DEMOCRACY, ORGANIZATION, MICHELS

JOHN D. MAY
Yale University

This article marks an attempt to clarify the teachings of Robert Michels. It suggests that in Political Parties: A Sociological Study of the Oligarchical Tendencies of Modern Democracy (1915), Michels presented a favorable account of the compatibility of organization and democracy.

Other treatments attribute to Michels a thesis of the following kind: (1) Large, organizationally complex associations, compared with small, simple associations, are likely to be governed by cliques whose powers (disposable resources, freedom of action, security of tenure) are abundant and whose policies (use of official status and resources) deviate from the policy-preferences of their constituents. (2) Incremennts of Organization (of scale, or members, and of complexity, or procedural formality, functional differentiation, stratification, specialization, hierarchy, and bureaucracy) augment the powers and the policy-deviating propensities of leaders vis-à-vis followers.1


It probably is true that in Michels’s terms, a system where leaders possess the means and the disposition to ignore their followers’ will (or wills) is an undemocratic system.2 It is not true that on Michels’s showing, organization is relatively inhospitable to democratic leader-follower relations. It is not true that Michels portrays increments of Organization as breeders, persistently and proportionally, of counter-democratic changes. Instead, he argues (in a complex but not inconsistent manner) that Organization is incompatible with the attainment or maintenance of absolute democracy and yet can be a source, in many cases and in many ways, of democratization.

It is true that Michels deplored Organization. It is true that Michels voiced a profound pessimism about the fate of mankind, a pessimism rooted in conceptions of the indispensability and the consequences of Organization. It is not true that Michels’s pessimism was the pessimism of a democrat.

Far from being a democrat, Michels was a


2 Michels does not use the terms “democracy,” “oligarchy,” and “organization” in a consistent or coherent manner. The terminological difficulties have been probed by C. W. Cassinelli, in “The Law of Oligarchy,” this Review, Vol. 47 (Sept. 1953), p. 3 ff. However, Michels persistently associates democracy with equality, with conditions suggesting the notion of popular sovereignty, and with the “system in which delegates represent the mass and carry out its will.” On the other hand, he speaks of “The notion of the representation of popular interests, a notion to which the great majority of democrats . . . cleave. . . .” Political Parties, trans. Eden and Cedar Paul (Dover Publications, 1969), esp. pp. 1–2, 27, 401. References hereafter will be to this edition unless designated otherwise.
Romantic Revolutionary. He deplored the “conservative” effects of Organization—its general tendency to facilitate the maintenance of a society which is not and cannot be perfectly democratic, and its particular tendency to dissipate “revolutionary currents” in society. But by his account, Organization is countervoluntary precisely because it facilitates the amelioration of discontents and injustices; it facilitates democratization.

Far from being a democrat, moreover, Michels was a Scientific Paternalist. He portrayed, and lamented, Organization as the nemesis of authority-systems wherein leaders possess the means and the disposition to voice the scientifically ascertained Interests of the “mass.” But by his account, Organization facilitates the advent and the maintenance of leaders who are able and willing to express the manifest wills of their clients or constituents.

Such, at any rate, is the interpretation which seems consistent with the following analysis of (I) Michels’s account of general historical trends, (II) his basic reasoning, and (III) his treatment of the Socialist experience.

I

According to Michels’s account of general trends, democratization has persistently accompanied Organization.

The modern era, in which “political and economic life” acquires increasingly “complex forms,” and in which massive bureaucratization occurs in the state and industry and labor, is “what we know as the era of democracy.” Only the “blind and fanatical” fail to perceive that “the democratic current daily makes undeniable advance.”

Modern “state institutions” exhibit increasing democratization.” Human “freedoms and privileges” have broadened. The workers are enjoying “better conditions of labor;” their burgeoning aptitude for criticism and control” is bound to increase further “in proportion as the economic status of the masses undergoes improvement and becomes more stable, and as the masses are admitted more effectively to the advantages of civilization.”

Michels stipulates that in “the sphere of party” as contrasted with “the sphere of the state,” democracy is in a “descending phase.” Yet he testifies that a “democratic external form” prevails among modern parties. The aristocratic parties have come to espouse “democratic” policies, and some liberal and conservative parties have worked “essentially” for “socialist ideas and for the victory of the proletariat.” The Socialist International has changed from an “individual dictatorship” into “a federal republic consisting of several independent oligarchies.” Nearly every Socialist and labor group has manifested “tendencies toward decentralization,” tendencies which create pluralistic rather than monistic oligarchies. In the German Socialist and labor parties, an “enormous increase” in membership and in organizational development has been accompanied by changes from “dictatorship” to “oligarchy” and to “theoretical and applied democracy.”

The foregoing citations are not arbitrarily selective. Michels does not specifically name any associations in which democracy has been attenuated by Organization.

His contradictory testimony concerning party evolution may be ascribed to at least two sources. On the one hand, it may be ascribed to inconsistent, ambiguous use of the term “party.” Sometimes “party” denotes an existential aggregate; sometimes if refers to a hypothetical aggregate. Thus, the so-called, existential ‘parties’ have not manifested counter-democratic changes, but hypothetical, authentic ‘parties’ must undergo such changes.

On the other hand, his contradictory testimony may be ascribed to inconsistent, ambiguous use of the term “democracy.” Sometimes “democracy” signifies close control by followers over leaders; sometimes it signifies a distinctive associational character (an ideological, sociological, operational uniqueness) and a moral commitment to the cause of social-democratic revolution.

