

The Mass Party Debate

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Political parties are a crucial, perhaps indispensable, aspect of modern representative government. Yet today parties occupy an odd space in the studies of democracy and democratic institutions conducted by political theory.¹ Contemporary democratic theory is enmeshed in the question of what democracy is, but the legitimate function of political parties and their role in a democratic society is strangely absent from those discussions. Aggregative, agonistic, and deliberative models of democracy are deeply concerned with expressions of preference, adversarial conflict, and political will formation/justification, but generally from the perspective of the individual or at times the “group.” This is unsurprising given that democratic theory is deeply connected to the history of liberalism in the United States.² But by relegating the core aspect of modern government – the mass party – to a footnote, democratic theory has removed itself from dialogue with the political world in favor of academic conversations that veer increasingly towards linguistics and philosophy. This has further widened the split between theory and the remainder of the discipline. Empirical political science has produced data and models of parties, party organizations, and party systems but without theory’s input has rarely asked deeper theoretical questions about the meaning of democracy and the place of parties within it.

I maintain the mass political party, the possibilities and the problems it poses for democracy and representative government should be core research questions for democratic theory. Moreover, there was a period when liberal and socialist theorists grappled with these issues. I call this the Mass Party Debate, and it contained both academic analyses of the phenomenon and internal organizational discussions over the impact of the party. We can roughly date this era from 1888-1921³, which corresponds with the rise of the mass party in the Western world. Alongside this came major studies into the nature of the phenomenon, its impact on the politics of the era, and on democracy by

¹ I. van Biezen and M. Saward, ‘Democratic Theorists and Party Scholars: Why They Don’t Talk to Each Other, and Why They Should’, *Perspectives on Politics*, 6 (1) (2008) pp. 21-35.

² J. Gunnell, *Imagining the American Polity: Political Science and the Discourse of Democracy*, (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004).

³ These dates were chosen because, beyond their rough correspondence with the phenomenon’s growth, they begin with a publication on the topic by Bryce as well as (in 1890) the legalization of the German SPD and its explosive growth, and they end with the cresting of the European post-war revolutionary wave and another major publication by Bryce on the topic.

luminaries such as James Bryce⁴, Robert Michels⁵, Moisei Ostrogorski⁶, and Max Weber⁷ that have come to be regarded by political science as seminal texts in the study of modern political organization. A similar conversation within the German Social-Democratic Party, and to an extent within the international socialist movement, debated the impact of the mass party on the socialism, revolution, and the influence of the party's rank-and-file on the growing SPD administrative apparatus; Karl Kautsky, Rosa Luxemburg, and Anton Pannekoek were prime theorists and adversaries within the dialogue, but it reached thinkers a spectrum of socialist thinkers as diverse as Eduard Bernstein and Alexander Parvus. Here again we find Robert Michels, who straddled the divide between liberals and socialists, incorporated liberal theories about the party into socialist concerns, and understood, perhaps more clearly than most socialists of the era, that the mass party was a new phenomenon that posed specific challenges to democracy and socialism.⁸

The debate is also a purchase point for larger questions concerning democratic theory itself. The questions raised within the mass party debate are relevant ones that critically engage with dominant parts of the subfield and have the potential to reform, and even reshape it. It is exactly where those theories are most vulnerable to criticism that the mass party debate finds relevance. It also requires us to examine why the questions of the mass party seem at their peak in periods when liberalism and socialism contend for political power. Finally, it is also where political theory and party studies might intersect and create a place for dialogue between theory and political science as a field.

The essay is structured as follows: construction of the mass party debate through the theorists, their work, and the questions posed; a critique of contemporary political theory from the perspective of the mass party debate; and a conclusion about the debate's contemporary relevance. Through this I hope to revive the mass party question as a fertile ground for research, a touchstone in the history of political thought, and a space for discussion on the nature of democracy for political theory and political science. Finally, I also discuss briefly the debate as a place where political theory and party studies might intersect and create a place for dialogue between theory and political science as a field.

⁴ J. Bryce. *The American Commonwealth, Vols. I-III, 3rd Edition*. (New York, 1898).

⁵ R. Michels, *Political Parties: A Sociological Study of the Oligarchical Tendencies of Modern Democracy* (New York, 1959).

⁶ M. Ostrogorski. *Democracy and the Organization of Political Parties, Vol. I-II*. (Chicago, 1964).

⁷ M. Weber. *Economy and Society, Vols. I-II*. (Berkeley, 1978).

⁸ P. LaVenía, Jr., 'Rethinking Robert Michels', *History of Political Thought*, vol. XL (1), Spring 2019 pp. 111-137.

The Beginnings of the Mass Party Debate

The mass party debate had its origins in the late 19th century expansion of the franchise, growth of the urban proletariat as a voting bloc, and as a consequence the eventual development of the mass political organization. Liberal and socialist thinkers alike struggled with the growing professionalization of politics and the extraordinary effects it had on democratic practice, political leadership, and party behavior. The reasons each side had for concern fundamentally differed. Liberals ultimately understood the expansion of suffrage meant the decline of representative government based on local notables and the propertied, cultured middle class alongside the rise of transactional political machines tied to working class voters;⁹ they feared the decline in middle-class political power, but also the rise of political leadership not based on an educated, talented elite but rather the crass political motivations and crude talents of party bosses, and the ultimate erosion of representative institutions. The mass party presented socialists with a different dilemma: party growth was linked in the political arena to the same tendencies within capitalism that caused explosive growth for labor unions in the economic. Yet while the party grew, prepared the working class for the socialist revolution, and ostensibly supported fuller democratization of capitalist society, concern arose that increasing parliamentarism and bureaucracy within the supposedly revolutionary party had caused the leadership to eschew radical tactics, ignore the rank-and-file, suppress dissent, and embrace a more conservative and reformist path. Finally, an outgrowth of these concerns was a current in both camps that identified a germ of oligarchy in the organizational bureaucracy and entrenched leadership of parties that was otherwise cloaked in a veneer of democratic elections.

From this it is possible to identify key aspects of the debate: 1. The growth of professionalization of tasks and roles within parties; 2. The effect of the mass political organization on democratic institutions; 3. Internal party democracy (or lack thereof) and its effect on organizational leadership and mass of voters; 4. Increased bureaucratization within parties; 5. The place of individuals in mass democracy; 6. What role there was for talented and responsible leadership; 7. Conservatism of party leadership and its impact on revolutionary politics; 8. Whether reforms to mass organizations could make them more democratic. Few of the authors, except perhaps for Michels, some of the syndicalist milieu in which he traveled, and Max Weber, touched on all of these within their writings. Yet all the participants took some of the aspects quite seriously, and devoted significant theoretical

⁹ In the context of the United States this was a racialized and xenophobic fear as evidenced in Bryce and Ostrogorski's dismissal of African-American and European immigrant voters.

effort in an attempt to deal with them. The sum of their work is greater than the parts, and it is this that underscores the importance of understanding the debate as such rather than separately.

The final question about the mass party debate must be: why it has hidden in plain sight for over a century? It has long been acknowledged a broad discussion between liberals and socialists on the nature of imperialism occurred over roughly the same time period, involving many of the same participants. Hobson's *Imperialism* was famously cited by Lenin in his own volume, but Bukharin, Hilferding, Kautsky, and Luxemburg wrote on imperialism as well, as did Hobhouse. That the topic of the mass party was a concern is not in doubt: Bryce and Ostrogorski produced major texts on the subject, it runs like a thread through Weber's, and Hobhouse wrote a small volume on it. Kautsky, Lenin, Luxemburg, Pannekoek, and Trotsky all produced articles and books on the party. I believe the lack of identification of discussion around the topic of the mass party as a phenomenon is clearly not because it was not happening or that it was hidden in obscure publications. Instead, scholars have perceived both discussions differently, with liberal concern over the rise of the party centering on its effect on professionalization, rational leadership, individual political efficacy, and political institutions, where socialists were concerned with the internal issues of leadership response to rank-and-file pressure, growth of bureaucracy, and the role of the party in broadening internal and external democracy while preparing for the revolution. That they were both discussing the same broad topic was apparent to Max Weber and his protégé Robert Michels but few others at the time. The syndicalist milieu in which Michels traveled was concerned with the mass party and its impact on democracy, but it has been consigned to an historical footnote in discussions of the era.

