CONTENTS

Introduction

ON 23 JUNE 2016 the United Kingdom voted to leave the European Union. According to leading Brexiteer Michael Gove, the people had 'had enough of experts'.[1] At the October Conservative Party conference, the then Prime Minister Theresa May denounced the 'rootless cosmopolitan' international elite. Later that year, on 8 November, Donald Trump was elected president of the United States, having promised to take on the 'DC establishment' to chants of 'drain the swamp'. 2017 saw a wave of populist politicians in Europe, from the far-left to the far-right (think of France's Marine Le Pen or Jean-Luc Mélenchon, the Italian Five Star Movement, the German AFD), denounce the EU's 'Eurocratic elite': Viktor Orbàn, the original Hungarian anti-EU provocateur, had already been elected to office in a landslide election in 2010.[2] The Covid-19 pandemic was blamed on Bill Gates, the founder of Microsoft, who (allegedly) wanted to implant us all with microchips, and the financier George Soros, in a return to classic antisemitism.[3] And all this before we even look at the rise of Narendra Modi in India in 2014, Rodrigo Duterte's success in the Philippines in 2016, Jair Bolsonaro's—the 'Trump of the Tropics'—election in Brazil in 2019 and Javier 'El Loco' Milei's taking the Argentinian presidency in 2023. Today Trump is in his second term at the White House, Modi is still in power, Le Pen is preparing her third tilt at the French Presidency, Georgia Meloni is

1. Henry Mance, 'Britain Has Had Enough of Experts, Says Gove', *Financial Times*, 3 June 2016 (https://www.ft.com/content/3be49734-29cb-11e6-83e4-abc22d5d108c accessed on 4 March 2024).

2. Hugo Drochon, 'Between the Lions and the Foxes', *New Statesman*, 13 January 2017.

3. Hugo Drochon, 'The Conspiratorial Style in Pandemic Politics', *Project Syndicate*, 1 May 2020.

Prime Minister of Italy, and Brexit continues to upturn British society, economics and politics. We live in the age of the revolt against the elites.[4]

Populism has been the main lens through which this phenomenon has been interpreted.[5] It has brought many insights to light: how populists claim to speak for the 100% or the 'real' people; the structuring of politics into an 'us versus them' of a 'pure people' against a 'corrupt elite'; the highly-charged and conspiratorial nature of political discourse. Yet, whilst populists all reject the 'elite', they are often themselves elites. Indeed, most theories of populism emphasise the visceral link followers have with their populist leaders. If Trump in 2016 was no doubt a political outsider, he is also part of the 1%—the economic elite—and a media personality through his show *The Apprentice*. Nigel Farage, leader of the Brexit Party (now Reform UK), is a wealthy former stockbroker and was a Member of the European Parliament (MEP), ironically at that time elected to the institution he wanted to leave. Boris Johnson, whose rallying to the Leave cause got it over the line, is a quintessential product of the British establishment (Eton, Oxford). Le Pen junior is the daughter of Le Pen senior, the founder of the *Front National*, and whatever Meloni claims about being an 'outsider', she has been a member of the Italian political class since 2006, and even served in Silvio Berlusconi's 2008 government as the Minister for Youth. Similar things might be said of Modi, Duterte and Bolsonaro.

Populist politics, then, is the process of replacing one elite with another. Mainstream politicians like Barack Obama and David Cameron have been replaced by populist leaders like Trump and Johnson. There seems to be a paradox here, as populism and elitism are often thought to be opposites: populism pitting a 'pure people' against a 'corrupt elite'; elitism setting an enlightened elite against the squabbling masses.[6] Yet here they go hand in hand:

4. For a work that anticipates such a revolt, see the—aptly inversely titled—Christopher Lasch, *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy*, New York, W. W. Norton, 1996. See also, from a different perspective, José Ortega y Gasset, *The Revolt of the Masses*, New York, W. W. Norton, 1993.

5. Jan-Werner Müller, *What Is Populism?*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016; Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2017; Federico Finchelstein, *From Fascism to Populism in History*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2017. For the most original—and positive—theory of populism, see Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, London, Verso, 2005.

6. Marte Mangset, Fredrik Engelstad, Mari Teigen and Trygve Gulbrandsen, 'The Populist Elite Paradox: Using Elite Theory to Elucidate the Shapes and Stakes of Populist Elite Critiques', *Comparative Social Research*, Vol. 34, 2019, pp. 203–222.

they are mirror images of one another. And the political end-result is the same: in both cases one elite replaces another.

If populism is a form of (non-pluralistic) democracy, then the same might be said of elitism. After all, aren't elections—the key democratic institution—simply one way of replacing one elite with another? In democratic theory, theorists such as Joseph Schumpeter and Robert Dahl, who both focus on elections, retain an undeniable elitist hue: it is either 'elite competition' or 'polyarchy'—i.e. 'control of elites'—respectively.[7] So neither in theory nor in practice do democracy and elitism appear to be in tension. Quite the contrary.

If the relationship elites entertain with democracy is no doubt a burning issue, it has been raised before. How can the fact that a small number of people wield disproportionate power in economic, social or political spheres be reconciled with democracy understood as political equality? At the turn of the twentieth century three key thinkers—Gaetano Mosca (1858–1941), Vilfredo Pareto (1848–1923) and Robert Michels (1876–1936)—were the first to grapple with the problem of democratic elites in a specifically modern setting, one characterised by the spread of universal suffrage and the rise of the mass, centralised, bureaucratic party to organise it. That context—universal suffrage and political parties—is still the context we operate in today, so that although much has undeniably changed, in many ways that setting, and its problems, remain our own. Indeed, many of the terms they coined—'ruling class' (Mosca), 'circulation of elites' (Pareto) and the 'iron law of oligarchy' (Michels)—is still the language we use to try to articulate our contemporary politics.

These theorists were the first to posit that modern democracy is in fact a façade behind which elites rule. Whilst Marxists had been theorising the state as the 'executive arm of the bourgeoisie' since the mid-nineteenth century, what marked these thinkers out was their rejection of the belief that democracy—in the sense of the people *actually* ruling—could ever be achieved, even after a proletarian revolution: we could never pass, as Friedrich Engels (borrowing from Saint-Simon) put it, from the 'government of people' to the 'administration of things'. As such, they were explicitly anti-Marxist thinkers, especially Mosca and Pareto, although Michels' relation to Marxism is more complicated, as we shall see.[8]

7. Joseph Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, London, Routledge, 2010; Robert Dahl, *Democracy and Its Critics*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1989.

8. Geraint Parry, *Political Elites*, Colchester, ECPR Press, 2005, pp. 24–27.

Mosca was the *primo uomo* of the group: he developed an historical and political theory of elite rule in *The Ruling Class* (1896), which claimed that all but the most primitive societies are ruled by a governing minority. Hot on his heels—they were to have a *prima donna* debate over who first came up with the notion—Pareto sketched his theory of the 'circulation of elites' in *Les systèmes socialistes* (1902), which he more fully worked out in his 1-million-word and 3,000-page behemoth *Trattato di sociologia generale* (1916), in which he tried to lay the foundations for an all-encompassing psycho-scientific account of the world. Indeed, it is to Pareto that we owe the term 'elite' as we use it today.[9] And although Pareto was ten years Mosca's senior, priority here is given to the latter because *The Ruling Class* predates Pareto's *Systèmes socialistes*.

After Mosca and Pareto, the task of applying the concept of elite rule to a new phenomenon of modern politics, namely the highly centralised, bureaucratic and disciplined mass party, was left to Michels, which he (maintaining a friendship with both the theorists, a feat in itself) completed by theorising the 'iron law of oligarchy' in his masterpiece *Political Parties* (1911).[10] Together, the three are known as the 'elite theorists of democracy', although they have gone by other appellations too: 'Machiavellians', 'sociological pessimists', the 'Italian School' and 'theorists of minority domination.'[11]

I: Elite theory

The aim of this book is threefold. The first—what might be described as the history of political thought claim—is to recover the thinking of the three theorists within their historical contexts to see what resources they might offer us to conceptualise the relation elites entertain with democracy today. There is a tendency in the literature, from Dahl to more recently Nadia Urbinati, Jeffrey Winters and Jeffrey Green, to lump all three into a 'Mosca, Pareto and Michels'

9. Tom Bottomore, *Élites and Society*, London, Routledge, 1993, p. 1.

10. If the terms 'ruling class', 'elite' and 'oligarchy' are used here interchangeably as forms of minority domination, it is because the point of this study is to explore the different functions and senses of each theory in its own right.

