Breaking the iron law: Robert Michels, the rise of the mass party, and the debate over democracy and oligarchy

Peter Albert Lavenia, Jr.

University at Albany, State University of New York

Please share how this access benefits you.

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.library.albany.edu/legacy-etd

Part of the Political Science Commons

Recommended Citation
https://scholarsarchive.library.albany.edu/legacy-etd/382

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the The Graduate School at Scholars Archive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Legacy Theses & Dissertations (2009 - 2024) by an authorized administrator of Scholars Archive.

Please see Terms of Use. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@albany.edu.

By

Peter A. LaVenia, Jr.

A Dissertation
Submitted to the University at Albany, State University of New York in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Rockefeller College of Public Affairs and Policy
Department of Political Science
2011

By

Peter A. LaVenia, Jr.

Copyright 2011
Abstract

This is a reexamination of Robert Michels’ work *Political Parties: A Sociological Study Of The Oligarchical Tendencies of Modern Democracy* and its place in the debate over the rise and role of the mass political party in democracy and democratic thought. It examines Michels’ involvement with the German Social Democratic Party and the syndicalist faction around Georges Sorel’s *Le Mouvement Socialist*, as well as his friendship with Max Weber, and his experiences with socialist electoral politics that led him to write *Political Parties* and explore the nature of political parties and the tension between democracy and oligarchy within them. Time is given to refuting the charge that *Political Parties* is an anti-democratic work, instead showing that it is profoundly concerned with finding a democratic exit from the problem of oligarchy. Chapters are also devoted to the early twentieth century socialist movement and the debate over the mass strike between Kautsky, Luxemburg, Pannekoek, and the party orthodoxy; later chapters describe liberal writers such as Weber, James Bryce and Moishe Ostrogorski and their works on political parties and political machines. The dissertation shows that all groups were struggling with the ubiquity of political organizations and their relationship to democracy, and that a re-examination of the debate would help democratic theory and political science in understanding democracy and political parties in the contemporary era.
Acknowledgements

To those friends who have helped during this decade-long process, which many thought would never be done: Jeff Hilmer, Dan Halper, Martin Springfield, Kevin Sullivan, Robert Attardo, Claire McEwan, Matthew Willemain, Jane Pearson, Elizabeth Searle, Monica Mercado, Michael Welch, Loralynne Krobetzky, and to the countless others who have urged, nudged, and pushed me along the path of completion.

To my professors, Peter Breiner, Morton Schoolman, Bruce Miroff, John G. Gunnell, and many others who took the time to read, critique, and guide my dissertation to its completion.

To the countless political campaigns I have worked on in the last decade, and to completing the dissertation while co-chair of the Green Party of New York State. Working alongside activists committed to justice like Ralph Nader, Howie Hawkins, Mark Dunlea, Gloria Mattera, Alice Green, Michael O’Neil, Rebecca White, and the others who have given me the courage to continue in the face of adversity.

To my parents and siblings: Michelle and Peter A. LaVenia, Sr., Andrew and Melissa LaVenia, who never ceased believing in me – as much as they may have doubted me at times – and gave me the inspiration to finish this work.

To family and friends who were with me at the beginning, but are no longer here at the end: Roman Rog, Lesley Grapka, Derek Benham – you are loved and missed, and your kind thoughts and words were in my mind as I completed this tome.

To all those people working to build an equitable, democratic and socialist future whether now or later – the debate uncovered in this work shows how far we have come, and how far we have yet to go.
Introduction

Robert Michels’ work, *Political Parties: A Sociological Study Of The Oligarchical Tendencies of Modern Democracy*, is a classic in the field of political science, and widely regarded as one of the founding texts of the elite school of democratic thought. Most contemporary scholarship, when it does acknowledge Michels, credits him with the “iron law of oligarchy,” which describes the tendency for all political organizations, especially political parties, to become closed bodies dominated by a virtually irremovable hierarchy. It is my contention, and that of this dissertation, that both *Political Parties* and Michels’ own intentions with the work need to be re-evaluated, and that the larger debate over democracy, oligarchy, and the rise of the mass political party that took place in the early twentieth century is also worth re-examining for political science, and especially democratic thought. The debate between socialists and liberals over the relationship between the mass party and democracy, which arose in the broader context of potential socialist revolution against liberal capitalism, provided a fertile ground in which to discuss issues of mass democracy, the relationship between parliaments and extra-parliamentary mass actions, party elite and base, and the potential for reform in a system dominated by party electoral machines. The mass party debate asked important and difficult questions about modern democracy that remain relevant to politics, and especially to a political science where democratic thought either tends toward minimalist theories that reduce democracy to electoral competition and deliberative democrats, who tend to focus on discussion as the core of democracy. Within the mass party debate there were not only more robust arguments over the nature
of democracy, but also answers more based in and relevant to politics, as the majority of the participants were both intellectuals and political actors themselves.

**Background and Structure of the Work**

Robert Michels outlined his argument in the classic work *Political Parties: A Sociological Study of the Oligarchical Tendencies of Modern Democracy*. Michels argues "...in modern party life aristocracy gladly presents itself in democratic guise, whilst the substance of democracy is permeated with aristocratic elements." As a Social Democratic activist in Wilhelmine Germany, Michels wished to see a socialist transformation of society. Yet, as his work in *Political Parties* attests, he was one of many that doubted the revolutionary credentials of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and had begun to see it as a mere electoral party machine controlled by an oligarchic leadership. This was part of a larger trend of mass electoral parties in Europe and North America; contemporaries of Robert Michels like James Bryce, Moisei Ostrogorski, Friedrich Engels, and Max Weber first observed the development of the political machine during the 1890s. Their descriptions of the rise of the mass political machine were tied to their understanding of the rise of bureaucratic, mass industrial capitalism and the extension of universal male suffrage in most European and North American nations. Weber, Ostrogorski, Bryce, Engels, and eventually writers such as Luxemburg, Kautsky, Pannekoek and Sorel (and of course Michels) saw the patterns of contemporary capitalist life mimicked within the mass party; of course their reaction and thoughts on potential solutions depended on what they envisioned the role of the mass party to be, and their understanding of democracy and democratization.

---

Michels’ study is an attempt to come to grips with what may be a tendency within human cultures to hierarchical, entrenched oligarchies in every organization above a certain size. If Marxists of his era, who claimed to be pursuing the utmost freedom for humanity, suffer from the same ills as every other party, then it is likely an endemic trait in all organizations. Leaders such as Bebel and Kautsky were able to control and influence the party through the subservience of the masses of party members who are “really delighted to find persons who will take the trouble to look after its affairs… in the mass… there is an immense need for direction and guidance.”\(^2\) A leadership clique had, through seeming inertia and control over the levers of power, grown increasingly prominent and difficult to dislodge as they ignored or stifled internal dissent.

Michels also realized that, in the modern era, political parties must become mass organizations in order to win power through elections or even through a revolution. Given that “the modern party is a fighting organization in the political sense of the term, and must as such conform to the laws of tactics... a fighting party needs a hierarchical structure.”\(^3\) The difference between success and failure in the era of mass parties is consistent mobilization of loyal party members and voters. This requires a stable bureaucracy of propagandists and secretaries; power over the staff (which requires fundraising as well) is usually entrusted to a competent leadership. As party influence expands the leadership becomes better known for its success with the base, and thus is less likely to be replaced. Indeed, this is often an argument against term limits in parliamentary bodies; why replace experience with novices? Rapid turnover and term limiting are not discussed by the masses or leadership; the leadership overtly or tacitly

\(^2\) Ibid, 88.
\(^3\) Ibid, 78.
wants to retain power and the masses are happy to let them, even if they occasionally grumble.

Over the years, Michels has often been grouped together with Gaetano Mosca, Vilfredo Pareto, and Max Weber as theorists of elite behavior in democracy; this, however, is a mistake. Unlike Mosca and Pareto, Michels’ work was a fervent attempt to find a way out of the oligarchic trap. The last few sections of *Political Parties* look at those potential options: direct referendums, syndicalism, and anarchism. Michels was not satisfied with any of them, while acknowledging that Mosca and Pareto had come to terms with perpetual aristocratic and oligarchic rule, he attempted to find a way around the permanent ruling class described in Mosca’s thesis⁴. At the end of his work, however, Michels sounds a slightly more optimistic note:

“The democratic currents of history resemble successive waves. They break ever on the same shoal. They are ever renewed. This enduring spectacle is simultaneously encouraging and depressing.”⁵⁶

Michels’ work is thus a stepping-stone to the larger debate over the issues of democracy, oligarchy, and the mass party within the context of the SPD. The first decade of the twentieth century saw the German Social Democratic Party expanding its reach, influence, and vote totals, and for many it was a sure sign of the coming success of socialism and inevitable decline of capitalism. Party leaders like Karl Kautsky and August Bebel believed that the path to socialism was through a socialist majority in parliament; any street actions or revolution would merely be a response to the declining capitalist class, not instigated by the socialists. Left-wing party dissidents such as Michels, Rosa Luxemburg, and Karl Kautsky, however, were dismayed by the party’s

---

⁴ Ibid, 342.
⁵ Ibid, 371.
⁶ In some ways, this looks very much like Wolin’s description of “the political”. 
adherence to a strictly legal, parliamentary path. During the first decade of the twentieth century a debate over party tactics, specifically over the mass political strike, was part of an overarching debate over party tactics and the problems involved with turning a mass electoral organization into a revolutionary force, regardless of its ideology. Luxemburg and Kautsky sparred over the party’s lukewarm support for a series of political strike waves in Germany, with Luxemburg eventually deciding that the party, as important as it was, had a leadership that stood in the way of potentially democratizing the German state and even socialist revolution. The debate over the mass strike identified one of the main problems within electoral politics, especially for radicals and socialists: while parties and strong organization allowed for the proletariat to win victories against capitalism and capitalist forces, it also constrained the organization by focusing its efforts on expanding its voting block and away from potential mass street actions with their high risk, high reward strategy. It boiled down to whether the party and its decisions were democratic, and whether the leadership was responsive to the masses – and whether it should be – and how the party should react to extra-parliamentary protests. Socialists were caught between admiring the success of the movement in electoral politics and the effect of the mass party on their own goals. Thus the importance of the SPD and the mass strike debate to the question of mass political parties was: it was Michels’ focus in Political Parties and his activist work; the party was verbally committed to socialist democracy, i.e. both economic and political democracy and the abolition of classes; and the larger political debates within the party masked the fact that the intellectual debate the actors had was largely over the same issues as those contained within Political Parties.
Conversely, the liberal dilemma centered on the rise of the political electoral machine and the problems it posed for both the individual political actor and the political leadership itself. Bryce and Weber were concerned with the rising bureaucracy and the appearance of, as Weber would describe in “Politics As a Vocation,” leaders who lived by and not for politics. Other liberals, such as Moisei Ostrogorski, saw democratic potential in various reform movements against machine politics. Yet, like Michels, their works were linked by a common understanding of the problems inherent in centralized party machinery, unlike the socialists, who identified their own movement with the success of the socialist political party. Liberals were able to clearly see the issues, and the potential that partial reforms could presage a greater victory against the machine— which most socialists did not see—but their prescriptions for what ailed the electoral system were perhaps less realistic than their socialist counterparts. Still liberals, like those involved in the socialist debate, were intensely involved with what they saw as the key question of modern politics: the rise of the mass political party.

Finally, in the contemporary period, the mass party debate has been pushed to the side as democratic theory has embraced minimalist or deliberative democratic thought. Minimalist democracy bypasses the problems of oligarchy and party politics by identifying democracy solely with party competition and nothing more; deliberative democrats see the essence of democracy in discussions between citizens and the institutions created for deliberation. Neither deal directly with the issues involved with the mass party debate. Yet, the problems of the mass party debate have a bearing on political theory and politics itself, for real-world political struggles still center around the very issues of the mass party debate, even as the debate and the terms of the debate are
ignored within political science. Thus the stage is set for a revival of Robert Michels and
the debate over the mass party question.

Chapter 1 examines the life and intellectual background of Robert Michels, and
provides context for the development of Political Parties and the mass party debate. This
chapter sets up my argument that Michels wrote Political Parties while he was still a
syndicalist and socialist, and that the work was related to his earlier writings in
syndicalist journals critiquing the German Social Democratic Party. It also presents a
thesis that the text, which has been held up to be a founding document in elite theories of
democracy, is actually an attempt by a partisan of socialist democracy, albeit a
pessimistic one, to find a way out of the problems contained within modern electoral
politics.

Chapter 2 takes a close look at the text of Political Parties itself. Here we look at
the often-contradictory elements of the work, as there is a constant tension within
between elite control and passivity of the masses, and the possibility of revolt. I compare
how the work is described in classic analyses by James Burnham, Arthur Mitzman, and
David Beetham, and find that the text and Robert Michels’ own political tendencies when
the work was written was not that of a socialist-turned-conservative, but rather a
pessimistic socialist academic. Michels concludes the work with an examination of
potential remedies for oligarchy and the mass party, and never stops searching for a
potential path to democracy. This sets up Michels and his work at the center of the
debate going on in liberal and socialist circles over the mass political party.

Chapter 3 is a deep look into the argument within the socialist movement,
especially the German Social Democratic Party (SPD), over the role of the party in
bringing about socialist revolution and democracy. It focuses on the question of the mass strike, within which was contained the larger questions of party elite vs. mass control, the role of the party as a revolutionary or anti-democratic force, and the potential for reform within the organization against the need for extra-organizational pressure to change the functioning of the organization. Since Michels was embedded within this debate, and *Political Parties* was largely about the functioning of the SPD, this is a crucial debate to examine both for the conclusions of the authors involved, but also for the role of the SPD as the preeminent electoral party in Europe. I examine the writings of Rosa Luxemburg, Karl Kautsky, Anton Pannekoek, Georges Sorel, and Hubert Lagardelle in this chapter.

Chapter 4 is a look at the liberal discussion on the rise of the mass party and political machines. The writings of Max Weber, James Bryce, and Moisei Ostrogorski are examined especially. Here I attempt to explain why the liberals had a more thorough understanding and examination of the mass party phenomenon, and the potential reform movements, but were perhaps more utopian in their solutions than the socialists. Care is taken to link Robert Michels and his work with the other sociologists of the era, especially his friend and mentor, Max Weber.

Chapter 5 is the concluding chapter, and an attempt to explain the relevance of the mass party debate to democratic thought of the current era. Here I discuss the rise of Schumpeterian minimalist theories of democracy and their main contemporary counterpart, deliberative democracy. I explain that the relevance of the mass party debate and re-examination of the conclusions reached by its authors is in the continued parallels between it and real-world political struggles, which are not well explained by either
minimalism or deliberative democracy. The rehabilitation of the debate would add a needed voice to democratic theory and a program of study.

Chapter 1: Robert Michels and Political Parties

Introduction

Robert Michels (1876-1936) was many things during his life: a committed revolutionary, social scientist, and eventually an apologist for the Mussolini regime. He is most famously known as the author of Political Parties: A Sociological Study Of The Oligarchical Tendencies of Modern Democracy, as a colleague of Max Weber’s, and with Gaetano Mosca (1858-1941), Georges Sorel (1847-1922) and Vilfredo Pareto [1848-1923], as part of a school of mostly Italian writers that Mosca, apologizing for the neologism, termed ‘a-democratic.’” I wish to argue that the orthodox interpretations of Michels and his scholarly path: either that of a romantic revolutionary whose disillusionment with politics led him to adopt the cynical stance of a-democratic sociology and then fascist-sympathizer or as that of syndicalist critic whose intellectual development logically led becoming an elite theorist are incomplete and that there is a more coherent way to view him as a person, political actor, and scholar. We should instead view Michels as: a model for Max Weber’s category of the Gesinnungsethiker, the political actor who follows an “ethics of conviction” rather than an “ethics of responsibility” (Verantwortungsethik), an originator of a type of revolutionary pessimism, and as someone who developed a unique version of syndicalist analysis into which he incorporated theories of a permanent ruling elite. Likewise I want to argue that

---

8 This revolutionary pessimism may or may not follow a strictly Marxist path, but still accepts basic tenets of political socialism and its world-view. I want to emphasize that these thinkers are still revolutionary but unconvincing of the probability of successful revolution.
seeing Michels in a more historically grounded and lends itself to reinterpretation of 
*Political Parties* and his theories on oligarchy, one that sees a subtext of revolt and 
democratic potential contained within the overt structure of that work and his later 
writeings. We will focus on reinterpreting Michels as a theorist in this chapter, and then 
move on to a detailed look at *Political Parties* in the next.

**Michels and His Intellectual Development**

In order to (re)interpret the intellectual work of an author we must be apprised of 
the major influences in their development as thinkers. In the case of Robert Michels 
these influences are:

1. His early life in Cologne.
2. Involvement in European socialist and syndicalist circles.
3. His intellectual relationship with Max Weber.
4. The elite theories of Mosca and Pareto.

These elements are often interpreted as constituting separate and definite stages of 
Michels’ life; the romantic revolutionary, Weberian protégé, and eventually the elite-
theorist-cum-fascist. Arthur Mitzman saw him as transforming from an idealistic radical 
into a disillusioned academic. David Beetham, the most sympathetic to a view of an 
organic evolution in Michels’ thought instead of definitive breaks, still views him as 
growing from a syndicalist to an elite theorist from 1907-11, and then from elite theorist 
to fascist sympathizer from that period until the end of his life. A major problem with a 
theory of definitive breaks in any thinker’s life is that we can rarely point to a place at 
which their theorizing takes such a turn. Nor is it normal for a person to completely 
abandon ideas they had previously developed over the course of long and rigorous 
struggle; this may make for a good if simplistic summary of a person’s thought, but it is
rarely connected very deeply to the complexity of a theorist’s writings. So it is with Michels; his work shows common themes and threads from his early writings as a syndicalist through Political Parties and even into his later period as an Italian patriot. Most commentators have grasped his disillusion with the German Social Democratic Party, which is patent and overt, but even those who contextualize his disillusionment within the historical context struggle to do much more than explain why he chose to incorporate Mosca and Pareto into his theorizing except as part of an evolutionary process away from Marxism and his colleague Max Weber’s conception of social science. Instead of arguing thusly, I propose that we examine the four sources of Michels’ intellectual theories as mutually existing, reinforcing and contributing to him as Weberian conviction politician, esoteric syndicalist, and pessimistic revolutionary, starting with his childhood and moving towards the publication of Political Parties.

Michels’ Development

Michels’ early life betrays the origins of his “ethics of conviction,” especially his anti-authoritarian and pacifist streak which was to follow him until his death. He was born in the Rhineland to parents of Franco-German-Belgian background; his cosmopolitan heritage seems to have lent itself to his ease in moving through European socialist circles and later in his identification with his adopted Italian homeland. His great-grandfather, Mathias, built a prosperous textile business during the Napoleonic wars, and his grandfather Peter Michels “played a prominent role in civic and political life, as evidenced by his representing the interests and sentiments of Cologne’s

---

9 Witness the debate in the mid-twentieth century after the publication of the Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts and the Grundrisse over the “early” and “late” Marx, which is rendered moot when we see that Marx never abandoned his hypotheses on alienation but rather incorporated them into his later economic writings.

10 He was born in Cologne.
bourgeoisie to King Friedrich Wilhelm IV of Prussia in 1848.”

Michels’ father received close to 1 million marks from Peter Michels in the 1870s or 80s, and this probably helped fund Robert’s studies at the French Gymnasium in Berlin, his travels as a young man to England, Paris, Munich, and eventually Leipzig in 1897 to study and complete his dissertation. Interestingly, he had a brief stint during 1895 in the Imperial Germany Army’s Grand Duke of Saxony regiment, but “disgusted by the cruelties practiced on recruits in the Prusso-German Army he threw up his officers’ commission and decided to devote himself to an academic career.” This clearly colored his later anti-militarism.

Michels’ family history comes to us largely from his autobiographical writings, but it is worth noting the influence that being bourgeois and of Franco-German-Belgian descent in the Rhineland must have had on him as a political thinker and actor. The Rhineland had been absorbed into the French empire during the Napoleonic wars and remained in French hands until 1814; afterwards its proximity to France, Catholicism and more modern class structure meant it was out of step with aristocratic Prussian,

---

11 Linz, Robert Michels, 6.
12 Peter Michels was a member of the Cologne chamber of commerce and “the goal of the men in this trade group was ‘the struggle against the absolutist Prussian bureaucratism, which wanted to curtail the rights of this old French institution, and to subject it to the regime… in order to reduce it to complete insignificance.’” Clearly Peter Michels, if not a radical revolutionary, at least represented the progressive struggle of the bourgeoisie in the Rhineland against Prussian Junker bureaucratism. Arthur Mitzman, Sociology and Estrangement, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1973), 273.
13 Linz, Robert Michels, 7.
14 Linz states that Michels’ dissertation was completed under the direction of Johann Gustav Droysen on Louis XIV’s 1680 incursion into Holland.
Protestant, Junkerdom. Both Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels also hailed from the Rhineland; Marx from Trier and Engels from Barmen, and like Engels Michels was the son of a wealthy textile manufacturer and eventually a revolutionary socialist. Given their domination by Prussia it should come as no surprise that many of their Rhenish subjects were staunch antimilitarists – though their cultural connection with France may have helped this as well. Indeed “in 1870 the letters of Peter Michels to his son Julius revealed ‘honest and unconcealed fear’ before the prospect of war despite the fact that the war would certainly be good for his textile business… In 1880 the four-year-old Robert Michels found a box of wooden soldiers representing the Prussian and Austrian armies in his grandmother’s storeroom, and was informed by his aunts that such playthings were wicked and had been hidden on that account. ‘That was the mood which, some fourteen years after the end of the ’66 war, still ruled in the house of Michels.’”

Peter Michels, and likely other bourgeois citizens of Cologne, must have been quite conscious that the final consolidation of the German state under Bismarck and Prussia during the Franco-Prussian war would do nothing good for Rhenish freedom or bourgeois power vis-à-vis the aristocracy. Still, the antimilitarist tendency bordering on pacifism in Robert Michels’ socialist and syndicalist writings and agitation clearly have some basis in his childhood in Cologne; the fierce ethics of his family and the citizenry of Cologne in stubbornly resisting the Prussian mores permeating much of the rest of German society molded the young Michels.

After his travels and completion of his education, Michels settled in Turin for a year in 1900. While there he helped found a small arts magazine, La Commedia, and

---

17 And, incidentally, as noted previously Michels served in the military as did Engels.
18 Mitzman, Sociology, 274-275.
managed to author a number of articles glorifying the Italian proletariat.\textsuperscript{19} Clearly his stay in Italy had an effect, as he was to return in 1907 and eventually chose to make it his elective country for the rest of his life. While there he made some contact with the Italian Socialist Party.\textsuperscript{20} This was a sign of the direction in which his thoughts were headed, because his most famous period of revolutionary agitation would take place over the next few years, after he had returned to Germany and become a committed member of the German Social Democrats, and which would provide him with experiences which he would describe within \textit{Political Parties}.

It is problematic to mechanically link youthful experiences with a thinker’s later output; it is also unnatural to divorce those experiences from all impact. As a native of Cologne, Michels would have absorbed fully the impact of political and cultural domination the Rhineland felt at the expense of Prussia. Domination, whether political, organizational, cultural, or psychological, would come to play a recurring role in his writings. This is true from his early, more reformist writings through his adoption of syndicalism and association with Max Weber (who explicitly urged his study of domination). His criticism of the German academic system would see professors cast as exploited wage slaves at the mercy of the Prussian bureaucracy. In addition, his peripatetic life defined his early adulthood until he came to rest for half a decade in Marburg. Like many of his fin-de-siècle intellectual comrades, he was at home across Europe due to his heritage, travels, and rejection of the dominant Prussian culture within

\textsuperscript{19} Mitzman, \textit{Sociology}, 281.
\textsuperscript{21} He first became a Socialist party member in Italy, and remained in personal touch with many of the PSI leaders after his return to Germany, while also writing frequently for the syndicalist journal \textit{Il Divenire Sociale}.” \textit{Ibid.}, 5.
Germany; this internationalism is overt within his socialist writings but also his ability to analyze the entirety of the European situation. Finally, the last of the traits we can identify from his youth have already been mentioned: antimilitarism and a commitment to ethical values, which manifested in his commitment to socialism. His stay in Marburg would find Michels’ developing these traits in deeper and more sophisticated directions.

Marburg

Michels returned to Germany in the fall of 1901, specifically to the town of Marburg in the state of Hesse, a region near the center of the country. He had seemingly hoped to begin a career teaching at the University of Marburg, but was refused a permanent position due to his membership in the Italian Socialist Party. At this point Michels’ writings identify him as a cautious, but nonetheless committed, socialist. Indeed, between 1901 and 1907 Michels had two primary occupations centered on both of these: that of a socialist agitator and as a young adjunct lecturer (Dozent) at the university. Still, being a socialist agitator paid nothing and that of an adjunct close to nothing, so Michels had to find other sources of funding. Apparently his primary income came from nearly 200 articles written mostly for the journals like Das Freie Wort, Ethische Kultur, Weber’s Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik, and numerous socialist papers.

Indeed, his first two articles for Ethische Kultur lay bare the driving passions that would consume the rest of Michels’ life: the first attacked the German university for its hypocrisy in not hiring the more idealistic socialist intellectuals, and the second delivered

---

22 Mitzman, Sociology, 283.
23 Ibid., 283.
24 Linz, Robert Michels, 7.
25 Mitzman, Sociology, 283.
a stinging criticism of academia as bound to the need to specialize so that the academic could monopolize their chosen area and acquire the greatest return on the intellectual capital they have invested. Force of conviction coupled with materialist analysis – the journey of Michels would find him, as Weber would later observe, unwilling to divorce personal mores and convictions from his research and desired outcomes. It is striking how clearly this thread continued to the end of his life, and how clearly it links Michels and his writings through his various periods.

These articles also chronicle Michels’ journey from the cautious socialist of 1901, to revolutionary syndicalist in 1904, and his ostensible drift away from socialism and syndicalism by 1907, and finally the development of the iron law of oligarchy and the foundations for *Political Parties*. Therefore it is worth examining his parallel but intertwined experiences as a socialist activist and a budding intellectual. His interaction with great socialists of the era like Luxemburg, Bebel, and Kautsky represent one side of this; his growing relationship with the outstanding German intellectual of the era, Max Weber, the other.  

Michels’ socialist writings from 1901-03 display a transformation from that of cautious socialist to revolutionary syndicalist. What underlies them, again, is something Weber would later come to criticize and is evident in Michels’ hypotheses in *Political Parties*: that his underlying argument is made on the basis of ethics and ethical concerns. While his early writings praise the Italian socialists for “directing the movement ‘into quiet, worthy, legal paths’” by 1903 he is railing against revisionism within the SPD and stating that “only through a class struggle that is tightly bound to intransigent unspoiled

---

26 Of course, his action as a socialist prevented him from becoming a professor in Germany, which led him to leave for Italy and eventually association with anti-socialists such as Mosca and Pareto.
[unverkümmt] mental goals can the socialism of the ethicist be brought about.”

Michels’ reliance on his own conception of socialist ethics differed from that of Bernstein’s Kantianism that had led Bernstein to revisionism and “evolutionary socialism”; it was instead that of an uncompromising zealot for socialism. It was not that Michels rejected the doctrine of scientific socialism had been enshrined in the SPD’s 1891 Erfurt Programme (as Bernstein had), but rather that he felt compelled to make normative arguments for socialism’s success, and eventually that of direct democracy vis-à-vis political representation, and from 1903 until at least 1907 this meant a policy of no compromises for the sake of lesser goals than the revolution – something at variance with the official policies of the party.

What seems to have shaken his confidence in the SPD and its official rhetoric occurred in 1903: there was a “five-cornered election to the Reichstag… [that] led to a run-off between Helmuth von Gerlach, a National Social follower of Friedrich Naumann and the only candidate of his party with a chance at being elected, and a Conservative. The National Social party stood for Demokratie und Kaisertum (democracy and monarchy), opposed both Junkers and revolution, and espoused a social program that aimed at drawing workers away from socialism. Under the influence of a group of intellectuals, among them Michels, the local Marburg SPD organization, conforming to the 1902 Munich party congress which instructed members to support only candidates who were against increased military spending, called on socialists to abstain, since von Gerlach was not against it. This would have handed victory to the Conservative. The SPD party organ Vorwärts, however, called on socialists to vote for von Gerlach since his position on tariffs, an issue affecting the price of bread and therefore of great importance to the working class, was preferable to that of his opponent. An SPD deputy and friend of von Gerlach’s, Wolfgang Heine, informed him of the Vorwärts note, and, strengthened by this support, von Gerlach won the election.

Typically the editors of Vorwärts had the blessing of the party’s central committee, or at least were seen as their mouthpiece. The decision to go behind the back of the Marburg local, as well as violate the rules of the previous year’s party congress, must have been a rude shock to Michels. The party was willing to sacrifice its principles and

27 Mitzman, Sociology, 283.
28 Linz, Robert Michels, 8; see also Mitzman, Sociology, 287-8.
29 Vorwärts was the German Social Democratic Party’s main daily paper and as such its editorial endorsements reflected the views of the leadership of the party in most instances.
democratic process for the possibility that a more favorable vote might be obtained in the Reichstag on grain tariffs. It seems probable that this incident propelled Michels to the far left of the socialist movement and into the arms of syndicalists like Sorel, Lagardelle, and Labriola within the year, and created the germ of dissatisfaction that would end up in his blistering critiques of the SPD. Michels and the Marburg organization managed to garner the support of Bebel, a founder of the SPD and perhaps the most influential party member. In fact

“in a letter to Michels, he [Bebel] supported the Marburg local party organization and asked that the question be brought up at the 1903 Dresden congress. On that occasion Michels, with the support of the members of the Marburg party organization, 80 to 3, presented a censure motion against Wolfgang Heine, whom he rebuked for having meddled in the internal affairs of the local party in favor of a political opponent who was a personal friend of his. As for Heine’s assertion in Vorwärts that he had ‘wanted the party to avoid making a fool of itself,’ Michels asked how complying with the resolutions of a party congress could be thought of as making a fool of oneself.”

What happened next seems to have been a defining moment in Michels’ political and intellectual journey. Bebel spoke and made a long, trenchant attack on the revisionists. Michels was to speak immediately afterwards, and given the fervor Bebel had whipped up, it was likely that the censure motion would carry easily. Many of the most prominent radicals in the party like Rosa Luxemburg, Arthur Stadthagen, and Georg Ledebour encouraged Michels in his speech to deliver the hammer blow against the revisionists.

Yet Michels’ hesitated; in his diary he wrote: “There was no question: the fate of Germany Social Democracy, perhaps even much more, was at stake.” He feared that an acceptance of the censure motion after a provocative speech by him would probably split

---

30 Linz, Robert Michels, 8.
31 See Linz, Robert Michels, 8, or Mitzman, Sociology, 288.
32 Linz, Robert Michels, 8.
the party, something his conscience apparently would not let him do. Surprisingly he instead

“Made an emotional appeal against suspiciousness, ‘which kills all life,’ and for ‘unity and brotherhood.’ He gave his motives for the last-minute change of heart in his diary: Two reasons compelled me to be cautious. Given my youth, I felt I could not become responsible for the exclusion of so many outstanding men. Moreover, I considered it ungenerous to take advantage of the hatred that the so-called radicals felt for the revisionists (their spiritual and intellectual superiors), a hatred that was not always devoid of personal motives, even if its purpose was of a higher order.”

In another excerpt from his writings, Michels relates how he felt immediately after Bebel’s speech:

“The mass of delegates, after Bebel’s speech, were completely in tumult, incapable of any serious reflection. It was in a position to become the booty of the first one who, with heightened wrath, would have agreed with the great agitator.”

His actions here are an indicator of his internal motivation, although they are initially quite confusing. Michels initiated the motion of censure against Heine; why then speak against it? The complaint had a clear logic to it: Michels was concerned with the blatant disregard Heine had for binding decisions the party had made at its last congress, the move to undercut local democracy and decision-making, and also with the reformism inherent in the decision to back von Gerlach. Yet Michels clearly understood, from an ethical and logical standpoint, why he was asking for censure and what he hoped to accomplish with it: reorientation of the party and its leadership toward its goals as a revolutionary socialist party. The delegates whipped into frenzy by Bebel had no such clear convictions. If the party were to censure Heine, and the reformists, it should do so with a goal towards reforming its own procedures; Bebel seized upon it as a way to bludgeon internal critics instead.

---

33 The motion did carry, though it did not end in the purge against revisionists that Michels had feared. See Schorske, 24.
34 Linz, Robert Michels, 8-9.
The event also likely had an impact on Political Parties as Michels here saw quite clearly the effects of political organization on mass psychology, which would return as a crucial component of the iron law of oligarchy. His initial anger at the actions of Heine was dwarfed by revulsion he felt at the unthinking hatred the party had against the revisionists. Clearly he feared an unprincipled purge of dissidents, even if he might have agreed with a principled and logically argued punishment of Heine for violating party bylaws. Yet the entire process, from the Marburg election to the Dresden congress, imprinted on Michels the issues with which he would struggle as a syndicalist and theorist of elite control:

1. The affect of party organization and obedience of the masses to said authority.
2. The tendency of mass electoral organizations to sacrifice ideological principles for short-term gains.
3. The level of grassroots democracy and decentralization a successful mass political party can tolerate.

**The Road to Syndicalism**

Michels moved quickly after the Dresden congress to a position at variance with both the revisionist and revolutionary critics within the SPD towards a theory of radical syndicalism. While the orthodox Marxists of the Second International adhered to a formulation of Marxism that was linear and believed that capitalism would inevitably collapse mostly of its own accord, perhaps with only a slight push from a growing working class, syndicalists argued:

“Against the economic determinism of the latter and its doctrine of inevitable capitalist collapse (the ‘lazy revolution’), they insisted that the opportunity for socialist transformation could only be grasped by a working class trained in the continuous exercise of revolutionary energy through strike action and political agitation at the place of work. To identify the ‘syndicat’ rather than the party as the main instrument of class organization and socialist change did not entail the pursuit of merely economic goals or piecemeal improvement; they insisted on a further contrast between ‘trade unionism’ of the British or German type
and ‘revolutionary syndicalism’, with its conception of the general strike as an essentially political weapon.”

Syndicalism addressed two of Michels’ primary theoretical concerns, as it placed responsibility for action squarely on the shoulders of individual members of the working class and decentralized local “syndicats” or unions instead of a party executive, as well as placing emphasis on direct struggle and confrontation for political aims, rather than winning seats in parliament. Michels had been friends with the Italian unorthodox Marxists Arturo Labriola and Enrico Leoni since 1902 and this had reinforced his attempts to break out from party orthodoxy, but it was his growing ties with the French syndicalist group centered around Georges Sorel, Hubert Lagardelle, Edouard Berth, Paul Delesalle, and Victor Griffuelhes and their journal, *Le Mouvement Socialiste*, that solidified his intellectual conversion to syndicalism by 1904.

In his first article for *Le Mouvement Socialiste* Michels “identified a process of political atrophy within the German party behind its façade of revolutionary rhetoric… the chief weakness of the party, he argued, lay in its emphasis on Parliament as the exclusive arena for socialist political action. Increasing its electoral support became the supreme aim of the party, with the result that its socialist principles were dangerously compromised in order to accommodate ‘even the most reactionary sections of German opinion’.” The SPD had decided since the expiration of the anti-Socialist laws in 1890 to pursue an electoral course, which proved successful in expanding the party’s vote in

---

36 Beetham, “From Socialism to Fascism,” 10.
38 Lagardelle was a colleague Michels’ at the *Nouvelle Universite* in Brussels, at which Michels taught courses in 1905 and 1906.
40 Beetham, “From Socialism To Fascism,” 6.
41 Which had officially banned the party, although it allowed members to run as independent candidates, from 1878-1890.
the Reichstag. Yet the Reichstag itself was a mostly impotent body in the face of the Kaiser and the state bureaucracy. Michels had duly noted that the world’s largest and most successful socialist party, which was held aloft as a model, had in the end chosen to pursue a course which gave it very little actual power, and whose executive committee actively shunned more physical tests of strength as the syndicalists wanted, which may have given it more real power if successfully pursued as a policy. Said Michels in this first article for *Le Mouvement Socialiste*:

“Whether the bourgeois concedes a few reforms or introduces a law against the socialists, are but two different aspects of the same struggle, which has for its goal the destruction of socialism… The real socialist power does not lie in Parliament, but with the masses.”

While Michels is likely technically correct, the complexities of the situation in which the Social Democrats found themselves did not make it easy to change course by 1904. The quasi-representative character of Germany’s legislatures at the time meant an inordinate amount of time was spent by the party on attempting to reform the franchise, where the socialists in Italy and France could focus more specifically on political and economic questions.

**Syndicalist Synthesis**

The syndicalism contained within Michels’ writings, as it developed, was not the same as those of his syndicalist peers. In it we find: an emphasis on the party as the dominant form of organization, the need for a quasi-communitarian ethics within socialism, and a realistic attempt to grapple with the problems of the general strike, the favorite concept of syndicalists to foment revolution. Michels’ syndicalism was an influence on his writings on organization, and it also differed from that of his French

---

42 *Le Mouvement Socialiste* (hereafter *MS*), no. 144, December 1904, 193-212.
43 Though Michels was aware that once elected the Italian socialists moved in a similar direction to the German by offering a policy of compromise with the bourgeoisie on many issues.
comrades’ in that he did not call for syndicalists to leave the party. I would argue this was because he saw very clearly the general thrust of political activity in the modern era was to center around the mass political party, and that no group could avoid at least engaging with that form of organization if it were to be at all politically successful. It was his own version of syndicalism which was to color *Political Parties*; because it was an idiosyncratic version of syndicalism later authors would see the work as a full break with syndicalism instead of the pessimistic critique of the dominant version of syndicalism he encountered in the writings of Lagardelle and within *Le Mouvement Socialiste*. Even in his last article for *Le Mouvement Socialiste* – written after the publication of *Political Parties* - he welcomed the idea syndicalism leading to a revival of the Social Democrats, even as he considered it an unlikely possibility:

‘The existence of a syndicalist faction within the party is an absolute necessity. For the party, since only this can guarantee it the preservation of any revolutionary potential. But also for the syndicalists, their presence in the party is equally vital… in Germany as in Italy, the abandonment of the party by the syndicalists would mean their annihilation. It is their duty to remain there and do everything in their power to ensure that ‘the socialist party becomes the organization of all the forces capable of creating a favorable environment for the proletarian struggle against the bourgeoisie.’”

Divorce from the party, for Michels, meant syndicalists and other radicals would become isolated from the mass party and from politics in general. Yet he tacitly points to another scenario in his chapter on the isolated anarchist radicals in *Political Parties*: they are forced to recreate the forms of domination they profess to hate in order to succeed, namely a *de facto* political party and eventually, the state. Perhaps, then, Michels was also arguing against splitting from the socialists of his era because he knew those radicals would end up building a new political party anyway, with similar failings as the SPD, but far weaker (if purer).

Additionally, Michels’ syndicalism was:

---

“To insist on the irreducibly ethical character of socialism. Common to all syndicalists was a concern to secure the exclusively proletarian character of the socialist movement. But Michels argued that the pursuit of their economic interests by the proletariat was not in itself enough to ensure socialism, since their actual situation involved them in all kinds of mutual antagonisms.”

While it would be easy to simply link this with Michels-as-conviction-politician, it is clear that Michels’ syndicalism was of a sophisticated variety and that his emphasis on ethics was, like his call for syndicalists to remain within the socialist parties, part of a more calculated assessment of the problems facing the socialist movement as a whole. *Political Parties* would raise the question of whether a revolution, if it ever came, would lead to a socialist democracy, if the party involved did not address the problems of organization and democracy beforehand. Michels realized that, simplistic ideas of working-class harmony aside, a socialist society would quickly have to come to terms with competing demands for scarce resources and that workers’ cooperatives and industry would bicker over their allocation. A well-developed sense of ethics and solidarity on that basis within the movement could mitigate the effects of resource competition even within a socialist economy. Michels’ syndicalism taps into the same communitarian root that other activists have in order to provide a basis for social cohesion.

Lastly, within his syndicalism Michels did not devolve into the voluntarist theories of his friend Sorel, either, as he accepted the need for a proper historical materialist analysis to guide the proletariat. There would be no truck with Sorel’s mythmaking, but Michels was constantly at pains to synthesize the syndicalist desire for offensive strikes by the working class at the point of production and the nuance any revolutionary party would have to show in its actions in non-revolutionary situations. Of

---

45 Beetham, Ibid., 10.
course this was always the question posed to revolutionary syndicalists like Michels and those on the left of the SPD like Luxemburg by centrists like Kautsky: how far should the party take offensive strikes or general strikes, and can a party call into being a revolt if the conditions are not necessarily there? What is the proper balance of training and small successes necessary to energize the proletariat and the party to make the revolution as conditions become riper? While he had no illusions a general strike in the same way his syndicalist colleagues did (though Weber would criticize what beliefs he did hold in it), he did see direct action as part of the process of mass involvement in politics, and as part of a way to sweep aside recalcitrant leaders within the SPD.

**Critique of the SPD Develops**

Michels’ syndicalist critiques of the Social Democrats centered on his anti-militarism and the question of the general strike, which accelerated the development of the criticisms of organization and mass psychology he would bring to fruition in the writing of *Political Parties*. The tepid efforts by the party to agitate against the pervasive militarism in Germany at the time were seen by Michels as a capitulation to bourgeois cultural values, though effective anti-militarist actions would have also likely meant state repression. Similarly the fundamental question of the era: the debate on the mass, or general, strike, nearly split the party and in the eyes of many radicals, including Michels showed how fundamentally the party had evolved into a vote-seeking entity rather than the radical socialist organization it claimed to be. The fact that the debate on the general strike occurred from 1905-6, coinciding with the height of Michels’ radical activities, helped him sharpen his conception of the party and his later rejection of alternatives.
The question of militarism was one of increasing importance to the socialist movement as the tensions between the great powers of Europe increased during the decade prior to the First World War. Yet the Germany Social Democrats did very little in the way of actively promoting anti-militarist actions. Karl Liebknecht, son of party founder Wilhelm and later leader of the 1919 Spartacus uprising, attempted to force the issue at the party congress in 1904, a congress Michels attended as a delegate from the Marburg party. Liebknecht:

“saw in militarism the basic and ultimate weapon of capitalism against the upsurge of Social Democracy. Building upon Engels’ idea that the success of a modern revolution was contingent on the conversion of the soldiers, he called upon the party to lift the fight for militarism out of the general agitation of Social Democracy for special, intensified treatment. Liebknecht felt that the place to begin the fight against militarism was among the youth before they were conscripted and subjected to militarist indoctrination. He urged the Bremen congress (1904) to authorize the development of an extensive anti-militarist propaganda among potential recruits. Liebknecht’s proposal was rejected by the party leaders as both impractical and unnecessary. The German courts, they said, would never tolerate anti-militarist agitation among the youth. The fight against militarism was being conducted indirectly through the propagation of socialism. Before the victory of socialism, the executive’s spokesman said, militarism could not be overthrown. While Liebknecht’s motion received a little support from the floor, his later recollection of its fate was essentially correct: it was ‘rejected with a certain amount of scornful laughter.’”

Michels:

“himself wrote a series of anti-militarist articles for the Volksstimme of Frankfurt at the time of the Morocco crisis in 1905, but was disgusted that he got so little support from other socialists. He had earlier suspected that the opposition to war within the party was a token affair only; in the event of war, he had written, they will publish a manifesto disclaiming responsibility and march against the enemy just the same.”

Which, of course, was exactly what happened in August of 1914. The Social Democratic party had been one of the few anti-war voices during the Franco-Prussian conflict of 1870-1, but by the Morocco crisis of 1905 the party had little will to vigorously campaign against militarism, especially when it was likely to lose them votes with the

47 Beetham, “From Socialism To Fascism,” 6.
48 The crisis that developed between Germany and the Entente Cordiale after France moved to claim Morocco as a protectorate, and the Kaiser made a speech in Morocco in favor of Moroccan independence. The Kaiser hoped to test the boundaries of the alliance between the U.K. and France but was forced to back down within a year as the British fully supported their French allies against the Germans.
middle class. For Michels, and for outside observers as well, this was a direct betrayal of fundamental socialist principles, but it also was a clear sign that the effects of electoral success meant that the party leadership was pushed in a conservative direction. Not only was the organization anxious of state repression if it acted too vigorously, but it feared the loss of voters thoroughly socialized into the militarist Germany of the Wilhelmine period. Critics of the SPD on the left and right could see the extreme gap between the party’s bellicose rhetoric and the timidity of its actions quite clearly.

For Michels the question of the general strike (or political mass strike) and the reaction of the Social Democratic leadership to the topic being broached by radicals and syndicalists within the party was the most vivid expression of the conservative effects of bureaucracy and organization. A tactic employed by socialists in Belgium in 1902 to win equal suffrage, in 1903 in the Netherlands to combat an anti-strike law, and by the Swedish Social Democrats to force a general suffrage bill through the Riksdag, the question of a general work stoppage with political ends in mind languished in Germany.\(^{49}\) The question of the general strike as a way to spur the development of the class struggle and the development of the working class’ political consciousness was discussed by luminaries such as Rudolf Hilferding and Rosa Luxemburg; the revisionist Eduard Bernstein pushed its use as a way to force the issue of universal suffrage. Michels’ syndicalist peers (the so-called localist trade unions) brought the question of the mass strike to the SPD congress in 1903 where it was soundly defeated, and again in 1904,

---

\(^{49}\) Schorske, *German Social Democracy*, 33.
where Berstein, Karl Liebknecht, and Klara Zetkin urged the party executive to put the
question on the agenda for the Jena congress in 1905.  

Events then intervened to push the question to the forefront: the Russian
Revolution in early 1905 and the brief success of the working class in using the tactic of
the general strike to wring political concessions from the Czar reinvigorated the debate,
especially as labor strikes in Germany came to a head during the same year. Two things
then occurred: the trades-union congress at Köln which denounced the general strike as
“indiscussible” and the SPD congress at Jena in September where the radicals won a
partial victory as party elder Bebel pushed for a resolution that added the general strike as
an endorsed party tactic, albeit for defensive purposes. Yet by the next year’s congress,
the trade unions and party executive had cut a deal, formally acknowledging the
independence of the trade unions from the SPD and that, somehow, the party resolution
on the general strike and the Köln resolution were compatible.

Michels:

“Attended in both years [Jena and Mannheim] and reacted bitterly to the experience. ‘The feeble embryo
of the general strike has been killed off,’ he wrote after Mannheim; ‘the remnants of Marxism have been
severely damaged, and socialism itself debased, despised, degraded to a life of boorish idleness.’ It was
about this time that he developed the thesis of ‘organization for organization’s sake’, which was to become
an important theme of Political Parties.”

His disgust at the degeneration of the Social Democrats moved forward with rapidity
after the 1905 and 1906 congresses. Michels continued his writing in various syndicalist
journals, becoming ever more vehement as he developed a theoretical insight into the

---

50 For all his close connections to French syndicalist leaders, Michels seems to have had little contact with
German syndicalists, and wrote only infrequently for Einigkeit, the organ of German syndicalism. Philip J.
51 Schorske, German Social Democracy, 35.
52 While this will be discussed in greater detail later, in essence the trade union bureaucracy was petrified
that the general strike tactic would lead to massive state repression and a proliferation of demands for
decentralized control over the unions, something they saw as anathema to their continued success.
53 Ibid, 51.
54 Beetham, “From Socialism To Fascism,” 7.
problems of German socialism, which he saw stemming from its cultural heritage and love of the new mass organization since it provided them with votes and electoral victories. His relationship with Sorel became closer and

“Michels vented his anger in emotional assaults on the Party, some published in French, apparently without being restrained by Sorel’s pointed warning: ‘The boycott practiced for ten years by the official socialists against everything I write will follow you.’ Unlike some of Sorel’s other prophecies, this one proved correct.”