Substance of the Debate

The publication in 1888 of James Bryce's sweeping¹⁰ work *The American Commonwealth* is the rough origin of the larger conversation on the mass party and its place in modern democracy. Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* had inspired Bryce to echo the master, and as such he traveled the United States extensively over the course of three visits.¹¹ It stands as "a Victorian travel book and a work of Victorian social science."¹² Max Weber read it, held it in high regard, and encouraged Robert Michels to read it in its entirety; it would inspire Bryce's pupil Ostrogorski to write his own studies of

¹⁰ Bryce continued to edit and update the work through multiple editions.

¹¹ 1870, 1881, and 1883-4. See: M. Keller, 'James Bryce and America', *The Wilson Quarterly* (1976-), vol. 12 (4), Autumn 1988 pp. 86-95.

¹² M. Keller, 'James Bryce and America', pp. 89.

American democracy.¹³ Bryce gained great fame from its publication and would eventually be named British Ambassador to the United States from 1907-1913. Part III in volume 2 – which spans 23 chapters – is entitled “The Party System” and contains the substance of Bryce’s observations about party politics and American democracy. Bryce noted “the spirit and force of party has in America been as essential to the action of the machinery of government as steam is to a locomotive engine. The government counts for less than in Europe, the parties count for more.”¹⁴

Bryce identified the tendency within the mass party towards professionalization of tasks and leadership as its defining characteristic and most troubling feature. In fact, liberalism’s concern with the mass party hinged on the professionalization of modern politics through the party organization and the fate of classical liberal concepts such as individualism, natural laws and rights. It is not hard to read Bryce’s understanding of mass parties as the product of a largely structural problem: lack of a nobility or class of gentlemen ready to lead, proliferation of electoral offices, and population growth especially in urban areas from uneducated proletarians, often immigrants or African-Americans. In fact, the alleged fin-de-siècle crisis of liberalism was entirely bound up with the growth of bureaucratic mass organizations like the political party, which subordinated small-scale producers to the rationality of large cartels and independent parliamentarians to party discipline. For liberal thinkers, the real question begged from this was, if mass parties were embedded in the systemic structure of modern democracy, whether it was possible to ensure continued democratic government and liberty through this system, or if reform measures would be necessary and efficacious. This question will also, in its own way, bedevil socialist thinkers within the mass party, as we shall see. Yet Bryce, Ostrogorski, and Weber each offered different analyses of the problem, and distinctly different conclusions within the larger liberal framework.

Professionalization, for Bryce, stemmed from the conditions of representative government as found in modern democracies such as the United States.¹⁵ For “in America we discover a palpable inducement to undertake the dull and toilsome work of election politics.”¹⁶ Party workers were rewarded, either in cash, offices, or power, and because of this owed their loyalty to the party

13 *Democracy & the Organization of Political Parties* focused its second volume on the United States, and it would be followed several years later by *Democracy and the Party System in the United States: A Study in Extra-Constitutional Government*.

¹⁴ Bryce, *The American Commonwealth*, vol. 2, p. 323-324.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, p. 468.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, p. 391.

Machine,¹⁷ within that organization the Ring,¹⁸ and within that Ring the party Boss.¹⁹ While Bryce recognized the corruption inherent within the operation of the party machine,²⁰ he also saw its rule was based on control over, and often rigging, of the process of candidate selection for both internal and external office.²¹ Most importantly, the Machine did not aim to create *Weltanschauung* party, but rather was mostly devoid of ideological leanings itself. Bryce cited a politician of the day, who had happily noted that “there are no politics in politics.”²² Weber would identify these characteristics in Gladstone’s ‘Birmingham model’, but where the German would use the English model to argue for the party machine’s usefulness for the vocational politician, the Englishman would see none of this in the American example.

Another consequence of professionalization was the rise of party discipline, both the internal discipline of party workers and elected officials,²³ but also that of the citizen and voter to “their” party. Discipline produces consequences for democracy and liberalism; clearly inasmuch as individual choice is subsumed to party loyalty, and choice is largely meaningless when candidates are selected by the Machine, democracy – especially the role and power of the individual – suffers. It also means the decline of political leadership from an educated class of bourgeois elites that a rational, long-term view of politics, and as this was at the heart of classical liberal theories of government it meant the decline of that as well. Bryce aptly summarizes all the problems for liberalism contained with the rise of the mass party:

“Yet every feature of the Machine is the result of patent causes. The elective offices are so numerous that ordinary citizens cannot watch them, and cease to care who gets them. The conventions come so often that busy men cannot serve in them. The minor offices are so unattractive that able men do not stand for them. The primary lists are so contrived that only a fraction of the party get on them; and of this fraction many are too lazy or too busy or too careless to attend. The mass of the voters are ignorant; knowing nothing about the personal merits of the candidates, they are ready to follow their leaders like sheep. Even the better class, however they may grumble, are swayed by the inveterate habit of party loyalty, and prefer a bad candidate of their own party to a (probably no better) candidate of the other party. It is less trouble to put up with impure officials, costly city government, a jobbing State legislature, an inferior sort of congressman, than to sacrifice one's own business in the effort to set things right. Thus the Machine works on, and grinds out places, power, and the opportunities for illicit gain to those who manage it.”²⁴

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 449.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 452.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 453.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 442.

²¹ Ibid., p. 437.

²² Ibid., p. 461.

²³ Ibid., p. 458.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 449

Liberal concern with the professionalization of politics through the mass party was further developed in writings by Moisei Ostrogorski and Max Weber. Bryce encouraged Ostrogorski to draft a more in-depth study on political parties,²⁵ which he did with the publication of the two-volume *Democracy and the Organization of Political Parties*. Ostrogorski's analysis of the professional party painted a far bleaker picture for democracy than Bryce and did so in a normative fashion that gave the older scholar pause in much the same way it later did for Weber and Michels.²⁶ For Ostrogorski the most important aspect of the modern party was the permanent apparatus of leadership and party workers that were dedicated to churning out votes. The apparatus was legitimated by internal party bodies that, though ostensibly elected by the membership, only represented a small percentage of the party. Arguing that "the Organization of parties which we have been studying has disclosed to us a structure which may be described as ingenious. Intended to fight the battles of fiercely competing parties, this Organization combines all the essential conditions of success, by providing men accustomed to obey orders, well disciplined, and following freely acknowledged leaders, who in their turn possess in a high degree such qualities as energy, skill, and strategical and tactical ability",²⁷ he concluded with a famous metaphor "thus the whole Organization eventually ends in being a hierarchy of wire-pullers".²⁸ Robert Michels would later make a parallel argument about party bureaucracy and organization in *Political Parties*.

Ostrogorski argued in vivid tones that the "party system has seriously weakened the citizen's hold on the government, diminished the efficacy of the machinery of government provided by the Constitution, and has hampered the living forces which are its real motive powers,"²⁹ and "it proved also, and above all, a reactionary force. Having repressed the individual too much, it shackled the public mind..."³⁰ while for the citizen and party member it gave them "the same dogmatic expression as to his worship of country with a slight variation: "My party, right or wrong!" Invested with a more

²⁵ Moisei Ostrogorski's first recorded contact with James Bryce is in a letter dated 21 February 1889. Written not long after the publication of *The American Commonwealth*, in the letter Ostrogorski mentioned Bryce's desire that the younger scholar travel to the United States to do further research on the mass party in the American context. See: P. Pombeni, 'Starting in Reason, Ending in Passion. Bryce, Lowell, Ostrogorski and the Problem of Democracy'. *The Historical Journal*, 37 (2) (1994) pp. 332.

²⁶ Pombeni, "Starting in Reason, Ending in Passion".

²⁷ Ostrogorski. *Democracy and the Organization of Political Parties*, Vol. I, pp. 186.

²⁸ Ibid, pp. 178.

²⁹ Ibid, pp. 365.

³⁰ Ibid., pp. 393.

ritual character, the cult of party enabled the citizen to discharge his everyday civic obligations more easily with the outward observances of devotion.”³¹ Ostrogorski’s work is consumed with the anti-democratic aspects of the modern party organization and its deleterious impact on democracy.

Unlike James Bryce or Moisei Ostrogorski, Max Weber engaged with the problems posed by the mass party but likely because he was not tied to any belief in the desirability or superiority of democracy he was able to incorporate and deal with the phenomenon in a different manner: less resigned than Bryce (whose writings he respected greatly) and without dabbling in the type of normative theorizing like Ostrogorski.³² As Breiner points out “democracy is of interest to Weber depending on whether it permits the rise of individuals with leadership qualities. Even though Weber saw parliamentary democracy as the means for producing such leadership, there is nothing in this form of politics that expresses the values that Weber finds intrinsically desirable.”³³ His own study of modern government and bureaucracy brought him to study the political party, and it would be this that led him to develop the model of the charismatic, vocational political leader, which was at the core of his interest and hope for the mass party.

