

## Notes and Queries On Weber's Reception of Michels\*

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### Abstract

This paper calls attention to a paradox concerning Weber's reception of Michels. Despite Weber's scholarly interest in Michels' work, and personal esteem of Michels as a person, no quotations of Michels' work may be found in Weber's writings, except his private correspondence. Explaining this paradox has involved an analysis of Weber's correspondence with Michels. This analysis has shown that in his correspondence Weber urged Michels to undertake a major research program on the organizational structure of the modern political parties, and on the values and ideals of the electorate and the representatives of the German Social Democratic Party and trade unions. Michels' major work on the sociology of the modern political party, when it finally came out, was found by Weber of very limited use from the vantage point of his ultimate theoretical goal, namely, to shed light on the reciprocal influences between ideals and organization in a modern party. No matter how much Weber thought of Michels as an expert on the socialist parties and movements, while pursuing his own theoretical inquiries Weber had therefore no reason for quoting Michels' work.

**Keywords** Max Weber, Roberto Michels, reception

### *Introduction*

The Weber – Michels intellectual relationship has been the object of several investigations (Mommsen 1981; 1987; Scaff 1981; Segre 1989; Tuccari 1993). There has also been some more specific research on Weber's reception of Michels' *Sociology of the Political Party in Modern Democracy* (Michels 1911), his most famous work (Losito 1986). This essay sets out to shed light on what may account for the persistent lack of references in Weber's publications to this book, and (except for the correspondence) to Michels in general, despite a number of declarations on Weber's part of esteem for Michels and of great interest in

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his work. This paradox has so far neither been clarified, nor been the object of a specific inquiry. The Weber–Michels paradox (as it will be called) will be first presented, and then an explanation will be suggested. It will be argued that a plausible reason may be Weber’s highly selective interest in Michels’ work, not as a set of theoretical essays on the organization, legitimacy sources, and power of modern political parties in general, but rather as a useful reference containing factual information on the history and organization of the movement and parties of the working classes, especially the German Social Democratic Party, and on the values and world view of its followers. Weber’s correspondence with Michels, especially during the crucial period of the preparation of the *Sociology of the Political Party* and immediately after its publication in German (1909–1912), will be the main source of information, but reference will be made also to the secondary literature on Weber and Michels.

#### *The Paradox Presented*

Excepting his private correspondence, in Weber’s writings—including those dealing with political events, processes and institutions—the work of Michels is nowhere quoted. The only elitist author mentioned (albeit not explicitly) by Weber was Gaetano Mosca. Weber, who was familiar with the first volume of Mosca’s *Elementi di Scienza Politica*, made indirect reference in *Economy and Society* to some crucial concepts and passages of this work (Mosca 1896: 53, 55; Segre 1984: 11–13; Weber 1956: 548–49; 1994: 51). The fact that Weber’s published writings do not contain quotations of Michels should not be construed as a customary practice in the social sciences of the late nineteenth-century or early twentieth, nor as Weber’s lack of interest in, or consideration for, Michels’ work and person. These points will be considered separately.

#### *Quoting References*

As for the scholarly practice of citing an author’s reference sources, it was possibly as widespread during Weber’s times as it is nowadays. A perusal of some major works by authors, with whom Weber was personally acquainted, supports this assertion. Thus, Toennies’ *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* (1935), Sombart’s *Der Moderne Kapitalismus* (1924, 1927), and Michels’ *Zur Soziologie des Parteiwesens in der Modernen Demokratie* (1911) contain hundreds of quotations of other social scientists and their works, as evidenced by the names index provided

at the end of these works. Marx, for instance, was cited six times by Toennies, 98 times by Sombart, and 38 times by Michels. Many of such quotations were complete, to the effect that there were references to specific writings of Marx, with indication of the page numbers (see e.g. Michels 1911: 140, 165, 166, 211, 233, 265, 295, 347, 371). Weber himself complied with this scholarly practice, and quoted other authors for the purpose not only of contrasting his views with theirs in the course of polemical exchanges, but also of relying on their scholarship in particular areas, such as the sociology of religion, political sociology, the epistemology and methodology of the social sciences, and the formulation of basic concepts in economics and sociology.<sup>1</sup>