11. S. M. Lipset, 'Introduction' to Robert Michels, *Political Parties: A Sociological Study of the Oligarchic Tendencies of Modern Democracy*, New York, The Free Press, 1962, p. 33; James Burnham, *The Machiavellians, Defenders of Freedom*, New York, John Day, 1943; Juan Linz, *Robert Michels, Political Sociology, and the Future of Democracy*, New Brunswick, Transaction Publishers, 2006; Ettore Albertoni, *Mosca and the Theory of Elitism*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1987; Dahl, *Democracy and Its Critics*.

triumvirate.[12] Yet each had their own, individual, emphases: Mosca developed a narrower historical and political theory of the *classe politica*,[13] whereas Pareto offered an all-encompassing system of human society and activity through his notion of the 'circulation of elites'.[14] Neither, however, offered a systematic account of the modern political party—it is revealing that in his long review of Michels' *Political Parties*, Mosca just saw it as the confirmation of his own thesis, rather than a novel application to an institution he had overlooked[15]—which Michels did through his notion of the 'iron law of oligarchy'. If for Mosca history was the reference point, for Pareto it was economics and for Michels social classes.

Their contexts were different too. Mosca was a Sicilian politician, journalist and political theorist who made the best of the opportunities Italian Unification offered him, whereas Pareto was a Franco-Italian heir to a Genoese Marquis, best known for his economic theories such as 'Pareto efficiency' or 'Pareto distribution'. Michels was German, close to Max Weber, whose context was Imperial Germany and the rise of the German socialist party, the SPD, which he analysed. Both Pareto and Michels were influenced by Sorel.[16] If Mosca and Pareto were liberals—Mosca a 'conservative-liberal' and Pareto a 'free-market' liberal but with social tendencies—Michels was a committed socialist, at least at the time of writing his masterpiece, on the anarcho-syndicalist wing of the movement. This coloured Michels' critique of the SPD, and he would later switch to supporting Mussolini after his move to Italy, believing 'charisma' to be the only way to overcome the 'iron law'.[17] Yet in the

12. Dahl, *Democracy and Its Critics*; Nadia Urbinati, *Democracy Disfigured: Opinion, Truth, and the People*, Cambridge (MA), Harvard University Press, 2014; Jeffrey Winters, *Oligarchy*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2011; Jeffrey Green, *The Eyes of the People: Democracy in the Age of Spectatorship*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.

13. H. Stuart Hughes, 'Gaetano Mosca and the Political Lessons of History' in James Meisel, ed., *Pareto and Mosca*, Englewood Cliffs, Prentice-Hall, p. 151.

14. Charles Powers, 'Introduction' in Vilfredo Pareto, *The Transformation of Democracy*, New Brunswick, Transaction Publishers, 2009, p. 1.

15. Gaetano Mosca, 'La sociologia del partito politico nella democrazia moderna', *Partiti e Sindacati nella crisi del regime parlamentare*, Bari, Laterza, 1949, pp. 26–36.

16. For Pareto, see Norberto Bobbio, 'Introduction to Pareto's Sociology' in *On Mosca and Pareto*, Geneva, Droz, 1972, pp. 68–69; for Michels, see Andrew Bonnell, *Robert Michels, Socialism and Modernity*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2023, pp. 6–9.

17. Francesca Antonini, 'Between Weber and Mussolini: The Issue of Political Leadership in the Thought of the Late Michels', *Intellectual History Review*, Vol. 34, No. 4, 2024, pp. 773–790.

conclusion of his 1911 edition of *Political Parties*, he defended a view of democracy that could be saved from within.

They also differed in temperament. Mosca was a moderate, and the image we have of him is of a moustached, world-weary paterfamilias, who nevertheless retained an 'ebullient Mediterranean good humour'.[18] Pareto, on the other hand, started his life as an aristocratic, liberal firebrand, to finish it as a recluse in the Swiss mountains surrounded by his cats. Michels was the quintessential *'Gesinnungsethiker'* who would serve as his friend Weber's model for the 'ethic of conviction'. Whilst all three can be styled as 'acerbic' and 'sophisticated', 'cool' is not exactly how one might describe Michels or the young Pareto, as Albert Hirschman famously depicted those who propounded the 'futility thesis' in *The Rhetoric of Reaction*.[19]

Although the 'elitist' epithet has been ascribed to them, it would be a mistake to understand them as somehow defending the status quo. In reality all three were highly critical of the elites of their day. Longing for a return of the Historical Right, Mosca deplored the corruption of the new Left leaders of the day, and made his last speech before the Italian Senate denouncing Mussolini, after which he promptly retired: his ideal was for a new, expert, cultivated and financially independent 'middle class'—of which he was a representative—to take over Italian politics. Pareto condemned 1920s Italy as a 'demagogic plutocracy' and wished to see a new elite rise up to challenge it, whilst Michels rejected the leaders of the German Social Democratic Party, the SPD, at the time the richest, most numerous and most powerful socialist party in the world, as being insufficiently revolutionary. All three defended ideas that today can be understood as democratic: Mosca the representative system grounded in a liberal and pluralist notion of 'juridical defence'; Pareto an 'open elite', regularly replenished by the best elements rising from below; and Michels how 'democracy' offered two 'palliatives' against the 'iron law of oligarchy', namely that it honed the intellectual abilities of the masses so that they might better hold their political rulers to account, and that the development of competing elites in other fields would effectively hold the different elites in check.

18. James Meisel, *The Myth of the Ruling Class: Gaetano Mosca and the Elite*, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1962, p. 19 and H. Stuart Hughes, 'Gaetano Mosca and the Political Lessons of History', p. 144. On the liberal temperament, see Joshua Cherniss, *Liberalism in Dark Times: The Liberal Ethos in the Twentieth Century*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2021.

19. Albert Hirschman, *The Rhetoric of Reaction: Perversity, Futility, Jeopardy*, Cambridge (MA), Harvard University Press, 1991, pp. 43, 51.

Natasha Piano has recently argued that instead of 'elite theorists of democracy', Mosca, Pareto and Michels might best be understood, in a happy turn of phrase, as 'democratic theorists of elitism'.[20] Following in the footsteps of McCormick's 'populist' reading of Machiavelli, which places him squarely on the side of the plebs in their struggles against the patricians,[21] this reading of the 'Machiavellians' is reminiscent of Rousseau's footnote about Machiavelli's *Prince* in *The Social Contract*: that Machiavelli's 'mirror of princes' should not be understood as a handbook for rulers but instead reveals to the population the dark arts of rulership so that the people might better resist their overlords or indeed overthrow them.[22]

This is not the position adopted here. First of all, the reading of Machiavelli one gets from someone like Raymond Aron, whom we shall be exploring, is rather on the 'liberal' side of the interpretation, seeing liberty as emerging from the struggle—the 'tumult'—between the plebs and the patricians, a position he will attribute to Mosca. Although she is critical of elections, Piano nevertheless wants to retain them but to supplement them 'beyond the ballot'. Mosca, Pareto and Michels certainly doubted elections produced anything other than another form of elite rule, were interested in democracy 'beyond the ballot', and, as we have just seen, rejected the 'demagogic plutocratic' elites of their day. But the key difference is that they still affirmed the existence of elites, and selectively endorsed some of them. So the question for them was rather: what could—and *should*—democracy mean in this setting of elite rule? Whatever that was meant to be, it had to start with the empirical 'fact' of the existence of elites, and take it from there.

II: Democratic Theory

The second claim—one in intellectual history—is that we cannot understand the development of the twentieth century, in Europe and America, without reference to these 'elite' thinkers. This is valid for both democratic theory and the social sciences more generally. Schumpeter, for instance, who

20. Natasha Piano, *Democratic Elitism: The Founding Myth of American Political Science*, Cambridge (MA), Harvard University Press, 2025.

21. John McCormick, *Machiavellian Democracy*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2011; John McCormick, *Reading Machiavelli: Scandalous Books, Suspect Engagements, and the Virtue of Populist Politics*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2018.

22. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract and Other Later Political Writings*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2019, p. 98.

straddled Europe and America, would not have been able to articulate his 'new' theory of democracy as 'competition for political leadership'—which remains one of the most powerful paradigms within democratic theory today—without recourse to Pareto's theory of the 'circulation of elites'. The 1956 'elitism v. pluralism' debate between C. Wright Mills and Dahl, foundational to the development of American social science, explicitly refers back to Mosca, Pareto and Michels, which both thinkers used to develop their competing theories of the 'power elite' and 'polyarchy': part of the story this book wants to tell is of the translation of these thinkers and themes into other settings, and the link 'elite theory' entertains with the rise of the social sciences post-war.[23]

In France Aron construed his Cold War theory of democracy on the basis of the 'fact of oligarchy', and in Italy Norberto Bobbio and Giovanni Sartori's work is in direct dialogue with the 'Neo-Machiavellians'. Taking Aron as his cue, Martin Conway, in *Western Europe's Democratic Age 1945–1968*, has reminded us that the re-establishment of democracy in post-war Europe was anything but a given. Indeed, Western European democracy, which has become a reference point for democracy worldwide, was explicitly top-down, with little thought given to wider political participation: popular sovereignty, with what had happened in previous years firmly on everyone's mind, was looked upon with suspicion. This was an elite-led process: mass participation was not on the cards.[24] As Jan-Werner Müller has also reminded us in *Contesting Democracy: Political Ideas in Twentieth-Century Europe*, post-war European democracy borrowed much from the regimes that preceded it, something that has often not been recognised or admitted.[25]

Seen against this backdrop, democratic theory reveals itself to be fundamentally elitist. None of the thinkers denied the existence of elites within the political system: the question was rather whether they were more likely to compete or cooperate. If they compete, then democracy can be saved, with

23. H. Stuart Hughes, *The Sea Change: The Migration of Social Thought, 1930–1965*, New York, Harper & Row, 1975. On the link between the social sciences and anti-Marxism, see Hirschman, *The Rhetoric of Reaction*, p. 73: 'to construct a social science with laws as solid as those that were then believed to rule the physical universe . . . ideally suited to do battle with the rising tide of Marxism and the scientific pretensions of that movement'.

24. Martin Conway, *Western Europe's Democratic Age 1945–1968*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2020.

25. Jan-Werner Müller, *Contesting Democracy: Political Ideas in Twentieth-Century Europe*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2011.

various degree of participation or control by the population at large: Schumpeter and Dahl disagreed on how much elections act as a check on elites, Dahl being more sympathetic to participation. If they cooperate then we have a 'power elite'. This is the main dividing line between Mills and Dahl or Schumpeter: the former believed elites tend to cooperate, the latter two, to compete. Aron was open to the fact that there can be a 'divided' or a 'united' elite, whilst nevertheless preferring the former, and his analysis focused on whether elites were trapped in the same institution or were independent of one another. From a broader historical perspective, however, these debates appear to be two sides of the same (elite) coin.[26]

If the Cold War represents a second moment of elite discussion and recovery of Mosca, Pareto and Michels, we seem to be entering a third phase today, with the theme, and indeed Mosca, Pareto and Michels, all featuring prominently in recent work by McCormick, Green, Urbinati and Winters, amongst others.[27] This makes a full recovery of the original debate, in all its richness, urgent, to ensure that we build on this discussion, rather than simply repeat its arguments. As Istvan Hont has written: 'good history can unmask theoretical and practical impasses and eliminate repetitive patterns of controversy about them'.[28] By lumping Mosca, Pareto and Michels together, we close ourselves off to seeing the different emphases each had, and the individual elements of their theories. Because of this someone like Dahl, for instance, failed to see how his advocacy of increased competition within the political system was precisely what Michels had been arguing all along, or that Mills' demand for 'educated publics' overlooked Michels' view of democracy's educative function. Schumpeter's 'minimalist' democracy consciously restricted the larger range of the original elite thinkers, leaving us less well-equipped to

26. For a critique of 'democratic elitism' and a call for greater public participation, see Peter Bachrach, *The Theory of Democratic Elitism: A Critique*, Lanham, University Press of America, 1980 and Bottomore, *Élites and Society*. For an overview, see Parry, *Political Elites*, pp. 124–138.

27. McCormick, *Machiavellian Democracy*; McCormick, *Reading Machiavelli*; Green, *The Eyes of the People*; Jeffrey Green, *The Shadow of Unfairness: A Plebeian Theory of Liberal Democracy*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2016; Urbinati, *Democracy Disfigured*; Winters, *Oligarchy*; Pierre Rosanvallon, *The Society of Equals*, Cambridge [MA], Harvard University Press, 2016; Luke Mayville, *John Adams and the Fear of American Oligarchy*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2016; Gordon Arlen, 'Aristotle and the Problem of Oligarchic Harm: Insights for Democracy', *European Journal of Political Theory*, Vol. 18, No. 3, 2019, pp. 393–414.

28. Istvan Hont, *Jealousy of Trade: International Competition and the Nation-State in Historical Perspective*, Cambridge [MA], Harvard University Press, 2005, p. 156.

understand the world in which we live: have the lions replaced the foxes? Only a full retrieval of this first moment can ensure that we do not fall back onto familiar patterns of controversy.

One distinctive feature of today's debate about elites is its focus on wealth. This marks a departure from the mid-century debate between Schumpeter, Dahl, Mills and Aron, who were more concerned with the oligarchic nature of modern institutions, especially parties. In *The Power Elite*, to take but one example, Mills wrote that 'wealth also is acquired and held in and through institutions', and not the other way round (i.e. that it is wealth that leads to control over institutions).[29] Indeed, Jeffrey Winters has accused the elite theorists, Pareto and Michels in particular, of having obscured 'the central role of material power in their studies'.[30] That may not be fair, as we shall see, but it is certainly the case that today's theorists, in contrast, see wealth—the recent *Zeitgeist* best captured by the unexpected success of Thomas Piketty's *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*[31]—as the main force behind the influence of policy-making. Perhaps this is due to the decline of the mass modern political party, as Michels theorised.

One of the big questions facing this literature, as Winters has pointed out, is that if greater participation within politics has undeniably brought many benefits, notably by bringing formerly marginalised groups into the political system, it is unclear whether it fundamentally challenges the oligarchic nature of wealth.[32] As such it might be worth returning to Pareto's theory of 'demagogic plutocracy', where the rich rule behind the façade of democracy, to see what light it might shed on our current predicament.[33] It is Pareto who, after all—*pace* Winters—first coined the 80/20 rule: that 80% of the wealth of the country always belongs to 20% of the population. There is a strong—if intensified—echo of that notion in the slogan of the 99% v. 1%.

Tracing this history is also important in that it allows us to tell a different story about twentieth-century democracy, and what we might do about it in the twenty-first. Mosca, Pareto and Michels were the first to identify the gap

29. C. Wright Mills, *The Power Elite*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 9.

30. Winters, *Oligarchy*, p. 8.

31. Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, Cambridge (MA), Harvard University Press, 2014.

32. Jeffrey Winters, *Domination through Democracy: Why Oligarchs Win*, Penguin Random House, forthcoming.

33. Joseph Femia, *The Machiavellian Legacy: Essays in Italian Political Thought*, Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1998, pp. 145–166.

between the ideal of democracy as rule by the people and the reality of the continuation of elite rule within a modern setting.[34] Nazism, fascism and communism all tried to close that gap by claiming that the 'true' people—the Aryans, the Italians or the working class—could directly rule through a symbiotic link with a 'leader' or a 'vanguard'. Here Michels is the most instructive figure in that he moved from radical syndicalism to fascism, in a classic move Zeev Sternhell had identified in his seminal study *Neither Right nor Left*.[35] What is meant by this is that if we mean to avoid the pitfalls of fascism or today's populism, which also claims to close the gap by 'incarnating' the 'true people', we must take seriously the 'fact of oligarchy' and start thinking about what democracy might mean from there.

Mosca, as we've seen, denounced Mussolini in his final senatorial speech, but Pareto's relation to fascism is more complicated, although this book will argue that prediction is not the same as endorsement, and that Pareto remained a high liberal, detached from the fray in his Villa Céligny in Switzerland, surrounded by his cats, until his death.[36] Schumpeter, as we shall explore, thought up his 'minimalist' democracy precisely to counter the broader claims of socialism, and Dahl and Aron defended the 'polyarchic' or 'Constitutional-Pluralist' regime against Soviet Russia or 'Party Monopolism'. Even Mills, who remained the most sympathetic to the socialist cause—famously visiting Castro in Cuba as part of his 'bad boy' routine—at least in *The Power Elite* took his inspiration from John Dewey to advocate for active 'educated publics', which were—revealingly—to be led by intellectual elites like himself.

III: Dynamic Democracy

The third claim—in political theory—is that the early elite thinkers, Mosca, Pareto and Michels, lay the groundwork for the elaboration of a *dynamic* theory of democracy. If elites always rule, what does democracy mean in this context? It can mean neither 'sovereignty of the people' nor 'majoritarian rule' in any true sense of the word. As Michels put it, the people can only be made

34. See Norberto Bobbio, *The Future of Democracy: A Defence of the Rules of the Game*, Cambridge, Polity, 1987, for the 'six broken promises of democracy'.

