CHAPTER I

Democracy and Oligarchy in Trade Unions

IN RECENT YEARS political democracy has proved so vulnerable to changes in social structure that the better understanding of these processes has become one of the major tasks of social science. Few still believe (as the American negotiators in Paris in 1919 seemed to believe) that formal guarantees and written constitutions can insure democracy. The most carefully worded guarantees have been swept aside, and the most intelligent of constitutions ignored, until now men seem liable to the opposite error of considering guarantees and constitutions worthless. In few areas of political life is the discrepancy between the formal juridical guarantees of democratic procedure and the actual practice of oligarchic rule so marked as in private or voluntary organizations such as trade unions, professional and business associations, veterans' groups, and cooperatives. In fact, as many observers have noted, almost all such organizations are characterized internally by the rule of a one-party oligarchy. That is, one group, which controls the administration, usually retains power indefinitely, rarely faces organized opposition, and when faced with such opposition often resorts to undemocratic procedures to eliminate it. This is especially true for national organizations.

There is, however, one trade union—the International Typographical Union (ITU), the organization of the men who set type in the print shops of North America—which does not fit this pattern. It is the only American trade union in which organized parties regularly oppose each other for election to the chief union posts, and in which a two-party system has been institutionalized. Since the beginning of this century,
the officers of the international union and of most of the larger locals have been chosen in biennial elections, in which two or more political parties have offered a complete slate of candidates for all offices. The two major parties of the union operate much as do the Democratic and Republican Parties in American politics, though they have no connection with any group or party outside the union. The parties have been of roughly equal strength in the international since 1920, so that turnover in office occurs at least as frequently as in national politics. In the thirty-five years since 1920, five incumbent presidents of the international have been defeated for re-election. In the New York local of the union, the largest local of the ITU, containing 10% of the membership, seven out of the last fourteen elections have resulted in defeat for the incumbent president. Probably nothing like this has happened in any other trade union or other of the private governments (as we may call voluntary organizations) anywhere in the world.

§ The Theory of Oligarchy

THE PATTERN WHICH CHARACTERIZES almost all voluntary organizations was generalized over forty years ago by the German sociologist, Robert Michels, when he laid down his famous “iron law of oligarchy” in the following terms: “It is organization which gives birth to the dominion of the elected over the electors, of the mandataries over the mandators, of the delegates over the delegators. Who says organization says oligarchy.”¹

The experience of most people as well as the studies of social scientists concerned with the problem of organization would tend to confirm Michels’ generalization. In their trade unions, professional societies, business associations, and cooperatives—in the myriad nominally democratic voluntary organizations—men have learned, and learn again every day, that the clauses in the constitutions which set forth the machinery for translating membership interests and sentiments into organizational purpose and action bear little relationship to the actual political processes which determine what their organizations do. At the head of most private organizations stands a small group of men most of whom have held high office in the organization’s government for a long time, and whose tenure and control is rarely threatened by a serious organized internal opposition. In such organizations, regardless of whether the membership has a nominal right to control through regular elections or conventions, the real and often permanent power rests with the men who hold the highest positions.

Since Michels first wrote, many books and articles have been written about oligarchy in voluntary organizations, but almost invariably they have documented the operation of his iron law in another set of circumstances. They have shown how control of the organizational machinery, combined with membership passivity, operates to perpetuate oligarchic control. From these studies it is clear that unions and other voluntary organizations more closely resemble one-party states in their internal organization than they do democratic societies with organized legitimate opposition and turnover in office. Indeed, the pattern of one-party oligarchy is so common in the labor movement that one defender of the Soviet Union has pointed to it as a justification of the one-party regime in that country:

What is totalitarianism? A country that has a totalitarian government operates like our union operates. There are no political parties. People are elected to govern the country based upon their records.... That is totalitarianism. If we started to divide up and run a Republican set of officers, a Democratic set, a Communist set and something else we would have one hell of a time.²