Accordingly, Weber and other German social scientists of his times frequently, and even customarily, quoted their scholarly sources. Dif-

1. As for the sociology of religion, Ernst Troeltsch was quoted by Weber fifteen times as a very important authority on Western religions (Weber 1922. See especially I: 18), along with a host of other sources. Weber's works on Ancient Judaism, Hinduism and Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism, contain at the time of their inception quite extensive lists of bibliographical references, with Weber's own comments and evaluations, complemented by numerous additional references in subsequent footnotes. In his well-known lecture on 'Politics as a Vocation' Weber made explicit reference to Ostrogorsky, who along with Bryce had been one of his major sources on Anglo-Saxon political parties (Weber 1992: 205; see also Mommsen 1971: 375). Moreover, in his epistemological and methodological essay on Roscher and Knies, he frequently referred to Rickert's work on the limits of the concept formation in the natural sciences, which he called 'fundamental' and whose relevance he set out to establish for the economic science (Weber 1973: 4, 7; on Weber's reception of Rickert, see Burger 1987). He also referred to Husserl, in connection with the problem of the acquisition of knowledge through lived experience (Weber 1973: 77, 102, 109, 110; on Weber's reception of Husserl, see Segre 2000: 149-150); to Spann, in particular to his evaluation of Simmel's philosophy of history (Weber 1973: 97); and to Hellpach's assessment of the objective validity of psychiatric knowledge (Weber 1973: 111). Considering only the first two chapters of *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*, in addition to Jaspers and Rickert (Weber 1956: 1), whom Weber also quoted approvingly elsewhere, he also relied on the authority of many other sources in order to make some points, and provide his readers with essential bibliographical references. For example, readers were referred to Jhering, Oertmann, Ruemelin, Toennies, and Weigelin insofar as the concepts of usage, custom, and convention are concerned (Weber 1956: 15, 17, 18); again to Toennies for the distinction between community and association (Weber 1956: 1, 22); to Von Gottl and Liefmann for the concept of economic action (Weber 1956: 32-33); to Boehm-Bawerk for the concepts of economic opportunities and goods (Weber 1956: 34); to Von Mises for an economic theory deemed acceptable, and for the distinction between means of payment and means of exchange (Weber 1956: 40); again to Von Mises, and to Neurath, for the technical problems of an economy that does not use money as a means of exchange (Weber 1956: 56-58).

ferent reasons should therefore account for the absence of quotations of Michels in Weber's work, aside from personal letters. Lack of scholarly interest or personal interest were not, however, among such reasons. On the contrary, Weber evidenced a lively interest in Michels' work, especially in his book on the sociology of the political party, as well as great esteem for its author.

#### *Indicators of Scholarly Interest*

Among such indicators there are Weber's overt declarations of interest in Michels' most famous work that may be found in his private correspondence. Accordingly, Weber declared in a letter sent on the day of Christmas of 1909, about one year before it came out, to Michels' wife, Gizela Michels-Lindner, to be 'extremely excited' because of its announced publication. When a complimentary copy was finally sent to him, this declaration was followed by a pledge to read it in only 'eight days' despite poor physical and psychological conditions, and by a thorough appraisal of Michels' book in a subsequent letter (Weber 1994: 348-49, 726, 754-61). Weber's concern with Michels' scholarly production preceded by a few years the latter's composition of the *Sociology of the Political Party in Modern Democracy* translated into English as *Political Parties* (1958). In a letter written on 1 January, 1906, even before his personal acquaintance with Michels, Weber stated his 'uncommon interest' in Michels' work; presumably, an essay on the German Social Democracy that Michels had submitted to the *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik*, of which Weber was co-editor. This was published in that same year, and also a lengthy investigation on the proletarian and bourgeois classes in the Italian socialist movement that came out in the *Archiv* in 1905 to 1906 (Michels 1905, 1906a; Weber 1990: 19). Weber's scholarly interest was further evidenced by questions and detailed commentaries regarding Michels' 1906 essay on German Social Democracy (Michels 1906b; Weber 1990: 55-58, 84, 94, 99-100); and later, by suggestions and comments concerning other works by, or entrusted to, Michels, before as well as after the publication of his major work (Weber 1994: 60-62, 125, 664; 1998: 171-72, 224).