35. Zeev Sternhell, *Neither Right nor Left: Fascist Ideology in France*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1986.

36. John Tomasi, *Free Market Fairness*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2012.

to rule '*in abstracto*', but not in reality.[37] For Mosca and Pareto, the notion of 'sovereignty of the people' can, respectively, only be part of the 'political formula' the ruling class use to justify their rule, or a post-facto rationalisation ('derivation') of an action that has already taken place. The same might be said of the notion of 'constituent power', which in this formulation can only be the *a posteriori* legitimisation of an existing power relation, upon which, nevertheless, it may have an impact.[38]

Instead, dynamic democracy starts with the reality of power and the 'fact of oligarchy': the existence of an elite who control the levers of power, namely the state.[39] In this sense it is Weberian, in that it sees politics as the struggle for control over the state.[40] 'Elite theory', after all, was developed within the historical context of the creation of the Italian nation-state, where the state was made before Italians themselves were 'made'. Indeed, most remained disenfranchised: a point worth remembering when thinking about 'elite theory'.

Movement

Perhaps the best metaphor for dynamic democracy is Aesop's fable, as used by Michels, of the old peasant on his death-bed telling his sons there is a buried treasure in the field. Michels writes:

> After the old man's death the sons dig everywhere in order to discover the treasure. They do not find it. But their indefatigable labour improves the soil and secures for them a comparative well-being. The treasure in the fable may well symbolise democracy. Democracy is a treasure that no one will ever discover by deliberate search. But in continuing our search, in labouring indefatigably to discover the undiscoverable, we shall perform a work which will have fertile results in the democratic sense.[41]

37. Michels, *Political Parties*, p. 366.

38. Lucia Rubinelli, *Constituent Power: A History*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2020 and Adam Lindsay, '"Pretenders of a Vile and Unmanly Disposition": Thomas Hobbes on the Fiction of Constituent Power', *Political Theory*, Vol. 47, No. 4, 2019, pp. 475–499.

39. Note how the state returned as a strong theme in post-war thought (see Ira Katznelson, 'A Seminar on the State' in *Desolation and Enlightenment: Political Knowledge after Total War, Totalitarianism, and the Holocaust*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2003, pp. 107–151).

40. Max Weber, 'Politics as Vocation' in *Political Writings*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1994.

41. Ibid., p. 368.

True democracy will never be found, but striving towards it will help reap democratic rewards.

This book argues that democracy must be understood as the continual challenge to elite rule: that it is in the moment of challenge to the established elite by a new elite that change may occur—for better or for worse, one hastens to add. This is the meaning of *dynamic democracy*. Democracy's true location is therefore not to be found where it is usually thought to lie: it is to be found neither in institutions nor in principles. Institutions like elections are insufficient to determine whether a regime is democratic or not: witness autocratic regimes with electoral scores of 88%,[42] or even, as Schumpeter conceded, free and fair elections but with a highly constrained franchise (women before the vote, disenfranchised African-Americans). But even in fully-fledged democracies like the US, where democratic rules appear to have been adhered to, democracy nevertheless appears imperilled. This is because certain democratic 'norms' have been flouted, yet norms on their own a democracy do not make.[43]

For democratic theory this is one of the biggest challenges facing Schumpeter's emphasis on elections: that elections are no guarantee of democracy. In response to this, Dahl offered several criteria and institutions which, should a regime match them, can be considered as representing a 'polyarchy', if not a democracy.[44] Yet this rather static view of democracy fails to identify where change might occur within the political system: after all, governments may change, but policies remain the same. Margaret Thatcher, a Conservative leader, famously claimed that her biggest success was Tony Blair: that although 'New Labour' had come to power, her neo-liberal economic policies remained intact.[45]

Instead, democracy must be found in the movement of challenge itself. In this, social movements have a crucial role to play: *democracy is to be located in the interaction between social movements and elites, mediated through institutions*. Historically these institutions, at least over the course of the nineteenth and

42. Pjotr Sauer and Andrew Roth, 'Vladimir Putin Claims Landslide Russian Election Victory', *The Guardian*, 18 March 2024 (https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/mar/17/kremlin-vladimir-putin-claim-landslide-russian-election-victory accessed on 4 April 2024).

43. Jedediah Purdy, 'Normcore', *Dissent*, Vol. 65, 2018, pp. 120–128.

44. Dahl, *Democracy and Its Critics*.

45. Tony Blair, 'My job was to build on some Thatcher policies', *BBC*, 8 April 2013. On a possible link between the 'Italian tradition' and neo-liberalism, via James Buchanan, see Sean Irving, 'Power, Plutocracy and Public Finance: James M. Buchanan and the "Italian Tradition"', *Global Intellectual History*, Vol. 6, No. 6, 2021, pp. 956–976.

early twentieth centuries, were political parties, although the waning or 'hollowing out' of the latter has led to a populism that ties movements directly to a leader (think of MAGA-Trump), or the creation of 'people-parties', like Emmanuel Macron's *En Marche*, which reproduced his initials.[46]

Studies of social movements show that they have a political impact—they lead to political change—when a section of the political elite breaks with the established order and rallies to their cause.[47] Together they challenge the established elite and effect political change. Without one or the other—without either a rallying of a section of the elite or a social movement—change does not occur: the political elite remains the same, the same policies are continued. In the context of dynamic democracy, this is the expression of how a rising elite, leading a social movement, challenges the established elite. Whether the rising elite effects political change is dependent on whether a section of the established elite rallies to their cause to challenge the rest of the elite that remains in place.

This looks very much like Pareto's circulation of elites, whose metaphor is a river: the rising elite slowly merging with the established elite. Of course, sometimes there are dams that stop the river from flowing: the notion that the established elite doesn't split and take on the new cause. But as Pareto also pointed out, sometimes the river floods and breaks its banks: there is a revolt or a revolution, and the established elite is completely overthrown. What the work on social movements identifies is change within a regulated democratic system. But sometimes the democratic system is overthrown, or we are trying to account for elite circulation within a non-democratic context.

There is much to be learnt from these studies of social movements, not least that non-violent movements, because they bring in more people to their cause, are twice as likely to achieve their aims than violent ones (53% v. 26%), because violence alienates people (although note that success is only just over 50%). Indeed, they offer the figure of 3.5% as a way of measuring whether social movements will be successful: if 3.5% of the population gets behind the cause, it will succeed, although this figure has also been challenged.[48]

46. Peter Mair, *Ruling the Void: The Hollowing of Western Democracy*, London, Verso, 2013.

47. Daniel Schlozman, *When Movements Anchor Parties: Electoral Alignments in American History*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2015; Edwin Amenta, Neal Caren, Elizabeth Chiarello and Yang Su, 'The Political Consequences of Social Movements', *Annual Review of Sociology*, Vol. 36, 2010, pp. 287–307.

48. Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan, *Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2011. For a critique, see Kyle Matthews, 'Social movements and the (mis)use of research: Extinction Rebellion and the 3.5% rule',

Another key element is that movements need to be organised. This brings us back to Mosca, Pareto and Michels, as organisation was Mosca's fundamental reason as to why elites rule: minorities are organised, majorities are not. In fact, much of what has been articulated above can be re-described through the theories Mosca, Pareto and Michels propagated: 'social movements', for instance, is another way of talking about Mosca's 'social forces', which are the drivers of historical change in his account. Pareto's theory of the 'circulation of elites' was based on an A-B-C diagram: B, the rising elite, would ally itself with C, the people, to challenge A, the established elite. Should B succeed, a new elite—D—will arise and play the same role with B as B did with A. And so on and so forth: the one continuum is that C, the people, will never rule, because the elite always rules. Michels, as we've seen previously, offers us the formulation of dynamic democracy grounded in movement, and organisation was for him the necessary reason for the emergence of the iron law of oligarchy: 'who says organisation, says oligarchy'.[49] His reflections, moreover, centred on political parties, the institution that plays the key role in articulating the interaction between movements and elites; the location of democracy.

Steven Klein and Cheol-Sung Lee have recently offered a dynamic theory of civil society, based on a forward and a backward infiltration between civil society, the state and the economy, which chimes with the approach taken here.[50] Infiltration can either be through influence (discursive), substitution (functional replacement) or occupation (institutional takeover). Respectively, these map well onto what, for instance, Michels says about intellectually keeping the elites in check, Mosca's 'social forces' that create their own sphere and, of course, elite-replacement. As argued above, the forward and the backward movements of infiltration are key as it is only when a section of the established elite breaks off to join the rising forces from below that true change occurs, which is why the more specific emphasis here is on how social movements lead to change in the political system by applying pressure to the institutions that mediate the two, namely, to parties.

