The article deals with the concept of elite as a phenomenon of social consciousness and public opinion. This phenomenon was considered as part of an associative experiment, which is widely used to diagnose students’ knowledge, among students of Siberian Federal University. As a result of our investigation we collected a hundred and five students’ answers, mostly from three institutes. We reduced the answers to six categories of associates. We developed a diagram of a collective semantic spectrum of thematic associations and a table of eleven major associates linked to the concept of elite. We also analysed individualities of the answers of students majoring in different subjects. On balance, we established a connection of these associates with the concepts of wealth, money and power. These conclusions can help with the correction of students’ educational process.

Keywords: social consciousness, public opinion, elite, associative experiment, associate, students’ public opinion.


Research area: culture studies.

Social consciousness, as is known, is a spiritual aspect of the historical process. It is not a set of individual opinions, but a special integral spiritual phenomenon. It is characterized by the inner structure, qualitatively different levels, among which everyday and academic consciousnesses are distinguished, ideology, emotional and mental sphere. Some specific kinds of consciousness, such as politic, economic, legal, moral, religious, aesthetic, philosophic, scientific, and others can be mentioned. Our objective is to analyze how the concept of elite is reflected in public mind and public opinion on the example of a survey of associates of this concept among the students of SFU.

The category of social consciousness started being researched as early as XIX century when it was being contrasted with the category of social being. According to K. Marx: “It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness” [Marx, 1959, p. 7]. It is at that time that dialectical materialist direction of the research of this phenomenon was established.

The following significant features of public consciousness can be distinguished. To start with,
this consciousness cannot be regarded as some passive mirror reflection of the outside world but should be perceived as an extremely complex process, as a result of active position of public people to the reality. This approach allows us not only to distinguish the causal dependency of social consciousness on its material base, but also it enables us to oppose it to idealist views about substantiality of this consciousness. In addition it opposes it to the metaphysical comprehension of the subject’s lack of activity. This approach exhibits the dependency of social consciousness on social being and is a foundation of the inclusion of social consciousness in the system of laws of the society.

The research into social consciousness, in particular by Russian philosophers and scholars, has decisively proved that social consciousness enjoys a certain relative autonomy, is capable of development and self-development, is characterized by continuity, interaction and cooperation of its levels and forms and is able to radically transform. Social consciousness nowadays is a major agent in the evolution of the society and aids its stabilization or destruction. The impact force of social consciousness on social being is defined by verity and integrality of the reflection of real interests and needs of social groups and the society in general and also its link with practice.

Public opinion is a special kind of social consciousness and includes obvious or hidden attitude of different social groups to the reality and certain events. Public opinion manifests itself in monitoring, consulting, directing and expressive functions, aids some social group to take a certain position, exchanges information, impressions within itself, makes decisions on certain issues of interest. There are following types of public opinion subject to their context and the nature of the statement: evaluative, analytical, constructive and nonconstructive, emotional, expressive and trivial assessment. Public opinion strongly affects regulation of the behaviour and activity of social groups, individuals and social institutions. Public opinion influences the regulation of behavior and activities of social groups, individuals and social institutions. It contributes to the assimilation of ideas from the spheres of politics, economy, ideology, science, education, religion, etc.

Public opinion is a universal phenomenon, it penetrates the whole structure of society, its classes and social groups, responds to everything of interest happening around. Its distinguishing feature is that its assessments, estimations and views often do not concur on one and the same issue.

V.A. Medvedev, analysing tendencies in theory and methodology of the development of social humanitarian cognition states that new philosophical concepts are emerging which comprehend the role of cognition, language, cognitive practices, social reality and so on. Nonclassical and postnonclassical scientific rationality focuses on phenomenological, hermeneutic, ethnomethodological, practical, synergetic and other approaches. A modern anthropological revolution in social humanitarian cognition is taking place.

Associative experiment has recently become one of the promising lines of social phenomena research. It interests us from the point of view of its reflection in social consciousness, in public opinion about such a concept as elite.

Associative experiment as a method of research has outlived a long predominant theory of associanism and is used also nowadays in psycholinguistics, cross-cultural research, etc. A.I. Nazarov and R.V. Sokolov point out: “…association (connection) is not primordial and not the only mechanism of the formation of mental phenomena functioning as the classics of associanism believed, but one of the finite or intermediate forms of their behaviour which
took shape as part of whole focused activity of an individual … associations are the result of education, not its cause”

Associative experiment is successfully being used to diagnose students’ academic performance. American psychologists have developed an associate test where students are offered a list of terms on the topic studied and they should respond to them with a relevant word or a short phrase. The extend of their relevance is assessed on a four point scale. These answers are a perceived characteristic of the inner content of the memory of the student being diagnosed.

