

### Robert Michels and French Socialism and Syndicalism

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Robert Michels is best-known as the author of the 1911 book *Political Parties*, which claimed to diagnose an “iron law of oligarchy”<sup>1</sup>. This referred to the tendency for large modern political parties to fall under the control of a bureaucratic regime of party functionaries, which was manifest even in parties like the German Social Democratic party, which purported to be democratic in both their ideology and their internal constitution. Michels had been an activist in that party from 1902 to 1907. He had also apparently been a member of the Italian Socialist Party even before he joined the German party, and he was to find that involvement in socialist politics in Italy, unlike in the German Empire, did not disqualify him from employment in a university, gaining a lectureship at Turin in 1907. While he was allergic to German nationalism, Michels became increasingly attached to his adopted Italian nationality — his sympathies, and his ties to elite theory, would notoriously see him drawn to Fascism under Mussolini.

Robert Michels’ involvement with French socialism has been less thoroughly researched than his activity in Germany and Italy. This article suggests, however, that his involvement in French socialism and syndicalism was significant for two reasons. First, it is relevant to debates on how to understand Michels’ own political and intellectual trajectory, from radical-left socialist in the early

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<sup>1</sup> Michels, *Zur Soziologie des Parteiwesens*.

1900s to a fascist under Mussolini.<sup>2</sup> Second, Michels figures prominently in the debate around the work of Zeev Sternhell on the “left-wing origins of fascism”, in which Sternhell controversially interpreted the origins of fascist thought in heretical versions of Marxism in the early 1900s. Sternhell placed some emphasis on the journal *The Socialist Movement (Le Mouvement Socialiste)*, edited by the revolutionary syndicalist Hubert Lagardelle, and featuring contributors who included Michels and the author of *Reflections on Violence*, Georges Sorel, who is often cited as an influence on Benito Mussolini. The group around *Le Mouvement Socialiste* were viewed by Sternhell as a key intellectual link between a faction of the revolutionary left before 1914 and fascism.<sup>3</sup> The fact that many members of this group (like Mussolini himself) migrated from far left to radical right lent some plausibility to Sternhell’s provocative arguments.

In tracing Michels’ involvement in French socialism, one can discern three overlapping phases — as historian, as witness and critic from the outside, and as a participant in the discussions of the revolutionary syndicalist section of the French socialist movement, in particular through his involvement with the journal *Le Mouvement Socialiste* as a regular contributor. Michels also had links with the radical anti-militarist Gustave Hervé, contributing to Hervé’s newspaper *The Social War (La Guerre Sociale)* and praising Hervé’s views and forthright opposition to chauvinistic nationalism.

Michels started his intellectual career as a student of French history. He was proud of his part-French family heritage, the source of his affinity with the Latin peoples that was such a key part of his personal identity. He had attended the French Grammar School (*Französisches Gymnasium*) in Berlin and had shone in French in his German matriculation examination, or *Abitur*. His doctoral dissertation was on Louis XIV, for which he undertook research in French archives. As Michels began his planned scholarly career as a historian, he published a number of essays on the early history of French socialism as well as Italian, although contemporary Italian socialist literature started to claim a greater share of his attention. He published a series of reviews and edited documents on the history of French (and Italian) socialism for Eduard Bernstein’s periodical on the history of the socialist movement, *Documents of Socialism (Documente des Socialismus)*.

Perhaps a legacy of Michels’ study of the France of Louis XIV for his dissertation was an essay on the utopian communism (albeit of an authoritarian and monarchistic variety) of François de Salignac de la Mothe-Fénélon (1651—1715), as sketched in Fénélon’s didactic novel *The Adventures of Telemachus*, the son of Odysseus (*Les Aventures de Télémaque*). Michels had to concede that Louis XIV was right in calling Fénélon a “fanciful wit” (*bel esprit chimérique*), but he considered Fénélon’s *Telemachus* a “courageous deed”, nonetheless.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Key authors in this debate include Röhrich, *Robert Michels*, who stresses the continuity of Michels’ “revolutionary romanticism” from radical socialism to fascism and the dissenting view of Beetham, “From Socialism to Fascism”. Genett, *Der Fremde im Kriege*, stresses biographical and contingent factors, arguing that Michels was close to liberalism in the period between 1910 and the end of the First World War, with no continuity of extremist attitudes.

<sup>3</sup> See Sternhell, *Neither Right nor Left*; Sternhell, with Sznajder and Asheri, *The Birth of Fascist Ideology*, which includes a focus on the syndicalists of *Le Mouvement Socialiste* and Michels; on the “Sternhell debate”, see Roberts, “How not to Think about Fascism”; Dobry, *Le mythe de l’allergie française au fascisme*; Berstein and Winock, eds., *Fascisme français?*, and Jenkins, ed., *France in the Era of Fascism*, which includes an essay by Sternhell, reflecting on some of the criticisms of his work.

<sup>4</sup> Michels, “Ein kommunistischer Entwurf am Hofe Ludwig XIV”, 93, 95.

