

Marxism and the Party: Obstacles to Class Democratic Will Formation

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Introduction

In the introduction of his classic work *Political Parties*, Robert Michels defended his choice of the “socialist and revolutionary labour party”¹ as a case study, arguing that “the principle of social and democratic parties is the struggle against oligarchy in all its forms.”² If the tendency towards oligarchy were present within the mass socialist party, an organization ostensibly devoted to the overthrow of hierarchical privilege derived from class society, it was, Michels argued, likely present in all mass organizations. Michels at this time was ensconced in a broader, ongoing conversation on the mass party within the Second International. This debate included thinkers as varied as Eduard Bernstein, Édouard Berth, Karl Kautsky, Hubert Lagardelle, Rosa Luxemburg, and Anton Pannekoek, though its coterminous existence with questions of revolutionary tactics – for instance, the great Mass Strike Debate – has largely obscured it from view.

It was in this period, roughly the two decades prior to the First World War, that the mass party solidified as the dominant force in the political superstructure of the bourgeois state. Marx and Engels lived just long enough to see this occur, even though their understanding of the term party was, however, rather abstract, and subject to modification along with the historical development of the party in their lifetimes.³ With the explosive growth of the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) and its adoption of the explicitly socialist Gotha and then Erfurt

¹ R. Michels, *Political Parties*, p. 11.

² *Ibid.*

³ See: Harman, Chris, [Party and Class](#). *International Socialism* (1st series), No. 35, Winter 1968/69, pp. 24–32; Johnston, Monty. [“Marx and Engels and the Concept of the Party.”](#) *Socialist Register* 1967, pp.121-158; Molyneux, John. [Marxism and the Party](#). Pluto Press, London, 1978.

Programs, the mass electoral party was understood as the proper site for the development of proletarian political consciousness. Antonio Gramsci, in his work *The Modern Prince*, argued the mass party was the site of *collective will* formation, and indeed the necessary space to forge the consciousness of a class-for-itself.⁴ Collective will formation is a type of *articulation* that includes defining both the historical tasks of the proletariat in its role as the primary antagonist of the bourgeoisie *and* the situation and demands – the material reality – of the working class in the place in which said party is operating.⁵ Gramsci’s outline of the party corresponds generally to the model developed by the German Social Democratic Party and reflected in both its Communist and Social Democratic variants: a base of disciplined partisans, innovative and centralizing leadership, and an intermediate group of party workers to act as the transmission belt.⁶ Inasmuch as the model requires the consent, participation, and (often) a vote of its mass base on at least some portion of the articulation, it can be called a site of collective *democratic* will formation.

The acceptance by Marxist thinkers of the party as the primary, if not the sole, site of collective proletarian will formation has been firmly ensconced since the events of 1917. My intention is to raise the question of whether the party is the *proper* site of proletarian class will formation, and to explore the problematic potential for the party to stymie or restrict the development of proletarian political consciousness and power. I will do so through the historical unpacking of the larger socialist Mass Party Debate in which Michels was engaged, referencing a radical counter-tradition that includes anarchists, heterodox Marxists, and syndicalists, who have long contested the mass party’s dominance and role. I will examine what role the party can and

⁴ Antonio Gramsci. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. New York: International Publishers, 2012, p. 129.

⁵ Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*.

⁶ Lars T. Lih. *Lenin Rediscovered*.

should play in the development of mass proletarian will and political movement formation, the challenge posed to democratic will formation by the party apparatus, issues with partisanship and psychological subordination of mass will to leadership, and the potential for democratic challenge and reform of the apparatus. In addition, I will pose the question of whether alternative institutions and organizational forms, better suited for class will formation, exist. Finally, my goal is to propose the necessity of a party studies research program within Marxist scholarship that incorporates both the questions raised by the counter-tradition and engages with contemporary political science on the nature of the party and bourgeois party systems.