Oligarchy becomes a problem only in organizations which assume as part of their public value system the absence of oligarchy, that is, democracy. In societies or organizations in which the self-perpetuation of the governing elite is the norm few people will raise questions regarding the determinants or consequences of oligarchy. In such organizations oligarchy is a thing given, not a phenomenon to be explained. However, when one finds an organization ostensibly devoted to the extension of democracy which is nevertheless itself undemocratically governed, some explanation seems demanded. Thus in his Political Parties, Michels, himself a socialist at the time he was writing, raised the question of why the German Social-Democratic Party and the German labor movement, though ideologically committed to a completely democratic society and actively engaged in fighting for democratic rights within Germany, were themselves oligarchic in their internal structures. To Michels, oligarchy within the democratic socialist movement was significant because it was an ‘unintended consequence’ of organization. For him, the fact that the conservative German political parties or other organizations were also oligarchic was not a problem, since they did not believe in democracy to the same degree as the socialists, and in fact often upheld the principle of oligarchy for the larger society. In the same way and at about the same time the oligarchic structure of Ameri


can political parties attracted the interest of some observers such as Moise Ostrogorski, who were struck by the apparent contradiction between American democratic ideals and the reality of the boss and the machine.  

The problem had been recognized earlier, of course, but until Michels, European socialists took a generally optimistic view of the problem of machine domination of workers' organizations. Marx and Engels themselves viewed oligarchy as part of the early stage of the political emergence of the working class. They believed that the workers could come to control their institutions as soon as large numbers of them acquired class consciousness and political sophistication. Clique domination of socialist groups could not survive when workers really understood the facts of political life.  

American political scientists, with their generally liberal and optimistic outlook, took a similar point of view. They saw the boss as the machine in social problems which would gradually be solved as democracy advanced, the immigrant was assimilated, and education was extended. They viewed the American political party as progressively moving out of close control of a small group of leaders, first to the caucus, then to open conventions, and finally to the ultimate stage of the preferential primary. During the first period of this century, this point of view found expression in a movement to extend formal popular control through the direct primary, initiative, referendum, and recall.

During the first period of this century, this point of view found expression in a movement to extend formal popular control through the direct primary, initiative, referendum, and recall. In Europe where the idea of a popular democracy did not actually come to fulfillment in terms of universal adult or male suffrage without class restrictions until after World War I, few efforts were made to formally democratize the structure of political parties. But the left and labor groups, which were concerned with achieving a more complete democracy, invariably set up formal blueprints which provided for a high degree of popular control over the selection of leaders and formation of policy by way of regular conventions, discussion periods, and elections.

Despite the optimistic hopes of early socialist bodies and the initiators of formal democratic control, the problem remained. As the trade union and the socialist movement grew in size and power, members who came to disagree with the policies of incumbent leaders found, with rare exceptions, that it was impossible to dislodge those leaders from office. They discovered that offices whose authority originally and formally derived from the consent of the members gave officials power over the members. In most cases, however, the opponents of an existing oligarchy did not generalize from their own experience, nor did they raise the question, is there something in the nature of large-scale organizations which engenders oligarchic control? Rather, like Karl Marx they tended to view the problem in terms of evil or weak men who were corrupted by power, and to place the democratic solution in a change of personnel.

By itself the existence of oligarchy in voluntary organizations rarely leads to great concern even in democratic societies and organizations. In most cases where men have forcefully and articulately opposed oligarchy, their concern has usually arisen from disagreement with the policies of a specific oligarchy. Thus the critics of the American party machine were not basically incensed by boss control per se, but rather by the fact that the machine was linked to corruption and inefficient government or refused to support the various social and economic reforms favored by the critics. In the pre-World War I socialist movement Lenin, for example, attacked the leadership of the German Social Democratic Party, not primarily for being oligarchic, but for having betrayed "Marxism." The CIO critics of AFL leadership in the mid-1930's in the United States were obviously not concerned with the lack of democracy within the AFL, but with the fact that the AFL was not organizing the mass production industries. Two American books which first brought Michels' analysis to the attention of the American labor movement were written by supporters of left-wing labor groups, and they objected more to the fact that many union leaders were restraining the post-World War I strike wave than to the fact that they were dictatorial.

