



A CRITIQUE OF THE DEMOCRATIC PARTY AND MYTHOLOGY OF PATRIOTISM IN ROBERT MICHELS

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ABSTRACT: Thinking about the intellectual journey that Michels undertook, one whereby his critique of social democracy and of the party in a democratic regime matured, and one in which he also moved towards the valorization of patriotic and national convictions, I noticed the existence of a significant connection – actually, almost of a cause-effect relationship between the latter and the former – as if they formed together in a coherent and correspondent process, both synchronous and yet contrary to one another. Hence it follows a necessary connection between the Michels' "iron law of the oligarchy" and the "law of transgression".

KEY WORDS: Democracy, Oligarchy, Patriotism, Nationalism, Transgression.

RESUMEN: Se describen en la presente colaboración algunos de los interrogantes que quedan abiertos en el pensamiento de Robert Michels y en su crítica a la democracia moderna, en contraste con los planteamientos de Max Weber. Para Michels el Partido Socialdemócrata alemán era la quintaesencia de lo que debe ser un partido democrático, aunque éste fuera incapaz de poner en marcha la revolución de las masas. Se comenta igualmente la obra de Michels sobre la oligarquía orgánica constitucional. Su libro sobre los partidos políticos está considerado como una obra capital dentro de la Ciencia Política. Por otro lado, para Michels la democracia resulta inconcebible si no hay organización. Se precisan también algunas diferencias entre Max Weber, Robert Michels y Vilfredo Pareto.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Democracia, Oligarquía, Patriotismo, Nacionalismo, Transgresión.

1. Premises

Thinking about the intellectual journey that Michels undertook, one whereby his critique of social democracy and of the party in a democratic regime matured, and one in which he also moved towards the valorization of patriotic and national convictions, I noticed the existence of a significant connection – actually, almost of a cause-effect relationship between the latter and the former – as if they formed together in a coherent and correspondent process, both synchronous and yet contrary to one another. In substance, I think it can be

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verified that in the evolution of Michels' thought there is a causal, reciprocal nexus in the maturation of two themes:

A) The critique of the party 'in democracy', and, more generally, of the very definition of 'democracy' – first under the influence of the 'Mosco-Paretians', and second under that of the Weberian doctrine of organisation and bureaucracy;

B) The increasingly participative appreciation of the 'feeling' of patriotism, at first in a definition of class, then State, and finally nation.

It seems to me that this correspondence hasn't been highlighted enough at present. Such an undertaking is paramount, in my opinion, as the convicted subscription to a patriotic and national conception – in the context of an ideologic crisis that hit Michels in the years 1907-1911 – was a secondary effect of young Michel's affinity for the 'Mosco-Paretian' school and for Weber's bureaucratic-organisation theories, and, consequentially, of his progressive detachment from international socialism. This subsequently engendered the approach of a metamorphosing patriotic, nationalistic and, eventually, fascist position. Put succinctly, the more refined his critique of the (social) democratic party got – the party being the main instrument in the socialist revolution at the time of the Second International – the more a feeling of disenchantment grew in Michels for the category of 'class' and, at the same time, this fomented a need to explore the category of 'national mother country' as an alternative instrument that would allow him to interpret the world and act in order to transform it. It is also important to state that, despite Michels' many declarations of detachment from political action – despite an effective withdrawal from concrete political activism – he was always subscribed to well recognisable political alignments, as protector and propagandist, even if in a less direct role.