Weber saw the mass party as a manifestation of the growth of bureaucratic domination in the modern world. Bureaucracy was more than its institutional representation: it was embedded in social interactions, as people grew used to bowing to rational-legal authorities and the behavior patterns they engendered. Democracy had not quelled this tide; the expropriation of the titular aristocracy meant an administration staffed not by notables but rather bureaucrats who were charged with ensuring equality before the law and maintaining stable property relationships. As capitalism had divorced the producers from the means of production, modern government had divorced the rulers from ownership over the state apparatus. Representative government had, in many ways, made the growth of bureaucracy even more inevitable.

Weber claimed political parties “are nowadays by far the most important bearers of the political will of those who are ruled by the bureaucracy, the ‘citizens of the state’ (*Staatsbürger*).”³⁴ For Weber political parties, like democracy, contained a contradiction at their core: where democracy had

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 408.

³² D. Beetham, ‘Max Weber and the Liberal Political Tradition’. *European Journal of Sociology*, 30 (2) (1989) pp. 311-323.

³³ P. Breiner, *Max Weber & Democratic Politics*. Ithaca (Cornell University Press, 1996), pp. 126.

³⁴ M. Weber, ‘Parliament and Government in Germany under a New Political Order’ in *Weber: Political Writings*, ed. P. Lassman and Ronald Speirs. Cambridge (Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 149.

overthrown *de jure* rule of the aristocracy it had put in place of necessity rule by bureaucratic officialdom. Political parties were forced to operate on an increasingly bureaucratic model if they were to succeed, thus limiting the impact of the democratic mass on decision making even further. For “in their internal structure, all parties have gone over to the bureaucratic form of organization in the course of the last few decades as the techniques of electoral struggle have become increasingly rationalized. The individual parties have reached different stages of development on the road to this goal but the general direction is absolutely clear, at least in mass-states... the development of the revealingly named party ‘machine’ in America and the growing importance of party officials everywhere (including Germany, where this is happening most rapidly in the Social Democratic Party, which is to say, quite naturally, precisely in the most democratic party); all these are comparable stages in this process.”

In Weber, much like Bryce and Ostrogorski, the liberal concern with rational, responsible leadership, and the space for individual liberty within an increasingly bureaucratized order was central.³⁵ Yet where the others – as we will see shortly – had very little hope for that type of leadership short of a sustained political reform movement, Weber saw potential by fusing the bureaucratized, professional party apparatus with his concept of the vocational politician (*Berufspolitiker*).³⁶ Here are the beginnings of a fundamental split within liberalism, with Weber at the root of a tradition that would include the Schumpeterian model that accepted democracy as party competition between elites. The structural necessities of industrial society precluded any attempt to break up the bureaucratic state, but the party allowed the possibility that the bureaucracy could be used towards responsible, non-bureaucratic ends. For where party bosses and parliamentarians of the era lived by, not for, politics, the vocational politician was someone who felt a calling to politics, to make decisions based on “responsibility” to the public, rather than their own self-interest. The charisma and skill of the vocational politician would allow them to both inspire the party faithful and to make use of the party machine for their own responsible ends. Much like Machiavelli’s prince, Weber’s vocational politician was a theoretical construct designed to show how the contradictions of contemporary society could be used to produce a new, better kind of leader for the modern state.

While Weber saw little hope for reform of the mass party, both Bryce and Ostrogorski articulated notes that would become part of longstanding efforts to perfect liberal democracy. Attempts

³⁵ Ibid, pp. 159.

³⁶ M. Weber, ‘The Profession and Vocation of Politics’ in *Weber: Political Writings*, ed. P. Lassman and Ronald Speirs. (Cambridge, 1994).

to reform or defeat the party machine had taken a few main channels: 1. Electoral reforms that would limit its power; 2. A primary challenge to the machine slate; 3. Running Independent or Third-Party candidates on a reform slate; 4. Sustained civic activism around reform efforts. Both saw these as successful even in their failure, as they forced the machine to respect the rule of law slightly more, they occasionally won and elected reformers to office, and helped mobilize citizens around the issue of the mass party and democracy. Inasmuch as the potential for democratic reform exists, there remains the possibility that the leadership of a mass party could be defeated, and the organization reformed, or perhaps through wholesale electoral reform the bureaucracy, to an extent, could be tamed Bryce was pessimistic that the mass party could be done away with – in a letter to Goldwin Smith he lamented that no country with representative government did without them except Switzerland, which was a unique case and not replicable³⁷ – but saw that there were impulses by activists to curb the worst behaviors and excesses. As the mass party has proved an insoluble problem for modern societies, democratic reformers formed another wing of liberal thinkers on the party.

Ostrogorski, however, was far bolder in his prescription for the mass party and called for its complete abolition. In this he echoed the thoughts of Bryce’s mentor Goldwin Smith,³⁸ and argued the only way to deal with parties was to abolish their permanent presence, permitting them only for short periods during electoral campaigns, writing “is not the solution demanded by the problem of parties an obvious one? Does it not consist in discarding the use of permanent parties with power as their end, and in restoring and reserving to party its essential character of a combination of citizens formed specially for a particular political issue?”³⁹ By embracing a fundamentally retrogressive view on the party – one that Bryce and Weber never would – in order to solve the issues presented by the mass party, Ostrogorski foreshadowed future liberal democratic thinkers who would either sidestep the issue of party or be confounded with what to do with the permanent party organization and its seeming indispensability to modern government.

Bryce, in the end, accepted Robert Michels’ theory that the mass party contained an inherent tendency towards oligarchy, which he understood as rule of the many by a skilled and talented few.⁴⁰

³⁷ Bryce MSS, English Correspondents, vol. XVII, fo. 190.

³⁸ See Pombeni, ‘Starting in Reason’, fn. 34 pp. 327. Ostrogorski was open about his admiration for Goldwin Smith’s attacks on the party. A good primer on Goldwin Smith’s views of the party can be found in essays such as G. Smith, ‘The Disintegration of Political Party’. *The North American Review*, 164 (487) (1897) pp. 753-754.

³⁹ Pombeni, ‘Starting in Reason’, pp. 356.

⁴⁰ J. Bryce, *Modern Democracies*, vol. II, pp. 546.

Still, he maintained, democracy had succeeded in overthrowing the permanent and hereditary aristocracy and at least it allowed the masses to participate somewhat in selecting how they would be governed.⁴¹ It is possible to argue with Bryce, as with Ostrogorski and Weber, that their prescriptions for the problem are far weaker than their analyses of the phenomenon, and often utopian. To call for abolishing the party or hoping a vocational politician would eventually take the reins strikes as, at best, wishful thinking. But to that extent the problems liberals of that era had with the mass party have been echoed in democratic theory's inability to address the mass party or fully incorporate it. Thus, it is doubly important that Michels is a figure that lurks in the writings of both Bryce and Weber, and that he incorporates their work into his own, for Michels straddles the world of academic analysis of the mass party phenomenon and the internal debate within the socialist movement over the problems of the mass party. The debate over the mass party was robust at this particular point in history perhaps because there was a sharp, and very real, debate between liberalism and socialism over the future of capitalist society. Thus, we turn to the socialist side of the mass party debate.

Socialism and the Mass Party Debate

Where the liberal discussion over the mass party took place largely within academic texts,⁴² the socialist side was primarily contained in an ongoing internal party debate over revolutionary strategy and tactics. Socialist thinkers of the era largely saw the mass party as a natural outgrowth of the expanding size and power of the industrial proletariat in modern capitalist society. During the period leading up to the First World War, the German Social-Democratic Party (SPD) had become the largest socialist party in the world and a force in German politics, and consequently the discussion of socialism and the mass party focused primarily on the SPD.⁴³ The fight over the party took place in its most heated form during the mass strike debate of 1905-6 – when the influence of the Russian Revolution of 1905 was at its peak – and 1910-14 when mass demonstrations over suffrage rights and growing dissatisfaction with parliamentary politics furthered the rift between the revolutionary left of the party and its criticisms of the party's course and tactics. While the debate over the mass strike encompassed the entire party, and a portion of the broader European socialist left, we will focus on the polemics

⁴¹ Ibid., pp. 549-550.