Only in the latter unconventional sense, and only with respect to hypothetical aggregates, does he sustain the argument that ‘parties’ necessarily undergo a counter-democratic transformation.

II

According to Michels’s basic reasoning, Organization precludes democracy, and can destroy democracy, and can facilitate democratization.

These three propositions are not contradictory. The first pertains to what is ultimately attainable. The others pertain to what can happen in various situations.

Organization precludes democracy. Michels argues persuasively that the presence of Organization is incompatible with the presence of democracy:

6 Pp. 3, 5, 5n, 11, 63, 190, 194, 201.
Organization implies the tendency to oligarchy. ... Immanent oligarchical tendencies [exist] in every kind of human organization which strives for the attainment of definite ends. ... Oligarchy is ... a preordained form of the common life of great social aggregates. ... The majority of human beings, in a condition of eternal tutelage, are predestined ... to submit to the dominion of a small minority, and must ... constitute the pedestal of an oligarchy. ... Leadership is a necessary phenomenon in every form of social life [and] every system of leadership is incompatible with the most essential postulates of democracy. ... All order and civilization must exhibit aristocratic features.7

This reiterated proposition seems logically unassailable, so long as two considerations are kept in mind: (a) the proposition pertains only to the attainability of 'pure' democracy, or absolute equality; and (b) "oligarchy" signifies not the antithesis of democracy, but a condition occupying the ground between pure democracy and pure autocracy.

With these considerations noted, the basis of his proposition can readily be appreciated.8 The presence of Organization signifies the presence of an association whose members are so numerous that it is technically difficult for all to participate equally in all decisions. This condition also is technically incompatible with the exercise by one member of direct control over the formulation and implementation of policies.

Similarly, the presence of Organization signifies the presence of a "system" of leadership, or of subordinate-superordinate relations, together with an established pattern of differentiated tasks, responsibilities, privileges and resources. These conditions are incompatible with equality—and with autocracy. There must be inequalities, and the inequalities must be multiple. Various tasks and resources are vested in various members of the association, each being endowed with a particular expertise and a particular decisional jurisdiction.9

In short, Organization necessitates "oligarchy"—that is, arrangements which are neither absolutely democratic nor absolutely autocratic.

Between the poles of pure democracy and pure autocracy lies an enormous range of variations. Although no "system of leadership" can be democratic, some can be less undemocratic than others. Variations can arise from differences in the rules, in the social composition, and in other traits of associations.

Michels does not say, nor does he imply, that the extent of deviation from pure democracy must be directly related to the size or complexity of organization. He does not exclude the possibility that increments of democratization can accompany increments of scale and complexity. Thus his proposition that Organization precludes (absolute) democracy is logically compatible with his reports that democratization has persistently accompanied Organization.

Organization can destroy democracy. Michels devotes most of his attention not to the proposition that Organization is a condition which precludes (absolute) democracy, but to the proposition that Organization is an agent which destroys (absolute) democracy:

Democracy leads to oligarchy, and necessarily contains an oligarchical nucleus. ... 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. ... Oligarchy ... issues from democracy. ... Organization is ... the source from which the conservative currents flow over the plain of democracy. ... The formation of oligarchies within the various forms of democracy is the outcome of organic necessity.10

The proposition contained in these passages has been persistently misunderstood. It is not that Organization breeds Oligarchy; it is that Democracy leads (through Organization) to Oligarchy. The difference is momentous.

Michels's proposition—his Iron Law of Oligarchy—is a statement about what must happen in groups which initially are democracies. Only when democracy is present initially can it be slain by Organization. Democracy is not self-evidently present in all groups which lack Organization. Some small, primitive groups may be run by bullies; others may be isocracies, or associations of equals. Only in the latter instances can the onset of Organization be blamed for the demise of Democracy.

7 Pp. 11, 32, 390, 400, 402.
8 We are excluding here Michels's arguments for the indispensability of Organization and his suggestions that the process of Organization tends to be self-accelerating. Attention is confined to the question of what arrangements can be compatible with the presence of Organization.
9 For a sophisticated discussion of these processes and of some implications, see Langer, above, note 1, esp. ch. 3.
10 Pp. viii, 22, 168, 402, 408.
Scholars have persistently inferred that Michels's Law applies, or can apply, to a much broader range of cases—perhaps to the generality of voluntary associations, or of social movements, or of human groups. Michels has been credited with the broad proposition that increments of Organization invariably yield increments of Oligarchy. This misunderstanding may be due to a misapprehension concerning his use of key words. The key words are emphasized in the following passages:

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 the led. As a result of organization, every party or professional union becomes divided into a minority of directors and a majority of directed.

Reduced to its most concise expression, the fundamental sociological law of political parties (the term “political” being used in its most comprehensive significance) may be formulated in the following terms: “It is organization which gives birth to the dominion of the elected over the electors, of the mandatories over the mandators, of the delegates over the delegates. Who says organization, says oligarchy.”

The crucial point here is that by “political parties” and “professional unions” Michels does not mean the generality of so-called, historical parties and unions. Instead, he uses these terms to designate the “kind” of association which is emphasized in Marxian thought: association by social class. This qualification is of vital importance.