It was difficult to double-check this notation in the vast literature that takes into consideration the evolution of Michels' political thought. It seems to me that not even Francesco Tuccari, who undertook an accurate analysis of the formation of Michelsian critique of democracy in parallel with the Weberian theory¹ in the '90s, has underlined this circumstance, even upon unearthing crucial motivational data which revealed reasons as to why Michels sought to abandon his social democratic revolutionary position, embracing the 'science' of the Mosco-Paretians in its stead. Tuccari does however correctly highlight three of the emerging elements in the Michelsian scientific profile²: 1) on both the psychological and activistic planes, a conceptual shift is apparent after the political disappointments of 1904-5, whereby a different scientific attitude is adopted, recognised as 'self-normative activity' and unlinked from the nexus of revolutionary theory-action. This happens, it seems to me, also under the influence of the Weberian doctrine of *Wertfreiheit*, of which Michels explicitly becomes debtor in that period; 2) an increasing inclination to reason positivistically, in terms of 'iron laws' which should discipline the social life of both individuals and nations; 3) the acceptance of the categorial language of the Mosco-Paretian school. The amalgamation of these three elements, according to Tuccari, encouraged the transformation in Michels and the composition of the sociological work on the party.

¹ Francesco Tuccari, *I dilemmi della democrazia moderna. Max Weber e Robert Michels*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 1993.

² *Ibid.*, p. 221.

But if this is true, then it is also imperative to put into the foreground the interdependence between the culminations of the critique of the democratic party and the progressive growth in Michels' mind of a privileged relationship with the categorial apparatus of national patriotism, which he very soon put under analysis, at first very critically, but whose valuative premises then transformed in the period 1907-1910. Michels' works from this period, which he defines as preparatory to the *Soziologie* (1911³), allow us to follow this synchronous and contrary shift of detachment from the socialistic position and attachment to the national patriotic position. Such a change is also verifiable in letters and other texts⁴, which document a politically introspective attitude that develops into a burgeoning self-realisation, whilst retaining the requisite elements of theoretical study. The second paragraph of this paper will therefore focus on the aforementioned texts, and seek to emphasise some of the events and reasons that highlight this synchronous and contrary relationship.

2. From the critique of the (social)democratic party to the definition of the organic constitutional oligarchy

Michels considered the social democratic party to be the quintessence of the democratic party. The sociopolitical critique of this form necessarily implied the critique of 'democracy' *per se*, and therefore the crisis of international social democracy meant the crisis of democracy as a political system. Michels soon extends this belief to the point where his 'iron law of oligarchy' is already in application in 1910, on the trail of the particular spin he gives to the Weberian organisational-bureaucratic doctrine, to the syndicalist model, and thus generalised to any kind of political association. We see therefore the progression of the formative process of the critique of national and international social democracy on one hand and of democracy as an 'organic constitutional oligarchy' on the other.

It has been shown that between 1904 and 1906 the relationship of trust between Michels and the SPD broke down, along with his Kautskian and Bebelian centrist alignment, especially on themes of antimilitarism and national patriotism⁵. This is easily recognisable with reference to the topic here approached, as well as analysing the different positions that emerge from the two articles of critical analysis – even if the analysis is of two distinct political alignments that Michels wrote on the Social Democratic party: the first, titled

³ See *The Prefation* by Robert Michels to the first Italian edition (Turin: UTET, 1912) of *Sociology of the democratic party in modern democracy* (original German edition: *Zur Soziologie des Parteiwesens in der modernen Demokratie. Untersuchungen über die oligarchischen Tendenzen des Gruppenlebens*, Leipzig, Dr. Werner Klinkhardt, Philosophisch-soziologische Bücherei, Band XXI, 1911), as seen in the Italian edition (Bologna, Il Mulino, 1966, p. 3-4).

⁴ See Corrado Malandrino, "Lettere di Roberto Michels e di Augustin Hamon (1902-1917)", *Annali della Fondazione L. Einaudi*, Turin, 1989, vol. XXII, p. 502-508, 542 ss; Id., "Affinità elettive e sotterranee divergenze. Il rapporto Loria-Michels tr accademia e politica attraverso il carteggio inedito (1905-1936)", in *Quaderni di storia dell'Università di Torino*, curated by Angelo D'Orsi, anno IV, n. 3 (1999), p. 245-288; Id., "Patriottismo, nazione e democrazia nel carteggio Mosca-Michels", in *Annali della Fondazione Luigi Einaudi*, Turin, 2004, p. 211-226.

