

# **Sociological Theory: Historical and Formal**

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**Nell J. Smelser**  
*University of California,  
Berkeley*

**R. Stephen Warner**  
*Yale University*

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## CHAPTER 13

# Robert Michels' Theory of Organizational Structure

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As we have just seen, one of Marx's most conspicuous characteristics was his profound antagonism toward industrial capitalism. He regarded it as an economic system that set classes in conflict with one another and that generated the conditions for its own downfall by means of revolutionary overthrow. Marx's sympathies, moreover, lay with the proletarian class, which would overturn the political and economic structure of capitalist society and build the foundations for the communism of the future.

Robert Michels, born in 1876—shortly after the publication of *Das Kapital*—was thoroughly exposed to Marxism, and he shared many of the revolutionary ideals of Marxist socialism. His great contribution to sociology, *Political Parties*, clearly shows the influence of Marx. Michels was preoccupied with the class struggle and with the kinds of organizations—trade unions, socialist political parties, cooperative societies—that represent the efforts of the workers to protest against the oppressive system of industrial capitalism.

Michels shared another characteristic with Marx. Both men tended to minimize the importance of ideas as moving forces in history. For Marx, human consciousness reflects more fundamental economic forces in society and men's ideas are determined in large part by their position in the economic system. Michels, too, regarded ideas and ideologies as rationalizations, or efforts to preserve a position of power in a social organization. The real basis for action, according to Michels, lies in the political relations among persons.

Even though Michels thus took up many aspects of Marxian thought, there are a number of important differences between the two men. First, Michels never intended to develop a grand, deductive theory with a full exposition of its philosophical foundations. In fact, he explicitly disavowed an interest in such theories. In the preface to *Political Parties*, he stated that

the present study makes no attempt to offer a "new system." It is not the principal aim of science to create systems, but rather to promote understanding. It is not the purpose of sociological science to discover, or rediscover solutions, since numerous problems of the individual life and the life of social groups are not capable of "solution" at all, but must ever remain "open." The sociologist should aim rather at the dispassionate exposition of tendencies and counteroperating forces, of reasons and opposing reasons, at the display, in a word, of the warp and the woof of social life. Precise diagnosis is the logical and indispensable preliminary to any possible prognosis [1911, p. viii].<sup>34</sup>

By adopting this position Michels clearly eschewed the creation of a grand theoretical and ethical system, to which Marx devoted so much of his energy. Nevertheless, as we shall see, most of the components of a theory are to be found in Michels' work; and in fact he did generate a highly organized explanation of the origins of oligarchy in social life. Second, Michels' focus was narrower than that of Marx. In particular, he was concerned with the political aspects of Marxian theory—especially class conflict between the bourgeoisie and proletariat. Michels, however, took class conflict as his starting point, whereas Marx analyzed the economic relations that give rise to class conflict. Michels concentrated on the political fate of revolutionary movements and organizations, whereas Marx built a theory that would encompass all of social life. Third, while Marx felt that industrial capitalism—as well as all preceding economic systems—rendered social democracy impossible, he did predict that when the economic conditions of capitalism were destroyed and when a socialist society was created, genuine social democracy would emerge. Michels was more pessimistic. He felt that certain fundamental sociological laws prohibited the attainment of

social equality, no matter what the economic or political system. In sharp opposition to Marx, Michels argued that a socialist revolution could not substantially modify the conditions of social inequality. "The socialists might conquer, but not socialism, which would perish in the moment of its adherents' triumph. We are tempted to speak of this process as a tragi-comedy in which the masses are content to devote all their energies to affecting a change of masters" [p. 391].

Why did Michels lack faith in the ability of a revolutionary movement to establish a society based on social equality? To ask this question is to go to the heart of Michels' theory. Let us now recapitulate his main arguments.