According to the Marxian formulation, the members of a social class are equal to one another and are endowed with identical needs. If they actively associate, the initial relationship among them must be democratic. The leaders initially will be equal in resources to the followers and will exemplify the policy-preferences of their followers. In Michels's terms, then, who says “party” says initial democracy. Thus,

The term “party” presupposes that among the individual components of the party there should exist a harmonious direction of wills toward identical objective and practical aims. Where this is lacking, the party becomes a mere “organization.”

Similarly, in a “party,”

Originally the chief is merely the servant of the mass. The organization is based upon the absolute equality of its members. Equality is here understood in its most general sense, as an equality of like men. . . . The democratic principle aims at guaranteeing to all an equal influence and an equal participation in the regulation of the common interests. All are electors, and all are eligible for office. . . . All offices are filled by election. The officials, executive organs of the general will, play a merely subordinate part, are always dependent upon the collectivity, and can be deprived of their office at any moment. The mass of the party is omnipotent.

From this romantic premise of “pure democracy,” Michels unfolds his tragic tale of degeneration wrought by Organization. In the “sphere of party,” with “the advance of organization, democracy tends to decline.” As far as party life is concerned,

It may be enunciated as a general rule that the increase in the power of the leaders is directly proportional with the extension of the organization. In the various parties and labor organizations of different countries the influence of the leaders is mainly determined . . . by the varying development of organization. Where organization is stronger, we find that there is a lesser degree of applied democracy.

Given this premise of initial democracy, Michels is logically free to argue that only at a

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11 For example, David Easton, The Political System (Knopf, 1959), pp. 56-7.
12 P. 32.
13 P. 401.

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14 P. 376; emphasis added. He also says, “A party is neither a social unity nor an economic unity.” (p. 387) His characterization of change in parties, however, presupposes initial unity. See section III below, under Social Pluralism.
15 Pp. 27-8. Omitted from this quotation is a contradictory remark, illuminating Michels's chronic confusion about the difference between hypothesis and history. He remarks that the “equality of like men” is “manifested” in some cases (i.e., Socialist labor groups) “by the mutual use of the familiar ‘thou,’ which is employed by the most poorly paid wage-laborer in addressing the most distinguished intellectuals.” (p. 27) If poor laborers and intellectuals are associated, then “equality of like men” is absent. The group is not a social democracy, although it may employ equalitarian rituals and it may be pledged to the attainment of social democracy.
16 P. 33.
"second stage" of organizational development (the stage of full-time, salaried, specialized officialdom) do leaders become "stable and irremovable." Similarly, the assumption that the first leaders were indistinguishable from the followers enables him to say that the "first appearance of professional leadership" marks "the beginning of the end" for "democracy," since such leaders are said to be stronger than their followers and to be animated by deviant interests.\footnote{P. 401.}

This line of reasoning depends for its elemental plausibility on the validity of the premise of initial democracy. Michels's argument applies only to cases where "at first" the leaders are "no more than executive organs of the general wills," where the leaders first arise "spontaneously" to perform only "accessory and gratuitous" functions, where the leaders initially are "simple workmates" or "single molecule(s) of the mass."\footnote{P. 36.}

Such reasoning is conspicuous for the contingencies it does not cover. It does not cover associations initially run by bullies. It does not cover groups initially led by men who, instead of being "simple workmates," descend from upper social strata. Since it does not cover cases of this sort, it is neither sustained nor refuted by evidence that in many cases, including cases of so-called political parties, Organization has been accompanied by democratization.

**Organization can facilitate democratization.** The propositions that Organization precludes absolute democracy and can destroy absolute democracy do not exclude the possibility that Organization can facilitate democratization. Two broad possibilities, within appropriate circumstances, are discernible from Michels's analysis.

(1) **Organization can facilitate ‘external’ democratization.** Michels teaches that Organization is the "weapon of the weak in their struggle with the strong"—an instrument which facilitates "economy of effort" and the political utilization of numerical strength.\footnote{Pp. 31–2, 36, 206, 400.} He acknowledges that "Within certain narrow limits, the democratic party, even when subjected to oligarchical control, can doubtless act upon the state in a democratic sense."\footnote{Pp. 21–2.} (In the context, the phrase "democratic party" evidently denotes a kind of aim or interest, rather than an internal structure.) The chances for democratizing the state are relatively favorable "where there exists universal, equal, and direct suffrage, and where the working class is strongly organized and is awake to its own interests."\footnote{P. 365n.}

In this argument Michels covers a contingency which he has been accused of overlooking. He acknowledges that the democratization of the state and of society can be promoted by, and can occur in the midst of, associations which are non-democratic.\footnote{For example, see Sartori, above, note 1, pp. 121–26.} Strong organization among society's lower strata impels the ruling caste, for the sake of self-preservation, to make concessions in the form of policies and positions.\footnote{See pp. 176, 185–87, 272, 392.}

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 importance attributed to the masses increases, even when the leaders are demagogues. The legislature and the executive become accustomed to yield, not only to claims proceeding from above, but also to those proceeding from below.\footnote{P. 365.}

(2) **Organization can facilitate ‘internal’ democratization.**

Michels does not deal explicitly with the possibility that Organization can facilitate the democratization of groups within society—that is, the equalization of resources among members and the conformity of leaders' policies to followers' wishes. Such a possibility may be inferred, however, from his testimony that counter-autocratic changes accompanied Socialist Organization. The same possibility may be inferred from the basis of his reasoning. Increments of Organization necessitate delegation and dispersal of authority. In the case of an association where all the members have exercised all authority on an equal basis, the effect of Organization will be counter-democratic. In the case of an association where one or just a few members have exercised all authority, the effect of Organization will be counter-autocratic. An appraisal of these possibilities may be gained from a review of Michels's treatment of Socialist history.