Interface: A Journal for and about Social Movements, Vol. 12, No. 1, 2020, pp. 591–615. Note that Chenoweth has admitted that the 3.5% rule has been broken twice—Brunei in 1962 (4% mobilised) and Bahrain in 2011–2014 (6% mobilised)—both times failing. See https://www.directactioneverywhere.com/dxe-in-the-news/chenoweth-blog (consulted on 4 March 2024).

49. Michels, *Political Parties*, p. 365.

50. Steven Klein and Cheol-Sung Lee, 'Towards a Dynamic Theory of Civil Society: The Politics of Forward and Backward Infiltration', *Sociological Theory*, Vol. 37, No. 1, 2019, pp. 62–88.

Indeed, Mosca and Pareto also offer a *dynamic* theory of democracy. For Mosca, society's evolution depends on the development of ever-new 'social forces' that arise because of new technological, social, economic, legal and military phenomena. These come to challenge the established ruling class, which can either adapt to best integrate them within its bosom or be overthrown. Society's level of 'civilisation' depends on how many of the social forces it can integrate within a harmonious whole, and Mosca thought that the system he called 'juridical defence'—the parliamentary regime of the rule of law and checks-and-balances—is best equipped to do the orchestrating. It is the *movement* of social forces that drives political change in this account.

Pareto's 'circulation of elites' seems to speak for itself, and indeed in the original French formulation of *Les systèmes socialistes* the phrase used is 'the movement of the circulation of elites'.[51] As Sartori writes, 'as for Pareto, there is nothing inherently undemocratic in his law of the "circulation of elites"'.[52] For sure, the vision of the 'best' competing for power might still be our ideal of what democracy should be: Pareto defended an 'open' elite that would be continually renewed from below. For Pareto, history is the swing from one type of elite to another: the 'lions' and the 'foxes', borrowing Machiavelli's terminology,[53] who represent different types of rule: 'lions' rule through force and are more conservative, emphasising unity, homogeneity, faith and centralisation (centripetal forces), whereas 'foxes' are characterised by *combinazioni*: deceit, cunning, manipulation and co-optation, and theirs is a decentralised, plural and sceptical rule, uneasy with the use of force (centrifugal).

This displacement means democracy is not an end-point, but a continuous striving: the never-ending challenge to elite rule which, even though it never fully achieves its aim, nevertheless may bring about certain democratic benefits. It is not the by-product of this struggle, but the struggle itself: it is the democratic benefits that are the by-products. In many ways, as we shall explore, this is how one might read the German SPD that Michels studied: although it never succeeded in achieving its own ideology of democratic revolution, nevertheless, in striving towards it, it achieved real welfare benefits for its members.

51. Vilfredo Pareto, *Les systèmes socialistes*, Genève, Droz, 1978, p. 9.

52. Giovanni Sartori, *The Theory of Democracy Revisited. Part One: The Contemporary Debate*, Chatham, Chatham House Publishers, 1987, p. 47.

53. On how the 'elite theorists' inherited Machiavelli's legacy of anti-metaphysics, the empirical method and political realism, see Femia, *The Machiavellian Legacy*, pp. 1–63.

French political theory and history has often, notably through the work of François Goguel, opposed the forces of 'movement' with those of 'order'.[54] This distinction is sometimes proposed instead of the more common one of the left and the right: note how Blair's left-wing 'New Labour' continued the right-wing politics of Thatcher, as discussed above.[55] Indeed, it is the strength of the *dynamic* conception of democracy to see beyond the usual left/right divide to identify not simply continuities but also deeper structural change: change that can happen within the respective left or right parties themselves.[56] 'New Labour' was a change from what came before it on the left, but the Conservative Party has also changed significantly since Brexit, from the liberal government of David Cameron to that of the hard-liner Theresa May or indeed of the populist Boris Johnson, back to a libertarian one under Liz Truss followed by Rishi Sunak. Perhaps one way of conceptualising that change, which we'll return to in conclusion, is from foxes to lions.

Yet the approach formulated here is more in line with the one developed by Georges Burdeau, who, in a seminal article of 1968, 'The dialectic of order and movement', articulated a conception of politics as the dynamic interaction between the forces of order that aim to conserve society and those of movement that want to transform it: politics being the always-temporary equilibrium that results from the interaction between the two (Pareto's theory is also based on an ever-shifting equilibrium).[57] That never-static equilibrium, because it comes from a dialectic between the two forces, is not simply an addition of the two forces, but forms instead a new synthesis. Politics, in this account, is the 'art of making order from movement'.[58]

Dynamism

It is important to underline here that dynamic democracy puts the emphasis on *force* and not simply on *motion*. On its own, motion can simply mean the reproduction of the same, static, system, with the parts repeatedly circulating

54. François Goguel, *La politique des partis sous la III République*, Paris, Seuil, 1958.

55. On New Labour's 'Third Way', see Anthony Giddens, *Beyond Left and Right: The Future of Radical Politics*, Cambridge, Polity, 1994 and Anthony Giddens, *The Third Way: The Renewal of Social Democracy*, Cambridge, Polity, 1998.

56. Maurice Finocchiaro, *Beyond Right and Left: Democratic Elitism in Mosca and Gramsci*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1999.

57. Georges Burdeau, 'La dialectique de l'ordre et du mouvement', *Revue français de science politique*, Vol. 18, No. 1, 1968, pp. 5–19.

58. Burdeau, 'La dialectique de l'ordre et du mouvement', p. 6.

along the same route. Here, instead, the focus is on the *movement of forces*, because those forces impose change within the system: the passage, for instance, of the lions to the foxes. This is why Pareto puts so much emphasis on force—as opposed to violence, a sign of weakness by embattled elites to his mind—either to preserve the system or to change it. If there is a pure circulation of elites, then new elites simply replace the old ones, but the paradigm of either foxes or lions remains the same. It is when different elites arise, those with the sentiment either of the 'instinct for combination' or of the 'preservation of aggregates', that a challenge occurs: that rising elites apply *force* to the established elites, to either change the system if successful, or not.

It is true that for Pareto there are certain immutable features, such as the 80/20 rule that sees eighty percent of the land belonging to twenty percent of the population. In other words: the elite always rules. And when he comes to describing the social system,[59] Pareto has it as a closed one, where there is circulation within it: i.e. there is always the same percentage of rich and poor people, but who might be rich and who might be poor changes. Indeed, that Pareto sees that it matters whether the lions or the foxes are in power—or the rentiers or the speculators in the economic sphere—and that society is determined by who is in control, means that even though the system is a closed one, it does indeed change. It is not always the same thing. To that end we can add Mosca, who underlined the role *social forces* play in determining the level of civilisation: the social system might expand or retract, depending on the number of social forces accommodated within 'juridical defence'.

This, then, is why the theory is a *dynamic* theory of democracy, in the philosophical sense of the word: 'a theory that all phenomena (such as matter or motion) can be explained as manifestations of force', where force is understood as 'an agency or influence that if applied to a free body results chiefly in an acceleration of the body and sometimes in elastic deformation and other effects'.[60] Here, by 'movement' is meant not (repetitive) motion but rather the application of force to produce change, change understood as the acceleration of the object to which it is applied. Translated to politics: dynamic democracy is democracy understood as the application of force by social movements onto a political system to speed up the circulation of elites, from lions to foxes or

59. Talcott Parsons famously developed the concept of the 'social system', drawing directly from Pareto, in his 1951 *The Social System* (Talcott Parsons, *The Social System*, London, Routledge, 1991). See, further, Powers, 'Introduction', p. 11.

60. 'Dynamic', 'Force', *Merriam-Webster*.

vice versa, and to make the 'iron law of oligarchy' more pliable (i.e. incentivise more participation). Force is applied via political institutions such as parties, and whether change occurs depends on the openness of those political institutions to change (the rallying of elites).