Occasionally the criticism of oligarchic control within the labor movement led to successful attempts to further democratize the constitutional structure of unions so as to reduce the power of the officials. A favored remedy introduced in some unions before World War I was to replace convention election of officers by a direct vote of the membership and to require referenda for constitutional changes, as well as


5. Bukharin, op. cit., pp. 306-7, explicitly notes this fact that critics of oligarchy are concerned only with policy, not with oligarchy.

to make it possible for members to directly initiate referenda. The Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) tried to insure turnover in office by limiting the number of years that a man might hold office and requiring that he return to the shop after his term as an official. With very few significant exceptions all the efforts to reduce oligarchic control by formal mechanisms have failed. In those cases where an entrenched oligarchy was finally dislodged, the new leaders soon reverted to the same tactics as they had denounced in the old in order to guarantee their own permanent tenure in office and reduce or eliminate opposition. Even anarchist political and labor groups, whom we might expect to be highly sensitive to the dangers of oligarchy on the basis of their ideology, have succumbed to the blight. In pre-Franco Spain and in other countries where the anarchists had large organizations, a small semipermanent group of leaders maintained itself in power and selected its own replacements through a process of cooptation (selection by the leaders themselves). There is no more persuasive illustration of the unanticipated consequences of men’s purposeful social actions than the recurrent transformations of nominally democratic private organizations into oligarchies more concerned with preserving and enhancing their own power and status than in satisfying the demands and interests of the members.

What are the factors that account for the lack of democracy in labor unions? Why do opposition groups find it so difficult to survive? Michels and others who have dealt with the problem have summed it up in broad generalizations: The nature of large-scale organizations is such as to give the incumbent officials overwhelming power as compared with that of the opposition; the situation of the leaders of most unions is such that they wish to stay in office and will adopt dictatorial tactics to do so; and the relationship of the members to their union results in a low level of participation by the members. These factors have been discussed in considerable detail in another publication by the senior author. Some of these generalizations are deserving of treatment here.

7. It is, of course, true that the leaders’ objectives of personal power and permanent tenure need not conflict with the needs of the members. Most voluntary organizations do in fact represent their members’ interests in conflicts with other groups. But there may arise a situation in which the needs and goals of the leaders or simply their desire for peace and quiet as they remain in office lead them to oppose or not fight for membership objectives. In an organization in which the members cannot vote on alternative procedures or courses of action, it is impossible to know whether a leadership decision is in fact something that the members desire.

Large-scale organizations give union officials a near monopoly of power. (a) Unions, like all other large-scale organizations, tend to develop a bureaucratic structure, that is, a system of rational (predictable) organization which is hierarchically organized. Bureaucracy is inherent in the sheer problem of administration, in the requirement that unions be “responsible” in their dealings with management (and responsible for their subordinate units); in the need to parallel the structures of business and government, in the desire of workers to eliminate management arbitrariness and caprice, and in the desire of the leaders of unions to reduce the hazards to their permanent tenure of office.

The price of increased union bureaucracy is increased power at the top, decreased power among the ordinary members. With the increase in the power of the top officials over local units and members, the sources of organized opposition are controlled or reduced. Most unions have given their executive boards the right to suspend local officials for violating policies of the central bodies. Whether they follow a conciliatory tone (as when they call for intraunion discipline and responsibility) or a militant one (as when they call for union solidarity in a dispute with management) union leaders strengthen their own hands and justify their monopolization of internal power in the course of articulating organizational needs and purposes.

(b) Control over the formal means of communication within the organization is almost exclusively in the hands of the officials. The individual member’s right of free speech is not an effective check on administrative power if the union leaders control all public statements made by members of the administrative or field staff and the union newspaper. Since the only viewpoints about union matters that are widely available to the members are those of the administration, even widespread discontent which might result in organized opposition cannot be effectively expressed.

(c) In most unions, one of the chief factors perpetuating the power of the incumbents is the administration’s almost complete monopoly of political skills and the absence of those skills among the rank and file. Within a trade union the principal source of leadership training is the
union administrative and political structure itself. The union official, to maintain his position, must become adept in political skills. The average worker, on the other hand, has little opportunity or need to acquire them. Rarely if ever is he called upon to make a speech before a large group, put his thoughts down in writing, or organize a group's activities. To the extent that union officers possess a monopoly of political skills, they inhibit the rise of an effective opposition.