Michels also contributed a translation of Louis Blanc's socialist political programme, written on the eve of the February Revolution of 1848. In his commentary, Michels stressed the extent to which socialistic ideas were endorsed by a number of figures from the bourgeois republican milieu, showing the formidable influence of socialist ideas at that time.<sup>5</sup> One of Louis Blanc's supporters in 1848, François Vidal, was the subject of an essay by Michels in *Documente des Socialismus*. Vidal seems to have appealed to Michels as a "warm-hearted idealist, who likes to bring out the ethical elements in human character". If Vidal essentially sought only to carry out Louis Blanc's ideas, "his temperament, different by nature, was able to lend them another shape".<sup>6</sup> This emphasis on the ethical dimension of socialism was one that chimed with Michels' own conception of socialism as a mark of an ethically superior way of life.

Michels returned to Louis Blanc and the 1848 revolution in France in an article on "the right to work" that he contributed to the journal *Ethical Culture (Ethische Kultur)* in 1903. While Michels discussed the gap between socialist conceptions of the national workshops (*ateliers nationaux*), set up during the 1848 revolution in France, and their realization, he presented a positive view of the work of Louis Blanc and the radical worker Albert (Alexandre Martin). Michels saw the great achievement of the Luxembourg commission as having provided a common platform for representatives of all political tendencies and schools of thought which supported social reform. Michels cited Blanc's claim that two months of the commission had been enough to bring forward the arrival of complete justice in society by perhaps half a century.<sup>7</sup>

Turning to contemporary French socialist politics: in 1902, writing in the Italian socialist newspaper *Forward (Avanti)*, Michels saw France as a dire example of how disunity could weaken the movement of the proletariat. The branches of French socialism would only be formally united in the SFIO in 1905. Michels wrote: "The example of France, where tendencies theoretically no more different from each other than the Ferrian and Turatian [wings of Italian socialism], or Bernsteinian and Kautskyan [wings of German Social Democracy]! — are waging a bitter and implacable war against each other in a way that renders any common action impossible".<sup>8</sup> Michels also queried the attachment of some French socialists (among supporters of Jean Jaurès) to small land-holdings, despite socialist collectivism in theory."<sup>9</sup>

In September 1903, Michels took part in the Dresden party congress of the Social Democratic party, at which the party leader August Bebel lent his weight to the party Left's critique of the revisionist tendency. Michels acted as a partisan of the Left in this debate, critical of the conduct of the party newspaper *Forward (Vorwärts)* under the editorship of Kurt Eisner, even if aspects of Michels' own position would actually have been at odds with the position of the party Left, had they been subjected to closer scrutiny. After the Dresden congress, with its symbolic triumph over revisionism and reformism, Michels travelled to Paris, ostensibly to conduct historical research, and also to give talks to German, French and Italian socialist groups there.<sup>10</sup> On this occasion (October 1903), Michels met Paul Lafargue (for a Sunday lunch), as well as other leading socialists, such as

<sup>5</sup> Michels, "Das Programm der Socialdemokraten Frankreichs", 230-231.

<sup>6</sup> Michels, "François Vidal und die Arbeitscommission des Luxembourg", 267.

<sup>7</sup> Michels, "Das Recht auf Arbeit", 330.

<sup>8</sup> Michels, "Fra due congressi: Imola e Monaco".

<sup>9</sup> Michels, Review of Gatti, *Agricoltura e Socialismo*, 63.

<sup>10</sup> [Anon.], "Aus dem Kreise Marburg-Kirchhain".

Edouard Vaillant, Louis Dubreuilh and Alexandre-Marie Desrousseaux, known as Bracke. He also made the acquaintance of Charles Rappoport, obtaining introductions to Rappoport and others from Karl Kautsky.<sup>11</sup>

In France, Michels had the opportunity to observe the participation of French socialists in the French bourgeois coalition government. On balance, Michels' evaluation, as conveyed in the *Magdeburg People's Voice* (*Magdeburg Volksstimme*), was negative. Millerand and Jaurès's contributions to defending the (bourgeois) democratic republican state form were seen as positive, but limited. On the other hand, and here Michels used the French example for an implied critique of the German revisionists, he argued that the fixation on day-to-day work in parliament led to the "final goal" of socialism becoming lost to view. The French socialists found themselves having to share responsibility for outright reactionary and oppressive decisions of the coalition government, with the result that the left wing of the party was breaking away.<sup>12</sup> Writing from Paris, Michels reported finding advantages and disadvantages of the French bourgeois republic, while he also criticized the German party for failing to campaign more strongly for their republican constitutional views. Despite the advantages of the French republican constitution compared to that of Imperial Germany, it was still not genuinely democratic. Jaurès could rely on applause from bourgeois republican deputies when he held abstract speeches on ethics, but met resistance when he tried to put concrete proposals into practice. Michels stressed that the French socialists should not let themselves be side-tracked by a vice-presidency in the chamber of deputies.<sup>13</sup>

