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REVIEW ARTICLE

THE IRON LAW OF OLIGARCHY: A DILEMMA FOR POLITICAL PARTIES

By

IJAZ GILANI

A review on the works of Robert Michels, *Political Parties* (1916) and M. Ostrogorski, *Democracy and the Origin of Political Parties* (1902), in the light of contemporary literature on political parties.

In Michels' view, there were three problems which needed the attention of social scientists in his days, 'the principle of nationality', 'labors' right to full produce of his labor' and the "principle of self-government." He chose to deal with the third question, *i.e.*, the problem of democracy. Democracy, he thought, had entered, at once as an intellectual theory and as a practical movement, upon a critical phase from which it would be extremely difficult to discover an exit. It had encountered obstacles not merely imposed from without but spontaneously surgent from within, *i.e.*, bureaucratization of democratic organizations led to oligarchy.

In order to substantiate his thesis Michel presented sociological analysis of the German Social Democratic Party and examples from other European socialist parties. These parties, he showed, wanted democracy and fought for adult suffrage, free speech, and popular participation, yet they tended to be undemocratic in their internal structure. From this he deduced that the need for organization was an internal obstacle to the attainment of democracy, an obstacle which could be suppressed or removed only partially. That was the crux of his famous law of oligarchy which said:

"It's the organization which gives birth to the domination of the elected over the elect, of the mandatories over the mandators, of the delegates over the delegators. WHO SAYS ORGANIZATION SAYS OLIGARCHY."

Michels thought that the *individual psychology* of human specie as well as the *psychology of organization* were responsible for a stratified society in which some people were leaders and the rest followed them. He quotes Proudhon : "the human specie wants to be governed ; it will be. I am ashamed of my kind." And he speaks of the "pathology of the crowd" *i.e.*, words and actions are far less deliberately weighed by the crowd than by the individuals and the elite groups of which this crowd is composed. The individual disappears in the multitude and therewith disappears also his personality and the sense of responsibility.

Although Michels deals with psychology, his main concern are the constraints derived from the organizational needs which give birth to oligarchical tendencies, such as the expansion in size, complexity, specialization and need to make rapid decisions.

His major emphasis is on three sources of resource gap between the leaders and the ordinary members :

- (a) Superior knowledge : leaders have more information about how to secure assent for the programme.
- (b) Control over the formal means of communication with the membership ; press and travelling opportunities etc.
- (c) Skill in the art of politics ; competence in speech making, writing articles, and organising group activities.

These resource differences, Michels explained, led to the development of oligarchy in the following way :

- (1) The emergence of Leadership.
- (2) The emergence of professional leadership and its stabilization.
- (3) The formation of professional bureaucracy.
- (4) The centralization of authority.
- (5) Displacement from ultimate goals (*e.g.* socialist society) to instrumental goals (perpetuating the organizations).
- (6) Increased ideological rigidity.
- (7) Divergence between goals of leaders and members, in which the goals of the former take precedence.
- (8) Decline in opportunities of members willing to do so.
- (9) Co-optation of emergent opposition leaders to existing leadership.
- (10) The omnibus leaning of parties ; shift in appeal from membership to broader electorate.

In the process of mustering evidence for his Iron Law of Oligarchy, Michels looks into the characteristics of leadership in the labor movement. His analysis of what he calls 'ex-manual' and 'ex-bourgeois' rubbing their shoulders together in the leadership of socialist movements' is fascinating and perhaps his contribution in this aspect has been insufficiently appreciated by most of his commentators including S.M. Lipset, who is otherwise responsible for introducing Michels to contemporary students of social sciences. Even Almond, who deals with related issues in "Appeals of Communism" fails to take note of Michels work.

Michels shows that neither 'ex-manuals' can go back to manual work, nor 'ex-bourgeois' can go back to their class. This gives them very high stakes in preserving the organization per se, and assumption of oligarchic powers.

Michels' definition of what he calls 'refugees from the bourgeois' is highly insightful and deserves a rather long quote :

"It was as youthful enthusiasts that they joined the organization of workers and soon attained dominant positions. Their life was full of fatigue and hardship, and like all careers in which fame can be acquired, was extremely exhausting to the nervous system. Such men grow old before their time.

"What are they to do? They have become estranged from their original profession, which is altogether out of relation with their chosen vocation of professional politician.

"Having gone to the other side of the barricade to lead the enemies of the clan from which they sprang, they have fought and worked, now suffering defeats and gaining victories.

"Now youth has fled, they are ageing, with the passage of youth their ideals which have also passed, distressed by the contrarities of daily struggles, often also expelled by newly acquired experiences, which conflict with old beliefs.

"Thus many leaders are inwardly estranged from the essential content of socialism. Some of them carry on a very difficult struggle against their own scepticism; others have returned, consciously or unconsciously to the ideals of their pre-socialist youth.

