

ELITELORE AT TWENTY FIVE

Reflections on Elitelore: The Early Years (1993)

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There are many purposes for reprinting these studies on elitelore at the present time. This volume brings together under one cover 25 years of sustained analysis and debate about the lore of leaders as presented in the *Journal of Latin American Lore*, outlining the development of the field and defining its current parameters. Collecting these essays together serves to clarify the relationship between the informal knowledge of leaders and that of their followers and to show the broad impact of elitelore on policy decisions.

Since its inception, the field of elitelore has provided a unique avenue of inquiry into the motivations and practices of leaders at all levels of society. The elitelore approach first emerged in 1967 at the Social Science Research Council Conference on Folklore and Social Science in New York City when James W. Wilkie introduced the concept that leaders have a lore particular to themselves. Wilkie posited that understanding how leaders' perceptions and misperceptions of reality and their consciously constructed information systems is crucial to understanding Latin American history in the twentieth century.

The concept of elitelore refers generally to the accumulated knowledge, mythology, and tradition of leaders, from national figures to neighborhood caciques. Elitelore concerns leaders' self-perceptions of the past, the present, and the future. These perceptions are integrated into a life-history framework that is crucial to understanding how leaders participate in society. As elites construct a method of viewing the world, they begin to accept as truth many of their own assumptions and ideas; but seldom, even in writing autobiography, do they make explicit this life-history lore. Elitelore is witnessed in simple speech traits and physical mannerisms, captured and tested in biographically oriented oral history, and reflected in the complex images of literature and film. Elitelore does not directly involve psychohistory's concern for unconscious influences on leaders although indirectly it can be useful to psychohistorical inquiry. Nor should elitelore be confused with the concepts of "worldview" or "ideology." Worldview is essentially a passive term, saying little about creation or impact of the outlook of leaders, and ideology generally refers to active programs of political action which involve party or group loyalty rather than individual rationales for life trajectory.

Elitelore's concern is not with the great men and famous events of the outmoded scholarly tradition. The elites considered by the scholars in the essays that make up this volume are neither necessarily governing elites nor males. Nor have the persons discussed in this volume been exclusively involved in events with a national or international relevance. What emerges in these studies is a set of common themes involving how elites at any level in complex social hierarchies act, justify their actions, relate to other elites, court followers, and influence society.

As the elitelore field developed over time, it moved from a focus on the exegesis of materials in a number of elitelore genres (literature, film, opera), toward a more explicit focus on the mechanisms by which elitelore is created and transmitted in society. The contribution of the more analytically oriented studies was specifically to shift the focus of research to two processes within the creation of elitelore: 1) the transformation of elitelore into folklore, and 2) the merging of individual and collective lores among elites. The developing elitelore field revealed how the lore of leaders interacts with folklore, creating, among other things, climates of opinion in which policy decisions at the national level are made and implemented. The idea that elites draw heavily upon folklore and have a role in its creation was applied to economic, social, cultural, and political leaders ranging from Mexican "witch-doctors" to the Argentine leader Eva Perón (pictured on the cover of the volume).

In part One, our volume takes up high politics and high culture: *Evita* and Opera in Argentina. James Wilkie and Monica Menell-Kinberg begin with a piece that contrasts what is known of Eva Perón's history with her portrayal in the musical "Evita," looking at the creation of a national and international mythic figure in literature, cinema, and musical theater. The authors show that in the case of *Evita*, elitelore was formed, reformed into folklore, and then spread from an Argentine base to influence the global image of both *Evita* and Argentina. Ironically, the common impression received of *Evita* by viewers of the musical was counter to the image that the musical's creators had

Lorey, Ch. 1, Elitelore at Twenty Five, Elitelore Varieties

intended. In his study of the Teatro Colón of Buenos Aires, Ronald Dolkart explores related themes of elite and national images, examining how the institutional lore that grew up around the staging of operas in Argentina changed over time. Opera came to represent the enemies of the Perón regime and as a response the Perons consciously attempted to undermine the international reputation of the Teatro Colón and its productions. They thus played a central role in the shift from opera as an exclusively elite form of entertainment in Argentina to a popular one by the end of the 1950s.