⁴² There were, of course, political reformers such as the Populists and Progressives who were the counterpoint to theorists like Bryce, Ostrogorski, and Weber.

⁴³ See, for instance, C. Schorske, *German Social Democracy: The Development of the Great Schism, 1905-1917*. Cambridge (Harvard University Press, 1955) and G. Steenson, *"Not One Man! Not One Penny!" German Social Democracy, 1863-1914*. Pittsburgh (University of Pittsburgh Press, 1981).

between Karl Kautsky, Rosa Luxemburg, Anton Pannekoek. Finally, Robert Michels was an active participant in the debate and is a link between liberal academics writing on the topic and socialist authors hoping to shape party tactics.

Karl Kautsky, the editor of *Die Neue Zeit* and perhaps the leading Marxist intellectual in the world at the time, had embraced democracy as “indispensable as a means of ripening the proletariat for the social revolution.”⁴⁴ The growth of the parliamentary socialist mass party was, for Kautsky, at the core of his socialist strategy, for:

“whenever the proletariat engages in parliamentary activity as a self-conscious class, parliamentarism begins to change its character. It ceases to be a mere tool in the hands of the bourgeoisie. This very participation of the proletariat proves to be the most effective means of shaking up the hitherto indifferent divisions of the proletariat and giving them hope and confidence. It is the most powerful lever that can be utilized to raise the proletariat out of its economic, social, and moral degradation. The proletariat has, therefore, no reason to distrust parliamentary action; on the other hand, it has every reason to exert all its energy to increase the power of parliaments in their relation to other departments of government and to swell to the utmost its own parliamentary representation.”⁴⁵

The growth of the mass party and its electoral success was therefore a key tool in Kautsky’s theories of socialist revolution. Kautsky, perhaps even more than Weber, saw the growth of large political and economic organization as a fundamental feature of modernity. Central planning of the economy and state would require a large, technically adept bureaucratic apparatus, and thus could not be shattered and replaced by an anti-bureaucratic state as Marx had argued in the *Eighteenth Brumaire* or his writings on the Paris Commune.

Yet where Weber lamented the routinization of politics while conceding its inevitability, the SPD leadership of the era embraced it. Kautsky’s version of revolution was one whereby the proletariat took control of parliament and expanded proletarian control over the economy and bureaucracy, but did so *legally*, without bloodshed if at all possible. The mass party, its role in organizing the proletariat and winning control of parliament, was key to this, as the proletariat would use the state forms bequeathed to it by the bourgeoisie as much as it would use consolidated industry to bring forth planned socialist production. It would expand and defend the legal rights granted by the bourgeoisie to their logical maximum, until the ruling class attempted to violate those rights and repress the proletariat, at which point the “final battle” would begin, usually conceived by Kautsky as bloodless mass strikes against the capitalist class which would eventually wear down bourgeois resistance. Kautsky expected political

⁴⁴ Ibid, pp. 81.

⁴⁵ K. Kautsky, *The Class Struggle (Erfurt Program)*. (Chicago, 1910), pp. 188.

rights to be extended into the economic sphere, heightening the contradictions and tensions within bourgeois democracy.

The debate in the SPD over the mass political strike was a direct consequence of its use in the yearlong Russian Revolution of 1905, though the ultimate cause was a growing frustration in the party because electoral success had not translated into revolution, nor had it brought about serious everyday reforms, and Russia – hardly an industrial nation – had a more combative proletariat than Germany. Kautsky had accepted the use of the general strike in 1902⁴⁶ if it were planned and controlled by the party and its union allies and used to supplement and strengthen their parliamentary strategy. The mass political strike had been discussed in socialist circles since the 1890s, when it had been used by the socialist party in Belgium to fight for universal suffrage,⁴⁷ and was later copied by other socialist parties with varying degrees of success. By 1903 even orthodox social democrats like Rudolf Hilferding had embraced the general strike as a tool if the German state decided to restrict universal suffrage because of SPD electoral success.⁴⁸ A wave of work stoppages had hit Germany in the period leading up to 1905, and in 1905 more workers struck (507,964) than in the previous four years or the entirety of the 1890s.⁴⁹

The Russian Revolution had created a new energy for the SPD left, as *Vorwärts* held a daily front-page column in 1905 giving regular word on the revolution's progress, and party locals across Germany held sympathy meetings for the Russians. The energy of the era was palpable as “new political vistas opened before the eyes of the long-frustrated revolutionary activists as the international class struggle seemed ‘to want to emerge from stagnation, from the long phase of parliamentary sniping, and to enter a period of elemental mass struggles.’”⁵⁰ What happened next pushed the party left to develop a strong critique of the mass party and attempt to find answers for the problems articulated in a similar fashion to liberal critics. At the Jena party Congress of 1905, the mass strike was on the agenda; a wave of spontaneous wildcat strikes had swept the industrial Ruhr region prompting intensified pressure from localist-syndicalist unions for radical action and decentralized control and from the SPD leadership for party involvement. While the union leadership denounced the mass strike,

⁴⁶ K. Kautsky, *The Social Revolution*. (Chicago, 1905), pp. 90.

⁴⁷ S. Tegel, “Reformist Social Democrats, the Mass Strike, and the Prussian Suffrage 1913,” *European History Quarterly*, 17 (3) (1987), pp. 311.

⁴⁸ Schorske, *German Social Democracy*, pp. 35.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, pp. 31.

⁵⁰ Schorske, *The Great Schism*, pp. 36.

the SPD leadership acceded to the left's demands and incorporated the mass strike (but only as a defensive tool) to the party's program to be used to defend suffrage rights if all other avenues were blocked.⁵¹ The SPD executive was fully caught in the contradiction of the party's revolutionary ideology and reformist practice; now that the party masses were beginning to demand action on a host of fronts both economic and political, the executive's ability to paper over their policies was drawing to a close. It also spotlights the basic contradiction of a democratic, socialist, and ostensibly revolutionary political party within a time of mass struggles. If the party's success to that point depended on strict discipline and organization, what was it to make of an era when it was possible that the unorganized masses might pull it into a conflict not of its own making, but which risked mass support if the party shunned participation and destruction if it lost against the state?

Mass demonstrations in Saxony against attempts by the government to further limit working class suffrage (a backhanded compliment to the growing power of the SPD) angered a broad swath of the population, leading to largescale street demonstrations. In February of 1906 the SPD party executive met secretly with the trade-union general commission to discuss the situation and what their reaction should be, and both decided to attempt to avoid a mass strike at all costs. Word of this leaked out via the localist trade-union press; after this the suffrage movement lost whatever steam it had left. Four years later, Kautsky entered a polemic with Luxemburg during the mass demonstrations against the restrictive Prussian suffrage law in 1910, and afterwards with Pannekoek over the nature of the mass strike and revolution. Kautsky intensified his commitment to the necessity of mass organization and parliamentary institutions as crucial to the future socialist society. He continued to be a steadfast defender of the mass party organization, its leadership and bureaucratic apparatus. Rejecting calls by the left for the party to take an active role in the suffrage demonstrations, he compared the military strategies of overthrow (*Niederwerfungsstrategie*) and attrition (*Ermattungsstrategie*) to modern politics.⁵² The party would best be served by the latter, and by maximizing its votes in Parliament rather than risking the apparatus in a frontal assault on the state through demonstrations and strikes. Kautsky, whether he understood the deeper implications of his hypothesis, was articulating the final transformation of the *Weltanschauung* party into one that was, as Weber had described, not much more than a technical machine.

⁵¹ August Bebel, "Socialism and the General Strike," *International Socialist Journal* (US), November 1905, Vol. VI no. 5, pp. 257-292.

⁵² K. Kautsky. "The Mass Strike." In *Karl Kautsky: Selected Political Writings*, ed. Patrick Goode, (London, 1983), pp. 54.