#### *Signs of Personal Esteem*

Signs of appreciation of Michels were frequently given by Weber throughout the period of their relationship. Appreciation was expressed in many ways, as positive (though often ambivalent) evalua-

tions of Michels' work and person, or as requests of new contributions, or as invitations to take new roles in the German academic and scholarly world. Thus, Weber stressed his friend's moralism and honesty; asked him to contribute to a sociological investigation of the press and to a new *Grundriss der Sozialökonomik* (Outline of Social Economy), to be published under Weber's editorship; urged him to write a cultural history of the modern proletarian movement (a task for which Michels was in Weber's mind especially qualified), and took him as an expert on German Social Democracy; praised him for the structure, content, and systematic character of his *Political Parties* (1958), and his knowledge of demography and the international workers' movement; recommended him for an academic position as lecturer (*Habilitation*) in Italy, since much to Weber's regret this was not possible in Germany; invited him to participate both at the First and the Second German Congress of Sociology (this latter invitation was reiterated a number of times); and repeatedly suggested that Michels should take over Weber's own position as co-editor of the *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik* (Weber 1990: 56, 207, 210, 616; 1994: 62, 125, 349, 402-403, 411, 637, 664, 694, 754; 1998: 26-27, 98-99, 448, 460, 466, 480, 491, 566, 764, 767, 770, 778, 780. See also Mommsen 1987: 123).

### *The Paradox Explained*

As mentioned, the presence of indicators of scholarly interest in, and signs of personal esteem for, Michels on Weber's part cannot be easily reconciled with the absolute lack of citations of any work by Michels in Weber's writings, apart from his correspondence. An explanation will now be suggested of this paradox. This explanation will first focus on those epistemological, conceptual and theoretical points of explicit disagreement of Weber with Michels. The disagreement will be then shown to be serious enough, to reduce the relevance to Weber of Michels' work merely as a source of empirical knowledge on the working class movement, rather than an useful account of the legitimacy sources and organizational structure of modern political parties, whether socialist or not. These points may concern the epistemology of the social sciences, as well as conceptual and theoretical issues. Epistemological questions concern chiefly the distinction between value judgements and judgements of fact. Weber often took Michels to task for the latter's alleged proneness to formulate value judgements in the context of scholarly argumentation. One instance was, in Weber's opinion, Michels' ethical evaluation

of German Social Democracy in place of a scientific analysis of its specific values. Another instance was Michels' usage of value-loaded expressions, such as the 'social value' of a given occupation, or bureaucratic organizations that are 'harmful to the common weal'. Concepts, moreover, were not clearly defined. As Weber maintained, this was the case, in particular, of *Political Parties*. In this work important concepts were not defined, such as the concept of power (*Herrschaft*), and concepts referring to collectivities, like the State, class and union as totalities, and class interest. The concept of class, moreover, was misdefined as though class membership might be indicated by income and life style (Weber 1990: 640; 1994: 755, 757, 758, 760, 761. See also Scaff 1981: 1275-78).