A month later, in January 1904, Michels welcomed the expulsion of Millerand from Jaurès's socialist party. Michels welcomed the end of the experiment of the socialist minister ("His Excellency Minister comrade Millerand"); he believed that the example of Millerand's ministry had serious negative effects on the international socialist movement ("for years it [the Millerand ministry] has weighed on international socialism like a nightmare and has sown a veritable Pandora's crop of evil poisonous seeds in the widest of circles"). Millerand had clashed with Jaurès when the former voted against a disarmament bill moved by the socialist deputy Hubbard on November 25, voting against all other socialist deputies in the Chamber. Michels was sceptical about the chances of Millerand's expulsion bringing about a renewal of Jaurès's party: Jaurès and his supporters moved against Millerand not to cleanse the party, but in an act of self-defence, trying to save what credibility they could in the eyes of their voters, according to Michels. Michels described Millerand as the "intellectual progenitor of all shadings of 'practical revisionism'" in the international labour movement, and Millerand's departure from the party was therefore a major symbolic blow to "opportunism" in Germany, Italy, and elsewhere.<sup>14</sup> At the same time, Michels was critical of Jaurès, who was playing down suggestions by French left-wing socialists that the defeat of revisionists at

<sup>11</sup> See Pouthier, "Roberto Michels et les syndicalistes révolutionnaires français", 42; International Institute for Social History (IISH), Amsterdam, Archiv Kautsky K D XVII, 535, Michels to Karl Kautsky (postcard), October 22, 1903 (from Paris); Kautsky to Michels, October 24, 1903, in Archivio Roberto Michels in Fondazione Luigi Einaudi (ARM/FLE), Turin.

<sup>12</sup> Michels, "Die Teilnahme an der Macht".

<sup>13</sup> Michels, "Durch Spottlieder gemildert!". Jaurès had been elected Vice-President of the Chamber in January 1903, a step criticized by the left wing of the French socialist movement. Goldberg, *The Life of Jean Jaurès*, 296.

<sup>14</sup> Michels, "Das Ende vom Liede Millerand". On Millerand's expulsion, see Derfler, *Alexandre Millerand. The Socialist Years*, 241-245.

Dresden had implications for revisionist and reformist tendencies in France.<sup>15</sup> In Michels' view, Jaurès was sowing confusion in the French labour movement, and making too many concessions in order to stay in the government coalition. Instead of conducting "socialist class politics", Michels wrote, Jaurès believed in "salvation by the power of government alone".<sup>16</sup>

In addition to his articles in the German Social Democratic press, Michels expanded on his critique of Jaurès' in letters to Kautsky. Kautsky thanked Michels, and congratulated him on evidently not having wasted his time in Paris. Kautsky wrote to Michels that he could see some greatness in Jaurès, who was no common careerist (*Streber*), but that Jaurès had allowed himself to be dragged down by "highly dubious elements" such as Millerand. "Now he finally seems to want to free himself from them", Kautsky wrote, giving rise to the hope that "Jaurès will play a great role in the political life of France yet".<sup>17</sup> Michels responded, characterizing Jaurès as "more a poet than a politician", and as excessively optimistic by nature; Jaurès, Michels argued, needed to be disillusioned by some harsh reaction against his politics from outside the socialist party, in order that he learn some hard lessons. Interestingly, Michels argued that the German "national character" was intrinsically more susceptible to revisionism than the French; only the more favourable climate for "bourgeois democracy" in France and the dominant personality of Jaurès enabled socialist revisionism in France to prosper more than in Germany. If a more accommodating government ruled in Germany, Michels suggested, the German party would be overrun with epigones of Jaurès.<sup>18</sup> Michels continued to see Jaurès as a manifestation of a transnational wave of revisionism in the socialist movement, which he criticised in the Italian syndicalist *Socialist Vanguard* (*Avanguardia Socialista*) as based on an over-optimistic and illusory view of society, which denied the reality of class conflict. Michels wrote scathingly of Jean Jaurès's ill-founded (even "infantile") optimism regarding the prospect of peaceful collaboration across class divisions.<sup>19</sup> Michels' view of Jaurès would later soften, as he came to compare Jaurès's stance on anti-war resolutions at the Socialist International congresses favourably with the circumspect position of the German party on this issue.

By the end of 1904, Michels' involvement in French socialism entered a new phase when he started his association with the low-circulation, radical syndicalist journal *Le Mouvement Socialiste*, a platform for some of Jaurès's most vocal leftist critics. His first article appeared in December, entitled "The Dangers of the German Socialist Party". It began by quoting Jaurès's critical remarks about the German party at the recent International Socialist Congress at Amsterdam, but went on to criticize Jaurès too. For Jaurès to accuse the German party of opportunism, was, Michels argued, like a thief giving evidence in a case of theft, but he believed the attacks had a kernel of truth.<sup>20</sup>

Michels declared that the German Social Democratic Party was lacking in "the courageous will to action, the revolutionary ferment".<sup>21</sup> He characterized the German Reich as the most backward state in Europe, with the exceptions of Russia and Turkey.<sup>22</sup> However, despite the party's

<sup>15</sup> Goldberg, *The Life of Jean Jaurès*, 312.