Kautsky, in his writings from 1905-1914, especially those in which he was engaged with the party left wing as embodied by Luxemburg and Pannekoek, defended the party organization and the intense, hierarchical discipline as a necessary feature in social-democratic practice. We see this most explicitly in the period between 1910-1914 in his extended polemic with Luxemburg and Pannekoek. As we shall see, both esteemed members of the party left saw the party's role as both educating its membership and the broader working class about the necessity of revolution, preparing the foundation for political struggles, and intensifying contradictions in the political and economic realms to the point where mass action was likely. In Luxemburg's case, and to an extent Pannekoek's, the party would engage in a dialectical relationship with non-party (unorganized) masses, because the masses constituted a larger part of society and had were far more likely to engage in spontaneous and unplanned revolts than organized party and union workers. Either the party would lead in this, or the mass upsurge would potentially sweep away the old party leadership. In contrast to this Kautsky, who famously called the SPD as a "revolutionary, but not revolution-making" party, saw a definite split between the action of the organized and the unorganized mass; the planning, foresight, and success of the organized party would allow for the success to be built upon by the masses of party workers and leadership in the way that an unorganized action could not.⁵³ By encouraging reckless mass action, the party organization could face potential repression at the hands of the state. Kautsky repeatedly excoriates his left-wing opponents on this; was not the party and its leadership far more important as an embodiment of the democratic will of the masses than any singular popular upsurge?⁵⁴

For Kautsky, the mass strike was to be used as part of either the "overthrow strategy" or in defense of rights the working class had already won.⁵⁵ This was how he had discussed the mass strike in *The Social Revolution*, and in the 1910-14 period. The party and its union allies would meticulously plan, and through education and discipline the party masses would carry out the enormous task of the mass political strike. Kautsky distrusted the *unorganized* masses, and their ability to draw the party organization into battles it could not win. In contrast, he preferred the routine politics of parliamentary elections and the organizing contained therein. In two separate essays he takes Pannekoek to task for suggesting the mass party encourage the political mass strike at the potential cost of its organization

53 Kautsky, "Die Aktion der Masse", *Die Neue Zeit*, Volume 30, Volume 1, 1911.

54 Ibid.

55 This is how Bebel and the party leadership at the Jena conference in 1905 had adopted the mass strike into the tactics to be used by the SPD: as a defensive weapon only.

being lost to state repression.⁵⁶ Kautsky's emphasis on party organization and parliamentary electoral success at the expense of the mass strike is a window on how important he believed the mass party to be; the routinized, bureaucratized party was the essence of democracy for Kautsky, who opposed party involvement in spontaneous street protest and mass strikes to carefully planned and executed electoral campaigns and demonstrations. Social democracy performed the same function for Kautsky that liberal reformers hoped for in the United States: a party that had responsible leadership and democratic internal processes. If this were true – and his opponents doubted both this, and that electoral activism was sufficient – then the party leadership was correct in disregarding the spontaneous protests of the unorganized workers.

Where liberal thinkers had been concerned with the mass party's effect on democracy, Kautsky embraced the aspects of the mass party that worried liberals: 1. the professional organization with hierarchical leadership; 2. A small cadre of active party members; 3. An emphasis on expanding vote totals and party power; 4. A preference for the professional, rather than vocational, politician. Holding a conception of democracy as a collective power of a class, rather than for individuals, meant that expansion of that class's power was predicated on the success of its organizational embodiment. Yet it also meant the organization became an end-in-itself, and questions of internal democracy and the party's role in preventing or delaying radical action towards socialism, were difficult to discuss and even harder to address. Kautskyian Marxism could not address the problematic aspects of the mass party as an institution. That is why Kautsky tended to see and express his differences with the leadership and left-wing of the SPD as almost entirely ideological rather than address the deeper structural problems with the organization he had placed at the center of his theories.

Luxemburg and Pannekoek Respond

Rosa Luxemburg wrote *The Mass Strike, the Political Party, and the Trade Unions* in August of 1906 after a trip to Russia and especially after witnessing the behavior of the SPD and union leadership during the Saxony suffrage demonstrations. Luxemburg acknowledged the problems of the mass party, and her writings on the mass strike deal with her attempt to find a solution to those issues. Luxemburg charted a difficult course: she embraced the Social-Democratic party as a great weapon of the working class, something built consciously as a weapon against the strength of the bourgeoisie but believed the

⁵⁶ See Karl Kautsky, "The New Tactic" (Die neue Taktik), *Die Neue Zeit*, 30th Volume, 2nd volume, 1912, and Kautsky, *The New Radicalism (Der jüngste Radikalismus)*, *Die Neue Zeit*, 1912/13, Vol. 1, pp. 436-446.

mass party could conduct itself in a revolutionary and democratic manner. She never thought of abandoning the parliamentary struggle, seeing it as a rostrum to educate the working class, but continued to argue for bold extra-parliamentary action to forward the course of the revolution. The problem was how to give real power to the party rank-and-file and sweep away recalcitrant leadership. Luxemburg believed the mass strike could be effective in dealing with the problems of the mass party in the struggle for political equality and socialism.

The SPD leadership had a vision of a tightly controlled mass strike, as she wrote: “it is a very clear and simply thought out, sharply sketched, isolated phenomenon... a single grand rising of the industrial proletariat springing from some political motive of the highest importance... carried through in the spirit of party discipline and in perfect order, and in still more perfect order brought to the directing committees as a signal given at the proper time...”.⁵⁷ For Luxemburg this was a projection of the party’s spirit of discipline and not a reflection of reality. Her analysis focused on the role played in Russia by the *unorganized* masses of workers and the tendency of political strikes to merge into local, economic ones, and come back around again, blurring the clear lines the German SPD and Trade Union Confederation had set between economic and political strikes. The unorganized masses, because they had not yet submitted to party or union discipline were far more likely to revolt than the organized. She argued “the specialization of professional activity as... leaders, as well as the naturally restricted horizon which is bound up with disconnected economic struggles in a peaceful period leads only too easily amongst... officials to bureaucratism and a certain narrowness of outlook... there is first of all the overvaluation of the organization, which from a means has gradually been changed into an end in itself, a precious thing, to which the interests of the struggles should be subordinated.”⁵⁸ The logic of mass organization had made dangerous struggle anathema to the organization. Organization had become a fetish. The locus of democratic energy was primarily, then, outside the organization, yet it was only potential, not actual, to be activated by external pressures (class struggle). For “in the case of the enlightened German worker the class consciousness implanted by the social democrats *is theoretical and latent*: in the period ruled by bourgeois parliamentarism it cannot, as a rule, actively participate in a direct mass action... in the revolution when the masses themselves appear upon the political battlefield this class consciousness becomes *practical and active*.”

⁵⁷ R. Luxemburg. *The Mass Strike, The Political Party, and The Trade Unions*. In *Rosa Luxemburg Speaks*, ed. M. Waters, (New York, 1970), pp. 162-163.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, pp. 199-200.

For Luxemburg, the party could not create the revolution, but would instead hasten it via education and struggles it chose to engage in during the immediately preceding epoch. Once the mass strike had broken out it would become the brains of the movement, and the party membership its elite troops. Organized and unorganized would have a dialectical relationship, pushing and pulling each other at different points in the struggle. If the party leadership were recalcitrant to enter the struggle, then the mass strike would provide a situation where they could be swept away by leaders more in tune with the demands of the masses. As the masses grew to trust the party, the membership rolls would grow. She saw that “here the organization does not supply the troops for the struggle, in an ever-growing degree, supplies recruits for the organization.”⁵⁹

Luxemburg, and Pannekoek, would engage with Kautsky in the period between 1910-13, first about party tactics in mass demonstrations against the restrictive Prussian suffrage law in 1910, and afterwards about the general nature of the mass party and the mass strike. As we have seen, Kautsky intensified his commitment to the necessity of mass organization and parliamentary institutions as crucial to the future socialist society. He continued to be a steadfast defender of the mass party organization, its leadership and bureaucratic apparatus. Rejecting calls by the left for the party to take an active role in the suffrage demonstrations, he compared the military strategies of overthrow (*Niederwerfungsstrategie*) and attrition (*Ermattungsstrategie*) to modern politics.⁶⁰ The party would best be served by the latter, and by maximizing its votes in Parliament rather than risking the apparatus in a frontal assault on the state through demonstrations and strikes. Kautsky, whether he understood the deeper implications of his hypothesis, was articulating the final transformation of the *Weltanschauung* party into one that was, as Weber had described, not much more than a technical machine.

Luxemburg wrote a lengthy response entitled *Theory and Practice* to Kautsky’s new position on the general strike.⁶¹ She feared the party machine could become a hindrance or worse, obstruction, to mass struggle, arguing “it could easily appear that the complicated organizational apparatus and the strict party discipline of which we are justly proud are, unfortunately, only a first-rate makeshift for the parliamentary and union daily routine; and with the given disposition of our leading circles they are a *hindrance* to the mass action in the grand style, to what is demanded by the coming era of violent

⁵⁹ Ibid, 198.

⁶⁰ K. Kautsky. “The Mass Strike.” In *Karl Kautsky: Selected Political Writings*, ed. Patrick Goode, (London, 1983), pp. 54.