## A Selective Summary of Michels' Theory

### The Range of Data and the Problem

Michels' fundamental range of data can be identified empirically with two branches of the working-class movement in Europe in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—socialist political parties and left-wing labor unions. He posed two sorts of questions about these organizations: (1) Why were these working class organizations ineffective in class warfare; why had they lost their militancy? (2) Why had these organizations become less democratic; why had leaders consolidated their positions of power? These two sets of questions were intimately connected, for in answering them Michels felt that the disappearance of democracy was one of the main factors in making such groups less militant and therefore less effective in fighting the class war.

Why did Michels choose revolutionary groups as his main object of analysis? He felt that it would be too easy to choose organizations committed to oligarchic ideologies to demonstrate the universality of his new law that oligarchy arises in all organizations. He felt that revolutionary parties, committed to an ideal of egalitarianism, would provide the best settings for demonstrating his law, because in such organizations it would hold *in spite of* their ideologies. "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" [p. 11]. Just as Durkheim chose what might appear to common sense to be the *least* social of all activities—suicide—to prove the importance of the social factor, so Michels chose the type of organization apparently *least* committed to an oligarchic ideology to demonstrate the tendency for oligarchy to develop in organizations.

**Central Concepts**

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Michels' central interest is in the paired and opposing concepts of oligarchy and democracy. In the history of political thought a great many meanings have been assigned to these terms, but Michels did not clearly indicate which meanings he intended to stress. Oligarchy, for example, can refer to differential participation in decision making; differential placement in power positions; differential consolidation of power over long periods of time; or exploitation of a group that does not hold power by a group that does. Michels referred to all of these meanings, and possibly more, as he developed his argument. As we shall see, a number of criticisms arise from ambiguities in his conceptualization of oligarchy and of its opposite, democracy.

Michels set for himself the task of analyzing the antidemocratic tendencies in social life. Among these tendencies he singled out for special attention what he called "the nature of organization" and "the nature of the human individual" [p. viii].

Michels was also vague about the exact meaning of "organization." The term was never formally defined, and in fact Michels did not go beyond identifying certain empirical characteristics of the organization of the groups that he was studying. Several salient characteristics of organization occupied his attention. The first is size. On the whole, Michels was interested in analyzing the structure of large groups, numbering perhaps from 1,000 to 10,000 members. The second is the complexity of organization—the number of functions or the degree of specialization. Third, Michels considered the *coordination of group activities* to be an important feature of organization. In these three characteristics of organization lie those tendencies that Michels believed to operate against democracy.

Michels also felt that certain psychological tendencies on the part of leaders and followers are important in the creation of oligarchic structures. He referred to age, experience, and training as important factors in leadership, and he also employed certain psychological generalizations relating to the susceptibility of the masses to persuasion and manipulation.

**Operationalization**

At present we shall say only a word about how Michels identified his basic concepts empirically. Like Parsons and Marx, he referred in a somewhat unsystematic way to available historical and institutional data. Michels assembled as much material as was available to him on the political parties and trade unions of his day and interpreted this information as evidence for his basic propositions. As we have seen from

previous critiques, however, selective illustration is a method that may have severe limitations. We shall take up some special problems in Michels later.

### Logical Structure

In identifying the main tendencies that bear on democracy and oligarchy, we have already indicated a certain causal priority in Michels' concepts. To formalize this priority, it is helpful to employ the language of dependent and independent variables.

The basic dependent variable in Michels' system is the degree of democracy or of its opposite, oligarchy, that exists in an organization. In particular, Michels was interested in analyzing why organizations with a fighting spirit and a democratic structure gradually develop oligarchical structures over time.

All the other variables in Michels' theory can be considered as independent, and all work toward the same result. The most important independent variables are to be found in the phenomenon of organization itself. Michels referred to the "mechanical and technical impossibility of direct government by the masses" in the kinds of organizations he was analyzing [p. 226]. Several features of large organizations prevent such democratic participation. For example, large numbers of persons cannot deliberate and arrive at any sort of resolution or direct action. In addition, the masses cannot possibly participate equally in day-to-day activities of large organizations. The difficulties of maintaining adequate communication and coordination prevent the involvement of all members equally. As a result of this necessarily differential level of participation, Michels concluded that "the technical specialization that inevitably results from all extensive organization renders necessary what is called expert leadership" [p. 31]. Such are the origins of centralized power and oligarchy.