Theoretical issues, as Weber remarked, were not adequately dealt with by Michels. Which theoretical issues Weber referred to may be gathered not only from his correspondence with Michels, but also from other Weberian sources and from the secondary literature on the Weber – Michels relationship. Of particular significance in this regard is a short presentation by Weber, in 1905, hence before he became acquainted with Michels, of an article by R. Blank, concerning the social composition of the German social-democratic electorate (Weber 1905). Weber's presentation called attention to some research questions, such as the formal features of modern party organizations, the differences between the organizations of Anglo-Saxon parties and that of the German Social Democratic Party, and finally, the relations between the organization of this party and other party or union organizations, and the party electorate (Portinaro 1984; Roth 1971: 271-72; Scaff 1981: 1274; Segre 1989: 348-50). As has been argued by interpreters of the Weber – Michels relationship, Michels took on the task of investigating the organizational structure of the German Social-democratic Party, following Weber's encouragement (Mommsen 1981: 109; Portinaro 1984: 218; Roth 1971: 246; Scaff 1981: 1279-80; Segre 1989: 368).

In fact, those sections of Michels' major work dealing with the social analysis of leadership and the oligarchic tendencies of party organizations, especially of the Social Democratic Party, were those that elicited Weber's greatest praise (Michels 1911: 260-381; Weber 1994: 754-55). Michels investigated, however, neither the features of modern party organizations in general (as distinct from those characteristic of the German Social Democratic Party), nor the organizational differences between the German Social Democratic Party and the British and American Parties, nor the relations between this party, other organizations, and the unorganized electorate. A considerable

portion of Weber's original research program was not, accordingly, carried out by Michels. For about five years (1906-1910), Weber repeatedly prodded his friend Michels to conduct a thorough investigation on most, if not all, the points of this program, and consequently took him to task for having failed to do so when *Political Parties* finally came out.

In this connection, some passages drawn from his correspondence with Michels are worth noting. Barely a few months after having become acquainted with Michels, in March and June 1906, already Weber encouraged him to undertake a vast research program on: a) the relations of economic or psychological dependence on the political party of its followers, and vice versa; b) the differences, insofar as these relations are concerned, between the Anglo-Saxon parties and the German Social Democracy; c) whether having an ideological orientation, as in the case of the German Social Democracy in contrast to that of the Anglo-Saxon parties, affects the bureaucratic structure, and vice versa. This question should be dealt with – he suggested – in a comparative way: the comparison is made possible by the fact that all these parties, and only these, are endowed with a developed organizational structure; d) the formation of the ideological character of the German Social Democratic Party; e) why, and with what consequences, the German Social Democracy as a party organization, and its working-class followers, show reluctance to collaborate with party members of bourgeois origin; f) whether 'revisionist' (namely, reform-inclined) and academic members of the party affect its organizational structure (Weber 1990: 56-58, 99).

In subsequent letters, Weber urged his friend Michels not make the mistake to believe that: a) economic indispensability involves power, and b) there exist a 'will of the people', and some form of democracy that would do away with the domination of some people by other people. He further invited him: a) to investigate the transformation of the German Social Democracy from an ideological party to a bureaucratic organization, like its American counterparts; b) to analyse regional differentiation of this party and the motive forces of its organizational evolution; c) to improve his knowledge of the German 'bourgeois' parties; d) to study in depth the programs, values, ideals, and the culture of the Social Democratic Party, unions, and of the socialist movement in general, and to ascertain what ethic prevails in its fold, whether an ethic of principles or rather one that takes into consideration the consequences of a given course of action. This study should be congenial, as Weber observed, to Michels, himself a

trade unionist and a man of principles (Weber 1990: 424, 615-18, 640-42, 647; 1994: 60-61, 125, 350, 402, 403, 411, 664).