The Party and Collective Will

The era in which the mass party first arose and solidified is ill-defined, largely because it varied across states, but the period from the adoption of the Gotha Programme (1875) by the SPD seems to be as good a starting date as any, though the peak of the discussion around the phenomenon of the mass party be better defined as 1888-1921.⁷ The rise of the socialist mass party was coterminous with the struggle for the expansion of the franchise in Europe, and as such the Social Democratic parties of the era had their origins in this late 19th century fight alongside the growth of the urban proletariat as a voting bloc. Socialist success at the polls, which surprised even the old Engels, saw the coalescence of electoralism as the primary strategy of the Second International era. This was especially true in Wilhelmine Germany, with its unequal franchise rights, where the SPD was (ostensibly) simultaneously committed to construction of the

⁷ I date this era from 1888-1921 because beyond the rough correspondence with the phenomenon's growth, it begins with a publication on the topic by James Bryce as well as (in 1890) the legalization of the German SPD and its rapid expansion, and it ends with the cresting of the European post-war revolutionary wave and another major publication by Bryce on the topic.

bourgeois democratic state and socialist revolution. Kautskyian Marxism linked the eventual victory of socialism with securing a parliamentary majority in the Reichstag.⁸

This linkage is more than an historical curiosity. Since Kautsky, the general thrust within Marxism has been the acceptance of party professionalization and partisanship, and at least in bourgeois parliamentary states the contestation for political power via electoral competition. Lih has convincingly argued the Leninist Bolshevik model was an adaptation of the SPD and Kautskyian ideas on the party to Russian conditions.⁹ The historic split between Communists and Social Democrats has largely hinged on what role the party had in preparing for revolution and whether the parliamentary majorities were the basis for institution of socialism, or if the bourgeois state must be smashed and replaced by a new proletarian one. Social Democratic views on the mass party as the proper site of proletarian will formation have not shifted much since the *Belle Epoque* (even if the institution of socialism via parliamentary majorities was removed from their programs by mid-century). It is also clear from Lenin's sparring with "left-wing" communists like Pannekoek on the question of the revolutionary party's participation in bourgeois parliaments¹⁰ that the mass (electoral) party model was not in question. Gramsci's *Modern Prince*, a furthering of the Kautskyian-cum-Leninist revolutionary mass party model re-envisioned for Western conditions, thus articulates the party as the proper site of proletarian democratic collective will formation.

⁸ Gronow, Jukka (2016) : On the Formation of Marxism: Karl Kautsky's Theory of Capitalism, the Marxism of the Second International and Karl Marx's Critique of Political Economy, Historical Materialism Book Series, No. 113, ISBN 978-90-04-30665-3, Brill, Leiden, https://doi.org/10.26530/OAPEN_613393

⁹ Lars T. Lih. *Lenin Rediscovered*.

¹⁰ Lenin, "Left-wing Communism, an Infantile Disorder" and Pannekoek, "World Revolution and Communist Tactics."

There is little question that this classic model of the party and its role, articulated eloquently by Gramsci, mirrors the later understanding of the mass party in Katz and Mair's work on the cartel party.¹¹ Class will emerged from the historic development of the class struggle within capitalist relations of production but is *understood* and *articulated* through the mass party. Thus, Lenin's skepticism of trade union consciousness in *What Is To Be Done?* is due to the inability of the trade union organizational form in articulating an expansive class will and was not noticeably different than the conclusions reached by the Bebel and the SPD in their great fight with the trade union leadership.¹² Unions could, at best, express the immediate defensive class interest of workers. Trade union consciousness was of necessity localized at the point of production, while the party allowed for a more holistic view of the class struggle. Gramsci would famously make similar criticisms of the Turin factory council movement's inability to transform its radicalism into a broader working class political project.¹³ The party, with its mass base, cadre of party workers and intellectuals, and skilled leadership provided an ongoing forum for political debate, contestation, and transformation of party decisions into actionable policy.

A corollary to this is the question of the potential negative impact the party administrative apparatus and internal hierarchy has on *democratic* will formation. This is not simply a question of structural barriers but also psychological subordination of the party base to the leadership, leadership attitudes, and the effects of partisanship more generally. These questions were the basis of Michels's *Political Parties* as well as his pre-WW1 political writings, but there was a broader and ongoing conversation in this period on this within and around the Second

¹¹ Specifically the role of the party as an intermediary between the mass base and the state as a transmission belt of democratic will formation.