The number of associates can be narrowed down to six according to how far the associate is removed from the essential features of the concept. Those are, first, the associates having the direct relevance to the notion and characterising its structure; second, those having direct relevance to the topic and characterising its properties; third, closely related to the topic (one or two connecting links); fourth, those far removed from the topic, having more connecting links; fifth, those functionally related to the topic characterising the properties it acquires as a result of its interaction with the environment; sixth, non-relevant associates connected with the topic mostly through the personal life experience of the respondent.

In this connection we will analyse the attitude of the students of SFU to the concept of elite manifested in their associates.

The students majoring in Philosophy (17) delivered the following associates relevant to the concept of elite:

- Finance
- Knowledge
- Personal growth
- Good education (2)
- Wealth (3)
- Closed-door Stalin
- Status
- Money (6) Authority
- Prestige
- Authority
- Star
- Chrystal
- Village
- Upper class
- Power (3)
- Beauty
- Intelligentsia (2)
- Luxury (2)
- Upbringing
- Expensive
- Influence
- Forces
- Army
- Politic
- Society (2)
- Professional
- Individual
- Manners
- Love
- High standard of living

The respondents majoring in History (23) offered the following associates relevant to the concept of elite:

- Aristocracy
- Influence (3)
- Power
- Striving for the top
- Expensive
- Money
- The best (3)
- Wealth
- Country house
- Politics
- Nobleman
- Education (2)
- Fat man
- Upper society
- Bloodline
- “Upper crust (2)”
- Social stratum
- Haute couture
- Elegance
- Top (of society)
- First-born
- Quality
- Social
- Elitist
- Language
- “Prosperous scum”
- Army
- Culture
- Superiority
- Luxurious house
- Wide circle of people
- Upbringing
- Minority
- Luxury
- “Cool Car”
- “Cool house”
- Wealthy person
- Smug creatures
- Education (2)
- Smug creatures
- Fat man
- Upper society
- Village
- “Rublevka”
- Prestige
- Respect
- Beauty
- Upper
- Top (of society)
- Quality
- Society
- Social
- High social status
- Nation
- Language
- Behaviour
- “Prosperous scum”
- Brazen
Respondents majoring in Record-keeping and Archival science (21) suggested the following associates:

- Prosperity
- Wealth (5)
- Privilege
- Chic (2)
- Big, Popular
- Controllers
- Accessibility
- Popular
- Education
- Chosen
- Higher education

- Confidence
- Celebrity
- Authority
- Uniqueness
- Beauty
- City tours
- Intellect
- Respect
- Human being (2)
- Stability
- Highest social status

- Active
- Prestige (2)
- Modernity
- Class, Society, Group
- Status (4)
- Higher society
- Limited access
- Power (2)
- Key
- State
- Village outside Krasnoyarsk

- Ability
- Might
- Trendy
- Pathos
- Recognition
- Main
- Prestige
- Age
- SFU

- Lots of personal connections used for personal goals
- Understanding that they are better than others
- Spiritually enlightened, educated, literate
- Master of his trade, profession
- Rogues

Students majoring in Applied IT (3) noted the following:

- Higher status
- Success
- Luxury (2)
- Outstanding people

- Wealth
- Head, main
- Money

Respondents majoring in Philology (2) and Journalism (1) recorded the following:

- Privileges
- Pathos
- Isolation
- Money

Respondents majoring in Pedagogy (2), Social cultural activity (1), Public relations (1) and Sociology (2) named the following associates:

- Popularity
- Respect
- Money
- Power (2)
- Education
- Knowledge
- Luxury
- Position in society
- Science

- Wealth
- Village
- Lineage
- Advantage
- People
- Intelligentsia
- Top
- Creativity

Certain group of people whose life should be an example to others

One of a kind, not like the rest

Students majoring in Town building and economy, Buildings design and Decorative applied art and design (5) provided the following:

- High financial status
- Luxury
- Excellent
- Pathos
- Power
- Best

- Mercedes
- Top
- Superior
- Social ladder
- Money
- High culture of behaviour

Lots of personal connections used for personal goals

Arrogance

Show off in front of others

Respondents majoring in Pedagogy (2), Social cultural activity (1), Public relations (1) and Sociology (2) named the following associates:

- Popularity
- Respect
- Money
- Power (2)
- Education
- Knowledge
- Luxury
- Position in society
- Science
- Creativity
Students majoring in State and municipal management, Organisation, Economy and Accounting, analysis and audit (6) suggested the following:

- **Highest**
  - Intellectual
- **Minority**
  - Human being
- **Politics**
  - Responsibilities
- **Higher society**
  - Best (about things)
- **Top (2)**
  - State
- **Business**
  - Intelligentsia
- **Superiority**
  - Money

Village (I’ve got a summer house there)

A respondent majoring in Recreation and tourism suggested the following:

- **Management**
- **Organising**
- **Thieves**

A Biology student wrote:

- Village outside Krasnoyarsk
- Privileged people
- **Quality**

A medical student offered:

- **Money**
- **Power**
- **Wellbeing**

A Customs and excise student gave the following answer:

- **Higher society**
- **Manners**
- **Lawers**

Students majoring in Linguistics (12) wrote:

- Top of (higher) society (2)
- Accomplishments (3)
- **Popularity**
- Intelligence
- **Chic**
- Higher education
- **Inflated self-esteem**
- Cream of society
- **Highest position in society (3)**
- Erudition
- Conductor’s place
- **Insularity**
- Centre
- **Society**
- Literacy
- **Leadership**
- Success
- Ethics
- Government
- **Monocle**
- Money (3)

High financial security

One hundred and five SFU students majoring in different subjects took part in the research in November 2014.

We will attempt to separate individual associates into larger semantic groups. The group of concepts connected with wealth and money is the most often repeated associate of elite. They are such associates as wealth, money, prosperity, fortune, finance and their derivatives. These associates are mentioned 37 times.

The notion of power stands out as the next biggest group of associates which is referred to 23 times.
The relevant concept of influence and its derivatives are noted 5 times.

Associates linked with authority, respect and prestige are mentioned 6 times.

The concept of education and its relevant notions are often enough associated with the stated topic and are cited 17 times. Closely linked to this group semantically are associates linked to intellect, intelligence, intelligentsia (8 times).

Some students associate elite with something privileged, inaccessible, closed off (isolated, minority, one of the kind, etc) referring to this meaning 16 times.

Others perceive this concept as the best (6 times).

Respondents quite often point out the outer characteristics, façade of the concept, talking about luxury, chic, haute couture, fashion, etc (14 times).

There are also numerous rather superficial associates: Rublevka, village outside Krasnoyarsk, cool house, gold, fur coats, Mercedes, etc (17).

On numerous occasions elite is connected with politics, government, politicians, ruling circles (11 times).

A cluster representing something higher and top borders the group above: higher society, higher class, top brass, etc (13).

We set aside a distinct group of associates linked with ancestry: aristocracy, nobleman, first-born, etc (8).

A number of respondents marked human qualities of elite: manners, high culture of behavior, language, beauty, love, restraint, etc (9).

There are neutral associates, such as society, social stratum, social ladder, nation, human being, etc (11).

There are some definitions zooming in on the positive side of the concept: people whose life should be an example to others; outstanding people; master of his trade, profession; spiritually enlightened, educated, literate (3).

In view of their modest life experience only a few respondents mentioned some negative qualities and characteristics inherent to modern elite. These are such associates as inhumanity, arrogance, inflated self-esteem, lots of personal connections, rogues, brazen, drugs, etc (13).

We present a diagram of a collective semantic spectrum of thematic associations according to the major groups of associates linked to the concept of elite (see Fig. 1).

Notes

Wealth, money
Power
Education
Outer objective associates
Privilege
Demonstration of its exclusiveness
Higher, top of the society
Negative associates
Politics, government
Neutral associates
Human qualities
Intellect, intelligence
Ancestry
Authority, prestige
The best
Influence
Positive sides of elite

We put this data together into a table where we allocated eleven basic associates. Only the most numerous focus areas are pinpointed in the table.