Michels was a committed syndicalist, but his assessment of the party became sharply critical. During the crucial years of 1905 and 1906 another development in Michels’ life occurred: he met Max Weber and began to write for his journal, the Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik. In fact, Michels’ first piece was a pointed criticism of the SPD, as:

“On the political front, the first of Michels’s significant studies of the German Social Democrats was published in the Archiv’s September issue (1906b). Its publication, assisted by Weber, was really a political act, intended to coincide with the annual Party congress scheduled for Mannheim (AMW 8, May 21, 1906). The critique caused a stir, as Michels (and perhaps Weber) evidently hoped, and in the Mannheim debate Karl Legien and August Bebel declared Michels persona non grata for his syndicalist leanings. Citing Michels by name, Legien bluntly delivered the orthodox point of view: ‘The general strike is general nonsense’ (Protokoll 1906, p.246).”

The ethical syndicalist, the Gesinnungsethiker Michels, did not separate his intellectual analysis from the ends he desired here, or in future writings, something he would be criticized for by Max Weber. It is to Michels’ growing intellectual relationship with Weber that we now turn, as it is a crucially important piece in the development of Political Parties.

Michels and Weber

The partnership between Weber and Michels has been generally known at least since Marianne Weber published a biography of her husband in 1926, but it was known to their contemporaries in European and especially German academic and socialist circles

56 Ibid, 1270.
even before the First World War. Although Michels had written for the *Archiv* in 1905, the first record we have of their meeting is in 1906. Weber

“Dashed off a note to Robert Michels [on New Year’s Day], offering to meet him soon in Heidelberg. The invitation came shortly after publication of Michels’s first article in the *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Socialpolitik*, the influential journal coedited by Weber. Praising this analysis of socialism and citing his ‘uncommon interest’ in Michels’s ‘projected work,’ a reference to the research that led to *Zur Soziologie des Parteiwesens in der modernen Demokratie*…”

Weber was already a famous figure in German intellectual circles, and it is probable that his interest in the younger Michels’ academic work was quite flattering. The friendship that blossomed from the meeting was to impact Michels’ thinking in profound ways, leading to the writing of *Political Parties* and his eventual split from socialism. Although Weber was hardly sympathetic to socialism, he was convinced enough of Michels’ capabilities as a scholar to fight publicly for a spot for Michels at a German university, and then to publicly ridicule the German state for banning talented socialists from teaching simply because of their party affiliation. Eventually (1907) it was Weber that helped Michels attain a teaching position at the University of Turin. It was also Weber whose suggestions and criticism of Michels’ work in the *Archiv* led to a sharpening of Michels’ own criticisms of the Social Democrats. Eventually Weber turned editorship of the *Archiv* over to Michels for a few years prior to the First World War. Their relationship ended after Michels published an essay in the Swiss press in 1915 defending Italy’s entry into the First World War on the side of the Entente, but in an

---

57 Ibid.
58 Ibid, 1269.
59 Michels was only 30 at the time, Weber 42.
61 1913-1914.
62 Michels was then teaching at the University of Basel in Switzerland.
obituary after Weber’s death in 1920 Michels remembered their friendship quite fondly. Michels’ later writings show an attempt to merge his own thoughts, those of Weber, and the writings of Mosca and Pareto. In fact, Weber was so influential on Michels’ writing and thought that he dedicated the first German edition of *Political Parties* to him:

To his dear friend

MAX WEBER

In Heidelberg,

The upright

Who

As far as the interest of science demands it,

Does not balk at any vivisection

Dedicated with the greetings of a soul mate.  

It was Weber’s influence as a scholar and friend that led Michels into more rigorously academic studies of the European socialist movement aside from the syndicalist diatribes he was writing for *Le Mouvement Socialiste* and other socialist journals of the era. Along with the critiques provided to him via his syndicalism, this can be seen in some of the broad categories Michels began to investigate:

1. How the structure of modern political movements affected their membership.
2. Whether or not the increase in bureaucratization was inevitable, and what the effects of this would be on the political systems in which the parties operated.
3. The effects of culture on mass participation and the potential for conservatism on the part of a (revolutionary) party’s leadership.

In fact, Weber had given a brief presentation on a potential future study of the Social Democrats in 1905 prior to meeting Michels, and it is logical to think that this helped

---

63 This appears in the first German edition of *Political Parties*, published in 1911.
guide Michels as he became increasingly concerned with the sociological questions of political parties, bureaucratization, and oligarchy. We see that:

“Webber’s presentation called attention to some research questions, such as the formal features of modern party organizations of Anglo-Saxon parties and that of the German Social Democratic Party, and finally, the relations between the organization of this party and other party or union organizations, and the party electorate. As has been argued by interpreters of the Weber-Michels relationship, Michels took on the task of investigating the organizational structure of the German Social-Democratic Party, following Weber’s encouragement.”

Michels’ writings were increasingly concerned with these sociological problems after the Jena and Mannheim conferences had banished the general strike from the party’s repertoire. Michels approached these issues with the critical tools provided by his syndicalism, even as the path for syndicalist change within the party was blocked. For it was very clear to him that the SPD was a supremely successful version of what was coming to be called the ‘mass political party’ that centered around a disciplined organizational apparatus of party functionaries and papers, a sophisticated get-out-the-vote effort, and obedience by party members to the party leadership. The SPD was at the vanguard of the European mass party transformation, but scholars like James Bryce had been studying the phenomenon in the United States a decade earlier. Yet unlike the liberal scholars Weber or Bryce, the ethical code of Michels did not demand just analysis but interpretation of how it was possible to circumvent the problems the mass party presented to revolutionary action (and democratic participation).

Perhaps his continued syndicalist beliefs were what so intrigued Weber; Michels embodied what Weber called “politics of conviction” while Weber subscribed to the “ethics of responsibility” that forced him to separate means from ends in his scholarly pursuits. Weber wrote to Michels’ wife, Gisela that

---

“He is a ‘moralist’ from head to toe…. His ‘ethos’ is clearly and consciously the most precious possession he has and from it flow the essence and reason of his life. Moreover, in his political evaluations he is so exclusively ruled by this highly personal ethos that he once completely failed to understand the distinction I mentioned ad hoc between vocation (affairs [Sache]) and ‘life’. In fact even though I often differ from him on particulars and also on matters important in themselves, I too repeatedly find so many affinities in our fundamental mode of seeing and comprehending things. And that happens to me so rarely….” (AMW 67, Dec. 25, 1909)

Weber attempted to steer Michels towards his conception of social science, which was meant to be divorced from normative desires. His criticism of an unpublished essay of Michels, meant for the Archiv, Weber took him to task for what he saw as the dual purposes of the essay, failing at both:

“‘Your essay could be either of two things, Weber wrote in one case: “(1) a confession and ‘appeal’… or (2) it should represent a scientific analysis and not only an ad hoc (ad usum Delphini, so to speak), given ‘illumination’ of a situation for practical-political purposes.’ Having proposed such a categorization of knowledge, Weber then insisted that ‘a scientific work is not a work that ‘separates light from shadow,’ as you write, and there is no ‘justice’ there, only facts and causes. Granted, with each of us ‘representation’ and ‘valuation’ are always in danger of flowing together, but one must want one of them. You want the one, and don’t achieve it… whereas you achieve the other, but in a politically ineffective way’ (AMW 60, Aug. 11, 1908). As summarized in other passages, the choice was between wanting to issue ‘subjective appeals’ and aiming for ‘impartial history,’ or between ‘ethics’ and ‘science (AMW 62, Aug. 21, 1908)…. Was it compelling or persuasive for the intended audience? Speaking of the Archiv’s readership, Weber asserted, ‘I am absolutely sure about the article’s effect: 0!’ As an effective appeal it would have to be more ‘coolheaded,’ ‘controlled,’ and ‘historically to the point’ (AMW 59, Aug. 4, 1908).”

Michels’ writing would focus more on the scholarly topics that Weber suggested, and he would settle into being an academic apart from political activism after his move to Italy, but he would never achieve the kind of objective scholarship demanded by Weber. Indeed, Political Parties was highly conditioned by his “ethics of conviction” which greatly disappointed Weber and lead to a series of exchanges with Michels about its inadequacy.

Given his keen interest in SPD, Weber attended a number of party congresses with Michels and commented on what he saw, even as Michels vehemently disagreed with his conclusions. He attended Mannheim and witnessed the attack on the general

---

65 Apparently “Struktur der sozialdemokratischen Partei Deutschlands” which was probably not published due to Weber’s criticism.
strike, Michels, and the party left by the unions and party leadership, and wrote to

Michels that

“Mannheim was a miserable affair…. Ten times at least I heard Bebel and Legien emphasize ‘our weakness’ [i.e., the movement’s weakness]. On top of it, there were all the extremely petty-bourgeois attitudes, the self-satisfied physiognomies of innkeepers, the lack of élan, and the inability to move to the right if the road to the left is blocked or appears to be so – these gentlemen no longer scare anyone (AMW, Oct. 8, 1906).”67

Weber bemoaned the inability of the party leadership to draw the conclusion that they lived in a non-revolutionary epoch and could at best hope for political democratization (which he saw as no mean feat). Unlike many other German bourgeois intellectuals of the era, Weber saw the SPD as a potential tool for that democratization if it could cement an alliance with the liberal parties of the day (not unlike Eduard Bernstein’s revisionist platform). Of course Michels the syndicalist drew the opposite conclusions, that the party leadership had rejected one of the few tools it had to raise proletarian consciousness to revolutionary levels, and that it was necessary to sweep that leadership away if such a thing were to be given a chance. Weber did not disrespect Michels’ views on the general strike, but again required him to categorize it as an ethical conviction rather than a realistic strategy for the party. Indeed, Weber took umbrage with Michels’ support of Luxemburg’s theories of the spontaneous revolutionary mass-strike as such a means of revolutionizing working-class consciousness and Germany society:

“It cannot possibly have escaped you that a very considerable proportion of all strikes (such as the defeated Hamburg dockers’ strike) achieve the opposite of their desired effect, not only in the unions (this you would not mind) but on every kind of progress within the working-class movement, which they set back by years if not by decades. Their effect is exactly the opposite of what must be desired by anybody who measures the value of a strike by its contribution to the advance of ‘socialization’ or to the unification of the proletariat as a class or to whatever (provisional) socialist ‘goals’ you like. It is the most bizarre assertion that can ever be made to say, in the light of these experiences, that every strike works in the direction postulated by socialism, ergo, every strike is justified. And then there is this measuring of ‘morality’ by ‘success’. Have you totally forgotten your Cohen? Surely he must have succeeded in curing you of this at least. Most particularly in curing Michels the syndicalist. The syndicalist M[ichels] ought to (is indeed compelled to) view the conviction which motivates a strike as ‘proper’ in every case; it is

patriotic (patriotic to the class) – ergo, and so on. Yet what weakness is displayed in this obsequious courting of success! And in this violation of the facts before you! (AMW, Aug. 19, 1908)”

It is, perhaps, an oversimplification of the views of the SPD left, and especially Luxemburg, to say that every strike is justified, but rather (as we shall see) that the spontaneous strikes of unorganized workers will often blossom into potentially conscious-changing acts by their very nature. Weber accused many syndicalists of the era of advocating strikes even when they were tactically stupid or not winnable. Again, clearly, Weber was attempting to force Michels to confront the realities of the situation as he saw them. It is, however, unfair to say that Michels did not confront the same issues in his writings before or after Political Parties. Yet his approach was complex, both as one concerned with material analysis of politics and as someone concerned with the outcome of the process as well.

Max Weber thus played a crucial role in the life and intellectual development of Robert Michels. Weber’s comments and criticism spurred Michels into developing a critique that would lead to Political Parties. He was also crucial in defending Michels from the German bureaucracy’s rejection of him as a scholar and professor in Marburg; it was Weber who helped Michels obtain his first professorship in 1907 at the University of Turin with Achille Loria. Although Michels was to fall into the orbit of Gaetano Mosca and Vilfredo Pareto and their conception of social science while there, it was indeed still Weber’s comments in various letters that seem to have been the most trenchant and impressive in helping shape the writing of Political Parties.

Michels’ Departure from Germany

The year 1907 was a turning point in the life of Robert Michels. He would leave Germany; leave the German Social Democratic Party, and finally the Italian Socialist Party. At the beginning of the year Michels was still clearly committed to syndicalism and socialism, and tried once more to gain a permanent position teaching at the University of Marburg. His inability to do so after six years meant that his status as a socialist would likely haunt him at any university at which he attempted to teach across Germany. In the 1907 elections the SPD lost seats even as it picked up votes, though this caused a crisis of confidence in the party where it lurched even further to the right. Michels himself ran for office in 1907, though not in one of the SPD’s stronger districts (Alfeld-Lauterbach), and lost.\(^6^9\) At the 1907 Essen congress the party leadership and revisionists came to the conclusion that the party had been too radical in its speech and lost seats because it had driven away left-liberals.\(^7^0\) Michels attended the Socialist International’s Congress in Stuttgart as a delegate from the Italian syndicalist faction, and attempted to win, unsuccessfully, Werner Sombart for syndicalism.\(^7^1\)

It is at this point that most analyses of Michels mark him as departing from his syndicalism towards Mosca and Pareto. Yet a closer analysis of Michels, his writings, and actions do not point to an intellectual departure at all. While the actions of the SPD in the previous two years and its sharp turn to the right after Mannheim and then the elections of 1907 had affected him, Michels gave a speech at a syndicalist conference in

\(^6^9\) Cook, “Robert Michels”, 777.
\(^7^0\) By the 1908 Nuremberg congress the syndicalist (localist) trade unions in Germany had been expelled from SPD membership.
\(^7^1\) Linz, Robert Michels, 11.
France early in the year where his full criticism of the SPD could be seen from a syndicalist point of view:

“In a country where initiative does not count, and people have a remarkable talent for being disciplined, where large numbers are enrolled into vast organizations characterized by a mechanical inflexibility, and where everything is militarized and bureaucratic, the workers have followed the same route and take the same pattern of organization as the other classes. There is only one thing to equal the socialist and trade union bureaucracy in the perfection of its complex functioning and that is the bureaucracy of the state itself… One can understand how our workers’ organization has become an end in itself, a machine which is perfected for its own sake and not for the tasks which it could have performed.”

In his speech Michels uses concepts that would later find their way into Political Parties: bureaucratization of the party/society, the conservative effects organization has on the leadership, and the obedience of the masses to the party. While his argument here is that the effects of organization are still a strictly German phenomenon and not the universal problem of Political Parties; his syndicalism had not flagged. In fact, much of his criticism in 1907 was not a radical departure from his initial articles as a syndicalist in 1904. Perhaps doubts were brewing in Michels, but his political activities and writings did not show it as he departed Marburg for Turin.

Marburg had been a fruitful place for the young Michels to develop as a radical theorist as

“Two successive groups seem to have formed around Michels… The first was composed of Michels and his wife Gisela, Ernst Thesing (a young intern), Thesing's wife, and Otto Buek, a German-Russian student of the neo-Kantian Hermann Cohen and translator of Tolstoi. In general, Michels tells us, the basically Marxist philosophy of history in this group was well mixed with Kantian and Tolstoian ethical elements. Here we have the intellectual core of the Marburg socialist section that sent Michels to Dresden in 1903 to slay the revisionist dragons.

By the end of 1906, Buek and the Thesings had left Marburg. They were replaced in Michels' circle by Adolf Köster, a theology student who had just finished a study of Pascal’s ethics and was later to cooperate with Michels in translating from the Italian a book of Niceforo’s on the anthropology of the lower classes; Rudolf Franz, a friend of Köster’s; and Hans Teschemacher, a student who joined the party in Marburg, and in 1912, published a study on the income tax and the revolution in Prussia.

Köster and Franz agreed with Michels in their emphasis on a living socialist idealism, in their rejection of any compromise or alliance with bourgeois parties, indeed, their rejection of parliamentarism in general, and finally ‘in the passionate appeal to the youth.’

It was to the youth in particular that Michels turned as his hopes for a healthy development within German social democracy faded. The high point of his efforts to win the university students for socialism was a public debate in February 1907 between, on one side, Köster and himself, and on the other, a

National Liberal librarian and a Catholic Center party schoolteacher. The debate and ensuing discussion lasted six hours and were attended by an overflow audience of students, workers, and townspeople. Only a few professors were present, but among them was neo-Kantian Paul Natorp. Michels valued this debate highly for the intellectual stimulation it gave the university community, and he agreed to repeat it a few weeks later in the nearby university town of Giessen.\textsuperscript{73}

Clearly, “the fact that at this time he was engaged in organizing a number of controversial public meetings to win student opinion for socialism cannot have endeared him to the authorities.”\textsuperscript{74} The reason we point this out is twofold: first, he was thoroughly engaged at the local level in Marburg, and, as indicated previously, at the national level (his attempts to win Sombart to syndicalism) in 1907.

It is possible to see this as a last gasp in terms of his revolutionary spirit, and that his move to Italy was a clean break from his revolutionary, German, past. Clearly his departure for Turin would remove him from his Marxist social network and deposit him into one that was decidedly more hostile to his beliefs at a time when Michels was moving further down the line to becoming a pessimist in terms of revolutionary efficacy. While we cannot know for sure, it is obvious the social circle in Marburg helped tie him to political activism if he were still willing to engage in such a risky undertaking given his attempt to gain a spot at the university the same year. In Turin, Michels would engage in no such activism. Yet his departure from active politics does not, as many have assumed, divorce him from his syndicalist and radical analysis of organization and politics.

**Elite Theory and Michels**

While at the University of Turin he would meet Gaetano Mosca and study the writings of Vilfredo Pareto\textsuperscript{75}, co-founders of elite theory. *Political Parties* was to

\textsuperscript{73} Mitzman, *Sociology*, 304-5.
\textsuperscript{74} Beetham, “From Socialism to Fascism,” 12.
\textsuperscript{75} He would not meet Pareto until almost a decade later.
become a work permeated by a perspective on social science developed by both men, through categories of inquiry initially suggested by Weber and a continued emphasis on conclusions reached early in his years as a syndicalist. At the time Michels moved to Turin their two major works were *Elementi di scienza politica* (Mosca) and *Les Systèmes Socialistes* (Pareto). Apparently there was bad blood between the two as to who had first formulated the idea of a permanent ruling class (Mosca had published in 1896 and Pareto in 1902). It is in Turin that we see Michels turn away from direct political activism: having already left the SPD, he gives up his membership in the Italian Socialist Party by late 1907. It is in early 1908 that most biographies argue Michels had abandoned the revolutionary syndicalism he had professed so strongly just a year before. It is clear that his writings of this period are influenced by Mosca, but it would be a mistake to say that the structure and conclusion of the articles is a radical departure from his syndicalist writings. The tone, however, is different, and decidedly more pessimistic than even his most critical prior ones.

Michels published two articles in 1908, one in the Italian journal *Riforma Sociale* and one in the *Archiv* that show his increasing commitment to the conception of a permanent societal ruling class: “La fatalità della classe politica” and “Die oligarchischen Tendenzen der Gesellschaft.” In these articles Michels develops his typical themes:

“The character of the masses and their need for leadership, the ‘mirage of representation’, the oligarchical nature of organization, the effect of working class institutions as agents of social mobility, and so on. All the evidence, he concludes, gives powerful support, not only to Mosca’s general theory of the political class, to the view that the ‘ruling class is the one factor of permanent significance in the history of human development’; but also to Pareto’s doctrine of elite circulation, in showing how proletarian leaders become detached from their class of origin and assimilated into the existing political elite.”

---

76 This has traditionally been translated into English as *The Ruling Class*, even though a more accurate translation would be “Elements of Political Science.”
77 Beetham, “From Socialism To Fascism,” 13.
His academic work while in Turin emphasized the pessimistic aspects of his radical syndicalist critique and the hope that there could be a successful revolution that did not end up providing a new “ruling class.” In the piece published in the Archiv, Michels appears to fundamentally reject his previously strident revolutionary views:

“History appears to teach us that no popular movement, however powerful and energetic, can effect any lasting changes in the organic structure of social life. The reason is that the most outstanding elements of such movements, the men who originally led them and set them alight, always become gradually detached from the masses and assimilated by the ‘political class’, to whom they contribute few new ideas, maybe, but all the more youthful energy and practical intelligence, and thus through a process of repeated rejuvenation serve to perpetuate their supremacy… History also teaches us that the government – or if you like, the state – can only be the organization of the minority, whose purpose is to impose on the rest of society a legal order appropriate to the requirements of its own control and exploitation of the masses; it can never be the product of a majority, let alone represent their interests. The majority of mankind will never have the possibility, nor even the capacity, to govern themselves. A cruel fate of history has predestined them to suffer passively the domination of a small minority risen from their midst, and to serve merely as the pedestal for the greatness of their rulers.”

Weber would later chide Michels for his view that elites could not effect radical change, stating “the power of the Trust Directors has a revolutionary effect, the power of the Jacobins does too.” Still, his 1908 articles show clearly that he had begun to digest the writings of Mosca and Pareto. Michels adopted Pareto’s concept of a “circulation of elites” into his writings as well as becoming sympathetic to Mosca’s thoughts on a permanent ruling class – though this was not a huge theoretical leap from his radical syndicalist writings. His growing acquaintance with their sociology would also lead Michels to take the research project he had begun under Weber (the study of the sociological characteristics of the Social Democrats) and attempt to make a broader statement about the effects of organization on democracy. Mosca himself had a distinctly positivist view of historical “laws” that he sought to generalize across wide epochs of human history. Indeed “the most obvious feature [of Mosca’s theories] was the view that

---

78 Ibid, 13.
to be scientific is to search for general laws, and that social scientists must therefore concern themselves with ascertaining those regularities of social behavior which hold good everywhere, and which underlie the superficial appearances of everyday life.”

Michels would come to see *Political Parties* and his later work as a contribution to the discussion of elite control begun by Mosca and Pareto, as well as the sociology of bureaucracy and domination Weber had urged him to write. Still, it would be impossible to ignore that his work differed greatly from the positivist Mosca; while Michels gained a penchant for making sweeping historical statements after his acquaintance with the elite theorists, he would remain concerned with a materialist analysis and his conception of elite domination sprung from examination of the social relations involved in organization. Finally, where Mosca was terrified of impending revolution and saw collectivization of the means of production as a move towards a ‘single crushing, all-embracing, all-engrossing tyranny’, and Pareto believed that the rising socialist movement proved that his theory of ‘circulation of elites’ was true, Michels tried to show that there was little to fear from the socialist parties of the day as their own theories of elite control could be extended to prove the essential *conservatism* of organization and oligarchy. In fact

“Central to Michels’ project in *Political Parties*, then, was to show not merely that the experience of the socialist movement gave powerful support to the elitist argument, but that it did so in an original way, through the process of deviation of its leadership from its original socialist principles and their gradual assimilation into the privileged strata of bourgeois society. In arguing for this conclusion he was able to draw on the whole range of his personal experience of the movement, which Pareto and Mosca knew only from the outside, and which they therefore judged by the façade rather than the reality.”

Michels was less worried about the revolutionary potential of the movement than his Italian colleagues, perhaps because he still wanted to find a way a revolutionary socialist movement could fulfill its promise of socio-economic democracy. I believe Michels

---

80 Beetham., “From Socialism To Fascism,” 21.
81 Ibid., 15-16.
found in the ideas of the elite theorists a certain kinship with the pessimism of his
syndicalism, in the same way that he found his friendship with Weber to be fruitful as he
developed as a sociologist without ever fully committing to Weber as a disciple.

Michels emerges as a complex character, and placed within his intellectual and
historical context a clearer, deeper picture of him surfaces. His youth, socialist politics,
intellectual partnership with Max Weber and theoretical kinship with Pareto and Mosca
all contributed to his refinement as a thinker and to the publication of Political Parties in
1911. Now we turn to the interpretations of Michels that emerged in political science
after his rediscovery in the post-war era. To that we will add another, more complete
reinterpretation of Robert Michels, his work, and Political Parties in particular. It is to
be hoped that this will reorient his work in the history of political science as someone
more varied and important than simply a writer of the elite school he has so often been
lumped into and as a foil for less pessimistic views on democracy, socialism, and
organization.

Interpretations of Michels

Although Michels was known in the West during his lifetime\(^2\) his work was only
sporadically analyzed by Western scholars during that period and that immediately after
his death. James Burnham grouped Michels with Machiavelli, Mosca, Pareto, and Sorel
in his 1943 work The Machiavellians\(^3\), Philip Selznick cited him in an essay on

\(^2\) Michels taught at Williams College and the University of Chicago in 1927 where his name appears in a
catalogue together with those of Charles E. Merriam, Harold F. Gosnell, and Harold Lasswell for a course on “comparative political parties.” Additionally, he had an essay published in the APSR the next year:

1943).
bureaucracy in the *American Sociological Review*[^84], and Sylvia K. Selekman[^85] in her study on labor unions. Philip J. Cook[^86] dates the first major post-war interest in Michels to the 1949 republication of *Political Parties*[^87]. Political science had started to shift focus in the immediate post-war era; Schumpeter’s[^88] work on elitist forms of democracy (which were clearly influenced by the writings of Michels, Weber, Mosca, and Pareto) along with the classic studies of Key[^89] on political parties helped spark an interest in the role of political parties in democracy, as well as the limits of democratic participation. Some of the interest in reviving Michels at this point may have come from political scientists grappling with Marxist and Marxian-inspired theories of elite domination like those of C. Wright Mills. The rise of pluralism, its study of private political organizations and its acceptance of minimalist theories of democracy meant that Michels’ study of political parties and his attempt to grapple with what he saw as inevitable tendencies towards oligarchy in these private bodies (as well as society as a whole) fit in very well with the writings of authors like Dahl and Lipset. In the canonical *Who Governs?* Dahl questions the internal democratic character of the organizations his pluralist model argues allow for democracy in the state; Lipset’s *Union Democracy* was a direct attempt to study Michels’ “iron law of oligarchy” and ends by finding an exception that seems to prove the rule.[^90]

[^87]: The original English edition was brought out in 1915 but seems to have had little effect at the time on English speaking political scientists.
[^90]: Lipset’s excellent study of an American union that has intra-organizational electoral competition is so unique and specific to the organization’s own history that it can hardly be seen as a model for circumventing the problems of oligarchy. See S. M. Lipset, “Democracy in Private Government,” *The
For our purposes we will leave some of the critiques of Michels until later since they mainly deal with concepts developed within *Political Parties* and we are here concerned with a broader view of him as a scholar. To that end we start with James Burnham’s 1943 work, which contextualized Michels by grouping him together with Mosca, Pareto, and Sorel. Machiavellians were “concerned with politics, that is, with the struggle for power,” and they were also “discontent with what in normal times passes for political thought and science – that is, disguised apologies for the status quo or utopian dreams of the future; and compels them to face more frankly the real issues of power…”91 Burnham’s synopsis of Michels’ *Political Parties* is a somewhat typical reading, and even he concludes that the book does not completely abandon the pursuit of a democracy. Its larger significance, I think, lies with the fact that later writers would use it as a model for understanding Michels. Burnham had created a small canon of authors he did not quite title theorists of elite control, though he clearly meant it as such.92 Michels and Sorel fit more uneasily in his framework than perhaps Mosca and Pareto. Michels becomes, in Burnham’s hands, divorced from his history as a socialist intellectual; only his criticism of democracy is presented to us.

Burnham’s framework and its influence are apparent in S.M. Lipset’s introduction to the 1962 edition of *Political Parties*. Lipset had already produced a classic work based on testing Michels’ hypotheses about oligarchy, and his introduction does an excellent job of placing Michels back into the context of the larger European fin-de-siècle socialist tradition. Michels was referenced as a member of the “so-called

---

91 Burnham, *The Machiavellians*, 82.
92 Burnham, a former Marxist, had done an about-face in the late 1930s and claimed the world was undergoing a “managerial revolution” in which the new ruling class would be managers and bureaucrats.
Machiavellian school of politics by whom he was influenced, such as Pareto, Mosca, and Sorel.” 93 Elitist theories of democracy had, according to Lipset, incorporated much of their theorizing into the framework contemporary democratic thought. Michels had “felt that he had proven democracy and socialism to be structurally impossible,” and believed the only answer to oligarchy and bureaucratic domination “was in strong charismatic leaders… [like] Benito Mussolini.” 94 In Lipset’s view, socialists and communists alike could benefit from grappling with the text. His introduction expanded the limited framework Burnham had given us for understanding Michels’ motivations, and in many ways is an excellent overview, and influenced thought on Michels given its ubiquity with subsequent editions of the text. Guenther Roth’s study of the Social Democrats, published in 1963, repeated the historical framework of Burnham and then Lipset: Michels was a peripatetic socialist-turned-syndicalist who write Political Parties, became disillusioned with socialism and democracy, turned into an Italian patriot, and ended his life as a disillusioned idealist. With the exception of a few works such as Juan J. Linz’s excellent study, which remains neutral on Michels’ motivations while giving a wealth of biographical data, the majority of post-war pieces of political science literature on Michels operate within the paradigm developed by Burnham and expanded by Lipset.

The logical culmination of this view is contained within Arthur Mitzman’s study Sociology and Estrangement. Michels, in Mitzman’s narrative, was above all interested in the function of the human will in politics, something he had gotten from his syndicalist phase. His identification with this will comes along with his fierce adherence to a personal ethics and morality with which he imbued his socialist writings. Mitzman saw

94 Ibid., 32.
Michels as a romantic and passionate revolutionary, whose experiences within the SPD jaded him towards practical political work. Moving to Italy and divorcing himself from his Marxist circle in Marburg, Michels steeped himself in Mosca and Pareto, wrote *Political Parties*, and divorced himself from socialism both practically (renouncing his membership in both the SPD and then the Italian Socialist Party by 1908) and then ideologically. Writing *Political Parties* was a step on the road towards identifying with Italy and Italian-nationalism-cum-fascism. The disillusioned idealist found a new repository for the will inside the persona of Mussolini, and with fascism a way around the problems of democracy and bureaucracy. Distinct stages appear in Mitzman’s analysis: socialist activist, scholar and elite theorist, academic and Italian patriot, fascist-sympathizer.

It is possible to read the narrative of Michels’ life as such. The text of *Political Parties* chooses the SPD as its case study; he is as critical of his syndicalist comrades as he is of any other reform group within the movement. Indeed, it is not too far a leap to see 1907-11 as a transitional period following his move to Italy, and the years after 1911 as one of a slow, but sad move towards holing himself up within academia and abandoning his socialism entirely to praise Mussolini’s fascists. His adherence to will remains constant, first in syndicalism and the mass’s ability to enact a socialist revolution, and then to the Weberian charismatic politicians as manifest in Benito Mussolini. His acceptance of a position at Perugia in 1928, given to him by the Italian regime, and his service in creating apologies for the brownshirts in the last 8 years of his life seem to reinforce this. The narrative of Michels’ break into distinct stages of thought
ignores a certain consistency in his work and writing through the period of *Political Parties* and beyond.

In opposition to Mitzman, David Beetham’s essay on Michels argues that the former’s characterization of Michels as a disenchanted idealist who turned to fascism ignores the complexity of Michels’ thought from 1907-11 and into his later works of political sociology. Beetham argues that by late 1907 Michels had begun incorporating elite theory into his own political thought, but that the change was organic rather than a sudden break. Certain aspects of Marxism were either discarded, or modified to fit better into the elite model. Class struggle does not disappear, but it only ends in oligarchy, nor does Michels cease to be a historical materialist because he adopts some of Mosca’s hypotheses. Syndicalism especially that of Sorel had a kinship with elite theory’s analyses; it is not too much of a reach to see the criticisms leveled in *Le Mouvement Socialiste* against the party oligarchs and need to roust the unthinking masses, and that of an elite theorist who is more sanguine about said prospects, but only just. What continues into his nationalist and fascist period is an interest in political will as a counterpoint to bureaucratic growth. With this, I think, Beetham creates more of a plausible historiography than Mitzman (and that of the Burnham school). Though *Political Parties* comes across at first glance the definitive break with his former ideology, another, clearer way to read it is as a bridge in the historical development of a keen thinker. The syndicalist analysis of parties, organization, mass movements and individual will was coupled with hypotheses of elite dominance, circulation of elites and rejection of portions of Marxist analysis. Michels’ work through his period of Italian nationalism and fascist-sympathizing continued to use these categories in an attempt to understand and
provide insight on overcoming the major issue, drawn from syndicalism, of organizational bureaucracy and oligarchy.

**A New Interpretation**

I want to posit that while Beetham’s argument has plausibility as an interpretation of Michels’ intellectual trajectory; there is a more subtle way of viewing Michels that calls for a reinterpretation of his legacy. Instead of contending that Michels did, at some point in 1907-11, abandon his connections with the socialist movement and theory, it is possible to see *Political Parties* as part of a larger adaptation of Marxism and revolutionary syndicalism that led Michels to a pessimistic interpretation of revolutionary prospects and a form of radicalism along the lines of Sorel. As we shall see, *Political Parties* is a searching work and as impossible as Michels finds democracy he is still searching for it and answers to the problem of organization. While he renounced his official membership in the SPD and Italian Socialist Parties by late 1907 – which is what leads many to claim that is his official break with socialism – he continued to write in *Le Mouvement Socialiste* until 1912. Daniel DeLeon, the American Marxist of the era, talks quite warmly of Michels in two 1907 articles around the time of the supposed “break,” and even mentions

“With this explanation it is safe to say of Michels he has grappled with the task that circumstances have roughhewn for him, and he is valiantly shaping the same. That task is to sum up the history of the Movement; to trace it back to its sources; to exhibit its present status; to point out the waywardness of its present course; consequently, to recall the movement itself.”

Nine years later, E. Belfort Bax, the British Marxist, wrote on *Political Parties* and found that Michels

96 Ibid., 5.
“will not be unknown to members of the…Socialist party…He was, however, no party man in the sense of leader worship and soon fell into disfavour enough through an admirable criticism of the chief men of the Reichstag fraction, not sparing Bebel himself, which he published in 1907. His criticism, it should be said, was more than justified by subsequent events. Nevertheless it is significant that this led to his being ostracised by many leading men of the German and Austrian Socialist organisations. Our author later on became Professor of Political Economy at the Turin University and shortly before the war was called to occupy the chair of Economics and Statistics at the University of Basel, which he still holds.”

The important part of the review, however, is Bax’s discussion here:

“As a matter of fact, however, Michels, in playing the part of advocate diaboli, does certainly lay on the black colour with a liberal hand. Bad as things are and have been in the past in this respect, they are still not quite so hopeless as he paints them. The book is, without question, an advocate’s indictment of the past history (i.e., the recent past history) of democracy, whether political, industrial, or Socialist. The logical and convincing style of Michels powerfully helps the statement of his case. By his work, in spite of the tendency to overstatement spoken of, excusable perhaps under the circumstances, he has performed a real service to Social-Democracy, and we can only hope that when the war is over and the International Socialist Party begins again to reconstitute itself, the book will receive the attention it deserves.”

Clearly, readers of the era knew what many removed from the milieu did not – that Michels, at least in the Political Parties era, was still very much writing the vein of syndicalism. Philip J. Cook almost reaches this conclusion in his article on Michels, but concludes Michels meant the book as an attack upon syndicalist theories.

Far from changing radically between 1907-11, Michels creates a radicalism influenced by the pessimism of elite theory and that of a committed syndicalist who has been cast out of the main party of that era, the SPD. While he includes his former comrades in the chapter “Syndicalism As Prophylactic,” he remains sympathetic throughout the chapter to the goals of syndicalism, as much as he does later to anarchism. Remember that Michels’ version of syndicalism differed greatly from his co-thinkers in Le Mouvement Socialiste. At the end of Political Parties he makes the claim that

“there is no essential contradiction between the doctrine that history is the record of a continued series of class struggles and the doctrine that class struggles invariable culminate in the creation of new oligarchies which undergo fusion with the old. The existence of a political class does not conflict with the essential content of Marxism, considered not as an economic dogma but as a philosophy of history; for in each particular instance the dominance of a political class arises as the resultant of the relationships between the

98 Ibid.
different social forces competing for supremacy, these forces being of course considered dynamically and not quantitatively.”

While one could read his growing pessimism in the period from 1907-11 as a break with the past, or an organic growing over into elite theory, it is as logical, if not more so, to see this as an evolution of concepts held by Michels since at least 1904.

In fact, in a Marxian sense, Michels is not wrong, if unorthodox. Within the *Communist Manifesto* Marx had described how each successive stage of history had seen its own new ruling class; looking back at the French Revolution he had even claimed a section of the bourgeoisie would break off and fuse with the rising proletariat to lead the new revolt. While not quite the circulation of elites that Pareto envisaged, it was certainly an open question as to which way the influence of the newly fused elite flowed: from the old guard or the new? Michels was making an argument for virtual compatibility of this with the Mosca and Pareto-inspired *Political Parties*, and in many respects, he is correct. Of course, Michels denies the possibility of democratic control within socialism and a socialist revolution – but the structure of his hypotheses still retains the influence of Marxist thinking.

The pessimism of the *Political Parties*-era Michels is coupled with his apparent drive to both examine the effects of the rise of mass political organizations and attempt to find a solution to the oligarchy he saw arising from those organizational structures.

While *Political Parties* can be viewed as a profoundly cynical work, perhaps it is more helpful to see it as the author saw it: a realistic work given the author’s experience and access to data, with an ending that, if not hopeful, was at least searching for answers.

Why write the chapters on the referendum, renunciation, syndicalism, or anarchism

---

otherwise? In his final considerations, Michels grants that the socialist, democratic working class struggle might have a mitigating effect on oligarchy, and that democratic currents in history resemble waves upon a shore. This is an apt metaphor; for waves give no immediate sign of being able to break down the shoals and rocks, but after much struggle the erosion is evident until one day, the obstacle is no more. Michels is here still searching for the answer, but had not yet found it.

We cannot deny that Michels was profoundly influenced by elite theory, nor that his radicalism changed during the period of writing and publishing *Political Parties*. He would continue to focus on the psychology of the masses, the dominance of organizational leadership, and the conservative tendencies within political parties until the end of his life. These would become Michels-ian themes, which were different in scope and character than those of Mosca or Pareto. In the period of his growing association with Italy and rapprochement with fascism, he was able to convince himself of its radical character by using Weber’s category of the charismatic politician to show that Mussolini had the best chance of anyone of sidestepping the problem of oligarchy with his direct appeals to the masses outside of the party structure. As misguided as his justifications of fascism now seem, Michels’ writings from 1922-36 retain the same drive as in his more classically activist and radical period.\(^{101}\)

It is here that we see Michels never lost his essence as a Weberian conviction politician. His exposition of the rise of mass political parties was always coupled with a normative desire to solve the problem of democratic control by the rank-and-file, motivating the masses, and the larger problem of bureaucratic domination of politics.\(^{101}\) Michels retreated from direct engagement with politics in 1907, but the next three

\(^{101}\) Mosca never approved of the fascists, and Pareto died in 1924, only two years into the fascist regime.
decades would see him continue to lace his writings with normative and ethical concerns which he clearly hoped would influence the political scene. Bax argued for the ultimate importance of *Political Parties* for socialists as “Indeed, the neglect of Robert Michels’s warning criticism would be nothing less than treason to the Socialist cause. The oligarchic danger exposed in the book under consideration is a matter of the very first importance.”

The problems of previous canonical interpretations of Michels and *Political Parties* lie with their attempts to reconcile his socialist writings with his later period. Those who, like Mitzman, primarily see him as a disillusioned romantic idealist have to explain his ideological trajectory as one with a great rupture somewhere from 1907-11. Unfortunately, as we have shown, the great rupture never quite seems to occur. Michels continues to write as a materialist, who is concerned with the growing tendency of the socialist movement into a mass electoral party like any other and the host of bureaucratic and organizational issues this incurs. *Political Parties* is not only concerned with sketching the tendencies of mass political parties and the electorate but with, at least tacitly, finding a way around these problems. We can either view this as the work of someone still, as Bax insinuates, very much interested in the fate of the movement, or perhaps as some interpretations of *The Prince* would have it, a handbook for citizens on the bag of tricks rulers use to control the masses. In any case his later work is hardly an apologia for the elites he unfortunately came to believe would always rule, and in this he is unlike Mosca or Pareto – he is still searching for a way out of bureaucratic domination, and believed he had found it with the charismatic politician Mussolini. This is also a problem for those who, like Beetham, saw a more organic evolution towards elite theory.

---

and fascism in his thinking. Beetham’s nuanced views of Michels are to be commended for the detail in which they show how there is a scientific component to the evolution of his thoughts, rather than some catastrophic break or disillusionment. Where we can take issue with Beetham is, rather, the fact that Michels heavily incorporated his syndicalist and Marxist analysis into Political Parties and later work, even as he began to see Weber’s charismatic politician as the most logical hope to avoid the worst aspects of bureaucratic domination. Michels was extraordinarily interested in the fate of the socialist project, which he saw overall as an ethical one, and a democratic one. Where Beetham separates the two in his writings into that of revolutionary consciousness for socialism and democratic control over representative for democratic theory, this is not a neat distinction for Michels (or socialists of his era). A thorough contextualization of Michels and his project in the writings of the era on mass political parties and the problems therein can only serve to deepen our understanding of his overall motives behind writing Political Parties.

Alfred de Grazia seems to have a handle on this, as he writes

“Michels’ relationship to European democracy was complex. If one searched his life and writings for his hierarchy of values, I believe one would have to place extreme individualism, even anarchy, first and derive from that his succeeding values. An energetic anti-authoritarianism characterized his earliest life and one finds in his later writings pensive, regretful references to the unattainable ideal of the Jeffersonian or Rousseauian democrat… it was the authoritarianism immanent in absolute mass democracy – the Caesarist tendency – that pulled him up short; and when he considered that the alternative to the ‘rule of the masses,’ as demonstrated by his studies, was the rule of the democratic party bureaucrats, he found himself preferring some aristocracy of culture to the aristocracy of trade unionism. The ‘culture,’ ‘class,’ and ‘chivalry’ elements in his romantic side triumphed against ‘economic determinism’ – Marx’s ‘philosophy of poverty’ – and against the inevitable ‘bureaucratization’ of egalitarian democracy. He remained a believer in democratic ideals, a disbeliever in the possibility of realizing the ideal.”

It is in this respect we turn to Political Parties and a reinterpretation of that work, especially as we have shown that Michels was still ideologically committed to the

---

problems of socialism, democracy (which he saw as intertwined) and the rise of mass political organizations while incorporating Weberian and elite-theory concepts into the foundations of his socialist style.

**Chapter 2: Political Parties and Michels**

Robert Michels’ most famous text is undoubtedly *Political Parties: A Sociological Study Of The Oligarchical Tendencies Of Modern Democracy*. It is still his only major work translated into English[^104], and it has assumed a place in the canon of political science as a foundational book in democratic theory, contributing the phrase ‘iron law of oligarchy’ to our lexicon. Michels’ work is largely lumped together with Gaetano Mosca’s *Elementi di Scienza Politica*[^105] and Vilfredo Pareto’s *Trattato Di Sociologia Generale*[^106] as a theory of elite domination and a critique of democracy. Most discussions of *Political Parties* within American political science have focused on its place as a work of a-democratic theory and specifically the “iron law of oligarchy” which Michels is credited with developing. I wish to argue two interrelated points: first, that *Political Parties* is a deeply contradictory work filled with fissures, counter-arguments to oligarchy, and above all undertones of a commitment by Robert Michels to materialist analysis, socialism, and democracy (which he saw as inseparable), and secondly, that *Political Parties* is a work that is firmly within the syndicalist thought of the period, and is itself a critique and extension of that thought. While the work is flawed, and never fully answers the questions put forth in its hypotheses, it is filled with numerous attempts to engage with the major political development of the era: the rise of mass political

[^104]: Michels wrote a number of other books, including some major political and historical works, but outside of the text *Sexual Ethics* and a few of his lectures it seems they have yet to be translated into English.
[^105]: Typically translated into English as *The Ruling Class*.
[^106]: Translated in English as *The Mind and Society*. 
parties, bureaucracy, and mass participation in politics. If Michels’ intellectual background warrants reinterpretation, so too does *Political Parties* and its place in political theory.

The thinking of Michels of the *Political Parties* era is best understood as a nexus of much of early 20\textsuperscript{th} century European political thought. His work interacts with at least five major areas of concern:

1. Socialist/Syndicalist theory
2. Liberal theory
3. Democratic (and a-democratic elite) theory
4. Theories of mass psychology
5. Theories of societal bureaucratization

Although it was approached from all different angles, the main question of the period was the nature of mass democracy, the rise of truly mass political parties organized on a permanent basis, and the entry of all segments of society into the political process. What role were the newly organized working class voters and mass parties to play in the democratic process (and struggle)? Within the socialist movement electoral success was greeted with growing concern by some that the masses were increasingly reformist, that bourgeois democracy had blunted their drive for a truly egalitarian socialist democracy and the party leadership had become entrenched and increasingly conservative. Liberals of the era were increasingly worried that the role of the independent citizen was to be forever subsumed by the herd of voters attached to a political party not because of rationality but rather patronage and irrational group obedience to authority. The ‘a-democrats’\textsuperscript{107} feared the advent of mass representative democracy because the fastest-growing parties of the era seemed to be the socialist (which they loathed) but also because it heralded the rise of a potential ruling class they believed was unworthy of the

\textsuperscript{107} Mosca, Pareto.
role. Engagement with the issue of the effects of rising levels of bureaucracy in the state and its impact on the psychology of the masses\textsuperscript{108} struck a chord across these schools of thought.

The importance of *Political Parties* derives from the encapsulation of the questions asked by the varied schools of thought above from Michels’ unique point of view. Michels’ practical experience within the socialist movement and as a socialist writer, his close connection to Weber, Mosca and Pareto, and his deep ethical concern for socialism, democracy, and the consequences the rise of mass organizations had for his society led him to write the work; his questions within the text and the attempted answers given by the milieu of his compatriots are important ones both for that era and for political science. Although the text (and Michels) has long been pigeonholed as a masterwork of a-democratic theory, its importance extends far beyond this, to allow a reexamination of a swath of political thought that has not often been linked together, but whose practitioners were often talking about the same thing.

Just as important as *Political Parties* is for its place in the center of the debate on mass parties, it is also a text firmly in the syndicalist tradition of Georges Sorel, Hubert Lagardelle, and Eduardo Berth. This has only infrequently been mentioned in the scholarly literature\textsuperscript{109} but the main themes: the impossibility of representative democracy, organizational oligarchies, leadership cliques and cults of personality, (lack of) revolutionary will of the masses, and the interaction of mass political parties with the state are all major syndicalist themes as well. Michels had developed these thoughts in

\textsuperscript{108}Their behavior and how it had changed, as they became part of the new bureaucratic state and mass organizations.

his Le Mouvement Socialiste writings and an examination of the writings of Lagardelle and Sorel show his writings here as an attempt to extend the writings of the syndicalists. This, perhaps, is the reason he chose the SPD as the sole focus of his attention in Political Parties, not just because it was the most democratic of parties in aim, but because it was also the main focus of the era’s syndicalist critiques. Instead of following Weber’s insistence he write a broader piece organization and bureaucracy, or the larger historical scope of Mosca and Pareto, he wrote about the SPD. This is a general indication of the importance of his syndicalist comrades on his own though, and an important one in our reconsideration of Michels in this period and the work itself.