¹² V. Lenin, *What Is To Be Done?*, in *The Lenin Anthology*

¹³ See A. Gramsci, "Syndicalism and the Councils," in *Pre-Prison Writings*, ed. R. Bellamy, p. 127-131.

International. The great debate between Kautsky, Luxemburg, and Pannekoek on the mass strike was simultaneously a question of the extent to which the mass party form had solidified into a conservative, anti-democratic institution, and what could or should be done to address those problems. From this to syndicalist polemics on the party, works such as Trotsky's *Our Political Tasks*, and the broadsides between Gorter, Lenin, and Pannekoek, this is perhaps the great period of Marxist questioning on the problems of party democracy and professionalization of politics. Gramsci's writings on the party, coming after this period, interestingly engage by dismissing the problems of the party raised by Michels.¹⁴

Finally, there is the question of whether the political party should be the sole, or even primary site of proletarian democratic will formation. Though the Russian Revolution codified this role for the party, in the period of the mass party's rise its role was not uncontested. Trade unions were at first seen as the most likely alternative to the party, given their proximity to the class struggle and their link to the social relations of production. Here the growth of anarcho-syndicalism challenged the notion of the party's primacy; syndicalists like Hubert Lagardelle and Eduard Berth were wary of the party and the potential they saw for its bureaucratization due to the perceived distance it had from the lived experience of the working class and preferred to agitate for class struggle and direct action within the unions, leaving only a limited propagandistic role to the parliamentary party.¹⁵ Similarly, Daniel De Leon's Socialist Labor Party would advocate for a socialist industrial unionism that blurred the line between party and union. Rosa Luxemburg's sophisticated analysis of the 1905 Russian Revolution brought into question both the interrelationship between party and class, but at what level the party (and

¹⁴ A. Gramsci, *The Prison Notebooks*, p. 150.

¹⁵ H. Lagardelle. (1911). *Le socialisme ouvrier*. Paris: V. Giard & E. Brière.

unions) were needed for development of class consciousness. 1905 would also see the birth of workers' councils (soviets) that Pannekoek and eventually Lenin would argue were the proper site of proletarian rule, and the question of councilism would rise again a decade later and spawn a heterodox councilist tradition which argued for them, and not the party, as the site of proletarian will formation.

The organic nature of the mass party's emergence in the political superstructure of bourgeois society is clear. This is especially true as it emerged nearly simultaneously across states and was adopted quickly by socialists as a tool of political class struggle, either in the construction of the bourgeois democratic institutional infrastructure or to compete within it. Yet, it is interesting that while the primacy of trade unions in socialist political class struggle was challenged by the mass party – and afterwards the trade union has rarely been understood as the sole site of proletarian will formation – the party has only rarely seen a challenge to *its* role. Our next task is to unpack and analyze these concerns. To do so means to pursue a course that will clarify the status of the party, and to build the foundation of party studies within Marxism. This requires the elaboration of the Mass Party Debate and a serious engagement with the questions it raised for the party's potential to stymie or prevent proletarian democratic will formation and its exercise. We will examine, in depth, the three areas mentioned above as overarching questions for Marxism, the political party, and revolutionary political thought.

The Debate on the Mass Party

The Mass Party Debate (MPD) was a larger theoretical conversation about the character and role of the political party as it became the dominant political institution in the late 19th and early 20th centuries mediating citizen interaction with the superstructure of the bourgeois parliamentary system. Classics of political sociology produced in the era by Bryce, Michels,

Ostrogorski, and Weber (amongst others) wrestled with the topic. Academic work on the party also intersected with political reform efforts within bourgeois politics. Marxist concern about the party, however, has only rarely been considered as part of the larger MPD. Michels, for instance, was ensconced in a broader political and theoretical discussion inside the SPD and the socialist movement but today is largely placed outside that context, and inside the more constrained academic discourse.¹⁶ Serious inquiries into the nature of the party within Marxism, especially of this period, have been largely hidden or ignored. This is primarily linked to two issues: 1. The early acceptance of the party (and then the mass party) as a form of proletarian struggle by Marx and Engels, far earlier than most bourgeois theorists and 2. the primacy of the reform v. revolution debate, which was an overarching theme in this period.