⁵ On the 'political Michels' see the various works by Pino Ferraris, collected in *Saggi su Roberto Michels*, Faculty of Law, University of Camerino, Jovene Editore, 1993.

*Les dangers du parti socialiste allemand*⁶, that is «the dangers (or the mistakes) that the German socialdemocracy will face», written in 1904, and the second: *Die deutsche Sozialdemokratie im internationalem Verbande*, written in 1907, which was published in Weber's "Archiv"⁷.

In the 1904 article Michels claims that it is necessary to accept the impotence of social democracy in order to put into place the values of the revolutionary party in the political challenge, as any adversarial political assets would summon patriotic motives capable of fooling the masses. In this particular instance, he does not recognise the reasons for said impotence as a betrayal operated by the head of the party in respect of the vocation of the party, as he will do later on. In actual fact, in his opinion the head of the party is attempting to educate the masses, but cannot carry out the task because national patriotism is too deeply embedded in the population, due partly to a psychological conformity in being brought up with a history and discourse lending itself towards messages of the primacy of the teutonic race (the "patriotic spirit of the German people"), and also because of the degenerative nature of parliamentarism, supported by the reformists and revisionists who advocated moderacy, hoping for an alliance with the bourgeois classes. Michels literally says: "It's the masses who are the obstacle for the party"⁸.

From this critique, it is germane to notice how Michels at the time still maintains a faith in Kautsky, Bebel and in the social democratic mission. His critique is in fact classifiable as a leftwing critique *within* the party. In fact, the social democratic *Linken* at the time saw an ally in him⁹.

In order to overcome the crisis of socialdemocracy, in this phase, it seemed necessary to Michels to sophisticate any formative action to consistently educate the masses towards revolution on one hand, and to fight against the reformist degeneration of parliamentarism on the other. To that end, in the SPD congress in Jena in 1905 he proposed without success an addition to the party's statement about the 'Moroccan crisis' a line that would give more strength to their otherwise 'meek position', which had been tarnished by excessive patriotism¹⁰. In said declaration, Michels claimed that the SPD should have opposed the war in every sense, so that the antimilitaristic and non-collaborationistic nature of the party was clear to the government. It is palpable that the Mosco-Paretian and Weberian influence is very far away. Michels still thought he could convince the party to become anti-militaristic with the help of its major orthodox leaders.

In the article from 1907 however, Michels denounces a different situation, as the general picture had been intrinsically changed by the Moroccan crisis, the Hottentot elections, and by a visible realignment to the right of the main body of the party. Here he affirmed that, instead of trying to convince the masses, it was the heads of the party themselves who should be irremediably driven by scionivism and patriotism. In fact, he saw in the very behaviour of the directional

⁶ See *Le Mouvement Socialiste*, II series, VI, no. 144, November-December 1904, p. 193-212.

⁷ See *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Socialpolitik*, Bd. XXV, H. 1, p. 148-231.

⁸ See Michels, *I pericoli cui va incontro il partito socialista tedesco*, op. cit., p. 155.

⁹ See the epistolary relationship with Anton Pannekoek in Corrado Malandrino, "Lettere di Anton Pannekoek a Robert Michels (1905)", *Annali della Fondazione Luigi Einaudi*, Turin, XIX (1985), p. 467-492.