Furthermore, when a revolutionary organization begins to engage in a struggle, a hierarchical chain of command is required to mobilize the participants for action. If leaders had to consult with the rank and file on every question of action, "an enormous loss of time" would be involved, "and the opinion thus obtained would, moreover, be summary and vague" [p. 42]. Democracy is a luxury a fighting organization cannot afford.

The problems of the hour need a speedy decision and this is why democracy can no longer function in its primitive and genuine form, unless the policy pursued is to be temporizing, involving a loss of the most favorable opportunities for action. Under such guidance, the party becomes incapable of acting in alliance with

others and loses its political elasticity. A fighting party needs a hierarchical structure [p. 42].

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The very act of entering into a struggle, then, sets in motion tendencies that undermine democracy in a fighting group.

Michels also considered that the psychological characteristics of the masses contribute to oligarchy. He spoke of "the need for leadership felt by the masses" [p. 49], of the "gratitude felt by the crowd for those who speak and write on their behalf" [p. 60], and of the "childish character of proletarian psychology" [p. 67]. The masses are hypnotized by a speaker's power and momentarily see in him a magnified image of their own egos. They want to have a leader they can admire and worship. "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, and even in the organized mass of labor parties, there is an immense need for direction and guidance" [p. 53].

Michels identified two additional peculiarities of the masses that contribute to their passivity. First, most trade union members appeared to be between the ages of 25 and 39 years [p. 78]. Michels concluded from these data that the very young men, who would supply passion to the movement, are slow to join and that men over 40 often become "weary and disillusioned" and resign their membership. "Consequently, there is lacking in the organization the force of control of ardent and irreverent youth and also that of experienced maturity." Second, the rank and file in trade unions has a more fluctuating membership than leaders, and consequently, leaders "constitute a more stable, and more constant element of the organized membership" [p. 79].

The third set of factors contributing to the development and consolidation of oligarchy comprises the qualities of individuals who become leaders. In the early stages of organization, oratorical skill is especially important; the masses are hypnotized by it. Other qualities that facilitate leaders include

force of will which reduces to obedience less powerful wills; . . . a wider extent of knowledge which impresses the members of the leaders' environment; a *catonian strength of conviction* of force of ideas often verging on its very intensity; self-sufficiency, even if it is accompanied by an arrogant pride, so long as the leader knows how to make the crowd share his own pride in himself; in exceptional cases, finally, goodness of heart and disinterestedness, qualities which recall in the minds of the crowd the figure of Christ, and reawaken religious sentiments which are decayed but not extinct [p. 72].

All three sets of independent variables work in one direction: to estab-

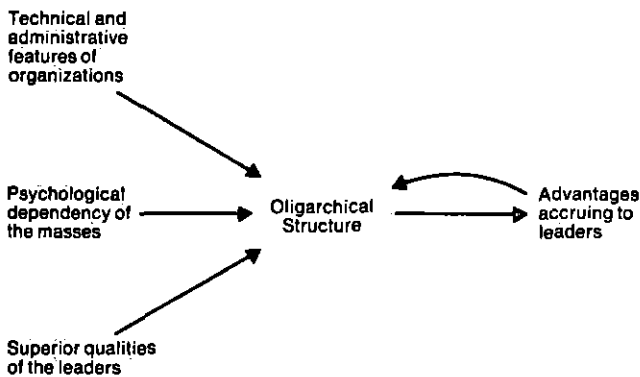


lish an oligarchical structure. Furthermore, once an oligarchy is established, it manifests similar consequences. In particular, Michels pointed out the tendency for leaders to become superior in education, wealth, and cultural skills, once they had attained the advantages of office. In addition, leaders come to think of themselves as indispensable and regard their right to office as necessary and sacred. These by-products of oligarchical leadership feed back and further consolidate the original tendencies for power to become centralized.