The socialist side of the mass party debate was part of a larger discussion over the ill effects of political professionalization on democracy, radicalism, and possible solutions to it by theorists who accepted the necessity of political parties in the modern era. Those who began to question the effects the mass party had on radical struggle began to see that the party apparatus had a bias towards cautious and conservative tactics and a tendency to ignore or suppress those who argued more radical action was necessary for a revolutionary party if it were to help spur the masses towards revolution. The debate over the mass party was contained in a debate over parliamentarism; it also saw a pointed critique of party bureaucracy and a growing understanding of the need to fight for internal democracy. We see that the socialist thinkers involved in the debate were well aware of the rise of the mass party and its effects though many involved within

¹⁶ As I have argued elsewhere (P. LaVenia Jr., "Rethinking Robert Michels," *History of Political Thought*, 40:1, 2019, p. 111-137), Michels is typically situated within both the academic conversation on the mass party and as a founder of an a-democratic school of elite theory alongside Mosca and Pareto. He should also be placed – perhaps most prominently – in the socialist debate over the mass party.

the mass strike debate had not fully understood or examined the changed political structure in a professionalized system of mass bureaucratic organizations as an equally important component in the debate over party tactics and radicalism.

The mass party debate and the conclusions drawn by the factions involved illustrate the possibilities oligarchy can be overcome within professionalized politics by the rank-and-file, as well as the birth of an intellectual tendency that identified mass party politics with democracy and believed the question of oligarchy to be at best misplaced, and otherwise ignored. The complexities and relevance of the debate are deepened as the socialist movement fought for what was, essentially, the establishment of bourgeois political rights; as such it delivered a deep critique of democratic limitations within capitalism, but also the limitations of any discussion of democracy without also considering the dynamic of the bureaucratic state and modern mass organizations on politics.

The fulcrum of the MPD occurred during and after the 1905 Russian Revolution and is often known as the ‘mass strike debate,’ but it continued for nearly another decade especially when political strikes in Germany were potentially on the agenda to expand suffrage rights from 1910-1914. While the former era is far better known due to its link with the Russian Revolution of 1905, by the latter period the party leadership’s turn towards conservative electoral activism and away from revolutionary politics was impossible to deny. By 1905, the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) had become the largest socialist party in the world, both in terms of membership and total votes.¹⁷ During this time the SPD committed to a parliamentary strategy that required it to be the primary engine in the creation of the liberal state, as most of the

¹⁷ G. Steenson, *Not One Man! Not One Penny!*, pp. 39.

bourgeois parties were either indifferent to or hostile to full democratization of Wilhelmine Germany. This meant the SPD had to be an intensely professional political machine as it was creating the conditions whereby professional politics would come to be routine. The SPD's model of Marxism, as expressed in the 1891 Erfurt Programme, saw socialism as part of a logical progression of capitalist economic consolidation and the party's eventual electoral success. Karl Kautsky, the party's leading theoretician, argued as early as 1893 (and reiterated in his 1909 *The Road to Power*) that "the Social Democratic Party is a revolutionary party, but not a party that makes revolutions. We know that our goals can be reached only through a revolution; however, we also know that it lies just as little in our power to make this revolution as it lies in the power of our opponents to prevent it. Thus it does not even occur to us to want to foment a revolution or to prepare the conditions for one."¹⁸

Although the concerns around the mass party had circulated from some time, it was the 1905 Russian Revolution that provided a consolidated path to their articulation. Russia – hardly an industrial nation – had proven to have a more combative proletariat than Germany. Russian workers had engaged in a series of political strikes and formed their own councils – *soviets* – that paralyzed the country for a year and electrified socialists across the world. Nor was the revolution initiated by either the Bolshevik¹⁹ or Menshevik factions of the RSDLP²⁰ - though they would come to play a role in the important St. Petersburg soviet.

In Germany the debate centered on the use of the mass strike and it was, at its heart, attached to the mass party debate. Within it we find questions on: the role of organization, the

¹⁸ K. Kautsky, *The Road To Power*. (Atlantic Highlands, NJ, 1996), pp. 34.