¹⁰ See the study by Dieter Groh and Peter Brandt, "Vaterlandslose Gesellen". *Sozialdemokratie und Nation 1860-1990*, München, Beck, 1992, p. 101.

organ of the SPD – and of his charismatic head August Bebel - on the matters of motherland, patriotism and the risks of war as not only one of the fundamental reasons (along with parliamentarism, militarism, gregariousness towards the leading class of the *Reich*) of the impotence of German socialists, but even the “*causa causarum*” of the anti-German reaction to international socialism¹¹. He reported the controversy of the French “insurrectionist” trade-unionist Gustave Hervé and the independent socialist MP Rene Viviani¹² in Paris (close to the positions of Alexandre Millerand and future head of the government at the outbreak of the First World War) against Bebel on patriotism and militarism, in turn taking a stand against Bebel, who in the Congress of Essen said, defending the patriotic position of revisionist Gustav Noske: «If one day we were to truly defend the homeland, we would defend it because it is our land and because it is the ground on which we live, the language that we speak, because we have assimilated the costumes, because we want to make our country a country that has no equal in the world for perfection and beauty»¹³. At this point Michels accused the SPD of excessive national patriotism, but realistically took note that the attractive force of the category of “national patriotism” proved greater than that of the “patriotism of class”.

This means that, whilst retaining the content of such a critical tone that brought together the SPD on the left (think of Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg) and fringe revolutionary syndicalists, so too began to grow in Michels a realistic trend, and a concurrent acknowledgement of social-psychological mechanisms and political factors that made him increasingly receptive to the emerging elitist school of thought.

Given this, the year 1907 is important as the beginning of this metamorphosis: a burgeoning doubt emerges that the Social Democratic Party (and, more generally, the Democratic Party) had exhausted its potential for social transformation and had been curtailed to perform the functions of power management; this, dovetailed with a personal adoption of a “scientific” position that appeared to allow him to understand and explain the most recondite arcana of political power, constituted the shift.

The writing of the *Organic constitutional oligarchy* in December of that year provides pertinent information about this breakthrough¹⁴. First of all it should be noted that the immediate interest Michels took in the “Mosco-Paretian” school happened not in contrast to his continued membership in socialism (and perhaps “syndicalism”, as stated in an autobiographical entitled to «a current of German socialism of syndicalist orientation»¹⁵), but as a logical development of his shift to left-wing socialism. In fact, the first page of the paper is devoted to showing that the doctrine of a ruling political class, or elite, or “oligarchy”, as he prefers, is originally present in the first doctrines of the “socialist anarchists”:

¹¹ See Michels, *La socialdemocrazia tedesca nell'Associazione internazionale*, op. cit., p. 357 ss.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 359.

¹³ See citation in Jacques Droz, “La socialdemocrazia tedesca”, in *Storia del socialismo. Dal 1875 al 1918*, Roma, Editori Riuniti, 1974, p. 67.

¹⁴ See Robert Michels, “L'oligarchia organica costituzionale. Nuovi studi sulla classe politica”, in *La Riforma Sociale*, a. XV, vol. XVIII, n. 12, December 1907, now published in Michels, *Potere e oligarchie*, op. cit., p. 431-457.

¹⁵ See Robert Michels, “Eine syndikalistisch gerichtete Unterströmung im deutschen Sozialismus (1903-1907)”, in *Festschrift für Carl Grünberg zum 70.*, (1932), Leipzig, Geburtstag, now published in Michels, *Potere e oligarchie*, op. cit., p. 403-426.

from Saint Simon to Fourier, Proudhon to Bakunin, and even Marx and the Marxists. The only significant difference is that «while some [Mosca and Pareto, ed] consider the existence of the political class a good thing, seeing it as the only possibility of a fruitful civilization, the other [the socialist side, ed] claims it to be the source of all wickedness and a defining symptom of an inferior and immoral civilization»¹⁶.

Michels' targets here are the twin pillars of the parliamentary system and parliamentary democracy (which is precisely defined as “constitutional oligarchy”), and he wishes to expose their limitations as a vehicle for social emancipation. With this purpose in mind, both the socialist-anarchist or syndicalist theories have currency, and so do the doctrines of the Mosco-Paretians¹⁷. This said, it is important not to ignore the fact that at this stage Michels harboured an aversion for national patriotism typical of the socialist left.