In the broader sense our task will be to develop the ideas contained within Political Parties, and in later chapters extend the concept of it as a nexus point from which to unpack the larger debate on mass political parties, organization, bureaucracy, and political action going on in Europe at the time of Michels’ writing. More narrowly, we will examine the arguments and theses put forward by Michels’ in the work, section by section and offer a close reading. Along the way we will offer critical analysis of Political Parties. Towards the end of the chapter we will also highlight some of the contemporary criticism of Political Parties, especially from Max Weber and some of Michels’ old friends within the socialist and syndicalist movements.

Michels and the Structure of Political Parties

The years leading up to the publication of the work (1907-11) saw Michels deepen his connection to the field of academic sociology and the Italian theorists of elite control. Early articles developing his theses on oligarchy, organization, and democracy
appeared in the Archiv as early as 1906. He continued to publish in the syndicalist Le Mouvement Socialiste until the French edition of Political Parties came out; after a series of articles with his old friend Lagardelle about the applicability of his theses to syndicalism, Michels ceased writing for the journal in 1913. As noted in the previous chapter, this is a sign that Michels was not done with syndicalist or socialist theorizing in 1907, and lends credence to Political Parties being written by someone who was still trying to find a solution to the problems of revolution and democracy.

The work, first published in German in 1911, is made up of six main parts:

1. Leadership in democratic organizations
2. Autocratic tendencies of leaders
3. The exercise of power and its psychological reaction upon the leaders
4. Social analysis of leadership
5. Attempts to restrict the influence of the leaders
6. The oligarchical tendencies of organization

It is worth working our way through each section, with commentary, and then discussing the work as a whole. While previous commentators have often looked at the fundamental theses Michels worked out, it is much more difficult to find a close reading of the work, and the complexity of its hypotheses and the depth of the writing in terms of contradictory theses and their relationship to the milieu in which Michels was writing deserve a re-evaluation.

**Introduction and Fundamental Structure**

---


111 Yet not in English until 1915, the edition we will use here. As we will examine later, Political Parties seems to have been mostly ignored in Anglo-American circles until its republication in 1949, something multiple authors (Cook 1971 and Kelly 2003) claim was due to the time not being ripe in American circles to accept its theses until after World War II.

112 Juan J. Linz’s essays on Michels are an exception.
In his preface to the 1915 English translation (taken from the Italian edition), Michels states, “the present work aims at a critical discussion of… the problem of democracy. It is the writer’s opinion that democracy, at once as an intellectual theory and as a practical movement, has today entered up on a critical phase from which it will be extremely difficult to discover an exit. Democracy has encountered obstacles, not merely imposed from without, but spontaneously surgent from within. Only to a certain degree, perhaps, can these obstacles be surpassed or removed.”

He continues by stating that

“The unravelment and the detailed formulation of the complex of tendencies which oppose the realization of democracy are matters of exceeding difficulty. A preliminary analysis of these tendencies may, however, be attempted. They will be found to be classifiable as tendencies dependent (1) upon the nature of the human individual; (2) upon the nature of the political struggle; and (3) upon the nature of organization. Democracy leads to oligarchy, and necessarily contains an oligarchical nucleus. In making this assertion it is far from the author’s intention to pass a moral judgment upon any political party or any system of government, or to level an accusation of hypocrisy. The law that it is an essential characteristic of all human aggregates to constitute cliques and sub-classes is, like every other sociological law, beyond good and evil.”

The problem presented here is twofold: one of domination, and one of democracy. This is not a trivial formulation; Weber was concerned with problems of domination and democracy as well, but his interest in the latter was only inasmuch as he saw the general tendency of modern society tending toward some form of representative government. He turned to a concept of ‘leadership’ democracy as a way to mitigate bureaucratic tendencies he saw slowly but organically developing. Michels, on the other hand, did not accept domination as a given (as Weber did) and thus his work was dedicated to the problem of democracy, and not domination. Mosca and Pareto were interested in providing a theoretical basis for undermining socialism and democracy, which they both feared and loathed. His calumnies against the German socialist leadership and bleak
conclusions on democratic progress mask his very real history as an activist, and his concern with overcoming oligarchy. While his colleagues Mosca and Pareto were clearly anti-democratic, Michels struggles with a normative question they did not ask because they had no interest in doing so. In his letters to Michels and Michels’ wife Gisela, Weber clearly understood his friend’s continued ethical commitments, even if he did not share them. Thus I would argue that the term a-democratic is, perhaps, a misnomer; while Mosca and Pareto clearly wished to develop theories that would be seen as objective and a-democratic, in hindsight they are fully subjective and anti-democratic. Michels too wished for objective scholarship, but he could not avoid his ethical and normative commitments, and seems to have remained in *Political Parties* a pessimistic theorist of socialism and democracy.

As a syndicalist critic Michels had tread this path before, and indeed many of the concepts he would develop in *Political Parties* could be found during his period within the SPD. It is worth nothing that while syndicalists were concerned with local control over unions and strikes those within the syndicalist movement hardly saw simple democratic control as a panacea for the ills of organization. In point of fact, most syndicalists were appalled by the reformism of the majority rank-and-file workers – though their desire to see true mass revolutionary strikes made this a tension within their movement and its tendency towards vanguardism. This tension within syndicalism, between democracy, revolution, and mass consciousness, is replayed in the tension within Michels’ intellectual hypotheses and the text. The twin problems of the text: revolutionary consciousness/action by the party and democratic control were the twin problems of the left wing of the socialist movement in the first decade of the twentieth
century. Political science in the modern era has chosen to focus on Michels’ and the problem of democracy given most political scientists’ lack of interest in revolutionary action, but this would have been a false separation for Michels. Socialism and democracy were inseparable concepts for Robert Michels, i.e. economic and political democracy, something very few seem to have grasped in modern accounts of his work. Marx had called on socialists to “win the battle for democracy,” and while Michels acknowledges non-socialist parties may be democratic, the ultimate democracy for him was entwined with socialism.

The Meaning of Democracy?

Thus ambiguity of the word ‘democracy’ as used by Michels in the preface and throughout Political Parties is worth highlighting. Given the complex nature of the phrase one would expect the author to give a standard definition, but as we will see, he only approaches it tangentially. About as close as he comes to a working definition of democracy is Rousseau’s, and he argues, “A mass which delegates its sovereignty, that is to say transfers its sovereignty to the hands of a few individuals, abdicates its sovereign functions. For the will of the people is not transferable, nor even the will of the single individual.”115 His estimation of professional leadership is akin to Rousseau’s, in that it is the “beginning of the end.”116117 This tends to mean that his specific theorizing about ‘democracy’, while important, is less valuable for its conclusions and more so for the questions with which Michels will leave us about its organizational forms. Deciding that democracy leads to oligarchy will only have meaning if the definition of democracy that

115 Michels, Political Parties, 36-37.
116 Ibid.
117 Max Weber, on the other hand, saw in the rise of the vocational politician a potential antidote for the professional one.
we use is one in which a non-oligarchized mass becomes dominated by an oligarchy (willingly or not). If this was never the case (or if there are ways out) then the ‘iron law’ may be less sturdy than Michels thinks it is.

Perhaps part of the problem was the era’s larger discussion about the very meaning of democracy. Marx had charged that the “first step in the revolution by the working class, is to raise the proletariat to the position of ruling class, to win the battle of democracy.” Even amongst socialists there was myriad discussion of democracy’s salient features: was it to be a parliament dominated by a working class party that passed legislation nationalizing industries, a society ruled by decentralized, syndicalist unions, a collection of workers’ and peasants’ councils, or something else entirely? Would there need to be a revolution, or could the old society ‘grow into’ a new order? Michels’ view of Rousseauian direct-democracy was by no means a unique viewpoint amongst socialists of the era; it was a dominant theme amongst syndicalists that representative government could not be democratic, and that direct democracy was democracy’s only legitimate form. We can view it as just one part of a spectrum that ranged to acceptance of parliamentary forms as democratic and socialist. This was part of the larger discussion across the ideological spectrum on democracy. So, we have to see Michels’ hypotheses on democracy as one of many, but one directly related to the concept of socialism and democracy as being intertwined, something a linkage that has been lost over much of the last century.

What interests us is the overarching premise upon which Michels rests his work’s argument in the section *Democracy and Aristocracy*; that the fundamental feature of

---

119 In German the phrase is *die Erkämpfung der Demokratie*, which literally means, “win the struggle of democracy.” This is a slightly different meaning.
modern democracy is the political party, and that "the political party is founded in most cases on the principle of the majority, and is founded always on the principle of the mass." Thus in the modern era even the hereditary aristocracy is forced to create a political organization to appeal to the masses against democracy – and the aristocratic state (Germany) creates parliamentary forms to buttress its legitimacy. The rise of the ‘mass’ and its demands for inclusion in politics meant democratic forms had to be used as a form of control. Michels also cites the rise of the political party as a part and parcel of this late-19th and early-20th century phenomenon; the political party that was initially created to expand the democratic franchise became a tool to restrict the democratic will of the majority. In fact Michels pointedly argues the political party contains the germ of aristocracy within itself. He writes:

“We may sum up the argument by saying that in modern party life aristocracy gladly presents itself in democratic guise, while the substance of democracy is permeated with aristocratic elements. On the one side we have aristocracy in a democratic form, and on the other democracy with an aristocratic content. The democratic external form which characterizes the life of political parties may readily veil from superficial observers the tendency towards aristocracy, or rather towards oligarchy, which is inherent in all party organization.”

I think, here, we see the first stirrings of the contradictory democratic undertones of the work. Expansion of the franchise was due to pressure from the masses. Parties of the aristocracy must base themselves, to some extent, as legitimate executors of the will of the mass. The new aristocracy, or rather oligarchy, is a different form of domination than hereditary rule of the nobility. While Michels will point out that political parties are dominated by cliques and, in that regard, political families, they gain their rights not from a dynasty connected to land and god, but rather votes by the masses. All parties are subject to these tendencies; meaning that representative government might not be a

---

120 Ibid, 3.
121 This is a favorite term of Michels, Mosca, and Pareto, though the concept is ill defined.
122 Ibid, 10-11.
‘democracy’ but the democratic undertones of legitimation by vote of the masses is an important distinction to make.

He goes on to explain why he has chosen the Social Democrats as his target:

“If we wish to obtain light upon this tendency, the best field of observation is offered by the intimate structure of the democratic parties, and, among these, of the socialist and revolutionary labour party. In the conservative parties, except during elections, the tendency to oligarchy manifests itself with that spontaneous vigour and clearness which corresponds with the essentially oligarchical character of these parties. But the parties which are subversive in their aims exhibit the like phenomena no less markedly… thus the appearance of oligarchical phenomena in the very bosom of the revolutionary parties is a conclusive proof of the existence of immanent oligarchical tendencies in every kind of human organization which strives for the attainment of definite ends.”[^123]

Thus Michels has three clear hypotheses:

1. All human organizations are prone to oligarchic tendencies. This is no less true for revolutionary organizations than expressly aristocratic ones.

2. Revolutionary socialist and labor organizations are important because: they are the only organizations that claim to be fighting for full democracy in the economic, social, and political spheres. If they too succumb to oligarchic tendencies, then there is little hope for democratic change.

3. In modern societies, it is organization that creates the tendency toward oligarchy. This is a distinct difference between Michels’ writing and that of Mosca and Pareto.

This is not just an example of taking an assumed “least favorable case” for his argument and attempting to prove the hypothesis. German Social Democracy claimed to be fighting not just for socialist transformation of the economy but also for immediate democratic reforms to the German franchise, as well as a host of other democratic demands. If the party apparently most interested in these reforms were to prove to be controlled by a clique no less than the party of the Prussian Junkers[^124], Michels argues, then the reforms are, in the end, meaningless for any kind of real control over everyday life by the masses. Additionally, Michels had no use for liberalism or liberal claims to

[^123]: Ibid., 11.
[^124]: The Conservative Party.
democracy, for “nor does the theory of liberalism primarily base its aspirations upon the masses. It appeals for support to certain definite classes… which do not yet possess political privileges… the cultured and possessing classes. For the liberals also, the masses pure and simple are no more than a necessary evil, whose only use is to help others to the attainment of ends to which they themselves are strangers.”

Michels’ socialism and democracy are intertwined – there is no other party but the socialist that will be able to deliver real democratic change, and no class but the working class or “masses” that has any real interest in doing so for the population. This is an important concept for the rest of our study, for even though he will use refer to liberal, socialist, and aristocratic parties in his discussion of democracy, it is clear that while he sees liberal and aristocratic organizations participating, he does not see them interested in the full realization of democracy.

Organization

The paradoxical phenomenon Michels and his contemporaries observed was that, as the franchise grew in the late 19th century and allowed for the participation of ever-larger numbers of people, consequently the political parties that sprung up required ever more sophisticated techniques to achieve electoral victories. The amorphous masses of democratic citizenry were thus aligned into strict channels of participation. Michels goes so far to claim, “democracy is inconceivable without organization… organization, based

---

125 Ibid., 7.
126 Indeed, the later Michels’ apologias for Mussolini seem to show that with this hypothesis one could argue that if an open oligarchy were in power it would at least be an honest form of domination, unlike the rule of supposedly ‘democratic’ liberal parties, whom he continued to despise until the end of his life.
as it is on the principle of the least effort… is the weapon of the weak in their struggle with the strong.” ¹²⁷ However

“This politically necessary principle of organization, while it overcomes that disorganization of forces which would be favorable to the adversary, brings other dangers in its train. We escape Scylla only to dash ourselves on Charybdis. Organization is, in fact, the source from which the conservative currents flow over the plain of democracy, occasioning there disastrous floods and rendering the plain unrecognizable.” ¹²⁸

In Machavelli’s *Prince* fortune is like a river, but in Michels it is not unpredictability but the most predictable path of all - organization and bureaucracy - that creates the flood that overflows and destroys democracy. The weak are compelled to organize strong political parties to combat the elite, and yet it is these political parties that, once organized, Michels claims will never accomplish the end-goals that were initially set for them. It his focus on the tendencies of organization to create oligarchy that set him apart from Mosca and Pareto, who simply assumed that an elite, based on cultural and psychological tendencies, were naturally occurring. The structure of the system (an inevitable structure for him) created by the needs of the modern bourgeois electoral system and the rise of the ‘mass’ in politics was at the core of the problem of elite domination and the impossibility of democracy. It is upon this that Michels rests his theory, though it is also where he received the most strident criticism from Weber and other intellectual peers.

According to Michels,

“Organization implies the tendency to oligarchy. In every organization, whether it be a political party, a professional union, or any other association of the kind, the aristocratic tendency manifests itself very clearly. The mechanism of the organization, while conferring a solidity of structure, induces serious changes in the organized mass, completely inverting the respective position of the leaders and led. As a result of organization, every party or professional union becomes divided into a minority of directors and a majority of directed.”

¹²⁸ Ibid, 22.
Organization normally implies some sort of division of labor, and at times a kind of board of directors to oversee the everyday chores a group encounters. The argument that Michels constructs goes further to assume that the structure of organization creates a permanent change in the relationship between the mass and elite that is (seemingly) irreversible. Obviously there is a question of why the mass allows itself to be led. Yet there is also, in his non-definition of organization, another problem. Does organization simply mean having a board of elected representatives within a party or union? That is a far cry from a cadre of salaried bureaucrats at the helm of a party organization. Without a proper definition of organization (something he would be criticized for by Weber) we are left to wonder. In a footnote Michels quotes Rosa Luxemburg’s warnings about the imposition of salaried officials in the SPD to local branches from the central office.

“There can be no doubt that this seamy side of officialism involved serious dangers for the party. The latest innovation in this direction, in the German social democratic party, is the appointment of salaried secretaries to the local branches. Unless the rank and file of the party keep very much on the alert, unless they are careful that these secretaries shall be restricted to purely executive functions, the secretaries will come to be regarded as the natural and sole depositaries of all power of initiative, and as the exclusive leaders of local party life.”

Michels is really examining two separate but interrelated phenomena involved with the construction of a mass political party in the modern era, although he conflates the two. They are:

1. The growth of an executive board, elected officers, or representatives to take care of the functioning of a large and geographically dispersed organization.

2. The use of unelected, salaried administrators within an organization as division of labor increases and specialization of function is required.

Within German social democracy there was a long tradition of elected party congresses and centralized officialdom, but the link between party locals and the executive was kept

---

129 Ibid, 32.
by the *Vertrauensmann*\textsuperscript{130} who Michels describes as “still a simple workmate, sharing the mode of life and the social condition of his fellows.”\textsuperscript{131} It was only in the first decade of the twentieth century that the party (at the urging of the left-wing) began to replace the system of loose, elected *Vertrauensmann* with salaried bureaucrats appointed to locals by the central executive. He argues, “It is indisputable that the oligarchical and bureaucratic tendency of party organization is a matter of technical and practical necessity.”\textsuperscript{132} He then states, “To-day he has been replaced by the professional politician, the *Bezerkleiter* (U.S. ward-boss), etc. The more solid the structure of an organization becomes in the course of the evolution of the modern political party, the more marked becomes the tendency to replace the emergency leader by the professional leader.”\textsuperscript{133} The growth of the need for technical skill is one of the great themes at play here; obviously Michels believed that, given the exigencies of modern electoral parties, such a shift was inevitable if a party wanted electoral success, thus decreasing the power of the party rank-and-file. Yet while it is probable in large organizations that the two have grown side by side, it is also wrong to say that one inevitably leads to the other. Delegated leadership in the form of an executive board was common prior to the era of mass parties and may or may not be oligarchic in Michels’ sense; the exigencies of regular electoral work might be carried out by a small but regular executive body and large numbers of volunteers, though parties tend to choose paid party workers to give them greater flexibility (besides retaining talented workers).

\textsuperscript{130} Literally, ‘confidence man’, although in Germany the word actually means a person in which you can place your trust.  
\textsuperscript{131} Ibid, 36.  
\textsuperscript{132} Ibid., 35.  
\textsuperscript{133} Ibid. 36.
It is also only in a specific form of democracy that representation must be seen as abnegating the will of the majority. As stated before, Michels advocates a Rousseauian conception of democracy, stating “a mass which transfers its sovereignty to the hands of a few individuals, abdicates its sovereign functions. For the will of the people is not transferable, nor even the will of a single individual.”\(^{134}\) If democracy is, for Michels, the ability of the ‘mass’ or individual to efficaciously enact their sovereign desires and participating in articulating a general will, then clearly any form of representation will end up negating said sovereignty. Only direct, participatory assemblies would have the capability of being democratic. Yet Michels spends a great deal of time denying the possibility of said assemblies to be functional, and then describing how they would still be dominated by those with oratorical skills and charisma. In fact his example is that of Labriola, his Italian syndicalist comrade, convincing an assembly of striking workers to continue the strike merely by making a passionate speech. Grassroots assemblies seem to inevitably have a problem with the appearance of powerful and charismatic speakers, but it is unclear why it is necessarily the case that even they will inevitably become undemocratic in the face of charismatic members.\(^{135}\) Of course, there is also the problem of Michels’ curiously strict interpretation of democracy and overly loose description of organization, which seems to create a fait accompli for his argument. This is no reason to throw the baby out with the bathwater, but rather to understand that his argument about

\(^{134}\) Ibid, 37.

\(^{135}\) Is it merely the appearance of dominant and charismatic individuals that is a problem here for Michels, when he discusses direct democratic assemblies? If so, it is unclear what his idea of a healthy, functioning grassroots democratic body would be. Would each individual have to act on a purely rational basis, with no passionate arguments allowed? Clearly the difference between the ‘leaders’ and ‘led’ in an assembly is different than that of a professional party machine – though we have to concede that Greek examples show that there is potentially a danger in the split becoming quasi-permanent.
oligarchy in political parties must be unpacked while acknowledging the limitations of
his conception of democracy.

*Leadership and the Fighting Party*

Having laid the groundwork with his conception of democracy and oligarchy,
Michels goes on to describe the preconditions that political parties, especially the
socialist parties of his day, created in their rhetoric for the principle of oligarchic
leadership. Military phraseology was not uncommon, both in party slogans and
intellectual journals. Michels points out that Ferdinand Lassalle, one of the founders of
German socialism, believed that “the rank and file… must follow their chief blindly, and
the whole organization must be like a hammer in the hands of its president.” We must
grant that German social democracy grew up in the midst of a highly militarized Prussian
society, and working class members of a society are usually highly inculcated by that
society’s norms and values. Socialism, especially Marxist socialism predicated upon the
concept of class struggle, is bound up with the concept of revolution (usually perceived
as violent) and the overthrow of the old order. Marx in the Eighteenth Brumaire speaks
of the proletariat smashing the machinery of the state, and in his writings on the Paris
Commune of 1871 he applauded the Communards for ‘storming heaven’ and setting up
the dictatorship of the proletariat in embryo. It is hardly a leap to see how Social
Democracy would adopt such language, even if the reality of the Social Democrats by the
turn of the twentieth century was hardly revolutionary.

Michels, of course, sees it as a symptom of a party structured in such a way as to
see leaders and lead, generals and soldiers. Although the working class must emancipate
itself, it could be helped along with the proper guidance from its vanguard. How can a

136 Ibid, 41.
‘fighting party’ allow too much democracy, if it needs to act quickly to take advantage of a revolutionary situation? Indeed, a “fighting party needs a hierarchical structure” according to Michels.\(^\text{137}\) If then, bourgeois parties never claim to be radically democratic in structure, and the revolutionary socialist party hews to military formulations, the point may be well taken that political parties in the modern era have evolved to a point where democracy is limited for the sake of organizational success. Yet, for Michels, to understand such success we must understand the structure and psychology of leadership and its interplay with the masses.

Once representation is established within a political party, the effects of incumbency are felt almost immediately. Michels calls them a ‘customary right’ and that delegates to the executive committee, party congress, or parliament gain a feeling of entitlement to their offices. He claims that “whenever an obstacle is encountered, the leaders are apt to offer to resign, professing they are weary of office, but really aiming to show the dissentients the indispensability of their leadership.”\(^\text{138}\) Socialist Party representatives in Italy who were reproached for their reformist ways threatened to resign their seats in Parliament, and got their way because the rank-and-file were loathe having to contest the seats again. He states:

“One who holds the office of delegate acquires a moral right to that office, and delegates remain in office unless removed by extraordinary circumstances or in obedience to rules observed with exceptional strictness. An election made for a definite purpose becomes a life incumbency. Custom becomes a right…. [the false threat of resignation when incumbents disagree with party decisions made by the masses] often happens [in] socialist members of parliament [that] find themselves in disagreement with the majority of the party upon some question of importance, such as that of the opportuneness of a general strike; or in the party branches they may wish to record their votes in opposition to the views of their respective branches… at the socialist congress in Bologna in 1904, some of the deputies voted in favor of the reformist resolution, in opposition to the wishes of the majority of comrades whose views they were supposed to represent. When called to account, they offered to resign their seats, and the party electors, wishing to avoid the expense and trouble of a new election, and afraid of the loss of party seats, hastened to condone the deputies’ action. In May 1906, twenty-four out of the twenty-seven members of the socialist group in the

\(^{137}\) Ibid. 42.
\(^{138}\) Ibid. 46.
Chamber resigned their seats, in consequence of the difference of views between themselves and the rank-and-file on the subject of the general strike, which the deputies had repudiated. All but three were re-elected.\footnote{139}

Yet it seems more likely that the basic effects of incumbency: name recognition, establishment of competence, access to connections and levers of power, all of these things play an important part in the establishment of self-perpetuating leadership groups within political parties, and for Michels, permanent oligarchy. Thus the leadership soon accepts its role as much as the masses come to accept the leadership’s dominance.

Michels goes on to establish his claims about mass psychology, namely that most party members and citizens are apathetic and would rather not participate in political action or concern themselves with politics. A minority of activists runs most parties, and the Social Democrats are no different. A minority of enrolled party members bothers to attend meetings regularly, and thus become the controlling cadre even if it is a \textit{de facto} situation and not mandated by party bylaws. In a footnote he explains:

```
“Here is a typical example. The deputy Leonida Bissolati, a leading Italian socialist and one of the founders of the party, was on November 5, 1905 (with other distinguished members) expelled from the party. The expulsion was affected at a meeting of the Roman branch. The full membership of this branch was seven hundred, but only one hundred were present at the meeting; of these fifty-five voted for the exclusion and forty-five against. (“Azione Socialista,” I, No. 28). In May 1910, the same branch then containing about six hundred members, passed a resolution fiercely condemning the socialist deputies on account of their being too friendly with the ministry. The resolution was carried by forty-one votes against twenty-four (“Stampa,” liv, No. 134).”\footnote{140}
```

Also:

```
“In the modern democratic parties… it is only a minority which participates in party decisions, and sometimes that minority is ludicrously small. The most important resolutions taken by the most democratic of all parties, the socialist party, always emanate from a handful of the members.”\footnote{141}
```

The level of party activists already shows itself to be at an abysmally small level of enrolled party members. A \textit{de facto} clique of people who have the time or care enough to

\footnote{139} Ibid, 45-47. \footnote{140} Ibid, 50-51. \footnote{141} Ibid.
attend meetings and vote on resolutions control the apparatus tacitly supported by the vast mass of enrollees, and an even smaller group of party officers at the top. Yet why is there not more participation on the part of party members? Michels answers that “though it grumbles occasionally, the majority is really delighted to find persons who will take the trouble to look after its affairs… in the mass… there is an immense need for direction and guidance.”

The masses are ill educated, overworked, and separated from a picture of totality by the division of labor. Much like the argument of Dahl in *Who Governs?* Michels sees the majority of people as incapable or unwilling to exercise their democratic will as party members. This leads to a creation of the cult of the leader, and acceptance of the actions of the leadership. If the masses are too uninterested in thinking for themselves, why would they challenge the orders of the executive board?

Of course, Michels points out that the apathy of the masses can backfire on a leadership determined to engage in strident action. He gives an example:

“In Saxony, in 1895, when it was proposed to restrict the suffrage, the socialist leaders vainly endeavored to arouse a general agitation, their attempts being rendered nugatory by the general apathy of the masses. The language of the press was inflammatory. Millions of leaflets were distributed. Within the space of a few days a hundred and fifty meetings of protest were held. All was without effect. There was no genuine agitation. The meetings, especially in the outlying districts, were very scantily attended. The leaders, alike the Central Committee and the district organizers, were overwhelmed with disgust at the calm indifference of the mass, which rendered serious agitation altogether impossible. The failure of the movement was due to an error of omission on the part of the leaders. The rank and file did not recognize the importance of the loss they were to suffer because the leaders had neglected to point out all the consequences. Accustomed to being ruled, the rank and file need a considerable work of preparation before they can be set in motion. In default of this, and when signals which the rank and file do not understand are unexpectedly made by the leaders, they pay no attention.”

The ‘mass’ is perfectly willing to be led, as long as adequate work is done to arouse them from their typical state of apathy. Here lies another question: was this the apathy of the

---

142 Ibid., 53.
143 Interestingly Lukacs would make the reverse argument that the structural position of the proletariat is such that only the working class can see the totality of the capitalist system and how to move beyond its problems.
144 Ibid., 55-6.
masses or common sense? As we will see in the next chapter, the German Reichstag was a mostly impotent body anyway; it is possible Michels glosses over the fact that the masses might have had a basic understanding of this and refused to be aroused for a mostly meaningless suffrage struggle. So, while the mass might be apathetic, it may be for the reasons Michels argues (psychological) or even structural, something he pursues with less vigor.

Mass psychology and Michels’ interpretation are also introduced at this stage. The masses, he writes, are prone to elevating their leaders to cult-like status and bestowing honors upon them after long years of service. As the split between leaders and led turns into a quasi-permanent one, and incumbents routinely voted back into office year after year, they only see it as a right that they are routinely showered with praise and gratitude. Bebel and the elder Liebknecht, founders of the SPD, were each returned to party office (and Bebel the Reichstag) until the ends of their lives. Apparently “The German socialist party showed a fine spirit of gratitude toward the elder Liebknecht, appointing him, when his intellectual powers were already beginning to fail, to the editorship of “Vorwärts,” and voting him, though not without opposition, a salary of 360 pounds (Protokoll des socialdemokratischen Parteitags zu Frankfurt, 1894, pg. 33). When Liebknecht died and his family was left badly off, the party provided funds for the continuance of his sons’ education.”

Ferdinand Lassalle was routinely showered with wreaths and parades were held in his honor. In more rural areas of agitation the peasantry treated the party leadership as they had treated the clergy in previous eras. The leaders thus attained a supernatural aura about them, even as they directed a party committed to leveling societal inequalities.

What is interesting about Michels’ analysis of the veneration of leaders by the masses is the active quality of their ‘love’ for the party bosses. There is energy on the part of the masses, but it is directed entirely at the leadership, and at times what the

145 Ibid, 61.
leadership wants. Although this begs the question, because it seems that the masses have energy that could be used on their own behalf if they so chose. Michels, in this chapter, ignores the fact that there are many intermediary levels of leader who are not venerated by the masses but simply go about their jobs thanklessly. While it is undoubtedly true that the great mass of people at times heap too much praise on the leadership for their deeds, thus helping continue the mental and physical gap between leaders and led, this shows how maddeningly brilliant and how much was left out of *Political Parties*. If most of the party staff is ignored, are the masses really venerating leaders, or just the top echelon? What does this mean for his theory of mass psychology? In comparison to Weber’s studies, it is much sloppier (though perhaps this is an unfair comparison, even if Weber was his mentor).

I think, rather, we can see a few things in Michels’ development of the leadership question. First, the progression of types of leader is from those who base their leadership on superior oratorical skill, to those who have some oratorical skill but whose real talents lie in making use of the party machinery. Leadership transfers from the charismatic speaker of the direct democratic assembly to the party boss, as the complexity of the machinery increases. In this he is correct; the need for skilled orators drops and becomes a thing of the past as we reach an era in which merely competent speakers who have the support of the party organization dominate. Yet again there is an undertone here – it is still the masses that must legitimate the rule of the leadership. While Michels is correct that the problem of participation by the masses is at the core of the leadership dilemma, it is also the case that the masses provide the validation, in the final instance, for the leaders. Michels countered that the masses rarely choose to exercise such a function –
but the very fact that it exists means a democratic counter-tendency is possible, no matter how feeble it may be.

*Superiority of the Leaders?*

Leaders, then, are not only believed by the masses to be superior, but Michels points out that they seem to be more competent to rule than the masses are. As a political party grows, the “provisional must then give place to the permanent, and dilettantism must yield to professionalism.”¹⁴⁶ The staff and leadership of a party evolve from the volunteers of the early era to paid staff and permanent representatives in parliament. The Social Democrats of the underground period in the 19th century gave way to a sophisticated national staff; other parties would follow suit by copying the SPD model. Given the varied tasks necessarily performed in an organization or party, Michels notes that specialization is required in leadership roles. Staff members specialize in propaganda, organizing, get out the vote efforts, and there is little need for a broadly talented leader when the party is large and geographically varied. Michels goes on to make the claim that due to the training, intelligence, and specialization, the divorce from the masses becomes ever more severe as the leadership *is* actually more competent to rule than the party membership.

In fact, this was an argument to be taken up in later decades by theorists of bureaucratic dominance like Bruno Rizzi or James Burnham, who argued that the division of labor in modern industrial society was enough to make it technically impossible for the working class to have democratic control over the means of production without the aid of technocrats and specialists, who were the real beneficiaries of industrialization. The technical skill necessary to run a workplace, and the difficulty a

¹⁴⁶ Ibid, 80.
line worker would have doing so, was already apparent in Germany during the era in which Michels wrote *Political Parties*. Added to that was the traditionally conservative argument that the better educated and wealthier have more of a grasp of national and international affairs – a Madisonian hypothesis at its core – and thus they should rule. It is, of course, hard to argue that running a competent political campaign, whether electoral or not, requires skill and knowledge. Most people have little time to devote to learning such a craft, and even less patience to conduct it, and the masses of SPD members were seemingly happy enough to allow the party staff to conduct day-to-day affairs.

Still, the problem here is that as the skill of the party staff and leadership becomes more specialized, are they really more competent than the rank-and-file, who remain generalists? This is the great fallacy of theories that deal with bureaucratic domination. While specialists may be necessary to run a modern party, and their technical skill may make some aspects of party life outside the reach of the typical party member, their competence level on the whole cannot be any greater than an interested party member. If, somehow, a truly competent rank-and-file regime were to emerge they could supervise the staff either by reducing their duties simply remaining vigilant about the real power the specialized party workers wielded. While Michels is correct in worrying about the increasing reach of specialization, there is a problem with his not taking the argument as far as it goes; to the problems specialists often have with acting as generalists when necessary.

Michels argues “thus democracy ends by undergoing a transformation into a form of government by the best, into an aristocracy.” The growth of bureaucratic and administrative posts within political parties, leadership dominance, and specialization of

---

147 Ibid, 89.
function all detract from the very possibility the mass could exercise democratic
influence even if it so chose. Clearly the mimicking of the growing complexity of the
capitalist economy within the political superstructure was no coincidence. Michels is
linking the growth of the bureaucratic structure of political parties with the expansion of
the capitalist economy. Though he never explicitly states it, this is a Marxist analysis at
its core, how in every society the form of organization follows definite social
relationships. As the structure of work at the point of production becomes more
vertically integrated, so to does that of political organization.

Yet again Political Parties is maddening for its brilliance but also for its
omission. There is no counter-analysis of ‘mass subservience’ or even a discussion of
counter-examples: worker owned-and-operated co-operatives, grassroots strike councils,
local town government. Of course it is possible to find all these lacking or examples that
prove the rule, but their exclusion points to a very ideologically charged commentary on
what is actually a complex topic of mass control, capacity, and desire to participate.
Either the spread of democratic forms across Europe was simply the newest guise for
ruling class domination, a transitory form of bourgeois rule, or it was a harbinger of
things to come. Michels clings to the concept that not only is democratic form anything
but, a permanent elite also dominates making the form a shade of what it should be.
While it might be difficult for the mass to exercise their democratic demands or will even
if they are successful, there is also a capacity and desire for struggle that one could
witness very well even in the first decade of the twentieth century. If the masses are
willing to struggle, and Michels admits that the leaders cannot get them to act in accord
with the wishes of the party all the time, then there is a possibility they have some desire
and competence beyond what he is ascribing them. If this is so, then there might be a chance around some of the problems he highlights – or if not, at least it is worth a discussion that never comes.

*The Consolidated Party and Leadership*

As a political party becomes a stable entity after the period of mostly volunteer activism and leadership, certain characteristics arise. According to Michels, these have to do with the long-term stability of the leadership, the rivalry of old and new leadership groups with eventual incorporation of elements of the new, leadership effects on the mass, and the growth of a party bureaucracy. All of these could be seen in the history of the SPD from its inception in the 1870s until the publication of *Political Parties* in the second decade of the twentieth century. At this point the long-term character of the oligarchy becomes more apparent, and almost impossible to dislodge (if it had been any easier in the period of volunteerism). Leaders quarrel not over democracy, but rather over their relative strength within the party, although at times they use the masses and their discontents as a façade for their own machinations. Party bureaucracy, mimicking state bureaucracy, appears on the scene and starts its rapid growth. Let us examine each of these in turn.

Especially within the SPD, there was little leadership turnover, something that was noticed by Michels and quite a few other contemporary authors. Bebel and Liebknecht each held high party office until their deaths, along with party stalwarts like George von Vollmar and many others. Michels studied the lists of socialist delegates to the Second International’s congress at Cologne in 1893 – specifically of the German, Italian, and French parties – and found that
Once a person attains high party office, it seems, they are either loath giving up the prestige and/or power it brings, or they are committed enough ideologically that abandoning the struggle is not easy for them. Regardless, long tenure in office is a sign of dominance by a small minority of party members over the great majority. As we have noted before, incumbency usually spells victory for a candidate – no less true in the modern era than in Michels’ day – but the small amount of turnover also means the leadership has no desire to let go of what it has acquired, for better or ill. In fact, Michels explicitly states, “Long tenure of office involves dangers for democracy. For this reason those organizations which are anxious to retain their democratic essence makes it a rule that all offices at their disposal shall be conferred for brief periods only.” Short terms and rapid turnover in office make it difficult for any one person to accumulate enough power and name recognition to build up a cult of personality within the party or have enough access to the levers of power to maintain their office against the will of the masses. Of course, the side effect of rapid turnover in leadership positions tends to be increased strength of the administrative apparatus (since they are the ones who then acquire the real governing knowledge), something with which Michels would no doubt concur. Still, it is undoubtedly true that “the longer the tenure in office, the greater becomes the influence of the leader over the masses and the greater therefore his independence. Consequently a frequent repetition of election is an elementary precaution

148 Ibid, 96.
149 Ibid, 97.
on the part of democracy against the virus of oligarchy."\textsuperscript{150} With this we must no doubt concur. Yet party leadership is almost always against limited tenure and term limits for self-serving reasons. The masses also, as previously stated, seem to grow to appreciate the specialized work the leadership does, making the argument easier for leaders in their re-election campaigns or for longer terms.

It does not aid the case against incumbency and oligarchy that the majority of rank and file members have a far more limited tenure as party activists (at least in the SPD). Michels highlights the statistics of membership in the Munich local of the SPD for the year 1906. Close to 47\% of them have been active for 2 years or less. The largest swath of the rest was active between 2-5 years (32.5\%).\textsuperscript{151} It is unclear why so few people chose to remain active members for a longer period of time (though it is also possible the party was attracting a great deal of younger and new members in that era). Perhaps some felt stymied by the leadership’s control over party activities or the limited nature of party democracy. Others might simply have gotten bored, as many new members of organizations are wont to do. This lends credence to Michels’ concept of mass apathy or disillusionment with the leadership. A leadership that turns over only infrequently coupled with new members who rarely feel empowered to challenge the elder members of the party bodes ill for dissent and democratic challenges within the party apparatus.

There seem to be a few main reasons Michels proffers for the stability of the leadership vis-à-vis the mass of party members, especially within the SPD. He sees it partly as a characteristic of German ‘spirit’ that they have fidelity to their organization. It

\textsuperscript{150} Ibid, 98.
\textsuperscript{151} Ibid, 79.
is also likely that the utter isolation of the socialists and working class within Wilhelmine Germany made a transition from the SPD to any other party or occupation rare and difficult. There may simply have been nowhere else to go once committed to socialism.

They were also not able to join the government as ministers; though he does suggest,

“the virtue of the German labor leaders lies in the fact that they have never been exposed to serious temptations, so that it resembles that of a young woman who has never been courted… Arturo Labriola… is undoubtedly right in his caustic prediction that as soon as the day comes when the German Government is willing to afford itself the luxury of a lukewarm liberal ministry, since the socialists are really not difficult to satisfy, the ‘reformist infection’ will spread far even in Germany.”

This seems to hold special resonance as the party leadership decayed rapidly after being let into the government during and after WWI. Many of the party intellectuals like Kautsky could likely have made a better living in terms of money by choosing another profession. Yet they stuck with the party once in it, perhaps because as Michels also notes

“the practice of paying for the services rendered to the party by its employees creates a bond which many of the comrades hesitate to break, and this for a thousand reasons. The pecuniary remuneration for services to the party which is given by the German social democracy immunizes the party employees against the grosser forms of temptation.”

Part of the loyalty seems to have been the capacity for the SPD to pay its operatives.

This seems applicable to most political parties in a democratic system; being paid by an organization with which you have some ideological affinity likely decreases the risk of desertion. Yet this also means those who hold the key to the purse strings are extraordinarily influential party members, and likely to be supported by the mass of party activists on the party dole. Again, another support is laid in place for the continued dominance of a very few inside the political organization.

As the party grows and takes office, the parliamentary branch of the organization gains power above their official rank. This is, as Political Parties identifies, due to the

---

152 Ibid, 112.
153 Ibid, 114.
largely “parliamentary character of the modern socialist parties.”\textsuperscript{154} Elected officials tend to become the mouthpiece of political organizations due to their political office and the fact that the media will pay attention to what they say, for good or ill. In fact, Michels states that

“To today the socialist masses in Germany have accustomed themselves to the idea that the decisive struggle on behalf of the aims they have at heart will be carried out in parliament, and for this reason they scrupulously avoid doing anything which might make difficulties for their parliamentary representatives.”\textsuperscript{155}

Indeed the parliamentary representatives, due to the emphasis electoral parties place on holding seats, become nearly immune to any real censure even if their actions are contrary to those wished by the party congress or the rank and file. Of course this creates an almost untouchable oligarchy, especially if the party’s representatives have any say on making party policy. In addition the representatives encounter the traditional dilemma faced by elected officials in a normal parliamentary system: do they owe their allegiance to the constituency of voters who elected them or to the party to which they belong, especially if it is an ideological one like the SPD? If we extrapolate Michels’ thesis, it is likely that they will lean on both, depending on which side pressures them more at the time, and reap the benefits of being able to use both and commit to neither. It is also interesting, according to Michels, that the party does a good job of pointing out the cliques and oligarchies in the rest of society (even their union allies) without recognizing it inside the party itself. The party leadership calls on the German government to enact a process for citizen initiative and referenda, but these reforms are never put into place within the party itself as they might threaten leadership’s power.\textsuperscript{156}

\textsuperscript{154} Ibid, 136.  
\textsuperscript{155} Ibid, 138.  
\textsuperscript{156} Ibid, 146.
The only limitation, it seems, to the leadership’s power is the rise of new rivalries within the party itself. Party rivalries at times cross over as part of a rank and file period of discontent as

“The oligarchy which issues from democracy is menaced by two grave dangers: the revolt of the masses, and (in intimate relationship with this revolt, of which it is often the result) the transition to a dictatorship when one among the oligarchs succeeds in obtaining supreme power. Of these two dangers, one comes from below, whilst the other arises within the very bosom of the oligarchy: we have rebellion on one side, and usurpation on the other. The consequence is that in all modern popular parties a spirit of genuine fraternity is conspicuously lacking; we do not see sincere and cordial mutual trust; there is a continual latent struggle, and a spirit of irritation determined by the reciprocal mistrusts of the leaders, and this spirit has become one of the most essential characteristics of every democracy.”

Michels notes that this struggle often comes at the risk of serious limitation of free speech and democratic rights within the party, as the old leadership will often result to censorship and expulsion to keep their posts. Oftentimes the leadership will even be able to count on the party masses to support them against dissident leadership factions. This has been documented quite well in the history of American unionism, as even rank-and-file reform caucuses in groups like the Teamsters or Mineworkers Union have been painted as unsavory types by an entrenched leadership even if they bring legitimate demands that might help the masses. Very often, though, the entrenched elite seems to be smart enough to offer some kind of compromise and appoint parts of the dissident, rival oligarchic faction to leadership positions.

The masses, of course, have the capability to dislodge the leadership via elections if they so choose, though they rarely exercise that right. In fact, Michels points out that when they do defeat someone who has been in party office for quite a while, the leadership as a whole expresses its displeasure. If Michels is correct, this means that the

---

157 Ibid, 168.
158 Ibid, 177.
masses are under a great deal of psychological pressure as well not to revolt against the entrenched incumbents. Still

“It cannot be denied that the masses revolt from time to time, but their revolts are always suppressed. It is only when the dominant classes, struck by sudden blindness, pursue a policy which strains social relationships to the breaking point, that the party masses appear actively on the stage of history and overthrow the power of the oligarchies. Every autonomous movement of the masses signifies a profound discordance with the will of the leaders. Apart from such transient interruptions, the natural and normal development of the organization will impress upon the most revolutionary of parties an indelible stamp of conservatism.”

What is interesting here is that there is still apparently a latent energy on the part of the masses, and an understanding that they have a capacity to overturn the old order if they wish, though the obstacles placed in their path are numerous indeed. Again, there is an undercurrent of democratic revolt here, something Michels is seeking, even if he despairs of its efficacy. Thus there is always a possibility of grassroots success even if that possibility is remote – something that makes the iron law less than solid.

Finally, and as a capstone to the development of a robust electoral party, is the development of a party bureaucracy. In fact “the organization of the state needs a numerous and complicated bureaucracy,” but the modern political party mimics the structure of the state apparatus. Bureaucracy grows, as there is need for it in the electoral and agitational activities. Once embedded, the bureaucracy tends to support those that will fund its continued existence, who tend to be those already in power. Bureaucracy, though, “is the sworn enemy of individual liberty, and of all bold initiative in matters of internal policy.” It also finds its justification in the mundane tasks of everyday life, not revolutionary ideals or goals. Michels traces the degeneration of the Second International to the growth of socialist party members more interested in

---

159 Ibid, 162-3.
160 Ibid, 185.
161 Ibid, 189.
potholes, electricity, and grain tariffs than revolution. He adds in this chapter that the argument within the SPD (and repeated in many other parties) of centralization vs. decentralization is exposed by the work as often being one between the national leadership and leaders of regional organizations who have no hope of claiming a majority at that level.

**Mass Psychology, Leadership, and Possible Cures**

The last few sections of *Political Parties* outline the effects of leadership on the leaders, the changes undergone by a previously ideological party as it courts electoral success, and potential democratic cures for the oligarchic ills that haunt organization. Michels winds us through an array of arguments in order to reach his conclusion; namely, that oligarchy is inevitable and that democratic moments are fleeting, if they exist at all. The latter half of the work is filled with very specific allusions to the workings of the German Social Democratic party, and some chapters read like the polemic it is rather than the work of neutral social science Michels modestly claimed it was. Or perhaps it is, as Weber had cautioned in his review of Michels’ never published article for the *Archiv*, a cross between both, satisfying neither.

As much of a psychological effect as organization has on the mass, Michels argues that it has a complementary effect on the leaders themselves. Indeed

> “The apathy of the masses and their need for guidance has as its counterpart in the leaders a natural greed for power. Thus the development of the democratic oligarchy is accelerated by the general characteristics of human nature. What was initiated by the need for organization, administration, and strategy is completed by psychological determinism.”

Leaders are as seduced by power, then, as the mass is for leadership. Many who reach a position of power within a political organization become such specialized workers that

---

162 Ibid, 205.
they lose the aptitude they may have had for their former jobs. A party administrator who rose from working-class roots on the shop floor grows to enjoy the increased salary and after years of service, is unlikely to wish to have to relearn a trade. Michels points out another phenomenon of his era, namely the bourgeois citizen who has abandoned his class roots to become a partisan for socialism – for them, in Germany, there was no going back once they had joined the party.\textsuperscript{163} If they became disillusioned they could do little but cynically serve the party. Interestingly, Michels also claims

“Reformist and revisionist theory in the international socialist party is largely the outcome of the psychological need to furnish an explanation and an excuse for the metamorphosis which has taken place in the leaders.”\textsuperscript{164}

Now one could argue this is a chicken-and-egg problem, but the rise of reformist and revisionist literature within the socialist movement of the era was firmly linked to very real material forces pushing for a more evolutionary course within the structure of capitalism, and not necessarily an ideological cover for the changed mental state of the leadership. Eduard Bernstein, one of the leading revisionists, had spent a considerable amount of time in England observing the thoroughly reformist Fabian Society, and sought to emulate their success in Germany. Southern German leaders like Georg von Vollmar had a different political structure in which they operated, with far fewer large landowners and more liberal parties willing to invite them into the government. Trade-union officials tended to adhere fiercely to a reformist line in defense of their livelihoods and perhaps the danger a revolutionary movement might pose to their own social position.

