

**ELITELORE AS A NEW FIELD OF INQUIRY:
INFLUENCES OF THE NOVEL, FILM, AND
ORAL HISTORY ON NATIONAL POLICY DECISIONS
IN
LATIN AMERICA**

**Edited by
James W. Wilkie
and
Edna Monzón de Wilkie**



**GRADUATE SCHOOL OF
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FOREWORD

The purpose of reprinting these five studies on the field of elitelore is manifold: it brings together sustained analysis and debate about the lore of leaders as presented in the *Journal of Latin American Lore*; it defines the parameters of the field's focus on informal knowledge of leaders as it relates to followers; and it stresses the emergence in the articles of a common theme involving the impact of lore on policy decisions of the elite.

The new field of elitelore, first developed in 1967 by James W. Wilkie in a presentation to the Social Science Research Council Conference on Folklore and Social Science in New York City, is concerned with showing, for example, that the lore of leaders interacts with folklore to create climates of opinion in which policy decisions at the national level are made and implemented. Elitelore is defined as noninstitutionalized knowledge found in conceptual and perceptual information and views held by leaders at all levels of society. It is based upon the theory that the leaders' perception and misperception of reality is crucial to understand how they consciously construct information systems and justify retaining or changing the life situation of followers. The theory applies to economic and social leaders as well as to cultural and political leaders ranging, for example, from presidents at the national level to municipal leaders at the local level, to chieftains at the tribal level. Discussed here are national political and cultural elites concerned implicitly with seeing that their ideas live beyond their own short existences on earth.

Part One, The Novel, summarizes the theory of elitelore as it has evolved to date, and it develops a case study of the theory as applied to one of Latin America's most important novels, *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Gabriel García Márquez. Here the novelist's view of village life and protest against outside intervention in its affairs is tested in two ways, first against his own contradictory oral comments about the aims of his novel and then against the research of village life in the same area by a noted social scientist. Once these tests are made readers can appreciate the potential irony of the novelists' influence on climate of opinion if national political leaders plan programs based on ideas that may have nothing to do with "reality." If the novelist's eliteloric vision of idyllic village folk life comes to be widely accepted by the literate and modern sector of society, it is hard for those who make policy to suggest much government intervention to improve public welfare, the "happy people" considered to be better left without the "benefits" of modern society. It becomes difficult to marshal the public support necessary to divert scarce funds from urban to rural problems. Elitelore-cum-folklore thus influences decisions about national development.

Part Two, Film, offers three papers analyzing the elitelore of the cinema. In two of them Professors E. Bradford Burns and Mark Falcoff debate the extent to which the 1973 film *State of Siege* 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? *State of Siege*, which portrays the 1970 "execution" of a U.S. Agency for International Development (AID) official in Uruguay by the Tupamaro guerrillas, has had a tremendous impact upon the intellectual community of the Western world. Thus one noted U.S. economist specializing in Latin American affairs privately stated that the film's emotional impact caused him to withdraw on moral grounds from consulting with officials of AID.

The third paper raises some important questions that also need to be asked. If filmmaker Constantin Costa-Gavras has purposely changed the dialogue between the U.S. official and his executioners to distort its true significance, are not the film's viewers confused as to the meaning of history? If the "inner truth" of U.S. aid to all foreign countries is depicted mainly as U.S.-sponsored torture of Uruguayan dissidents, are not the film's viewers left with the erroneous impression that international issues are simple? James Wilkie and Daniel Geffner argue that the film's viewers are swayed to believe in an uncomplicated outlook on life that has allowed masses to be manipulated by leaders since time immemorial. As a final irony, the image captured on film of the Tupamaro guerrillas as "beautiful" may have come to be believed by the Tupamaros themselves, elitelore becoming folklore in yet another way.

Part Three, Oral History, develops the methodology to test not only views of political and cultural elites but also to tape record the oral memoirs of leaders. Memoirs of leaders reveal how they have selected information for themselves and for public consumption to protect their egos and to develop a myth about themselves, myth calculated to give everlasting life to their ideas. Although the interviews with García Márquez and Costa-Gavras discussed in Parts One and Two were conducted by investigators without an interest in the cumulative life history factors necessary to explain the personal lore of each leader, the interviews help us to understand some aspects of elitelore. The model questionnaire presented in Part Three is intended to advance methodology in oral history by illuminating the dimensions of inquiry needed to more fully capture the lore of the elite.

* * *

The interplay of elitelore and folklore is illustrated in some examples from other countries of the Americas:

In Argentina after 1946 the nation's leader Juan Domingo Perón convinced a strong majority of his countrymen that the rural sector could be made to pay for industrial development in the urban sector without damaging agricultural productivity. With disincentive to produce meat and cereals, the rural sector cut production, and resultant shortages of food meant not only less to export but less to feed the urban masses in whose name antiagriculturalist policy had originally been undertaken. Perón's elitelore had become so important a part of Buenos Aires folklore about development that subsequent political elites were unable to help the numerically small and economically struggling rural sector

after Perón's fall in 1955. Only by the late 1970s could his strategy of development be challenged. (Perón's return to power from 1973 to 1974 certainly did not help resolve matters.)