**III**

According to Michels's account of Socialist experience in Western Europe before 1914,
Organization facilitates democratization. He depicts Organization as the efficient cause of multitudinous changes in the ‘character’ of Socialism, changes that are alleged to be unavoidable and horrible. He spins a fable of innocence lost.

In the days of the so-called “socialism of the emigres,” the socialists devoted themselves to an elevated policy of principles, inspired by the classic criteria of internationalism. Almost every one of them was . . . a specialist in this more general and comprehensive domain. The whole course of their lives, the brisk exchange of ideas on unoccupied evenings, the continued rubbing of shoulders between men of the most different tongues, the enforced isolation from the bourgeois world of their respective countries, and the utter impossibility of any “practical” action, all contributed to this result. But in proportion as, in their own country, paths of activity were opened for the socialists . . . the more did a recognition of the demands of the everyday life of the party divert their attention from immortal principles.26

With the advent of practical activities and professional activists, Socialism’s “wider and more ideal cultural aims” were smothered by the “petty, narrow, rigid, and illiberal” bureaucratic spirit. The “logical audacities” and “revolutionary currents” suppressed, the once-bold champions displaced by routinizers whose “personal inclination towards quietism” could not be “neutralized” by “the preponderant energy of a comprehensive theory.” Socialism’s youthful promise to represent the “popular interests” was violated; the “democratic principle” of “that which ought to be” was suffocated by “that which is.” Bureaucratization and vote-chasing ravished Socialism’s “essential character”; having contracted “promiscuous relationships with the most heterogeneous elements,” Socialism lost its “political virginity.”27

Now let us dry our tears. Let us attempt to break the spell of the “metaphysical pathos” of organization. Before agreeing with Michels that Socialism underwent a moral and a counter-democratic degeneration because of the imperatives of Organization, let us attempt a more systematic canvas.

Below are listed ten changes which by Michels’s account took place as the Socialist parties developed. Each will be discussed briefly for its broader theoretical implications.

(1) Mitigation of formal dictatorship. Genuine Socialist parties allegedly are, and some of the young Socialist parties allegedly were, corps of para-military combatants. Small, frail, ostentatiously seditious groups cannot afford the luxury of democratic procedures. Socialist growth and development produced a new orientation, emphasizing legalism and engineering. This marked a deviation from principle; it also facilitated and necessitated a measure of formal democratization.

In broader terms, Michels’s analysis suggests that patterns of internal authority vary systematically according to associational aims and situations (or strategies) and sizes. Internal dictatorship is most likely to accompany revolutionary aims, extra-legal tactics, and smallness. Bigness necessitates allegiance, legalism, and a modicum of internal democracy. Each factor helps to explain and engender the others.

(2) Mitigation of informal dictatorship. “Every great class movement in history has arisen upon the instigation, with the co-operation, and under the leadership of men sprung from the very class against which the movement was directed.” The Socialist movement allegedly consisted initially of two social strata: wage workers, or incipient proletarians, who in terms of “culture and of economic, physical and physiological conditions” are society’s “weakest element”; and ex-bourgeois intellectuals, veritable “supermen,” the “best instructed, most capable, and most adroit” products of society’s most powerful class. Such a com-

28 See A. W. Gouldner, “Metaphysical Pathos and the Theory of Bureaucracy,” this REVIEW, Vol. 49 (1955), p. 3. Gouldner argues that Michels, Selznick (in TVA and the Grass Roots), and other modern theorists of group organization quite arbitrarily assume that the “unanticipated consequences” wrought by Organization will be deplorable.
30 P. 238.
sition is required because the workers, without help, are ignorant of their interests and their practical needs. It was "only when science placed itself at the service of the working class" that "the proletarian movement" became "a socialist movement." The men of "science" served at the head of the new movement. The early Socialist program was not a compromise between insight and ignorance; it was "a synthesis of the work of numerous learned men."32

Michels never claims the Socialist groups were democracies at inception. He claims rather, that they were democratic in conception—in the goals they espoused (rather than the procedures employed), and in the Interests they 'objectively' represented (as contrasted with the cause they actually promoted). Thus, the socialist and revolutionary parties, ... in respect of origin and of program, represent the negation of any such tendency [as oligarchy], and have actually come into existence out of opposition thereto. ... In theory, the principle of the social and democratic parties is the struggle against oligarchy in all its forms.33

More generally, Michels suggests that history's great political movements must initially be internally oligarchic, even if their goals and results are democratic. Leaders of the great leveling movements descend from the upper echelons of society; followers are recruited from the most deprived strata. As the resources of leaders and followers become more equal, the drive for societal equalization loses momentum.

