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The current members of the European Round Table: A transnational club of economic elites

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Abstract

The European Round Table of Industrialists (ERT) is usually presented by the media and in the literature as one of the most influential economic lobbies at the European level. In order to go beyond this mere observation and to better inform the logics of collective commitment of economic elites in the European political space, this article suggests a detailed sociological analysis of the resources of the current members of the ERT. It appears that this group is not homogeneous, as it brings together economic leaders with various profiles. This suggests that the ERT is not merely a tool of economic pressure, but that it is also a tool for a social elite strategy of distinction. Being an ERT member provides social, political and symbolic capital with a specific European value. This sociological approach of elites therefore intends to give some clues to reinterpret the power of economic elites in a more socially informed way.

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Notes

1. For a synthesis of the debate, see Puchala (1999).

2. Without opening here this specific debate, it can be underlined that the main problem of the research about a transnational capitalist class (see, for instance, Sklair, 2001) is that it delivers little evidence about the relations their members *concretely* develop. In addition, another problem of such a concept refers to the idea of a complete emancipation of the economic elites from their national framework. However, the withdrawal of public authorities in the regulation of economy and more generally the globalization do not necessarily imply the end of national modes of organization (Hall and Soskice, 2001).

3. The results presented here rely particularly on empirical data collected about the current members of the ERT (members in December 2007), using a methodology that consists in collecting biographies and making prosopographical studies in order to apprehend the group studied in a collective and structural perspective. The analysis also relies on the precise study of some documents produced by the ERT (charters, official reports and so on) and press articles. Moreover, a dozen interviews with current and past members or their associates were undertaken.

4. The population studied here is composed of 46 biographies of ERT members in December 2007.

5. Among the 18 countries, 15 are member states of the European Union (the United Kingdom, Spain, Portugal, France, Germany, Italy, Greece, Finland, Hungary, Sweden, Ireland, Belgium, Netherlands, Austria and Denmark) and three are not (Turkey, Norway and Switzerland).

6. Since the second half of 2008, there is a woman in the ERT group: Güler Sabançi, from Turkey.

7. We use the ranking of the 2000 biggest companies worldwide, established by the magazine *Forbes* and titled ‘Forbes Global 2000’ for 2007. It takes into account the sales, the benefits, the resources of the firms and the value on the markets.

8. The self-presentation of the organization on its website (http://www.ert.be/home.aspx) puts the emphasis on the quality of the members (CEOs or chairmen), the European and multinational dimension of the firms, the sectors of activity, the geographical diversity of the group: ‘ERT is an informal forum bringing together around 45 chief executives and chairmen of major multinational companies of European parentage covering a wide range of industrial and technological sectors. Companies of ERT Members are widely situated across Europe’.

9. For details and a discussion on the notion of European enterprise, see Schröter (2008).

10. The biographical data consist of past and current positions and activities.

11. A limitation of our work must be underlined at this stage of the analysis. The collection of the biographical data was conducted through the combination of three main sources of information: national or international biographical databases such as the *Who's Who in France*, *The International Who's Who*, or the *Who's Who in European Business* and professional CVs generally available on the websites of the different firms. The construction of these databases relies on self-declaration. This means that some information can be voluntary hidden and some might be ‘massaged’ by the people studied here.

12. The ‘Bilderberg Club’ or the ‘Bilderberg conferences’ is a space of sociability that gathers, unofficially, more than a hundred members selected among

political and economic elites from Europe and North America. It has held annual meetings since the 1950s.

13. For Boltanski, the analysis of the positions of power can be used to measure the social surface area of the members – that is to say to assess the extent and the nature of their social capital – and, at least in part, the extent and the power they have. The social surface area of someone is the part of the social space that one can cover and control occupying successively different positions of power. Therefore, the social surface area depends on the dispersion of the positions in various social areas, on their value and on their number.

14. Data from the last version of the Charter of the ERT.

15. The current members of the Steering Committee are: Jorma Olilla (Nokia), Leif Johansson (Volvo), Peter Sutherland (BP), Jean-Louis Beffa (Saint-Gobain), Gerard Kleisterlee (Philips), Henning Kagerman (SAP), Paolo Scaroni (ENI).

16. Words of an ex-Secretary General of the ERT: Keith Richardson, 'Big business and the European agenda. Reflections on the activities of the European Round Table of Industrialists, 1988–1998', Sussex working paper, no. 35, August 2000.

17. Interview with an ERT official, Brussels, June 2009.

18. Interview with a French ERT member, Paris, April 2009.

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