In Mexico for decades government-created folklore led the country's socially aware citizens to believe that projected expenditures of the central government were the valid tool of planning. Not until 1967 did it become apparent through publication of James Wilkie's *The Mexican Revolution: Federal Expenditure and Social Change since 1910* (Berkeley: University of California Press) that actual expenditures differed by up to 100 percent from projections. Middle-level planners now no longer debate folklore about budgets, serious argument over whether or not 25 percent of Mexico's projected expenditures should be allocated to education having been rendered useless since it became known that the actual figure did not reach half that amount.

In Costa Rica in 1948 José Figueres fostered a revolution based on the elitelore that the country's ills could be cured by limiting the power of the president to abuse authority. His solution, once the revolution was victorious and he was president, was to institute in 1949 a decentralized system of autonomous governmental economic agencies organized outside the sphere of direct central government power. In 1968 when he prepared to assume the presidency for the period from 1970 to 1974, we asked Figueres why he wanted to become president again when it was clear that he would be virtually powerless to effect the economic changes necessary to resolve serious problems of underproduction and underemployment. Figueres responded that his intention was to recentralize presidential control over the autonomous agencies, admittedly a difficult operation because most of his countrymen had come to see the agencies as one cornerstone in Costa Rica's smoothly functioning democracy. His elitelore of 1948 had become part of the Costa Rican folklore, and Figueres noted that he could not take up the matter on its own terms in the election without raising the cry that he sought too much power. By the time he left office in 1974, he had not succeeded in even beginning to dismantle the decentralized system created after 1948. Figueres has since spoken to us of the need for a new revolution, this time to restore power to presidents so that they can act decisively in national matters.

El Salvador in early 1963 found itself to be a pawn in the game of elitelore played by the U.S. international development fraternity. Needing a case of heroic efforts by a local leader of the U.S. Peace Corps to justify and enhance President Kennedy's Alliance for Progress, U.S. officials propagandized the "success story" of Corpsman James T. Portman. According to U.S. officials in Washington, D.C., in less than a year's tour of duty in Tonacatepeque, El Salvador, Portman lost 80 pounds as he accomplished the following: revolutionized the country's tomato industry; organized a 200-boy 4-H Club that learned to assure the town an abundant supply of eggs and poultry; introduced to local farmers the technique of mulching for moisture conservation and assuring the town of enough vegetables for the entire population; converted the farmers

to contour-planning and terracing, thereby saving crops and adding three and four hundred dollars a year to each farmer's income; introduced the raising of pineapple, watermelon, peanuts, and bananas; persuaded a New York relief agency to send him 500 yards of cloth and two sewing machines so that he could teach the town girls to make rugs; purchased with his own funds expensive aluminum molds to cast religious statues then sold to support the above activities; developed a town park; completed construction on the town's soccer field and swimming pool. As part of an independent audit of what U.S. agencies call "success in foreign assistance," however, William and Elizabeth Paddock went to El Salvador to analyze Portman's programs. To the Paddocks' surprise, Peace Corps officials there had to search their files to recall that Portman had indeed ever been in the country. And in Tonacatepeque the Paddocks found that every one of the Portman successes, heralded by Washington as outstanding examples worthy of independent audit, proved to be a myth. To Washington, for example, Portman's own tomato garden had become a "revolution," his raising of chickens and ducklings a saga, and his sewing project the basis for a new industry. How did Washington's image of Portman become so distorted? The Paddocks believe (*We Don't Know How* [Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1973], p. 74) that when Portman returned to Tonacatepeque to spend Christmas and to distribute toys after having been transferred elsewhere, he must have stood out—the first U.S. citizen that Tonacatepeque had ever much talked about. And when the regional director of the Peace Corps, Jack Hood Vaughn, traveled through Latin America looking for success stories, he wanted to believe, indeed had to believe, that legendary accomplishments could be found and cited back in Washington. In this manner, we may conclude, distortions about Portman's successes were to become part of the elitelore of Washington's vested interests, elitelore that through dissemination in the news media was to become part of lore for the U.S. taxpayer: The Peace Corp Lives!

The United States itself is enmeshed in the relationship of elitelore and folklore in the almost humorous circumstances surrounding the 55-mile-per-hour speed limit imposed on traffic. The real issue has to do not with 55 miles per hour but with 65 because police do not usually ticket speeders until they exceed the limit by 10 miles per hour. That the speed limit of 55 is workable exists only as a myth in elite-created lore written into law, law that puzzles most motorists who fail to understand that if the fictitious speed limit were increased to match the reality of 65 miles per hour, the functional limit would increase to 75. "Responsible" leaders decline to discuss openly the matter in realistic terms apparently for fear of shaking the public's fragile confidence in "the law." Thus, in the lore of the law-making elite it is unwise to raise the issue of "grace" in the process of writing speeding tickets—never mind that the law does not work.