The system of variables summarized in figure 13 shows how oligarchy is "overdetermined" in Michels' analysis. Everything operates in the same direction. There are no other possible outcomes; there are no important countertendencies. Given large organizations, the inevitable result is oligarchy.

Concluding his analysis, Michels simplified his explanation even more. In reflecting on the various forces working toward oligarchy, he observed that "if we leave out of consideration the tendency of the leaders, and the general immobility and passivity of the masses, we are led to conclude that the principal cause of oligarchy in the democratic parties is to be found in the technical indispensability of leadership" [p. 400]. In other words, Michels' opinion was that even if we ignore the psychological characteristics of the leaders and the led, the technical and practical features of organization are still sufficient to produce oligarchy.

Figure 13. Causal relations among Michels' major variables.



### Generation of Hypotheses

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Michels' central proposition—the iron law of oligarchy—emerges from his analysis almost as an anticlimax. Given the overdetermined explanatory scheme, there can be no other result than oligarchy. It is not surprising he called it an iron law. As Michels stated the law, “it is organization which gives birth to the dominion of the elected over the electors, of the mandataries over the mandators, of the delegates over the delegators. Who says organization, says oligarchy” [p. 401]. Michels also concluded that this law is devastating in its consequences for revolutionary movements. Only in the beginning stages can protest movements be truly fighting, democratic units. In time, however, power is consolidated, oligarchy emerges, the “*embourgeoisement*” of the leaders occurs, and the movements become conservative.

### Empirical Aspects of the Study

Most of Michels' book is an effort to document his iron law by reference to the history of left-wing parties and trade unions in Europe. Basically, his method is that of selective historical comparison, not unlike the method employed by Marx. In addition, Michels devoted much attention to certain facts that might have appeared to be exceptions or contradictions to his iron law. For example, he noted that proletarian leaders are sometimes substituted for bourgeois leaders in the working-class movement. But he discarded this phenomenon as offering “no guarantee, either in theory or practice, against the political or moral infidelity of the leaders” [p. 307].

In a similar spirit, Michels also developed a brief analysis of the referendum. On first glance, the referendum would appear to be a means by which the masses exercise some control over the legislation of their leaders. Yet Michels stressed the futility of the referendum and the impotence of those who try to utilize it as a political weapon. In fact, he concluded that “the history of the referendum as a democratic expedient utilized by the social parties may be summed up by saying that its application has been rare, and that its results have been unfortunate” [p. 335].

Again, on the face of it, the phenomenon of the resignation of leaders in times of crisis would seem to present evidence that the leader's power can be diminished. Michels disagreed. He argued that we should not take seriously the reasons given by leaders who resign. Rather, he interpreted the threat to resign as the leader's attempt to consolidate his own power; it is an invitation for a new mandate. The leader emphasizes his indispensability by resigning or threatening to do so, and his followers

reinstatement in recognition of his indispensability. Resignation is, then, an instrument for bullying the masses and reconsolidating power.

Finally, Michels continually reiterated his position that ideology has no effect on the iron law of oligarchy. Those espousing radical syndicalist ideologies, for example, are not "immunized against the action of sociological laws of universal validity" [p. 347]. Anarchism, too, "succumbs . . . to the law of authoritarianism as soon as it abandons the region of pure thought and as soon as its adherents unite to form associations aiming at any sort of political activity" [p. 360].

In these efforts to discount possibly contrary evidence or arguments, Michels was employing a strategy that is by now familiar to us: argument by elimination. His particular method of pressing this strategy was to acknowledge the existence of apparently contrary facts, but to deny their significance by endowing them with a meaning different from their apparent one. Michels went behind the scenes in an attempt to discover other, more fundamental mechanisms that render the superficially democratic features of organized life unimportant.