In a 1961 article entitled '"Static" and "Dynamic" as Sociological Categories', Theodor Adorno defended a 'dynamic' conception of society that, if left unimpeded, would be liberating and diversifying.[61] This contrasted with a 'static' vision that he thought exploitative: to try to stabilise society was to entrench the power structures of the day and ward off the challenges from below. The 'static' conception of society Adorno traced back to August Comte, the founder of sociology, who was concerned with stabilising the liberal bourgeois order that had arisen from the French Revolution against the more radical socialist and working-class demands that had started to appear over the course of the nineteenth century. In his later 1968 *Introduction to Sociology*, the final lectures Adorno gave, he opposed this 'static' vision of Comte to his predecessor Saint-Simon, who, according to Adorno, had been on the side of 'dynamism'.[62]

He wasn't the only one: Adorno listed Nietzsche and Pareto as being on the side of 'dynamism'.[63] Both, according to Adorno, because of their openness to violence: they were willing to let the forces of the irrational loose, and we can presume that Adorno thought a degree of violence was the only way to challenge the static bourgeois order. Indeed, in the lectures Adorno lauds Pareto as being one of the first to integrate dynamism into a social system.[64] And yet Pareto, according to Adorno, ultimately was a conservative figure because he sought a social equilibrium, one that was inherently static. This was compounded by the fact that Pareto was one of those 'knowing winkers' who claimed that there are no revolutions or classes, only social interests.[65] This put him in the reactionary camp, one opposed to socialist revolution, all too easily put in the service of 'Signore Mussolini'.[66] It should come as no surprise that Aron's first piece on Pareto, whom he described as a reactionary thinker

61. Theodor Adorno, '"Static" and "Dynamic" as Sociological Categories', *Diogenes*, Vol. 9, No. 33, 1961, pp. 28–49.

62. Theodor Adorno, *Introduction to Sociology*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2000, p. 12.

63. Adorno, *Introduction to Sociology*, pp. 14; Adorno, '"Static" and "Dynamic" as Sociological Categories', p. 48.

64. Adorno, *Introduction to Sociology*, p. 14.

65. Ibid., p. 11.

66. Ibid., p. 14.

for having given the bourgeoisie an anti-revolutionary theory of class circulation—even if there is a proletarian revolution, a ruling class will always rule, and there are no 'classless societies'—was published in Adorno's long-time collaborator Max Horkheimer's *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*.[67]

Aron, however, as we shall see in chapter 6, later changed his mind, seeing Pareto as a 'Machiavellian' defender of liberty, following James Burnham.[68] And whilst Adorno is right to say that Pareto was interested in irrational action—or what Pareto would call the 'non-logical'—that is not to say that Pareto thought all action was simply post-hoc justification of irrational impulses: that everything should be irrational. Instead, he believed that much of human action was indeed rational, if rooted ultimately in different 'residues'—that if 'sentiments' were irrational, actions that sprung from them could indeed be rational—and belonged to the realm of political economy. Pareto had originally planned his *Treatise on Sociology* to have five parts, the last two focused on 'applied economics', which, as S. E. Finer has pointed out in his excellent overview of Pareto's work, 'would have put the logical actions . . . on an equal footing with the non-logical ones'.[69] Moreover, although Pareto did see an important role for violence in the maintaining or circulating of elite rule, he was careful to distinguish force, which could either maintain or change the system, from violence, which he thought was the weapon of the weak, and signalled the disintegration of the system in place.

It is important not to confuse circulation with repetition: yes, Pareto did search for equilibrium within his system, but the movement between the different parts has real consequences for the system as a whole, notably on whether the lions or the foxes are on top. This is why Pareto's system, and indeed those of the rest of the 'elitists', is a dynamic system, not one simply based on motion. In fact, the same might be said of Nietzsche's eternal return, to which the 'circulation of elites' carries certain affinities: as George Simmel has pointed out, if a system has the same amount of force but an unlimited amount of time, then no point of power distribution will ever recur.[70] One question is whether Pareto's system can expand or not: whether it can or not, Mosca's

67. Raymond Aron, 'La sociologie de Pareto' in *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, Vol. 6, No. 3, 1937, pp. 489–521.

68. Burnham, *The Machiavellians*.

69. S. E. Finer, 'Introduction' to Vilfredo Pareto, *Sociological Writings*, London, Pall Mall Press, 1966, p. 48.

70. George Simmel, *Nietzsche and Schopenhauer*, Champaign, University of Illinois Press, 1991.

theory of different levels of 'civilisation', determined by the number of social forces brought within the harmonious bosom of 'juridical defence', certainly allows for the system to expand.

Yet Adorno leaves us with two key points. The first is that a 'static' system, because it is by essence exploitative, will by necessity bring about forces to challenge it from below: in a word, movement. The second is that, with his Frankfurt School hat on, Adorno was aware that dynamism itself can also become oppressive, in the way rationality had become in modernity, as dissected in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*:[71] a thought that can be linked to Mosca's view that rising social forces can become tyrannical if they impose themselves on other forces without giving them their own space, such as socialism, in Mosca's account, or fascism.[72] In the end, Adorno, in a Hegelian dialectical vein, wanted a new synthesis to arise from this clash between static and dynamic forces, where two forces collided not for one to dominate the other, but for a new—third—force to appear.[73]

Much of contemporary democratic theory can be described through this static/dynamic dichotomy. Although John Rawls was not a democratic theorist per se, his 'two principles of justice' are meant to provide the theoretical basis for a 'well-ordered' society.[74] Indeed, in *Justice as Fairness* Rawls explicitly presents political philosophy as offering an Hegelian reconciliation with the world we live in—we are to 'accept and affirm our social world positively, not merely to be resigned to it'[75]—quite reminiscent of Comte's desire to stabilise the post-Revolutionary liberal bourgeois order. The same might be said of Dahl. In his self-declared masterpiece *Democracy and Its Critics*, Dahl listed seven conditions for a country to be recognised as a polyarchy.[76] These conditions are static; they don't change: it is on how well the different political systems match these seven criteria that they are to be judged. Again, this can be viewed as an attempt to stabilise the political system.

Chapter 4 will argue that Schumpeter's aim with his 'minimalist' conception of democracy was also to render democracy static, or at least to slow it down. The point was to limit 'movement' to the competition between

71. Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, London, Verso, 1997.

72. Adorno, '"Static" and "Dynamic" as Sociological Categories', p. 47.

73. Ibid., p. 38.

74. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, Cambridge (MA), Harvard University Press, 1999.

75. John Rawls, *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*, Cambridge (MA), Harvard University Press, 2001, p. 3.

76. Dahl, *Democracy and Its Critics*, p. 233.

politicians for votes. The rest of the political system, in particular the bureaucracy and the military, was to remain static: it was not to change. This was because, as John Medearis has persuasively argued, Schumpeter was worried about the more 'transformative' demands that democracy, understood here as socialism, had on the political system, demands he had experienced first-hand in his native Austro-Hungary.[77] To counter this, and the possibility of a socialist take-over of the economy in the form of 'corporatism', which he thought possible, Schumpeter posited instead his 'procedural' democracy focused on a narrow field that could persist even within a socialised economy.[78]

Medearis, a critic of Schumpeter, develops his own theory of 'oppositional' democracy with which the theory of dynamic democracy offered here shares a number of affinities.[79] For one, Medearis also singles out certain democratic theories as being static: he explains how deliberative democracy, for instance, 'builds [a] wall' to isolate itself from the tumult of real politics. It becomes a 'refuge' from the reality of politics.[80] Indeed, whilst throughout his life Jurgen Habermas showed an interest in and support for political movements, the 'siege model' of democracy he developed in *Theory of Communicative Action* is rather static too: a 'siege' is a blockage or defensive position in contrast to waves constantly breaking against the shoal, as in dynamic democracy (later, in *Between Facts and Norms*, Habermas moved towards a more procedural 'sluice' model).[81] Moreover, dynamic and oppositional democracy both see democracy as a never-ending struggle, as an 'intervention' in a specific historical context, and share a focus on the state.

But there are differences. Whilst Medearis sees Mosca, Pareto and Michels as part of Schumpeter's attempt to render democracy static—elite theory 'quarantines' itself from the people[82]—dynamic democracy sees the early elitists as being in reality the foundation of the dynamic conception of democracy (oppositional democracy takes its inspiration instead from Marx and

77. John Medearis, *Joseph Schumpeter's Two Theories of Democracy*, Cambridge (MA), Harvard University Press, 2001.

78. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy.*

79. John Medearis, *Why Democracy Is Oppositional*, Cambridge (MA), Harvard University Press, 2015.

80. Ibid., pp. 17 and 40.

81. Jurgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action: Reason and Rationalisation of Society*, Cambridge, Polity, 1986; Jurgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*, Cambridge, Polity, 1997.

82. Medearis, *Why Democracy Is Oppositional*, p. 149.

Dewey[83]). Their understanding of social movements is different too: Medearis is interested in the role of movements *within* democracy and democratic theory, whereas dynamic democracy thinks democracy *is* the movement of challenge to elites. As its link to 'elite' theory suggests, dynamic democracy remains sceptical, in contrast to oppositional democracy, that the people can in fact rule. Ultimately, oppositional democracy is quite defensive, resisting the same oppressive economic, bureaucratic and political forces, whereas dynamic democracy has a more active conception of politics as a continual process—and possibility—of change.