(3) Social pluralism. Whereas the Socialist groups initially consisted of a bourgeois and a proletarian stratum, they rapidly became heterogeneous. Many processes contributed to this differentiation:

(a) General social change. The social composition of the Socialist groups was differentiated in consequence of the general process which characterizes modern life—a process not of class polarization, à la Marx, but of "increasing differentiation."34

(b) Secular social change. Worker-Socialists became additionally differentiated among themselves, and within the working class, in consequence of their various political activities. These contributed to "an even greater accentuation of the differentiation which the proletarian groupings already present. ..."35

(c) Proletarian enterprise. Some worker-Socialists were transformed into petty-bourgeois in consequence of Socialist Organization. Of these, some were forced into small business in consequence of industrial blacklisting, while others exploited commercial opportunities (such as tavern-keeping) which developed in consequence of Socialist activities.36

(d) Bureaucratization. The advent of Socialist Organization enabled some worker-Socialists to become salaried officials. Organization served to "deproletarianize" workers, according to how "extensive" and "complicated" the "bureaucratic mechanism" of the Socialist movement became.37

(e) Immigration. Additional differentiation was produced by the influx of recruits drawn from various social strata. Such differentiation was facilitated by a number of factors and processes: formal accessibility of membership; the absence of repugnant slogans and policies; the increased availability of salaried posts and other vocational opportunities.38

In view of these changes, Michels suggests that bureaucratised associations in general, and politically sensitive associations in particular, cannot be (or long remain) socially homogeneous. Bureaucrats characteristically solicit new recruits, paying little attention to "quality." The "modern party, like the modern state, endeavors to give to its own organization the widest possible base," and to fortify the support attained by multiplying salaried posts.39 Consequently, each mature Socialist party became, "from the social point of view," a "mixture of classes," being composed of elements fulfilling "diverse functions in the economic process."40

Such a social transformation might be deemed counter-democratic, from the standpoint of intra-group relations, if the transformation occurred in a once-homogeneous setting. In the Socialist case, as Michels portrays it, the change was from polarized dualism to horizontal and vertical pluralism.

(4) Petty-embourgeoisement. Whereas the authentic or early Socialist groups were dualistic and polarized, social change involved chiefly an enlargement of middle-ranking strata. This occurred through the attraction of petty-bourgeois recruits and the "deproletarianiza-

32 P. 238; emphasis his.
33 P. 11; emphasis added. Elsewhere (esp. ch. 2) Michels voices doubt that such a commitment has ever truly animated a particular social group.
34 P. 40; also pp. 289–90.
tion" of some worker-Socialists.

Michels summarizes this transformation as "the embourgeoisement of the working-class parties."
41 However, his label is not accurate, unless it is meant as a psycho-moral judgment rather than a sociological description. A bourgeois element was present at the beginning, and this element persisted. Socio-economic distance was not created or increased by Socialist Organization; it was "filled in."

The Socialist case cannot be cited to show that Organization invariably 'de-polarizes' groups. The 'de-polarization' was conspicuous in the Socialist case because of a distinctive social origin. However, Michels does suggest unmistakably that Organization facilitates the maintenance and enlargement of society's middle strata.

Bureaucratic posts are middle-class in social status. These posts allegedly multiply faster than total populations. The proliferation of bureaucratic posts serves to counteract the effects of capital-concentration, effects which otherwise would drive bankrupt small businessmen into the ranks of the proletariat.

Various bureaucracies cater to various social strata. The modern state's bureaucracy caters particularly to the sons of "small manufacturers and traders, independent artisans, farmers, etc."—the sons of people who are particularly discontented and articulate, because they feel the squeeze of "expropriative capitalism" and organized labor.42 The Catholic Church enables talented sons of petty-bourgeois and peasant families to attain middle-class professional status, whereas this status normally is unattainable because it requires long formal education at private expense.43 Similarly,

For the German workers, the labor movement has an importance analogous to that of the Catholic Church for certain fractions of the petty bourgeois and of the rural population. In both cases we have an organization which furnishes opportunities for the most intelligent members of certain classes to secure a rise in the social scale.44

In no instance does Michels argue that Organization polarizes society. He depicts Organization, rather, as a built-in antidote to the worst consequences of capitalism. The processes of production and exchange under capitalism supposedly spur the creation of two radially distant classes, each increasingly homogeneous. But these processes also spur Organization. The processes generated by Organization facilitate (a) a general, but uneven, improvement in the socio-economic status of the lower strata ('deproletarianization'); (b) the maintenance and enlargement of the middle strata; and (c) a kind of "social exchange" whereby some people move upward socio-economically while others move (in a non-socio-economic sense) downward.46 Michels laments this process, because it is counter-revolutionary.

(5) Careers opened to talent. Throughout his book, Michels emphasizes that the individuals most directly and substantially benefited by Organization (in terms of socio-economic elevation), are society's most talented, most intelligent individuals. Organization provides "facility for ascent in the social scale" by such individuals.47 The peasants who attain middle-class status through the Church, the bourgeois who penetrate the Prussian nobility through the military corps, the workers who become petty-bourgeois through Socialist organizations, are not hacks. At one point, indeed, Michels declares that "democracy" (his fictional starting-point of Socialist development) "ends by undergoing transformation into a form of government by the best, into an aristocracy."

Such a characterization of the men who attain bureaucratic eminence seems particularly remarkable in view of one of the meanings he assigned to democracy. Although he frequently identifies democracy with absolute equality, Michels also says that democracy "gives to each [citizen] the possibility of ascending to the top of the social scale . . . annulling . . . all privileges of birth, and desiring that in human society the struggle for pre-eminence should be decided in accordance with individual capacity."49

On the other hand, Michels maintains that "the bureaucratic spirit corrupts character and engenders moral poverty."50 This accusation is closely identified with his major accusation: that in elevating talented workers (along

41 P. 268.
42 P. 275f.
43 Pp. 185-7.
44 P. 278.
45 Ibid.
with other workers), Organization forestalls revolution.

(6) *Advent of diverse interests.* Whereas the early Socialists allegedly were endowed with a singular Interest (social-democratic revolution), social differentiation allegedly produced a conflict of Interests. Especially debilitating was the emergence of full-time, professional leaders endowed with a singular "conservative" Interest which diverges from the Interest of the "mass."