\textsuperscript{163} Ibid, 209.
\textsuperscript{164} Ibid, 211.
Organization of mass parties brings with it two more phenomena: gradual “embourgeoisement” of the administrative apparatus, and the identification of the will of the mass with the leadership’s actions. Michels uses the term “Bonapartism”\textsuperscript{165} to describe a condition by which the leadership believes it has been given the right to rule and its decisions codified by the masses via election. He writes

“Bonapartism recognized the validity of the popular will to such an extreme degree as to concede that will the right of self-destruction: popular sovereignty could suppress itself. Yet if we look at the matter from a purely human point of view, popular sovereignty is inalienable… Bonapartism is the theory of individual domination originating in the collective will, but tending to emancipate itself of that will and to become sovereign in its turn… once elected, the chosen of the people can no longer be opposed in any way. He personifies the majority, and all resistance to his will is antidemocratic. The leader of such a democracy is irremovable, for the nation, having once spoken, cannot contradict itself… it is reasonable and necessary that the adversaries of the government should be exterminated in the name of popular sovereignty, for the chosen of the people acts within his rights as representative of the collective will, established in his position by a spontaneous decision.”\textsuperscript{166}

While it is easy to link 19\textsuperscript{th} century Bonapartism to the eventual totalitarian movements of the 20\textsuperscript{th}, it is more interesting and important for us to realize it is also connected with Burke-ian theories of popular representation, though taken to an extreme. Party leadership, especially at the executive level, would tend to function as Burke-ian ‘trustees’ acting in the supposed best interest of the party since, for Michels, most party members pay little attention to the day-to-day affairs of administration. Clearly, as leadership becomes entrenched it would tend to see itself as the personification of the party’s will (else why the regular re-election). Of course this would potentially mean dissidents attacking the leadership are then seen as attacking the party, and require elimination or censure. Historical examples of these purges of loyal party members abound: within the SPD syndicalists were essentially expelled by late in the first decade

\textsuperscript{165} This is a reference to the dictatorship of Napoleon III in France and Marx’s characterization of his regime as one in which the old aristocracy, rising bourgeoisie, and the working class were all balanced by the state, which was then given freer reign to make decisions outside of strict class demands. Napoleon III had seized absolute power via a referendum in 1851, which he claimed was a democratic abnegation of the parliamentary republic.

\textsuperscript{166} Ibid, 216-18.
of the 20th century, and then the numerous examples of expulsions from the Bolshevik party culminating in the Stalinist show-trials of loyal party members who had criticisms of tactics and leadership show that, perhaps, Michels was correct on this point.

More importantly, Michels is highlighting his belief in the existence of a genuine popular will. A Bonapartist leader can only usurp something that is already there; they do not create the popular will out of thin air. Again, there is a current here that the masses do have actual political desires, and the party does not simply create those desires, as much as they may manipulate them. If a popular will exists (and of course this is a debatable assumption) then it is possible that, either Michels is wrong and they are acknowledging the party leadership is meeting the demands of the popular will, or that they will be able to either eject the leadership, replace it with one that does suit their will, or eventually discover a system in which they do not need a permanent leadership at all to attain the objects of their will.

Still, the effects of Bonapartism could only occur in conjunction with the growth of a party apparatus to carry out the executive’s directives. Generally, the growth of the mass party meant that parties previously homogenous along class-lines (though this was certainly a more European tendency than American) attracted heterogeneous elements as they struggled to pick up votes, especially in plurality-based voting systems such as that found in the German Empire of Michels’ day167. The SPD’s apparatus had become ‘infiltrated’ by petty-bourgeois elements, and many of the working class members had become petty bourgeois in temperament – which to Michels and others of a more radical bent meant a less-revolutionary posture. This

167 Although this rears its head even in proportional systems, though the tendencies are a bit different from plurality voting. The Wilhelmine electoral system had a run-off built-in that tended to require the SPD to make some inroads with liberal voters in their more marginal districts.
“embourgeoisement is the outcome of three very different orders of phenomena: (1) the adhesion of petty bourgeois to the proletarian parties; (2) labour organization as the creator of new petty bourgeois strata; (3) capitalist defense as the creator of new petty bourgeois strata.\(^{168}\)

The adhesion of petty bourgeois strata was the direct outcome of the SPD’s shopping for electoral votes, and it had a mitigating effect on the leadership’s calls for revolution. In more generic electoral parties the adherence of new class elements to the party or social groups without a clear interest in the party program has a tendency to cause blurring of the party’s actions and programs as it searches for ways to maintain its electoral coalition. Growth of the party apparatus also meant, as has been previously discussed, the growth of a corps of bureaucrats whose interest was in the continued growth of the organization, not necessarily the end-goal. Michels took this to mean, not that the SPD bureaucrats were uninterested in the party platform, but that organization tends towards reigning in the tendencies potentially more dangerous to the ruling clique within said organization. Why would the apparatchiks risk their position on the potential success of a general strike, or revolutionary uprising, when the far likelier outcome would be the destruction of the political party by the state? If this is a general tendency of organization, then Michels has again found a catch-22 for radicals and democrats. Finally, and perhaps less important for our purposes, Michels notes the conservative effect that small business owners affiliated with the party have on party policies (the SPD was heavily supported in its early years by innkeepers, and later by co-operative property), another infiltration by petty bourgeois tendencies. Still, this ‘infiltration’ seems to have had more to do with contingent historical factors in Germany than general tendencies of organization as-such.

Michels goes over an incomplete list of potential cures for a party or party members attempting to restore some semblance of democracy within the organization:

\(^{168}\) Ibid, 268.
the referendum, renunciation of income, syndicalism, and anarchism. This seems to be a purposefully incomplete list, or a sign of how little thought was given to internal democratic reforms in political parties. The first concerns an actual structural reform, the second personal principles, and the final two a wholesale change in the party orientation (or its entire existence). While most commentators have used this section to propose that Michels could not find a solution to his ‘iron law’ it is also possible that he was using this section as a way to illustrate that his law was not so ironclad. While none of the reforms, on their own, was a panacea, they did show that there was still some possibility of resistance to oligarchy and that new ideas and situations could develop that he could not foresee at that time.

Michels compares the referendum and its application in Switzerland, where citizens regularly vote on laws of importance to their canton or the country, and the lack of said referendum procedure within the SPD or most socialist parties. In fact, “from the democratic point of view they are therefore inferior to many of the Swiss cantons.” To submit party decisions to the members is risky for the leadership; a determined dissident faction could win using a referendum, which is likely why it was only rarely instituted and used. Party leaders, however, argued that mass incompetence and the clumsiness of referendums made them at best useless, and at worst dangerous to implement. If Michels is correct, then the masses would either be too incompetent to use the referendum, or would be easily swayed into voting as the leadership wanted. Yet again, the structural reform of the referendum is touched upon too lightly, and it should be seen as a basic demand of any democratic reformer in a party, if they wish to potentially have

\[169\] Ibid, 334.
\[170\] Ibid, 336.
any kind of mass participation. The referendum is a tool that can be used by a
determined portion of the membership at the grassroots as much as it might be ignored or
manipulated by the leadership, but it is still a potent tool of reform around entrenched
bureaucratic channels of power.

Renunciation is the principle of living the same lifestyle as the party membership,
which in the socialist movement would have meant an austere working-class life. While
the “dissolution of the democratic consciousness of the leaders may doubtless be
retarded, if not completely arrested, by the influence of intellectual or purely ideological
factors,” forcing them to essentially be one with the base might do so on a more
consistent level.\textsuperscript{171} Lenin went so far as to include it in \textit{The State and Revolution} as a
precondition for the officials in a post-revolutionary epoch. The problem, of course, is
that in the pre-revolutionary epoch keeping talented workers and specialists on the party
staff is difficult if their pay is so meager as to force them to look elsewhere for
employment. Once they have gotten a taste of higher wages, officials are unlikely to vote
a pay cut for themselves, and will fight fiercely any attempt on the part of the mass to
force one through. Michels again dismisses this as a possible reform. Yet as a structural
reform its real promise would be to link the consciousness of the party leadership again
with that of the party’s base, something that should not be overlooked. While some
admission of decent pay is necessary for technical skill, absurdly high pay rates for
officials do increase the separation between leaders and led, so a reform on this scale
might be part of a reform package.

Interestingly, Michels the former syndicalist puts his chapter on syndicalism at the
middle of potential reforms, not at the beginning or end. Syndicalism is seen as a

\textsuperscript{171} Ibid, 339.
conscious effort to deal with the flaws inherent in the party model, by placing the locus of activity back on the individual worker and shifting the locus of power from a party bureaucracy to the trade unions and direct struggle, not parliamentary maneuvering or electoral action. He writes “no other movement bases itself so energetically as does the syndicalist movement upon the right and the ability of the masses for self-government.” Yet the syndicalist movement, which Michels is obviously still sympathetic towards, has certain obvious failings that for him render it as being incapable of real reform of party politics. Syndicalist organizations, of course, and trade unions especially, have the same problem with bureaucracy that parties do, simply transferred to another structure. A more serious problem is the fact that in most nations, unions encompass only a minority of the working class population. Some syndicalists rejoice in this fact, seeing themselves as a vanguard, but it creates the obvious problem of a minority once again substituting for a majority. While the question of whether syndicalist principles of direct action on a mass scale could overcome problems associated with parliamentary focus is intriguing, Michels drops syndicalism into the trash can of history as an inadequate answer to the problem of oligarchy. Yet direct action clearly has some effect on the masses; Luxemburg would highlight the mass strike as a period of revolutionary movement on the part of the base, and workers involved in direct strike action on a regular basis frequently were more conscious of militant demands.

Finally, we come to anarchism, a collection of theories openly hostile to the concept of organization, as well as oligarchy. The problem of anarchism vis-à-vis

---

172 Ibid, 351.
173 Ibid, 353.
organization was part of the Marx-Bakunin debates, and Michels spares nothing in showing how Marx was correct that in eschewing authority, anarchists eventually come around to an ultra-authoritative structure in post-revolutionary situations. Anarchists, who demand the dissolution of the state apparatus, would be forced to create a new one in order to fulfill the demands of their decentralized municipal councils – which Michels points out would be a *de facto* government and oligarchy once more. Even the most radical anti-statist theory can do nothing to prevent, seemingly, the march of oligarchy.

In closing, Michels surprisingly argues that a party of democratic oligarchy can have positive effects upon the state

> “Within certain narrow limits the democratic party, even when subjected to oligarchical control, can doubtless act upon the state in the democratic sense. The old political caste of society, and above all the ‘state’ itself, are forced to undertake the revaluation of a considerable number of values – a revaluation both ideal and practical.”

The circulation of elites and the satisfaction of the demands of the masses as new political organizations rise to power can thus actually help democratize the state in a limited way (akin to pluralist theories). Yet, for Michels, “power is always conservative.”

Political parties can only push the boundaries of the state so far before they too become enmeshed in the problems of everyday life and retaining power. The iron law of oligarchy still holds; any organization over a certain size will tend towards oligarchy. Thus, “every party organization represents an oligarchical power grounded upon a democratic basis.” This is Michels’ most succinct statement about his concept of political parties, and we must concede it is at least partially true. Yet, in the end, Michels sounds a vaguely hopeful note:

---

175 Ibid, 366.
176 Ibid., 401.
“…. Nothing but a serene and frank examination of the oligarchical dangers of democracy will enable us to minimize these dangers, even though they can never be entirely avoided.

The democratic currents of history resemble successive waves. They break ever on the same shoal. They are ever renewed. This enduring spectacle is simultaneously encouraging and depressing. When democracies have gained a certain stage of development, they undergo a gradual transformation, adopting the aristocratic spirit, and in many cases also the aristocratic forms, against which at the outset they struggled so fiercely. Now new accusers arise to denounce the traitors; after an era of glorious combats and of inglorious power, they end by fusing with the old dominant class; whereupon once more they are in their turn attacked by fresh opponents who appeal to the name of democracy. It is probable that this cruel game will continue without end.”

**Commentary and Criticism**

*Political Parties* is an extension of the syndicalist thought of Michels and his colleagues, his intellectual kinship with Weber, and growing acquaintance with the works of Mosca and Pareto. Our understanding of the work must flow from this standpoint, even though what is going on inside the work is more complex than just naming it a largely socialist text with pessimist themes. Many of the elements labeled most troubling for his thesis become intelligible in this context, even if they are still troubling in the abstract. I think it also adds something to his relationship with Max Weber, and why he did not reference Michels’ work in his later writings on organization, bureaucracy, and society. While the later works of Michels may have veered towards apologias for Mussolini and Italian nationalism, though they still contain a strong anti-bureaucratic streak, his most famous work still lies in an era in which he was still searching for a way to aid the socialist and working class movement towards a revolution against oligarchy, both in the economy and in so-called democratic institutions themselves.

Though most accounts have him departing from socialist and syndicalist politics in late 1907 after his move to Italy and departure from the Italian Socialist Party, it is probable the main reason he withdrew his membership was the expulsion of the Italian...

---

177 Ibid, 408.
178 At least in the context of the charismatic leader in fascism as a potential solution vis-à-vis the problem of the tendency of oligarchy within modern organization.
syndicalist faction from the party. How closely do his views accord with those of Sorel, Lagardelle, and Berth, the dominant group of French syndicalists at the time, his friends, and editors at *Le Mouvelement Socialiste*? Rather closely, actually. Hubert Lagardelle attacks the principle of representative democracy:

“What are the bases of democracy? The individual and the state… Rousseau explained the fiction in which this regime bases itself. Political society considers not the real practical life of men… but a type of abstract man, with all concrete qualities removed, rendered the same in social life: the citizen. On this dust of men, the State establishes its dictatorship… but between the individual and the State an abyss exists that prevents direct communication. Intermediaries are needed: these are the parties. Their role consists of picking up the popular will and expressing it. They replace the citizen… they are its representatives. This is the principle of democracy; the citizen is replaced… by others that represent him. He cannot exercise his power anymore and abdicates it to representatives.

**Syndicalism** claims the principle of direct action of democracy as a corrupter of the human personality. The representative mechanism supposes, by definition, that the citizen is impotent. He is impotent because he is incompetent. And he is incompetent because he is an abstract personage, separated from the real conditions of life…

Once an election is carried out, he remains inert. He has delegated his power, he doesn’t have to do anything more than hope. It is obligatory laziness… no feeling of responsibility, no notion of effort, no call to the active forces of the individual! Nothing or almost nothing: the easy gesture of the voter, once every four years. Inertia worsens with demoralization. What result from the bargainings, the clevernesses, the duplicities of the vulgar policy, but a horrifying reduction of the characters? The rivalries of the parties are not more than wild races of customers eager for them… and sinecures that the possession of the State offers.”

Earlier we noted that Michels proclaims direct democracy as the only true form of democracy stating, “A mass which delegates its sovereignty, that is to say transfers its sovereignty to the hands of a few individuals, abdicates its sovereign functions. For the will of the people is not transferable, not even the will of the single individual.” Many commentators have had a problem with Michels’ definition of democracy – it is indeed a very narrow and subjective one – but it is clearly a part of revolutionary syndicalist theories. Democracy is a direct expression of individual wills which cannot be interpreted or represented; as soon as a representative system is established, the masses

---


become apathetic and increasingly incompetent at politics and governing. Syndicalists like Georges Sorel saw the revolutionary working class both as a powerful collective body and a collection of free, independent producers. Sorel contrasted the ‘free’ Republican armies with the slave-like Monarchists of the French Revolution:

“In the wars of Liberty each soldier considered himself as an individual having something of importance to do in the battle, instead of looking upon himself as simply one part of the military mechanism committed to the supreme direction of a leader. In the literature of those times one is struck by the frequency with which the free men of the republican armies are contrasted with the automatons of the royal armies…”

Without direct participation in the struggle the working class lost both real power, but also the conception of themselves as free individuals. That Michels agrees is confirmed by the closeness of his thoughts to Lagardelle and Sorel.

Where he differs, of course, is not just in agreeing that representation is not democracy at all, or in desiring direct democracy (a subtext of the whole work) but rather in claiming even direct democratic assemblies has a tendency toward oligarchy. Direct democracy is ‘real’ democracy, but it too regularly succumbs to the pressure of the mass wanting to be lead by the most charismatic, talented individuals. Early in the work, he mentions Arturo Labriola was able to keep a general strike alive in Italy simply by making a speech to the gathered assembly of workers - and this creates a weird tension for Michels as he is attempting to show the general conservatism of leadership, though in this case radicalism won, but he also wants to show how even direct democracy cannot be what the syndicalists wish it to be. His definition of democracy is thus squarely with that of the syndicalists even as he reaches pessimistic conclusions about their democratic ideal.

---

A similar concurrence appears on the topic of political parties, especially parliamentary socialist parties. For Lagardelle, parties both usurped the individual will of the masses and the popular will. Parliamentary socialism “in both its revolutionary and reformist aspects creates the illusion that political parties are the expression of classes in the parliament.”\textsuperscript{184} Both he and Sorel saw the parties as angling for votes, not revolution. Parties were the product of the political system, not the real power of the working class. Hence, the syndicalists wished to base all revolutionary action on the union \textit{syndicat}, the local group of workers, and not the political party. Michels, again, is clearly influenced by these ideas on political parties, but his studies led him to conclude, “the oligarchical and bureaucratic tendency of party organization is a matter of technical and practical necessity. It is the inevitable product of the very principle of organization.”\textsuperscript{185} While his intellectual comrades wished to banish parties, Michels saw them as an inevitable outcome of modern politics, and always advocated for syndicalists to remain within the socialist parties.\textsuperscript{186} Here again, Michels is accepting, but extending, syndicalist thoughts.

As a final example, there was an understanding within syndicalist thought of the problems abstract bourgeois democracy creates for socialists, and how this had transformed the socialist parties. For Sorel, “Bernstein, perceiving the enormous contradiction between the language of social democracy and the true nature of its activity, urged his German comrades to have the courage to appear what they were in reality…”\textsuperscript{187} Bourgeois democracy had obscured the reality of the class struggle. Socialist theory and action had become divorced; Lagardelle presciently wrote “socialist theory and

\textsuperscript{184} Hubert Lagardelle, ed. \textit{Syndicalisme & Socialisme}, 1908.
\textsuperscript{185} Michels, \textit{Political Parties}, 35.
\textsuperscript{186} Lagardelle always saw the struggle as an extra-parliamentary one, which did not exclude the parties, but only made use of them when necessary. He comes close to Luxemburg’s thoughts on this.
\textsuperscript{187} Sorel, \textit{Reflections on Violence}, 64.
democratic practice cannot coexist for very long. All the internal confusions that have disorganized socialism in recent years spring from this contradiction.” For Michels, too, the practice of electoral politics muted the revolutionary and truly egalitarian tendencies, as the growth of the political machine meant an emphasis on electoral gains, and a tendency towards conservative choices by the leadership. Lagardelle and Sorel saw this as a problem of motivating the working masses to direct action; Michels was, of course, doubtful it could ever be overcome. There is still, though, in their ideas a clear kinship.

To that end, part of the problem with most scholars evaluating *Political Parties* is that they have not placed the work within the correct milieu, and fewer still seem to have understood how much the work was both a reply to his comrades and an attempt to systematize the insights gained by a Marxist syndicalism informed by Weber, Mosca, and Pareto’s sociological conclusions about organization and domination. Michels states this explicitly near the end of the work:

“There is no essential contradiction between the doctrine that history is the record of a continued series of class struggles and the doctrine that class struggles invariably culminate in the creation of new oligarchies which undergo fusion with the old. The existence of a political class does not conflict with the essential content of Marxism, considered not as an economic dogma but as a philosophy of history; for in each particular instance the dominance of a political class arises as the resultant of the relationships between the different social forces competing for supremacy, these forces being of course considered dynamically and not quantitatively.”

*Political Parties* is a tension-filled work because of Michels’ desire to make both a sociological argument about organization and a normative argument about its desirability and search for solutions. Weber had criticized him in a similar way for an article written for the *Archiv* five years earlier. This, along with the real tensions and inadequate or tacit definition of his main object of study, have created real problems of interpretation in

---

the last century, to the point where few actually look beyond the a-democratic arguments made within.

Even if we place the work within its proper context, there are issues with his argument and how he constructs it. His so-called ‘iron law of oligarchy’ has been subjected to intense scrutiny over the last century and found wanting in many respects. There is a conflation in the text between growth of organization and growth of salaried officials. Michels never explicitly states either the ‘iron law’ or, even if it is the syndicalist version, he never states what his theory of democracy is. Even his mentor Weber derided his conception of the organization always being conservative in the political realm. The importance of Michels work may lie more in the questions it broaches (at times tacitly) about democratic theory, mass behavior within a system of bureaucratized political parties, and mass psychology within contemporary politics. Still, the amount of ambiguity in it may be purposeful, left open as part of a polemic within the early twentieth century socialist milieu as much as Michels’ own desire to find a solution to the problem of oligarchy. The two fundamental issues from the work come from: the nature of democracy and oligarchy must first be examined and explained.

Much of the work hinges on the operational definition of democracy Michels provides. If, as Michels (and Rousseau) did, we conclude that it is impossible for anyone to alienate their will to a representative, if only direct democratic assemblies have a chance at being called democratic, then by definition any organization that begins to delegate tasks as it grows and requires specialized and differentiated workers would tend to become less and less democratic over time. A large strain of political thought has devoted itself to such a conception over the last few centuries, with major proponents like
Rousseau and Marx inspiring groups like the syndicalists from which Michels sprang. Given our connection of his work to the writings of Lagardelle and Sorel, it is safe to say Michels’ concept of democracy is that of the syndicalists, i.e. direct democratic participation by individuals without any intermediaries. Yet, of course, he denies that direct democracy can remain democratic, and that modern political life precludes the possibility of such assemblies existing on a large-scale. Representation removes both power and individual will to act from the masses, and representation is thus a seed of oligarchy.

Michels was correct in that in the modern era political organization and representation seem an inevitable component of how we interact with the state, if it is not the only way, or the only possible way. Representatives may be very responsive to their constituents or group. If the leadership of an organization responds to their constituents at varying levels, and we accept for the purposes of this argument that representation is not incompatible with certain forms of democracy and democratic decision making, then we have to break down when and where we could consider leadership to be democratic and responsive, and when it tends towards the term ‘oligarchy’ used by Michels, and why this is the case.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Leadership tendencies</th>
<th>Representation category</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Leaders respond directly and regularly to mass desires/demands</td>
<td>Active and responsive representative democracy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leaders respond directly and regularly to mass demands/desires, masses are content with status quo or apathetic</td>
<td>Passive representative democracy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leaders respond directly and regularly, demands/desires are manipulated</td>
<td>Active pseudo-representative democracy, tacit de facto oligarchy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leaders do not respond/different views from the masses, masses actively make demands/desires</td>
<td>Actively non-responsive democracy, active de facto oligarchy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leaders do not respond/different views from the</td>
<td>Actively non- responsive democracy, passive but de</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The reason we label all of these ‘democratic’ if de facto oligarchies, is that without a structure set up for some kind of replacement of the leadership, then we might as well call representative democracy an autocracy with elections. While this may be the case in many situations for our purposes let us assume it is theoretically possible that elected officials in and from a political party can be delegated and respond to demands of their constituents. The first two categories, in which the leadership actively and regularly responds to either active demands or contentment with the status quo (tacit demands), are clearly where we must place actual representative democracy, if such a thing is possible. Responsiveness is a component of what Michels views as the problem of alienated democratic wills: the leadership of a political party will never embody the ‘general will’ of its constituency over an extended period of time, and will eventually grow to manipulate said will and replace it with their own. For us, and for democratic theory, the issue is:

1. How can we judge what are actual desires of the masses versus manipulated ones?
2. What level of mass participation is necessary in an organization to call it democratic, as opposed to oligarchic?
3. What level of responsiveness is required from officials on issues that the masses may care about, versus those in which they have little or no interest?
4. Does responsiveness mean honoring the demands of all party members, or simply the (X+1) majority within the organization or electoral constituency? How is the majority demand measured?

The schizoid character of representation within an organization or parliamentary institution is not a trivial question and has plagued not only Michels but also party activists in the mass suffrage era, but it is also at the heart of his equating representation with a tendency away from democracy. Did a member of the Social Democratic Party in the German Reichstag owe their allegiance to the party membership who supported them,
ran their campaign, gave them a platform and a ballot line, donated funds, etc.? Or, would the representative claim they now have to respond to the wishes of a broader constituency of voters, even if this means pursuing a different (and usually more conservative) course than the party faithful wish? Obviously this matters more when a party obtains actual power, something the SPD did not have to contend with in the era of Political Parties.

Yet when it does happen, the party and the representatives are faced with a choice: whose democratic will trumps whom: the party members, the electorate, or the interests of the nation as a whole? In Michels’ era, trade union officials faced such a problem:

“A similar dilemma obtains when leaders of a trade union identified with a labor party have to contemplate taking actions that would further the interests of union members but endanger the party’s chances to reach or retain power. Certainly ‘responsible’ democratic politicians tend to consider such broader ‘national’ interests (even when they do not consider those of humanity as a whole), and this often means neglecting the interests of their constituents and/or not being responsive to them. Naturally, they will try to escape ‘accountability’ for such behavior.”

This may pose a larger dilemma for a revolutionary party, whose membership is likely to be more interested in the eventual revolution than the citizenry as a whole, but it is still a vexing dilemma. If you cannot identify the priority that should be given in terms of responsiveness and to whom you are responsible to be responsive as a party official, then where does that leave democracy? SPD leaders like Bebel often claimed they were acting in the interests of the party as a whole when they stymied action on the general strike in the face of party pressure to incorporate it as a tactic. If the ‘broader’ interest of the nation or party can always be cited as a reason for leadership to disregard the will of their particular party loyalists or constituency (and it is nearly impossible to remove them from office), then Michels is correct in suggesting that the tendency towards “Bonapartism” is inherent in representative democracy. Yet for a party leader to never be able to put the legitimate interests of the organization ahead of the parochial interests of their local party

---

190 Ibid, 52.
branch or electoral seat would mean they would be forced to take up only parochial and local interests. There is again, though, a difference between an open debate and discussion on a topic like the general strike within the SPD and a real vote on the issue even if the leadership disagrees, and the backroom deals that Bebel and the executive committee made with the SPD unions to quash the efficacy of the general strike even if it were used.

Inside an organization, Michels links the growth of representative officials with the spread of a paid bureaucracy that usurps the roles played by committed volunteers. This is a conflation of two separate tendencies within party organization; the growth of one is not necessarily parallel. Michels forcefully argued this growth was inherently anti-democratic, but also conservatizing and anti-revolutionary. Here again, he includes the conservative effects of organization because he is still intimately concerned with the revolutionary movement. While it would be nearly impossible to run a modern electoral party without a large number of paid operatives, this phenomenon is a separate but parallel part of the mass party’s growth. Bureaucracy and administration have a tendency to be unresponsive and self-serving, two trends that run counter to democratic efficacy by the party base. Very often, indeed, paid bureaucratic strata prefer the status quo to risky endeavors based upon ideological and not ‘practical’ rationale. Yet it is not true that party staff, bureaucrats, and leadership are inherently conservative. Weber was dismayed by this and said so in one of his letters to Michels critiquing *Political Parties*:

“For example, Michels’s assertion that ‘political organization leads to power’ which is then ‘always conservative was countered by the reminder that ‘the power of the Trust Directors has a revolutionary effect, the power of the Jacobins does too’ (AMW 126).”

---

After the war Michels ignored counterexamples of revolutionary parties with paid staff apparatuses conducting revolutionary activity and succeeding, at least in the case of the Bolshevik revolution in Russia, because the Bolsheviks never made a claim to be democratic. So, we may cautiously alter Michels’ statement on the conservative power of organization and bureaucracy to say that it may lead to such an outcome, but that this is by no means certain.

In fact, Lagardelle had argued as a syndicalist that a socialist party in parliament was useful, as long as it was merely an arm of a more powerful, revolutionary and directly democratic syndicat. This is the crux of the matter; if Michels is correct then neither the syndicalist union nor the socialist party could be democratic or responsive to the will of the membership, and would inherently move in a conservative direction. Can the elected leadership of a body, and its paid bureaucracy, be brought under control by a conscious membership engaged in direct action? If so then the left-wing socialist and syndicalist solution to the problem of representation and oligarchy has merit; if not perhaps the best we could hope for is Schumpeterian minimalist democracy. The searching nature of the text, the potential for revolt and Michels’ own admission that revolts do happen, his attempts at the end to find a solution, show he was very much still invested in the revolutionary socialist and democratic movement. If representation has a strong tendency toward oligarchy, it is not inherently unresponsive and oligarchic.

There is also oddness about Michels’ arguments about the superiority of leaders to the mass in their ability to lead and run the party. Generalists will always be needed at higher levels of party management, but then of course anyone could become a generalist. It is the growth of specialists that Michels sees as the problem. Indeed, the mass party
organizations require specialists in data collection, analysis, campaign management, literature production, etc., and most of the party mass would not be able to step in and fulfill that role. This is indeed a hurdle that any anti-oligarchic movement would face. Yet, as party staff becomes more specialized, they also lose the general skills of party management outside their area of expertise. An enormous paid staff might rectify this by having many specialists and a few generalists; but it also points to another potential crack in Michels’ ‘iron law’ – that the masses might have just as much ability to run a party as the specialists do, or at least to oversee the specialists in their duties.

Finally, it is at least somewhat clear that Michels never stated the concept of the ‘iron law of oligarchy’ in a conclusive format. In fact later discussions center on this;

Cassinelli writes

“This situation is partially Michels’ responsibility, since his statement of the law of oligarchy is badly confused and quite incomplete. Nevertheless, the notion that ‘oligarchies prevail’ has a high degree of general credibility, and even the realization that Michels’ statement of it is inadequate and his evidence for it inconclusive does not destroy its intellectual appeal.”

Much like Mosca and Pareto, the concept of a ruling elite or ‘oligarchy’ is vague enough to be true about almost any studied group or bureaucracy. Cassinelli continues

“Since Michels never labels a particular sentence with the title ‘the law of oligarchy,’ we are obliged to construct a law on the basis of several of his general statements about a ‘ruling class in society.’ Let us take the following as a preliminary statement of the law of oligarchy: For any x, if x is an organization, then x is an oligarchy. This does not convey much information, except that Michels utilizes the notion of organization, a decided advance beyond the vague notions about ‘class’ or ‘stratum’ or ‘group’ expressed by other ‘elitists’ like Mosca and Pareto.”

This does not, indeed, convey much information about oligarchy and organization at all. Yet the work is clearly far too influential and important to have its central premise boiled down to a tautology. Michels’ discussion of oligarchy contains within a good number of premises: The growth of representative institutions, bureaucracy/organization,

---

193 Ibid.
psychological reaction to mass politics, conservative tendencies within organization, lack of democratic responsiveness by leadership – these are complex concepts that Michels never fully unpacks in a satisfying manner. Linz provides perhaps the best summary explanation:

“In the analysis of Michels it is important to separate several quite distinct aspects often covered by the term ‘oligarchy’ or ‘oligarchic tendencies’ that may or may not go together. Let us list them:

1. The emergence of leadership
2. The emergence of a professional leadership and its stability
3. The appearance of a bureaucracy – that is, an appointed staff with distinct duties, regularly paid
4. The centralization of authority
5. The displacement of goals, particularly the shift from ultimate goals (such as a socialist society) to instrumental goals (the organization become an end in itself), and the addition of goals, like the amelioration of the condition of the working class, leading to increased importance attributed to actions designed to satisfy the immediate needs of the members, particularly through trade union actions in collective bargaining or through participation in municipal government (reformism).
6. Increased ideological rigidity – conservatism in the sense of adherence to policies and ideas inadequate to changed circumstances and intolerance toward attempts to revise them (an aspect little emphasized by Michels)
7. A growing difference between the interests and/or points of view of the leaders and those of the members, and a prevalence of decisions made in favor of the leaders’ interests rather than those of the members
8. A decrease in opportunities for participation in policy decisions by the members, even when they are willing to participate
9. The cooptation of emergent opposition leaders by the existing leadership
10. A shift from appeals to the membership to appeals to the electorate; a shift from appeals to a class electorate to appeals to a broader electorate (the ‘omnibus’ tendency of parties). Such a shift tends to, but does not necessarily, favor a more moderate appeal and the passing from opposition of principle into one of competition with other parties, from disloyal opposition to the social and political system to loyal opposition and even acceptance of participation”

It is immediately obvious that the only two of these tendencies that are inherently undemocratic are numbers 7 and 8; the rest may or may not be depending on the circumstances – certainly numbers 5, 6, and 10 are problems for a revolutionary party within a democratic system, but not necessarily anti-democratic.

I think, rather, there are two reasons why the ‘iron law of oligarchy’ is so protean: the tacit understand by Michels he meant it as an extension of syndicalist and elite-theories, and Michels’ own understanding that the law was only a tendency. Political

*Parties* is very tenuous in its language for the supposedly definitive conclusions reached about irremovable oligarchy. Thus Michels could claim both that democracy was “the tendency towards aristocracy, or rather towards oligarchy” and also “who says organization, says oligarchy.” He was clearly correct that the growth of mass electoral parties implied a tendency toward organizational cliques, passivity of the membership, and goal setting based on the party leadership’s well being, not the party’s professed ideology. A better definition of the iron law: there is a tendency within modern democracy toward oligarchy in the form of political leadership within organizations, and these organizations have become the main way in which the masses interact with politics. Only socialism has a potential to lead to a full democracy, but the movement has become dominated by organization and parties. The potential cures do nothing to solve the overall problem, even though they may weaken the tendency toward oligarchy for a while.

Michels’ attempt to take a specific case study of the rise of mass parties and organization, and the ill effects of oligarchy within suffers from his insistence using the Social Democrats as his sole case, without putting the party in historical or domestic context. His friend Lagardelle criticized him for claiming in 1907 that centralized oligarchy was a German phenomenon, only to extend it as a blanket problem for all political cases and organizations.  

Lagardelle had written, “The heavy masses of German socialism are not prepared for such [revolutionary] outbursts. The same reactionary role Germany plays in modern Imperial Europe, we can say that social democracy plays in contemporary socialism. It’s the same dogmatic weight, the same

---

fear of freedom, the same fetish for authority.”  Michels’ response was equally pointed, writing “beneath the problem of race there exists a problem of human psychology which is absolutely universal, and from which stem those laws which impose themselves on every national character of whatever kind. The French will have more difficulty submitting to them than the Prussians. Agreed! But, for good or ill, they will submit to them all the same.”  Georg Lukacs would apply a similar argument against Michels when he wrote of Political Parties.

“If – to give another very bald summary – the history of all social changes is only the superseding of an old ‘elite’ by a new one, then the ‘perennial’ foundations of capitalist society are saved sociologically and there can be no question of a fundamentally new type of society, the socialist type. The German Robert Michels, a later follower of Mussolini, also applied these principles to the labour movement. He exploited the fact of the origin of a labour bureaucracy under imperialist conditions – of which he naturally said nothing – to prove the embourgeoisement of every labour movement as a sociological law…”

This weakness of Political Parties – something Weber also noted – is partly that Michels did not differentiate between the very real problem of entrenched leadership as a tendency within the new mass political organizations arising at the turn of the twentieth century, and the historical problems encountered by radical labor parties and unions in an ‘imperial’ context of rising living standards and/or broadening access to political power in Europe and the United States. A more extended study, which Max Weber had wanted him to do, along the lines of Ostrogorski or Bryce may have allowed Michels to disentangle these problems. Surely, his own doubts about oligarchy and the death of radicalism peek through in the work via the potential for mass revolt that seems to be an undercurrent of the need of the masses’ approval the leaders seek. His dismissal of direct democracy as an alternative, or some form of it, as well as potential democratic

---

196 Lagardelle, Syndicalisme et Socialisme, 1907.
responsiveness of delegated officials, is not as convincing as he believed it was, leaving another door open to attack oligarchy.

Conclusions

When Michels writes, “the problem of socialism is not merely a problem in economics. In other words, socialism does not seek merely to determine to what extent it is possible to realize a distribution of wealth which shall be at once just and economically productive. Socialism is also an administrative problem, a problem of democracy, and this is not in the technical and administrative sphere alone, but also in the sphere of psychology,” he summarizes his project. His dialogue with syndicalism, the socialist movement, and the a-democratic theorists led him to be pessimistic about the chances of success of anti-oligarchic attempts, while still bothering to search. The usefulness of *Political Parties* lies in how clearly it exposes the problems inherent in socialist and democratic thought, and the questions it asks of their practitioners. Rather, going forward, the most important questions are: what relationship should the mass of party members (and perhaps the electorate) have to paid party staff and operatives, what kind of control do bureaucrats have over the mass, and whether it is possible to counteract the worst tendencies of bureaucracy with any kind of internal reforms, or to concede the point to Michels that any such reforms are hopeless. Our task is to examine the debate about the mass political party going on in the socialist and liberal spheres at the time, as they indirectly dialogued with the concepts in *Political Parties*, and their questions, concerns and answers to those problems. This is the focus of the next chapters.

---

199 Michels, *Political Parties*, 386.
Chapter 3: The SPD: A Case Study

Introduction

The larger questions of Political Parties center on the relationship between individual will, efficacy, and democracy within a successful political party and a rapidly professionalizing political system. Michels concludes that the success of the greater organization means that the rank-and-file individuals whose choices and actions built the strength of the group were no longer (if they ever were) able to much influence the leadership of the party, either because they had fully absorbed the concept of the leadership’s right to make decisions, or because their dissent was blocked from the top. The party would then quickly shed anything but a surface attachment to ideology, especially if it were a revolutionary socialist one, and simply become another electoral machine. This, of course, was largely written with Michels’ experience of the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) in mind, both given his experience as a member of the party, its perceived ideology of full social and economic democracy, and its then-status as the premiere European example of a modern mass political party. It is to the SPD we now turn, for if Michels served as a nexus for the larger debate on the issues of party democracy, oligarchic leadership, and party conservatism, he was by no means the only socialist who did so. The larger narrative inside the SPD over the party’s growing bureaucracy, electoral success, and the leadership’s fear of rank-and-file mass action caused a flurry of writings on all sides with discussion of the problems and potential solutions.  

200 Although from the leadership’s point of view, there was no need for a solution, as the party was expanding its voter rolls and elected officials.
As the rifts and divisions within the SPD have been covered in great detail before, we will focus our efforts on unpacking the narrative through the writings of Karl Kautsky, Rosa Luxemburg, Eduard Bernstein, and a small coterie of associated thinkers. While Michels described the tensions involved in the rise of the mass party as an object of study in *Political Parties*, most of the SPD’s intellectuals engaged those issues in the context of immediate political struggles. Thus the mass strike debate, with which Michels was concerned during his tenure as a member, approached the problem of internal democracy and revolutionary consciousness but did so as a question of tactics, not only (or primarily) as a theoretical concern. Still, the brightest lights of the debate represented not only themselves, but also historical blocks within the party itself and their concerns over the party’s direction.\(^{201}\) Great debates over democracy are always linked to the political interests of one group or another, or they would be mere academic footnotes.

The importance of including the mass strike debate and the argument within socialism over its use and meaning extends beyond simply placing Robert Michels and *Political Parties* within their historical context. Contained within the debate was a larger discussion over the ill effects of political professionalization on democracy, radicalism, and possible solutions by theorists who accepted the necessity of political parties in the modern era. Like Michels, the socialist thinkers involved were well aware of the rise of the mass party and its effects; unlike Michels, the major German socialist theorists involved within the mass strike debate had not fully understood or examined the changed political structure in a professionalized system of mass bureaucratic organizations as an

\(^{201}\) Michels and the syndicalists represented a particular block of highly class-conscious workers as well, though they were a small minority in the German party.
equally important component in the debate over party tactics and radicalism. The mass strike debate and the conclusions drawn by the factions involved illustrate the possibilities oligarchy can be overcome within professionalized politics by the rank-and-file, as well as the birth of an intellectual tendency that identified mass party politics with democracy and believed the question of oligarchy to be at best misplaced, and otherwise ignored. The complexities and relevance of the debate are deepened as the socialist movement fought for what was, essentially, the establishment of bourgeois political rights; as such it delivered a deep critique of democratic limitations within capitalism, but also the limitations of any discussion of democracy without also considering the dynamic of the bureaucratic state and modern mass organizations on politics.

Karl Kautsky and the SPD

While Kautsky’s role as the SPD’s, and the Second International’s chief theorist, has been examined numerous times, he is still our gateway into the debate over the issues within the SPD which Michels put forward in Political Parties. His writings, along with those also considered part of the party “center” such as August Bebel, give us an insight into what the leadership of the era’s most influential mass political party thought about said questions. He did not lose his role as chief theorist until the party lurched to the right after the elections in 1907 though this was not really apparent until 1910, when the mass strike debate flared up once more. Kautsky’s writings tied the political maneuverings of the SPD to a Marxist theoretical justification. It was Kautsky

---

202 Second International Workingmen’s Association, the federal body of socialist parties that was the successor body to the First International, the loose group of anti-capitalist organizations that Marx had chaired.
who had written the party’s 1891 Erfurt Programme\textsuperscript{203}, which solidified Marxism as the dominant theoretical position within the SPD, over competing socialist theories. His editorship of the party’s premiere theoretical journal, \textit{Die Neue Zeit}, gave him considerable influence over internal debates as well.

Kautsky’s positions were largely shaped by the victories of the Social Democrats in the period prior to the First World War. His optimism about the inevitability of capitalist collapse and socialist revolution flowed from this. In his pamphlet \textit{The Social Revolution} he argues

“We have discovered that social revolution is a product of special historical conditions… none of these factors of social revolution have been decreasing in power during the last decade. Many of them, on the contrary, have been much strengthened. Never was the rate of economic development more rapid. Scientific economics make, at least, a great extensive, if not intensive growth, thanks to the newspapers. Never was economic insight so broadly dispersed; never was the ruling class, as well as the mass of people, so much in a condition to comprehend the far-reaching consequences of its acts and strivings. \textit{This alone proves that we shall not make the tremendous transition from capitalism to socialism unconsciously, and that we cannot slowly undermine the dominion of the exploiting class without this class being conscious of this, and consequently arming themselves and using all their powers to suppress the strength and influence of the growing proletariat.}”\textsuperscript{204}

The physical growth of the German proletariat in this era was coupled with the electoral success of the Social Democratic Party as well as that of their trade union allies in organizing an increasing number of workers. While from 1878-1890 the German government officially outlawed all socialist parties, the underground growth of the socialist movement continued apace. In fact “the party suffered minor reverses at the polls in the first two elections under the antisocialist law, but by the third, 1884, it won more than half a million votes, and by the fourth, three years later, it passed three quarters of a million. In the last election under the law, 1890, when its renewal had already been rejected, the socialists stunned themselves and the rest of the country by winning the

\textsuperscript{203} Eduard Bernstein had contributed the more practical section, while Kautsky wrote on theoretical aspects of socialism.

largest vote of all the parties – 1,427,298!” The socialist trade unions grew after 1890 at a blistering pace, with an average annual rate of over 20 percent from 1896-1900 and then over 23 percent a year from 1903-06.\textsuperscript{206}

In retrospect many have seen Kautsky’s optimism as misplaced; Wilhelmine Germany was ostensibly a constitutional monarchy with a parliament, but suffrage was limited in the most populous state (Prussia), where a tiered voting system made it nearly impossible for working class votes to elect socialists. The Kaiser was powerful enough to ignore the decisions of the Reichstag, making the body mostly impotent. Yet the expansion of the socialist vote in every election from 1884 until 1907 gave theorists like Kautsky the confidence that the growth of the party and socialist ideas could not be denied, and that there would eventually be a reckoning with the bourgeoisie and the German state as “elections are a means to count ourselves and the enemy, and they grant thereby a clear view of the relative strength of the classes and parties, their advance and their retreat. They prevent premature outbreaks and they guard against defeats.”\textsuperscript{207}

Kautsky endorsed representative government (which Michels saw as antithetical to democratic control), as Kautsky believed “democracy is indispensable as a means of ripening the proletariat for the social revolution. But it is not capable of preventing this revolution. Democracy is to the proletariat what light and air are to the organism; without them it cannot develop its powers.”\textsuperscript{208}

Here, the growth of the SPD, its bureaucracy, and its march into the national and local legislatures was seen as a positive step towards democracy and socialism.

\textsuperscript{206} Ibid, 93.
\textsuperscript{207} Kautsky, The Social Revolution, 81.
\textsuperscript{208} Ibid, 81-2.
Kautskyian Marxism saw the achievement of bourgeois democratic rights by the proletariat as a positive step on the march to socialism. The working class was seen as the soon-to-be largest class in sheer numbers, and gaining basic political rights would allow the proletariat to accomplish the other side of its revolution, socializing and democratizing the economy. While the syndicalists like Michels conceived direct strike action at the point of production as the primary lever to raise the consciousness of the proletariat, Kautsky believed “whenever the proletariat engages in parliamentary activity as a self-conscious class, parliamentarism begins to change its character. It ceases to be a mere tool in the hands of the bourgeoisie. This very participation of the proletariat proves to be the most effective means of shaking up the hitherto indifferent divisions of the proletariat and giving them hope and confidence. It is the most powerful lever that can be utilized to raise the proletariat out of its economic, social, and moral degradation. The proletariat has, therefore, no reason to distrust parliamentary action; on the other hand, it has every reason to exert all its energy to increase the power of parliaments in their relation to other departments of government and to swell to the utmost its own parliamentary representation.”

The growth of the SPD and its electoral success were, for Kautsky, developing proletarian class-consciousness from a class-in-itself to a class-for-itself.

Kautsky, as representative of orthodox German socialist thought at the height of the Second International era, appears as a partisan of democracy since the victory of socialism and expansion of democratic rights were thought to be intertwined. There is little in his writings of Michels’ pessimism about oligarchy springing from a democratic form, or false consciousness on the part of the working class. While Michels had

---

expanded on the syndicalist critique of bureaucratic politics via his intellectual relationship with Max Weber and the Italian elite school, Kautsky had embraced the rise of professional politics because the success of the socialists in Germany had ushered in the era of mass political parties. The success of German socialism in parliamentary elections was, for the most part, unbroken until 1907, which provided little need for reflection on professional politics amongst those who tied the rise of the socialist revolution with the creation and expansion of a liberal state. No wonder, then, that the “Pope” of Marxism, Karl Kautsky, never systematically studied the dynamics of modern professional politics and its effects on the Social Democratic party; not only did he embrace modern mass politics as the culmination of the proletariat’s rise to power and democratic socialist revolution, but saw it as a logical outcome of the class struggle. Thus he would push for the further professionalization of politics and the liberal state which would be the best body in which to house a strong SPD parliamentary majority on its march toward revolution; even his left-SPD opponents never fully developed a critique of professional politics even as they began to appreciate the anti-democratic and conservative effects mass politics had on the movement. It fell to Michels, who was influenced by a French syndicalism experienced with universal suffrage and its deleterious effects on radicalism, to fully appreciate the situation in Germany.

The model developed by Kautsky in the Erfurt Program articulated a meta-narrative, which claimed to have its origins in the Communist Manifesto. For the SPD,

---
210 This is debatable point; clearly the development of capital-intensive, heavy industry and mass production was intertwined with the expansion of capitalism and the growth of the working class, so it can clearly be linked to the class struggle and the rhythms of capitalism. Sabel and Zeitlin, however, argue that while the increasing concentration of capital was likely, mass production was not an inevitable outcome of the class struggle in the late 19th century. Charles Sabel and Jonathan Zeitlin, “Historical Alternatives to Mass Production: Politics, Markets, and Technology in Nineteenth-Century Industrialization,” Past and Present 108 (1985), p. 174.
the worker movement (labor organizers and unions) had initially been separate from socialism; indeed both were hostile to each other in its model of socialism’s past. The model articulated that as the 19th century progressed the two joined hands to form social democratic parties and bring the goal of revolution closer. Social democrats were considered the core of class-conscious workers and intellectuals; there were expanding layers of consciousness outwards from that inner shell. The hope was that the consciousness would eventually extend and collapse all the shells until there was just a single consciousness.