There are also affinities between dynamic democracy and agonistic theories of democracy as developed by Chantal Mouffe, Bonnie Honig and William Connolly, notably in their shared emphasis on conflict, pluralism and a Nietzschean tragic worldview.[84] But there are differences too: dynamic democracy does not look to transform antagonism into a more democratic and respectful agonism. Or, to put it another way, from the perspective of dynamic democracy, agonism seems to be the circulation of the same elite, whereas antagonism its possible replacement. Moreover, dynamic democracy reveals the fundamentally elitist basis of agonistic democracy: the amount of time, energy and work demanded by agonistic democracy can only realistically be undertaken by a very select group of people.[85] The people—'C' in Pareto's account—even if they don't ever come to power, seem absent from this conceptualisation. Nevertheless, perhaps Honig's view of politics as a dialectic between order and movement remains the closest to the account articulated here.

Sheldon Wolin has theorised 'fugitive democracy' as a way of escaping from the 'inverted totalitarianism' of corporate economic domination and the authoritarian 'managed democracy' the US has morphed into following 9/11 and the War on Terror.[86] Again, although there is a shared criticism of certain

83. Ibid., p. 5

84. Chantal Mouffe, *On the Political*, Abingdon, Routledge, 2005; Bonnie Honig, *Political theory and the Displacement of Politics*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1993; William Connolly, *Identity/Difference: Democratic Negotiations of Political Paradox*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2002.

85. See Hugo Drochon, 'Nietzsche and Politics', *Nietzsche-Studien*, Vol. 39, 2010, pp. 663–677.

86. Sheldon Wolin, *Democracy Incorporated: Managed Democracy and the Specter of Inverted Totalitarianism*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2008 and Sheldon Wolin, *Fugitive Democracy and Other Essays*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2016.

aspects of elitism, 'fugitive democracy' seems more like a (momentary) escape from state structures to create more participatory forms of politics instead of a direct engagement with the regime of power as in dynamic democracy, which has a focus on the state. Ian Shapiro has defended 'nondomination' as the form politics should take.[87] It is not the position of this book that that pursuit is in vain—that it is futile—although it admits, as Shapiro does, that some form of (elite) domination is inevitable. The focus, rather, is on how changes in elites allows for, if not the replacement, then at least a change in the form of domination, with its attenuation as its attendant hope. More recently, Samuel Bagg has argued democracy must be understood as resisting state capture.[88] Dynamic democracy shares the view of democracy not being understood as collective self-rule, not looking beyond formal procedures, and not being invested in maintaining inter-group competition, but it is focused on the process of elite change as leading to a change in politics, even a redistributive one: that change being indeed the capture of a part of the state, but one that is ever-renewed and ever-changing.

It is true that these theories have more specific concerns—whether it be markets, neoliberal ideology, runaway technologies and their effect on political culture and social relations, ethnic and racial conflict, archaic institutions and laws, flawed constitutions, war, militaries and militarism, state capture or something else[89]—than those of dynamic democracy. Yet it is also true that all these challenges ultimately resolve into a more general, permanent phenomenon of elite dominance, even if the elites are quite different from each other. There is a difference here in the level of abstraction: dynamic democracy posits the permanence of elites at the structural level, but the question of which elite dominates at a given point in time is an empirical question to be determined historically. It depends, in Mosca's language, on which 'social force' is dominant at the time. Dynamic democracy offers an account of elite domination, going so far as to distinguish between foxes and lions, but specifying which elite is dominating at any given point is a discrete exercise—an *analytical* one—drawn from the overall theory, of which the Conclusion will offer illustrations.

87. Ian Shapiro, *Politics against Domination*, Cambridge (MA), Harvard University Press, 2016.

88. Samuel Bagg, *The Dispersion of Power: A Critical Realist Theory of Democracy*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2024.

89. See, further, K. Sabeel Rahman, *Democracy against Domination*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2016.

A final kindred spirit must be found in E. E. Schattschneider. By advocating in *The Semisovereign People*[90] the expansion of the realm of social conflict as a means of increasing political participation, he also proposed a 'dynamic' theory of democracy. Schattschneider was, of course, one of the fiercest critics of Dahl's pluralism: 'The flaw in the pluralist heaven is that the heavenly chorus sings with a strong upper-class accent'.[91] One difference, however, is that it is the 'losers' of economic competition, for Schattschneider, who call for governmental intervention,[92] whereas dynamic democracy sees the challenge to established politics coming from ascending forces.

Regimes

'Elite theory' rejects the usual tripartite of political regimes inherited from Aristotle—monarchy, aristocracy and polity, alongside their corrupted forms tyranny, oligarchy and democracy—although when Aristotle himself turned to analysing Greek constitutions he departed from his own schemata to explain the dynamics of ancient politics as the struggle between oligarchy, understood as the rule of the rich, and democracy, understood as the rule of the poor.[93] In many ways that latter vision is closer to the elite one, which sees politics as the struggle between the elite and the 'masses'. Dynamic democracy, therefore, sees democracy as a continuum between more and less oligarchic rule: full democracy understood as the rule of the people will never be achieved. Indeed, democracy, based on this understanding, is when pressure is applied to the 'iron law of oligarchy', to reprise Michels' formulation. The distinction here between democratic, oligarchic and monarchic regimes is void. As Rousseau himself conceded in *The Social Contract*, and Michels reports in the epigraph to the 'Final Considerations' of his *Political Parties*: 'to take the term in its fully rigorous meaning, there has never existed a true democracy and one will never exist. It is against the natural order of things that the great number governs and that the small number be governed'.[94]

90. E. E. Schattschneider, *The Semisovereign People: A Realist's View of Democracy in America*, Boston, Wadsworth, 1975.

91. Ibid., p. 34.

92. Ibid., p. 39.

93. Aristotle, *The Politics* and *The Constitution of Athens*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996.

94. Michels, *Political Parties*, pp. 73, 364.

Instead, dynamic democracy offers a way of thinking about how a regime might be more or less authoritarian, or, in this paradigm, more or less democratic, in the sense of whether elite rule is tighter or laxer, allowing a greater number to participate. It is a continuum. In some ways, dynamic democracy collapses the distinction between democracy and democratisation: democracy, as an abstract ideal, will never be achieved, however much we strive towards it, so instead we are always in a process of democratisation; a process that might go forward or indeed backwards (backsliding). Whether a regime is democratising or not is an empirical question to be measured over time: one always starts with a certain historical moment along the continuum; there is no abstract ideal point outside of time. *What the theory of dynamic democracy offers is a way of conceptualising that change—for instance, between lions and foxes–and an indication of where to look to identify that change, namely in the interaction between social movements (social forces) and political institutions such as parties.* The uncertainty about whether a moment of democratic challenge will lead to greater democratic participation or not—both Brexit and the election of Trump have led to increased authoritarianism—is part and parcel of what democracy is: a regime of uncertainty.[95]

In his *Mass and Elite in Democratic Athens*, Josiah Ober challenged the view that, in an Athenian context, an 'iron law of oligarchy' always obtained and that all democracies are in fact disguised oligarchies. The reason is that the ideological discourse of democracy from the 'masses' kept the 'elite' politicians of Athens, according to Ober, in check.[96] In this he followed Moses Finley, who in his *Democracy Ancient and Modern* first contested the 'elitist' reading of democracy:

> Athens therefore provides a valuable case-study of how political leadership and popular participation succeeded in coexisting, over a long period of time, without either the apathy and ignorance exposed by public opinion experts, or the extremist nightmares that haunt elitist theorists.[97]

95. Jan-Werner Müller, *Democracy Rules: Liberty, Equality, Uncertainty*, New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2021.

96. Josiah Ober, *Mass and Elite in Democratic Athens: Rhetoric, Ideology, and the Power of the People*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1989, pp. 11, 15–16, 33–34, 327–333. Thanks to Mordechai Levy-Eichel for insisting on this point.

97. Moses Finley, *Democracy Ancient and Modern*, New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press, 1985, p. 33. For a Marxist take on class conflict in ancient Greece, see G. E. M. de Ste. Croix, *The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World*, London, Duckworth, 1981.