<sup>16</sup> Michels, "'Schulbuben'-Kritik".

<sup>17</sup> ARM/FLE, Kautsky to Michels, January 8, 1904.

<sup>18</sup> IISH Archief Kautsky K D XVII, 536, Michels to Kautsky, January 10, 1904.

<sup>19</sup> Michels, "A proposito di socialismo illusorio".

<sup>20</sup> Michels, "Les dangers du Parti socialiste allemande", 193. Michels' contributions to *Le Mouvement Socialiste* have also been reprinted in Michels, *Critique du Socialisme*.

<sup>21</sup> Michels, "Les dangers du Parti socialiste allemande", 200.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

voting strength, its resources and organisation, Michels predicted that in the case of an outbreak of war, or of the government abolishing universal (manhood) suffrage, the German Social Democratic Party would do nothing, other than pass a protest resolution (worded as a “very revolutionary manifesto”); its record suggested it would tamely submit to “legality”.<sup>23</sup> A number of factors, in Michels’ view, accounted for the degree to which the German Social Democrats were prone to passivity: unlike the French socialists, they faced a united bourgeois bloc, given the high degree of political polarization in Germany along class lines. There were also factors of history — Germany’s lack of a strong revolutionary tradition — and “race”: the passive, slow, ponderous German national character.<sup>24</sup>

Michels became a regular contributor to the syndicalist journal *Le Mouvement Socialiste* and a regular correspondent with the French revolutionary syndicalist Hubert Lagardelle (a correspondence of which only Lagardelle’s letters survive). Lagardelle greeted Michels’ collaboration with the journal enthusiastically, all the more because the Italian syndicalists Arturo Labriola and Walter Mocchi had told him that Michels “largely shared our points of view”. Lagardelle had a contrasting view of the national conditions that favoured political radicalism — while Michels blamed German backwardness for the insufficient radicalism of the German party, Lagardelle suggested that German conditions were more conducive to radicalism than a more democratic state, which tended to dissolve radicalism. Nevertheless, Lagardelle wrote to Michels, the German party was getting bogged down in parliamentarianism, and was overrun with reformists “[Alfred] Südekum & Co. and other clowns”. “Only a strong revolutionary syndicalist current can save socialism”, Lagardelle exclaimed. He urged Michels to join *Le Mouvement Socialiste* in its efforts to this end, and to help spread revolutionary syndicalism in Germany.<sup>25</sup> Michels’ response to Lagardelle clearly evinced a degree of sympathy with Lagardelle’s project, while distancing himself from the German anarcho-syndicalist Raphael Friedeberg. While Michels tended to agree with some of Friedeberg’s criticisms that the German party was not demonstrating sufficient revolutionary élan, he was sceptical of the prospects of building a revolutionary syndicalist movement in Germany. Nonetheless, Lagardelle encouraged Michels to put him in touch with any potentially like-minded comrades in Germany, to whom copies of *Le Mouvement Socialiste* could be sent, with a view to building a truly international movement of “revolutionary revisionists”.<sup>26</sup> Michels obliged with a list of potential contacts, as well as sending Lagardelle the article on the state of the German party.<sup>27</sup>

A year after the cordial beginning of the correspondence between Michels and Lagardelle, Lagardelle seems to have been slightly chagrined by the fact that Michels expected to be paid for his contributions to *Le Mouvement Socialiste*. Michels did not hold any paid party post, such as editor of a Social Democratic Party newspaper, which he could well have done — Rosa Luxemburg once offered her services to help him find an editorship. Presumably, he was still hoping for a university post. In the absence of a position that would have given him a regular income, he freelanced,

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 196-197.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 199.

<sup>25</sup> ARM/FLE, H. Lagardelle to Robert Michels, October 17, 1904. This correspondence is also published in Gianinazzi, “La démocratie difficile à l’ère des masses”.

<sup>26</sup> ARM/FLE, H. Lagardelle to Robert Michels, October 23, 1904.

<sup>27</sup> ARM/FLE, H. Lagardelle to Robert Michels, March 28, 1905.

publishing his writings in journals across a wide spectrum, sometimes publishing the same work in German, French and Italian. In this period, it was unusual in Germany in particular for socialists to publish in “bourgeois” journals and newspapers, and equally unusual for non-socialists to publish in the labour movement press, making Michels’ publishing conduct across the “class divide” unusual. Lagardelle protested that French journals were generally impoverished, lacking in both funds and subscribers — an indication that *Le Mouvement Socialiste* was not sustained by a mass readership base. Indeed, Lagardelle lamented that the subscribers had disappeared, apparently scared off by the journal’s revolutionary, anti-militarist and anti-patriotic stance, and the readership was too small to sustain a journal. Lagardelle subsidized the journal out of his own pocket, and drew no pay as editor, nor did most contributors receive an honorarium — available funds were essentially reserved to compensate the foreign contributors. Lagardelle added that *Le Mouvement Socialiste* could not call on the treasury of a rich political party, like the German *The New Age* (*Die Neue Zeit*), nor was it backed by “millionaire Jews” like Jaurès’s *Humanity* (*L’Humanité*). (The journal’s financial straits would worsen during 1906, partly because of lawsuits against it.) At the same time, Lagardelle was already pronouncing the failure of the newly united SFIO in his letter to Michels:

In France, official socialism, the reunited electoral socialism of Guesde and Jaurès, is disintegrating faster than could have been predicted. It is the end of the socialist party as far as it represents a movement of social transformation. The electoral kitchen is only of interest to that association of subaltern officers in search of jobs or seats, and all their discussions are to do with the recipe of the electoral sauce.