### Concluding Note

At the end of his analysis, Michels found himself facing a troublesome dilemma. He was a man committed to the ideals of socialist democracy, yet his discoveries seemed to have led him to the conclusion that socialist democracy is impossible. Even the class struggle would "invariably culminate in the creation of new oligarchies which undergo fusion with the old" [p. 390]. Such a discovery was no doubt extremely disquieting.

At the very end of the book Michels made an effort to restore some of his old faith. He reminded the reader that he did not wish to deny that "every revolutionary working class movement, and every movement sincerely inspired by the democratic spirit, may have a certain value as contributing to the enfeeblement of oligarchic tendencies" [p. 405]. He then related a fable: "A peasant when on his death bed tells his sons that a treasure is buried in the field. After his death they dig everywhere looking for the treasure. They did not succeed in finding it, but their indefatigable labor so improves the soil that it secures for them a comparative well-being." Michels continued: "The treasure in the fable may well symbolize democracy. Democracy is a treasure which no one will ever discover by deliberate search, but in continuing the search, in laboring indefatigably to discover the undiscoverable, we shall perform a work which will have fertile results in the democratic sense" [p. 405]. Such an ending strikes a note of pathos; it seems neither realistic nor satisfactory. It is difficult to imagine a socialist party with the motto "We

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shall prevail, indirectly." Yet the fable and the moral that Michels drew from it perhaps constitute his own effort to reconcile his discovery of the iron law with his commitment to socialist ideals.

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## Some Unresolved Problems in Michels' Analysis

### The Conception of Democracy

The model of democracy that Michels adopted is an extreme one: the model of equal participation by all individuals in the decisions and binding actions of the group. Let us, however, consider another notion of democracy, one that does involve the influence of the rank and file on decision making but that does not necessarily imply equal participation by all individuals in all decisions. This alternative conception of democracy involves a plurality of organized groups, each possessing something like an oligarchical structure itself, to be sure, but each capable of exerting some power on the political center, thus representing the several *groups of constituents in decision making*. There is not equal participation by all, but democracy exists in the sense that the desires, grievances, and influence of the masses are taken into account when decisions are made. I am suggesting that because Michels began with an extremely individualistic notion of democracy he made his task of demonstrating that democracy could not exist in large organizations very easy; if he had considered the group-influence conception of democracy, his task would have been more complicated.

Michels also relied on the assumption that the only effective *group* for achieving democratic results is the fighting revolutionary group. When it becomes bureaucratized and conservatized, however, it loses its fighting qualities and can no longer contribute to the *struggle for democracy*. This assumption is contained in the following statement:

[When a party begins to compromise with other elements in society], not merely does the party sacrifice its political virginity, by entering into promiscuous relationships with the most heterogeneous political elements, relationships which in many cases have disastrous and enduring consequences, but it exposes itself in addition to the risk of losing its essential character as a party. The term "party" presupposes that among the individual components of the party there should exist a harmonious direction of wills toward identical objectives and practical aims. Where this is lacking, the party becomes a mere "organization" [p. 376].

Linking these two key assumptions, Michels believed that democracy is

impossible in large organizations, and as large organizations become undemocratic, they cannot contribute to democracy in the larger society.

I should like to raise the question of whether these two assumptions should be linked in the way that Michels linked them. I shall do so by considering an illustrative example: the history of protest movements among American farmers. In the last three decades of the nineteenth century, American farmers, suffering under great economic hardship, organized themselves into a number of "fighting" organizations, such as the Grange, the Farmer's Alliance, and the Populist movement (though these organizations were not revolutionary in the same sense that European socialist groups were). In this early phase of farmer protest, these groups were burdened with difficulties of recruitment, commitment, and coordination, and they were notoriously ineffective politically. It was only after the American farmer became involved, not in parties, but in organizations—that is, when he sacrificed his political virginity and began dealing in the world of compromise and pressure politics—that he and his organizations really began to influence governmental policy. If democracy is measured by the flow of influence from bottom to top, the mobilization of American farmers into organizations rather than parties clearly increased their effectiveness. The same argument might be made for the history of American labor unions. What I am suggesting by such illustrations is that in many cases Michels' iron law of oligarchy might hold *within* organizations, but that the very development of this kind of leadership might equip those organizations to represent the desires and wishes of their constituents more effectively in the larger society, thus contributing to democracy at another level.