**The Erfurtian Model**

![Diagram illustrating the Erfurtian Model]

There is very little mention in Kautsky of concepts developed by Marx and later writers that might have caused derailment of the SPD’s project: false consciousness in the working class, alienation/reification, widespread reformist consciousness in the working

---

class\textsuperscript{212}, or structural barriers. Reformism, in the guise of Eduard Bernstein and Georg von Vollmar, was either an isolated phenomenon or the result of petty-bourgeois class thinking, not part of the logic of professional politics. Events in the German Empire so mimicked the SPD’s version of deterministic Marxism that its main theorists were unable to link them not to a particular historical situation but rather the vicissitudes of the class struggle. The working class in Wilhelmine Germany was highly isolated from the rest of society, far more so than in the rest of Europe.\textsuperscript{213} This was partly due to the balance of forces between the Junker aristocracy, the bourgeoisie, and the proletariat (the class struggle), and while the working class often found itself culturally isolated in other industrial nations, the severity found in Germany was not necessarily a general trend in capitalist nations of the era.

Isolation of the working class and the SPD from the state and culture had led to a fervent belief in revolution, but a belief that the revolution would come as capitalism slowly decayed. Radical doctrine melded with reformist practice – the party had chosen organizational growth and a legal path instead of revolutionary intransigence very early. Indeed, while Kautsky had written the Erfurt Program’s theoretical section the arch-revisionist Bernstein crafted the practical part. In 1893 Kautsky wrote in \textit{Die Neue Zeit} (and quoted it in his 1909 work \textit{The Road To Power} when he was arguing with the SPD right and its left) “the Social Democratic Party is a revolutionary party, but not a party

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{212} Reformist ideas were identified with the petit-bourgeois intelligentsia and union leadership, not the working class itself.

\textsuperscript{213} Guenther Roth identifies the working class and SPD as a subculture rather than a counter-culture. He writes “I will call the complex of Social Democratic beliefs and organized activities a subculture in order to indicate the separateness of the labor movement from the dominant system and also their inherent connection. As a political subculture, the labor movement was a permanent factor of instability for the Reich, but it was unable to transcend major political and nonpolitical values of the dominant system.” Guenther Roth, \textit{The Social Democrats in Imperial Germany: A Study in Working-Class Isolation and National Integration}. (Totowa, NJ: The Bedminster Press, 1963), 160.
\end{footnotesize}
that makes revolutions. We know that our goals can be reached only through a
revolution; however, we also know that it lies just as little in our power to make this
revolution as it lies in the power of our opponents to prevent it. Thus it does not even
occur to us to want to foment a revolution or to prepare the conditions for one.”

Statements like this stretch back to the party’s founders, Bebel and the elder Liebknecht,
who wrote in 1871 “If the ruling class does delay the peaceful, lawful social revolution
for too long, the social revolution will break through violently with wildly streaming hair
and iron sandals on her feet.” There is a logical quality to this, perhaps a consequence
of a party and class objectively isolated and unsure of its capability of forcing the issue,
but dedicated in its desire to see socialism and democracy. Roth quotes Rudolf
Hilferding, a prominent Social Democrat: “To many Social Democrats, ‘power
appeared,’ Rudolf Hilferding observed, ‘concretely embodied in the army, police,
capital.’ He related this to Bismarck’s blood and iron politics and concluded that German
Marxism had the tendency to develop into a kind of ‘Bismarxism.’ This resulted,
however, in a hesitation to fight for major political goals which were supposed to be
attainable only after the final clash of the opposing forces, and ‘the rigid and at the same
time transparent power conditions’ also weakened the will to fight for political objectives
which seemed to have no direct relationship to the long-term goals of the movement.”

Problems Michels saw as crucial: internal party democracy, efficacy of party
members at the grassroots in their interactions with the leadership, direct action – these
things were either ignored or seen as completely met by the success of the Social
Democratic Party. The growth of the labor unions, the Social Democrats, the various

---

215 Roth, *The Social Democrats,* 91.
216 Ibid, 169-70.
clubs, cooperative organizations, a worker-oriented press (all considerable achievements in an authoritarian state), were seen as a collective victory by an increasingly conscious working class. The conservatism represented by the party leadership, by Kautsky’s cautious revolutionary posturing, so detested by Michels, could at the time also be viewed as simply a logical reaction to the circumstances. Perhaps the party was not as democratic as possible, or as combative, but it had won important victories in securing rights that could have formed the basis of a democratic transformation in German society. Kautsky against saw that “it is the first time in the history of the world that we are confronted with a revolutionary struggle to be fought out under the application of democratic forms by organizations created upon the foundation of democratic freedom against resources such as the world has not yet seen, prominent which are organizations of employers before which even monarchs bow…”217 What Kautsky does not mention, however, is that the SPD had decided on a course that required it to be the primary engine in the creation of the liberal state, as most of the bourgeois parties were either indifferent to or hostile to full liberalization of the Wilhelmine state. This meant the SPD had to be an intensely professional political machine as it was creating the conditions whereby professional politics would come to be routine.

Kautsky and the SPD were confronted by the spectacular growth of large economic, state, and political apparatuses that Marx never saw and Engels only witnessed at the very end of his life. Kautsky and the party were convinced that “the model of 1848 and the Paris Commune could no longer serve to advance workers’ interests in a social context demanded by large-scale capitalism; it could inspire neither greater offensive

actions by labor, nor the construction of a socialist state.” Far from smashing the state apparatus as Marx had demanded in the *Eighteenth Brumaire*,

“So far as the state, the civil service, and the nature of political parties were concerned, Kautsky arrived at conclusions which seem… singularly analogous to those of Max Weber on the relationship between firm, state, and parties… Kautsky maintained that any project of ‘direct democracy’ was doomed to failure in a society dominated by large-scale modern industry – that is, by a mode of production whose very essence requires not only central planning and coordination of the economy and the state, but also a bureaucratic apparatus as a professionally selected technical instrument for its implementation. He concluded that although the state apparatus constructed by the modern bourgeoisie could be used for different socio-political purposes, they could not be ‘shattered’ and replaced by an ‘anti-bureaucratic’ state and form of social organization.”

The centralized state and consolidated industry were not, for the SPD, aspects of capitalism to be superceded, but rather a pathway to socialism. Where Weber lamented the routinization of politics while conceding its inevitability, the SPD leadership of the era embraced it. Kautsky’s version of revolution was one whereby the proletariat took control of parliament and expanded proletarian control over the economy and bureaucracy, but did so *legally*, without bloodshed if at all possible. The proletariat would use the state forms bequeathed to it by the bourgeoisie as much as it would use consolidated industry to bring forth planned socialist production. It would expand and defend the legal rights granted by the bourgeoisie to their logical maximum, until the ruling class attempted to violate those rights and repress the proletariat, at which point the “final battle” would begin, usually conceived by Kautsky as bloodless mass strikes against the capitalist class which would eventually wear down bourgeois resistance. Kautsky expected political rights to be extended into the economic sphere, heightening the contradictions and tensions within bourgeois democracy.

While the narrative is understandable given the newness of mass organization and industry for the German party, it was problematic for those who, like Michels, saw mass

---

219 Ibid, 14.
organization as a damper on democratic forms. Would proletarian, social, democracy, simply mean that the working class dominated parliament? Democracy would be a hierarchical affair, with participation in the party a prerequisite for participation, and the potential for domination by a determined leadership, as Michels feared. On the other side, syndicalists and later, worker-council proponents like Pannekoek would wrestle with the issue and search for a new form of base-level control within the modern, technocratic state, whether it be grassroots councils, factory committees, or combative unions. The argument within the SPD was, again, over the external situation in which the party and the working class found itself, not over the internal logic of professional politics.

Both sides tended to fetishize their solution as the only one possible. The pertinent issue, one grasped by Kautsky (and Weber), was the near impossibility of decentralizing modern industry like steel or chemical plants, which could not operate on a small and local level and required a massive disciplined workforce. The state apparatus looked equally complex and difficult to de-bureaucratize, and the party had long been committed to full centralization and destruction of the last remnants of local, feudal privilege enjoyed by the various German states. Demands for political decentralization before these remnants were eliminated were seen as a retrograde step, even as the party harshly criticized control of the state by the Prussian Junkers. The SPD’s version of socialism was large-scale industry controlled by the proletariat, with a large bureaucratic state to help plan production. The SPD and Kautsky believed this would happen via laws passed in parliament and action on the part of the proletariat. Kautsky was clearly naïve to assume the bourgeoisie would be swept away peacefully by a proletarian party in parliament, or that it would be possible to introduce socialism via the Reichstag. His
work never satisfactorily came to grips with the questions of grassroots democracy and the oligarchic potential of large-scale organization. Michels, the syndicalists, and the worker council proponents would struggle with, precisely because Kautsky saw the construction of a vast professional party apparatus as necessary in order to defeat the Junkers, establish a liberal order, and eventually win the battle for socialist democracy. *Political Parties* was, in many ways, an outcome of Michels’ frustration with Kautsky and the SPD’s lack of interest in the problems associated with professional politics. At what level could elected worker/factory councils or grassroots organization replace, or supplement a technocratic bureaucracy in socialist society? If the SPD-supported worker cooperatives could operate on this model, why not engage in discussion of its applicability to larger industry, to municipalities, or the state in general? In many ways, Kautsky and the SPD leadership’s dismissal of said discussion lay directly in their own sense of indispensability vis-à-vis the rank-and-file party member and of the party in general, which might be replaced in a more decentralized order. If the party were the expression of the most advanced layer of proletarian consciousness, dispersing its power would make no sense.\(^\text{220}\)

The problematic dynamic involved in any mass-based political party, but especially one committed to a socialist and democratic ethos, is that the leadership cannot openly make a case they are better-suited and qualified to lead than the grassroots members, even if they believe it to be so. This is compounded when one considers the SPD and Kautsky’s concept of the party being the vanguard of proletarian consciousness. If the party is at the forefront of the movement, then the leadership of the party is likely

\(^{220}\) Kautsky would later take the opposite tack with the Bolsheviks, celebrating the diversity of socialist parties in Russia and denouncing the vanguardism of Lenin.
to be the most conscious of the class-conscious proletariat. Demands by the rank-and-file would have to be treated cautiously, especially with the apparent success of the leadership’s policies since the formation of the party. While there were internal disputes amongst the members of the executive committee, their missteps were fewer than their triumphs. The phenomenon described by Michels of the party staff becoming, or at least assuming it was superior in its capability to run the party to the mass, is likely apparent in any mass-based political party. Yet the German Social Democratic Party had constructed a historical narrative out of Marx’s writings whereby it assumed the march to socialism was unstoppable. Success then bolstered the unwillingness of the leadership to radically alter course, both because of their persecution by the state apparatus, but also inasmuch as capitalism was imminently doomed in the SPD’s deterministic interpretation of historical materialism.

Yet the first decade of the twentieth century brought with it not just rising success for the SPD but also inner discontent. Dissidents on the party’s left and right began to question the party leadership’s strategies. The turn of the century had brought with it the revisionist controversy whereby intellectuals such as Eduard Bernstein and party leaders such as Georg von Vollmar argued that the success of the party had opened a peaceful doorway to socialism through elections, and a new platform geared toward alliance with bourgeois liberals and electoral reform was key, but were frustrated by the party orthodoxy’s reluctance to push vigorously for reformist goals. On the left, luminaries such as Rosa Luxemburg, Anton Pannekoek, and Karl Liebknecht worried the party had largely abandoned its revolutionary pretensions and was radical in name only; they sought to find a way to reinvigorate the party base and remove an ossified party
leadership. Michels’ critique during this period fit in the broader circle of the party left, even as he incorporated syndicalist ideas that intellectuals like Luxemburg did not. The concerns contained within Political Parties had their gestation in this period, roughly 1904-1907. Working class combativeness in Germany rose with the yearlong Russian Revolution of 1905, while the conservative leanings of the party and union bureaucracy were laid bare by their reaction to rank-and-file stirrings. Where a party member stood on the mass strike was a reflection of their concept of how party democracy should function (or whether it was functioning at all), and the role played by the party leadership (for good or ill). We will turn to the mass strike now, as seen through the writings of Kautsky, Luxemburg, Michels, Bernstein, and other party thinkers, on our path to examining the reaction to the questions raised by Political Parties.

The Mass Strike Debate

In theory, the mass strike was a large-scale work stoppage by most or all of the nation’s proletariat, with political and economic goals interlinked. Yet it was a protean concept whose more intricate definition varied across the SPD’s ideological divide. At its heart the mass strike question was a debate over the relationship between the party rank-and-file, the unorganized masses, and their relationship to the party and its leadership. The mass strike is neither inherently reformist nor revolutionary, but the debate mapped onto that question largely because majority of debaters only tangentially engaged with the question of professionalized politics and mass political organization. Success as a party had seemingly not brought the revolution any closer, and those in favor of the mass strike as a revolutionary tool tended to see the strike as a way to reinvigorate a party comfortable with the status quo. This approached the symptoms of
mass professional politics, but not the root cause, nor the contradictions associated with
the party championing an expanded liberal state even as it put aside the question of
socialism to a more distant future. The masses mobilized and struck for political suffrage
rights in the majority of cases during the decade of the mass strike debate, not socialist
revolution. Whether this was inevitably to be the primary goal of the proletariat, a
question that had to be resolved before socialism could be put on the agenda, or the result
of incorrect political tactics and education on the part of the socialist organizations, the
mass strike was tied to the role of ordinary workers in promoting the expansion of their
rights.

Party leaders such as Bebel and Kautsky saw the strike as a tool, largely
defensive, that the party could call into being if the bourgeoisie attempted to roll back
gains won by the working class in parliament. Revisionists embraced it as a weapon the
party could use to force suffrage reform on the government (both national and regional).
Leftists such as Luxemburg witnessed its use in the Russian Revolution and believed it
was both an expression of rising class-consciousness and combativeness, and a way to
move the party in a more radical direction. Syndicalists like Michels and Dr. Raphael
Freideberg held out hope that the mass strike was a way to reinvigorate and radicalize the
party’s base. Others, especially German union heads, denounced the mass strike as pure
adventurism; but no one was able to avoid grappling with the question. In fact, the
debate occurred with varying levels of intensity within the German SPD from 1905 until
1913. If the every faction of the party ventured an opinion (reformist/revisionist, centrist,
radical), especially the most famous intellectuals and leaders of the era: Karl Kautsky,
Auguste Bebel, Rosa Luxemburg, Eduard Bernstein, Kurt Eisner, Dr. Helphand Parvus,
Rudolf Hilferding, Karl Liebknecht, and of course Michels, the debate generated enough interest and discussion that European radicals intervened as well: Anton Pannekoek, Georges Sorel, Henriette Roland-Holst; the ramifications of the topics reverberated long enough that Pannekoek and Lenin would debate each other in theoretical pieces written after the Russian Revolution of 1917, and later thinkers like the Marxist psychologist Wilhelm Reich\textsuperscript{221} would touch on the issue in his work *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*.

Within the debate are issues of: the role of organization, the place for independent political action, the nature of party bureaucracy, responsibility of party officials and responsiveness to mass pressure, and psychology of the party membership. Michels’ involvement clearly shaped his writings of the period and his later pessimistic conclusions in *Political Parties*. The reason the mass strike bubbled to the surface as a real debate within the SPD was partly due to the Russian working class revolt, but also a larger question of “what next?” Electoral success had not translated into revolution, nor had it brought about serious everyday reforms, and Russia – hardly an industrial nation – had a more combative proletariat than Germany. Socialism promised a thoroughgoing transition to a fully democratized society, and the Social Democrats had embraced the mass party where their liberal counterparts remained at best ambivalent. Yet the debate also contained, at least tacitly, the very issues that became central in Michels’ *Political Parties*: was the leadership too conservative, were the masses too docile, and was the growth of bureaucracy within the SPD something that could or should be rectified, and would the achievement of the goal be thwarted by the imperatives of organization?

Moreover, the German Social Democratic Party was, in 1905, the foremost successful

\textsuperscript{221}Reich was a member of the Austrian Social Democratic party in the 1920s and then the German Communist Party in the 1930s until his eventual expulsion for heretical views on sexual liberation.
European example of the new mass political party. Its internal debates thus hold an important place in our study of this phenomenon, besides the fact that it is central to Michels’ case study as well. Participants in the mass strike debate were also some of the foremost contributors to the era’s left political thought.

That said, the mass strike did not suddenly appear on the German scene in 1905 without discussion or precedent. While the immediate precursor to the debate at the Jena party conference that year was precipitated by the use of mass political strikes in the Russian Revolution months earlier, the party had witnessed a version of the mass strike meet with some success in Belgium in 1893. Indeed

“The Parti Ouvrier Belge or POB, were thoroughly reformist, so reformist indeed that when founded in 1885 they deliberated omitted the word socialist from the party title for fear of alienating Catholic workers. Yet in 1890 the reformist leadership agreed to the principle of peaceful strikes for political reform. Belgium had had a long tradition of its political opposition appealing directly to the masses against parliament by means of demonstrations and riots, and during the 1880s there had been large mass demonstrations for universal suffrage. Belgium had a restricted suffrage, limited to 4.4 percent of its male population... a general strike in 1893 led to the introduction of universal suffrage but it was limited by the addition of plural voting. The abolition of this restriction became a political objective of the POB in the pre-war period, with further strikes in 1902 and 1913.”

The party leadership and intellectuals also clearly knew that Russian workers had been fired on during the Bloody Sunday uprising in January of 1905, and that Belgian troops had fired on workers during the 1902 general strike. Questions about the general strike also had a taint of anarchism and voluntarist syndicalism dating back to Bakunin and the First International; in the years leading up to 1905 the cause had been taken up by thinkers like the French syndicalist Georges Sorel, the Dutch anarchist Domela Nieuwenhuis, and the intellectual leader of the German ‘localist’ unions, Dr. Raphael Freideberg. Freideberg pushed the idea as

---

222 Sometimes called the general strike. We will use them somewhat interchangeably.
“the key to regeneration of the labor movement. It would liberate the worker’s ‘free personality’ from the crushing effect of the dull routine involved in the reformist tactic. Through the strike the worker could again win an active role in determining the destiny of his class.”224

In fact by 1903 the idea had even spread into the minds of some of the party orthodoxy, as well as reformist and revisionist intellectuals as a potentially acceptable tactic:

“Basking in the sun of the Socialists’ electoral victory of 1903, Hilferding argued that the colossal increases in labor strength at every election would sooner or later impel the ruling classes to abolish or restrict universal suffrage lest it lead to the introduction of socialism by a Social Democratic-controlled parliament. In order to fend off such a catastrophe, the working class must prepare to use its economic power: ‘Behind universal suffrage must stand the will to the general strike.’ Hilferding commended the general strike not as a weapon of ‘latin… pseudo-revolutionary putsches’ but as ‘a means to… protect the forward march of the proletariat from forcible disturbances.’ He was, in effect, absorbing the general strike into the parliamentary tactic of the Erfurt program. Even at the opposite end of the party’s spectrum, Eduard Bernstein advocated consideration of the mass strike to defend or acquire universal, equal suffrage.”225

Most party and trade union leaders, however, were absolutely uninterested in even discussion of the tactic; Freideberg’s proposals were thoroughly defeated at the 1903 Dresden congress though Bernstein, Karl Liebknecht, and Clara Zetkin urged the 1904 Bremen congress to put the issue on the agenda at the 1905 Jena gathering.226

Part of the reason the mass strike was put on the agenda was that the political situation in Germany had shifted gradually from 1900-1904, and then radically in 1905.

In fact,

“From 1900 to 1904, the number [of workers engaged in strikes] rose to 477,516, thus exceeding in five years the number engaged in the previous ten. In 1905 alone, 507,964 workers were engaged in work stoppages, more than the total for all of the nineties, more than the total for the previous five years, or for that of any other year between 1848 and 1917… this was an atmosphere in which political radicalism could easily spread.”227

This was, indeed, an incredible change in the combativeness of the German working class. Rising expectations fostered by a well-organized trade union and socialist

225 Ibid, 34.
226 This was partly due to a shift in mood of the International; at the August 1904 congress in Amsterdam, the general strike was embraced as a tactic of bringing about “important social changes, or of opposing reactionary designs on the rights of workers.” (Schorske, German Social Democracy, 35.) Prior to this, even the International had refused to talk about the general strike.
movement, the growth of German industry and workers’ wages, as well as continued political and cultural isolation of the working class by the Prussian aristocracy likely combined to create a situation in which strike action, both official and wildcat, was far more likely than in the previous decade.  

This upsurge in radicalism coincided with an impressive victory for the SPD in the 1903 Reichstag elections; the party’s vote totals increased to 3.1 million from the 2.1 million received in 1898; the party gained 25 additional mandates bringing them to a total of 81 in the Reichstag - the second largest behind the Catholic Center party’s 101 members. More impressively, 9 seats were won in predominantly rural areas that had previously not seemed like fertile ground for socialist agitation (though these districts were not necessarily agrarian). It must be granted that the major issue of the campaign was not revolution, but rather the grain tariff, which could have increased the price of foodstuffs for the working class and urban poor.  

The question of the mass political strike become more than a specter for the SPD and trade union leadership; it was a theme that began to haunt them as a significant portion of their membership openly sympathized with direct action rather than parliamentary maneuvering and collective bargaining.

The questions contained within the mass strike debate, although they do not directly address the problem of oligarchy and professionalization of politics, are important as part of a discussion on the problem of democracy in the era of mass bureaucratic organizations. Those who embraced the mass strike a radical tactic also

---

228 Marxist world-systems theorists have tried to pinpoint the likelihood of economic and political struggles on various points of a Kondratieff or long wave. The majority seems to come along the beginning period of an upward swing of a new phase of capitalist growth, where the reality of economic expansion is coupled with continued wage stagnation and possible political problems. If so, the end of the ‘world depression’ of long-term price deflation that began after 1873 and is generally held to have lasted until the mid-1890s would have generated a new upswing, the fruits of which would have been noticeable to the German working class by 1900-05.

229 Steenson, *Not One Man! Not One Penny!*, 51.
championed the direct action of the unorganized and organized party members against a conservative, entrenched leadership. Those who rejected the mass strike, or only called for its use in limited, defensive struggles to protect rights already won, tended to embrace mass electoral politics and either ignored the problems of oligarchy and leadership or saw them as an intrinsic part of modern democracy. Thus, the debate contained within a multitude of positions on mass democratic organizations and professional politics that still have a possibility to inform political science and democratic theory on democracy and mass parties. Beginning with Kautsky and Bebel, as well as the trade union leadership as we explicate the problems of democracy and oligarchy.

**Kautsky, Bebel and the Trade Union Leadership**

Writing on the mass strike just a few years before the Jena debate, Kautsky mentioned “at a certain height of economic development the thought will at once occur to use the strike as a means for political struggle. It has already appeared as such in France and Belgium and has been used with good results. In my opinion it will play a great role in the revolutionary battles of the future.” Kautsky’s acceptance of the general strike in 1902 may seem at odds with the SPD’s general condemnation of it to that point, but it is worth keeping in mind that the party in this era was fully capable of letting its intellectuals make revolutionary pronouncements while acting in a reformist manner – something Michels would take as a central tenet of his critique. In point-of-fact, Kautsky’s vision of the general strike was

“not… the idea of the general strike in the sense that the anarchists and the French trade unionists use the word. To these latter the political and especially Parliamentary activity of the proletariat is to be supplemented by the strike and it is to become a means to throw the social order overboard. That is foolish… the strike as a political weapon will scarcely ever, certainly not in any time now visible, take on the form of a strike of all the laborers of a country. It can also not have the purpose of displacing the other means of political struggle but only of supplementing and strengthening them. We are now entering upon a

---

time where opposed to the overwhelming power of organized capital an isolated non-political strike will be just as hopeless as is the isolated parliamentary action of the labor parties opposed to the pressure of the capitalistically dominated governmental powers. It will be ever more necessary that both should grow and draw new strength from co-operation.\textsuperscript{231}

This is not the explosive, bottom-up strike envisioned by the syndicalists as a catalyst to revolution, but one used to bolster the party’s progress in Parliament. The mass strike was thus either a defensive weapon to be used only when necessary, to promote suffrage right expansion aiding the party’s parliamentary success, or when the final battle was at hand. Kautsky concluded, “The political strike is a powerful proletarian weapon that is applicable only in a battle which the proletariat fights alone in which it enters against the total bourgeois society. In this sense it is perhaps the most revolutionary weapon of the proletariat.”\textsuperscript{232} While strikes could be used to strengthen the hand of the working class and its representatives, the SPD, the political general strike was a tactic that could only be used when a battle against the full forces of the state were arrayed against the proletariat, not before.

The party that had harnessed the masses as they awakened to political action was also wary of those same masses breaking loose from party control. Thus the mass strike debate is as much an argument over tactics and the form of the unfolding class struggle as it is a question over how much control the party should have over its membership’s activities. Three general strikes - in Belgium, Sweden, and the Netherlands – over the course of a year, from April 1902-3, likely gave the SPD and sympathetic trade union leadership considerable pause. The Belgian strike was part of an ongoing struggle to expand suffrage rights to the working class\textsuperscript{233}; a general strike in 1893 had led to the

\textsuperscript{231} Ibid., 90-1.
\textsuperscript{232} Ibid., 92.
\textsuperscript{233} Most of the Social Democratic called or led mass strikes in this period had specifically reformist, not revolutionary, aims, usually attached to expanded suffrage.
workers being granted some voting rights, but not equal and universal suffrage. In 1902 the mass strike had broken out “spontaneously, without any call from the party, as a result of heated parliamentary debates on electoral reform between working-class and clerical representatives.”

Workers and police exchanged fire, but “the government, however, was well-prepared for the clash. It had reinforced 60,000 garrison troops by calling up several groups of reservists and mobilizing the civil guard,” and six days after the initial uprising the rejection of the electoral reform bill saw “again stormy demonstrations and clashes between workers and members of the armed forces. In Loewen the civil guard opened fire on demonstrators, killing six and wounding many more.”

The party was stuck between continuing the strike and risking civil war, and ending the strike and potentially demoralizing the entire Belgian working class with the added worry of gravely weakening the party itself. What happened next was instructive, as

“There then occurred one of the most surprising developments in the history of social conflict. The withdrawal from a contest which had engaged the most profound emotions of the workers took place in a calm and orderly manner. At the call of the party the workers resumed work in mine and factory with the same discipline they had shown when they had first downed tools. The party had undoubtedly suffered a defeat, but it was not a catastrophe. Contrary to Legien’s fears of the consequences of an unsuccessful general strike, the party was not destroyed. On the contrary, the workers tended, if anything, to draw closer to it.”

The Swedish strike, in contrast, was completely planned and executed by the socialist party. Occurring a month after the Belgian one, it was the culmination of months of planning after debates in the Rigsdag over, once again, expansion of the franchise to the majority of the working class. Calling for mass demonstrations against a bill that inadequately expanded the franchise, they also “asked the workers to cease work for three

235 Ibid, 293.
236 Ibid.
days beginning on 15 May – the day the bill came before the Rigsdag. As a strike it was a complete success. Industry and transport were paralyzed for three days. The strike, which was intended to display the strength and solidarity of the working class, fulfilled its purpose admirably. But as a means of bringing pressure on the Conservative majority in the Rigsdag it failed completely.”

A year later, a general strike in Holland started as a spontaneous protest of railway workers who refused to scab on striking dock workers; the government responded by introducing a bill to Parliament depriving all state workers (including those on the rails) of the right to strike. Workers immediately responded with hostility to the proposal, and the two Dutch socialist parties – the SDP and the SDAP$^{238}$ – set up “a joint defense committee which threatened to call out the entire working class of Holland in defense of the freedom to strike.”

The government seemed unmoved by the proposed mass strike, and thus it was called. Dutch workers fought state troops in “the most severe clashes between the workers and the state machine in Dutch history. The defense committee was prepared neither to push matters to extremes nor to call off the strike, and the movement accordingly fell to pieces. The defeat worsened and embittered relations between the two Socialist parties and represented a disastrous set-back for the trade-union movement.”

### Suffrage, Briefly

While the mass strike question was, for party and union leaders, quite often “dynamite,” so, in general, was universal suffrage. It was suffrage rights, and not socialism, that animated the majority of the mass strikes in this period, whether directed

---

$^{237}$ Ibid, 294.

$^{238}$ Sociaaldemokratisch Partij (Social Democratic Party) and the Sociaaldemokratisch Arbeid Partij (Social Democratic Workers Party).

$^{239}$ Ibid.

$^{240}$ Ibid, 295.
by the party or spontaneous uprisings. The ruling class and its adjuncts saw the granting
of voting rights to the working class as a dangerous and potentially revolutionary act,
presaging socialism – which is exactly how it was understood by the SPD. Neither side
could see the potential that granting the working class full citizenship rights would both
negate one of the major causes of unrest but also fully professionalize the socialist parties
into bourgeois parliamentary politics. Reformist sections of the parties, which had to
adhere to at least a veneer of radicalism before full suffrage, would be able to jettison
their support of revolution once they were able to enter government. Working class
voters would become less likely to support revolutionary strikes and confrontation with
the state if they believed their Socialist party could introduce socialism via parliament,
and of course because they became fully used to following the decisions made by party
leaders. Yet the suffrage question was such a contentious issue that virtually no one on
either side could see the ramifications.241 Political demands that united the fight for both
democracy and socialism, like Pannekoek’s worker councils, were either deemed too
radical, unworkable, or unnecessary by party leaders who were more worried about
increasing their votes in parliament.

Return to the SPD & The Mass Strike Debate

The SPD and trade union leadership saw the mass political strike as a question to
be kept mainly to the realm of theory, if it were to be discussed at all. Kautsky’s views
on the mass strike were not entirely in lock-step with the leadership’s, but he did not
advocate its use as a tool to spur revolution or to batter down electoral walls. At the 1904
Amsterdam Congress of the Second International, a resolution proposed by the French

241 Most syndicalists had an understanding of suffrage’s consequences, if not the root causes; Michels and
Weber were the ones who fully developed theories of professional politics.
delegation in support of the general strike as a tactic was strongly opposed by the German delegation (and the Dutch, who had suffered the consequences of a failed mass strike); the motion carried due to support from the Russian Social Revolutionaries, along with delegates from Switzerland and Japan. A month after the Congress, a massive strike wave hit Italy, unorganized but supported by Arturo Labriola and the Italian syndicalist wing of the socialist party. The action was in response to seething anger in the Italian working class at state repression of strikes in Sicily. While “the Italian general strike of September 1904 was mainly a strike of unorganized workers… it did not collapse, as Legien was convinced that such strikes must do… the Syndicalists were convinced that, in Arturo Labriola’s phrase, it ‘had proved to the masses that five minutes’ direct action was worth as much as four years of empty parliamentary chatter’.”

By late 1904, the German socialists had seen four separate mass strikes: two which began in unorganized fashion but later led by socialist parties, one of which collapsed due to party wavering and another that was called off before the strike completely collapsed; one that was completely planned by the party and was successful as an action but unsuccessful in its aims; and one that was completely unorganized and remained as such even though supported by the Syndicalist wing of the Italian socialists, and had no clear cut goals. SPD and German union leaders were unwilling to take any of these as models, even if there were successes here and there up to this point.

The problem was more than just an adherence to Kautskyian precepts of deterministic Marxism, presaging revolution at some unspecified future date if the party simply waited for the collapse of capitalism. Rather, the SPD and the unions were built by the labor and support of millions of workers. The party and unions during the period

242 Ibid, 297.
of 1904-6, the period of the first mass strike debate, not only saw success in the sense of
great electoral and strike victories, but also in membership growth; union membership
grew from 1.05 million in 1904 to 1.69 million in 1906, and party membership from
384,327 in 1906 to 530,466 in 1907 (1906 was the first year the SPD recorded official
national party membership).\textsuperscript{243} Party and unions ran dozens of daily newspapers and
monthly magazines, workers co-operative societies, businesses, besides their usual work
as electoral and economic arms of the socialist movement. The masses were absolutely
\textit{necessary} to forward the socialist cause – indeed they were the whole reason socialism
was possible – but the party orthodoxy was extremely unsure of the role the masses
should play in determining their own destiny. They had a habit of making decisions seen
as unwise in leadership circles, like spontaneously striking and drawing the apparatus of
socialist parties and unions prematurely into a struggle they were unlikely to win.

The attitude of the leadership on the mass strike shows the tension between the
party’s official ideology and its practical attitude toward rank-and-file participation in the
struggle for even basic democratic rights, let alone socialist revolution. It goes beyond
the debate over high risk-high reward tactics – it is a question both of whether a mass
political party should resort to quasi-legal street actions unless forced to do so, and at
what level the masses should be considered independent actors in their own political
organization. Given that the party officially saw itself as the vanguard of the labor
movement, as the most class conscious of class-conscious workers, the leadership could
reach the conclusion that strict hierarchy and discipline were requirements if the
revolution were to be accomplished. Of the general strikes in the period from 1902-4 the
only one that met this standard of strict discipline and leadership control was the

\textsuperscript{243} Steenson, \textit{Not One Man! Not One Penny!}, 94.
Swedish. The SPD reformists like Hilferding and Bernstein who supported the general strike used this as their vision, not the spontaneous Italian version favored by the syndicalists such as Michels. In fact, until 1905, the movement leadership could claim they were expressing the will of the membership that had elected them, as there was no mass upsurge in Germany towards a general strike. Positions of the SPD (and union) orthodoxy may be summed up:

1. Party leadership is mandated by regular elections to represent the interests of the party membership.
2. These decisions may or may not correspond to the immediate demands of the membership but they will always correspond to the long-term interests of the party as a whole.
3. Party leaders are more qualified than the mass to make critical decisions, and that is why there is leadership continuity.
4. Party success at the polls and increased membership rolls are a verbal endorsement of leadership policies and the democratic will of the party mass.
5. The masses follow party policies because they agree with the decisions reached and the success of the party in general.
6. Risking the success of the party in revolutionary ventures will only damage the party’s chances of victory in the long-term.

These views correspond to an orderly vision of democracy as one practiced by legitimate representatives acting in conservative patterns. It was, rather, the consequence of the SPD being the most successful of the first-generation socialist parties while nestled inside an authoritarian state that allowed for some parliamentary forms of representation. The party had to build, from the ground up, strategies and tactics for both democracy and socialism while figuring out how to both mobilize and, occasionally, restrain the masses.

For the SPD and the Second International, winning the battle for full suffrage and parliamentary democracy was an important first step towards the eventual victory of socialism. Tactics that had served it well for over three decades had not exactly brought about revolution or widespread reform, but had led to party growth. Weber and Michels
would both point to this as an example, quite rightly, of how successful organization is
loathe adopting new tactics, but also the growing logic of professional politics within the
German context had created an opening for the more reformist elements within the
German party to put the question of revolutionary action and the mass strike on hold.244

Yet by the debate at the 1903 Congress of the Second International there was
foment within even the German party. As previously discussed, the mass strike was
embraced by both reformists like Bernstein and radical syndicalists such as Dr. Raphael
Friedeberg, who presented a resolution on the general strike that was voted down at the
Dresden Party Congress, the first ever attended by Michels. Events in Russia were to
bring the question to a head, as discontent with official SPD policies in Germany reached
down to the rank-and-file. Rosa Luxemburg wrote her famous pamphlet on the mass
strike after witnessing the Russian Revolution, and entered into a half-decade long debate
with Kautsky and the executive committee, and the unions on party tactics, internal party
democracy, and the nature of the strike itself. It is to her and the German debate we now
turn, as the left of the party had serious reservations and criticism of the direction in

244 Of course this begs the question as to why the reformist elements were able to out-organize the
revolutionary ones. There is no inherent reason why a professionalized party apparatus could not be used
for revolutionary ends – Weber acknowledged as much when he wrote to Michels that the Jacobins were
able to do so with their proto-party. Some of the reason was the decisions made by the radical faction in
the SPD to centralize the party and expand the party bureaucracy. Initially a reaction to regional reformist
tendencies in Southern Germany, the centralization of the party apparatus by the radicals meant the party
cudgel would soon be used against them by the ascendant center-right alliance within the leadership.
However, in the hypothetical situation that a revolutionary faction gains control of a major party apparatus
in a parliamentary government, it must not only have the support of at least a determined portion of the
party membership to acquire internal control, but also to be willing to sacrifice a part of the apparatus
against the state and business elite in radical actions. This is not impossible; there are historical examples
even in the core industrial nations of unions and parties, at times, willing to take risky actions to win major
victories. Education, articulation of rank-and-file demands, and trust of the leadership by the rank-and-file
(or a party that allows somewhat for rank-and-file spontaneity) may mitigate the overwhelming tendency in
professionalized politics embedded within a capitalist parliamentary system towards compromise. Yet it is
an uphill battle.
which the organization was heading, and the consequences organization had on the masses – a debate that Michels was involved in as well.

**Luxemburg, Pannekoek, and the Mass Strike**

The vision of the mass strike for the SPD's left-wing was considerably different than Kautsky's. Where his was fundamentally defensive and party-controlled, in the minds of revolutionaries such as Rosa Luxemburg and Anton Pannekoek - who engaged Kautsky in polemics on the strike from 1906 until the First World War - it was the logical culmination of the class struggle in a revolutionary era, a way to sweep aside the conservatism of the party and trade union leadership, and the key to engaging broad layers of the unorganized working class while energizing the party's rank-and-file. Kautsky had fundamentally accepted the structures of the modern state as tools the proletariat would use in a future socialist democracy; an SPD majority in parliament would represent the triumph of the working class and could set about socializing and democratizing the economy. The party's left-wing was fundamentally less sanguine about the prospects of electoral victory in a parliament leading to socialism and the effects of modern organization on the revolutionary potential of the party. There was a fundamental questioning occurring in the socialist left of the period: mass organization, especially in the German SPD, had produced spectacular gains in party membership and seats in parliaments, a socialist subculture had been carefully cultivated, and reforms had been won after years of tough struggle. Yet, as Michels noted, while the organized masses were more objectively powerful in their organization, they were less likely to use that power than their unorganized predecessors, and very few of the Social Democratic parties of the era engaged in revolutionary activities beyond parliamentary campaigns or
struggles for basic civil liberties and electoral rights. Luxemburg had taken up the cudgel against the growing reformism of Bernstein and her writings of the era clearly articulate a fear, much like Michels, that organizational success was leading directly to a fundamental conservatism on the part of the leadership, which had drastic consequences for the party rank-and-file's internal democratic efficacy and especially for those who wished to see a thoroughgoing socialist revolution. The embrace of the mass strike by the party's left-wing was a culmination of years groping for a way to solve the dilemma of conservative bureaucratic cliques and the passivity of the party membership: while Luxemburg and the pre-war party left never called for abandonment of the parliamentary struggle as (most) syndicalists did, clearly the resurgence in anti-systemic action by the masses buoyed their hopes of revolution.

All this debate flowed from the Russian Revolution of 1905, along with the increased amount of strike action in Germany during that year, which brought matters to a head within the socialist movement (party and unions). What had begun as a mass demonstration for political rights by workers at the Winter Palace in St. Petersburg on 22 January 1905 quickly turned into chaos as the Tsar’s troops fired into the crowd. For most of the next year the Russian working class engaged in mass strikes aimed at political ends. Grassroots democratic assemblies, called soviets, sprung up in neighborhoods and factories and constituted a separate, dual power against the Tsarist government and capitalist industry. *Vorwarts* held a daily front-page column in 1905 giving regular word on the revolution’s progress, and party locals across Germany held sympathy meetings for the Russians. The energy of the era was palpable as “new political vistas opened before the eyes of the long-frustrated revolutionary activists as the

[^245]: The revolution came immediately on the heels of the Russian military defeat by the Japanese in 1904.
international class struggle seemed ‘to want to emerge from stagnation, from the long phase of parliamentary sniping, and to enter a period of elemental mass struggles.’\[246]\n
The mass strike had been placed on the 1905 Jena congress’ agenda at the late 1904 congress in Bremen by a broad spectrum of party intellectuals, but it took on an unexpected meaning after the advent of the Russian Revolution and intense strike action in Germany itself. Trade union leaders viewed this with alarm, as the mass strike in the Ruhr industries during 1905 was started by spontaneous wildcat strikes and intensified pressure from localist-syndicalist unions for radical action and decentralized control, as well as attacks from the SPD (especially Kautsky) for increased party control over union activities.\[247\] For the union leaders

“Carrying on extensive economic struggles in which the employers were all too often calling the tune, the sudden rise of the political mass strike question represented a triple threat. If the party should adopt a mass strike tactic, the principle of gradual gains by centrally controlled but localized strikes would be jeopardized; the organizations and their treasuries might be wiped out in a revolutionary adventure for political ends which the trade-union officials felt to be none of their concern; and the localists might gain strength among a rank and file infected with mass strike propaganda. For the union leaders, the mass strike question was dynamite.”\[248\]

At the trade unions' triennial congress at Koln in May 1905 the unions passed a resolution, which declared the question of the general strike ‘indiscussable’. Theodor Bomelburg, head of the mason’s union, summed up the position of the trade union leadership as

“Our literati [have] no notion of the practical labor movement… [there must be financial resources to prevent the strikers from going hungry,] and such means are not presently available… [even if the unions should one day have] means so enormous as to conduct such great political struggles, we should completely exhaust ourselves in the fight… to develop our organizations further, we need peace in the labor


\[247\] Although Bebel, Kautsky, and union officials had roughly similar opinions of the mass strike in the 1904-6 period: that it was a dangerous tool to be used in emergencies, if at all, and that the general course of history or policies of the party/unions were enough to bring about eventual victory, we must also note there were factional and territorial disputes within both leadership structures (as Michels notes often occurs within competing bureaucratic institutions).

movement… we must see to it that the discussion of the mass strike disappears, and that the solutions of
[the problems of] the future are left open until the appropriate time arrives.”249

This was a view in fundamental accord with orthodox SPD thought during a time
of rapid growth in party and union membership, if perhaps a bit more blunt: the slow but
steady success must not be interrupted by revolutionary ventures as the leadership carries
out the will of the base, and is charged with defending the organization from destruction.
The fundamental argument Kautsky and the SPD leadership had with Bomelburg was
whether the unions should pursue a policy separate from the party, or be bound to the
party's strategy. As Michels demonstrated in Political Parties, the rage spewed by
Kautsky and the party leadership against the unions was due to a battle over
organizational primacy even as it was cloaked in ideological phrasing. Luxemburg and
Kautsky's unity on this issue at the party congress in Jena hid their growing fundamental
disagreement over the nature of mass organization and the general strike.
With the Russian Revolution playing out in the background, strike action at a peak, and
ferment in the party press and locals on the mass strike, the SPD’s congress was held in
Jena on 17 September 1905. Auguste Bebel, revered party chairman, Reichstag
representative, master tactician, had not yet taken a definite position on the issue of the
strike, and his resolution showed clearly the limits to which the party center was willing
concede in order to head off further concessions to the radicals and to avoid what they
saw as reckless and irresponsible thinking on the general strike. Crucially, Bebel’s
resolution determined

“Therefore, the Congress declares that particularly in case of a conspiracy against universal suffrage, or the
right of coalition, it is the duty of the united working class to employ with the utmost energy every means
of defense that may prove expedient. The Congress considers that in case of an emergency, one of the most
effective means of defending the working class against the political crime of disenfranchisement, or of

conquering an important fundamental right for its emancipation, is the employment on the most extensive scale of the general strike. 250

In his speech, Bebel continued

“Since the first general strike in Belgium, in 1893, such strikes have been constant, especially within the last three years. It is true that we consider sympathetic and demonstrative strikes to be impossible. We have never recommended unprepared and unorganized general strikes. And we must consider well before we enter a severe struggle that may lead to results of the most serious nature. We must agitate and organize, and make it clear to the workers that when a vital issue is at stake - an issue which is to decide their fate as men, as fathers of families, and as citizens - they must be ready to risk all. We have no desire to rush blindly into a general strike; it is not our intention to egg on the unorganized masses. But the necessary organization can and must be created; and if the press, not only of the party, but also of the trade unions, does its duty in enlightening the working class, all this can be accomplished.” 251

The resolution carried 288-14, and because the left had forced the SPD leadership to acknowledge the mass strike's usefulness in the wake of the Russian events and general sympathy on the part of the German working class for the, it can be viewed as at least a partial victory for the left faction. Upon closer inspection, Bebel conceded virtually none of the left-wing and syndicalist points. General strikes were to be reserved for emergency situations only; the strike must never be spontaneous, but organized well in advance. The mass strike was to be used to win full suffrage rights against a bourgeois state that refused them, but only if all other avenues were blocked; there is no discussion of a mass strike leading to a revolutionary overturn of capitalism itself. Bebel, who can be seen as a proxy for the leadership in toto, was in general alignment with the union leadership as well in seeing the general strike as a dangerous debate and spontaneous uprisings as risky business. Bebel and the party executive were fully caught in the contradiction of the party's revolutionary ideology and reformist practice; now that the party masses were beginning to demand action on a host of fronts both economic and political, the executive's ability to paper over their policies was drawing to a close. It

251 Ibid.
also spotlights the basic contradiction of a democratic, socialist, and ostensibly revolutionary political party within a time of mass struggles. If the party's success to that point depended on strict discipline and organization, what was it to make of an era when it was possible that the unorganized masses might pull it into a conflict not of its own making, but which risked mass support if the party shunned participation and destruction if it lost against the state apparatus? The answer(s) to this required a fundamentally more thorough theoretical debate than Bebel or Kautsky were willing to countenance, because it might, perhaps, conclude that official party policy was not simply incorrect but required a major course correction that could well advance the movement but jeopardize the position of the leadership. Yet also, the party was attempting a Herculean feat of creating a liberal state out of an autocratic one but simultaneously fighting for extension of political rights within the autocratic state itself. While the party could have chosen a more confrontational course, if it had done so it would have had to give up the goal of immediate liberal reforms for longer-term, more radical demands, but also to potentially risk losing the party organization in part or whole. There were strong tendencies mitigating against this choice, even if it the choice was one that could have been made differently depending on the skill of the party factions within internal political maneuvering.

Michels, who attended the conference as a delegate from Marburg, was hopeful after the passage of the Bebel resolution that the party might slowly right its course, but he saw quite clearly the reluctance on the part of the leadership and the outright intransigence of union heads as a product of the conservative effects of organization. The mass strike debate coincided with his growing syndicalist sympathies and development of
the arguments he would later use in Political Parties.

In a letter to Henriette Roland-Holst, Luxemburg acknowledged the weakness of Bebel’s resolution but argued

“To intervene directly in the discussion at Jena against Bebel’s resolution would have been a tactical mistake on our part. It was much more important to show where we stood in solidarity with Bebel than to give his resolution a revolutionary taint. In the discussion, the mass strike was considered as a form of struggle for the revolutionary masses even by Bebel – though perhaps he was unaware of it. The spectre of the revolution clearly dominated the whole of the debate and the congress… the result was such that it fully satisfied our tactical plans.”