Pan Two, Literature and Folklore, features a piece that develops a case study of one of Latin America's most important novels, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, by Gabriel García Márquez. The nobel-prize winning novelist's view of village life and the village's protest against outside intervention is tested in two ways. First the views are examined against García Márquez' own contradictory oral comments about the aims of his novel. Second, the novelist's portrait of village life in Latin America is tested against field research on village life in the same area by a noted anthropologist. Once these tests are made readers can appreciate the potential irony of the novelist's influence on intellectual opinion not only in Latin American but throughout the large group of intellectuals who read the novel. The novelist's vision of idyllic village folk life has been widely accepted by the literate and urban sector of society; after all, it reflects their social biases and their general ignorance of the life of the rural poor. But what if national political leaders plan programs based on ideas that may have nothing to do with "reality"? The article concludes by suggesting that elitelore has an important, and unrealized, influence on decisions about national development.

Part Three, Cinema, offers four papers analyzing the elitelore of film. The first three treat the 1973 film *State of Siege*, which portrays the 1970 "execution" of a U.S. Agency for International Development (AID) official in Uruguay by the Tupamaro guerrillas and had a tremendous impact in the 1970s upon the intellectual community of the Western world (one noted U.S. economist specializing in Latin American affairs privately stated to the editors that the film's emotional impact caused him to withdraw on moral grounds from consulting with officials of AID). Professors E. Bradford Burns and Mark Falcoff debate the extent to which the film should be viewed as history. If the "inner truth" or essence of U.S. "imperialism" is indeed captured in spite of major factual inaccuracies, how should scholars treat this political film? James Wilkie and Daniel Geffner argue that, because film-maker Constantin Costa-Gavras purposely changed the dialogue between the U.S. official and his executioners and because U.S. aid to foreign countries is depicted as U.S.-sponsored torture of dissidents, the film's viewers are swayed to believe in an uncomplicated view of history. Wilkie and Geffner show that, in an ironic footnote to the controversy over the film, the filmic image of the Tupamaro guerrillas as "beautiful" may have come to be believed by the Tupamaros themselves and their supporters from the popular sectors (elitelore becoming folklore). In 1987, the Tupamaros recognized publicly that, far from being the symbolic execution of the movie, the death of Mitrione was an accident caused by the capture of the guerilla high command and bungled communications.

In his fascinating study of Werner Herzog's film *Fitzcarraldo*, Ronald Dolkart takes up "the most significant and enduring lore embraced by elites in Latin America": the division between civilization and barbarismo. In Herzog's movie, the contest between civilization and barbarism is portrayed as an epic conflict between European opera and Latin America's Indian and mestizo cultures. In his essay, Dolkart deftly weaves together the thought of Argentine pensador Faustino Sarmiento, the life of the historical Fitzcarrald after whom Herzog's Fitzcarraldo was fashioned, and rich veins of elite- and folklore to show that the conflict, imagined or real, continues in Latin America and in scholarly work on the region. Since the 1960s, of course, the standard view of the conflict between civilization and barbarism has been reversed: what nineteenth-century Latin-American elites regarded as barbarism is now commonly seen as a paradise spoiled by European culture (witness the widespread protests against Columbus in this quincentennial year). Exemplifying this shift, Herzog's film presents the message that civilization is, in fact, barbaric. This "politically correct" view contrasts sharply with the emerging consensus of archaeologists, anthropologists, and historians that the advanced indigenous societies of the Americas, like most "advanced"

Lorey, Ch. 1, Elitelore at Twenty Five, Elitelore Varieties

societies at the time, were generally repressive, frequently bellicose, and, in many places, environmentally devastating.