The trade-union movement, on the other hand, was vigorous and in conflict with the government.<sup>28</sup>

In the course of 1905, Michels was also contributing to the Italian syndicalist journal *The Social Future* (*Il Divenire Sociale*), edited by Enrico Leone. During that year, the journal also published articles by Berth, Griffuelhes (several articles), Lagardelle, and Sorel. In mid-1905, Michels’ article on the German Free Trade Unions Congress in Cologne for *Le Mouvement Socialiste* showed him as identifying with revolutionary syndicalism as found in France and Italy. He contrasted this revolutionary syndicalism, based on class struggle, with English-style trade unionism, based on the pursuit of limited improvements in pay and conditions, and argued that the German trade unions were following the latter tendency. Michels wrote here of revolutionary syndicalism:

It is the organizer of social war, against all peace, all compromise, all diplomacy, thus constituting the eminently necessary counter-weight to the parliamentarism of the Party. It only knows the struggle, and only lives in struggle.

Michels praised the revolutionary syndicalism of France and Italy as an “admirable example”, in contrast to the German trade union movement.<sup>29</sup> In the former, he saw “revolutionary conceptions,

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<sup>28</sup> ARM/FLE, H. Lagardelle to RM, October 31, 1905.

<sup>29</sup> Michels, “Le Congrès Syndical de Cologne”, 313.

anti-legalitarian, even anti-statist (*anti-étatiste*), which grow in the same proportion as the audacity of the class enemies”.<sup>30</sup>

Michels had already struck a syndicalist note in his report on the Ruhr miners’ strike for *Le Mouvement Socialiste* in April 1905. The leaders of the unions had been “pusillanimous” before the outbreak of the strike. Since the last major Ruhr strike in 1889, the German labour movement had pursued the “most civilised form of class struggle”, parliamentary action, which had of course changed nothing. Michels wrote that the bourgeois parties were sufficiently realistic not to be taken in by the radical rhetoric of parliamentarians, and had not been intimidated by it. Finally, the workers had called on the union leaders to declare a strike, for Michels: “Depressing proof of what a long period of *worker bureaucratism* can do to make the masses forget how to decree their own actions”.<sup>31</sup> Michels criticized the demand of a chain of Social Democratic party meetings for a nationalization of the Ruhr mines as showing a belief in the state (*étatisme*) that displayed “the total lack of Marxist spirit in the daily political life of German Social Democracy”.<sup>32</sup> Not only that, the strike leaders showed a failure to appreciate the “*psychological* factor in any strike movement”, being more concerned with the state of the strike funds than with the mood of the workers.<sup>33</sup> Michels concluded that, after the strike: “The masses are convinced that the parliamentary, neutralist and legalitarian tactics of their chiefs are bankrupt, and at their cost”.<sup>34</sup> He rejected the respect for legality that one found among German union leaders — let the bourgeois fear the strong arms of the workers!

Michels subsequently spent two months in Paris in early 1906, where he got to know Lagardelle and Edouard Berth better, and also made the acquaintance of Victor Griffuelhes, a leader of revolutionary syndicalism, and the leading exponent of Marxism in France, Jules Guesde. By this time, he had also started to correspond with Georges Sorel, who had identified himself in a communication to Bernstein’s *Documente des Socialismus* as one of the “thinking socialists” associated with the journal *Le Mouvement Socialiste*.<sup>35</sup> Around the time of Michels’ 1906 visit to Paris, Sorel was taking part in the regular Sunday afternoon get-togethers of the *Mouvement Socialiste* circle at Lagardelle’s home.<sup>36</sup> Michels himself was invited to take part in these gatherings. Only a few letters from Sorel to Michels are extant, although one letter from Sorel to Michels in December 1905 indicates that Sorel saw in Michels an ally against the “official” socialists whom Sorel viewed as trying to destroy *Le Mouvement Socialiste* and his own writing career.<sup>37</sup>

Around this time, Michels wrote a lengthy review article for the *Archives for Social Science and Social Policy* (*Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik*) on recent literature on socialism. He commented on the state of the socialist movement in France.<sup>38</sup> In terms that directly echoed Lagardelle’s arguments, Michels regarded the recently “unified” French socialist party as “very

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 321.

<sup>31</sup> Michels, “La grève générale des mineurs de la Ruhr”, 481. Emphasis in original.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 484.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 488.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 489.