¹⁹ Lenin was initially skeptical of the soviets and saw them as representing a threat to the (Bolshevik) party. The Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries sent representatives to the soviet almost immediately.

²⁰ Russian Social Democratic Labour Party

place for independent political action, the nature of party bureaucracy, responsibility of party officials and responsiveness to mass pressure, and psychology of the party membership.

Socialists like Rosa Luxemburg, Robert Michels, and Anton Pannekoek embraced the general strike as a way out of the electoral morass and reformism that permeated the SPD in this era, while the party leadership approached the topic warily and union heads denounced it.

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.'²¹ 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, 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.²² 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

²¹ C. Schorske, *The Great Schism*, pp. 36.

²² August Bebel, "Socialism and the General Strike," *International Socialist Journal* (US), November 1905, Vol.VI no.5, pp.257-292.

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 apparatus?

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, in 1910, a mass protest movement over suffrage rights once again broke out, and once again the Kautsky and the SPD leadership opposed it to tightly controlled party actions, while the left-wing represented by Luxemburg and Pannekoek engaged in strong polemics against the real danger the party, ostensibly the site of class democratic will formation, would work to stymie or prevent development of revolutionary consciousness and will.

Marxism and the Party: Analysis of the MPD

Questions surrounding Marxism, the party, and professionalization of politics, central to the debate over the mass strike, have always hidden in plain sight. Challenges to the party's role as the primary, or at least the sole, fulcrum of proletarian political will formation here intertwine with serious concerns about the nature of large organization and its potential to alter, and

potentially prevent, the development of a revolutionary working class. Hence the critique offered by the era's syndicalists – that the parliamentary party was prone to bureaucratization and divorce from the organic consciousness of workers – mirrored the concern of the party left such as Luxemburg and Pannekoek, who began to identify the site of proletarian will formation *outside* the party with *unorganized* workers and question the party's role as the SPD consistently chose a conservative tactical position often opposed to the broader working class. It is in this context that the writings of Robert Michels, both his academic and political in this era, should be acknowledged as part of the mass party debate, including *Political Parties*.

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 electoral democracy as class compromise 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.²³ Proletarian democratic will formation would thus occur not in the party, but *at the point of production*.

²³ H. Lagardelle, *Le Socialisme Ouvrier* (Paris, 1911), p. 221.

Similarly, Rosa Luxemburg's text *The Mass Strike, the Political Party, and the Trade Unions* was a trenchant criticism of the SPD party leadership *as well as* the party as the source of will formation. Attacking the SPD leadership and its vision of a tightly controlled mass strike, 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..."²⁴ 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."²⁵ 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

²⁴ 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.

²⁵ *Ibid*, pp. 199-200.

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*.”

It is the *direct experience* with class struggle, external to the parliamentary party, that sparks proletarian will formation in both syndicalist theories and those of Luxemburg. Consciousness formation for proletarians is tied to their role as exploited commodity producers, and as such their experience is far removed from that of parliament and electoral competition embodied in the party. Indeed, for Luxemburg, it was the still-pliable consciousness of the non-party workers that permitted their sudden and dialectical transformation into revolutionary actors, far different from that of the worker that had internalized obedience to party (or trade union) leadership. In this period syndicalists like Berth, Lagardelle, and Michels celebrated (revolutionary) localist unions as a space for the unity of class consciousness and action linked to proletarian struggle.

Alongside a centering of proletarian will formation *outside* the party, another part of the debate raised the question of whether the professional party could restrict, stymie, or alter its development. Here the writings of Anton Pannekoek, Kautsky’s other interlocutor, cut to the heart of the dispute. In a famous response²⁶ to Kautsky, who had been engaged in a series of disputes with both Luxemburg and Pannekoek on the party’s role in the mass strike since mass discontent with Prussian suffrage laws boiled over in 1910, Pannekoek argues “what

²⁶ A. Pannekoek, “Marxist Theory and Revolutionary Tactics,” *Die Neue Zeit*, XXXI, No 1, 1912. In *Pannekoek and Gorter’s Marxism*, Pluto Press, 1978.