Part Four, Oral History, presents a case study of elitelore formation in the oral histories of two Mexican leaders and develops methodology for eliciting full oral-history memoirs from leaders. Oral-history interviews conducted with individuals over long periods of time allow interviewers to construct a full memoir, returning to issues and events at different times from different vantage points. These memoirs reveal how leaders select information for themselves and for public consumption to develop a mythic image of themselves and their role in historical events. The concept of elitelore first emerged from study of this type of interview and analysis of leaders' "truths." The article by Lorey and Wilkie takes a close look at two sets of questions about lore creation. First, what is the relationship between individual and collective lores? Second, what are the purposes of elitelore and folklore for elite actors (why is elitelore transformed into folklore)? The authors discovered that leaders and their decisions and actions are bound by the collective context of "we" groups, that elite actors in Mexico must proclaim ties to members of a canon revolutionary heroes. The article uses Mexican agrarian issues as a backdrop for the discussion, suggesting that the most enduring folkloric myth of the Mexican Revolution—that of Zapata—had its genesis in elitelore. The model oral-history questionnaire developed by Wilkie and Wilkie is intended to advance methodology in oral history by illuminating the dimensions of inquiry needed to more fully capture the lore of the elite.

Part Five, Politics, offers three pieces on the variety of eliteloric expressions of national level political leaders. In the first selection, Ludwig Lauerhass shows how the lore surrounding Brazil's Getulio Vargas developed with the twists and turns of Vargas's complex political career. Lauerhass's aim in the article is not to separate fact from fiction, which he believes has consumed too much scholarly energy, but rather to examine how general perceptions of Vargas varied within both the elite and popular sectors of Brazil. As was the case with Eva Perón in Argentina, Vargas's lore was created over time from both elite and popular sources. Two contrasting eliteloric images of Vargas emerged: one a sacred image of Vargas as a national father figure; the other a profane image focusing on Vargas's political savvy. These two strains, developing together, balancing each other, came to permeate all levels of society. Lauerhass holds that Vargas himself became a captive of the lore he had helped create and that lore played a determinant role in his choice of suicide as an exit from politics in 1954.

Roderic Camp and Samuel Schmidt focus in their essays on different aspects of Mexican politics. Camp taps his extensive database of interviews with a broad cross-section of Mexican leaders to delineate the basic personal values and ideological beliefs of members of Mexico's "Revolutionary Family." In an attempt similar to that of Lorey and Wilkie's article on the use of T as 'We' in elitelore, Camp uses expressed values from interviews to explore the unity among and within generations of leaders. Among the most interesting findings of Camp's work is the roots of the statist ideology that came to dominate economic and social policy in the 1970s and then collapsed after the economic crisis of 1982. Camp concludes that elitelore both binds together different generations of leaders and holds together diverse elements within individuals elite generations. In his study, Schmidt suggests that political humor in Mexico plays an important role in strengthening the lore of leaders while at the same time providing a safe outlet for popular expressions of disaffection. As in the case of Getulio Vargas, political jokes in Mexico draw upon rich traditions of lore and permeate all levels of society. Schmidt shows that the fact that the person of the president is generally the most common butt of political humor in Mexico reflects the high degree centralization of power in Mexico.

Finally, Part Six, Border Lore, contains an interesting foray by Susan Schroeder into the realm of the complex lore of the U.S.-Mexican border region, where a half century of rapid economic and social change has created a rapidly consolidating cultural milieu. Schroeder shows how elite healers in Tijuana have taken advantage of the international boundary to exploit the rising demand in the United States for cancer and AIDS remedies that are illegal or unavailable there. Ironically, many persons seeking cures south of the border from Schroeder's elite curanderos are themselves elites in their own occupational fields; thus, Schroeder demonstrates implicitly how elitelore is exclusive by group, and how elites of one group can respond to the folklore created by other elites. This

Lorey, Ch. 1, Elitelore at Twenty Five, Elitelore Varieties

article also serves to point up a potentially very rich area of elitelore study. The U.S.-Mexican border region is replete with unstudied examples of the creation and mixing of lores, the most obvious of which is that created in the ongoing debate over the causes and consequences of international migration from Mexico to the United States.

The articles presented here, representing twenty-five years of elitelore study, make clear the wide range of possibilities for further research on the forms and functions of elitelore in Latin America. The essays in this volume show that the elitelore perspective can be fruitfully adopted in a wide variety of countries, periods, and scholarly disciplines. Perhaps the most valuable contribution of elitelore is to bring together methods of inquiry that have frequently been practiced in isolation from one another. The pieces collected together here reveal that economic policy, for example, is constrained by intellectual and cultural factors and must be studied with them. The complex interplay of such elements remains one of the least studied areas in Latin American scholarship, and one of the most important for understanding both the past and the present of the region.