

## 1. Preliminary title

# **The Bilderberg Network and the emergence of a Transnational Power Elite – Institutions, Discourses, Actors**

## 2. Research question

Since the 1950s, some American sociologists began to posit the existence of an American „power elite“ (Wright Mills 1956, Domhoff 2014 [1967]). At the same time, some of its internationally oriented members began secret meetings with their European counter-parts, the so-called Bilderberg Conferences. The goal of my research project is to determine whether and to what degree it makes sense to speak of a Transnational Power Elite when describing this network.

## 3. links to the thematic focus on Prowel

If, we think of elites in terms of *longue durée*, i.e. as the result of a slow and long process of accumulation, it is obvious that there is a connection between social inequality regarding income and especially wealth and elite sociology. This relationship might not be as straight-forward as „if the rich are getting richer, the poor are getting poorer“ but recent rising scholar interest in questions of social inequality (e.g. Piketty 2014, Atkinson 2015) has also led to a surge in studies of the influence of (power) elites on inequality (cf. Krosnes et al. 2017 for an overview).

## 4. Research goals

Determine whether and how the Bilderberg conferences have contributed to the emergence of a Transnational (Transatlantic) Power Elite during the Cold War.

Identify the main (formal and informal) organisations and networks which together formed the field of transatlantic governance during the Cold War.

Contribute to a more profound understanding of the process of European Integration during the Cold War.

Create a biographical database of all participants in the Bilderberg Conferences which can be used as foundation for a prosopography of the transatlantic elite during the Cold War.

## 5. State of relevant research / research gap

Considering the high-level of participants, there has been surprisingly little research into the Bilderberg Conferences which can be partly explained by the lack of reliable sources. Recently, the first historical accounts have appeared (Gijswijt 2007, Philipsen 2009, Geven 2014). However, there is still no genuinely sociological account of the composition and functioning of this influential elite network during the Cold War. My project intends to fill this gap in order to contribute to a better understanding of the transatlantic power structure during the Cold War.

## 6. Theoretical frame

The theoretical background is Mills' (1956) claim that the United States of America are ruled by a power elite. I want to extend his analysis to encompass NATO in general and not only the USA. The Bilderberg conferences provide a perfect starting point for research into Transnational (transatlantic) Power Elites (Kauppi/Madsen 2013) because by definition its participants are members of the 'establishment' and because it encompasses participants from all NATO and OECD countries. What is particularly interesting, and mirrors Großmann's findings about the 'Conservative International' (2014), is that the Bilderberg Conferences are only one of several overlapping and interconnected transatlantic elite networks which came into existence during the Cold War. Others include the International Institute of Strategic Studies, the Atlantic Institute, the Trilateral Commission or the European Roundtable of Industrialists. While for the last two academic studies exist (e.g. Knudsen 2016, Nollert 2016, van Appeldorn 2002), the history of the first two still remains to be written. A comprehensive historical-sociological study of the Bilderberg Conferences should contribute to a better understanding of the function and purpose of these organisations.

## 7. Methodological approach

My analysis is based on archive material which has either not been available before or has not been analysed yet by other scholars. In general power structure research is hindered by the fact, that there is not much data available. Informal elite networks are by definition secretive and often leave no documentary traces of their activities (cf. Großmann 2014: xxx). However, the conference reports which are prepared after every annual conference provide a lot of information about the participants and the contents of the discussions, even though the speakers are not identified by name.

In order to make reliable claims about this network, it is necessary to combine a broad scope of research methods. In a first step a prosopography (collective biography) of all participants is necessary as starting point for further research (Charle 2001). Social Network Analysis (Wassermann/Faust 1994) allows us to test further hypotheses. Based on this analysis, it is possible to identify institutions (International Organisations, Think Tanks, Universities etc.) which are at the centre of this network which in turn provides further information about the political orientation and other activities of its members.

For the analysis of the contents of the discussions first of all a Case Study approach (Gerring 2007) is necessary to select meaningful cases which can be analysed in detail by using methods of Critical Discourse Analysis (Jäger 2012). CDA needs to be supplemented by deconstructive, hermeneutical approaches (Derrida 1967, Agamben 2009) because the source material consists mostly of internal documents which usually need a translation effort in order to be understood by outsiders since they use ambivalent semantics.

## 8. First results

The first publication (Zieliński 2016) was a result of my research into the activities of the founders of the Bilderberg Conferences in the years 1940-1952 which had so far been neglected in the relevant literature. It demonstrated that the main protagonists have been active in similar initiatives many years before the first Bilderberg conference. Their activities provide important clues for their motivation in setting up this transatlantic elite network.

The second publication (Zieliński 2017) tried to answer the question whether it is possible to speak of a collective identity of the organizers of the Bilderberg Conferences which prima facie is counterintuitive because 80% of all participants took part in only one or two conferences. However, our research has shown that there exists an 'inner circle' (Useem 1984) of persons who participated in virtually every conference during at least 10 – sometimes up to 30 or 40 years – in a row. Most of them are representatives of powerful dynasties, especially from the financial sector.

## 9. Time schedule

2018            literature research and archive work

2019            writing of the Thesis

## 10. Relevant references

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