When this judgment on the oligarchic nature of parliamentary democracy turns into a judgment about the oligarchic nature of democracy *tout court* - and this happens in the period 1907-1910 and is clearly evident in the writing of *Democracy and the iron law of oligarchy*¹⁸ in 1910, which shows an integration of Weber's doctrine of organization and democracy with the Mosco-Paretian theory – there is a new step forward not only in Michels' disillusionment with socialism, but also in his abandonment of the concept of formal and class representation.

Science had “torn the veil” of the lies of representation from Michels' eyes, and he was preparing to play a new role as a mentor. From this point onwards, there appears a superseding conception of direct popular representation by the categories of “nation” and “patriotism”, both familiar concepts, even if both are coloured with different values and motivational factors. Equally, this re-evaluation sets in doubt his feelings about ideologies such as “Bonapartism”, and this is because between 1909 and 1910 he arrived – in particular with the article on “psychological crisis of socialism”¹⁹ – at the conclusion that both the socialist left and revolutionary syndicalism were incapable of avoiding the “oligarchic” critique, and therefore unable to fulfill their function of social emancipation through the creation of a new political order. In the steel cage of power, there is no room for emancipating the masses and equalising the classes, at least at a “national” level.

Divorcing himself from the class ideal of liberation, the concept of national patriotism is not to blame, but to be investigated more closely and made into its own vehicle. The Libyan war is critical as a catalyst in this instance: making the contradiction explode from the inside of Michels' political awareness and pushing him to make the explicit step towards nationalism.

¹⁶ See Michels, *L'oligarchia organica costituzionale*, op. cit., p. 435.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 436, where Mosca's anti-parliamentarism is praised.

¹⁸ First seen in “Rassegna Contemporanea” a. III, book V, May 1910, now published in Michels, *Potere e oligarchie*, op. cit., p. 495-523.

¹⁹ See Robert Michels, “La crisi psicologica del socialismo”, in *Rivista Italiana di Sociologia*, a. XIV, book III-IV, May-August 1910, now published in Michels, *Potere e oligarchie*, op. cit., p. 527-541.

3. *The Maturation of the writings on Patriotism*

I noted in a previous article²⁰ of the strategic importance that the issue of national patriotism assumes in the thought of Michels, in what is a delicate point in his intellectual biography. Michels intentionally devoted most of his energies as a scholar and political actor to the problem of national patriotism, so as to make the overall argument that he was developing a sort of Ariadne's thread, and in so doing allowing for an understanding of the complicated twists and turns of the political thought and of the political-intellectual biography. But this fact, in the fullest sense, continues to be misunderstood by many scholars interested in his work on the political party, and by those who have in the last half-century treated the issues of nationhood and patriotism. Michels is almost never mentioned in the literature after World War II, while he was often present in that of the twenties and thirties, especially in German studies: in the authoritative *Handwörterbuch der Soziologie* (1931) by Berlin sociologist Alfred Vierkandt the chapter on *Patriotismus* was assigned to Michels to compile²¹. In fact, the first writings on the subject by the Rhine sociologist date back to 1902 (he was 26), the last in 1936, the year of his death, at the end of an intellectual career that lasted 34 years. He departed as a socialist and arrived a fascist: a career that spanned the liberal age, the first World War, the crisis of democracy, and the rise and consolidation of fascism. It was a period of time during which Michelsian articles about patriotism and the nation exceeded the 30 mark but which also included brochures and dense essays on the sociology of culture - including the important report presented in October 1912 at the Congress of the *Deutsche Gesellschaft für Soziologie* of Tonnies and Weber with the title *Die Entwicklung des historische Vaterlandsgedankens* - and finally the monography of 1929 entitled *Der Patriotismus* (published in Italian in 1933 under the title *Prolegomena on patriotism*)²². Naturally, a broad view of these three decades shows the shift from the nascent socialist expressions to the last apologia of nationalism as rather pronounced or caricatured, but it is not possible in this instant to account for this change except in an extreme, schematic display.