⁶¹ Rosa Luxemburg, “Theory and Practice.”

<http://www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1910/theorypractice/ch05.htm>

struggles.”⁶² Luxemburg expressed fears like those from liberal scholars of the mass party. Yet she conceived of the party and remedies to its ills in a different fashion, perhaps because she saw democracy as linked to collective mass struggle rather than the individual. The masses outside the party would remain more likely to engage in spontaneous political action than party members and could energize a political party besides demanding a change in leadership – thus affecting change to the apparatus from the grassroots. A changed party could then help lead democratic and revolutionary struggles. But Luxemburg also foresaw the possibility the mass party could act to derail those struggles entirely.

Anton Pannekoek, who like Luxemburg was on the left of the socialist movement, engaged Kautsky on the same issue of the mass strike and the mass party. Pannekoek argued as well that mass action could be a corrective to parliamentary action,⁶³ but also like Luxemburg saw mass struggle and the party’s parliamentary actions as connected.⁶⁴ Yet Pannekoek also argued that the mass party (at least the SPD) was more than just an electoral machine, and that it had assimilated from its working-class members the potential for spontaneous action.⁶⁵ Hence the importance of the party’s involvement in mass action, but also its responsibility, which was a far different conception of the mass party than that of an electoral machine. Still, Pannekoek feared that “if the party saw its function as restraining the masses from action for as long as it could do so, then party discipline would mean a loss to the masses of their initiative and potential for spontaneous action, a *real* loss, and not a transformation of energy. The existence of the party would then reduce the revolutionary capacity of the proletariat rather than increase it.”⁶⁶

Luxemburg and Pannekoek’s conclusions are in sharp disagreement with those of Kautsky, who had overestimated the significance of the party organization while simultaneously ignoring the deleterious effects it could have on the rank-and-file’s revolutionary will and intra-party efficacy. The SPD and their trade union counterparts were petrified that they would be crushed or seriously damaged in a period of mass unrest, especially if they acquiesced to said ventures. The Russian Revolution proved for Luxemburg that a temporary defeat in the heat of political struggle would not spell final

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ A. Pannekoek, “Marxist Theory and Revolutionary Tactics,” in *Pannekoek and Gorter’s Marxism*, D.A. Smart, ed. (London, 1978), pp. 67.

⁶⁴ Ibid., pp. 68.

⁶⁵ Ibid., pp. 72-3.

⁶⁶ Ibid., pp. 73.

doom for an organization, and that its ranks could be replenished by the masses becoming engaged for the first time, whose political consciousness would have increased as well. Luxemburg's theories argue that if the unorganized mass can sustain itself in its struggles for a time, if external shocks can cause them to mobilize without being led by a political party, then there is hope for a way to clear the oligarchic blockages created by mass organization. Pannekoek's identification of the potential the mass party had both to expand democratic choice stood alongside his very prescient fear that a party could also, through discipline and mass obedience to leadership and the party apparatus, restrain the democratic will of the masses.

In that sense, Luxemburg and Pannekoek had begun to identify many of the same issues with the mass party that had so bothered liberal scholars. Moreso, they asked whether it was an inevitability that the mass party would end up as a machine, or if given the right circumstances, remain a *Weltanschauung* party. Luxemburg and Pannekoek provide a critique of the mass party and potential correctives to the problem of entrenched leadership oligarchy, as well as a growing fear that the mass party could be used to stymie rather than stimulate mass action. Thus, the mass strike debate contained a discussion of the very real effects of the mass party's growth on political action. Yet to begin to answer the question of whether the mass party could be reformed we turn, finally, to Robert Michels.

Michels and the Mass Party

Robert Michels was heavily involved in the debates over the mass party and was a crucial nexus for liberal scholarship and socialist theorizing on the issue. His major academic work on the subject, *Political Parties: A Sociological Study of the Oligarchical Tendencies of Modern Democracy*,⁶⁷ was a refining of his syndicalist criticism of the mass party and specifically the SPD.⁶⁸ Michels had been a close associate of Max Weber's since 1905, and like Bryce with Ostrogorski, Weber encouraged Michels to write an academic treatise on the mass party phenomenon.⁶⁹ Michels was also a member of

⁶⁷ R. Michels, *Political Parties: A Sociological Study of the Oligarchical Tendencies of Modern Democracy* (New York, 1959).

⁶⁸ LaVenia, Jr., "Rethinking Robert Michels", pp. 2.

⁶⁹ Like Bryce, Weber was also dissatisfied with the work of his protégé. See W. Mommsen, 'Robert Michels and Max Weber: Moral Conviction versus the Politics of Responsibility', in W. Mommsen and J. Osterhammel, ed., *Max Weber and His Contemporaries* (London, 1987), pp. 121-139, and W. Mommsen, 'Max Weber and Roberto Michels: An asymmetrical partnership', *European Journal of Sociology*, 22 (1) (1981) pp. 100-116; L. Scaff, 'Max Weber and Robert Michels,' *American Journal of Sociology*, 86 (1981) pp. 1269-1286

the SPD until his move to Italy in 1907,⁷⁰ part of the revisionist controversy, and the mass strike debate. It was Michels' syndicalism that pushed him in a direction that synthesized the liberal and socialist criticisms of the mass party and its impact on democracy.

Michels' critique of the mass party had six major elements: 1. the rise of the parliamentary mass party; 2. The growth of the party's bureaucratic apparatus; 3. The conservative tendencies at work in the SPD due to 1 and 2; 4. The anti-democratic tendencies of the mass organization; 5. The psychological submission of the masses to the leadership; 6. The potential for syndicalism to be a counter-force to these tendencies.⁷¹ As early as 1904 Michels described the problems of the German socialists as stemming from the power of the parliamentary party.⁷² Party leadership was committed to increasing the number of Reichstag deputies even though the German parliament was a largely impotent body; Michels pointed out that though they received 3 million votes in the last election, Germany and the SPD were no nearer to revolution. Rather than committing the party to leading a general strike in case of a war or abrogation of suffrage rights (a real danger in Wilhelmine Germany), it chose to reject these options for a more moderate course. Michels, in 1904, thus linked the problems of the German party with parliamentarism and the conservative effect it had on the party and its leadership, topics he would explore fully in *Political Parties*.

This was largely a syndicalist criticism of the mass party. Syndicalists believed the focus of the socialist movement should be on class struggle at the point of production to be led by decentralized (though coordinated) union locals. They rejected as class compromise electoral democracy and argued that all forms of representation were inevitably anti-democratic. This was especially true of the mass party: syndicalists saw it is bureaucratic and controlled by a leadership clique far removed from the everyday experience of workers that would inevitably become conservative and reformist. Syndicalists believed in a form of democracy (or democratic oligarchy) based on the lived experience of workers on the shopfloor, who would elect their union leaders based on competence – which could be seen easily because it corresponded, again, to their lived experience. Because the political party was far removed from that lived experience, it could never correspond to the democratic will of the masses or its individual members and explained the development of party bureaucracy and a leadership clique.

⁷⁰ He remained a member of the Italian Socialist Party (PSI) at least until the syndicalist faction was purged from both the SPD and PSI in 1908.

⁷¹ P. LaVenia, Jr., "Rethinking Robert Michels", pp. 9.

⁷² R. Michels, 'Le dangers du Parti socialiste allemande', *Le Mouvement socialiste*, 6 (1904) pp.193-212.

Michels developed this critique across a number of academic and political essays, but two stand out for their importance to the mass party debate. The first, in a dialog with fellow syndicalist Eduard Berth, saw Michels argued that Berth's criticism of representation did not go far enough; where Berth had criticized *parliamentary* representation, Michels said that even he needed to include unions as well, as they also were based on representation.⁷³ Here Michels was expanding his criticism of the mass party to understand how modern politics functioned as a whole. The other was in Eduard Bernstein's revisionist journal; Bernstein had attacked Michels' criticism of the SPD and called him anti-democratic. Michels responded with a long discussion of how other socialist parties had attempted to counteract the problematic aspects of the mass party through decentralization and frequent leadership turnover and had done so far more successfully than the SPD.⁷⁴

Political Parties was an attempt to synthesize the syndicalist critiques of the mass party organization, informed by liberal scholarship, and produce a volume that spoke to the problems for democracy and democratic theory caused by modern political organizations. Michels was honest through a series of prefaces to editions of the work that his sympathies lie with democracy,⁷⁵ but that his goal was to ask serious questions about its viability. It is a volume that could only have been produced from his vantage point: a socialist, torn between an understanding that the mass party was indispensable for modern politics but as a syndicalist a sworn critic of the party in the direction of decentralized democracy, and an academic, encouraged by Max Weber to engage with the writings of Bryce and Ostrogorski on the phenomenon. His thesis, often simplified into the "iron law" of oligarchy, stated that "we may sum up the argument by saying that in modern party life aristocracy gladly presents itself in democratic guise, whilst the substance of democracy is permeated with aristocratic elements... the democratic external form which characterizes the life of political parties may readily veil from superficial observers the tendency towards aristocracy, or rather towards oligarchy, which is inherent in all party organization".⁷⁶ Yet like Ostrogorski (as well as Luxemburg and Pannekoek), the work is critical of the mass party while searching for potential remedies to its ills.