distinguishes the workers' organisations from all others is the development of solidarity within them as the basis of their power, the total subordination of the individual to the community, the essence of a new humanity still in the process of formation."²⁷ Workers organizations – unions and the party – are both inevitable byproducts of collective struggle and individual weakness of the proletariat, but they provide the potential basis for collective will formation. A proletarian organization, for Pannekoek, “lays the foundations of a humanity which governs itself, decides its own destiny... it represents the self-created order of the people, and it will fight relentlessly to throw back and put an end to the brutal intervention and despotic attempts at repression which the ruling minority undertakes.”²⁸ Workers in these organizations develop “the firm solidarity and fraternity which bind them together as one organism ruled by a single will.”²⁹

Like Luxemburg, Pannekoek believed in a dialectical interplay between mass action and the parliamentary party, and in no way suggested its abolition. The external exigencies of the class struggle would force struggle into the streets uncontrolled by the party, and the party in turn would then strengthen and fortify those struggles. He then poses a prescient question, pertinent to our inquiry: “But how do matters stand with the party, which is a middle term, on the one hand a large group which consciously decides what action it will take, and on the other the representative and leader of the entire proletariat? *What is the function of the party?*”³⁰

Pannekoek ventures to suggest that the party has absorbed the capacity of the masses for spontaneous action, and in so doing “*The initiative and potential for spontaneous action which the masses surrender by doing so is not in fact lost, but re-appears elsewhere and in another*

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

form as the party's initiative and potential for spontaneous action."³¹ In this sense Pannekoek ventures that organization is inevitable *and* indispensable for the working class, and the specific form of proletarian democratic will formation requires organization to fulfill its tasks, and that it is unique in history in subsuming the interests of its individual members to that of the whole. Yet, and this is key, the party is tasked with acting on behalf of the section of the working class that adheres to it and using the collective will it has subsumed to advance the revolutionary interests of the proletariat.

Here Pannekoek asks a question that, if anything, is dismissed far too quickly. For, "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.*"³² There is a hint of Michels here, and given that he was a correspondent of Pannekoek's, it seems a likely influence.³³ The essential point remains: the mass party has absorbed the capacity of its membership for individual spontaneous action, socialized them to act as a collective, but it remains within the capacity of the party's leadership to *reduce* the potential for mass action, and with it, collective democratic will formation, if it chose to do so (and here Pannekoek is clearly insinuating the consequences of the SPD's activity in the pre-war period).

Alongside Michels, Pannekoek had developed perhaps the most robust understanding of the era's Marxists on the mass party, its hierarchical internal structure and differentiation of bureaucratic and officeholder needs from that of the class and party membership it represented.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Copies of several letters from Pannekoek to Michels reside at the Fondazione Luigi Einaudi, Torino, Italy.

Both Luxemburg and Pannekoek gave a complicated answer to the question of whether the party was the correct site of proletarian democratic will formation. For both, the class struggle as a consequence of the social relations of production (here both economic and political) was external to the party and as such the spot for initial struggle that would *lead* to will formation. For both, however, it was organization that would provide the channel for this will. The wariness with which they viewed the professionalization of party life did not lead either to abandon the parliamentary party *entirely* as a site for the organization of will formation. Yet there was an understanding within Luxemburg's discussion of the mass strike that the professional party apparatus and membership would often chart a conservative path not in tune with proletarian class interests, and that the unorganized workers would (potentially) act through direct class struggle to rejuvenate a moribund party. Pannekoek made explicit the danger posed by the party bureaucracy and the potential for the party to be a *reactionary* block on mass action; a few years later he would build on this to denounce the rottenness of the SPD's leadership and the inadequacy of parliamentarism as a path to revolution.³⁴

Kautsky, Luxemburg, and Pannekoek represent the most well-known, though by no means the only, interlocutors within the broader Marxist context of the era on the professionalization of the party and the problems it poses for class will formation. Robert Michels, in both his academic writings and political polemics of the era, synthesized syndicalist criticisms of parliamentarism and bureaucracy with growing concerns around institutional oligarchy.³⁵ He was also a member of the SPD, involved in party struggles of the era, and an

³⁴ A. Pannekoek, "Imperialism and the Tasks of the Proletariat," in *Discovering Imperialism*, Brill: Leiden, 2012, pp. 895-911.