We see then in Michels a succession of at least 4 stages in the development of the patriotic-national idea, which, put concisely, are as follows: the first, 1902-1907, corresponds to the period of maturation of a national conscience; the second, 1907-1913, is the period of ideological-scientific crisis, and the eventual transition to a sort of patriotism of Italian orientation; the third, 1913-1923, can be seen as the gestation period in Michels' thought of a nationalist outlook, though a nationalism more moderate – reasonable even in context of the arguments underlying populist Italian imperialism – than the extreme Corradinian nationalism, which he criticised in several places as “megalomaniacal”. The last stage, 1923-1936, coincides with the adherence to Fascism and is characterised by a scientifically disenchanting vision, but one

²⁰ Corrado Malandrino, “Pareto e Michels: riflessioni sul sentimento del patriottismo”, in Corrado Malandrino, Roberto Marchionatti (ed. by), *Economia, sociologia e politica nell'opera di V. Pareto*, Studi della Fondazione L. Einaudi, Firenze, Olschki, 1999, p. 363-382.

²¹ Robert Michels, „Patriotismus“, in *Handwörterbuch der Soziologie*, hsgn. von A. Vierkandt, Stuttgart, F. Enke, 1931, p. 437-441.

²² Robert Michels, *Der Patriotismus. Prolegomena zu seiner soziologischen Analyse*, München-Berlin, Duncker und Humblot, 1929 (Italian edition *Prolegomena sul patriottismo*, Firenze, La Nuova Italia, 1933).

that is more politically engaged in a national-patriotism that consciously accentuates the mythological dimension contained in the myths of ancient Rome, of the Latin peoples, and of the mission of Italy in the world.

From the second phase, which as we have seen above began with a critical detachment from Democratic Socialism, an attitude is modelled that is consciously twofold. On the one hand, and especially in the years preceding World War I, Michels states that his work is as that of a scientist in the descriptive and evaluative analysis of the concepts of patriotism and nationhood (and their political and cultural history), and therefore openly claims adherence to the Weberian notion of value-freedom. On the other hand there is the emergence in his political thought of a distinctive national and patriotic arena, which is publicised from 1915 so as to present him as a decision-maker and actor of his own political line. The coexistence of both these approaches – which involves a kind of intellectual and political action at two distinct levels, which Michels, mindful of Weber's teachings, is aware should be carefully divorced (though which easily blend in many instances of public discourses, which justify many reader's questions about their real expressive intent) – sets him apart from sociologists like Pareto, in which the monitoring is much more alert and the distinction between scientific claim and political discourse is generally maintained.

This said, it is possible to consider the most significant texts through which the theoretical content of the Michelsian discussions on the themes of nationhood and patriotism is outlined. In the first phase – in which Michels demonstrates a lack of awareness of the role played by the factors of power in the age of imperialism – there are the articles *Nationalismus, Nationalgefühl, Internationalismus* (1902), *Die Formen der Patriotismus* (1905) and the brochure *Patriotismus und Ethik* (1906)²³. These pinpoint the bond the young democratic socialist established with the trend that, in Italy, was close to the theme of Irredentism²⁴. Remember that from the end of the century Michels operated in Italy, and in 1902 he even enrolled in the PSI, before enrolling in the SPD²⁵. His beliefs were typical of the Rhine, consistently anti-Prussian (anti-militarist and anti-imperial): cosmopolitan and internationalist. He tries to reconcile this angle with the taking charge of the national problem, which makes patriotism different from nationalism in his view – the latter configured as an attempt by a people to raise their national character to the most dominant

²³ Robert Michels, „Nationalismus, Nationalgefühl, Internationalismus“, *Das Freie Wort*, II, 1902, n. 4, p. 107-111; „Die Formen der Patriotismus“, *Ethische Kultur*, XIII, 1905, n. 3, p. 18-19, n. 4, p. 26-28; *Patriotismus und Ethik. Eine kritische Skizze*, Leipzig, Diederichs, 1906.