But Ober's understanding of Michels is based on an historical anachronism:[98] Michels' theory was a specifically *modern* one, intimately linked to the rise of the modern, bureaucratic, state.[99] As such, the law was never meant to be applied to an ancient setting. Nevertheless, Michels thought that there was an inverse proportionality between democracy and the number of participants: the greater the number, the lesser the democracy (or the more the oligarchy). As we shall see in chapter 3, C. W. Cassinelli estimated that with under 1,000 participants, some degree of 'democracy' could be maintained: a figure that doesn't seem too far from the number who actively participated in the agora at any point in time.[100] In this sense a degree of Athenian 'democracy' could still be possible within Michels' law. Moreover, the type of discursive ideological check that Ober posits as a way of reining-in elite power is precisely the second 'palliative' Michels proposed to counter the iron law. Finally, it is worth noting that Ober still uses the terms 'elite' and 'masses', and sees the politics of ancient Athens as the struggle between the two: exactly as the elite theorists themselves saw modern politics. So, in the end, the overall 'elitist' framework, if not the 'iron law' as such, is validated in an ancient context.

Building on Ober's work—and Michels' iron law of oligarchy—Matthew Simonton has recently argued in *Classical Greek Oligarchy* that ancient oligarchy was not the most common form of constitution of the Greek polis, but rather emerged in reaction to the development of democracy in the ancient world.[101] He sees ancient oligarchy as a form of authoritarianism, and the challenges those oligarchies faced—of coordination and keeping the masses at bay—echo the themes of elite organisation versus mass disorganisation that is fundamental to the 'elite' thinkers.[102] Yet faced with naming minority rule before the emergence of the term 'oligarchy', Simonton tries to resolve the conundrum by calling Archaic regimes 'elite-led', for 'lack of a better term', as he confesses.[103] Whilst using a term coined in 1902 to describe an ancient regime presents certain difficulties—*eunomia* is the term most used during this

98. Quentin Skinner, 'Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas', in *Visions of Politics, Volume I: Regarding Method*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002, pp. 57–89.

99. Bonnell, *Robert Michels, Socialism, and Modernity*.

100. C. W. Cassinelli, 'The Law of Oligarchy', *The American Political Science Review*, vol. 47, no. 3, 1953, p. 782; Ober, *Mass and Elite in Democratic Athens*, p. 337.

101. Matthew Simonton, *Classical Greek Oligarchy: A Political History*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2017. See pp. 3–4 for Michels' iron law.

102. Ibid., pp. 71–73.

103. Ibid., p. 8, n. 22.

period[104]—Simonton's account of the rise of democracy shares many points of contact with dynamic democracy.

He writes:

> *Dēmokratia* was not simply a spontaneous movement by the newly awakened masses, nor was it a gift from elite to demos. Instead, it had (at least) three necessary conditions: 1) times had to be bad enough to give the demos good reason to risk uniting for political change; 2) certain members of the elite had to be alienated from the status quo enough to ally with the demos against their peers; and, crucially, 3) the members of the demos had to form a mass movements powerful enough that renegade members of the elite in question felt they had no choice but to offer power to the common people.[105]

Or, in short: democracy is achieved when a social movement places enough pressure on the established elite that a faction of it joins with the rising elite to overthrow the old elite. In other words: dynamic democracy.

But if it is the few who rule, then there are still many questions to be answered: Who are the few? How do they rule? From which principles? Who can be part of them? How do they relate to other elite groups? How do they relate to the people?

Pessimism

In his *The Rhetoric of Reaction,* Hirschman famously depicted Mosca, Pareto and Michels, alongside Tocqueville, as proponents of the 'futility thesis', where 'attempts at social transformation will be unavailing, that they will simply fail to "make a dent"'.[106] The futility thesis is captured by the popular saying '*plus ça change*', or again Tancredi's famous line in *The Leopard*: 'everything must change for everything to remain the same'.[107] As Hirschman more fully elaborates: 'the attempt at change is abortive, that in one way or another any alleged change is, was, or will be largely surface, façade, cosmetic, hence illusory, as the "deep" structures of society remain wholly untouched'.[108]

104. Ibid.
105. Ibid., p. 20.
106. Hirschman, *The Rhetoric of Reaction,* p. 7.
107. Ibid., pp. 43–44.
108. Ibid., p. 43.

Interestingly, Hirschman casts this discussion through the metaphor of movement, where Mosca, Pareto and Michels are meant to be the defenders of the 'law of no-motion' against those who advocate change, the 'law of motion'.[109] Hirschman's charge against the futility thesis is that it is either self-fulfilling or self-refuting: it is self-fulfilling if 'the assertions about the meaninglessness of intended changes and reforms weaken resistance to their further emasculation and outright abandonment'—in this, in pouring 'ridicule and discredit on the country's fledging democratic institutions', the 'elitists' are guilty of having contributed to the rise of fascism—and it is self-refuting if 'the very tension set up by the futility claim makes for new, more determined, and better informed efforts at achieving real change'.[110]

Certainly, Hirschman is right to say that for the elite thinkers—and, by extension, dynamic democracy—the 'deep' structures of society are unalterable if by 'unalterable' is meant the inevitability of elite rule.[111] Yet that in no way means that actions do not have consequences: most simply put, the passage from lions to foxes. Contra Hirschman, there is allowance for 'social learning or for incremental, corrective policy-making':[112] note the role the SPD had in improving the lot of workers, discussed above, even if it did not achieve its revolutionary aim of proletarian revolution.

At the end of *Political Parties*, Michels offered us a second metaphor for dynamic democracy, that of successive waves breaking against the shoal:

> The democratic currents of history resemble successive waves. They break ever on the same shoal. They are ever renewed. This enduring spectacle is simultaneously encouraging and depressing. When democracies have gained a certain stage of development, they undergo a gradual transformation, adopting the aristocratic spirit, and in many cases also the aristocratic forms, against which at the outset they struggled so fiercely. Now new accusers arise to denounce the traitors; after an era of glorious combats and of inglorious power, they end by fusing with the old dominant class; whereupon once more they are in their turn attacked by fresh opponents who appeal to the name of democracy. It is probable that this cruel game will continue without end.[113]

109. Ibid., p. 44.
110. Ibid., p. 78.
111. See also ibid., p. 72.
112. Ibid., p. 78.
113. Michels, *Political Parties*, p. 371.

This seems to capture precisely Hirschman's 'self-fulfilling' claim that the tension built up against the established elite will necessarily lead to new, more determined and better-informed efforts to challenge the status quo.

In his Inaugural Address at the University of Turin, Mosca explicitly rejected the thesis of the 'futile labour of Sisyphus', explaining that if there is always a political class, the question remained open as to how good that political class could be, and that 'some minorities have the necessary attitudes to direct the social corpus beneficially'.[114] So although democracy as 'rule of the people' will never be achieved—the few will always rule—striving towards it need not be in vain, and may indeed bring about some positive results. Democracy is not a sham, but a species of elite rule.

In his *Against the Masses*, Joseph Femia, discussing Hirschman's futility thesis, actually concedes the point when he mentions—he is one of the few to do so—both Aesop's fable and Michels' 'palliatives' against democracy, requesting that these reflections be deepened. He concludes: 'pursuit of the unattainable is not always a waste of time; the futility thesis, correctly understood, need not be a counsel of despair'.[115] In truth, the futility thesis—that if democracy is not *impossible* it is at least *imperilled*—is one of 'the most profound contributions to democratic theory'.[116]

Dynamic democracy, therefore, need not be a 'counsel of despair'. It is, certainly, a pessimistic account of democracy: the 'people' will never rule in any true sense. Yet that pessimism need not be disheartening.[117] It can be, to borrow Nietzsche's phrase, a 'pessimism of strength', where the fact of 'elite rule' need not be the end-point of the democratic discussion but instead its start: the *affirmation* of elite rule can open up new ways of thinking and acting upon democracy.[118] That is the 'profound' contribution to democratic theory. Indeed, there is an undeniable Nietzschean hue to this work, whether it be the circulation of elites as a form of 'eternal return', the ranking of elites or the iron law of oligarchy as 'beyond good and evil', Schumpeter's 'entrepreneur' as a value-creating *Übermensch*, the masses considered to be the 'much too many'

114. Beetham, 'From Socialism to Fascism II', p. 162.

115. Ibid., p. 109.

116. Ibid., p. 15.

117. Joshua Dienstag, *Pessimism: Philosophy, Ethic, Spirit*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2006.

118. For a critique of the 'elite theorists' as 'precluded them from understanding the main alternatives of political life', see Giulio De Ligio, 'The Iron Law of Elites and the Standards of Political Judgment', *Perspectives on Political Science*, Vol. 50, No. 4, 2021, pp. 262–277.

(continued...)

INDEX