³⁵ LaVenia, 2019.

intellectual correspondent with all the aforementioned.³⁶ Michels's thesis, developed leading up to the publication of *Political Parties* in 1911, is well-known but worth reiterating. Michels observed that the party bureaucracy had expanded significantly in the early 20th century, as a result of the party's rapid growth and the need for specialized and professional managers to ensure coordinated and routinized election campaigns as well as maintenance of the party in-between elections. This bureaucracy tended to be conservative, and unlike its working-class base which might best be served by revolutionary action (or at least contentious politics) in the struggle for working class suffrage and political power, the bureaucracy was more concerned with protecting its (and thus the party's) continued existence through small reforms and electoral campaigns. Partisans were socialized into a hierarchical party where administrators with specialized skills tended to drive party policy, and those partisans accepted and championed their own party's bureaucracy because of its skill in building the party and winning elections. Dissidents were often stymied or coopted by the bureaucracy – and Michels would later add that the very structure of the party meant those rebellions would never fully succeed in democratizing the party.

Michels' analysis grew directly out of his syndicalism, which was tempered by a strong SPD and the lack of a powerful syndicalist movement in Germany. Revolutionary syndicalists had an analysis of democracy that tied it directly to the organic lived consciousness of workers; as workers had no experience on the shopfloor that would allow them to naturally understand parliamentary politics – syndicalist 'democracy' was a confederation of union syndicates with a leadership by rank-and-file workers who would easily oversee and understand their leaders

³⁶ Letters from Kautsky and Luxemburg, alongside those of Pannekoek, exist within Michels's papers at the Fondazione Luigi Einaudi.

performance. In contrast Michels, and syndicalists, saw political parties leading inevitably to oligarchy, as a specialized and distant party bureaucracy and elected officials would easily manipulate a rank-and-file that deferred to a more technically competent and involved hierarchy.

These three interrelated but different approaches to the problem of proletarian will formation and the professional party which present us with an opportunity to question the primacy of the party as the primary tool of the revolutionary working-class. None entirely dismiss the party as a necessity within the contemporary superstructure of the bourgeois state, but each is critical of the adherence to the party as the sole legitimate site for binding the proletariat together as a class and carrying out its democratic will as a class. In the concluding section we will use the criticisms ventured within the MPD to develop an understanding of the Marxist mass party, its relationship to proletarian consciousness and action, and the potential future for a Marxist party studies.

A Marxist Party Studies?

Marxism has tended, aside from a few heterodox thinkers³⁷, to locate the site of proletarian collective will formation with the mass revolutionary party. Yet, the party form has also proven to be extraordinarily problematic, from Social Democratic betrayals of revolution to Stalinist terror and dictatorship. If, to alter Schattschneider 's famous observation, the party created the modern revolutionary working-class movement, and the revolutionary working-class movement is unthinkable save in terms of the party, what, if any, alternatives might exist? Acceptance of the mass party organization may be framed as an understanding of proletarian democracy as a type of collective class power that required the mass party to be its form. If

³⁷ Pannekoek would become a primary theorist of council communism and a fierce critic of the party, living until 1960 and, towards the end of his life, engaging with Castoriadis in *Socialisme ou Barbarie*.

bourgeois democracy is seen as a space for building proletarian power (and thus socialist democracy) *while* simultaneously constructing the working class as a revolutionary object, what other form could working-class political power take?

In this sense there is a need for rigorous theoretical study of the party form within Marxist theory. A space for analysis, and criticism, of the party and its limitations has long existed within bourgeois political science, and recent theoretical developments have been self-contained in liberal deliberative thought. Marxism, because the question of party centrality was seemingly decided long ago, has only rarely participated in more open discussion of the party form. The importance of Robert Michels and his attempt to do so on a systematic basis should not be understated. Likewise, broader criticisms of the party from others – even partially – such as the aforementioned Luxemburg, Pannekoek, and syndicalist writers is important, as are those of thinkers like Castoriadis, Debord, and Korsch. Marxism should have something important to say about the party, and the study of the party on a serious basis could help both inform Marxism but also Political Science more generally. The field of party studies has been bourgeois in its essence from its origins, and discussion of the party within political theory in recent years has centered on deliberative democracy, itself a post-modern variant of liberalism. This leaves us with more questions than answers, for which I will attempt to provide a rough outline for future study.