This line of reasoning suggests that in conceptualizing democracy, Michels perhaps considered too few of its aspects. At other times, however, one gains the impression that he fused too many aspects of a phenomenon into a single category. Consider the numerous connotations of the concept of oligarchy, for example. It may suggest a minority giving orders to a majority, with the majority submitting. It may connote that the minority of leaders are the sole source of any significant political action. It may mean that the minority of leaders are free from control by others who hold subsidiary positions in the organization. It may suggest that people in positions of authority pursue their own interests and exploit the others in the organization. Or, finally, it may refer to the tendency for leaders to consolidate their positions of power over long periods of time [Cassanelli 1953].

As Michels developed his argument, he tended to slip back and forth among these several connotations. But surely the causes of the consolidation of an elite over long periods are different from the causes of tem-

porary domination or exploitation. By not discriminating among these different aspects of oligarchy, Michels fell into the difficulty of trying to account for more facets of oligarchy than he could legitimately hope to within his relatively simple analytic framework. If the several aspects of oligarchy had been sorted out from one another analytically, Michels would have been in a better position to account for each aspect by using different combinations of causes.

### **The Uncertain Status of Psychological Categories, Especially "Ideas"**

As indicated, Michels' work falls clearly into that tradition of thought that emphasizes "real factors"—especially economic and political—as the determinants of behavior and minimizes the influence of ideas as determining factors. Michels' repeated assertion that socialist, syndicalist, and anarchist ideologies do not significantly deter oligarchic tendencies within organizations is consistent with this perspective. Also, in summing up his ideas on the origins of oligarchy, Michels concluded that the technical features of organization are a sufficient cause of oligarchic leadership and that the psychological characteristics of the masses and the leaders are only accessory and contributing factors. In all these arguments, psychological variables such as ideas and sentiments are dominated by "objective conditions."

From time to time, however, Michels appeared uncertain about the degree to which he wished to downgrade ideas and sentiments. He entitled an early chapter "The Ethical Embellishment of Social Struggles," which suggests that the moral aspects of conflict are in the nature of unnecessary adornments. Yet in discussing the ethical side of political life, Michels spoke of the need of all political movements to develop an ideology of democracy as "a *necessary* fiction" [p. 15, emphasis added]. "Political parties, however much they may be founded upon narrow class interest and however evidently they may work against the interests of the majority, love to identify themselves with the universe, or at least present themselves as cooperating with all the citizens of the state, and to proclaim that they are fighting in the name of all and for the good of all" [p. 16]. Struggles within parties also involve appeals to ideas. "In the struggle among leaders," Michels noted, "an appeal is often made to loftier motives. When the members of the executive claim the right to intervene in the democratic functions of the individual sections of the organization, they base this claim upon their more comprehensive grasp of all the circumstances of the case, their profounder insight, their superior socialist culture, and their keener socialist sentiment" [p. 172].

In connection with these observations, we might raise a question: why should the struggle for power—which depends in the last analysis on real factors—have to be legitimized by reference to the values or beliefs of the group itself? If the struggle is essentially based on power, why should not the contestants in this struggle feel free to ignore ideological questions? While Michels explicitly minimized ideological factors, his observations indicate that he believed the appeal to ideology to be an important weapon in securing the support of the masses in the drive for power. In short, Michels was ambivalent about the importance of ideas, sometimes treating them as sham and rationalization, at other times recognizing them as important and probably necessary ingredients in the struggles among groups.