We analysed the data above and observed the following. Students with major in Philosophy are represented more homogeneously based on gender therefore we can draw a comparison between male students (9) and female (8). We can see with reference to the table that the most
Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Major</th>
<th>Philosophy</th>
<th>Record-keeping and archival science</th>
<th>History</th>
<th>International relations</th>
<th>Linguistics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Topics</td>
<td>M (9)</td>
<td>M (6)</td>
<td>F (15)</td>
<td>M (8)</td>
<td>F (15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wealth, money</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Power</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education, intelligence</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outer objectives associates</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Privilege</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demonstration of exclusiveness</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher society</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative associates</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Politics, government</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authority, influence</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human qualities</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

frequently occurring associate in both groups is realia linked to *wealth, fortune* and *finance*; the second most popular category appears to be that of *education* and other relevant associates. The rest of the associates are put forward only once or twice.

We can only trace a trend among female students majoring in Record-keeping and archival science as the number of male students is far smaller than that of female students and we cannot draw a parallel here. Female students mostly cited associates connected with the category of *wealth,*
money and demonstration, outer characteristics: i.e. luxury, haute couture, star, etc.; next, with the margin of one reply, follows the associate of education; then everything linked to privilege and exclusiveness; male students accentuated authority, power and outer objective associates.

Students majoring in History also differ significantly based on gender. We observe that male students’ largest group of associates is related to positive outer objective associates followed by negative associates. On the whole, which is most notable, this group of students offered majority of the negative associates. Female students split their focus between the categories of power, higher society and human qualities, which are followed by education, demonstration of exclusiveness and outer objective associates. Third come the associates of wealth and money, privilege and politics.

Female students prevail among those majoring in International relations (10 to 2). The top place was shared between associates wealth, money and power; education and intelligentsia, privilege and politics, government came second; then come outer objective associates and human qualities. Male students marked education and intelligentsia, upper in society and politics, government.

All the Linguistics students are female (12) and they put education, intelligentsia (8) on the first place; next comes upper in society (7); next, with a wide margin, wealth and money (4); then power and outer objective associates (2 each).

Drawing upon the article by A.I. Nazarov and R.V. Sokolov, to be precise upon the introduced categories of associates, it is of major importance for us to outline the content, structure of elite and its characteristics therefore we will take only top three categories, i.e. associates characterizing its structure and content, its properties and outer characteristics and associates having direct and circumstantial relevance to the topic. Using the example of the group of Philosophy students, we will demonstrate the way to assign the number to the associates according to the logical remoteness from the basic characteristics of the concept. Such associates as finance, politics and upper class represent the place and the role of elite in society therefore we will refer them to the first category. Education, status, authority are more outer characteristics of elite and correspond with the second category. Such associates as crystal, village and beauty take a more remote position and their connection to the topic can be traced only with the help of some additional links and in this case we can speak of the specifics of an individual experience.

Finally, we arrive at some conclusions. Associative experiment is a specific form of reflection of such a social phenomenon as elite in social consciousness and public opinion. As we specified, it was conducted mainly in three institutes of Siberian Federal University in November 2014 and engaged 105 students.

Analysis of associates linked with the given category brought to light following key elements of the concept of elite in the given social group of respondents. It was established that associates wealth and money are significantly more widespread (37 responses) than all the others. The associate power follows it with 23 responses. Notably losing ground in mass perception and reflection in notions showed up education (17), outer objective associates (14) and privilege (16). Demonstration of exclusivity, upper in society and negative associates of elite should be designated to the third group of thematic associates. We allocate associates politics and government, neutral definitions, human qualities, intellect, lineage, authority into the fourth group of associates.

Associates of wealth, money, power and real levers of political influence in the society are linked with elite in social consciousness in the
first place taking into account a limited selection of respondents. Since the responses were given by those in university, owing to this fact they quite often linked elite to the associate of education. On the whole, the associates authority, the best, influence and positive sides of elite came last (14 – 17).

The dispersion of public opinions (associates) among students’ responses depending on their major (we dealt with mainly five specialisms) and gender is of some interest, too. These specific features were recorded above.

We will attempt to move over to practical conclusions. If we accept that these associates to a certain degree reflect the plausibility of the real status and the role of elite in our society then we have got to admit that it does not correspond with the strategic and tactic goals and aims of transformation of Russia from a lagging industrial society (over 50 % of the state budget is accounted for by raw materials sector of national economy) into post-industrial. It is fixated on itself, on self-sustainment and preservation of powers of authority. It essentially lacks passion and determination aimed at solving historic goals focused on metamorphosis of Russia into one of the leading and self-sufficient states in 21st century.

1 Nazarov, A.I. Association and Associative Experiment: Different Fate / A.I. Nazarov; R.V. Sokolov / Questions of Psychology. 2007. № 4. P. 126.