The passage of the resolution was the high-water mark for the SPD’s left faction in the first decade of the 20th century. Luxemburg’s “tactical plans” would soon change tack, as the leadership would reach a deal with the trade unions at the Mannheim congress a year later to effectively squelch the party’s role in participating in a mass strike. Indeed, almost immediately after Jena, reality intruded again to put the resolution passed on the general strike to the test. Mass demonstrations in Saxony against attempts by the government to further limit working class suffrage (a backhanded compliment to the growing power of the SPD) angered a broad swath of the population, leading to large-scale street demonstrations. In fact

“Beginning in November 1905 and lasting through 1906, spontaneous mass political upheavals occurred in several German cities, especially in Saxony. Most of the protesters were workers, and the issues generally focused on stopping the trend toward more stringent franchise requirements at the local level. These were exactly the sort of activities that party and trade-union leaders feared would get out of hand, and the leadership moved to limit its responsibility for and involvement in the protests. Fearing both chaos and severe governmental reprisals, the chiefs of both branches of the German workers’ movement took steps to insulate themselves from the people they were supposedly leading.”

Party members and party press began to discuss using the mass strike as a tool to finally win conclusive suffrage reform. Bebel had paid lip service to the idea of the general strike, hoping to ride out the wave of revolutionary enthusiasm that greeted the Russian

---

253 Steenson, Not One Man!, 105.
Revolution, and now *fortuna* was calling his bluff. While it is doubtful that the movement would have gone much further than street demonstrations given the defeat of the Russian Revolution in late 1905, the actions of the party leadership undoubtedly hastened the collapse of the suffrage struggle. In February of 1906 the SPD party executive met secretly with the trade-union general commission to discuss the situation and what their reaction should be, and what came out of it was

“A series of six propositions as a tentative basis of party-trade-union cooperation in the mass strike question. The main points of the agreement represented a victory for the trade-union attitude. In them the party executive not only disclaimed any intention of propagating the mass strike, but pledged itself to ‘try to prevent one as much as possible.’ If a mass strike should nevertheless break out, the party would assume the sole burden of leadership. While the trade-unions would not participate in it officially, they agreed ‘not to stab it in the back.’ The costs of a general strike would have to be raised by the party alone. Only if lockouts and strikes should continue after the mass strike was called off would the trade-unions contribute to their support.”

Word of this leaked out via the localist trade-union press; after this the suffrage movement lost whatever steam it had left.

A few conclusions can be drawn from this episode. Luxemburg would later write that, due to the class struggle, the potential for independent political initiative on the part of the masses was latent but always possible. The revolution in Russia and the protests across Germany in 1905 demonstrated this quite clearly. Workers rose up without a call to arms from the party or a prepared battle plan and performed heroic feats in the service of both fighting for expansion of ‘bourgeois’ civil liberties and socialism. Unlike previous eras, however, the spontaneous rising of the masses would rarely be sustainable for long without the support of mass organizations like the Social-Democratic Party and trade unions. Michels and Weber (and Kautsky) were correct in their insistence that the enlarged, bureaucratic state made it much harder to overthrow an established ruling class. Not only were the masses socialized to need help from mass party organizations, it was

---

difficult to see how an extended battle with the state apparatus could be won without their access to resources and leadership. It was this dilemma Luxemburg struggled with while imprisoned in Warsaw during a trip to Russia in March 1906, and which she devoted her intellectual powers in the broadside she wrote in August of that year aimed directly at the trade union-party collusion opposing the mass strike.

*The Mass Strike, the Political Party, and the Trade Unions* succinctly sums up her invective against her ideological opponents. Luxemburg, to a great extent, acknowledged the same problems Michels saw with mass organization and oligarchy, and her writings on the mass strike deal with her attempt, as *Political Parties* was Michels’, to find a solution to those issues. Due to his syndicalism Michels had an instinctive aversion to the hierarchical nature of parties, and despaired of finding a solution to the dilemma he posed. Luxemburg charted a more difficult course: she embraced the Social-Democratic party as a great weapon of the working class, something they had built consciously as a weapon against the strength of the ruling class, but believed the party could conduct itself in a revolutionary and democratic manner. She never believed in abandoning the parliamentary struggle, seeing it as a rostrum to educate the working class, but continued to argue for bold extra-parliamentary action to forward the course of the revolution. The problem was, just as it was for Michels, how to give real power to the party rank-and-file and sweep away recalcitrant leadership. Michels had arrived at the conclusion that the very form of the mass party made this impossible, but Luxemburg had come to her own conclusions about the relationship of the party to the masses and believed the mass strike could be effective in dealing with oligarchy in the struggle for political equality and socialism.
Revolution in Russia had provided Luxemburg with a firsthand view of the real process of what a nationwide mass strike encompassed. While for the SPD leadership “it is a very clear and simply thought out, sharply sketched, isolated phenomenon… a single grand rising of the industrial proletariat springing from some political motive of the highest importance… carried through in the spirit of party discipline and in perfect order, and in still more perfect order brought to the directing committees as a signal given at the proper time…” for Luxemburg this was a projection of the party’s spirit of discipline and not a reflection of reality. The Russian revolution had not been carried out at the behest of the Social-Democratic Party there, nor was it confined to the party membership. Her analysis focused on the role played in Russia by the unorganized masses of workers and the tendency of political strikes to merge into local, economic ones, and come back around again, blurring the clear lines the German SPD and Trade Union Confederation had set between economic and political strikes.

Luxemburg clearly understood the tendency of the mass party to become stagnant and attach itself to the status quo. How, then, would the blockages be cleared and the party once again become a vibrant force? Surprisingly, in an era of mass organization and discipline, her analysis highlighted the role played by the unorganized masses. With less to lose than their union comrades, and not having internalized either the mass party or mass trade union’s obedience to authority, the chance of vigorous and spontaneous revolt on the part of the unorganized was thus higher than that of the organized. This turned Kautskyian Marxism on its ear: in it the party workers were the most class-conscious, and they were the ones who would be the most likely to revolt. An organization had been

---

constructed to provide leadership and support to those workers, who would then draw the unorganized into the fight. She argued “and when the conditions in Germany have reached the critical stage for such a period, the sections which are today unorganized and backward will, in the struggle, prove themselves the most radical, the most impetuous element, and not that will have to be dragged along.”

In essence, the unorganized masses were the ones who had a chance to circumvent established behavioral patterns and provide a way forward for those who had. To a certain extent the bold actions taken by them correspond to the charisma needed by Weber’s vocational politician in order to break free of bureaucratic routine, but where he never looked to the masses and where Michels only saw sporadic and doomed struggles from leaderless revolts, Luxemburg witnessed a more complex dynamic was possible. She wrote “the specialization of professional activity as trade-union leaders, as well as the naturally restricted horizon which is bound up with disconnected economic struggles in a peaceful period leads only too easily amongst trade-union officials to bureaucratism and a certain narrowness of outlook… there is first of all the overvaluation of the organization, which from a means has gradually been changed into an end in itself, a precious thing, to which the interests of the struggles should be subordinated.” The logic of mass organization had made dangerous struggle anathema to the organization. Organization had become a fetish. The locus of democratic energy was primarily, then, outside the organization, yet it was only potential, not actual. For “in the case of the enlightened German worker the class consciousness implanted by the social democrats is theoretical and latent: in the period ruled by bourgeois parliamentarism it cannot, as a

---

258 Ibid. 214.
rule, actively participate in a direct mass action… in the revolution when the masses
themselves appear upon the political battlefield this class consciousness becomes

practical and active.”\footnote{259}

While the first part of her theory has similarities with syndicalism and anarchism,
she is set apart by seeing the mass strike as a natural process, not manufactured, and in
her continued belief in a role for an organized socialist party. Indeed

“...The social democrats are the most enlightened, most class-conscious vanguard of the proletariat. They
cannot and dare not wait, in a fatalist fashion, with folded arms for the advent of the ‘revolutionary
situation’... on the contrary, they must now, as always, hasten the development of things and endeavor to
accelerate events... by making clear to the widest layers of the proletariat the inevitable advent of this
revolutionary period, the inner social factors making for it and the political consequences of it.”\footnote{260}

The socialist party, then, had a role as an educational organization promoting
understanding of historical materialism and the class struggle and development of the
socialist subculture. The dissemination of democratic and socialist ideas would gradually
take root in the masses, and would make it far easier for the mass strikes to move to
fruition once they did occur. The party could not create the revolution, but would instead
hasten it via education and particular struggles it chose to engage in during the
immediately preceding epoch. Once the mass strike had actually broken out it would
become the brains of the movement, and the party membership its elite troops.

Organized and unorganized would have a dialectical relationship, pushing and pulling
each other at different points in the struggle. If the party leadership were recalcitrant to
enter into the struggle, then the mass strike would provide a situation where they could be
swept away by leaders more in tune with the demands of the masses. As the masses grew
to trust the party, the membership roles would grow. She saw that “here the organization
does not supply the troops for the struggle, in an evergrowing degree, supplies recruits for

\footnote{259} Ibid. 199.
\footnote{260} Ibid. 199-200.
the organization.” These newly radicalized masses would likely be reluctant to accept the conservative leadership that those recruited during non-revolutionary eras did.

Luxemburg’s conclusions are in sharp disagreement with those of Kautsky, and her assessment of the era of mass organization is decidedly more optimistic than Michels’. Kautsky had overestimated the significance of the party organization while simultaneously ignoring the deleterious effects it could have on the rank-and-file’s revolutionary will and intra-party efficacy. The SPD and their trade union counterparts were petrified that they would be crushed or seriously damaged in a period of mass unrest, especially if they acquiesced to said ventures. The Russian Revolution and other far-flung examples proved, for Luxemburg, that a temporary defeat in the heat of political struggle would not spell final doom for an organization, and that its ranks could be replenished by the masses becoming engaged for the first time, whose political consciousness would have increased as well. Michels had assumed that the unorganized mass would forever be stymied if large organizations chose to actively or tacitly oppose their struggle, or they would eventually be co-opted by one or another portion of the party bureaucracy fighting for supremacy. Luxemburg’s conception points to a huge potential flaw in his thought: if the unorganized mass can sustain itself in its struggles for a time, if external shocks can cause them to mobilize without being led by a political party, then there is hope for a way to clear the oligarchic blockages created by mass organization, at least within the context of the working class and a party aimed at socialism and democracy.

Michels’ theory held that the entire population was socialized, in the modern era, to the principles of organization and obedience to hierarchical authority within those

---

261 Ibid. 198.
structures. Perhaps, if Luxemburg is correct, there are gradations of obedience to oligarchy and organization. It might be that if you are not directly part of a political party or trade union your capacity for spontaneous political action is far greater than once you have joined for an extended period of time. While those masses lack discipline, leadership, and coordination provided by organization they maintain a latent capacity for individual will and action their organized brethren lack. Yet, it seems logical, as Michels and Pannekoek would argue, that an organization uncommitted to the struggle could sabotage it by leading the masses into a safe channel (as Belgium’s general strike of 1902) or by providing insufficient leadership until the struggle dissipates (Netherlands in 1903). Would the party then have its old leadership replaced by one more responsive to the radical demands of the new membership? Or, as Michels feared, would the leadership and bureaucracy fight tenaciously to cling to power even at the cost of sabotaging a mass strike? Luxemburg’s theories rely heavily (though not entirely) upon the existence of the social democratic subculture and the ability of the struggle to reorient a mass organization that had lost its way. For her the party must rediscover a correct program, a correct plan of action, and there must be a steady supply of unorganized workers to counterbalance the ones brought into the party during the course of the struggle. Yet during the pre-war period, the mass strike did not reach a peak whereby the leadership might have been replaced due to rank-and-file demands.

Yet I think that Luxemburg’s theory of mass interaction with political organization and their democratic efficacy has to be placed in contrast with those of fellow socialists Kautsky and Michels. Organizational and institutional primacy runs like a red thread through Kautsky’s works; they are seen as positive indicators of democracy
and the power of the masses. Party members participate in policy choices via discussion, but also through choosing leaders and inculcating organizational values. The Social Democratic party was different than all others because its success would mean the implementation of a truly socialist egalitarian democratic order. Kautsky’s view roughly corresponds to one that sees mass organization as the embodiment of modern mass democracy. Michels, as a syndicalist, identified democracy with the ability of the individual to make efficacious decisions and to participate fully, without representation, in the maintenance and governance of their society/organization. Decentralized organizations engaged in direct struggle with the ruling class were the syndicalists’ goal and example of democracy; he, like Kautsky, saw organization as the key factor of the modern epoch but had hoped that the syndicalist form would offer both a cure for the era’s problems and a future society in embryo. Dismissive as most syndicalists were of the unorganized masses, his conclusions were bound to be pessimistic, as he could not find an organization that suited his purposes or could regenerate itself once it had a stake in the status quo. Luxemburg’s theory of mass action within the era of mass organization relies partly on the concept of a spontaneous class struggle intrinsic to the era which could not be halted by any mass party, and partly by introducing the novel concept that non-party members were potentially more radical than party members, and indeed were part of the necessary cure for a stagnant party and conservative, entrenched leadership (although it assumed a steady supply of unorganized workers). Masses and party needed each other to complete their democratic and socialist tasks and demands. This is not splitting the difference between Kautsky and Michels, SPD orthodoxy and syndicalism dissident, but theorizing a different path altogether; if Luxemburg were correct then the
problem of oligarchy would not be insurmountable, even if always present. Still, Luxemburg acknowledged the likelihood the struggle to remove the party oligarchy would be difficult and by no means assured of success, even if the increasing bureaucratization of society and expanding political organization were still challenged by spontaneous revolts from time to time.

**Kautsky’s Response**

The period after the Mannheim Congress of 1906 was the beginning of what is often labeled Kautsky’s “centrism,” his attempt to hold the classic Social Democratic line against increasingly vigorous attacks from party radicals and reformists. He took a hard stance against Luxemburg’s view of the mass strike and on its necessity, while maintaining the mass strike as a weapon that should be considered part of the SPD’s defensive arsenal. He entered into a famous polemic with Luxemburg during the mass demonstrations against the restrictive Prussian suffrage law in 1910, and afterwards with Pannekoek over the nature of the mass strike and revolution. Kautsky intensified his commitment to the necessity of mass organization and parliamentary institutions as crucial to the future socialist society. Reflecting a view common to German Social Democrats of his generation\(^{262}\), who seem to have been permanently scarred by the failure of the Paris Commune, the tactics he espoused as a counterpoint to the radical faction’s were that of Fabius Cunctator: wait out and wear out the enemy without directly engaging them. His answers to the radicals show how thoroughly he believed the institution of the Social Democratic Party and its electoral success were to the furtherance of democracy, all while denying the claims of revisionists that capitalism could be negotiated out of existence.

\(^{262}\) Bebel, Wilhelm Liebknecht, Bernstein.
Kautsky outlined the role of the party in *The Road To Power*, where he reiterated that the party was revolutionary, but it was not revolution-making\(^\text{263}\). The mass organization was the correct form; parliament was the correct institution for control, and the success of the proletariat depended on its constant growth in real terms and on winning control over the government via elections. He admitted “the term ‘revolution’ has quit a few meanings, and so the views on the revolutionary character of our party are widely divergent.”\(^\text{264}\) Yet “the Social Democratic Party, as the champion of the proletariat’s class interests, is a revolutionary party, because… its liberation requires supplanting private property in the capitalist means of production and power with social ownership and the replacement of private production with social production… the Social Democratic Party is revolutionary in another sense, since it recognizes… that the social revolution for which the proletariat is striving cannot be carried out as long as it has not conquered political power.”\(^\text{265}\) Yet Kautsky eschewed what he saw as revolutionary adventurism on the part of Luxemburg and her associates, preferring (like the party) to remain committed to building the party’s enrollment and vote totals. *The Road To Power* was also an attack on party revisionists and their claim that the proletariat could form a coalition with the bourgeoisie that would eventually mitigate capitalism to the point where socialism would come into being. Yet “it is striking that he, who had constantly warned against the practical and theoretical revisionism and against the danger of bureaucratism, seemed not to perceive what Rosa Luxemburg had so acutely grasped: that a cleavage was arising between a ‘goal’ that was socialist and a ‘means’ that was ever more thoroughly administered by a conservative and moderate bureaucracy, which

\(^{263}\) Kautsky, *The Road To Power*, 33-34.  
\(^{264}\) Ibid. 1.  
\(^{265}\) Ibid.
was now concerned to fortify the organization within the dominant system.\textsuperscript{266} The centrism of the SPD leadership was an untenable position, one that could only hold so long as the party itself continued to be ostracized from the halls of power. A party in the era of mass electoral politics would have to choose between ideological commitments and the growing potential to become simply a vote-chasing organization, in essence between revolution and reform.

In early 1910, outbreaks of grassroots protest against the unequal election laws in the Reich spread countrywide. This culminated in a mass procession in Berlin on March 6.\textsuperscript{267} While the conservative and Catholic press began to talk about revolutionary plots, the radicals within the SPD argued Germany was heading for its own 1905. Rosa Luxemburg, in an article published a week after the Berlin demonstration, argued that the mass strike was the way to win full suffrage rights, as

“The party leadership in Berlin arranged those sixty-two meetings in January and failed to combine them with street demonstrations, in reality we experienced a set-back. As is well known, these meetings were very poorly attended, despite our increased agitation, and only on February 13th, when we had planned from the outset for processions through the streets, did the masses follow the party’s rallying cry enthusiastically and in vast multitudes. It is obvious that the scheme of neatly and efficiently going through the whole catalogue from beginning to end, from meetings without street demonstrations to meetings with street demonstrations, and so on, simply cannot he done in practice. The proletarian masses in Berlin, and in most of the great industrial centres of Prussia, have already been so strongly aroused by Social Democracy that the form of mere protest meetings against the injustice of the Prussian electoral system, with its usual passing of resolutions, is no longer enough for them. Street demonstrations are today the least action which can correspond to the resentful masses’ thirst for action and to the tense political situation.”\textsuperscript{268}

Cognizant of the party leadership’s wariness, she argued once more the party could not plan out and direct the course of the suffrage struggle as neatly as it fought an election campaign. Nor was the mass strike to be considered invincible, because it was the external manifestation of extra-parliamentary struggle of the working class, which meant a whole host of possibilities were open once the working class entered the struggle. She

\textsuperscript{266} Salvadori, \textit{Karl Kautsky}, 144.
\textsuperscript{267} Ibid, 135.
understood the party’s discipline had curtailed the spontaneity needed for success in previous revolutions, but argued a well-ordered party at the lead of the movement was even more crucial, as

“A party, such as German Social Democracy, which upholds the principle of organization and party discipline in an unprecedented manner virtually eliminates the initiative of the unorganized masses and their spontaneous and, as it were, improvised ability to act -which until now has been an important and often decisive factor in all great political struggles. To such a party falls the inescapable duty of pointing out the value to great actions of this highly developed organization and discipline, and their applicability to forms of the struggle other than parliamentary elections. A decision must be made as to whether German Social Democracy, which is supported by the strongest trade-union organization and the greatest army of voters in the world, can bring about a mass action (which has been done at various times with great success in little Belgium, in Italy, in Austria-Hungary, in Sweden – not to mention Russia), or whether in Germany a trade-union organization numbering two million members and a powerful, well-disciplined party is just as incapable of giving birth to an effective mass action at the crucial moment as were the French trade unions, which had been crippled by anarchist confusion, and the French Socialist party, which had been weakened by internal disputes.”

Yet the steadfastness of the conservative bloc led the SPD leadership to conclude “any frontal clash between the mass movement and the state apparatus, backed by the assembled forces of social and political reaction, would infallibly lead to a defeat of the workers’ movement, and a general political retrogression in Germany.”

Kautsky’s response to the protests and the radicals’ call for a party-led intensification of the struggle dovetailed with his desire to win an absolute majority for the party in the Reichstag. He argued

“Modern military science distinguishes between two kinds of strategy: the strategy of overthrow [Niederwerfungsstrategie] and the strategy of attrition [Ermattungsstrategie]. The former draws its forces rapidly together in order to go to meet the enemy and to deal decisive blows by means of which the enemy is overthrown and rendered incapable of struggle. In the attrition strategy, the commander-in-chief initially avoids any decisive battle; he aims to keep the opposing army on the move by all sorts of manoeuvres, without giving it the opportunity of raising the morale of its troops by gaining victories; he strives to gradually wear them out by continual exhaustion and threats had to consistently reduce their resistance and paralyze them.”

Forcing the issue of suffrage reform via strikes and demonstrations would, in his opinion, jeopardize both the party organization and its chance at winning control of the Reichstag

269 Ibid.
270 Salvadori, Karl Kautsky, 144.
in the next election cycle. One can easily criticize Kautsky’s superficial analogy to military tactics quite harshly: a military commander would use whatever strategy is best for their conditions, but would hardly have such a sharp boundary between their overall tactics. Kautsky firmly believed in the necessity of mass organization, of its pre-eminent role in political struggles, and in the SPD’s fundamentally democratic structure. The SPD, which saw itself as the vanguard of the most democratic class, would probably suffer a defeat if it fully engaged the might of the German state over suffrage. When “The Jena Party Conference recognized the mass strike, at any rate in the sense of the fighting strike, as one of our methods of struggle and thus declared it was possible for us, on occasion, to change over from the strategy of attrition to the strategy of overthrow, it initially had in mind only the first of the two cases just mentioned – when the enemy threatens our base, making our struggle using our previous methods impossible by infringing the suffrage or any other vital conditions of proletarian organization and propaganda.”

The mass strike is now, for Kautsky, only permissible to defend the organization. Attacking Luxemburg, he argues “Comrade Luxemburg seems to believe… ‘Either forward at all costs, or the mass action already initiated will collapse without success.’ This dilemma is supposed to be the inner logic of every mass movement… therefore Comrade Luxemburg does not derive the necessity of the mass strike from the conditions of any given situation, but from general psychological considerations, which are valid for every mass action, whenever and wherever they may take place. They must always come to a climax, must always assume new, more powerful forms. Once a mass action has been started, it must go forward rapidly, from a street demonstration to demonstration strike, from demonstration strike to fighting strike

272 Ibid, 59.
– and what then? What ‘climax’ is left to us beyond this?\textsuperscript{273} Luxemburg was merely responding to the emotional desires of the masses, not a fundamentally scientific analysis of the situation.

Kautsky fundamentally viewed the politics preached by the left faction as suicidal to the organization, and thus the working class movement as a whole. Temporary defeat was never worth sacrificing gains made, parliamentary seats won, and the objective strength of the party. The masses, the rank-and-file and the unorganized, were viewed with suspicion, as a group that could draw the party into a struggle it was not ready to win. Party leadership was needed to keep things from spiraling out of control; slow but steady success had permanently replaced the heady days of direct action on the part of the masses and their ability to directly influence a fight not directed by the party. The fear that the party would lose control and be attacked directly by the state was so great that it would not even take advantage of protests against the very unequal suffrage that kept it from making even greater gains in the parliament. Kautsky had also abandoned any critique he had of party staff and leadership, which seems like a particularly striking omission. When one accepts the structure of the modern mass party and the conditions under which it operates, rejects extra-parliamentary action except in extreme circumstances, it means the problems discussed by Michels (and the left radicals) can never be seen as an endemic feature of mass organization. This is not just a problem for Kautsky, who after World War I would come to be mostly in agreement with his former reformist foes, but anyone involved in studying or participating in the debate over democracy and mass organization. More than a fundamental disagreement over tactics,\textsuperscript{273}

\textsuperscript{273} Ibid, 59-60.
the mass strike debate turned out to be a fundamental disagreement on the nature of the modern party system.

**Luxemburg and Pannekoek Respond**

Luxemburg wrote a lengthy response entitled *Theory and Practice* to Kautsky’s new position on the general strike. Her article, “The Next Step,” had been subject to censorship by the party due to its call for open republican agitation, and had aroused the ire of Kautsky because it demanded the party take a leading role in a round of mass suffrage strikes. She develops a critique of Kautsky’s “strategy of attrition” and begins to question whether the structure of the party is more of a brake on mass activism than an aide, and skirts very close to Michels’ own conclusions. Anton Pannekoek, a fellow left radical, engaged Kautsky during this period on the question of the party and its role in helping bring the revolution to fruition. With the connection between political equality and the professional party developing just before the First World War, concerns and arguments about the mass party were reaching a head; Michels’ *Political Parties* was published in 1911 almost immediately after the suffrage struggle was terminated. The debate over revolutionary tactics that occupied much intellectual life in the party from 1905 began to deepen into a larger debate about the role of the party after several rounds of mass struggle were only tepidly supported (if at all) by the leadership.

Luxemburg’s attack on Kautsky focused directly on his new strategies of “attrition” and “overthrow,” and his retreat from support of the mass strike. Where he had previously foreseen, in *The Social Revolution* and *The Road to Power*, the mass strike as the outcome of a period of stormy struggles: “Now Comrade Kautsky would

---

274 Although the SPD was anti-monarchist it had never officially engaged in republican propaganda because the leadership feared state repression as the probable outcome.
strictly sever economic strikes from political action. Now he declares that all strikes in
Western Europe must unconditionally achieve “definite successes” or they have “failed
their purpose”; and as the means of “organizing the proletariat, heightening its insight and
sense of strength, and increasing the masses’ confidence in their organizations,” he
counts only “successfully fought campaigns for higher wages.” After all, we need nothing
so urgently now as “visible successes” to impress the masses. “But there are few
successes which so visibly document our mounting strength to the masses as electoral
victories, as the conquest of new mandates.” Thus, Reichstag elections and mandates –
that is Moses and the prophets!” Kautsky had become wedded to the institution and
structure of the party and the electoral process, even if at this point he still saw
revolutionary potential in the expansion of proletarian power through electoral gains.

Turning to the organizational apparatus, Luxemburg raises the same questions as
Michels:

“Naturally the obstructive effect of such leadership is most nearly decisive when the action is still in its
initial stages – as is the case with us in Germany, where it is just taking its first steps. If once the
revolutionary period is fully unfolded, if the clouds of battle are already rising high, then no brake-pulling
by the party leaders will be able to accomplish much, for the masses will simply shove aside their leaders
who set themselves against the storm of the movement. Thus could it also happen in Germany, one day.
But in the interest of Social Democracy, I find it neither necessary nor desirable to steer that way. If we in
Germany unquestioningly wait with the mass strike until the masses, with “raging anger,” storm right over
their brake-pulling leaders, this obviously can happen only at the expense of the influence and prestige of
Social Democracy. And then it could easily appear that the complicated organizational apparatus and the
strict party discipline of which we are justly proud are, unfortunately, only a first-rate makeshift for the
parliamentary and union daily routine; and with the given disposition of our leading circles they are a
hindrance to the mass action in the grand style, to what is demanded by the coming era of violent
struggles.”

While Kautsky feared the destruction of the SPD via state repression, Luxemburg
worried that disillusionment in the party could lead supporters to abandon it for action
independent of the party. Luxemburg saw the masses capable of independent action, and

practice/ch05.htm
of quickly rebuilding an organization that had been damaged by attacks. For her the political party was simply a tool in the larger struggle for revolution, socialism, and democracy. The benefits of a strong organization: leadership continuity, tactical capabilities, and politically conscious membership – these were all extremely important, but had to be balanced against the braking function often performed on the masses by the party itself. Hers was a sophisticated attempt to balance the needs of a revolutionary party participating in the electoral process but still desiring wholesale societal change to a more democratic and equitable social system. She saw clearly the masses would sweep aside a leadership that was braking their progress, if it was progress they desired, but at the same time never asked the question Michels did: what if the masses are socialized by organizations to the point where they never (or rarely) desire to make wholesale, effective change?

Continuing the left response to Kautsky’s positions, Anton Pannekoek sketched what he saw as the proper role for the mass party in its relationship to the unorganized mass and the revolution. Arguing the new forms of mass action were behind tactical disagreements:

“When they first made their appearance, they were welcomed by all Marxists and hailed as a sign of revolutionary development, a product of our revolutionary tactics. But as the practical potential of mass action developed, it began to pose new problems; the question of social revolution, hitherto an unattainably distant ultimate goal, now became a live issue for the militant proletariat, and the tremendous difficulties involved became clear to everyone, almost as a matter of personal experience. This gave rise to two trends of thought: the one took up the problem of revolution, and by analyzing the effectiveness, significance and potential of the new forms of action, sought to grasp how the proletariat would be able to fulfill its mission; the other, as if shrinking before the magnitude of this prospect, groped among the older, parliamentary forms of action in search of tendencies which would for the time being make it possible to postpone tackling the task. The new methods of the labor movement have given rise to an ideological split among those who previously advocated radical Marxist party tactics.”

Essentially, the rise of mass organization had created a split in the party, between those committed to revolution and emboldened by the new potential for mass action, and those worried about potential consequences (to the party) of mass action that then retreated into the parliamentary struggle. The problem with Pannekoek’s analysis is not that he is incorrect but rather that he is only half correct. Like Luxemburg, Pannekoek understands that the rift between radical, centrist, and reformist camps is connected to the rise of electoral politics and the mass party. Yet the SPD’s left radicals emphasized the ideological split, centering the disagreement almost on the cowardice of the leadership. Unlike Michels, there was no thorough analysis of the consequences of organization itself (perhaps because even the left radicals in the party were unwilling to admit a centralized party apparatus was the problem) or the changes in class consciousness as parts of the working class – and these tended to be the percentage of the population organized into unions - were able to achieve increases in their standard of living via more conciliatory gestures than the left-radicals demanded. Luxemburg and Pannekoek never completely explored the dynamic Michels believed endemic to modern politics: the tension between the rise of bureaucratic professional parties and the growing regularity of spontaneous street action by the masses.

Pannekoek criticized both Kautsky’s underestimation of the unorganized working class and his understanding of the new character of proletarian organization. Arguing “if Kautsky can only see motley masses, it is… because he denies the proletarian class character of those workers who are not organized or who have still not shrugged off bourgeois traditions. We therefore re-emphasize that what counts in the development of these actions, in which the deepest interests and passions of the masses break
surface, is not membership of the organization, nor a traditional ideology, but to an ever-increasing extent the real class character of the masses.”

Both Kautsky’s view (and that of the party) and the left radicals on the unorganized masses are logical given their conclusions about mass action, electoral politics, and the role of the organization. In the former sense the unorganized masses are really only useful to the party if they are persuaded to vote for the party’s candidates and perhaps become party members; in the latter they are important independent political agents, perhaps as important as the party in their ability to affect the state. As for the organization itself

“There is no disagreement between us as to the need for the workers to equip themselves as well as possible with powerful centralized associations that have adequate funds at their disposal. But the virtue of this machinery is dependent upon the readiness of the members to sacrifice themselves, upon their discipline within the organization, upon their solidarity towards their comrades, in short, upon the fact that they have become completely different persons from the old individualistic petty-bourgeois and peasants... what distinguishes the workers’ organizations from all others is the development of solidarity within them as the basis of their power, the total subordination of the individual to the community, the essence of a new humanity still in the process of formation. The proletarian organization brings unity to the masses, previously fragmented and powerless, molding them into an entity with a conscious purpose and with power in its own right. It lays the foundations of a humanity which governs itself, decides its own destiny, and as the first step in that direction, throws off alien oppression.”

Pannekoek celebrates the discipline of the masses to the party organization as the type of discipline and internal cohesion were direct outgrowths of industrial capitalism and the necessity of the proletariat for a mass body to combat the growing strength of the capitalist class. The party was the new society in embryo, but because Pannekoek is not here arguing about the structure of the party but rather about the direction of the leadership and the tactics used, the left radicals must argue that it is not the structure of the party that must change but rather the leadership, its interpretation of the political situation, and the education of the masses. Either, then, Michels is correct and even a more radical party would descend into oligarchy at some point, whether or not it led a

278 Ibid, 55-6.
revolution, or there is some capacity in the party and the masses to counteract the negative effects of organizational oligarchy and conservatism. Arguments of the (non-syndicalist) left radicals of the era lean toward the latter, but during this period were never able to fully analyze the logic of professional politics forced on the SPD due to its electoral success.

Completely disagreeing with the party’s passive strategy, Pannekoek demands that “when conditions permit, the party, as the conscious bearer of the exploited masses’ deepest sensibilities, must instigate such action as is necessary and take over leadership of the movement – in other words, play the same role in events of major significance as it does today on a smaller scale. The precipitating factors cannot be foreseen, but it is we who act upon them. Secondly, in terms of those taking part: we cannot restrict our present demonstrations solely to party members; although these at first form the nucleus, others will come to us in the course of the struggle.” At first he argues that mass action is “a corrective to parliamentary action,” but soon argues “parliamentary activity and action by the masses are not incompatible with each other; mass action in the struggle for suffrage endows parliamentary activity with a new, broader basis.”

Contradictory forces are at work; while the mass action of the party and unorganized would serve to radicalize the masses to the point of taking grassroots political action of their own accord, if they were to succeed in broadening access to parliament and correcting the party’s course there would be an inevitable tendency by some to demobilize and support, perhaps, reformist efforts.

281 Ibid, 67.
282 Ibid, 68.
Pannekoek then lays bare his conception of the role of the mass organization. He states “we entirely agree with Kautsky that an individual or group cannot make the revolution. Equally, Kautsky will agree with us that the proletariat must make the revolution. But how do matters stand with the party, which is a middle term, on the one hand a large group which consciously decides what action it will take, and on the other the representative and leader of the entire proletariat? What is the function of the party?”

This is the crux of the matter. Kautsky’s idea of the party’s function is as the most important part of the proletariat’s struggle; without it, the working class would falter. In an prescient passage Pannekoek writes “the masses have, so to speak, made over part of their energy, their revolutionary purpose, to the organized collectivity, not so that it shall be dissipated, but so that the party can put it to use as their collective will. The initiative and potential for spontaneous action which the masses surrender by doing so is not in fact lost, but re-appears elsewhere and in another form as the party’s initiative and potential for spontaneous action; a transformation of energy takes place, as it were. Even when the fiercest indignation flares up in the masses – over the rising cost of living, for example – they remain calm, for they rely upon the party calling upon them to act in such a way that their energy will be utilized in the most appropriate and successful manner possible.”

The party thus has the capacity, once held by individuals and the mass, to act in a spontaneous manner. Unorganized masses do not lose their ability to act, but now require (and perhaps desire) a guide to bring their demands to fruition – the party. Because he does not construct a model of bureaucratization of politics Michels’ dilemma, in Pannekoek’s estimation, does not hold for one segment of

---

284 Ibid, 72-3.
the population, and can be overcome with the proper leadership in the party, leadership that does not ignore the demands of the party base on the one hand, and the party’s stated ideology on the other.

Yet he also comes close to the Michels’ understanding of the dangers inherent within the party system, worrying

“If the party saw its function as restraining the masses from action for as long as it could do so, then party discipline would mean a loss to the masses of their initiative and potential for spontaneous action, a real loss, and not a transformation of energy. The existence of the party would then reduce the revolutionary capacity of the proletariat rather than increase it. It cannot simply sit down and wait until the masses rise up spontaneously in spite of having entrusted it with part of their autonomy; the discipline and confidence in the party leadership which keep the masses calm place it under an obligation to intervene actively and itself give the masses the call for action at the right moment. Thus, as we have already argued, the party actually has a duty to instigate revolutionary action, because it is the bearer of an important part of the masses’ capacity for action; but it cannot do so as and when it pleases, for it has not assimilated the entire will of the entire proletariat, and cannot therefore order it about like a troop of soldiers. It must wait longer for the right moment: not until the masses will wait no longer and are rising up of their own accord, but until the conditions arouse such feeling in the masses that large-scale action by the masses has a chance of success. This is the way in which the Marxist doctrine is realized that although men are determined and impelled by economic development, they make their own history.”

Thus the essence of the party era is split: the masses gain increased capacity to act through organization, but lose part of their independence. To an extent they gain an increased chance at democratizing society (in the socialist sense of economy and political spheres) while abandoning the immediate grassroots control Michels proclaimed the only true democratic form. The danger, of course, lies in Michels’ prediction that the inevitable outcome would be a leadership which restrained, ignored, and manipulated the masses away from truly democratizing outcomes and towards those that benefited the executive committee of the party but not the masses themselves. Pannekoek and Luxemburg held out hope that a truly radical party leadership would transcend those problems (though they did not address the problem of a radical party leadership that had the same oligarchic tendencies of their more conservative counterparts) and both respond

---

285 Ibid, 73.
to the demands of the rank-and-file, guide the unorganized masses, and lead the way
towards a socialist revolution.

**Summation of the Debate**

With the SPD as a microcosm, the real problems of a party (especially an
ostensibly revolutionary one) in the modern mass era all crystallized inside the Social
Democrats: local vs. centralized control, leadership foresight vs. rank-and-file demands,
ideological vs. pragmatic goals, etc. We cannot ignore that Kautsky was correct when he
argued the necessity of a mass party, centralized, as a feature of the modern system, but
whether this party was destined to remain democratic as he argued or whether it needed
corrective measures from time-to-time is a failing of his theorizing. In many respects,
although a revolutionary, Kautsky was the era’s outspoken proponent and defender of the
new electoral mass party. Convinced of the revolutionary potential of the working class,
the absolute necessity of a centralized political party, he believed that the revolution
would occur either through a socialist majority in parliament or a revolution brought on
as a reaction by the bourgeoisie to the growing socialist threat. The SPD, especially for
Kautsky, was tied to the historical epoch where immediate revolutionary struggles were
not on the horizon, but the rise of mass electoral politics and working class demands for
suffrage meant an increase in the party’s strength and popularity as their champion. At
that point in German history (1871-1914), the proletariat could identify itself with
democratic demands and see a parliamentary majority for its party as a radical goal. Yet
Kautskyian Marxism was to become a relic of an era where one could see the SPD as
both participating in a bourgeois parliament and refusing to cooperate with bourgeois
parties, only possible before the SPD was fully included in the now-professionalized state.

Rosa Luxemburg and Anton Pannekoek represented a course of thought that struggled with the clear conservative tendencies of the SPD. Eventually identifying the real revolutionary potential in the unorganized masses, the role of the party was to develop proper leadership and guide the masses toward a more democratic order via revolution. The left radical’s criticism of mass organization was based on an understanding that in the modern era the party was a necessity while identifying its shortcomings and attempting to sidestep or overcome them via mass action (although again, never developing a theory of the logic of mass organization). Angry at a party executive that made deals with the union leadership to effectively kill the idea of a party-led, union-supported mass strike, a leadership held back on a few separate occasions when party members demanded action on suffrage, and at times attempted to manipulate or ignore the demands of the party’s base, they struggled to find the reason for this, eventually pinning the blame on a too-timid leadership and the need for a grassroots uprising to bring with it radical change. The unorganized masses required a guide in their struggle, and here the left-radicals saw the party’s role as that of a leader of struggle since they will never claim a majority of the population as official adherents. A faction conscious of the corrosive effects organization has on the party could remake the organization, although this was by no means assured. Yet they were never able to fully identify the problems of the SPD as being tied to the inherent pressures of mass politics, and thus during this era were never able to fully develop a successful political strategy against the party bureaucracy.
Conclusions

The mass strike debate was a complex argument over the role of mass organizations and their relationship to the unorganized mass, their revolutionary potential, and the problems involved with democracy and revolution in the era of modern electoral mass parties. Added to this was the fact that the socialist party was attempting to develop a liberal parliamentary state in Germany; the party was both the first representative of the mass bureaucratic political organization and attempting to create the basis by which politics would succumb entirely to the logic of mass organization and professional politics. While the debate tied the mass strike together with the socialist movement, during this era it was seen less as a tool for igniting the socialist revolution but primarily as a way to fully democratize the state, and in the case of the party left, democratize the party leadership as well. Except for Michels no SPD thinker of the era saw the underlying concerns of the mass strike debate as that of a party struggling with the demands of fully democratizing society and the expansion of bureaucratic forms in the modern state. Yet the debate, however tangentially aware its participants were of the underlying causes, was able to occur precisely because the socialists were not simply concerned with liberal democratic reforms but also a future socialist society whereby both the state and the economy would be democratically run. Thus the mass strike debate was both an argument over the proper relations of the spontaneous revolts of the masses and the bureaucratic logic of party politics, but also the question of internal democracy, democracy, and what to do about the tendency toward conservatism and oligarchy in professional parties.

286 Except by the syndicalists.
The essence of the contemporary period is the dominance of the logical of professional politics, and with it the tension between the organized party, the masses on whom it depends for support and success and the occasional spontaneous movement of the masses in response to pressures external to professional politics. The mass strike debate occurred at the beginning of this era but was also at least partially a debate over the role of the party and its relationship to the spontaneous outbursts of the masses. It was this debate over a very real phenomenon that showed the real potential and limitation of the party and mass movements within professional politics (and later, the liberal state). Michels was partially correct in his observation that even the most violent mass strike did not break the hold an oligarchy over the unions and the Social Democratic party, but Luxemburg and Pannekoek were at least partially correct as well that the mass strike was (potentially) independent of the logic of party politics and could represent both a check and a radicalizing factor on the party. Kautsky, too, was correct in that the political party was an inescapable feature of modern mass politics and that its involvement in extra-parliamentary, quasi-legal street actions like the mass strike could endanger its organizational existence.

Is, then, the mass strike and action undirected by the organization the only way to overcome organizational oligarchy and conservatism? Michels theorized that revolts against oligarchy were ephemeral even as he searched for a solution the dilemma. By the end of *Political Parties* his argument his solutions have become contingent and the search for the magic cure descended into temporary palliatives. The essence, however, of Luxemburg and Pannekoek’s argument may be that there is no one cure, but rather that the end of the era of spontaneity and the dawn of the organizational era means that all
resistance to domination must come from a conscious, consistent faction of dissenters who are by no means assured of victory. What the mass strike debate injects into the discussion over the nature of democracy and professional politics is the need for a conscious, faction of anti-bureaucratic actors within the party as well as mass movement and protest outside the organization if there is to be any assault, even temporarily, on the nature of party oligarchy and its support for the status quo. Any group attempting to discover a path beyond professional politics cannot help but grapple with the concerns that animated the socialist scholars of the period, and it is likely such a debate cannot be had unless there is an ongoing political struggle between democratic anticapitalist forces and those in support of the professional state apparatus. The “iron law of oligarchy” is not as ironclad as Michels believed, even if it is still a weighty tendency. A movement that is conscious of the problems of professional politics and mass politics has the potential, at least for a short time, to radically reshape a political organization but also the landscape of politics, even if it proves impossible to permanently sustain the spontaneity and anti-bureaucratic nature of the mass struggle as it dissipates into regularized political routines.

Chapter 4: Michels, Political Parties, and Liberal Sociology

Introduction

Michels’ relationship to the European socialist movement was both that of an advocate and movement intellectual. His linkage to that of liberal sociology was strictly academic, first through his friendship with Max Weber and then, after his move to Italy, via the increasing closeness of his writings with those of Bryce, Ostrogorski, Sombart, and Weber on modern political systems. Openly dismissive of liberal politics, it is
nonetheless fair to characterize him as part of the growing trend in that era’s sociology and political science, which had become increasingly concerned with democracy, the mass political party and what they saw as endemic corruption involved with machine politics in an elected government. If Michels’ intellectual roots have one foot in socialism, the other lies with Max Weber, James Bryce, Moisei Ostrogorki, and Werner Sombart as a sociologist extrapolating the phenomenon of the mass party, its origins in the era’s changing social and political systems, and the consequences for representative government and democracy.

Like the socialist mass strike debate, the split in liberalism of the era hinged on a fundamental disagreement over the nature of modern politics and the fate of classical liberal concepts such as individualism, natural laws and rights. The growth of bureaucratic mass organizations was eroding the social basis of liberalism, as small-scale producers were subordinated to the rationality of large cartels and independent parliamentarians submitted to party discipline. Liberals like Weber and Bryce were of “a more exclusivist or elitist tendency, which emphasizes the differential qualities that, through a combination of inherent capacities and circumstances, come to be developed in different individuals or groups… from such a perspective freedom only has value to the extent that it provides scope for superior qualities to find expression and make their impact on society at large.”

Concern shown by Weber and Bryce about the decline of notables with proven leadership qualities and the rise of bureaucratic parties whose heads did not necessarily need to be good leaders, but only capable of rising competently through administrative ranks, was linked to their concern over the decline of possibilities

---

for liberal individualism. Their solutions to what they saw as the problem of mass parties thus veered in the direction of identifying the possibility of a competitive leadership democracy whereby politicians with true talent could still rise to the top of a party and the nation; this is at the core of Weber’s hypotheses on the vocational politician. On the other side, represented by thinkers like Ostrogorski\textsuperscript{288} were liberals who accepted the transformation of the economy and believed in “what can be called a universalistic or egalitarian tendency, deriving from the natural rights tradition, which emphasizes the potential inherent in everyone for self-realization. Within this perspective, the value of freedom derives from the scope it provides for all in their self-development. The ‘new liberals’ stood firmly within this tradition.”\textsuperscript{289} Ostrogorski and the ‘new liberals’ saw the changed economic and political landscape as creating a potentially positive and level playing field for everyone to fully develop their capacities, if the inequalities of opportunity were reformed away through income redistribution, social welfare programs, and reform of the electoral process and machine politics. The split between Weber, Bryce, and Ostrogorski reflected a more fundamental disagreement within liberalism, much like socialism, on how to cope with the nature of mass politics.

The common thread running between the intellectual works of the era’s political sociologists centered on the new mass democracy. Weber, the era’s dominant sociologist, has been characterized as concerned with democracy only inasmuch as it could illustrate his discussions of bureaucracy and rational-legal domination and help cultivate vocational political leadership. This ignores how clearly he saw the expansion of formal representative government inevitable in the long-term, and explains his

\textsuperscript{288} Also thinkers such as Hobson and Hobhouse.
\textsuperscript{289} Beetham, 318.
constant engagement with the concept in his political writings.\(^{290}\) Weber’s answer to bureaucracy, the vocational politician (\textit{Berufspolitiker}), uses the political system set up by professional politics to bend bureaucracy to responsible ends, making democracy an essential component for cultivating the vocational politician. James Bryce was mostly indifferent to mass democracy as such, and was skeptical of his pupil Ostrogorski’s sympathies towards the liberal reformers of the era. Yet, their relationship to Michels is this: unlike Mosca and Pareto, they all realized that to grapple with and understand the intricacies of politics in the modern era meant studying seriously the structure and development of democratic political systems. If it was not to be the only form of modern government, it was perhaps the most advanced, and the expansion of mass politics and bureaucracy could best be understood by examining democratic forms and their effect on the masses. Where they differed was in their emphasis: Weber, Bryce, and Ostrogorski’s major works on the subject deal with development of \textit{good leadership}; Weber and Bryce saw this as a fundamentally limited characteristic, while Ostrogorski, the ‘new liberal’ believed in the potential for its extension beyond rarified circles of vocational politicians. The talented individual, the virtuous and educated citizen, found little or no place within the modern political machine. Weber’s professional politician, who lives from (and not for) politics, Bryce’s “magnetic man,” and Ostrogorski’s “wire-pullers” were different expressions of this problem. The importance, then, of Michels argument is his agreement with the liberal sociologists that the phenomenon of mass democratic politics and the bureaucratic electoral machine was a crucial question of the era, but inasmuch as this was

\(^{290}\) Breiner argues “I doubt it is mere coincidence that when in ‘Science As A Vocation’ he seeks to illustrate the difference between social scientific clarification of political action and partisan persuasion, he uses the example of democracy to make his point.” In: Breiner, Peter. \textit{Max Weber and Democratic Politics}. Ithaca: (Cornell University Press, 1996). 149n15.
true he was not concerned with good government or political leadership but direct democracy and mass control. His fusing of the radical democratic commitments of a syndicalist theorist with the sociological analysis of the modern political party, while it comes across as incredibly pessimistic, is a search for a workable way for the masses to become efficaciously involved in their own political destiny.