"Yet for the disillusioned no backward path is open."

This long quotation brings us to the life history of Michels, which in part reflects the disillusioned ex-bourgeois socialist, and which is essential

to understand his book "Political Parties", because much of the data used in "Political Parties" stems from his personal experiences.

Michels' background was cosmopolitan. He was born to a bourgeois patrician family with a German, French, Belgian origin. He studied in England, Sorbonne and Munich. Until World War I he was in close touch with the intellectual and political worlds of Belgium and France.

As a young student at the University of Marburg, he became a socialist and participated in the social democratic party Congresses of 1903, 1904, and 1905. He left the party in that year but attended the Stuttgart Congress of that year as a delegate of the Italian Socialist party. A few months later he also resigned from the Italian Socialist party. Because of his socialist views, it was impossible for him to obtain a university position in Germany. Max Weber strongly deplored this and patronised him, giving him some editorial work. Their relationship perhaps strongly influenced Michels' thought.

Michels' political views were greatly influenced by French Syndicalists. He was disturbed by the state of the labor movement and he wanted to revitalise it by fusing the ideas of Marx, Proudhon and Pareto. In particular, he deplored the way calculations of parliamentary advantage dominated party life and led to the abandonment of every vigorous idea or course of action.

Michels' involvement in German politics provided him with insights of his critique of the Social Democratic Party and of the trade unions. We learn from his autobiography (1932), that his description of the "demagogic orator", of party congresses, of the characteristics required for leadership and especially of the intellectual in political, and of "Class Renegades" are largely based on his own experiences. But his involvement was not for solely intellectual concern, it was motivated by love for action and for principle.

Indeed his disillusion with democracy later led him to accept fascism. His life has been described as that of a romantic, frustrated politician, a patriot of an adopted country and a scholar; it reflected the conflicts of loyalty and the intellectual ambivalences of the first decade of the twentieth century.

His ambiguity comes up when at one point in the book he calls 'democracy a treasure...' and at another 'although we must choose democracy as the least of evils, the ideal government would doubtless be efficient aristocracy'.

Like Mosca and Pareto, to whom he pays his debt, he believed in the dialectical framework of "Cyclical Nature of Elites", in which democracy and aristocracy play and seek and Michels says :

"It is probable that this cruel game will continue without end".

Besides Michels, the other classic work on Political Parties is Ostrogorski's two volume study entitled, "Democracy and the Organization of Political Parties,"² published in 1902. Ostrogorski was a Russian who got his higher education in France and became interested in a comparative study of political parties in two adult suffrage societies, Britain and the United States. His work stands as a brilliant example of tremendous historical description and detail together with insightful systematic generalisations. Unlike conventional study of political parties, he looked for a systematic theory of behaviour of political parties—*i.e.*, what are the general attributes of political parties under conditions of universal suffrage. In this analysis of party machine Ostrogorski employed what has come to be known as the 'functional approach', that is, he asked what are the political needs of different groups in society and how are they met? It was this search for systematic theory that attracted Max Weber and Michels to his work. Although Ostrogorski analysed political parties which were quite different from European social democratic labor movement parties, he arrived at quite the same conclusions as Michels.

He, too, suggested that a party machine becomes the great inhibition against the participation of masses. A party machine, he said, tends to be bureaucratized much like an army. As an organization perennially engaged in combat with an opposite number, it emphasised obedience and the logic of a chain of command.

Ostrogorski proposed to substitute for party organization, a system of temporary associations which should come into existence only for the attainment of definite ends, and should be dissolved as soon as those ends were secured.

Michels takes this up in his book and holds it as not feasible. But unlike Michels who, (perhaps painfully), conceded that democracy in any real sense of the term was unattainable, Ostrogorski ends his work with a stragely emotional note :

"Even if it were demonstrated that all the efforts made for our subject were doomed to failure, we should act precisely as if the final triumph of democratic government were a mathematical certainty. The reason for this is simple: to die fighting is better than living a death".

There has been a complaint regarding a lack of follow-up on the works of Ostrogorski and Michels. The earliest among the contemporary social scientists to deal with the issues raised by them are S.M. Lipset from the United States, and Maurice Duverger, a French political scientist.

Lipset got interested in Michels, as he tells in a later essay, because his father was a member of the International Typographical Union (I.T.U.). Lipset observed that the internal I.T.U. policies did not support Michels' Iron Law of Oligarchy. This became the beginning of his huge study of the I.T.U. together with James Coleman and Martin Trow³.

Lipset began with the assumption that the Iron Law of Oligarchy was a valid law under the situation described by Michels *i.e.*, monopolies of power, status, funds, political skills and communication skills, but he thought there were deviant cases where the law did not apply, and the I.T.U. was one of them. It was a union of relatively high income people, a relatively small size. Its members were interested in union activities and historically it had developed a tolerance for multi-party systems in the union—tolerance for pluralism.