The party is created as a means to secure an end. Having, however, become an end in itself, endowed with aims and interests of its own, it undergoes detachment, from the teleological point of view, from the class which its represents. In a party, it is far from obvious that the interests of the masses which have combined to form the party will coincide with the interests of the bureaucracy in which the party becomes personified. . . . By a universally applicable social law, every organ of the collectivity, brought into existence through the need for the division of labor, creates for itself, as soon as it becomes consolidated, interests peculiar to itself. The existence of these special interests involves a necessary conflict with the interests of the collectivity. Nay, more, social strata fulfilling peculiar functions tend to become isolated, to produce organs fitted for the defense of their own peculiar interests. In the long run they tend to undergo transformation into distinct classes.

Michels rests his case for the oligarchical impact of Organization chiefly on the argument that the specialists' Interests clash with those of the "mass" and the specialists' powers are stronger. Thus the advent of "professional leadership" marks the beginning of democracy's end. This argument seems inapplicable to the generality of cases, including the Socialist cases, for these reasons:

In the first place, with regard to Socialism it is necessary to accept uncritically the assumption that initial class differences did not involve a conflict of Interests. Michels seemingly covers this eventuality by depicting the pioneer Socialist intellectuals as "ideologues" who transcended the Interest peculiar to their class status.

In the second place, the notion of a conflict of Interest between leaders and "mass"

spuriously presupposes a homogeneous "mass." According to Michels's analysis, the advent of professional leadership coincides with the advent of a heterogeneous rank-and-file.

In the third place, the notion that a "conservative" Interest clashes with the Interest of the "mass" arbitrarily presupposes an innovatively oriented, revolutionary "mass." Only the proletariat, according to Michels's Marxist analysis, is objectively endowed with an unconscious Interest in revolution. But worker-Socialists are not fully proletarianised. And any other membership would be endowed with an 'objective' Interest which is not diametrically different from a "conservative" Interest.

In the fourth place, while a given caste of leaders might be endowed with an identical Interest, what is in the interest of one leader may contradict what is in the interest of another. Michels devotes a chapter on "The Struggle Among the Leaders Themselves," to this chronic situation. He indicates that the policies championed by various leaders will differ *because* each leader is striving competitively to solidify his own position.

Finally, identity between the Interests of leaders and electors is not self-evidently a requisite of democratic representation. If there is a need which can be expressed in the language of Interest, it is the need that the Interest of the leader be one which impels him to conform to the will(s) of his electors. As it happens, the "conservative" Interest ascribed by Michels to professional leaders seems to meet this requirement. The professional leader is "conservative" in the sense that he craves to maintain his status. To that end he is likely to conform to the wishes (rather than to the 'objective' Interests) of his electors, insofar as such behavior is the most efficacious or economical means of staying in office.

(7) *Emasculation of unpopular doctrines.* While the early Socialist program allegedly voiced the true "interests of the workers," many elements of this program proved to be inexpedient politically. They were inexpedient for the game of "modern" party politics, the game of "electoral agitation" to secure votes and "direct agitation" to secure recruits. In short, they were unpopular.

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61 P. 389. A very similar argument (omitting the "teleology" of "class" fidelity), is advanced by E. H. Carr in *The New Society* (1951) and is dissected by Langer, above, note 1, p. 263.

62 P. 280.
Socialist and aristocratic party experience mutually demonstrated that "principles" are "often a stumbling block to a party whose main desire is to increase its membership; and to disregard principles may bring electoral advantage, if at the cost of honor." To "avoid alarming" potential "adherents" and "sympathizers" who are "still outside the ideal world of socialism or democracy, the pursuit of a policy based on strict principle is shunned.

..." Similarly, since the aristocrat "recognizes" that in this "democratic epoch" he "stands alone" with his unpopular "principle," he "dissembles his true thoughts, and howls with the democratic wolves in order to secure the coveted majority.""

The efficient cause of this doctrinal emasculation, as of all the other changes besetting the Socialist movement, is alleged to be Organization. With increments of scale and complexity, "every struggle on behalf of ideas within the limits of the organization is necessarily regarded as an obstacle to the realization of its ends"—the ends, that is, of the bureaucrats, who yearn for recruits and safety."

(8) Renunciation of unpopular policies. Let us examine two examples.

(a) Legalism. The old Socialist determination "to demolish the existing state" was supplanted "by the new aim, to permeate the state with the men and ideas of the party." This change allegedly was realistic, in the sense that it marked a response to the fact that "the forces of the party, however well-developed, are altogether inferior and subordinate to the forces of the government." The realism was prompted, however, by Organization, which created thousands of livelihoods which would be jeopardized by governmental suppression. Socialist experience demonstrates the general and ironic fact that "the party becomes increasingly inert as the strength of its organization grows." Numerical and financial affluence does not breed audacity. It produces a "need for tranquility." Thus "the last link in the long chain of phenomena which confer a profoundly conservative character upon the intimate essence of the political party" is the problem of gaining governmental indulgence. However, Michels acknowledges that the advent of Socialist legalism was consistent with widespread popular sentiments. He also acknowledges that the laws which the Socialists came to obey were the laws of formally democratic states.