Bryce, Ostrogorski and Sombart and Weber provide an expanded scope for the application of Michels’ argument. Unlike Michels, his peers studied the inner workings of the electoral process in the United States and Great Britain, which provided another vantage point with which to view mass political parties. The SPD was, as Weber argued to Michels, as concerned with winning votes as much as the far less ideological parties of the Anglo world. Bryce, Sombart, and Ostrogorski’s studies of the US and UK, Weber’s visits to the United States all paved the way for them to write about a mass electoral system in full bloom, as opposed to the quasi-parliamentary nature of the German system, which hindered Michels from developing fully his theories as he was limited to one case in an autocratic country. In addition, their dealings with the problems of political leadership and opening spaces of participation for interested citizens contrasts with though at the same time complements Michels’ emphasis direct democracy, but also the Marxian tradition out of which he came, which tended to believe good democratic leadership flowed from a well-organized proletarian party and an emphasis on Marxist theory. Michels wrote in *Political Parties*

---

291 Though I think, at least in 1906 when Weber made these comments, the tacit cynicism Weber sensed did not extend to the party as a whole. Many, if not most, party members genuinely believed the SPD’s electoral success was an important step on the road to the socialist revolution. The American parties of the era had no such ideology or ideological followers.
292 This is not to say that the liberals were more or less correct than the Marxists, but rather that they both had things to say to each other about the modern mass political party.
“The problem of socialism is not merely a problem in economics. In other words, socialism does not seek merely to determine to what extent it is possible to realize a distribution of wealth which shall be at once just and economically productive. Socialism is also an administrative problem, a problem of democracy, and this is not in the technical and administrative spheres alone, but also in the sphere of psychology.”

We will examine what Weber, Bryce, and Ostrogorski have to say to Michels’ topic, and he to them.

**Weber**

While Weber had been the impetus for Michels’ sociological study of the SPD, he famously disagreed with his pupil over the potential revolutionary nature of the Social Democrats. Writing to Michels, he argued

“The crazy idea that a class party with alleged class ideals could ever become anything other than a ‘machine’, in the American sense of the term, is the key issue. Therefore I preach to my peers: ‘you fools, the Social Democratic Party, whether parliamentary or syndicalist, is not, and never will be, anything worse (from your point of view) than a quite ordinary party machine.’ As far as you are concerned, the conclusion would have to be: political democratization is the only thing that is perhaps attainable in the foreseeable future, but this is by no means a negligible achievement. I cannot prevent you from believing that more is possible, neither can I force myself to do so.”

Weber’s interest in the Social Democratic Party, and indeed the structure of mass party politics, was entwined with his desire to understand the rise of the modern state and the corresponding bureaucracy that accompanied it, but also of the fundamental nature of domination, as he wrote “domination in the most general sense is one of the most important elements of social action. Of course, not every form of social action reveals a structure of dominancy. But in most of the varieties of social action domination plays a considerable role, even where it is not obvious at first sight.”

Both Weber and Michels accepted domination as a fundamental characteristic of political sociology, though Michels’ was drawn by an “ ethic of conviction” in a direction that led him to continue to

293 Michels, *Political Parties*, 386.
search for ways socialism and democracy could be brought to fruition and thus overcome domination.  

Weber’s fundamental concern was discovering a counterweight to the problem of bureaucracy – which he found intractable – and finding ways to cultivate non-bureaucratic leadership. Their mutual concern with bureaucracy’s defects: unconditional obedience to authority, leadership based on organizational status and not competency or innovation, and its detrimental effects on society as a whole very famously split during the period of Michels’ syndicalism, and Political Parties, over the question of whether there were any long-term structural changes possible. Michels initially linked syndicalism, human will, and the mass strike as an antidote to this problem, and then searched for some sort of internal structural reforms, always striving to find a way the masses could become involved as independent agents. Weber’s solution had a different purpose. Unlike Michels, “democracy is of interest to Weber depending on whether it permits the rise of individuals with leadership qualities. Even though Weber saw parliamentary democracy as the means for producing such leadership, there is nothing in this form of politics that expresses the values that Weber finds intrinsically desirable.”

Direct democracy, for Weber, was impossible outside of small groups, as in any modern society a permanent grassroots council would inevitably be dominated by rentiers and the wealthy, since “‘they [the wealthy] can afford to take the time to carry on the administrative functions cheaply or without any pay and as part-time jobs.’” The rise of modern mass politics and its implications, unforeseen by Marx (who had died in 1883),

---

296 It is the fundamentally close nature of the Marxism and syndicalism on class rule and elites in Michels’ thinking that links him to elite theorists like Mosca and Pareto, not the structure of their work. Michels approached the problem, as Weber (and Ostrogorski and Bryce) did in terms of the structure of the political system. Mosca and Pareto were concerned with a historicist vision of elite domination.


298 Though perhaps this was true even in pre-capitalist societies as well.

299 Weber, Economy and Society, 949.
had caused a major ideological rift within the parties of the Second International. Most of the era’s Marxists were unable to tie the internal debates over reform and revolution to the larger structural problems an ideological party faced when presented with mass electoral politics; this was perhaps because most socialists linked the growth of the party with the increasing strength and class consciousness of the proletariat and thus never endeavored to study the phenomenon. Given that Weber’s focus was on the interrelationship of power, the state, and society, and especially the social systems of power in modern society, his interest in mass parties and organization seems natural.\(^{300}\)

The argument first made convincingly by Marx, and then by Weber\(^ {301} \), was that we must understand the structure of government in its relationship to the modern economy and social forms. The growing density of economic interrelationships, the need of modern industrial capitalism for rational government precluded, for Weber, the possibility of direct democracy, which could not meet modern capitalism’s need of a rational and quick form of decision making. Weber, commenting on the near-inevitability of political parties and organizations as a result of modern patterns of industry and society wrote

“Although this parallel would seem to rest largely on the existence of a capitalist market economy, a democratically organized socialist economy would also engender power struggles by associations of workers over the amount to be reinvested and the distribution of desirable jobs and working conditions. Thus models of democratic control over the division of labor cannot be immunized against having to engage in a power struggle for survival whether in a capitalist market or a planned socialist society. In either case, they will collide with the demands of formal rationality and discipline.”\(^ {302} \)

Guenther Roth argues

“Since the nineties, Weber had been strongly under the influence of M. Ostrogorski’s monumental volumes on Democracy and the Organization of Political Parties… Ostrogorski showed in detail how mass suffrage and industrialization resulted in the creation of party machines mobilizing the masses in quasi-military fashion. Oligarchic controls and mass manipulation were the inevitable outcome. Ideological differences between parties tended to become blurred under the identical pressures of organizational requirements.

---

\(^{300}\) Michels’ interest in the structural problems presented by mass organization to democracy stems from his intellectual relationship with Weber beginning in 1905.

\(^{301}\) Though of course for different ends.

\(^{302}\) Weber, Economy and Society vol. II, 188.
Weber pointed out to Michels that the German Social Democratic party was, ‘outside the Anglo-Saxon realm, the only one which is technically fully developed,’ although it has ‘by contrast… something like a Weltanschauung’ and thus is ‘not just a technical machine,’ as are the parties in the United States.”

Weber here, in contrast to Roth’s generalization, sees the SDP as a party machine but one with an ideology, which is an advance on those pure machines in the American context. As for his reliance on Ostrogorski, this was not entirely true; actually it was James Bryce’s work that more caught Weber’s attention, and which he repeatedly urged Michels to study more closely.

Weber’s analysis of bureaucracy is intertwined with his three categories of domination: traditional, charismatic, and rational-legal. For Weber

“Bureaucracy is, however, distinguished from other historical bearers of the modern, rational way of ordering life by the fact of its far greater inescapability. History records no instance of it having disappeared again once it has achieved complete and sole dominance… except when the whole culture supporting it also disappeared completely… but wherever the trained, specialist, modern official has once begun to rule, his power is absolutely unbreakable, because the entire organization of providing even the most basic needs in life then depends on his performance of his duties.”

Like Marx arguing that pre-capitalist forms continued to exist along side the capitalist,

Weber made no claim that bureaucratic rational-legal domination was the only one that could exist in modernity, only that inevitably it would claim the commanding heights of the state as it permeated the rest of society. Bureaucracy was more than its institutional representation: it was embedded in social interactions, as people grew used to bowing to rational-legal authorities and the behavior patterns they engendered. Democracy had not quelled this tide; the expropriation of the titular aristocracy meant an administration

304 Traditional leadership meant domination tied to custom rather than law, charismatic domination means supporters regardless of their affiliation follow domination by a figure to any government authority, and rational-legal is domination conferred based on law or position within an organizational hierarchy.
306 Interestingly, in the 20th century it would be dissident Marxists like Guy Debord and the Situationist international that would re-examine and develop Weberian bureaucratic concepts in an attempt to forward an anti-bureaucratic revolution.
staffed not by notables but rather bureaucrats who were charged with ensuring equality before the law and maintaining stable property relationships. As capitalism had divorced the producers from the means of production, modern government had divorced the rulers from ownership over the state apparatus. Representative government had, in many ways, made the growth of bureaucracy even more inevitable.

Weber claimed, “Modern parliaments are assemblies representing the people who are ruled by the means of bureaucracy. It is, after all, a condition of the duration of any rule, even the best organized, that it should enjoy a certain measure of inner assent from at least those sections of the ruled who carry weight in society. Today parliaments are the means whereby this minimum of assent is made manifest.” ³⁰⁷ Political parties “are nowadays by far the most important bearers of the political will of those who are ruled by the bureaucracy, the ‘citizens of the state’ (Staatsbürger).” ³⁰⁸ For Weber political parties, like democracy, contained a contradiction at their core: where democracy had overthrown de jure rule of the aristocracy it had put in place of necessity rule by bureaucratic officialdom. Political parties were forced to operate on an increasingly bureaucratic model if they were to succeed, thus limiting the impact of the democratic mass on decision making even further. For “in their internal structure, all parties have gone over to the bureaucratic form of organization in the course of the last few decades as the techniques of electoral struggle have become increasingly rationalized. The individual parties have reached different stages of development on the road to this goal but the general direction is absolutely clear, at least in mass-states… the development of the revealingly named party ‘machine’ in America and the growing importance of party

³⁰⁸ Ibid, 149.
officials everywhere (including Germany, where this is happening most rapidly in the Social Democratic Party, which is to say, quite naturally, precisely in the most democratic party); all these are comparable stages in this process.”

I think, here, we see how close Weber’s intellectual kinship was with Michels, but also how it was maddening for both men; Weber accepted bureaucracy as inevitable, while Michels only did so grudgingly while searching for its cure. While agreeing on the problem of bureaucracy they completely disagreed about the political stance to take in regards to the problem.

Yet - and this is why Michels, Weber, Bryce, and Ostrogorski belong in an intellectual canon far more than an elite tradition of Michels, Mosca and Pareto – Weber is concerned with determining a place individual freedom can continue to exist in a thoroughly bureaucratized society. He is to the point when he states

“In view of the fundamental fact that the advance of bureaucratization is unstoppable, there is only one possible set of questions to be asked about future forms of political organization: (1) How is it at all possible to salvage any remnants of ‘individual’ freedom of movement in any sense, given this all-powerful trend towards bureaucratization? It is, after all, a piece of crude self-deception to think that even the most conservative among us could carry on living at all today without these achievements from the age of the ‘Rights of Man’. However, let us put this question to one side for now, for there is another which is directly relevant to our present concerns: (2) In view of the growing indispensability and hence increasing power of state officialdom, which is our concern here, how can there be any guarantee that forces exist which can impose limits on the enormous, crushing power of this constantly growing stratum of society and control it effectively? How is democracy even in this restricted sense to be at all possible? Yet this too is not the only question of concern to us here, for there is (3) a third question, the most important of all, which arises from any considering of what is not performed by bureaucracy as such. It is clear that its effectiveness has strict internal limits, both in the management of public, political affairs and in the private economic sphere.”

Weber seems to be simultaneously more and less pessimistic in his arguments than those put forward by Michels in *Political Parties*. This stems from two things: Michels was looking for a way to sustain democracy and “positive liberty” in *Political Parties* and when he found this impossible he despaired of sustaining any liberty in the face of the

---

309 Ibid, 153.
310 Ibid, 159.
311 There seems to be a very clear line from this reasoning to Schumpeter’s arguments for minimalist democracy and the later theories developed by political scientists in the latter half of the twentieth century.
ensuing bureaucratic tide. Weber was never looking to sustain a Rousseauian direct
democracy, but rather some bastions of individual liberty, which seemed more possible
because he was able to place his hopes in the construct of the vocational leading
politician. Indeed, he chastised Michels for ignoring the radical acts of the Jacobin
dictatorship, because after Michels decided direct democracy was unworkable, he fully
embraced the concept of bureaucracy as an Orwellian-nightmare. Weber expected far
less from democratic government and was thus able to see more open spaces for
individual liberty than Michels.

Weber, then, was less concerned with finding a solution to the problem of
democracy, than with solving the problem of retaining open spaces of liberty for the few
who could combine discipline with choice within the bureaucratized society. His answer
centered on the concept of the Berufspolitiker, or the vocational politician (politician with
a calling). Writes Weber

‘Here we are interested in above all the… rule by purely personal devotion by ‘charisma’ of the ‘leader’ on
the part of those who obey him. For this is where the idea of vocation (Beruf) in its highest form has its
roots. Devotion to the charisma of the… exceptional demagogue in the ekklesia or in parliament means
that the leader is personally regarded as someone who is inwardly ‘called’ to the task of leading men, and
that the led submit to him, not because of custom or statute, but because they believe in him. Of course, he
himself, provided he is something more than an ephemeral, narrow and vain upstart, lives for his cause
(Sache), ‘aspires after his work’, whereas the devotion of his adherents, be they disciples or liegemen
(Gefolgschaft) or his quite personal, partisan supporters, is focused on his person and his qualities.’

Much like Machiavelli’s prince, Weber’s vocational politician was a theoretical construct
designed to meet the challenges its creator believed contemporary society faced, both
were ad hoc, random and not structural creatures, yet where the prince used virtu to
construct order out of chaos, the vocational politician used charisma to coax fluidity out
of a rigid rational-legal state. The structural necessities of industrial society precluded

312 Weber, Max. “The Profession and Vocation of Politics.” in Weber: Political Writings, ed. Lassman,
any attempt to break up the bureaucratic state, it would instead have to be sidestepped or overtaken by a non-bureaucratic form of domination.

The party bosses and parliamentarians of the era lived by, not for, politics; they had no inner calling to mold a better society. Weber believed those that looked like vocational politicians were, as Bryce would call them, “magnetic men” who sought short-term gain from their positions. In contrast, the vocational politician was someone who felt a calling to politics, to make decisions based on “responsibility” to the public, rather than their own self-interest. *Berufspolitikers*, unlike machine politicians, did not learn to use false charisma – it was a part of who they were.\(^\text{313}\) This was crucial; charismatic domination meant people would follow the vocational politician regardless of political mobilization by the party machinery. Once ensconced in power the charismatic vocational politician would use the machinery of party and state to rule, with a foot in the world of bureaucracy and that of charisma.

Weber’s example of the vocational politician leans heavily on the English model:

> “The result was the centralization of all power in the hands of a few people and ultimately of one person at the head of the party. In the Liberal Party the rise of this whole system had to do with Gladstone’s rise to power. The fascinating thing about Gladstone’s ‘grand’ demagogy, the firm belief of the masses in the ethical content of his policies and above all in the ethical character of his personality, was what led this machine so quickly to victory over the notables. A Caesarist plebiscitary element, the dictator of the electoral battlefield, entered the political arena… by 1886, when the issue of Home Rule was opened up, the machine was already so completely oriented on the charismatic appeal of the leader’s personality that the entire apparatus, from top to bottom, did not ask, ‘Do we share Gladstone’s position in this matter?’, but rather simply wheeled at his command, saying, ‘Whatever he does, we will follow him.’”\(^\text{314}\)

Bureaucracy did not disappear, but Gladstone managed to bend it to his will and that of his followers. His rule was also responsible and *ethical*, which Weber believed was the key characteristic that distinguished vocational politicians from their machine counterparts, since they could force the state and machine to embrace certain ethical

---

\(^{313}\) Another link to Machiavelli’s prince.

\(^{314}\) Ibid, 342.
ends. Mass electoral democracy called into being a bureaucratic apparatus without both
denied the possibility of democracy and allowed, for Weber, the possibility that it could
be used by a responsible charismatc leader and his followers. The will of the
charismatic, vocational politician gave him the potential to utilize the state in a non-
bureaucratic manner. With his Berufspolitiker, Weber opened a door that is potentially
important in our dissection of Michels’ arguments.

Charisma and will were part of many responses by theorists to the endless march
of early twentieth century organization. In this, Weber’s vocational politician resembles
Sorel’s (and Michels’) new syndicalist man, who created his own destiny as a free
person. Where Sorel had seen a communal struggle for a free society birthed out of the
collective proletarian will, Weber saw an opening for some sort of individual liberty
against bureaucracy. Here Sorel, but especially Weber, highlights the limitations of the
modern political apparatus that Weber, at least, saw as nearly invincible. A conscious
individual and his followers (or individuals united around a common purpose) could
defeat or possibly beat back the organization Michels described as all consuming. Like
the prince of another era creating or seizing the state apparatus for his own use, the
vocational politician (or syndicalist groups) could make use of the bureaucracy for non-
bureaucratic ends. Weber never fully explored the ramifications of this because he was
wholly interested in finding the basis for a competitive leadership democracy.

Perhaps, then, pessimism was misplaced but rather, “slow, strong drilling through
hard boards,” meant open spaces could be created against the oligarchy Michels feared.
If industrial society precluded a democracy based on some sort of Rousseauian

315 Though what about an irresponsible “magnetic man” who mimicked a charismatic leader?
316 Ibid, 369.
absolutism, then neither was it impossible to think that the vocational politician or the syndicalist group would be unsuccessful at every turn. What the new, non-bureaucratic structures would look like was never truly explored by Weber or Michels, but it is nonetheless an important development in our discussion to acknowledge this. Non-bureaucratic leaders would not necessarily be unsuccessful and radical acts would not necessarily end in co-option by a bureaucratic party. These acts were not assured of success, but that is, perhaps, the point in Weber’s discussion of the vocational politician. Like would-be princes, those engaged in the battle against rational-legal domination were usually unsuccessful, but this did not eliminate the possibility that some would be successful. Yet in the end Weber’s vocational politician was a theoretical construct he used in polemics against philosophical and political opponents of the day who did not take into account the effects of professional politics on political responsibility.

James Bryce

Englishman, parliamentarian, and perhaps the next great scholar of American democracy after Alexis de Tocqueville, Lord James Bryce’s work The American Commonwealth became the standard text on the subject from its publication in 1888 until the first decades of the twentieth century. His academic career presents an interesting parallel to Weber’s; both wrote seminal texts on modern political science, focusing especially on the rise of political parties and party machines, and then urged their intellectual disciples (Ostrogorski for Bryce, Michels for Weber) to expand on the work they had started. Bryce’s position was that of a classic English liberal, and as such he was concerned with the rise of party machines and their impact on the talented individual

317 He was made a viscount in 1914; the correct form of address is “Lord.”
statesman and, above all, the rational discourse between ideas that he believed characterized an era now passing. It is worth quoting one of his letters:

“Surely it is in the development and functions of party, more than anything else, that the modern democracy differs from that of ancient or medieval times. Formerly a party – according to Burke – was a body of men united by a common sentiment or the desire to bring about a public policy. But now – I fancy on account of the enormous size of modern democracies – parties seem to be a necessary machinery for formulating public questions, or obtaining a popular decision upon them. Formerly the issue made the parties; now the parties make the issues and when those issues have passed away the parties show no sign of dying out. An era of good feeling or a ministry of all the talents, would hardly be possible today.”

Bryce’s work, perhaps more than Weber’s, shows the tensions involved within classical liberal thought on political parties. Political machines had indeed shut out many of the most talented notables and elevated men of more modest backgrounds who had little ambition beyond accumulating power and wealth. This curious thing, modern mass democracy, had also shut out rule by the demos, as they were quick to be lead by political parties and the issues that drove the parties to form became secondary to the perpetual existence of the parties. Bryce was a preeminent representative of classical liberalism in all its wariness of democracy and desire for rational constitutionalism; Bryce realized “he had to accept parties as necessary for democracy, but to be loyal to his liberal approach to the law of the constitution he had to admit that party politics was not a good road to rational government.”

Liberalism, in this incarnation, dealt with party politics by grudgingly accepting it; Bryce’s pupil Ostrogorski represented another major tension within modern liberalism of those who saw reform of political parties and the electoral system as absolutely crucial for good government. Bryce, however, would not come to share Ostrogorski’s view that reform was as possible, or perhaps even as desirable.

---

Like Weber, Bryce saw in the United States the future of modern government, leaving behind even his native Britain as a model. For "in America the great moving forces are the parties. The government counts for less than in Europe, the parties count for more; and the fewer have become their principles and the fainter their interest in those principles, the more perfect has become their organization. The less of nature the more of art; the less spontaneity the more mechanism." A “ministry of all the talents,” a government dedicated to the long-term interests of the state and parties, was impossible in the United States because suffrage had expanded further, faster there than anywhere else. It was only possible in an era of elected ‘notables’ composed almost entirely of direct representatives of the ruling class without party intermediaries. Expansion of the franchise meant the birth of mass electoral machines, ready to mobilize the plebes to the ballot box for what became a growing number of elected offices. Decline of the elected ‘notables’ and patricians meant the work of politics would no longer be done solely by wealthy educated men, but hired party men. To that end there was

"A great deal of hard and dull election and other local political work to be done. Few men of leisure to do it, and still fewer men of leisure likely to care for it. Nobody able to do it in addition to his regular business or profession. Little motive for anybody, whether leisured or not, to do the humbler and local parts of it... the parts which bring neither fame nor power,... in America we discover a palpable inducement to undertake the dull and tiresome work of election politics. It is the inducement of places in the public service. To make them attractive they must be paid... here then is the inducement, the remuneration for political work performed in the way of organizing and electioneering... politics has now become a gainful profession, like advocacy, stockbroking, the dry goods trade, or the getting up of companies. People go into it to live by it, primarily for the sake of the salaries attached to the places they count on getting, secondarily in view of the opportunities it affords of making incidental and sometimes illegitimate gains."

320 Weber had studied Bryce’s writings extensively, and was upset he could not get Michels to read more than the edited version of *The American Commonwealth*.
Indeed, "We find therefore in America all the conditions exist for producing a class of men specially devoted to political work and making a livelihood by it."\textsuperscript{323}

The decline of the notables and the rise of party machines set the stage for an era where Bryce and liberals like him believed competent and farsighted government was the furthest thing from the minds of party officials and elected officeholders. Long-term, responsible decisions by machine officials are at best an added sop to their voters, and at worst could cause a falling-out with the machine that backs them – hardly a reason to engage in them. Mimicking the industrial oligopolies (oligarchies?) around them, political machines were structurally bound not to innovate unless forced. Bryce and Weber understood the machines fulfilled a social purpose for their constituents as well as for the party members, but they did not explore how party machines could provide a subjective form of “good” government to their membership in the form of jobs and security, which legitimated their existence and in that respect were responsive if not democratically so to their membership. Here is where Michels’ analysis of the Social Democratic party is important, because while Weber was not wrong about the SPD being an electoral machine, he was not entirely right either – the ideological mass party was similar to, but not entirely the same as, American mass parties that Bryce described. A tension existed in the SPD between the ideological goals of socialism carried by its membership and the electoral demands of the party apparatus. This tension would exist as long as there was both an ideological and real conflict between the bourgeoisie and working class; as soon as it dropped off the agenda the socialist parties did indeed become electoral apparatuses. Yet while the specter of revolution was still a possibility, the parties involved represented both a machine something more.

\textsuperscript{323} Ibid, 60.
Bryce noted organization as the key to success in mass electoral politics, as "the greatest discovery ever made in the art of war was when men began to perceive that organization and discipline count for more than numbers." This was due to the need for mobilizing enormous numbers of voters on a constant basis, but also to one of the true contradictions of electoral democracy: the expansion of offices up for election meant simultaneously the expansion of voter power and that of the machine. With more offices up for vote, the electorate simply had less ability to judge between the multitudes of candidates for offices with which they may rarely have interacted. Bryce argued

"The number of places to be filled by election being very large, ordinary citizens will find it hard to form an opinion as to the men best qualified for the offices. Their minds will be distracted among the multiplicity of places. In large cities particularly, where people know little about their neighbors, the names of most candidates will be unknown to them, and there will be no materials, except the recommendation of a party organization, available for determining the respective fitness of the candidates put forward by the several parties."

Indeed, the machine fills the breach by selecting candidates:

This was the real purpose of the machine, as "the selection of party candidates… is important not only because the elective places are far more numerous than in any European country, but because they are tenable for short terms, so that elections frequently recur. Since the parties, having of late had no really distinctive principles, and therefore no well-defined aims in the direction of legislation or administration, exist practically for the sake of filling certain offices, and carrying on the machinery of government, the choice of those members of the party whom the party is to reward, and who are to strengthen it by the winning of the offices, becomes a main end of its being."

Contradictions in capitalism had lead to mass poverty amidst plenty; contradictions in mass democracy had lead to oligarchic control even as the number of state offices under voter control had grown. As Weber (drawing on Bryce) and Michels would note, the growth of bureaucratic parties was a structural consequence of modern industrial democracies and the decreased possibilities of mass control coupled with increased mass participation.

---

324 Ibid, 76.
325 Ibid, 95.
326 Ibid, 77.
Bryce saw machines, or “rings” as essentially business organizations; he argued “the interest of a Boss in political questions is usually quite secondary.”\(^{327}\) For, “it must not be supposed that the members of Rings, or the great Boss himself, are wicked men. They are the offspring of a system. Their morality is that of their surroundings. They see a door open to wealth and power, and they walk in. The obligations of patriotism or duty to the public are not disregarded by them, for these obligations have never been present to their minds.”\(^{328}\) The business of the machine was to collect votes and through elections, power and wealth. Machines of the era, at least in the United States, were usually linked to provision of services to immigrant groups and especially city-dwellers, but were also tied to the vast concentrations of wealth accumulating in modern capitalist cities. Political machines were the physical manifestation of the political power and wealth accumulation in the first era of permanent mass political mobilization, but especially one in which the party members were becoming accustomed to industrial discipline in every aspect of their lives, including the political. Bryce again writes, "The source of power [for the Machine] and the cohesive force is the desire for office, and for office as a means of gain. This one cause is sufficient to account for everything, when it acts, as it does in these cities, under the condition of the suffrage of a host of ignorant and pliable voters."\(^{329}\) Though, of course, it is debatable whether the majority was as ignorant as Bryce maintained, cynical about their situation, or as happy to allow people to lead them (as Michels argued).

What separates Bryce from Ostrogorski, Michels, and especially Weber is his contextualization of this machine; he clearly saw it as an American phenomenon first

\(^{327}\) Ibid, 115.
\(^{328}\) Ibid, 110-11.
\(^{329}\) Ibid, 107
even if aspects of it were apparent in the UK and other liberal societies. Michels is often criticized for using the SPD as his only case and extrapolating from that a general tendency for all political parties in the modern era toward oligarchy; while this is certainly true, it (as we have seen), ignores that while he was certainly looking for a general theory of mass political parties, his other, no less important goal, was a search for a way beyond the problem of oligarchy and democracy. The importance of Bryce is as an argument for thoroughly placing theory within a very discernable historical-cultural framework and only extrapolating what can be. Weber wanted Michels to read The American Commonwealth in order to be able to more fully describe party bureaucracy and oligarchy as a general sociological concept, and while it is likely a more thorough appreciation for the structure of the party system as Bryce described it could have helped Michels, it would also have helped Weber as well.

Bryce’s conclusions about the machine are cogent and find their echoes in Weber and Michels. He saw:

“Yet every feature of the Machine is the result of patent causes. The elective offices are so numerous that ordinary citizens cannot watch them, and cease to care who gets them. The conventions come so often that busy men cannot serve in them. The minor offices are so unattractive that able men do not stand for them. The primary lists are so contrived that only a fraction of the party gets on them; and of this fraction many are too lazy or too busy or too careless to attend. The mass of the voters are ignorant; knowing nothing about the personal merits of the candidates, they are ready to follow their leaders like sheep. Even the better class, however they may grumble, are swayed by the inveterate habit of party loyalty, and prefer a bad candidate of their own party. It is less trouble to put up with impure officials, costly city government, a jobbing State legislature, an inferior sort of congressman, than to sacrifice one’s own business in the effort to set thing right. Thus the Machine works on, and grinds out places, power, and opportunities for illicit gain to those who manage it.”

Compare this with Michels: “Though it grumbles occasionally, the majority is really delighted to find persons who will take the trouble to look after its affairs… in the mass… there is an immense need for direction and guidance.”

330 Ibid, 106.
331 Michels, Political Parties, 88.
scholars examining the new phenomenon of the mass party similar conclusions its structure and causes were reached by most, and were likely heavily influenced by Bryce’s original studies. Industrial capitalism’s expansion of the franchise and elected offices had created a feedback loop in which the political machine was almost certainly a necessary consequence, and would simultaneously lead some to apathy and others to accept or desire rule by the machine. There were few incentives for participating in the process, and especially for attempting to reform the process. Bryce is correct in arguing that the expansion of public offices up for election did not necessarily create democratization, and in fact the diffusion of power into many offices often led to anti-democratic ends as the machine took control. The “better” or at least less corrupt candidates had little chance of being selected by the machine and most had little interest in competing for small offices with no real power in order to build up name recognition to run for higher offices. Notables and the elite found it harder to win office and more effective to make deals with the machine. The masses were either tied by party loyalty to the machine or the amount of information to process regarding candidates for offices came at a high cost. While rebellions were not impossible, as we will see with Ostrogorski, the initial inertia created by the modern state and party system against it is quite high.

Bryce’s discussion on dislodging the machine’s bureaucratic control place him within the mainstream of liberal thought on this issue, though perhaps he is the exemplar for the rest of mainstream liberalism of the era. Party bosses, as Michels later noted artfully in Political Parties, were more concerned with dissident factions within their own party than other parties (for it was only by these factions that they could be
removed). In fact, “still more bitter, however, is the hatred of Boss and Ring towards those members of the party who do not desire and are not to be appeased by a share of the spoils, but who agitate for what they call reform. They are natural and permanent enemies; nothing but the extinction of the Boss himself and of bossdom altogether will satisfy them. They are moreover the common enemies of both parties, that is, of bossdom in both parties.”

Bryce highlights three ways in which the machine is assaulted by reformers: “There are several forms which a reform movement or other popular rising takes. The recent history of great cities supplies examples of each. The first form is an attack upon the primaries. They are the key of a Ring's position, and when they have been captured their batteries can be turned against the Ring itself...”

next, “a second expedient, which may be tried instead of the first, or resorted to after the first has been tried and failed, is to make an independent list of nominations and run a separate set of candidates. If this strategy be resolved on, the primaries are left unheeded; but when the election approaches, a committee is formed which issues a list of candidates for some or all of the vacant offices in opposition to the 'regular' list issues by the party convention, and conducts the agitation on their behalf. This saves all the trouble in primaries or conventions, but involves much trouble in elections, because a complete campaign corps has to be organized, and a campaign fund raised,” and finally “there remains the chance of forming a third party out of the best men of both the regular organizations, and starting a third set of candidates...it has been frequently employed of

---

333 Ibid, 166.
334 Ibid, 168.
late years in cities, generally of the second order, by running what is called a 'Citizens' Ticket.'

Bryce is pessimistic about the possibility of these attempts succeeding on more than a case-by-case basis. Yet, the temporary success, or near-success of the anti-machine forces can require a retreat by the party bureaucracy. He argues “the struggle between the professional politicians and the reformers has been going on in the great cities, with varying fortune, for the last twenty years... in the onslaughts against the Rings, which most elections bring round, the reformers, though they seldom capture the citadel, often destroy some of the outworks, and frighten the garrison into a more cautious and moderate use of their power. After an election which an 'Independent ticket' has received considerable support, the bosses are disposed to make better nominations... to 'pander a little to the moral sense of the community.'” It is interesting that Bryce, who is not necessarily looking for a way to truly democratize society, is less pessimistic about the outcome of pro-democracy struggles than Michels. In this it depends on whether we agree with Michels that democracy is always and only direct democracy; the observers who demand (at least somewhat) less see potential avenues of democratic revolt against bureaucratic politics. Michels was, perhaps, incorrect then in stating the masses would never put up a concerted, determined effort against the party machine. The question, of course, is whether the anti-machine forces are just another machine-in-waiting, or represent something qualitatively different. Yet the very fact that these forces exist represents (at least a small) departure from Michels' pessimism.

---

335 Ibid, 170.
336 Ibid, 172.
In fact, Bryce concludes that the people are not duped at all by the machine, but rather accept it as a fact of everyday life. Whether this is cynicism or apathy is debatable, but he writes

"The perversion by Rings and Bosses of the nominating machinery of primaries and conventions excites a disgust whose strength is proportioned to the amount of fraud and trickery employed, an amount not great when the 'good citizens' make no counter exertions. The disgust is less than a European expects, for it is mingled with amusement. The Boss is a sort of joke, albeit an expensive joke. 'After all,' the people say, 'it is our own fault. If we all went to the primaries, or if we all voted an Independent ticket, we could make an end of the Boss.' There is a sort of fatalism in their view of democracy. If a thing exists in a free country, it has a right to exist, for it exists by the leave of the people, who may be deemed to acquiesce in what they do not extinguish."

This is more than the grumbling Michels discussed; the masses know their apathy is a primary cause of machine dominance. Here Luxemburg’s arguments for unorganized uprisings reinvigorating the revolutionary/mass democracy movement seem a bit more plausible, even if they cannot completely solve the problem of structural causes creating bureaucracy in the first place, and yet the problem presented by Bryce is one not addressed by Luxemburg: how are the masses radicalized if they are already apathetic? Luxemburg assumes the external forces of capitalism and the class struggle; what Bryce shows is not that Luxemburg is incorrect, but rather the potential the masses have to act is as great as their potential to sit idle. Bryce, the liberal, did not argue for such a radical revolt against the machine, but rather lamented that "in America, as everywhere in the world, the commonwealth suffers more from apathy or shortsightedness in the upper classes, who ought to lead, than from ignorance or recklessness in the humbler classes, who are generally ready to follow when they are wisely and patriotically led." Still, Bryce believed the representative form of government best over any kind of direct democracy, as

---

"A state must of course take the people as it finds them, with such elements of ignorance and passion as exists in masses of men everywhere. Nevertheless, a representative or parliamentary system provides the means of mitigating the evils to be feared from ignorance or haste, for it vests the actual conduct of affairs in a body of specially chosen and qualified men, who may themselves entrust such of their functions as need peculiar knowledge or skill to a smaller governing body or bodies selected in respect of their more eminent fitness. By this method the defects of democracy are remedied, while its strength is retained. The masses give their impulse to the representatives: the representatives, directed by the people to secure certain ends, bring their skill and experience to bear on the choice and application of the best means."

Frustrated, he wrote to Goldwin Smith “party government is certainly showing its worst side. But how are we to change it? What remedy is there? No free country except Switzerland gets on without it; and we can’t reproduce Swiss conditions.”

In the end, “he realized that a ‘political scientist’ was in an unhappy position: to be realistic he had to accept parties as necessary for democracy, but to be loyal to his liberal approach to the law of the constitution he had to admit that party politics was not a good road to a rational government.” Bryce’s conclusions were, to an extent, hopeful about the possibility of good government, or at least that there was a potential that representative government could be a framework for it, as long as an intelligent and far-sighted elite were the beneficiaries. Yet like Weber his hope is just that, a hope that qualified leadership would emerge, even as his scholarship tended to point in the opposite direction. Liberal scholars had a more thorough and skeptical understanding of electoral machines than their socialist counterparts, but their solutions were if anything more utopian given that they saw no hope in mass democracy or a reinvigorated radical party. If then, qualified and responsible leadership – an ethic of responsibility - was the other axis of the concern about modern mass democracy, Bryce stands here alongside Weber. His pupil, Ostrogorski, was like Michels for Weber; more interested in potential avenues of reform

339 Ibid, 587.
rather than simple description, and in this respect his writing is part of the more radical
tension within liberal concerns over mass politics.

Ostrogorski

Ostrogorski was, like Michels, charged by his intellectual mentor to create a
classic of political science by expanding upon the work his mentor had begun. Like
Michels, he succeeded in creating an enduring work of political science, but one that was
a disappointment to Bryce as Michels’ was to Weber. Indeed, “both Ostrogorski’s and
Michels’ work on parties grew out of an attempt to test their respective masters’ general
theory of parties, but each in its own way would end up producing unexpected results.
Ostrogorski’s book ends too by twisting the approach of Bryce, at least by considering
the party question in a much less scientific and much more passionate way than
Bryce.”342 It is debatable whether Bryce’s approach was any less ideological and more
scientific, but it is quite true that Ostrogorski’s two-volume work on political parties in
England and the United States was written under what Weber labeled the “ethics of
conviction.”343 The normative stance taken by Ostrogorski in favor of reform and against
the machine is unequivocal by the end of volume II; it is a manifestation of the tension
within early 20th century liberalism on the desirability and possibility of electoral reform.
Yet it is also a testament to the split between those liberal scholars who saw the
development of “genuine” political leadership as the only way to counter the reduction of
modern politics to the imperatives of the party machine, and those who believed it was
possible to reform the party machine and the electoral process itself.

343 Much like he labeled Michels’ work.
Ostrogorski’s discussion of the machine is a clear extension of Bryce’s pioneering work, written a decade before. He observed in England, “Important as the groundwork of the Organization of the party, the ward association, in spite of its democratic constitution, really has an extremely narrow base; for its meetings are very little attended. And it is in these meetings, which contain two to three percent of the whole electorate, that the delegates are chosen who are to invest the Caucus with its representative authority…often, to curtail the proceedings, even the semblance of a vote is dispensed with; the old list is adopted again. The inevitable result is that all the work falls to a handful of men, who are willing to attend to it.”

Again sounding like Bryce (and Weber and Michels) he argues, “The Organization of parties which we have been studying has disclosed to us a structure which may be described as ingenious. Intended to fight the battles of fiercely competing parties, this Organization combines all the essential conditions of success, by providing men accustomed to obey orders, well disciplined, and following freely acknowledged leaders, who in their turn possess in a high degree such qualities as energy, skill, and strategical and tactical ability.”

Finally, his most famous observation was in comparing the party bureaucracy to puppet strings, as he wrote, “thus the whole Organization eventually ends in being a hierarchy of wire-pullers.”

Ostrogorski was a representative of early twentieth century analysts quickly coming to similar conclusions about the mass party. Like Michels, his importance lies with the discussion of democracy and the potential reforms necessary for it to flourish vis-à-vis political bureaucratization. While not unequivocal in his support, Ostrogorski

---

345 Ibid, 186.
346 Ibid, 178. (Emphasis mine)
was firmly within the camp of the liberal reformers found in cities across the United States in the latter half of the nineteenth and early twentieth century. His normative conclusions in the service of democracy link him with Michels; his liberal belief in the possibility of electoral reform separates him from the direct-democratic demands of Michels. His study of a more open political culture allowed him to see the very real possibilities of revolt against the bureaucratic order as a long-term process; his study of the liberal reform movement did not solve the problem of organization and democracy as Michels had put it, but raised a question – as Weber did – of whether all organization was inherently conservative. Struggle was also, perhaps, not impossible or unlikely. While the core question raised by Michels of direct democracy was left untouched, the most important part of his work is contained within his conclusions about the Progressive reform movement in the United States. It is worth quoting him in full here:

"The result of the election showed that the struggle undertaken against the Machine was not a desperate one, but it also proved - for the hundredth time, it is true, or for the thousandth - that it was not by sudden attacks culminating in a furious assault that the enemy could be overcome; that to lead the electors away from the Machine it was necessary to make efforts just as persistent as the Machine itself makes to win and to retain them. The politicians of the Machine looked after the electors day after day, they attended to this business morning and evening, for years together, and not only during election time. The 'reformers' had never acted but in a spasmodic manner, by fits and starts; when they roused themselves it was always too late, the politicians were always a long way ahead of them in the popular mind. The mode of action of the 'reformers' was anything but calculated to fill this gap: excellent persons, exceedingly well-meaning, they were too fond of oratorical arguments, they expended their energies in making big speeches, in voting solemn resolutions, in firing off denunciations which were often too vague, of too general a character to hit the culprits exactly and point them out to the world. The 'reformers' did not know how to put their shoulder to the wheel, whereas the Machine did nothing else - it 'worked' the electors, one by one, caring nothing for the effects of eloquence. Even the more or less successful 'citizens' movements,' in which the 'reformers' took their turn of 'work,' as, for instance, the movements which have just been related in the preceding pages, were paralyzed in their effects by the exertions which they entailed: the heroic character of these efforts soon wore out the zeal of the 'reformers,' and filled them with a conceit which made them complacently celebrate a triumph on the occasion of the slightest success. While the members of the committee of seventy or of one hundred and seventy were pouring forth torrents of reciprocal congratulations at their banquets and having their photographs taken, the Machine was collecting its battalions and quietly recovering its positions. To checkmate the Machine, or at all events to cope with it, it was necessary to display a less heroic, but more methodical and more steady, activity, to place the free action inaugurated by the citizens' movements on a permanent basis: such were the conclusions which

347 After he returned to Russia he joined the liberal party there, the Cadets.
experience suggested and which attempts have been made of late years to put in practice. These attempts
opened a new chapter in the history of the independent movements and of American political methods. 348

Ostrogorski’s dilemma: there are sources of revolt against the machine, from the mass, but they must create an organization to fight the larger organization. Either the new “citizens” organization will not function like the old machine, or Ostrogorski is ignoring Michels’ conclusion that all organizations end up the same no matter their ideology. This is clearly something different than Michels’ “out groups” struggling with the in-groups for power in a party; the Populists and Progressives Ostrogorski speaks of were looking to abolish the ability of the machine to function. Yet it was still a party organization; either it would succumb to the same problems described by Michels, or it would be proof that Michels’ tenets were not as iron as he assumed.

While both Michels and Ostrogorski pose problems for each other’s analyses, the importance of the argument in Democracy and the Organization of Political Parties lies in that the suffocating nature of the party machine does not stop external grassroots challenges from occurring. Electoral reforms had the possibility of placing anti-machine efforts on a more firm footing, the missteps of the reformers studied by Ostrogorski notwithstanding. Michels had dismissed these reforms as inadequate because he demanded direct democracy, but if one’s immediate goal was to reduce the power of the party oligarchy then a significant anti-machine victory was possible with electoral reform. Ostrogorski’s hypotheses cannot eliminate the need for political parties and bureaucracy or bring about direct democracy, but do show Michels’ pessimism about the Orwellian direction of the party system and the inadequacy of all revolts was misplaced, even if they both agree on the difficult nature of sustaining the attack on the machine.

Reform Problems

Yet problems arose when the reformers set about reforming; their missteps strengthened rather than quelled the hand of the machine. This was partly the fault of being the first to deal with the endemic problems associated with the mass party bureaucracy, but also the intrinsic problem with the liberalism of the era. Study of the United States allowed for a more full examination of the mass party system, moreso than Germany for Michels (or even Italy), but its limitations were lay with the weakness of the anti-systemic parties in the United States. While the Socialist Party existed in the United States it hardly had the same foundation in the population, as did the European socialist parties. In Europe, the question of mass democracy was bound up with the tension between liberalism, capitalism, and socialism. Democracy was often linked to the socialist movement; it was proletarians pushing for electoral reforms, sometimes allied to the middle class, sometimes opposed. In the United States and the U.K., democratic reformers tended to be petit bourgeois and their radicalism did not extend to direct democratic demands, let alone the call for a democratically managed economy.

Reformers went from symptom to symptom, treating the effects and not the cause. Elections in the late-19th century United States required parties to do printing of ballots and distribution to electors, thus placing an enormous burden on the reformers who typically had comparatively miniscule resources. The answer, hit upon by the anti-machine forces, was to transfer this responsibility to the state: voter registration, the printing and distribution of ballots, counting results. Unfortunately, this lead to a strengthening of the party machine, as it sanctioned one group as the official designating body for each party; candidates went to the machine not because it distributed ballots, but
because the legal sanction of the machine was necessary to get on the only valid ballot. Ostrogorski surmised: “Far from curtailing this arbitrary power, the Australian Ballot has unintentionally given it a legal sanction, by admitting candidates flying the colors of a political party only on a certificate of the committee of the Organization. By conceding the status of party to the great parties only, the law has placed them in a privileged position.” He continues

“This singular result was not due only to the perverse ingenuity of the politicians, but also to the simple-mindedness of the reformers. The latter diagnosed the complaint by dwelling on the external symptoms. The monopoly of the material organization of the elections which the Machine had assumed was not the cause, but the consequence of the moral electoral monopoly which it had acquired over men's minds under the mask of party orthodoxy. The remedy prescribed for the disease presented a flagrant logical contradiction: to allow full scope to the independent candidatures and to the free expression of suffrage, they were submitted to a set of restrictive regulations; to stop the usurpation of the political parties legal recognition was obligingly conceded to them.”

Ostrogorski, while mostly correct, misses the coercion the Machine used when it could actively count who took their ballots as opposed to the opposition’s; the adoption of the secret ballot was also meant to curtail this practice. The reformers went from Scylla to Charybdis, eliminating one problem but creating yet another. Ostrogorski, however, cuts to the heart of the matter: "While not having done what was expected of it, the Australian Ballot introduced a great innovation through the legal recognition which it gave to the political parties: being invested with a legal status, they formally became a part of the machinery of the State.”

Whether this was simply a codification of what was already essentially the case in a mass party electoral system, or a tactical blunder on the part of reformers seized upon by the incumbent parties, the acceptance of political parties as part-and-parcel of the machinery of state had a huge impact on the efficacy of dissident factions. Smaller,

351 Ibid, 263.
incipient parties would find it difficult to gain acceptance, as alternatives, since the
government and the established parties, essentially one and the same, would be able to
write rules to make it nearly impossible for challengers to establish themselves with any
legitimacy. What Michels and Weber observed in Europe was truer in the United States:
parties had become integrated into the state machinery and were, to an extent,
indistinguishable from it. Extra-constitutional parties had become constitutional. The
most liberal of countries lacked even the most basic reforms demanded by the socialist
parties pushing for working class political rights such as proportional representation and
publicly funded elections. Very often the tension between socialism and liberalism
meant that the socialists would push for more radical reforms to the liberal electoral
system than their bourgeois counterparts. Without a stronger, more embedded socialist
movement in the United States, these reforms went by the wayside. Indeed, may of the
reforms pushed by the Progressives hindered the development of independent parties, as
the liberal reformers were often acting out of general anti-party sentiment.