The leaders want to stay in office.

There is a basic strain between the values inherent in society's stratification system and the democratic values of the trade-union movement. With few significant exceptions, every trade-union official has moved up in the status hierarchy by becoming an official. The leader of a large local or national union has the income and prestige of a member of the upper middle class, and often wields more power than the average upper-middle class person. Most high-status positions carry with them some security of tenure. Democracy, on the other hand, implies permanent insecurity for those in governing positions: the more truly democratic the governing system, the greater the insecurity. Thus every incumbent of a high-status position of power within a democratic system must of necessity anticipate a loss of position.

It is hard for persons in such positions to accept this insecurity with equanimity. Once high status is secured, there is usually a pressing need to at least retain and protect it. This is particularly true if the discrepancy between the status and the position to which one must return on losing the status is very great. In other words, if the social distance between the trade-union leader's position as an official and his position as a regular worker is great, his need to retain the former will be correspondingly great.


14. Furthermore, as Shepard points out, "The demands on leadership are heavy and their positions precarious. To survive, leaders must be extraordinarily able, and able leaders are capable of consolidating their positions." Cf. Herbert A. Shepard: "Democratic Control in a Labor Union," American Journal of Sociology, 54:311-316 (1949).

15. Public officials in a democratic society are also faced with this problem. Most of them, however, come from occupational positions or social strata which permit them to return to private life without a sharp decline in income.

The strenuous efforts on the part of many trade-union leaders to eliminate democracy (the possibility of their defeat) from their unions are, for them, necessary adaptive mechanisms. The insecurity of leadership status endemic in democracy, the pressures on leaders to retain their achieved high status, and the fact that by their control over the organizational structure and the use of their special skills they can often maintain their office, all help in the creation of dictatorial oligarchies.

The members do not participate in union politics.

Although high participation is not necessarily a sign of democracy (dictatorships also find participation useful), the maintenance of effective opposition to incumbent leaders requires membership participation and interest. Ordinarily, however, few members show much interest in the day-to-day political process within the union; apathy of the members is the normal state of affairs. There are good reasons for this. Most union members, like other people, must spend most of their time at work or with their families. Their remaining free time is generally taken up by their friends, commercial entertainment, and other personally rewarding recreational activities.

Most trade unions in addition are concerned with technical administrative matters, which cannot be of deep interest to the average member. The typical union appears to its members as an administrative agency doing a specific technical job for them. Union leaders will often attempt to sustain this image to prevent "interference" with their conduct of their job. Consequently only a small minority finds the rewards for participation in union affairs great enough to sustain a high level of interest and activity.

The leaders of the trade unions and other formally democratic organizations must in some way explain and justify the suppression, and to do so they make two points: that trade unions are organized for political or industrial conflicts; and that their membership is more homogeneous in background and interests than the citizens of a nation or some other civic political unit. Officials of trade unions have argued that since the group is engaged in perpetual conflict with management, internal opponents only serve the objective interests of the external enemy. They argue further that there is no basis for factionalism in their organization (other than the illegitimate selfish desire for office of ambitious individuals, or the outside interference of Communists).

since all the members are workers and have common interests and objectives. According to this thesis, organized political conflict should take place only among classes, not within them. These same two arguments are, of course, used by the Communists to justify the contradiction between the one-party state and democratic values in the Soviet Union. They explain that since the Soviet Union is surrounded by the capitalist enemy, any domestic opposition is in effect treason; and that in any case in a one-class workers’ state there is no legitimate basis for disagreement.

Strengthening the force of these arguments is the fact that the political decisions of trade unions and of other groups which are totally or in part political pressure groups, such as the American Legion or the American Medical Association, often fall into the realm of “foreign policy”: that is, they involve the tactics and relations that these groups should adopt towards outside groups or the state. And just as in national politics there are many pressures toward a unified bipartisan foreign policy, so in trade unions and other voluntary groups we find similar pressures. Potential oppositionists are consequently faced with the likelihood that if they exercise their constitutional democratic rights, they will be denounced for harming the organization and helping the enemy.

