Morten Reitmayer, Eliten (Version: 2.0). In:

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"elite", one condenses not only analytical categories but also specific patterns of interpreting modern societies.

Both terms, whose complexity resists any simple summation, are particularly "weighty": they are semantically highly charged and surrounded by a field of tension between both derogatory and valorising connotations. At the same time, their semantic openness endows them with political efficacy. As is well known, "mass" and "elite" are capable of conveying specific normative assumptions and ideological positions, and they may – often in highly ambivalent ways – be associated with both conservative and progressive milieus. They may further imply critical judgments about "the many" and contrast them with an "intellectually and ethically superior individual." They may be used under the sign of an "elitist self-distancing from the barbarism of the superior number". At the same time, however, they may also be linked to egalitarian and mobilising stances, and, not least, they may touch upon the "fundamental ambivalence of collectivity and individuality" in modernity.[5]

The problem embedded in these two terms – and in what they represent – continues to have an effect today. It is evident both in public discourse (for instance, in the simplified use of the terms in newspapers and on social media) and in scholarly debate itself. From a historical perspective, the focus on the "masses" remains en vogue, particularly – though not exclusively – in research on totalitarianism. In this context, the term retains both a conceptual ambivalence and an explanatory potential that should not be underestimated.[6] From the perspective of the history of political thought or the history of ideas, reflection on "mass" and "elite" likewise remains of crucial significance, as these fields ultimately seek to reconstruct the meaning of terms, ideas, and concepts, as well as their political-theoretical modes of use.[7] In the social sciences, the concept of "elite" has recently moved increasingly into focus, especially within a broad field of research that examines the functions, transformations, and selection mecha-

Docupedia-Zeitgeschichte, 18.2.2022 (https://docupedia.de/zg/reitmayer_eliten_v2_de_2022; 11.12.2025). See also Heinrich Best/John Higley, Introduction. In: id. (eds.), The Palgrave Handbook of Political Elites, London 2018, pp. 1–6.

5 In its original version, the text quoted here pertains exclusively to the term "mass". Stefanie Middendorf, Masse (Version: 1.0). In: Docupedia-Zeitgeschichte, 5.11.2013 (https://docupedia.de/zg/middendorf_masse_v1_de_2013; 11.12.2025).

6 Among the classic references in this field is of course George L. Mosse, Die Nationalisierung der Massen: politische Symbolik und Massenbewegungen von den Befreiungskriegen bis zum Dritten Reich, Frankfurt a. M. 1993. See also Enzo Traverso, Il Totalitarismo. Storia di un dibattito, Milano 2002; Amerigo Caruso, „Blut und Eisen auch im Innern". Soziale Konflikte, Massenpolitik und Gewalt in Deutschland vor 1914, Frankfurt a. M. 2021.

7 Cf. Richard Bellamy, The advent of the masses and the making of the modern theory of democracy. In: Terence Ball/Richard Bellamy (eds.), The Cambridge History of Twentieth-Century Political Thought, Cambridge 2003, pp. 70–103; Joseph V. Femia, Against the Masses: Varieties of Anti-Democratic Thought since the French Revolution, Oxford 2001; Francesco Tuccari, Capi, élites, masse. Saggi di storia del pensiero politico, Roma 2022.

nisms of ruling groups in both Western liberal democracies and (semi-)dictatorial regimes[8] – in this regard, the question has increasingly come to the fore (accompanied by a measure of pessimism, or perhaps more appropriately realism) as to how far the United States is situated on a trajectory of autocratisation under the presidency of Donald Trump.

In addition, the terms "mass" and "elite" remain contested when they are directly opposed to each other. In short, the current complexity of social relations, the functional differentiation of elites, the social and political contexts in which they are embedded, and the growing organisation of movements, political parties, interest and lobby groups, associations, voluntary engagements, and many other organisations that characterise contemporary societies, render such a dichotomy only partially viable in analytical terms.[9]

However, it is precisely this "partially" that proves decisive. The historian Emilio Gentile – one of the most distinguished international scholars in the study of Fascism – insists that "leaders and masses, rulers and the ruled, have been present since the very beginnings of humankind." With marked emphasis, he observes: In the nineteenth century, the watchword was that "it is the leaders who make history"; in the twentieth century, that it is "the masses who make history". Today, it is held that history is made "jointly by leaders and masses".[10] A similar view is advanced by Nadia Urbinati, one of the most influential living scholars in political theory and the history of political thought, who characterises the fundamental political conflict of the twenty-first century as that between "the few" and "the many".[11]

Like Gentile, this is not meant to deny the complexity of modern societies. Rather, Urbinati situates this complexity within the relationship between "the few" and "the many" and illuminates this relationship from a perspective that is clearly more nuanced than a purely dichotomous one. Referring to Robert Michels, Urbinati emphasises that organisation is the only weapon "the many" have in their struggle against "the few." As she further explains, again drawing on Michels, what makes the situation paradoxical is that organisation is at the same time precisely the means by which "the few" secure their control over "the many". Accordingly, "the many" ultimately confront two opponents: the "few" they originally took on, and those among them who become the "new few," emerging from the "fighting organisation" and eventually constituting an

8 Cf. John Higley, Elites, Non-Elites, and Political Realism, Lanham 2021; Jens Borchert/Jürgen Zeiss, The political class in advanced democracies. A Comparative Handbook, Oxford 2003; Best/Higley, The Palgrave Handbook of Political Elites.

