

# MICHELS'S IRON LAW OF OLIGARCHY

Robert Michels ( 1876– 1936), was a young historian who had been unable to get a job in the German university system, despite the recommendation of Max Weber, because he was a member of the Social Democrats. Michels had participated extensively in party activities and had come to the conclusion that the Socialists did not live up to their own ideals. Although the party advocated democracy, it was not internally democratic itself. The revolutionary Marxism of the speeches at conventions and on the floor of the Reichstag was just a way of whipping up support among the workers, while the party leaders built a bureaucratic trade union and party machine to provide sinecures for themselves. Michels's analysis appeared in 1911 in a book called Political Parties. The phenomenon of party oligarchy was quite general, stated Michels; if internal democracy could not be found in an organization that was avowedly democratic, it would certainly not exist in parties which did not claim to be democratic. This principle was called the Iron Law of Oligarchy, and it constitutes one of the great generalizations about the functioning of mass- membership organizations, as subsequent research has borne out.

The Iron Law of Oligarchy works as follows: First of all, there is always a rather small number of persons in the organization who actually make decisions, even if the authority is formally vested in the body of the membership at large. The reason for this is purely functional and will be obvious to anyone who has attended a public meeting or even a large committee session. If everyone tries to have a say ( as happens especially in the first blush of enthusiasm when a new, democratically controlled organization is created), then in fact nothing gets done. The discussion goes on at great length without even covering all the necessary is-sues, until finally most people leave or keep quiet and let a few persons present their plans. Before long, the group has delegated to a few of its members the authority to prepare plans and

to carry them out, while most members confine themselves to formally selecting and approving plans presented to them. Second, says Michels, the leaders who have this delegated authority tend to take on more power than the members who selected them. Once in power ( whether this is an elected office or a purely informal leadership role), they tend to remain there for a long time and become relatively impervious to influences from below. New leaders enter their ranks primarily by being selected or co-opted from above by the old leaders, rather than by rising on their own from below. The reason for this is partly functional and partly because of the way resources of power are distributed in an organization. The leaders are a much smaller group than the rank and file, but they have the advantage of being better organized. The members as a whole come together ( if at all) only at occasional meetings or elections, but the leaders are in constant contact with each other. The leaders tend to form a united, behind- the- scenes, informal group, for it is much easier for them to make plans, carry out programs, and iron out disagreements in private personal negotiations than under the parliamentary rules of open meetings. But since the leaders operate in close contact with each other, out of the sight of the general membership, they tend to develop their own ways of looking at things. They are “ insiders” who have a sophisticated view of how things are done, how bargains are struck, how strategies are formed. They know the ropes, and new leaders must become initiated into their world; hence they are selected from above, rather than projected from below. Third, the leaders gradually develop values that are at odds with those of the members. Michels here applies the principle of Marx and Weber that individuals’ outlooks are determined by their social positions. The social positions of party leaders are fundamentally different from the positions of mere party members, since their experiences of participating in the organization are different. For the ordinary member, the organization is something he or she belongs to and participates in from time to time, but it is not usually the center of his or her life. Members expect their union to fight for their interests and their values, but that is about all. The leader’s position is different. For that person, the organization is usually a full- time job, or at least a

major part of his or her life. Especially if the organization is big and powerful enough to have paid officials, these officers receive money, power, and prestige from their positions, and often a chance to belong to a higher realm of other elites. The union leader gets to associate with corporation officials; the Socialist deputy sits in the legislature with other persons of power. It is not surprising, says Michels, that the values of such leaders become subtly corrupted. The leader becomes less concerned with the interests of the rank and file or the ideology of the party and more concerned with staying in office. Leaders become conservative, in the sense that they want only to preserve their organization and not jeopardize it on risky ventures, even if the organization's ideals call for it. But doesn't this corruption of the leaders bring them into conflict with their followers? It sometimes does, says Michels, but the leadership has the upper hand in such struggles. Unless the membership is extremely upset about something— and maybe not even then— they are unlikely to mobilize their numbers to displace the leadership. For power in the organization goes to those who control its administrative resources, and these are in the hands of the leaders. They are better organized than the membership. They are better informed, for they are in constant contact with the latest developments both inside and outside the organization, and they can use this knowledge, which is usually kept secret among themselves, to attack their opponents as ill-informed and unrealistic. They control the communications within the organization: distributing its newsletter, calling its meetings, setting its agendas, making its official reports. They have full time to devote to organization business and organization politics, whereas their opponents are usually part-time amateurs; the leaders also have the finances, the staff assistance, the contacts, and the know-how. And finally, they have the legitimacy of being the existing leadership who can claim to represent the organization, whereas their opponents can be called "factions" and "splitters" who represent only themselves and who aid the organization's enemies by creating internal dissension. The united leadership, then, can wield power out of all proportion to its numbers because it controls the material and ideological resources of the organization. Michels provides a sort of mini-

Marxism of class conflict and the weapons that enable one class to prevail, only his setting is a single organization rather than the whole society. But Michels had no hopes that history would ever reverse this distribution of power resources. As long as we have large- scale organizations, these consequences are inevitable. “ Who says organization,” stated Michels, “ says oligarchy.” Michels’s analysis was remarkably perceptive. Subsequent research has revealed that the dispersion of power away from the membership and into the hands of the leaders who control the administrative apparatus occurs in all sorts of formally democratic membership organizations— in political parties all over the world, trade unions, clubs, legislatures, charities, PTAs, and professional associations ranging from the American Medical Association to the American Sociological Association. The Iron Law of Oligarchy is not, of course, an outright declaration that members never have any control of their organizations. Theories that state such absolutes are usually wrong, for reality is more complex and variable than that. Properly understood, Michels’s theory tells how the different positions in an organization shape the interests of their holders and give them certain organizational weapons that they can use in the struggle with others for control of the organization. It does not state that the leaders are always completely corrupted or that they always have their way. The history of political parties in America illustrates the point nicely. The Republican and Democratic parties in America, especially the latter, have al-ways been strongly influenced by party bosses and professional politicians, from the spoils system of Andrew Jackson through the recent presidential campaigns. The techniques of organizational control that Michels describes are well illustrated in almost any political campaign. Nevertheless, some reforms have occurred from time to time; some politicians occasionally arise who make more than a token appeal to popular demands; and long- entrenched party bosses are sometimes displaced. Michels’s theory, then, is not a matter of absolutes, but of variations, of which he described the most typical outcome. Subsequent re-search has shown us that the threat of organizational oligarchy, although always present, varies with the type and setting of the organization. The most oligarchic associations are those that have

a very numerous and dispersed membership and large- scale centralized administrative machinery for the leaders to control. The less oligarchic organizations are those that depend on frequent participation by their members and that compete with other associations for their members' support. Michels's position on the chances of real democracy is pessimistic, but we have since seen that there are at least some possibilities of overcoming oligarchy.