First, is the party the only, or proper site of proletarian collective will formation? If the development of proletarian consciousness within capitalism requires a collective sublimation of individual wills to the broader interests of the class, at what level is the party the proper site for this. Worker consciousness in capitalism's social relations of production does not produce an intrinsic understanding of parliamentary procedure, and parliamentary activity is far removed

from the consciousness of the proletariat. As syndicalists argued, workers develop consciousness as a class through their existence as *workers*. Does this mean unions, or a party-union hybrid, are a better space for proletarian consciousness and power? Or, perhaps, as Gramsci observed³⁸, unions do not develop a united producer consciousness, but rather only that of the wage-earner, which is as limited as that of the party-member. Pannekoek would reject the party in favor of workers's councils, which united the workers at the point of production and as a new form of political control. Councils have sprung up time and again as a form of proletarian control, but their success has often been limited by the dominance of a party unwilling to cede power directly to the working class – though the first historically successful proletarian revolution depended on both the party and councils. The development of proletarian will *and* consciousness as associated producers would seem to be linked with an institutional form that allows for collective democratic control of both the worksite and political superstructure. The party is not, as such, embedded in the economic structure of capitalism.

Secondly, what role might the party play in *limiting* the development of proletarian collective will formation? Professional politics had created, as Michels and others observed, a party-in-government and party bureaucracy that had divergent interests from that of the mass membership. The party was inseparable from modern politics and organization, yet it socialized its rank-and-file to obey the decisions of a party leadership often unwilling or unable to articulate the will of the class, instead substituting rank self-interest. Given the tendencies toward hierarchy, oligarchy, and obedience to authority embodied in the mass organization, this created – and continues to create – a dilemma for Marxists. The necessity of the party in some capacity seems apparent, and yet the political party is rarely internally democratic for more than a brief

³⁸ Gramsci, "Syndicalism and the Councils," in *Pre-Prison Writings*, p. 128.

period, if at all. Even if, as Luxemburg observed, unorganized workers may respond to external class struggle and radicalize without the party, the history of the last century provides stark warnings of the party's potential role in blocking the struggle of unorganized workers (May '68 in France is perhaps the most recent example). What can be done to democratize the party, or limit the power of the party administration and electeds, if anything? Can the site of proletarian struggle be broadened enough that it is not solely dependent on the party?

Given that we are at a historical moment where history seems to have intruded, and socialism is at least part of the conversation in the West as an *intellectual* tradition (if not yet a mass political one), and conversely, the power of traditional Marxist movements has declined to where they have negligible power to restrict the discussion of the party, we now have the chance to do so on a broader basis. This is true within Political Science, which has long endured a split between quantitative party studies and political theory³⁹ and has increasingly despaired about the nature of (bourgeois) party democracy and its decline.⁴⁰ A *critical theory* of the party, rooted in the Marxist tradition, has the potential to unite both empirical and normative inquiries into the nature of the party. At the very least it may provide needed room and explanatory power as to why the nature of the party within societies ruled by the bourgeois class, inherently undemocratic, consistently frustrates liberal reformers. It may also, in the best Marxist traditions, provide a critical critique of the party, one that provides intellectuals and workers with a path towards a twenty-first century understanding of radicalism and revolution that has incorporated an understanding of the most problematic aspects of the party. Perhaps it can even help develop a

³⁹ Biezen, Ingrid van, and Michael Saward. "Democratic Theorists and Party Scholars: Why They Don't Talk to Each Other, and Why They Should." *Perspectives on Politics* 6, no. 1 (2008): 21–35. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20446635>.

⁴⁰ For instance, P. Mair, *Ruling the Void*, Verso: London, 2013.

theoretical praxis that can be used by future revolutionaries. Its development is outside the scope of this essay, but it is my hope to point a path in that direction.