<sup>35</sup> [Anon.] “Anfragen und Nachweise”. There is a large body of literature on Sorel. A good place to start is Roth, *The cult of violence*.

<sup>36</sup> Busino, “Lettres de G. Sorel à L. Einaudi, E. Rods et R. Michels”, 82.

<sup>37</sup> Letter from Sorel to Michels, 13 December 1905, in *ibid.*, 83.

<sup>38</sup> Michels, “Literatur. Zur Geschichte des Sozialismus”, on France, see 802ff.

precarious in its nature”, because the union had been based on opportunistic, external, considerations of electoral tactics, rather than a true unity of ideas. In the same essay, Michels characterized the syndicalists around *Le Mouvement Socialiste*, whose theoreticians included Lagardelle, Berth and Sorel, as the most significant among the socialist groups outside the unified party.<sup>39</sup>

While in Paris, Michels gave a lecture to French workers in the Palais du Travail, Belleville, Paris on February 21, 1906 on the occasion of the Morocco crisis. He subsequently published the lecture in the German “localists” newspaper, *Unity (Die Einigkeit)*, in the form of a series of articles on the danger of war and the German labour movement. The rationale for publishing it in German was to counter what Michels claimed were misrepresentations of his speech in *Vorwärts* and in the *Correspondence (Korrespondenzblatt)* of the General Commission of Free Trade Unions, among other German labour movement papers.<sup>40</sup> Michels’ lecture was held against the background of the Morocco crisis and the threat of war between Germany and France. Michels professed his alarm at the inactivity of the leadership of the German labour movement, especially of the free trade unions, in the face of this danger. His lecture, Michels explained, was designed to try to explain this inactivity to French workers, and to dispel any misunderstanding that the German union leaders were driven purely by old-fashioned “patriotism”.<sup>41</sup> In these articles, Michels heavily criticized the German free trade unions for their lack of socialist ideology and party-political “neutrality”, i.e. the autonomy of the unions from the direction of the party, contrasting them unfavourably with the French General Confederation of Labour, (*Confédération générale du travail*, or CGT), which maintained a commitment to class struggle. Michels sought to explain the German unions’ lack of this commitment to French workers. Victor Griffuelhes’ unsuccessful peace mission to Berlin during the Morocco crisis had failed because of the ideological “neutrality” of the German trade union leaders, not, Michels insisted, because of any innate patriotism of the German working class.<sup>42</sup>

A discordant note was sounded in Michels’ relations with his French syndicalist comrades in early 1907 when *Le Mouvement Socialiste* published a critique by Edouard Berth of a long article Michels wrote for the *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik* on the social base of the Italian labour movement. Rejecting political parties per se in favour of direct economic action by unions, Berth argued that party representative organisation meant “treason, deviation, becoming bourgeois (*embourgeoisement*)”. Michels partially concurred with Berth, but argued that Berth was mistaken in arbitrarily singling out representative structures in political parties for this criticism — were not trade unions also based on the same fundamental principle, “the principle of representation”? For Michels, the problem that needed to be resolved was “to find a means of countering the inherent defects of all organisation, that is all representation”. This was where Michels essentially parted company theoretically with syndicalists, even while he continued to express sympathy for their revolutionary temperament. Based on his knowledge of the trade union movement in Germany, which was even more wedded to reformism and to building up its own organisational structures than

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<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 803.

<sup>40</sup> Michels, “Kriegsgefahr”, May 26. On this speech, see also Michels. 1906. “Polémiques sur le Socialisme allemande”, in which Michels also responds to criticisms from the German workers’ reading club in Paris, and Otto Pohl, *Vorwärts*’ Paris correspondent.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> Michels, “Kriegsgefahr”, IV, June 16. On Griffuelhes’ mission to Berlin, described by Jolyon Howorth as a “humiliating failure” due to the refusal of the German Trade Union leadership to co-operate with Griffuelhes’ proposal for a joint political strike, see Vandervort, *Victor Griffuelhes and French Syndicalism*, 109-110.

the Social Democratic Party, Michels did not believe that a focus on unionism rather than political organisation was a remedy for the maladies of the Second International. If any form of organisation or representation was potentially suspect, this would apply to the CGT or the German free trade unions as much as to the political parties that were pursuing a parliamentary strategy. Michels went on to argue that Berth's explanation for the strength of syndicalism in France was lacking in historical depth: "Syndicalism, in France, is a historical fact. It is explained not so much by the innate revolutionary sentiment of the French proletariat as by the weakness in French life that the role of the *party* has always had". This was in marked contrast to Germany or Italy, where the party had preceded the trade unions. In France, the party had been weak and fragmented after the suppression of the Paris Commune. Michels wrote: "In France, the great mass of the proletariat is not intimately attached to the party".<sup>43</sup>