A final ambiguity in Michels' discussion of human psychology lies in his treatment of certain psychological forces as both causes and effects. In discussing the "accessory qualities" of leaders, which contribute to their rise to leadership, Michels mentioned the leaders' wider extent of knowledge, their strength of conviction, the force of their ideas, their pride, and their dedication. But elsewhere in his analysis, these same qualities turn out to be the consequences of leadership as well; for example, the longer a leader remains in power, the stronger is his conviction of his own moral correctness, the greater is his self-adulation, the greater is his sense of indispensability.

Certainly it is plausible to organize one's variables into a kind of model whereby a single type of variable becomes first a cause, then an effect generated by the very set of conditions it contributed to causing in the first place. Such a model is often referred to as a "positive feedback" model. Michels made use of such a model—though it is only implicit—in his characterization of the causes of oligarchy. Yet in his own examination of the historical material, he was only able to point to the empirical correlation between the leader's position in an organization and his psychological characteristics. He was powerless to demonstrate the ways in which these psychological characteristics are simultaneously both causes and effects, given the historical data available to him.

### **The Use of Cultural Differences as a Residual Category**

Most of Michels' energies were devoted to eliciting examples of situations that confirm his iron law of oligarchy. In chapters 5–8 of Part One of *Political Parties*, for example, he selected telling examples of the psychological submission of the masses to authorities. Often, however, he noted an apparent exception to the iron law, which he tended to attribute to a specifically national or cultural factor.

For example, in discussing the stability of leadership, Michels ventured the following observation about England:

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In international European politics, England has always been regarded as an untrustworthy ally, for her history shows that no other country has ever been able to confide in agreements concluded with England. The reason is to be found in this, that the foreign policy of the United Kingdom is largely dependent upon the party in power, and party changes occur with considerable rapidity. Similarly, the party that changes its leaders too often runs the risk of finding itself unable to contract useful alliances at an opportune moment. The two gravest defects of genuine democracy, its lack of stability . . . and its difficulty of mobilization, are dependent on the recognized right of the sovereign masses to take part in the management of their own affairs [p. 103].

Thus democracy in England appeared to interfere with the conduct of foreign affairs. But England, like all advanced industrial societies, presumably had its share of large organizations, which should have been governed by the iron law of oligarchy as much as other advanced states. If the law were as universal as Michels maintained, the English exception *should be an embarrassing instance for his theory*. But he merely noted it as a national exception.

Discussing the tendency of leadership to consolidate, Michels made the expected assertion that "with the institution of leadership there simultaneously begins, owing to the long tenure of office, the transformation of the leaders into a closed caste" [p. 156]. Yet in the next paragraph he qualified the assertion: "Unless, as in France, extreme individualism and fanatical political dogmatism stand in the way, the old leaders present themselves to the masses as a compact phalanx—at any rate whenever the masses are so much aroused as to endanger the position of leaders." Here he was identifying something characteristically "French" that made for an exception to the iron law. In another place, he noted the presence of an abundance of Jews among the leaders of the socialist and revolutionary parties and added that "specific racial qualities make the Jew a born leader of the masses, a born organizer and propagandist" [p. 258]. Then he proceeded to detail these specifically Jewish qualities. From Michels' statements it would appear that something distinctively cultural—something associated with Jewishness—would have to do with consolidation of power above and beyond the tendencies inherent in organization itself. Yet Michels tended to leave unanalyzed both these exceptions and the implicit cultural variables that would explain them. These variables surround his theory as convenient categories that are used to add to, or to account for, apparent exceptions to the iron law. This method of proceeding gives his theory an appear-



ance of simplicity and neatness, whereas in reality he was relying on many more variables than were incorporated into his original formulation of the empirical universal.

### **A Critical But Unexamined Residual Category: Conflict Among Leaders**

Let us return for a moment to figure 13, in which the system of technical requisites, psychological factors, accessory qualities, and positive feedback guarantee that oligarchy is the universal consequence of organization. One implication of this explanatory scheme is that if leaders and masses come into conflict with one another, the leaders will win every time, because they command more power; there is nothing in Michels' theory to suggest otherwise. In fact, Michels is explicit: "When there is a struggle between the leaders and the masses, the former are always victorious" [p. 157].