(b) Patriotism. In response to World War I, most of the Socialist leaders in Western Europe renounced policies which seemed consistent with their avowed principle of "proletarian internationalism." This change allegedly proved conclusively that the "oligarchical tendencies" infesting "modern political parties" impose a "regressive evolution": the "external form of the party, its bureaucratic organization, definitely gains the upper hand over its soul, its doctrinal and theoretical content." Be that as it may, Michels readily acknowledges that the leaders who opted for patriotism were conforming to prevailing rank-and-file sentiment. "Throughout the proletarian mass there has not been reported a single instance of moral rebellion" against the patriotic stance.

(9) Emergence of 'representative' leaders. Whereas the ex-bourgeois intellectuals allegedly expressed the Interests of the proletarian "mass" without belonging to that stratum, the second-generation Socialist leaders allegedly conformed more closely to the values and attitudes of their electors. The new leaders came up from the ranks. Michels emphasizes the psychological transformation which must accompany a change in status. But his conception of a psychological transformation pertains to Interests, or underlying motivations, rather than to attitudes and values. As to the latter, he portrays a close correspondence between those of workers and those of ex-worker-bureaucrats.

The leaders who have themselves been manual workers... are more closely allied with the masses in their mode of thought, understand the workers better, experience the same needs as these, and are animated by the same desires...
[They commonly possess] a more precise understanding of the psychology of the masses...

The ex-proletarian Socialist leaders deviated from official or sacred Socialist principles, not from rank-and-file attitudes and values. The typical workman’s “ideal” is “to become a petty bourgeois”; his attitudes are “optimistic,” accommodative toward other classes, and “conservative.” If the professional leader “continues to express ‘reasonable opinions,’” he may be sure of securing the praise of his opponents and (in most cases) the admiring gratitude of the crowd.

(10) Advent of ‘responsive’ leaders. Whereas the early Socialist leaders allegedly responded to the Interests of a Collectivity, the second-generation leaders responded to the manifest will(s) of constituents. Michels castigates such behavior. The new leaders’ “mania for promotion” found expression in “obsequiousness” toward employers, in “a semblance of obedience to the masses,” and in “demagogy.” Demagogues are “courtesans of the popular will. Instead of raising the masses to their own level, they debase themselves to the level of the masses.” Such deplorable responsiveness exemplified the characteristic Interest of professional leaders (a yearning for status-maintenance) and the characteristic situation of professional leaders, a situation in which deviations from constituents’ wishes entail relatively great risks. The situational imperatives include the following:

(a) Financial dependence. “When the leaders... are attached to the party organism as employees, their economic interest coincides as a rule with the interests of the party”; the “practice of paying for... services rendered... creates a bond”—a control which is not available in the case of non-salaried volunteers.

(b) Meager ‘personal’ resources. The professional leaders were relatively deficient in those non-technical resources which allegedly facilitate domination in the absence of tangible service. The principal “factors which secure the dominion of minorities over majorities” are “money and its equivalents (economic superiority), tradition and hereditary transmission (historical superiority),” and “formal instruction... (so-called intellectual superiority).” Also formidable are “prestige of celebrity,” hypnotic eloquence, catonian self-righteousness, psycho-economic self-sufficiency, and “force of will which reduces to obedience less powerful wills.” Compared with their predecessors, the second-generation Socialist leaders were meagerly endowed with these resources. They were not suited to become “temporal divinities” in the eyes of idolatrous masses. Such idolatry, with all the authority it confers, is not likely to devolve upon “strict and prosaic” bureaucrats.

(c) Alert constituents. Michels cites the “general immobility and passivity of the masses” as a major source of “oligarchy in the democratic parties.” In such groups, drawn chiefly from the lower social strata, turnover among members is high and turnout for meetings is low. The “leaders, when compared with the masses, whose composition varies from moment to moment, constitute a more stable and constant element.” The “gregarious idleness” of the rank-and-file facilitates “the influence of the leader over the masses” and the leaders’ “independence” from the masses. This condition varies among groups not according to organizational scale or complexity, but according to social composition and concern with the affairs of a group. The advent of professional Socialist leadership coincided with, and facilitated, an influx of petty-bourgeois members, an elevation of the socio-economic status of worker-Socialists, and an enlargement of the personal, tangible significance of Socialist affiliations.

(d) Non-available ‘official’ resources. The advent of professional leadership coincided with the establishment of regular, ‘official’ treasuries, organs of communication, files, agendas, meeting dates, mailing lists, and patronage. Michels discusses with keen insight the way such resources may be used by leaders to disarm challengers. But he does not indicate that these resources become more formidable, more available, in proportion to the scale or complexity of organization. He does testify
that “decentralization” of authority occurred, and this presumably involved a dispersal of control over the official resources. He also testifies that Organization entails procedural formalization; this presumably involves specification of legitimate uses of official resources.

(e) Individual technical expendability. Michels argues that the “technical indispensability of leadership” proved to be “the principal cause of oligarchy in the democratic parties.” This seemingly acknowledges that the leaders ultimately proved durable on account of their authentic utility to their followers, rather than their superiority in wealth, celebrity, oratory and other factors which promote obedience without necessarily rendering service. However, Michels’s concept of “technical indispensability” is elusive; it merits an extended analysis.