Lipset drew up a list of propositions to determine whether or not the Iron Law would apply. These propositions deal with:

1. History and Structure of a Union.
2. Status of the occupation and status distribution within the union.
3. Membership interest and participation in the union.
4. Law, legitimacy and value system in the union.
5. Distribution of resources within the union.
6. Basis of internal cleavages—ideology|interests.

Lipset et al hoped that *subsequent studies of internal government of voluntary organizations* would decide the validity of their propositions.

Maurice Duverger⁴ is probably the first author who makes a distinction between *Party Structure* and *Party Systems*. In *Party Structure* he includes party organisations, party membership, and leadership, *i.e.*, issues previously dealt by Michels, Ostrogorski and Weber et al.

In *Party System* he discusses the interaction of parties with each other, issues such as the number of parties, single party, two party and multi party systems, strength and alliances among parties and the relationship between parties and political regimes.

In his description of party structures, Duverger agrees with Michels' law, "the internal structure of parties", he says "is essentially autocratic

and oligarchic : their leaders are not really appointed by members, in spite of appearances ”.

He carries the argument further and suggests that “elections themselves ill-interpret the true state of opinion. Parties create opinion as much as they represent it”. (A result brought more elaborately by the MIT study, Bauer, Pool and Dexter, *International Trade and Public Policy* 1963. They show that the process of public opinion is a two-way process and the legislative leaders influence the electorate just as the opinion of the electorate influences the leaders).

But, then, Duverger turns around and asks the question, “would a system without parties be more satisfactory?” “Would liberty be better preserved”?, he asks in a rhetorical mood, “if the government found itself faced with only a scattering of individuals not grouped in political formations”?

Duverger takes up the issues of definition of democracy: “we are living on a completely artificial notion of democracy, forged by lawyers on the terms of the basis of eighteenth century philosophical ideas. Government of the people and by the people are fine phrases but with an empty ring. And he quotes Rousseau to his support: “In the strict sense of the term, no true democracy has ever existed and none will ever exist. It is contrary to the natural order for the majority to rule and the minority to be ruled”.

A true democracy, Duverger thinks, is something different, more modest but more real. It is liberty for the people, and for all sections of the people. The formula “government of the people and by the people”, must be replaced by “government of the people by an elite sprung from the people.”

Historically speaking, parties were born when the masses of the people really made their entrance into political life; the parties provided the necessary framework enabling the masses to recruit from among themselves their own elites. The rise of parties and especially working class parties have alone made possible any real and active cooperation of the whole people in political affairs.

This, in brief, is the response of contemporary western political scientists, to Michels et. al. *i.e.*, they show that the definition of democracy is “government of and for the people” but not essentially “by the people”,⁵ and that the political parties serve as a go-between which helps the contact of individual voters with their government. It strengthens rather than weakens the process of political participation.

It should be interesting to note the response from the communists to the Iron Law of Oligarchy. Undoubtedly this phenomenon was of greater concern to them as compared to the Western capitalist countries, whose *laissez faire* notions were not very friendly to any additional organisations from the beginning. To the communists, however, as one would note from the organisational textbook of Lenin, "What's To Be Done", party is an inalienable part of the strategy. It was perhaps the most outstanding contribution of Lenin to the movement.

The communists were troubled by such outrageous statements of Michels as "Socialists may win but not socialism, which will perish in the moment of its adherents' triumph".

The issue is taken up by Nikolai Bukharin⁶ in his "Historical Materialism, A System of Sociology", published in 1925. Bukharin believes the situation will change in a communist society where "incompetence of the masses", will disappear and there will be a colossal overproduction of organisers which will nullify the stability of the ruling groups.

Nevertheless, he concedes, that in a "period of transition" the system could have a tendency to degenerate and produce a leading stratum in the form of class germ.

It is somewhat surprising to note that Bukharin's solution for prevention of political oligarchy, *i.e.*, abolition of educational monopoly, is not very different from solutions presented by such western authors as Walter Lipmann in his famous book, "Public Opinion."⁷

Most recently the Social Science Research Council has dealt with political parties from a functionalist viewpoint asking the questions, "what kind of political party system, under what conditions, is suitable for a certain policy or political purpose?"⁸ This led to a search for greater elaboration and precision on the types of political parties. Harry Eckstein shows that the classification of political parties on simple arithmetical scale *i.e.*, one party, two party, multi-party system is not very meaningful. Weiner and LaPalmbora classify party systems into competitive systems and non-competitive systems. There is also the attempt to see what are the determinants of party systems.

What seems to me to be an interesting question raised by Eckstein⁹ is the issue of "party salience", *i.e.*, what is the role played by political parties in :

- (a) recruiting decision makers.
- (b) influencing the making of decisions.
- (c) influencing the implementation of decisions.