After receiving Michels' article containing these comments for *Le Mouvement Socialiste* in January 1907, Lagardelle was taken aback by the sharpness of Michels' response to Berth, describing Michels' article as "very unkind" (*bien méchante*), and querying the need for such aggressive formulations as Michels used. At the same time, noting that Michels had just secured a lectureship at the University of Turin, Lagardelle looked forward to Michels acting as a link between the *Mouvement Socialiste* group and the Italian revolutionary socialists around Arturo Labriola in Milan, hoping that they could form a common front at the 1907 International Socialist Congress in Stuttgart.<sup>44</sup> On April 3, 1907, a gathering of revolutionary syndicalists took place in Paris. It included Lagardelle, Berth, Arturo Labriola and Boris Krichewsky. In his address to the gathering, Michels saluted French syndicalism, comparing it positively with English trade unionism or the politically "neutral" German unions: "Its importance lies in the grand union of the class and the idea". French syndicalism embodied the revolutionary socialist idea.<sup>45</sup>

After 1907, however, the *Mouvement Socialiste* group went into decline. The break of first Sorel, then Berth, in 1908-1909 heightened the political and intellectual isolation of Lagardelle and his journal. In March 1909, Lagardelle wrote to Michels, with whom he continued to correspond, that he was in a "sad stage" (*période triste*), with syndicalism and socialism in France "in disarray". Sorel had broken with the *Mouvement* five months previously, and Berth had just followed. Lagardelle bitterly complained that Sorel and Berth had both "fallen prey to the worst kind of intellectualisms", admiring "the little abstract formulae that they had fabricated". Once again, the *Mouvement* was out of money, and having difficulties with its publisher, and it was also running out of contributors, and Lagardelle begged Michels for an article on German or Italian topics.<sup>46</sup> By this time, Michels was publishing much less in socialist journals, and focussing more on academic journals, in particular the *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik*, under the influence of Werner Sombart and Max Weber, but he did send Lagardelle one more article.<sup>47</sup>

During 1907, Michels established contact with the French antimilitarist and radical socialist Gustave Hervé. In February of that year, Hervé's paper *The Social War* (*La Guerre Sociale*)

<sup>43</sup> Michels, "Controverse Socialiste", 285-286, 287. Emphasis in original.

<sup>44</sup> ARM/FLE, H. Lagardelle to R. Michels, January 12, 1907.

<sup>45</sup> Robert Michels, "Le syndicalisme et le socialisme en Allemagne", 59.

<sup>46</sup> ARM/FLE, Lagardelle to Michels, March 13, 1909.

<sup>47</sup> Michels, "La politique étrangère et le Socialisme".

published an excerpt from Michels' article in *Le Mouvement Socialiste* on the German Social Democratic party after the Mannheim congress, noting that Michels' credentials as a socialist activist added weight to his forceful criticisms of the party.<sup>48</sup> The Mannheim congress had witnessed the formalization of a deal between the Social Democratic party leadership and the free trade unions on the autonomy and parity of status of the unions vis-à-vis the party, a development condemned by Michels and many on the left of Social Democracy.

Apparently in response to an invitation from Hervé, Michels sent *La Guerre Sociale* an article on the 1907 German elections for the German Social Democratic party. He addressed it to "My dear comrades of the *Guerre Sociale*". Michels wrote a more pointed version of a more academic essay already published in the Italian journal *Social Reform (La Riforma Sociale)*, criticizing the German Social Democrats for their timidity in failing to combat German nationalist election propaganda with a more forthright insistence on anti-patriotism, in the spirit of Marx's dictum that "the proletariat has no fatherland". Michels also argued that parliamentary success could have led to compromise with the party's enemies had it not been for the Social Democrats' electoral setback. Michels rejected such a compromise. The militant antipatriotism and antimilitarism expressed in Michels' article was in tune with Hervé's views on these issues. Michels' contact with *La Guerre Sociale* quickly came to the attention of the Prussian police, who were hyper-sensitive to anti-militarist propaganda of the sort practised by Hervé.<sup>49</sup> In contrast to the vigilance of the Prussian political police, Michels' links with Hervé have often gone unnoticed by researchers on Michels, as the standard Michels bibliographies omit the contributions to *La Guerre Sociale*.

Michels had much in common with Hervé's antimilitarist principles. He chastised German Social Democrats for opposing the antimilitarism of their French comrades, and emphasized the illogicality for workers of patriotism and nationalism. Michels parted company with Hervé only in arguing that antimilitarism in a single country was not enough — the antimilitarist élan of French socialists, which Michels admired, would be in vain if the German socialists did not follow suit, and here Michels believed the omens were not promising, with Karl Liebknecht finding himself relatively isolated in his antimilitarist agitation. Michels also praised the "tenacity and good sense of our comrade Edouard Vaillant", contrasting it favourably with the attitude of most German Social Democrats.<sup>50</sup>

Michels contributed to *La Guerre Sociale* again in May 1907, with a short article devoted to the question of whether there were revolutionaries in Germany. He concluded that there were, but that taken as a whole the German Social Democratic party was far from revolutionary. "There is little wanting for it to be solely a Millerandist party. There is already more than one Millerand in its ranks". There were party radicals, but they could not yet see how serious the decay of the party was becoming through the advance of the reformists.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Michels, "Jugement sur la social-démocratie allemande". On Hervé, see Heuré, *Gustave Hervé. Itinéraire d'un provocateur*. On *La Guerre Sociale*, see *ibid.*, 106-126, also the introduction to the anthology edited by Raoul Vilette, *La Guerre Sociale. Un journal "contre"*, 9-18 (which also reprints Michels' article cited here on 111-113).