When a complimentary copy of the *Political Parties* was finally in Weber's hands, he read it with utmost attention. While he did not dispute the existence of oligarchic and self-perpetuating tendencies in the organizations of modern parties, whether socialist or not, as himself had stressed long ago (Weber 1905: 551-52), he apparently found the work did not quite conform to his expectations. A few factual statements were, first of all, considered erroneous by Weber. Since their theoretical relevance is limited, only some of them will be hinted at in this connection: that marriage as an institution originated in the men's interest rather than women's (as Weber contended) in bequeathing their inheritance to their offspring; that the parties had been founded by working-class supporters rather than by privileged intellectuals; and that the English trade union members (rather than the workers' leaders, as the Editors have indicated) (Michels 1911: 301; Weber 1994: 759 n. 23) are, like their American counterparts, selfish, arrogant, and poorly educated (Weber did not subscribe to extending this evaluation to the English trade union members) (Weber 1994: 755, 756, 759).

Secondly, and more importantly, Weber raised objections of theoretical import (Weber 1994: 756-61). Some of these objections had not been anticipated in his correspondence with Michels. More specifically: a) practical experience rather than formal education is relevant for leaders of occupational groups; b) the choice of competent leaders does not presuppose competence on the part of those who make the choice, for anybody may feel the effects of incompetence; c) from the interests of their members, rather than from alleged psychological laws, follows the closure of occupational groups, and from such interests, rather than from sentiments of trust, also follows the cohesion of organizations like parties and cartels; d) power (*Macht*) is not necessarily conservative, and can in fact achieve revolutionary effects; e) the economic interests of the party leaders do not coincide with those of the party as a whole, which cannot be determined beyond dispute.

Other objections, however, had already been formulated: a) the question, whether the presence in the party of 'revisionist' and academic members affect its organizational structure, implied some fundamental distinction between these two components of the reform-oriented wing of German Social Democracy. Accordingly, their merging into a unitary consideration by Michels (Michels 1911: 307-308) was found objectionable by Weber. Parenthetically, Michels in a



subsequent work on the psychology of the anti-capitalistic movements dealt with socialist academic intellectuals separately (Michels 1926: 323); b) economic indispensability and technical competence do not imply power. To this remark Weber added, this time, that power (*Herrschaft*) may be reciprocal, for those that are subject to it in one sense may exert it in another. He contended, accordingly, that Michels' conceptual framework of power was 'too simple' to account for the complexity of social relations. The same point has been made by more recent critics of Michels (Beetham 1981: 89), and involves a rejection of Michels' elitist, anti-democratic political theory as conceptually and theoretically inadequate (Scaff 1981: 1281-83); c) Michels' insufficient knowledge of the work by James Bryce, *The American Commonwealth*, had been detrimental to his analysis. Weber, in his letters preceding the publication of the *Political Parties*, had urged Michels to read and study that work (Weber 1990: 57, 99, 617-18). Although Michels finally complied, he quoted it only once (Michels 1911: 187), and—much to Weber's displeasure—in the abridged instead of the full edition, which—as Weber thought—would have been useful to him. As Weber had already explained in March 1906, at the inception of their intellectual relationship, Bryce's work is indispensable to the students of modern, technically developed parties, such as those that obtain in the United States. The reciprocal influence between ideals and organizational structure in the German Social Democratic Party could be brought into light—Weber then maintained—by means of a comparison with the organizational structure of the American, non-ideological parties (Weber 1990: 57-58).

### *Conclusion*

Thus, Michels pursued his own line of research on the oligarchic tendencies within the working class parties and movements, without heeding Weber's advice to do comparative analyses of different party organizations and to refine his concepts of power and domination, in order to produce a more persuasive theory of democracy. This theory should consider the organizational prerequisites of modern political parties, the opportunities and constraints they provide to their charismatic leaders, and in general, the conditions and limits of parliamentary democracy in contemporary capitalist societies (Mommssen 1981: 113-14, and n. 25; Portinaro 1984: p. 219; Scaff 1981: 1281-83; Tuccari 1993: 272-79). Even after the publication of Michels' major work, Weber continued to esteem and praise him for his knowledge of the German Social Democracy, and of the international working class

parties and movements. However, it then became apparent to Weber that for those theoretical questions which he found most relevant Michels could be of limited help. Except for his private correspondence, he had therefore no reason for quoting his friend's work.

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