The fact remains, however, that the democratic political system of the International Typographical Union does exist. It is obviously no temporary exception, for the party system of the union has lasted for half a century, and regular political conflict in North American printing unions can be dated back to 1815. As we shall note in later sections of this book, there are also a few other unions which deviate from the iron law of oligarchy. Up to now almost all analysts of the political systems of private governments have devoted their energies to documenting further examples of oligarchy. Rather than do this we have undertaken an analysis of the major deviant cases. From the point of view of the further development of social research in the area of organizational structure, and indeed, the general expansion of our understanding of society, these deviant cases-cases which operate in ways not anticipated by theory-supply the most fruitful subjects for study. Kendall and Wolf have noted that the analysis of deviant cases can by refining the theoretical structure of empirical studies, increase the predictive value of their findings. In other words, deviant case analysis can and should play a **positive** role in empirical research, rather than being merely the “tidying up” process through which exceptions to the empirical rule are given some plausibility and thus disposed of.

In the course of our analysis of the ITU we have systematically looked for the various oligarchic mechanisms—the elements and processes which Michels and others found operative in the organizations which they studied. Many of these mechanisms—for example, the monopolies of power, status, funds, and communications channels which the officials of most unions ordinarily possess—are not found in the ITU, or if present their effects are greatly mitigated by other elements in the system. A large part of our analysis is directed at specifying those elements in the structure of the ITU and the printing industry which work against oligarchic mechanisms, and at spelling out the processes by which they contribute to the maintenance of the union democracy. And as we look for those attributes and patterns in the ITU which work to nullify the oligarchic tendencies present in large organizations, we are implicitly or explicitly setting forth the conditions necessary for the maintenance of democratic politics within private organizations. In this our purpose is not, of course, to “refute” Michels or other previous workers in this area, but rather to refine and build on their insights and findings, paying them the respect of using them more often than we quote them.

§ A Theory of Democracy

THE PROBLEM OF DEMOCRATIC or oligarchic political institutions may be approached from two vantage points. We may ask, as we have asked in the previous section, what are the conditions which are responsible for the development and institutionalization of oligarchy, or alternatively we may ask under what conditions democracy arises and becomes institutionalized. All the literature that deals with political institutions in private governments deals with the determinants of oligarchy. We have found only one article that raises the question of under what conditions democracy, the institutionalization of opposition, can exist in voluntary organizations.¹⁸ There is of course a voluminous literature discussing democracy as a system of civil government, but we must ask ourselves whether a variable which seems related to the existence of democracy in states is relevant to the existence of democracy in organizations.

Aristotle, for example, suggested that democracy can exist only in


a society which is predominantly middle class."19 In essence he and later
theorists argued that only in a wealthy society with a roughly equal
distribution of income could one get a situation in which the mass of the
population would intelligently participate in politics and develop the self-
restraint necessary to avoid succumbing to the appeals of irresponsible
demagogues. A society divided between a large impoverished mass and a
small favored elite would result either in a dictatorship of the elite or a
dictatorship of demagogues who would appeal to the masses against the elite.
This proposition still appears to be valid. Political democracy has had a
stable existence only in the wealthier countries, which have large middle
classes and comparatively well-paid and well-educated working classes.
Applying this proposition to trade-union government, we would expect
to find democracy in organizations whose members have a relatively
high income and more than average security, and in which the gap
between the organizational elite and the membership is not great.

A second proposition which has been advanced about democracy is
that it works best in relatively small units, in which a large proportion
of the citizenry can directly observe the operation of their govern-
ments:20 for example, the small Greek city-states, the New England
town meetings, and the Swiss cantons. While historical research
has indicated that much of the popular mythology about the
democratic character of these societies is untrue, it is probably true that the
smaller a political unit, the greater the possibility of democratic control.
Increased size necessarily involves the delegation of political power to
professional rulers and the growth of bureaucratic institutions. The
translation of this proposition to the level of private government is clear:
The smaller the association or unit, the greater membership control.
There can be little doubt that this is true in the trade-union movement.21