9 Cf. Carlo Mongardini, Pensare la politica. Per una analisi critica della politica contemporanea, Roma 2011, p. 215.

10 Emilio Gentile, Il capo e la folla. La genesi della democrazia recitativa, Bari 2021, pp. VII f.

11 Nadia Urbinati, Pochi contro molti. Il conflitto politico nel XXI secolo, Bari 2020.

oligarchy themselves.[12] This brief analytical scheme goes beyond a purely dichotomous logic.

Thus, if we speak of the relationship between "elites" and "masses" – and, for the sake of analytical complexity, deliberately avoid the singular, unitary notions of "elite" and "mass" – this amounts less to a strictly dichotomous perspective than to an approach that uncovers the roots of a conflict intrinsic to democracy and, in the last instance, irresolvable.

Given the exceptional complexity of this field and the polemical nature of two terms that still need to be critically reassessed, this issue pursues a clearly defined approach, contributing to reflection on masses and elites through a decidedly historical and historicising perspective. It is devoted to a cluster of enquiries whose exploration aims to contribute to the debate in the German-speaking context. It sets out to provide a thorough and nuanced analysis of the role of masses and elites and of their evolving interpretations in Italy, charting a course from the Risorgimento, through the far-reaching transformations of the turn of the twentieth century, to the consolidation of Fascism.

By way of an overture, the volume begins with a contribution on the role of the masses during the protracted struggle for Italian national unity. *Gabriele B. Clemens* investigates whether, between circa 1830 and 1870, the masses were effectively mobilised for the Italian state-building movement – or whether such mobilisation was ever intended at all. As the author shows, for a time liberal and democratic actors managed to win over several thousand young patriots from bourgeois and noble milieus for armed uprisings. At the same time, however, Clemens makes clear that they largely failed to mobilise the urban and rural lower classes for the national struggle, so that "the masses" in the stricter sense remained for the most part outside the unification process.

Stefano Cavazza opens his analysis at the turn of the century, a moment that allows, at least in part, for inferences about Italy's trajectory in the twentieth century. He shows that the 1890s were characterised both by social unrest and by the establishment of the Socialist Party; this configuration went hand in hand with an increasing apprehension toward "the masses" within parts of the ruling classes, a development that persisted into the early twentieth century and helped prepare the ground for the emergence of Fascism. The contribution offers a particularly detailed examination of Italian intellectuals' reactions at the turn of the century to the development of mass society and reconstructs the corresponding interpretative patterns, anxieties, and political implications.

Maurizio Bach turns to the subsequent years, during which new forms of political mobilisation and the central importance of the masses had become firmly established, and a specific relationship between "masses" and "leaders" emerged that came to characterise Italian Fascism. Starting from the Italian case, the author develops a comparative perspective on Germany and, in this context, places particular emphasis on mass consent as well as on the differences between

12 Ibid., pp. 3 f.

polycratic and monocratic forms of rule within the two dictatorships. From a sociological perspective, the author analyses the pivotal significance of personalised leadership, drawing on Max Weber's concept of charismatic authority as an analytical frame of reference.

Jens Späth analyses the role of "the masses" in early Italian anti-Fascism (1919–1925). His argument is that, in the discourse of the time, the concept of the masses was less prominent than earlier research has maintained. He shows that anti-Fascism in its initial phase was predominantly an elite phenomenon, even if it later "increasingly displayed elements of mass impact." Building on an expanded conception of anti-Fascism, the contribution examines militant modes of mobilisation, intellectual and parliamentary opposition, and the organisational structures of political parties. The example of the Arditi del popolo, Giacomo Matteotti's reflections on "the masses", and comparative views across Europe serve to recast the ambivalent relationship between elites, masses, and social change in early anti-Fascism.

Claudia Baldoli examines the self-perception and self-reflection of Italian anti-Fascism, paying particular attention to the role of "the masses," through a close analysis of Piero Gobetti and Carlo Rosselli and of their respective interpretations of Fascism as both an Italian and a European phenomenon. She demonstrates that neither thinker conceived of anti-Fascism as a spontaneous mass movement, but rather as the undertaking of an active and morally responsible minority. Their pessimistic judgement of society's passivity, she maintains, proved crucial to both the theoretical and practical articulation of anti-Fascism in the 1920s. Especially significant in this context was the contemporaneous reflection on a potential "post-Fascism" scenario – namely, the awareness that the fight against Fascism needed to be understood as a long-term undertaking for the benefit of future generations.

Alongside this thematic focus, the volume includes a contribution by *Hannah Riedler* on the deportation policies of Nazi Germany and Stalin's Soviet Union between 1939 and 1945. The author emphasises the fundamental differences that arose from the distinct functions of deportation within the two systems. As she argues: "On the Soviet side the primary aim was assimilation, whereas on the German side it was replacement. A clear distinction between the objectives and the actual implementation of the deportations reveals much about both systems and their commonalities – as well as their differences."