⁷³ R. Michels, 'Controverse socialiste', *Le Mouvement socialiste*, 184 (1907) pp. 278-288.

⁷⁴ R. Michels, 'Einige Randbemerkungen zum Problem der Demokratie', *Sozialistische Monatshefte*, 13 (1908) pp. 361-368.

⁷⁵ Most explicitly in R. Michels, *Zur Sociologie des Parteiwesens in der Modernen Demokratie* (Leipzig, 1911), p. VII.

⁷⁶ Michels, *Political Parties*, p. 10-11.

In that respect *Political Parties* helped define the mass party debate by placing at the forefront the problem it posed for democratic theory. The text also interwove contributions from the liberal and socialist participants into a coherent study of the issue. By understanding the work and Michels' writings in that light we can add a new layer to the debate and to a canonical understanding of a text that has long been relegated to a part of the canon with Gaetano Mosca and Vilfredo Pareto. To do so would be to understand the importance of his contribution but also to begin to conclude what the mass party debate is, and what it might mean to understand it now as part an important historical discussion.

Democratic Theory and the Mass Party Debate

It is difficult to find evidence that contemporary democratic theory has grappled with the mass party or the questions raised by the mass party debate. Dean's work on the party is one of the few places it is possible to find the political party and the questions it poses seriously discussed within recent democratic thought.⁷⁷ Yet examining the major strains of democratic theory (aggregative, agonistic, and deliberative) we find that the decision to ignore the mass party question means they are vulnerable to the issues raised therein, and would be strengthened by engagement with the debate. It is possible to also examine this as a larger issue within democratic thought inasmuch as it is largely *liberal* democratic theory, and the lack of engagement with socialism both in the political and theoretical world allows for the liberal preoccupation with the individual to dominate. The mass party debate requires engaging with a more collective concept of democracy.⁷⁸ It also necessitates understanding why the mass party debate was at its peak when liberal and socialist ideas both clashed openly and socialist (electoral) success was a distinct possibility.

The aggregative model initiated by Schumpeter's writings in *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy* attempted to codify a modern understanding of democracy as one of individual preferences collected through periodic voting for political parties.⁷⁹ Of the three major subsections of democratic thought, the aggregative most closely parallels the concerns of liberal mass party theorists like Weber, as well as those of Michels, especially concerning the formation of elites and oligarchy. Yet the debate is relevant here no less than in the other subsections. The existence of party machines both limits individual choice and preference through selection of candidates and suppression of intra-party alternatives, while the manipulation of election law often limits choice for alternatives outside of the

⁷⁷ J. Dean, *Crowds and Party*, (New York, 2016).

⁷⁸ *Ibid*, pp. 4.

⁷⁹ C. Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, (London, 2000) pp. 81.

party machine(s) as well. Preferences are constructed for individual voters through agenda-setting by party leadership and staff, and the acceptance of the voting mass public (whether this is through laziness or resignation as Bryce/Ostrogorski argued or manipulation of mass psychology like Michels, the effect is similar). While the aggregative model can absorb much of the mass party debate into its model of minimalist democracy, it is difficult to argue that the model of democracy can maintain itself if the choice of (party) elites reveals itself to be no choice at all due to the machinations of mass party machines. If this is the case, then the aggregative model is not one of democracy at all, but rather oligarchy.

Agonistic pluralism⁸⁰ argues “that a central task of democratic politics is to provide the institutions which will permit conflicts to take an ‘agonistic’ form, where the opponents are not enemies but adversaries among whom exists a conflictual consensus.”⁸¹ In *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, Laclau and Mouffe do spend a significant amount of time examining socialist and communist parties of the early twentieth century and analyzing Marxist theories of the party and its relationship to social class and revolution. Like aggregative theories, agonistics acknowledges the existence of parties, especially within the institutional realm to which ‘politics’ is ascribed.⁸² Political parties are one of the primary tools by which hegemonic articulations occur in the modern world. Like aggregative theories, agonistics understands a portion of the mass party debate’s conclusions on modern democracy to be integral, as a fundamental characteristic of modern representative government is the competition and antagonism between opponents attempting hegemonic articulation. Yet the structure of institutions and how they impact agonistic pluralism is less explored within Mouffe’s writings than ‘the political’ meta-structure on which the competition within ‘politics’ is based. Inclusion of the mass party debate into agonistic theories presents a similar problem for its theorists. For the competition between opponents to occur, there must be some possibility reasonable challenges to the dominant order may exist, whether they be in the electoral or other arenas. The mass party debate presents a dual challenge: either the chance for legitimate competition has been eliminated via the rise of the machine and suppression of dissent within the party, or via the near-impossibility of crafting a challenge outside the party in districts where the machine is strong and has changed electoral laws to suit itself. It also begs the

⁸⁰ See E. Laclau & C. Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, (New York, 2014), 2nd edition; C. Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*; C. Mouffe, *Agonistics: Thinking The World Politically*, (London, 2013).

⁸¹ C. Mouffe, *Agonistics*, pp. XII.

⁸² As opposed to ‘the political’ which is the meta-structural world of agonistics.

question as to whether mass adherence to a political party and its leadership is the same as hegemonic articulation. To a certain extent the oligarchic division of districts between party machines, even opposing machines, may create the *appearance* of agonistic competition in a legislative body as one-party districts rapidly polarize when fear of cross-party competition has declined in weight relative to primary challengers, but, there is very little competition and control is fought over a small number of swing districts (if at all). Parties, in this sense, function like cartels. The existence of opposition in the realm of “the political” may be muted or translate poorly into a “politics” in which groups, regardless of their interest, desire, or power, may never find an opening in the world of mass parties to contest power and any kind of agonistic pluralism.

Deliberative theories of democracy have been dominant within political thought for much of the last three decades. A cogent definition of deliberative democracy is that a “theory is deliberative if the fair terms of social cooperation include the requirement that citizens or their representatives actually seek to give one another mutually acceptable reasons to justify the laws they adopt”⁸³ but also “authentic *democracy* can then be said to exist to the degree that reflective preferences influence collective outcomes...”⁸⁴ and “by authenticity I mean the degree to which democratic control is engaged through communication that encourages reflection upon preferences without coercion.”⁸⁵ It is important to unpack this in terms of the mass party debate; what can the mass party question add to an already robust multi-decade criticism of deliberative theories? Where previous authors have focused on the question of inclusion/exclusion and who determines what is considered rational deliberation,⁸⁶ deliberation as a theory about particular practices that mimic university discourse in the process of collective will formation, rather than the collective will itself,⁸⁷ or as an attempt to crystallize liberal and democratic discourses while ignoring hegemonic power relationships,⁸⁸ the mass party debate presents a new and many-faceted problem for deliberative democrats. The most serious concerns the role of the mass party in producing and manipulating individual will formation. If the mass party cannot help but cultivate an atmosphere in which party faithful adhere to the opinions promulgated by the party apparatus, then we cannot hope to see any form of objective rationality even when individuals

⁸³ J. Fishkin & P. Laslett, ed., *Debating Deliberative Democracy*, (Oxford, 2003), pp. 34.

⁸⁴ J. Dryzek, *Deliberative Democracy and Beyond*, (Oxford, 2000) pp. 2.

⁸⁵ *Ibid*, pp. 8.

⁸⁶ I. Young, *Inclusion and Democracy*, (Oxford, 2000).

⁸⁷ J. Dean, *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies: Communicative Capitalism & Left Politics*, (Durham, 2009) pp. 80.

⁸⁸ C. Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, pp. 49.

are placed into a deliberative discussion, or that rationality will likely disappear when it is time to vote.