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To put the papers on elitelore presented here into perspective, we offer several qualifications about the field. Elitelore does not directly involve psychohistory's concern for unconscious influences on leaders although indirectly it can be useful to further psychohistorical inquiry. Nor should elitelore be confused with the concepts of "worldview" or "ideology." Worldview is essentially a passive term, and ideology deals with active programs of political action which involve party or group loyalty rather than rationale for life trajectory. A recent work by James MacGregor Burns on *Leadership* (New York: Harper and Row, 1978) confuses these distinctions. According to Burns (p. 249), ideology is defined as *what* one believes and *how* one came to hold those beliefs. By failing to separate ideas into analyzable components, Burns does not address clearly a central issue of leadership: to what extent leaders lie to their followers. Burns dismisses Machiavelli's dictums as impractical to apply in the workaday world of politics. Yet there has long existed the notion that leaders do not tell the truth, hence distrust has increased in recent years, making leadership an increasingly laborious task. The issue that needs to be addressed is how leaders select information and, in effect, lie to themselves as they construct frameworks to explain their own "burden" of leadership and protect themselves from a world of confusing forces that they can only partly understand.

It is worth noting here the view of Víctor Paz Estenssoro, founder and leader of the Bolivian National Revolution, 1952-1964. In an oral history interview tape recorded with us in Los Angeles, May 23, 1977, he discussed his distinction between the "circumstantially true" and the "truly true":

VPE (Victor Paz Estenssoro): When a [leader] upholds a circumstantial truth it does not mean that he has a double personality, another "I" which is involved in self-analysis and which says to the other self, "All right, what you are upholding is a relative truth of a fleeting sort, valid only this instant and not part of an absolute truth." If the politician begins to have an internal analyst who is continually undermining and making him doubt the rationale of his acts, he will end up doing nothing. Now that I am no longer active in politics, I have an interior little devil who is involved permanently in criticizing me—I have time for introspection. Moreover, it is only when one no longer has the urgency to act and has acquired retrospective vision that certain truths upheld as indispensable can be seen in reality to have been only circumstantial truths in the sense that they corresponded to given conditions of the historical moment. . . .

JW (James Wilkie): And that "truth" was not a lie.

VPE: At that moment in time one believed wholeheartedly in that "truth." Later, with long-range perspective, when new factors have come to the fore and the determining factors of that historical moment pass, the leader can acquire a new vision. From the vantage point of a wider context and at a distance from those events, the leader can confirm what was believed to be the truth, negate it, or arrive at a series of intermediate conclusions. . . .

While in power it is inevitable that the politician be forced to make statements with a very large proportion of circumstantial truths. Also, if in the interplay of numerous forces and factors a government leader shows truth in its completely naked form, the possibility of realizing many absolutely justified goals would be annulled.

Thus Paz Estenssoro in his oral history conversations with us since 1966 in Lima has continued to stress the difference between what is "circumstantially true" and what is "truly true." The former involves truth of the moment which leaders must believe (or must have the public believe) in order to carry out the day-to-day business of state, it being impossible to question too deeply each situation and reaction to it. With hindsight, the "truly true" may become apparent as leaders assess past interaction of forces and personalities. We may add here that in time usually the leader may come to see the "circumstantially true" as the "truly true" simply because in the onrush of events he does not have time to reassess all past actions in which he has been involved. Few leaders in positions of national power read subsequently into the scholarly research on their times because, since they influenced them, they believe that only they can really know what happened—the studiousness of Paz Estenssoro is an exception. So in spite of objective research into the complexities of reality, the leaders' view of past events tends to remain frozen.

In two important and interlocking ways leaders in Latin America are often constrained from changing their views. From one side political, economic, and intellectual leaders realize that they must dedicate years to the task of gaining a consensus to support their ideas. From another side they face the problem that their followers in the middle and upper classes of Latin America often criticize them for deviating from the original statement of ideas that launched their role as leader. In this criticism, which restricts the process of change, there are only principled and unprincipled leaders, the former having the courage of conviction to stand by their original views and the latter having given in to opportunism. Both constraints interact with the leaders' frustration to reach goals that are not fully achievable within their own lifetimes let alone sustainable afterward. Thus, it is conducive for leaders to involve their lives with myth that will insure the continuous importance of their historical roles after they are gone. The problem is that even when leaders realize that some of the programs they originally initiated or supported are no longer viable (as when land reform results in higher food costs for the urban sector that over time grows from the minority population to the majority), they cannot discuss issues publicly without destroying myth about self, myth necessary to rally followers to meet their broader goals for all society.

Elitelore encompasses complex elements which include the following:

1. Meshing self-image and idealized self. Octavio Paz sees the matter as dissimulation: "The dissembler pretends to be someone he is not. His role requires constant improvisation, a steady forward progress across shifting sands. Every moment he must remake, recreate, modify the personage he is playing, until at last the moment arrives when reality and appearance, the lie and the truth, are one" (quoted in James Wilkie, *Elitelore*, p. 42.).
2. Justifying "consistency" throughout life's various stages.
3. Fostering the notion that "success" in life is related to that consistency rather than to luck or good fortune.