In one sense, the “technical indispensability of leadership” signifies merely that a particular function, leadership, cannot be forsaken. Since those who perform this function are likely to enjoy some advantage in one-to-one contests with challengers (the advantage, for example, of incumbency), there must be an element of Oligarchy in Organization. But this tells nothing about the relative advantages of leaders in various organizational and sociological contexts.

In another sense, Michels seemingly is suggesting that an individual’s power (his freedom of action and security of station) depend ultimately upon the ‘objective’ utility of the skills at his disposal. One who is richly endowed with a skill which is rare and prized approaches technical indispensability. Such an endowment raises the problem of discretionary action. Gratitude for past service and diffidence toward current complexities may impel clients to grant their agents a broad range of discretion. Agents thought to possess rare skills may be retained even if they defy their clients’ policy directives, on the expectation that in future the officials will prove to be technically adept and responsive.

On this subject Michels testifies that

This special competence, this expert knowledge, which the leader acquires in matters inaccessible, or almost inaccessible, to the mass, gives him a security of tenure which conflicts with the essential principles of democracy.

* * *

The democratic masses are . . . compelled to submit to a restriction of their own wills when they are forced to give to their leaders an authority which is in the long run destructive to the very principle of democracy . . . . The history of the working-class parties continually furnishes instances in which the leader has been in flagrant contradiction with the fundamental principles of the movement, but in which the rank and file have not [drawn] the logical consequences of this conflict, because they feel that they cannot get along without the leader, and cannot dispense with the qualities he has acquired in virtue of the very position to which they have themselves elevated him, and because they do not see their way to find an adequate substitute. Numerous are the . . . leaders who are in opposition to the rank and file at once theoretically and practically . . . [The rank and file] seldom dare to give [the] leaders their dismissal.

If indeed the second-generation Socialist leaders could survive “practical” conflicts more readily than their predecessors, then one could not conclude that the new leaders were relatively responsive to the will(s) of their electors. But Michels does not systematically develop, or sustain, the charge that the new leaders could readily retain office in the face of “practical” conflicts (deviations from the policy-directives of their constituents). He confines himself almost exclusively to the charge that the new leaders persistently, and securely, retained office in spite of “theoretical” conflicts (deviations from the policies ‘demanded’ by Socialist doctrine).

That “practical” conflicts actually dwindled in the course of Socialist development seems evidenced by the nature of the changes in Socialist policies and by the growth of Socialist membership. The new leaders did the popular, rather than the theoretically ‘correct,’ thing.

That “practical” conflicts necessarily dwindled in the course of Socialist development—dwindled in consequence of Organization—

76 P. 400.

77 “The mass per se is amorphous, and therefore needs division of labor, specialization, and guidance.” This “incompetence” is “incorvable.” (p. 404). Sartori observes that what is rendered as “leadership” in the English translation of Political Parties appears as Führerstum and as sisteina di capi in the German and Italian editions. The latter terms allegedly connote “rulership,” or “headship” or some sort of arrangement more sinister than what is conveyed by “leadership,” Sartori, above, note 1, p. 110.
seems likely in view of all the considerations advanced earlier in this article and in view of two more considerations.

First, Socialist Organization facilitated, and was accompanied by, material affluence. To that extent, the Socialist partisans acquired more resources with which they could search for agents who were technically qualified and psychologically disposed to be responsive.

Second, Socialist Organization involved task-specialization, and task-specialization often involves task-simplification. "It must not be supposed that the technical competence of the leaders is necessarily profound. . . ."78 Moreover, the "epoch" of Organization also is a time when "science puts at every one's disposal" such "efficient means of instruction" that "even the youngest may speedily become thoroughly well-instructed." Thus there is "less need for accumulated personal experience of life. . . . Today everything is quickly acquired, even that experience in which formerly consisted the sole and genuine superiority of the old over the young."79 To that extent, the supply of qualified technicians grows more abundant as organization develops. Consequently, the risks involved in defying an employer's policy-directives become more substantial.

On this showing—on Michels's showing—political survival in large-scale, complex organizations would seem to require that officials gratify the wishes of those they are hired to serve, regardless of the Interests of the latter. The result may be denounced as "obsequiousness" and as infidelity to popular interests, or it may be described as democratization.

Summary and Conclusion

Contrary to prevailing belief, then, Robert Michels actually provided a favorable account of the compatibility of Organization and democracy. While maintaining that Organization is incompatible with pure democracy, and that increments of Organization produce counter-democratic changes in associations which initially are pure democracies, he also suggested (in the case of European Socialism and in broader theoretical terms), that Organization can and frequently does accompany and facilitate a multitude of changes which constitute or facilitate democratization.

Among the conditions he linked to Organization are augmented formal rights and privileges, a general increase in social wealth, more prosperity and security and leisure and education and sophistication among the lower social strata, increased horizontal but not vertical social differentiation, enhanced opportunities for talented individuals to ascend socially, and the advent within public and private associations of leaders who are conspicuously qualified technically, disposed socio-psychologically, and obliged circumstantially to conform to the policy-preferences of their electors.

Far from being a pessimistic democrat, Michels was a pessimistic Romantic Revolutionist and a pessimistic Scientific Paternalist. He denounced Organization for promoting the amelioration instead of the radical purification of society. He detested Organization for promoting the manifest wishes rather than the 'objective' Interests of the "masses."

Michels's solicitude for the welfare of the "masses" evidently was linked with a profound disdain for the judgment of the "masses." In the light of his values and his beliefs, it seems understandable that Michels accommodated himself to Fascism.