Ostrogorski could have been speaking to modern deliberative theorists when he wrote:

“But here the convention of party intervenes again; it does not allow discussion. Not that it stifles the material liberty of discussion, but it affects it injuriously by attacking moral liberty. It is all very well for a citizen to possess the right of speaking and writing, his mouth is stopped by the argument that his opinion is an insult to the honour of the party, to its glorious flag, an affront to ‘regularity.’”⁸⁹

If the psychology of citizens is changed by the existence of institutions such as political parties, interest groups, unions, etc., and if the hierarchical nature of those organizations makes it extraordinarily unlikely the masses will defy the will of the leadership on all but rare occasions, deliberation is either meaningless or predetermined. Additionally, deliberative theories are underpinned by the normative concern that citizens and lawmakers should be able to rationally justify decision-making, but if the masses are subject to the rationality of party machines they may easily adjust their opinions to that of the machine *regardless* of objective rationality. Finally, and most damning for deliberative theories is that there must eventually be an end to deliberation and a *vote* or decision made. Yet if the party apparatus controls the selection of candidates, issues, bills, and votes of representatives, what does deliberation matter? Coercion of opinion is mostly unnecessary in a system where choice is both molded and controlled by parties; in fact, if functioning properly the mass party system will give the appearance of limited, if any, compulsion of party members and voters. Deliberative democratic theory seems unwilling or unable to answer this question, because it echoes the vision of Ostrogorski from a century ago: a liberal hope that political parties can be abolished or ignored in an attempt to restore the rationality and power of the individual. Like Ostrogorski’s proposal, deliberative democracy collapses under the weight of utopian designs that attempt to ignore or wish away, rather than directly confronting, a major structural part of the contemporary political landscape.

Given the inadequacies of contemporary democratic thought in dealing with the issues raised by the mass party debate, it is important to unpack and re-examine how the participants attempted to solve them. Liberal and socialist participants in the debate developed internal and external strategies to democratize mass parties or check the power of the party machine. At various points Bryce, Michels, and Ostrogorski argued for internal reforms to the selection of candidates, rotation in office, and decentralization of decision-making that would at least have opened up the possibility for intra-party democratic choice and less influence by the party apparatus. They also offered external solutions: reformist factions challenging machine candidates in primaries, the formation of independent and third-

⁸⁹ M. Ostrogorski, *Democracy and the Organization of Political Parties*, vol. 2, pp. 637.

party campaigns, and – in the case of Michels – building factions (in his case, syndicalist) within and without parties that explicitly acknowledged and attempted to face the dangers of mass organization. Luxemburg especially, but also Pannekoek, detailed the potential that unorganized, non-party masses could have in democratizing (and radicalizing) a party, if the party (or party faction) were to engage with the unorganized masses during times of economic and political upheaval. Whether some, or any of these are efficacious is to a certain extent besides the point. Michels ended *Political Parties* with skepticism, and Bryce was sanguine about the prospects of far-reaching reform. Rather, by grappling with one of the primary questions at the heart of contemporary representative government – the role of mass political organizations and their impact on democracy – we add to a discussion that should not simply exist in the realm of theory but could be translated to the political world as well.

It is also important to note that the debate occurred in a period during which there was serious ideological and electoral competition between liberal and (revolutionary) socialist electoral parties throughout the West. It is no accident liberalism underwent a moment of doubt during the same period socialism was on the rise; the consolidation and cartelization of the capitalist economy was mirrored by the same in the political realm. Thus, many of the liberal tomes written about the mass party were backwards looking at the same time socialist debates were about what was assumed to be a rapidly approaching future cataclysm. It would take Weber and younger liberals to settle accounts with late-capitalism and move beyond the malaise and overtones of dread that permeated writings of thinkers like Bryce and Ostrogorski and their milieu. But – it was also a period in which both liberal and socialist thinkers were considering what democracy was and what it could be. Liberals wary of the new order, and of socialism, produced tomes critically examining the party organization and machine. Socialism and democracy were interlinked, and the major participants in the mass party debate were as concerned with a concept of *collective* socialist democracy – both in terms of the party as a mass organization and class power that looks beyond liberal focus on individual rationality and choice – as well as heavy critiques of liberalism that should inform us today. It is likely a robust debate could only happen in a period when the possibility of socialist success might lead to both collectivization of the economy and expanded democracy, forcing liberals to take that and to ask about the state of liberal democracy in an era of mass parties.

The Mass Party Debate, Democratic Theory and Political Science

As noted previously, democratic theory rarely engages with either the concept or the reality of the political party and its centrality in modern representative government. In so doing, it misses the

possibility of increased interaction with empirical political science, where a vibrant subfield is devoted to the study of political parties.⁹⁰ Why democratic theory so rarely addresses the issue of parties is partly linked to the dominant liberal discourse within the subfield that prioritizes a conception of the individual and their relationship to governmental processes, as well as a concern with a common good stemming from individual rationality; political parties fit oddly or not at all into these normative concerns. It is also a product of the seventy-year, progressive alienation of political theory within political science.⁹¹ The consequences of this for both theory and political science have meant a detachment of theory from commentary on real-world political processes and the disappearance of normative concerns and historical context from empirical political science. While the discipline of political science as a whole has had difficulty coming to terms with its role as a second-order discourse that has limited or no ability to influence the political realm, it is largely by choice that theory has removed itself from engagement both with the rest of the discipline and discussion of the immediate political world.⁹²

The mass party debate presents itself as both an historical example of an era in which there was a relative unity between questions of democratic thought and empirical political science, as well as a fertile space for disciplinary work and conversation. Vital democratic questions are intertwined with the existence and necessity of mass political organizations. It is not hard to envisage a dialogue between theory and the rest of the field over questions of democratic efficacy (both internal party democracy and systemic), mass psychology, the role of strong leadership in bureaucratic organizations, the potential for organizational reform, and the larger question of oligarchy cloaked in a democratic guise. The potential here should not be underestimated, as the large community of party scholars and democratic theorists – should they choose to find ways to cooperate – could produce a robust research program that has implications for the discussion of politics and its normative concerns.

It also opens a space in which the dominant theories of democracy within political thought might be criticized, strengthened, or discarded. I do not think it is a coincidence that the socialist theorists in the mass party question era engaged with the party on a basis that considered it both necessary for modern government and a progressive movement towards collective will formation in the political sphere. Even Michels, whose criticisms touched upon many of the same topics as liberal

⁹⁰ I. van Biezen & M. Saward, ‘Democratic Theorists and Party Scholars’.

⁹¹ J. Gunnell, *Between Philosophy and Politics: The Alienation of Political Theory*. (Amherst, 1986).

⁹² J. Gunnell, *Imagining the American Polity*, and J. Gunnell, *The Orders of Discourse*.

thinkers of the era, never believed in the possibility that mass organizations would disappear – and he too believed in collective democratic will. The reappearance of the party as a serious concern for political theory in Jodi Dean’s writing is clearly linked to her Marxism. By engaging with the mass party question, it may be possible to challenge the dominant liberal paradigm within the subfield through the growth of theories of socialist and collective democracy. At the very least it will provide the opportunity for questioning a paradigm that has grown aloof from the concerns of contemporary democracy.

Conclusions

The Mass Party Debate appears as an important moment in the history of political science that has contemporary relevance for the field. This is true to the extent that it has remained relatively unexcavated for nearly a century; the potential for historical research is significant. It also appears to provide a path for democratic theory to speak to and with the rest of the discipline and especially through the robust empirical subfield of party studies. Theory remains alienated from the discipline, partly through the historical drift of the field itself, but also the choices made within political theory that led to its divorce from consistent conversation between it and the rest of political science. The Mass Party Debate both points to an historical situation from a time when political science was concerned with empirical questions and normative theory. With the continuing importance and relevance of political parties for representative government, the questions that arise concerning parties and democratic thought remain so as well. It may represent a path towards reconciliation, or at least fruitful joint development, between theory and party scholars.

Democratic theory itself would benefit from the questions raised by the Mass Party Debate. It remains to be seen whether the dominant liberal theories of democracy would be able to address those questions and remain internally coherent. A space also opens for the reintroduction of socialist, collective, theories of democracy and the party. Given that the mass party debate occurred in an era of intense ideological competition between liberalism and socialism, with the intellectual depth of the conversation reflected in the simultaneous development of concern and theories of the mass party, the possibility of a fruitful conversation over the mass party could create similar intellectual ferment within the subfield. At the very least, it would spark conversation about a topic of importance to the political world that should be of importance to democratic theory, even if to this point it has not been.