Immediately after this statement, however, Michels added the qualifying phrase "if only they [the leaders] remain united." This suggests the possibility of victory on the part of the masses if their struggle with the leaders coincides with a struggle among the leaders themselves. His qualification further suggests two questions: (1) Why should conflict between leaders occur at all? (2) Does not a victory of the masses in periods of conflict among leaders actually constitute the exercise of democracy? Even more, if conflict among leaders is institutionalized politically, does this not make for a periodic voice of the masses and hence a periodic exercise of democracy, which would thereby qualify, if not contradict, the iron law of oligarchy?

Given the accumulation of independent variables and secondary consequences in Michels' theory, there seems to be no reason why leaders in an organization would ever come into conflict with one another. After all, as leaders they are securely placed, psychologically gratified, possessed of information, cultural accessories, and wealth, and fortified with beliefs in their indispensability. Why endanger these positions by struggling with one another? The only conflicts in Michels' theory would seem to be between those aspiring to power and those holding it, and the cards are so stacked against the aspirants that they would always lose.

Actually, Michels presented a number of reasons why conflicts among leaders arise in organizations. He spoke of "rivalry between established leaders and great outsiders who have established reputations in other fields and then offer their services to socialist parties"; of conflict between age and youth; of conflict between leaders of bourgeois origin and leaders of proletarian origin; of struggles between subdivisions of the organization (between, for example, executive and administrative or

local and national); of struggles based on racial (i.e., ethnic) differences (such as the contests between French and German socialists during the Franco-Prussian War of 1870). And, finally, he spoke of struggles based on "objective differences and differences of principle in general philosophical views" [p. 167].

Empirically, these bases for contests among leaders make sense, and it is possible to find illustrations of each from our own knowledge of political conflict. But from a theoretical point of view, *these contests are not a consequence of the major variables in Michels' original theory*. He made no formal use of age, locality, race, ideology, and so on, except occasionally to declare one or another of them irrelevant to the iron law of oligarchy. Thus it appears that in this case, as in others, Michels introduced a number of categories that do not find a place in his original theory, but which he used to develop his argument.

Nevertheless, given *some* basis for conflict among leaders, what are the implications of this conflict for the workings of democracy? Michels did give a certain power to the mass to influence factional struggles. He observed, for example, that "the path of the new aspirants to power is always beset with difficulties, bestrewn with obstacles of all kinds, *which can be overcome only by the favor of the masses*" [p. 177, emphasis added]. Apparently, then, mass support is needed for an emerging leader to overthrow an established one. Having acknowledged this, however, Michels later minimized the importance of this phenomenon by noting that

only in exceptional instances do [overthrows of leaders] signify that the masses have been stronger than the leaders. As a rule, they mean merely that a new leader has entered into conflict with the old, and thanks to the support of the mass, has prevailed in the struggle, and has been able to dispossess and replace the old leader. The profit for democracy of such a substitution is practically nil [pp. 182-183].

Once again, Michels' argument appears to rest on a limited view of democracy. He regarded the *fact* of leadership and followership as antipathetic to democracy. But it is also plausible to regard the overthrow of leaders—which is dependent upon mass support—as evidence of a periodic upward flow of influence. The masses will obviously support the aspiring leader who best represents what they desire. And if he ceases to take their feelings into consideration, they will be inclined to throw their support behind another contending leader.

Furthermore, if conflict among leaders is institutionalized—as in the constitutional provision for free elections involving two or more parties

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and associated civil liberties and rights—the political system has regularized the struggle among leaders and increased the ability of the masses to express their preferences. This is not to say that the leaders will not consolidate their positions repeatedly, as Michels' analysis suggests that they will do. But it is also possible to institutionalize tendencies that operate to diminish the workings of the iron law of oligarchy. The institutionalization of conflict among political leaders would seem to require a formulation of the law of oligarchy somewhat less rigid than Michels' version.