<sup>49</sup> Landesarchiv Berlin (LAB). A. Pr. Br. Rep. 030 Tit.95, No.16386: Akten der Abteilung VII-4 des Königlichen Polizei-Präsidiums zu Berlin, betreffend den Schriftsteller, Professor Dr. Robert Michels 1903-1917, Bl.2.

<sup>50</sup> Michels, "Le prochain Congrès socialiste international", quotation on Vaillant, 46.

<sup>51</sup> Michels, "L'Allemagne est-elle révolutionnaire".

Michels' contacts with *La Guerre Sociale* continued, with the paper printing an interview with Michels following the International Socialist Congress in 1907. Michels complained that the venue had been badly chosen for a congress that had to decide on effective ways to combat militarism: the legal restrictions that prevailed in Germany (such as the restrictions on *lèse-majesté*) inhibited free debate, and the Germans as host party were relatively backward when it came to the question of anti-militarist agitation. Michels feared that the need to accommodate German views on anti-militarist agitation may have had a negative effect on the more advanced French delegation, which had been willing to take a stronger anti-militarist position.<sup>52</sup>

In Michels' file in the Berlin political police records, a note based on information received from Rome in June 1908 suggested that Michels' writing for Hervé's paper *La Guerre Sociale* may have continued into 1908.<sup>53</sup> But no further contributions to the paper by Michels have been identified. Just as Michels' contacts with *Le Mouvement Socialiste* started to atrophy as he settled into his academic career in Turin, so too he seems to have let drop his active links with Hervé.

However, Michels continued to praise Hervé's antimilitarism and antipatriotism as an antidote to the opportunism of mainstream social democracy, from which he was more or less openly estranged by 1908. While convinced anti-militarism is a consistent element in Michels' writings, apparently fuelled by a visceral aversion to the military which he acquired during his own military service in Germany, Michels' sympathies with the French syndicalists and radical socialists otherwise seem to have been motivated less by theoretical considerations, and more by his perceptions of an affinity with their temperament and ethical principles, with their cultivation of a sense of revolutionary élan. As Pino Ferraris has suggested, and as Michels' exchange with Berth indicates, it is far from clear that Michels could be described as a syndicalist, as far as his attitude to the role of trade unions is concerned.<sup>54</sup>

Given the later intellectual trajectory of Lagardelle, Berth, Sorel, and Michels himself from left to right, it is not surprising that the circle around *Le Mouvement Socialiste* was of great interest for Zeev Sternhell's work on the "left-wing intellectual origins of fascism".<sup>55</sup> However, a reading of Lagardelle's correspondence with Michels suggests that Sternhell's attention to *Le Mouvement Socialiste* may be out of proportion to the journal's actual influence, given its increasingly exiguous subscription base, and Lagardelle's increasing isolation.<sup>56</sup> Michels and Sorel were also intellectuals without any constituency in the labour movement at the time of their links with the journal. It also misses the fact that Michels did not transition directly from radical left to right, but moved more to bourgeois liberal positions by 1914.<sup>57</sup> This reading of Michels misses other intellectual influences on Michels, such as elite theory and social-anthropological biologicistic ideas prevalent in Italian social thought in the period. Finally, it does not cover his borrowing from the crowd psychology of the anti-socialist French writer Gustave le Bon.<sup>58</sup> In his adopted home country after 1907, Michels also

<sup>52</sup> [Anon.], "Nos Interviews. Stuttgart".

<sup>53</sup> LAB, A Rep. 030, Nr.16386, Bl.2.

<sup>54</sup> Ferraris, *Saggi su Roberto Michels*, 58-59, 172-175.

<sup>55</sup> Sternhell, *Neither Right nor Left*; Sternhell, with Mario Sznajder and Maia Asheri, *The Birth of Fascist Ideology*.

<sup>56</sup> See Pouthier, "Roberto Michels et les syndicalistes révolutionnaires français".

<sup>57</sup> A point made by Genett, *Der Fremde im Kriege*.

<sup>58</sup> An exploration of these influences goes beyond the possible scope of this article. They are treated at greater length in a monograph on Michels currently in preparation by the author.

developed an attachment to Italian nationalism, irredentism and imperialism that contrasted with his rejection of the nationalism of Wilhelmine Germany. In French revolutionary syndicalism, Michels found a socialism with added temperament and élan that he missed among the more sober German comrades — a temperament that resonated with his own French origins and affinity for the Latin peoples. For Michels, temperament was always ethnically coded. While his anti-militarism was sincere and genuine, his relationship with revolutionary syndicalism in both France and Italy was more vicarious, and limited by his profound scepticism towards trade unionism in general.

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