The party system hid the real nature of power: "While applying the old method to
democratic government, the party system introduced into it two modern practices -
popular election and free association. But the employment of these practices, far from
mitigating the defects of the method, only aggravated them. In the first place, it disguised
its reactionary tendencies from the very persons who carried out the method. The
champions of counter-revolution... fought without a mask; and they had only to enter the
lists for people to know what to make of them, whereas the party system, clothed with the
forms of popular election and association, appeared in all the glamour of democratic
principles.” 352 Ostrogorski concluded, much like his mentor and European counterparts, that “the source and the nature of the evil are the same, and its dangers as well, in the one still somewhat remote, in the other coming to close quarters with deadly effect. They are political formalism and machinism. Will it be possible to escape from this evil? If not, how will it affect the future of democracy?” 353 Indeed, Ostrogorski noted

“To immobility of political forms in the State the stereotyped party organization tended to add immobility of mind in this political society, where growing wealth increased the number of persons satisfied with things as they are. To preserve its cadres, the Organization was always trying to make opinion crystallize within them, to prevent the new currents of public feeling from gathering volume and flowing into fresh channels. It kept opinion a prisoner inside old formulas which often were nothing but pure conventions... party formalism thus puts obstacles in the path of progress and creates dangers to the healthy development of political life, the gravity of which increases in proportion as the nation grows older; it is paving the way for a reaction in an anti-conservative direction...” 354

Organizations prefer their cadres to respect tradition and order, and political parties were no different than other groupings in this regard. What is interesting is, that contra-Michels, he argued the stifling of change and internal dissent within political organization was creating a potential for more, not less, radical reaction. If the party machines held fast, it seems that they would engender more reform movements, not less. Conservatism, which Michels saw as a fundamental feature of the modern electoral era, would inevitably leave sectors of society unsatisfied, enough to mount a counter-assault. It might be difficult to break the machine, or to damage it, but not impossible. The dynamic here did not lead to a future where all dissent had died, as Michels feared. Instead, there was always a counter-tendency at work toward anti-machine efforts.

Unfortunately, where Ostrogorski could clearly see the defects of the machine, his solutions made little sense for the enormity of the problem. This is, again, a problem of

352 Ibid, 329.
353 Ibid, 318.
354 Ibid, 297.
liberalism and its concern in this period with good government over democracy. He argued,

"According to Burke's well-known formula, a party is 'a body of men united for promoting, by their joint endeavors, the national interest upon some particular principle in which they are all agreed.' However elastic may be this definition given by the great champion of the party system, it assigns to party very precise limits: party is a special combination, its basis is agreement on a particular principle, and its end is the realization of an object or objects of public interest. These limits have been exceeded in practice."

And also

"That being so, is not the solution demanded by the problem of parties an obvious one? Does it not consist in discarding the use of permanent parties with power as their end, and in restoring and reserving to party its essential character of a combination of citizens formed specially for a particular political issue?" For all his analysis, Ostrogorski’s conclusion was a legal one: forcing political parties to return to an earlier period when they organized for brief durations around single issues.

Believing parties to be indispensable, but also in the general passivity of the population, he reached out to a halfway measure that had no constituency outside his writing. It was this of analysis that led his mentor Bryce to approach the work warily. Much like Michels, his searches for a democratic solution in his conclusions, but does not readily find it. While unfortunate, his analysis and the possibilities contained within allow for us to add robustness to the discussion between Michels, the socialists, liberals, and in *Political Parties* itself.

Ostrogorski’s analysis and hypotheses are an important parallel and counterpoint to that of Michels. The rise of party machines created apathy and tacit acceptance by party members and voters, but also resistance and revolt. Michels was correct that these revolts would have to become party machines themselves to sustain their efforts, but wrong that the potential electoral reforms could not open up a more level playing field for revolts in the future. While not solving the problem of direct democracy and

organization bureaucracy in *Political Parties*, Ostrogorski’s work was important in its contribution that revolts did occur, and were often engendered by frustration with a rigid party machinery and limited political choices. While the works of Luxemburg and Pannekoek attempted to show that external causes could force rejection of party oligarchy, Ostrogorski and his fellow ‘new liberals’ based their actions on the concept of the party system itself being the cause of revolt. The rhythm of modern political life was more complex than accepted by Michels, even if the solutions to the problem of the mass party and oligarchy were not the full direct democracy put forward in *Political Parties*. Ostrogorski at least showed revolts had the potential to be successful in limiting the effective power of the machine.

**Conclusions**

Liberal sociologists of this period produced for more systematic studies of the mass political party and its effects than their socialist counterparts. Partly this was due to their tendency to study more open and developed representative government in the U.S. and U.K., but their concern with the fate of liberal individualism led to studies of machine politics. Weber and to an extent Bryce made attempts to find a place in modern party politics for a competitive struggle to produce qualified and responsible leadership, while Ostrogorski sided with the ‘new liberals’ who rejected the model of elite liberalism and believed that reforms to politics and the economy in the modern capitalist state could lay the groundwork for a full realization of the liberal individual across society. Unlike their socialist counterparts none of them saw the rise of the mass political party as a positive, and the impact of the class struggle on politics was almost entirely absent as liberal writers subsumed economic conflicts to the competition within and between mass
parties and organizations. While their socialist peers were unable to fully appreciate the problems of the mass party system, the limitations of the liberals meant a thorough analysis of the nature of democracy as a class instrument was precluded; especially so in the writings of Bryce and Ostrogorski where organized socialist parties were far weaker than in continental Europe and the specter of socialist revolution was not on the agenda.

Yet Michels’ writings on party and organization run parallel to those of liberal sociologists of the era, especially those of Weber, Bryce, and Ostrogorski; the former due to his mentorship, and the latter two because it was first liberals who, through their studies of the United States and Great Britain, raised the alarm about the mass party and democracy. As we have discussed, socialism was ideologically linked to the growth of the mass organization, in both the party and the industrial union; while the syndicalists were concerned with the ill effects of bureaucracy and electoral politics, none produced a systemic study on machine politics unless one counts Michels. Liberalism of the era straddled the gap between an older era of limited suffrage and representation by notables, and the new era of plebian mass suffrage and machine politics. In part curiosity, but also the marginalizing of talented personalities whose predecessors formed the core of another era’s political corps drove them to examine what the consequences would be for “good” government and democracy. These studies were not unconcerned with proffering solutions to the problem of party organization and bureaucracy; Weber developed the concept of the charismatic vocational politician and Ostrogorski embraced, to an extent, the reform efforts of the Progressive movement in the United States.

Their relevance to Michels’ larger question on organizational oligarchies and democracy lies beyond their link as academic peers in the same subfield of study; rather,
it is in the description of the larger struggle against the machine and the possibility of defeating or overcoming it. Studies of more open electoral systems by Ostrogorski and Bryce identified a consistent, if not successful, anti-machine faction in both the United States and Great Britain. While *Political Parties* had focused on quarrels between proponents of regionalism in political parties masquerading as democrats in order to protect their own fiefdoms from centralized control (which mirrored the debate within the SDP), it never touched upon a group committed to reform of electoral laws against the party machinery. While this type of grouping did not yet exist in Germany, it is a phenomenon of mass electoral systems and a counterargument that all groups would accept oligarchy more or less unchecked. Whether or not electoral reform internal to the party or to the external state structure could weaken party bureaucracy enough to give an opening to grassroots party members is another question and moot if one insists like Michels that anything but direct democratic control is not democracy. If, however, we are more circumspect on that particular point, then the discovery of determined counter-tendencies is an important one. Ostrogorski’s claim that the stultifying nature of the party machine has a tendency to create more, not less, radical demands for change again shows that there is a counter-tendency at work; while in normal times many may be content to let the party bureaucracy rule, this is not always the case.

Weber’s contribution to the discussion of the vocational politician creates the possibility that bureaucracy, if not able to be destroyed, could be managed by someone whose rule is not tied to organizational status or traditional forms of legitimation. What remained unasked was whether the vocational politician had to be an autocratic figure as Weber portrayed Gladstone to be in terms of internal Liberal party politics. Does the
concept not open a door for charisma and will on the part of democratic leaders? The appearance of one or more of these in a group like the syndicalist unions, parti du travail, or grassroots organizations could have a thoroughly democratizing effect if the charismatic figure and their peers created open spaces for democratic change rather than simply laying hold of the machine for particularist purposes. If Weber could chide Michels for refusing to recognize the sometimes-revolutionary potential of oligarchies, then Weber can be chided for ignoring the radical and democratic potential of the vocational politician(s).

What liberals did contribute to the discussion was the potential for the structure of mass electoral politics and party machines to create anti-machine tendencies within the population. Like the external class struggle of Luxemburg contributing to revolts against the party bureaucracy, the structure of oligarchic control by the mass party over elections created the potential for rebellion against the party machines. If successful the reformers would constrain the machine’s actions and place future revolts on a firmer footing. While this does not tackle the core question of oligarchy and democracy, it does mean Michels’ discussion of these struggles simply being between in-and-out group elites is too simplistic. Progressive and Populist reformers in the United States studied by Ostrogorski won limited but crucial victories against party machines in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, even if they did make some initial missteps. While the tendencies Michels analyzed existed within modern party politics, the combination of socialist and liberal thought on the issue must give us pause and reiterate that Michels’ concepts were not an “iron law” but a series of tendencies in modern politics that created their own counterpoints.
While none of the liberal theorists saw a way out of the organizational morass created by mass democracy, their insights and the openings, however small, they believed existed in reform potential, are a counterpoint to Michels. Of course, examining societies without a tension between socialism and capitalism meant the larger question – overcoming oligarchy embedded within organization, was never asked, for the researchers were intensely skeptical of mass control, preferring good government to plebian control. The insight provided by the studies of Bryce, Ostrogorski, and Weber were crucial for Michels’ own study. Perhaps they also shone a light on the irresolvable tensions created by the structural concerns of the modern industrial economy, the need for a sophisticated bureaucracy to manage it, and its counterpart in the political sphere. This does not mean, necessarily, the victory for all time of oligarchy and the party machine, but rather that countervailing tendencies were a weaker, but ubiquitous presence, and that the disappearance of bureaucracy might require a far more radical restructuring of society, one that the economies and states of the early 20th century were not yet in a position to afford. At the very least the liberal theorists of mass parties, even if they mostly disparaged it, were able to chronicle the struggle between opponents of bureaucracy and the machine and the machine itself as an endemic feature of modern society. As we move toward the conclusion of our study, this is as important an addition to the Michels’ thesis as the arguments made during the mass strike debate by the socialist thinkers as to the rhythm of mass protests, democracy, and the class struggle.
Chapter 5: Conclusions

Michels and Beyond

In *Political Parties*, Robert Michels “aim[ed] at a crucial discussion… the problem of democracy. It is the writer’s opinion that democracy, at once as an intellectual theory and as a practical movement, has today entered upon a critical phase from which it will be extremely difficult to discover an exit… the present study makes no attempt to offer a ‘new system.” There is no doubt he meant his thesis to be an important work of political sociology, but it was also a polemic with German Social Democracy and syndicalism. Yet as much as his writing disputes syndicalist conclusions it owes an enormous intellectual debt to the syndicalist tradition. Today, his work is viewed as an historical relic, and he (however reluctant) a founding member of the elite theory school along with Gaetano Mosca and Vilfredo Pareto. This work has been dedicated to re-evaluating *Political Parties* and the debates on mass political party occurring in the decade leading up to its publication; the debates on mass political parties, democracy, and oligarchy remain *central* to democratic theory, and have *never* disappeared from the political debate outside academia. The strength of the mass party debate against more recent theories is that the issues which it discusses have consistently been those that spark political protest, movements, and parties to democratize or more fully democratize institutions and societies, issues which have been sidelined in democratic theory while never being so in politics itself. Even the minimalist school of democracy has acknowledged those problems by attempting to construct a theory of democracy that explains away the issues contained within by simply accepting them as part of a limited version of democratic control. Yet the evolution of the discussion within

---

democratic theory has not lessened the relevance of the larger argument of which Michels was a central figure; indeed they have been a constant of real-world political struggles, if not academia. Acknowledging this, evaluating and using the conclusions and writings of Michels and his peers would strengthen contemporary democratic theory.

The debate over these issues has been most intense in periods and places where the conflict between socialism, capitalism, and democracy has been on the political agenda, as that tends to be the time when various ideas about the role of mass democracy, de-centralization and the extent of democratic control come to the fore. As this debate waned in the latter half of the twentieth century, so did interest in Michels and understanding of the context of the debates in which Political Parties waded. In American political science dominant views of democracy for the last half-century have tended to owe a debt to the intellectual products of Bryce, Ostrogorski, Michels, and especially Max Weber. It is hard not to see the end product of the liberal debate on the mass party in Joseph Schumpeter’s claim that

“A party is a group whose members propose to act in concert in the competitive struggle for political power... party and machine politicians are simply the response to the fact that the electoral mass is incapable of action other than a stampede, and they constitute an attempt to regulate political competition exactly similar to the corresponding practices of a trade association. The psycho-technics of party management and party advertising, slogans, and marching tunes, are not accessories. They are of the essence of politics. So is the political boss.”358

Schumpeter’s advance on their theses is simply: parties constitute modern politics. There is no lamenting this as in Bryce, or attempts to find a way out, as in Ostrogorski and Weber. Unlike the socialist supporters of the mass party, there was no positive side to inclusion of the masses in political democracy or a solution to this in some version of socialist democracy. Schumpeter famously concluded, “The democratic method is that

---

institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people’s vote.”

Democracy is representative government, the masses exist as voting blocs and little else, and the competitive leadership democracy described is not that of Weber, but that cataloged by Bryce between political bosses and their machines. This wing of democratic thought spawned by Schumpeter, often called minimalist democracy, certainly finds purchase in reducing the conclusions of the original participants in that debate over the mass political party to what most had been trying to avoid. Certainly it finds little home in the versions of liberalism discussed, either the ‘new liberals’ who saw modern democracy as offering a way for all to potentially participate in political control, or those who like Weber were searching for a way the modern political system could identify qualified and responsible leadership. It declares irrelevant the question of socialist democracy forward by Luxemburg or Pannekoek of the masses discovering political agency, or even of Kautsky’s socialist parliamentary democracy, even though the modern democratic debate is directly related to the questions surrounding socialism and democracy. From the debate around Political Parties Schumpeter and minimalist democrats have extracted a reading of political parties and oligarchy that sees little hope in demanding much else from mass political organizations and elections but that competition between parties will stop a descent into unchecked rule by a ruling elite. This vision became the dominant one because after the Second World War, it corresponded to a reality tightly controlled by large mass parties and bureaucratic state apparatuses that had been described by Weber and Michels.

359 Ibid, 469.
Minimalist democratic thought as it developed was first formulated by Schumpeter, but extended by the likes of Anthony Downs, Robert Dahl, William Riker, and Adam Przeworski\(^{360}\). Minimalist democratic theory develops Schumpeter’s conclusions within the context of modern political science. Although there is no definitive statement of minimalist thought, Przeworski’s claim that “democracy is a system in which parties lose elections”\(^{361}\) comes close. Thus a short summation of the school’s views can be put succinctly by stating that minimalist democracy’s tenets are:

1. Competitive elections between at least two different political parties.
3. Rational actors vote (or choose not to vote) based on their individual preferences, not adherence to a popular or general will.
4. All voting systems run the risk of “gaming” or adaptation to their flaws by particular voting blocs.
5. Checks on popular control over government are necessary to protect liberties as too much popular influence has a tendency to lead to anti-democratic results.

This is, again, more than just a continuation of the elite democratic school of thought. Questions asked by both the socialist and liberal schools, which were considered crucial by all participants in the mass party debate, about mass control over political parties, their effects on democratic participation, and development of leaders are considered irrelevant to the question of contemporary democracy. Indeed, William Riker made just such an argument, as his theories claimed, “… one of social choice theory’s main results is that all aggregation mechanisms are vulnerable to strategic manipulation.”\(^{362}\) Without a way to measure the general will\(^{363}\) via voting, minimalists assume the reason limited democracy is preferable to non-democracy is that a political organization or leader that

---

\(^{360}\) Przeworski coined the term; the rest of the major authors have used a variety of phrases such as “thin” democracy to explain the concept.


\(^{363}\) Of course, they disbelieve in the very concept.
grows corrupt or tyrannical could still be replaced without bloodshed. This leaves us
with, as Benjamin Barber contended in *Strong Democracy*, that minimalist liberal
democracy boils down to “zoo-keeping,”

364 guarding individuals from the state, and the
state from them, but little else. Barber argued, correctly, that

“In the end, wary minimalists have been anemic democrats, proffering a politics as thin as the thinnest
gruel. Privacy and passivity are celebrated not because they maximize individual liberty (that is the
anarchist’s argument) but because privacy and passivity alone guarantee that no delusive certainty will
come to dominate a world in which truth has no warrant. Pluralism is advocated not in the name of the
intrinsic merits of diversity but because there can be no common or public ends, no common or public
goods, no common or public will. Commonality itself is transformed into an enemy of doubt and thus into
the nemesis of freedom. The impossibility of certain knowledge becomes the impossibility of affirmative
politics; without an agreement on common principle and common thought, there can be no common
life.”

365 Minimalist democracy declares invalid the questions debated by Michels and his peers
and the real world debates and struggles for broader and expanded democratic rights,
which is not only a gap in their theories, but a willful decision to ignore the importance of
mass movements.

The Schumpeterian minimalist view of democracy is still part of the dominant
discourse in one form or another in political science, but it has been challenged (and also
refined) within the discipline by the development of alternative models of democracy,
some of which were the result of democratic social movements that impacted the
academy. During the 1960s and early 1970s this surfaced around a school of
“participatory” democracy – the result of pressure on the academy from the grassroots
struggles and new intellectuals who took issue with the normative consequences of
minimalist democracy and the conclusions of offshoots like pluralism. Like the debate
over the mass party in the time of Michels, with minimalism established as a doctrine the
argument over mass parties and participation in power only flared up when there were

364 Benjamin R. Barber. *Strong Democracy: Participatory Politics for a New Age.* (Berkeley: University
365 Ibid, 62.
serious social movements that questioned socio-economic flashpoints such as class structure, treatment of ethnic and gender minorities, and the colonial question. Subsequent decades have seen an expansion of democratic theory and its analysis, with the rise of deliberative democratic theories as the primary challenger to minimalism, though it rose alongside agonistic models, and a recent interest in the direct action strategies of the alter-globalization movement. The inability of these challengers to displace minimalism is a function of minimalist democratic theory’s impressive (if incomplete) model of mass democracy’s functioning. Deliberative democrats have chosen to focus on an aspect of democracy – deliberation, and the institutions which could promote it – and have also chosen to set aside the questions contained within the mass party debate over political organization and democracy. The decline of real-world movements for socialist democracy and the demands they made on the liberal democratic order mean that academics have largely abandoned them as well, and have conceded the point on political parties to the minimalists or ignored those problems altogether.

Reintroducing the mass party debate is crucial because the question of what contemporary democracy is, or could be, are more clearly contained within that discussion than the current discourse. The aforementioned tension between mass control and elite dominance, between parties-as-mass-mobilizers and tools of elite control, the development of political leadership, and finally the very question of what a democratic society can or should look like in the face of direct democratic and socialist challenges have not disappeared, and in fact are as much a cause for concern today as they were a century ago when Michels first published *Political Parties*. While minimalists may wish to ignore or declare these questions irrelevant, the continuing existence of real-world
political struggles in liberal democratic regimes over these very issues means that these
concerns do exist outside academia and must be addressed seriously by democratic
theorists. The preponderance of deliberative democracy as the alternative to minimalist
theories is just as problematic, for while deliberative thinkers present an alternative
model, they too ignore the crucial questions involved in the mass party debate.

For example, Susan Stokes argues while deliberative democrats believe
deliberation generates civic inclusion and legitimate decisions based upon thorough
debate, it can create “outcomes that are perverse from the perspective of democratic
theory.” Political parties, for Stokes, “manufacture identities in accord with ideology
and party strategy,” creating a mass socialized to follow party leadership even within
deliberative bodies. Adam Przeworski criticizes deliberative democrats for the role
parties play in constructing debates over policies: “My central claim is that deliberation
may lead people to hold beliefs that are not in their best interest… deliberative
theorists… wish away the vulgar fact that under democracy deliberation ends in voting…
most public discussion concerns not aims but means,” and “voters have preferences
over outcomes, yet parties do not propose outcomes, only policies… [voters have beliefs]
of two kinds: a. technical beliefs, that is, models of causal relations between policies and
outcomes, and b. equilibrium beliefs, that is, beliefs about other people’s beliefs… in
Gramscian language, a system that comprises both classes of beliefs is called
‘ideology.’” He concludes with echoes of Michels:

366 Susan C. Stokes, “Pathologies of Deliberation,” in John Elster, ed., Deliberative Democracy,
(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 123.
367 Ibid.
368 Adam Przeworski, “Deliberation and Ideological Dominance,” in John Elster, ed., Deliberative
Democracy, 141.
369 Ibid, 143.
“In a society in which interests are in conflict, the fact that various economic agents spend money to persuade others constitutes prima facie evidence that someone is irrational. Either those who spend money to communicate are throwing it away or these costly messages persuade others to hold beliefs that are not in their best interest. Deliberation can occur – a public discussion can take place – only if someone pays for it. Even if someone who knows the truth seeks to share it with an ignorant or misinformed person for the sake of that person’s best interest, communication is costly. Private corporations have money they can use; political parties need to raise it just to be heard.”

These are serious contentions about the primary challenger to minimalist democratic theories, but ones that are already contained within the mass party debate and arguably dealt with in greater depth. From an anti-minimalist perspective, Iris Marion Young critiques deliberative theories because they bracket out mass movements and collective action:

“Yet contemporary democratic theory rarely reflects on the role of demonstration and direct action. Indeed, it might be thought that one of the major strains of contemporary democratic theory, the theory of deliberative democracy, should be critical of typical tactics of activism such as street marches, boycotts, or sit-ins, on the ground that their activities confront rather than engage in discussion with people the movement’s members disagree with.”

As we have seen, the role of mass action in confronting entrenched leadership and reinvigorating democracy was a large part of the socialist debate on the party. Mass action represents a problem for many deliberative theorists, but was a large part of the discussion within the socialist wing of the mass party debate. Engaging with this question is crucial, as mass action such as protests and marches is, potentially a large part of democracy. What these critiques of deliberative democracy highlight is that the lack of discussion over the structure of the modern politico-economic system, the role of parties and mass organizations, and their impact on the “masses” challenges to minimalist democracy incomplete, as they exclude the role of mass action in modern politics. No less than minimalists, deliberative democrats exclude parts of democratic thought they

---

370 Ibid, 148.
372 Also, to an extent, the ‘new liberal’ part as represented by Ostrogorski.
find inconvenient. Reintroduction of the mass party debate would re-focus the field on important, but currently excluded questions of democratic thought.

None of this would matter if the debate discussed in the previous chapters had nothing to say to Schumpeterian models of democracy, either. The more modern versions, in the form of pluralism and models of rational choice voting, tend to fundamentally accept theories of elite control. Robert Dahl famously argued\(^\text{373}\) contra Michels that “even if we grant that political parties are oligarchical, \textit{it does not follow that competing political parties necessarily produce an oligarchical political system}.”\(^\text{374}\) This was one of the main questions at the heart of the mass party debate, and one that Dahl conveniently sidestepped in arguing that competing party oligarchies have no effect on producing a political system dominated by oligarchies. Not one of the participants surrounding Michels made this argument, because none of them believed that permanent dominance of bureaucratic mass parties with oligarchic structures was democratic, even if some like Ostrogorski saw the possibility of voters switching parties or creating their own as potential remedies. This also begs the question of voter rationality, which has been questioned amply, but a good portion of the mass party debate was spent on the behavior of voters and rank-and-file party members. For much of political science, the importance of Michels and the mass party debate lies in the minimalist-Schumpeterian acceptance of elite dominance in the form of political organizations; a normative conclusion on mass democracy that fundamentally ignores the pre-WWI debate over potential counter-pressure within the mass party system, but also the fact that mass organization and

\(^{373}\) Though he has reversed this position in later years.

political parties have, at times, had a positive and democratizing impact as vehicles of mass expression of popular will.

The importance of reintroducing Michels and the mass party debate has relevance both for political science in its examination of politics, and for our understanding and desire for democratic change. Very real questions of the role of political parties, mass action – especially non-deliberative - vs. parliamentary control, the problem of elite and mass relationships in democratic society, as well as what a truly democratic society would look like are all crucial questions at the heart of democratic thought that none of the contemporary dominant paradigms can answer. They are also still questions that lead to the creation of movements and political parties that battle and struggle for democracy and revolution, much as in Michels’ day. Neither minimalist nor deliberative theories have much, if anything, to say to these movements, unlike those of the authors we have previously discussed. This is the importance of reinserting Michels and the debate over the mass party and democracy into contemporary political theory. Extracting the essence of his argument from the positivist confines of the “iron law of oligarchy” and fully understanding his conception of democracy, as well as joining socialist with liberal understandings of the party problem to Michels’ analyses adds a new dimension to the democratic debate, but also crucial questions that remain at the center of contemporary political theory, and which were discussed with more depth and vigor a century ago than today. Concomitantly, it allows political science a relevance to participants in the modern struggle for democratic reform and revolution that neither minimalism nor deliberative theories provide. We will begin with the “iron law” and his concept of democracy, and move forward from there towards our conclusions.
Michels and the Future of the Demos

For all the pessimism in Michels’ work, *Political Parties* ends on a note of hope, arguing, “The democratic currents of history resemble successive waves. They break ever on the same shoal. They are ever renewed. This enduring spectacle is simultaneously encouraging and depressing.” What is important here is it again shows the “iron law of oligarchy” is even in Michels’ mind far from solid, but it also encapsulates for political science the importance of the early 20th century mass party debate. Michels engaged the questions of oligarchy, democracy, the role of mass political organizations, and their effect on the “masses,” acknowledging the problems of democracy that later came to dominate the minimalist critique, but understanding the impossibility of abjuring away the larger issues with which his work dealt. Struggles of class, gender, ethnicity, and nationalism – to name but a few - flare up periodically and must be dealt with, so too do those of the mass party debate and democratic rights. Minimalist theories, and to a great extent those of deliberative democracy, are neither good models of democratic politics nor do they have as much to say to participants in the democratic conflict as those of the aforementioned mass party debate.

As Michels and his peers noted, there is a strong tendency within mass political organization toward the creation of a self-perpetuating leadership clique, potentially an oligarchy that reinforces itself through the socialization of the membership to accept leadership decisions and rule. Even in situations where the demos have a potential for involvement, even minimally, such as voting for officials, its choices are constrained both internally and externally. The structure of modern society, whether capitalist or socialist, is such that some form of large organization is necessary for continued efficient

---

375 Michels, *Political Parties*, 408.
functioning and for conditions that create a non-aristocratic civil service to ensure the de jure equality of citizens. Political organizations in some form are necessary and will be the primary form of interaction between the masses and government. Any attempt to approach the problems of democracy and government must wrestle with these questions if it is to represent more than an idealized version of the modern state and democratic politics.

The reason the findings of the socialists, liberal sociologists, and Michels must be re-examined is that in the midst of their debates and disagreements over the rise of the mass political organization, their theorizing encompassed democratic problems that have been not been addressed by minimalism or its contemporary challengers in democratic thought, but which are problems central to democracy and which have not disappeared or become any less important with the passing of time. Indeed, just a few of the main areas with immediate relevance are: the ramifications of reform to the internal structure of political organization and the electoral process, the potential for popular revolts either engendered by external shocks or reaction to the party machine and bosses, the relationship between democracy and political parties and the capitalism/socialism debate. Excavating the fin-de-siecle debate means continuing it, because the debate itself never came to a conclusion, but was cut short by the First World War. Michels is the crucial figure, as his work acknowledged the problems of political organization as much as he sought a solution to the problems contained therein, both as a radical socialist and academic.
The Political and The Essence of the Iron Law

Part of the problem with Michels, and where he is most linked to the positivists Gaetano Mosca and Vilfredo Pareto, are his attempts to create a sociological law out of tendencies in (modern) politics. Mosca and Pareto, both elitist anti-democrats, crafted their hypotheses as a polemic against the rising tide of mass involvement in political affairs. By contrast, Michels was an ardent revolutionary and democrat as he wrote *Political Parties* but his attempts to codify into law the tendency of all organizations to become oligarchies conflate the essence of politics with a general trend within industrial society. Politics is, at least partly, a clash over distribution of resources, control over the apparatus of government, and a debate between differing ideologies of governance. Michels goes so far as to deny a democratic assembly of citizens the ability to do much except be swayed by powerful orators; even the grassroots assembly descends into domination and illegitimacy.\(^{376}\) Thus politics-as-conflict even in a fully democratized, non-bureaucratic society is dismissed by Michels, who joins a Rousseauian concept of the political as an inalienable will with a more prescient analysis of the modern political party and bureaucratic organization. There is nothing inherently wrong with a Rousseauian conception of democracy, but the way Michels constructs his own understanding of it separate from Rousseau and his syndicalist comrades undermines the concept before it leaves the ground. This is part of a larger tension within Michels, where he constructs a concept of democracy as direct democratic assemblies, but through much of his work is attempting to find a beachhead for grassroots democratic reform of the German socialist party.

The conflict-laden nature of politics did not escape Michels’ friend Max Weber, who argued, “domination in the most general sense is one of the most important elements of social action,” and also “although this parallel would seem to rest largely on the existence of a capitalist market economy, a democratically organized socialist economy would also engender power struggles by associations of workers over the amount to be reinvested and the distribution of desirable jobs and working conditions. Thus models of democratic control over the division of labor cannot be immunized against having to engage in a power struggle for survival whether in a capitalist market or a planned socialist society.” Interestingly, Michels’ fellow socialist Friedrich Engels understood this very well in an earlier debate with anarchists when he wrote “we have thus seen that, on the one hand, a certain authority, no matter how delegated, and on the other hand, a certain subordination, are things which, independently of all social organization, are imposed upon us together with the material conditions under which we produce and make products circulate.” Very few of his socialist comrades believed it possible to fully eliminate delegation and some form of legitimate authority; they were, after all, engaged in a class struggle against the bourgeoisie, which they believed could only be fought collectively and with discipline. Whether the Hobbesian concept of the “war of all against all,” Machiavelli arguing a republic’s strength came from inner conflict between the plebs and aristocracy, or Carl Schmitt’s thesis on the political as “the most intense and extreme antagonism, and every concrete antagonism becomes that much more

---

political the closer it approaches the most extreme point, the friend-enemy grouping," which presupposes a form of control and domination of the other, the supposition that the political – politics – includes the potential for legitimate forms of authority and conflicts within and over such authority in a direct democratic assembly permeates the majority of theorists’ attempts to define the political.

Michels simultaneously acknowledges the nature of politics as conflict and domination, while arguing the oligarchic tendency within modern mass party politics precludes his only legitimate form of government, direct democracy, and thus with it any legitimate forms of domination. This is a larger problem for his theory since, unlike Mosca and Pareto, Michels is determined to find a way from bureaucratic party politics to rank-and-file democracy. Contained within his initial criticisms of democratic assemblies is the justifiable point of their unwieldiness as permanent bodies in modern society, but his argument that even when they do exist they tend to be controlled by charismatic orators means he is presupposing that only a deliberative body with no real conflict and full participation by all members is legitimate. He thus sets up a straw man within his hypotheses on democracy, parties, and oligarchy from which he is not able to extricate himself in the concluding chapters of Political Parties when he examines potential remedies to the problem of administrative oligarchy. This becomes a problem when the argument shifts to a discussion of the bureaucratic nature of modern politics.

Michels begins by sociologically undermining the potential for legitimate forms of democratic control, and is then dismayed at the end of his own work when he still cannot find a suitable form of remedying the problem of conflict and the leader/follower problem and its metastasizing into the larger issue of mass political parties. The

---

problematic nature of his analysis and work is furthered by his own conception of the law of oligarchy, where he acknowledges that organization only implies “the tendency to oligarchy”\textsuperscript{381} and not that all organizations necessarily end up with an illegitimate and immovable leadership clique. Concerning other parts of the “iron law,” Weber himself took issue with Michels’ conception that organization implied conservative behavior, as he pointed out to Michels the role the French Jacobins had in destroying the ancien regime and in codifying the liberties contained in the Rights of Man. The very prescient analysis and criticism of the modern mass party and the consequences of its dominance over the political process had was unfortunately not enough for Michels, who was on far firmer ground when he recognized tendencies in modern mass politics instead of his attempts at codifying “laws” of politics.

Robert Michels’ attempt in \textit{Political Parties} to identify an “iron law” of modern politics was linked to his association in Italy with Gaetano Mosca and the writings of Vilfredo Pareto. Yet his conception of what made up legitimate rule was bound up with a combination of Rousseau-ian and contemporary French syndicalist thought. That his ideas on democracy are bound up with Rousseau’s are in no doubt: he quotes Rousseau in his denunciation of elected delegates as illegitimate and unable to represent the general will.\textsuperscript{382} Yet Rousseau, in his \textit{Social Contract}, conceived of a Sovereign who could act based upon the silence of the people (seen as tacit consent),\textsuperscript{383} surely a delegation of authority. The government in Rousseau’s work was designed to carry out the general will, not the citizenry, but was also interested in the right proportion of power so as not to usurp the citizenry, either. Michels’ problematic conception of democracy thus owes part

\textsuperscript{381} Michels, \textit{Political Parties}, 32.
\textsuperscript{382} Ibid, 36.
to Rousseau, but also to his involvement with the syndicalist movement. His friend Lagardelle argued socialism’s goal was to liberate “the factory from the authority of the employer and society from the authority of the State,” and establish “free work a free society.” Workers’ democracy would function fundamentally differently than its liberal counterpart, as the destruction of formal class and state hierarchies would give way to decentralized, local control. Yet within the workers’ councils would emerge a natural hierarchy of competent workers who would oversee efficient administration of the economy. Parliamentary politics would disappear, as “the destinies of the working class would be freed from the uncertainties and oscillations of the movements of opinions which are produced in political democracy,” and in contrast to the constant chaos of political life, workers’ democracy would be “stable” and “organic.”

Thus the brilliant and conflicted nature of *Political Parties* is bound up within Michels’ concept of democracy (as influenced by Rousseau and syndicalism) and with it the problematic separation of an organic “social” with the illegitimate sphere of domination in the “political.” For, the entire volume of *Political Parties* is partly a long polemic with his syndicalist comrades over the indispensable nature of the political party in modern life, over which he disagreed with Lagardelle vehemently. Where they saw salvation in revolution, the general strike, and workers’ syndicats, Michels viewed another mass organization subject to the same rules he believed governed the rest of mass politics. Yet while he was able to extend the syndicalist critique of hierarchy to all

---

388 Ibid.
bureaucratic organizations, he was unable to free himself from the straightjacket of their stylized Rousseauist conception of democracy. This fundamental problem meant Michels would clearly see the tendencies inherent within mass party politics, but because he was searching for a normative answer to the problem of democracy and oligarchy as posed by his syndicalist-socialist ideology, he could only see his failure to identify an answer as pointing to an inevitable law of modern politics in his “iron law” of oligarchy. Viewing democracy as direct democracy is a noble and possibly logical idea, but to hamstring yourself with an impossible conception of it so early on an argument means you cannot help but point to the inevitable conclusion.

**Helping Michels**

His fellow thinkers in the larger discussion were never as pessimistic as he, but they also help modify Michels’ stance on political parties. The idea of an “iron law of oligarchy” was one they all fundamentally struggled with, at least the partial consequences of the law. Writing mid-twentieth century, Alvin Gouldner suggested the problem with approaching the problem of political parties and bureaucracy as if they only had negative consequences:

> “When, for example, Michels spoke of the "iron law of oligarchy," he attended solely to the ways in which organizational needs inhibit democratic possibilities. But the very same evidence to which he called attention could enable us to formulate the very opposite theorem-the "iron law of democracy." Even as Michels himself saw, if oligarchical waves repeatedly wash away the bridges of democracy, this eternal recurrence can happen only because men doggedly re-build them after each inundation. Michels chose to dwell on only one aspect of this process, neglecting to consider this other side. There cannot be an iron law of oligarchy, however, unless there is an iron law of democracy.”

Gouldner suggested that the problem of oligarchy was intrinsically, perhaps dialectically, intertwined with democracy. This had manifested itself in two ways: the construction of mass organizations like trade unions and socialist parties meant to expand the rights of

---

the working class within the context of the bourgeois state and the revolt against party hierarchy witnessed by Luxemburg, Pannekoek, Bryce, and Ostrogorski. Michels’ own admission at the end of his work that democratic currents are “ever renewed” belies an understanding of this as well. These are not “laws” but tendencies, each at times more powerful than the other, but nonetheless a constant part of modern mass politics.

External pressures and shocks are a major cause for revolts against party oligarchy and conservative leadership. What Rosa Luxemburg argued during the mass strike debate held true in the less radical climate described by Bryce and Ostrogorski: wage pressures, rising prices, unemployment, war – the potential exists for the masses, especially those not integrated or fully integrated into a party machine to either sweep aside calcified party leadership, form their own organization out of the struggle, or broaden the space for direct democracy because of shocks uncontrolled by the state or party machine(s). Luxemburg was too optimistic in assuming there would be a regular source of unorganized workers\footnote{Luxemburg saw the peasantry and its steady movement into the factories of Germany as the source of these unorganized masses.} and her theories do not deal with a society in which all have been at least partially socialized to routine bureaucratic behavior patterns, but the class struggle and related external shocks have historically been, especially in the twentieth century, a major source of rebellion against bureaucracy and oligarchy. Given Michels’ experiences up to the publication of Political Parties and with the last real rupture of this sort in Western Europe the example of the Paris Commune\footnote{The Russian Revolution of 1905 helped spark Michels’ interest in radical direct action but the quick deflation of German class struggle by the unions and SPD around this issue meant for him it could not serve as an example outside of Russia.} it is not a surprise he left this potential out. Events in the ensuing years would prove otherwise, as
there were spaces of democratic (and socialist) revolt in Western and Central Europe that flared up regularly (if briefly) until the end of the Second World War.

Ostrogorski’s (and Bryce’s) analysis points out the very real revolts against party machines spurred by the dominance of the party machine itself. That the structure of the system could produce revolts was acknowledged by Michels in *Political Parties*, but dismissed. What the liberal examination of the American and British experiences produced showed these revolts were not uncommon, if they were not always successful. For while many people who were satisfied by the party and integrated into the machine either through patronage or socialization as a voter, a number revolted against the dominance of party bureaucracy, the stifling effects it had on democracy and voter choice, and the general corruption involved in the party machines. This corresponds very well to Gouldner and the tendency towards democracy as a feature of any system with a counterpoint towards oligarchy. It is hard to blame Michels for not noticing this, as it was more a feature of an already-established bourgeois democracy, of which Europe was in short supply at the time, though one cannot help but see Ostrogorski already noticing this in the United States and Great Britain.

Reforms, both to the electoral system and the party, are no panacea for the ills described by Michels. Yet it is hard to deny the positive effect they may have on providing grounds for anti-machine groups to establish themselves, both in the electoral arena and possibly within political parties themselves. Public campaign financing, term limits, initiative and referendum, proportional representation: these give the potential for a group to establish themselves on firmer footing to oppose a party machine. None of them assure success, and they may lead to further entrenchment of established
hierarchies. Yet Michels denied their effectiveness because they alone could not provide the magic bullet he sought to defeat oligarchy and establish democratic control. Perhaps their function is not to do so on their own, but to provide a baseline from which anti-bureaucracy groups may establish themselves to do so. Robert Michels suffered from the tendency to equate lack of total success with complete failure, or a complete victory but the entrenched hierarchy.

On a meta-structural level the importance of a group or groups that critically challenge the structure of the socio-economic system and the meaning of democracy appear to be important to even the beginnings of a conversation on mass parties and democracy. This is, of course, why Michels picked the SPD as he subject, which was on the surface committed to a radical extension of democracy beyond liberal capitalism. It is also why he disregarded bourgeois parties that he thought never committed to full equality and democracy, as there would likely be little point in trying to remove oligarchies in organizations that were committed to a liberal world that would continue to contain them. In situations and eras in which classes and political groups take a hard look at the established order and find it wanting in terms of (their conception of) democracy and equality the discussion the problems contained within the mass party question appear again, almost anew. In Europe and the United States during Michels’ era, during the struggles of the Great Depression, then later during the New Left revolts of the 1960s and 1970s against the state and the Old Left’s bureaucracy, these debates surfaced as the question of parties and democracy were on the agenda, often with that of socialist against liberal politics as well.
Conclusions: The Mass Party Question, Democracy, and Political Science

The importance of the mass party question is not just one for political science and democratic theory, but also one that extends into the problems of everyday life in modern mass democracies. These questions were not academic but intensely political for the participants, and the intersection of the political and academic lent their writings great insight. In some ways the problem lies at the intersection of Marxism and democratic thought, sociology and political action. This was also the point at which Robert Michels found himself as he wrote Political Parties. None of the issues contained within the debate have been surmounted, and the structure of the party system and mass democracy has only become more entrenched in the last century. Reviving the debate and the discussion contained within means returning questions that have remained of central importance in the political world back to political science, which has tended to ignore those questions in order to construct models that are elegant in their simplicity but do little to address the full depth of the problems contained within contemporary democratic thought. Bringing the questions asked by Michels and his peers back into common discussion can only benefit political science and its relevance – limited as it may be – to politics. There are implications for socialist and democratic political thought, but also connection with the alterglobalization movements of the last decade.

What positive implications do Michels and the debate have for political science?

Here again Gouldner:

“This, however, seems to parallel the way in which some social scientists have approached the study of organizational pathology. Instead of telling men how bureaucracy might be mitigated, they insist that it is inevitable. Instead of explaining how democratic patterns may, to some extent, be fortified and extended, they warn us that democracy cannot be perfect. Instead of controlling the disease, they suggest that we are deluded, or more politely, incurably romantic, for hoping to control it. Instead of assuming responsibilities
as realistic clinicians, striving to further democratic potentialities wherever they can, many social scientists have become morticians, all too eager to bury men's hopes."\footnote{Gouldner, “Metaphysical Pathos,” 507.}

Michels and the participants in the debate were not only interested in describing the issues at hand; the majority were interested in proscribing remedies. \textit{Political Parties} may work with an idealized version of Rousseauean democracy, but it was part of Michels striving to find a way for the masses to be politically efficacious against an increasingly professional party elite. His argument and those of his peers were also normative precisely to the degree they were rooted in a new kind of political sociology. The conclusions we can draw for democracy, whether liberal, socialist, critical, are important ones for political science and politics to the extent that they are crucial questions for democracy and democratic actors themselves. Many of the minimalist-Schumpeterian school have sought to describe only, and given their separation from the political world, their descriptions have been as pessimistic as some in the debate, but without any search for a solution or opening from the potential problems of mass parties and organizations, and so have chosen to focus on institutional design. Their problem is similar to Michels’: perhaps no perfect solution is ever possible, but the breadth of answers to the question, from simple reforms to socialist democracy, are not only possible but show rejecting any change as impossible without a complete victory is a shallow answer indeed.

The arguments engendered by reading Michels are complex, and go beyond the simplistic readings he had typically been subjected to: can political parties be legitimately controlled by their base, is it possible to create a more directly democratic society, is there any hope for reform of the political system to limit the damage from oligarchies
within political organizations? Benjamin Barber cited Michels in his arguments for “strong” democracy:

“For our purposes here, we can turn to the answer offered by Robert Michels at the beginning of the century. Surveying the democratic aspirations of French syndicalism, Michels concluded that the evolution of representative democracy was inherently unstable. It followed a parabolic course: it was democratic enough in its beginnings but inevitably oligarchical in its outcome. The ‘oligarchical and bureaucratic tendencies’ of representation were for Michels a ‘matter of technical and practical necessity’ because they were an ‘inevitable byproduct of the very principle of organization.’”

Barber’s “strong democracy” revives direct democracy by agreeing with Michels and the syndicalists on representative government’s tendency to quickly become oligarchic. While he sidesteps the question of whether this can be achieved within capitalism, he is correct in placing the question of democracy and oligarchy again on the level of representation vs. direct popular control over party and state policies. Whether we imagine a capitalist, socialist, or some other socio-economic arrangement, the likelihood of decentralized communes on the Proudhonian model taking over is as unlikely now as it was a century ago. The workers’ councils that Pannekoek demanded as solution to the problem of worker control over the means of production and the state were initially to be ad hoc democratic assemblies of workers; but in every instance they existed for more than a brief period they quickly moved towards normalizing on more than an ad hoc basis and professionalizing their staff. Political parties may not disappear from the landscape, or representation, but having direct democratic bodies with real decision making power either as a counter-balance to representative institutions or in their own spheres of control may represent a check against some problems within representative government. It remains a class question as well, as it broaches the topic of democratic control over the economy and in the workplace, which cannot be left out and indeed as

393 Benjamin R. Barber. Strong Democracy, 250.
394 I would argue they existed in Russia in 1905 and 1917, areas in Spain from 1936-9, and numerous other brief instances over the last century.
we have noted is part of the very reason these questions have arisen during periods of intense class conflict where revolt was potentially on the agenda.

Perhaps, then, Sheldon Wolin is correct in surveying what he calls “fugitive democracy,” as he is reluctant to call it a “form of government,” but rather “democracy is a project concerned with the political potentialities of ordinary citizens.”

Democracy is not an incorporated system, but rather a series of “demotic moments” where the demos “would have to act from outside and against the system. Consequently demotic action tend[s] to be ‘informal,’ improvised, and spontaneous – what can be called ‘fugitive democracy.’” These moments push at the boundaries of the political, and Wolin is clear that the end result of revolts and revolutions are (potentially) new boundaries of what is politically possible. Perhaps these occur slowly but steadily as Karl Kautsky argued and with the aid of political parties, or perhaps they will meet violent setbacks and be pushed forward yet again by the masses as envisioned by Luxemburg. Wolin argues demotic moments are a result of “felt grievances” that can quickly transform from chaotic revolts into political protests for expansion of democratic rights. They have the potential to move the balance away from entrenched power structures and toward mass participation and can range from revolts against the power of political machines to full-scale class warfare and revolution. Political parties may indeed limit popular participation in power, but the success or failure of grassroots upsurges and the structures they create before they recede have an impact on the level of mass participation in power afterwards.

---

397 Ibid, 255.
Just as democratic moments have the potential to radically change political parties and politics, the point after the initial demotic wave was rightly a topic of interest for Michels and his socialist comrades, as well as the liberal scholars. It is likely that in a moment of anti-oligarchic protest the sway of political parties will be enough, as Pannekoek fretted, to quash it. Michels saw this clearly with how the unions and SPD stymied the development of the mass strike by withdrawing their support first tacitly, then openly, from the burgeoning suffrage movement’s direct action. Yet clearly the existence of an anti-systemic political party that had educated the working class subculture in Germany about the potentials of growth in democratic control played a part in stoking the initial fires. The existence of at least a faction within the anti-systemic party of those who wished to expand into more radical action as represented by Luxemburg meant there was a place for the initial collective uprising to coalesce and potentially expand their rights in the party (or a new party as happened in 1918) or through new rights and structures within the state (or a new state entirely). When Robert Michels argued with his syndicalist comrades over the need for keeping a presence in a political party, his argument was that the presence of party members conscious of the need for direct action and who understood the dangers of bureaucracy could help check the strong tendency in the SPD towards oligarchy and conservatism. I think he was correct here; but whether they were to be successful depends on whether there was any possibility of dislodging the party leadership at all in any case. In more modern times the German Green Party has inculcated the warnings on the mass party debate and initially favored term limits, rotation in office, limited staff and decentralization, this of course
lead to the famous realo-fundi debate which was partly a reiteration of the argument between the centrist and left-factions that occurred in the SPD.

The questions of democracy, political party, oligarchies; these are questions that should concern political thinkers and actors whether they are Marxists or liberals, centralists or localists, in favor of a unitary or federal state, revolutionaries or reformers. As Michels wrote, socialism is not just an economic problem, but an administrative one as well. Likewise democracy in any form – and of course Michels believed socialism could only be realized if democracy was – is as much a question of administration as it is theory. To not discuss the questions involved in the mass party debate, to not take parties and the questions involved in them seriously, is to leave aside a fundamental question of modern politics. Like Michels, we must not be afraid to be inspired by a “politics of conviction” if we wish to study democracy. Political theorists have studied the world, in various ways; the point, as Marx put so well, is to change it.