Both of these approaches to democracy, that in terms of internal
stratification, and that in terms of size, however, are somewhat unsatis-
factory as solutions to the problem of democracy in complex societies
or large private organizations. Clearly democratic political institutions
do exist in large, complex, and bureaucratically run societies and in so-
cieties which have wide variations in the distribution of income, status,
and power. There is a third proposition about the conditions that favor
democracy that seems to be of greater value for our understanding of
democracy in large private organizations. We know it under two names,
the theory of political pluralism, and the theory of the mass society. Writers
in English-speaking countries, trying to explain why democracy exists
in these countries, have developed the theory of political pluralism.
European writers, trying to explain why democracy seems so weak in
Germany and other countries, have developed the theory of the mass
society. Both theories say in essence the same thing. They argue that in a
large complex society the body of the citizenry is unable to affect the
policies of the state. If citizens do not belong to politically relevant
groups, if they are "atomized," the controllers of the central power ap-
paratus will completely dominate the society. Translated to the realm
of the internal politics of private organizations, this theory suggests that
democracy is most likely to become institutionalized in organizations
whose members form organized or structured subgroups which while
maintaining a basic loyalty to the larger organization constitute relatively
independent and autonomous centers of power within the organization.
Or to put it in another way, democracy is strengthened when members are
not only related to the larger organization but are also affiliated with or
loyal to subgroups within the organization.22 Since it is this approach
which we have found most useful in understanding the internal political
system of the ITU, we will briefly characterize it here.

Democratic rights have developed in societies largely through the
struggles of various groups-class, religious, sectional, economic, pro-
fessional, and so on-against one another and against the group which
controls the state. Each interest group may desire to carry out its own will,
but if no one group is strong enough to gain complete power, the
result is the development of tolerance. In large measure the development
of the concept of tolerance, of recognition of the rights of groups with
whom one disagrees to compete for adherents or power, arose out of
conflicts among strong and indestructible groups in different societies.
There were a number of processes through which tolerance became
legitimate. In some situations groups such as the Catholic and the Prot

19. Aristotle: Politics, IV, it.

20. Thomas Jefferson advocated "general political organization on the basis of small
units, small enough so that all members could have direct communication with one
another and take care of all community affairs."-John Dewey: Freedom
and Culture, New York, G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1939, p. 159. Cf. also Gunnar
Myrdal: An American Dilemma, New York, Harper & Brothers, 1944, PP. 716-59; John
1927, Chap. 5; "The Federalist, No. 10," in The Federalist, New York, Modern
Library, Inc., 1937

21. It has been pointed out as well that in small homogeneous societies a political
democracy often succumbs to the danger of extreme democracy: intol-
erance of the minority by the majority. The authors of the Federalist Papers were well
aware of this and pointed out the dangers of a small "pure" democracy. See The
Federalist, pp. 57-59

22. "The stability of any democracy depends not on imposing a single unitary
loyalty and viewpoint but on maintaining conflicting loyalties and viewpoints in a
1954)
estant churches attempted to destroy the opposing faction, but finally recognized that the complete victory of one group was impossible or could occur only at the risk of destroying the very fabric of society. In these conflicts minority or opposition groups developed a democratic ideology, an insistence on specific minority rights, as a means of legitimating their own right to exist. These groups might then force the dominant power group to grant these rights in order to prevent a revolutionary upsurge or achieve power themselves. For them to reject their own program may then mean a considerable loss of support from adherents who have come to hold the democratic values.

Once democracy is established in a society, private organizations continue to play a positive role. These organizations serve as channels of communication among different groups in the population, crystallizing and organizing conflicting interests and opinions. Their existence makes more difficult the triumph of such movements as Communism and Fascism, for a variety of groups lay claim to the allegiance of the population, reinforcing diversity of belief and helping mobilize such diversity in the political arena. This brief discussion of theories of political pluralism and of mass society does not pretend to be an adequate summary. A fuller discussion of these concepts as applied to voluntary organizations will be found in Chapter 4 and other parts of this book. We have discussed them here to sensitize the reader to the type of factors which we were looking for in our analysis of the political system of the ITU.

23. Calhoun thought these factors so important he wanted to institutionalize faction by means of the concept concurrent majority. Cf. John C. Calhoun: A Disquisition on Government, New York, Political Science Classics, 1947.