²⁴ One of the first articles with Italy as its main subject written by Michels and aimed at a German audience was centred on the theme of Irredentism, see Robert Michels, „Das unerlöste Italien in Österreich“, *Politisch-Anthropologische Revue*, I, n. 9 (1902), p. 716-724. On the relationship between the socialist movement and Irredentism, see Renato Monteleone, *Il movimento socialista del Trentino 1894-1914*, Roma, Editori Riuniti, 1971; on the relationship between Irredentism and the then forming nationalism, see Giovanni Sabbatucci, „Il problema dell'irredentismo e le origini del movimento nazionalista in Italia“, *Storia Contemporanea*, 1970, p. 467-502; 1971, p. 53-106. On the historical issue of Irredentism, an up-to-date starting point is the essay by M. Garbari, „L'irredentismo nella storiografia italiana“, in A. Ara, E. Kolb (ed. by) *Regioni di frontiera nell'epoca dei nazionalismi. Alsazia e Lorena / Trento e Trieste 1870-1914*, (1995), Annali dell'Istituto Storico Italo-Germanico, Bologna, Il Mulino, p. 27-60.

²⁵ On these issues see Corrado Malandrino, „Roberto e Gisella Michels e il socialismo piemontese“, in Patrizia Audenino (ed. by) *Democratici e socialisti nel Piemonte dell'Ottocento*, Milano, Angeli, 1995, p. 423 ss.

position: "Patriotism at its maximum", characterised by chauvinism and jingoism²⁶. A "healthy national consciousness", however, is not only possible but necessary for a people, within contained limits. Michels' argument relies in this respect on the argumentation of the principle of nationality made by Pasquale Stanislao Mancini in the 1851 inaugural lecture at the University of Turin, *On Nationality As a Fundament Of People's Rights*²⁷, and on the two Gumplowicz, the most eminent Ludwig – the influential sociologist from the end of the nineteenth century, recalled by Mosca – and his son Ladislaus, active politician: both dedicated to the cause of Polish independence²⁸. It is a concept summed up in terms of a "healthy" (the adjective is Michels') patriotic national conscience of democratic renaissance mould, which aims at recognising and guaranteeing for each people an autonomy based on ethnic, cultural, linguistic, but also moral, legal, economic, and political elements. Acquiring and defending the integrity of national identity is an inalienable right and duty of the people. In an explicit step Michels says: «The preservation of the cultural integrity [in the sense of its own form of civilisation, ed] of the people is the only form of patriotism that is ethically entitled»²⁹. Crucially, this demands liberation from foreign influence; national unity and freedom are two essential steps on the path that leads to social freedom and a liberated humanity. A strong commitment to the defence of Irredentism is a natural companion for such beliefs, as is so for Trento and Trieste, and for the Danish communities subjected to the *Reich* in Schleswig-Holstein as well as for a Poland divided between the Russians, Austrians and Prussians.

Of some interest may be the appearance, already at this stage and next to that speech, of some considerations – borrowed from Bernstein³⁰ – on the right of access to advanced civilised peoples of the experiences of colonisation as seen in the same civilising missions and solutions to the problems of overpopulation: this is a core ideal destined to grow during the second phase, distinct from the first by the emergence of a crisis of orientation in the face of growing awareness of the burning issues of imperialism and, not surprisingly, declared publicly when in favour of war against Turkey in Libya. It is also the phase, as mentioned above, of the maturing of the critique of Socialism and Democracy, particularly facilitated by knowledge of the works of Mosca on the political class and the relationship with Weber, as the conceiver of the convoluted problem of democratization-bureaucratization, culminating in the definition of the iron law of oligarchy in the *Sociology of party oligarchy* in 1911.

It is imperative here to emphasise the shift to a more realistic-come-Machiavellian view for what concerns the issue of national patriotism. The disenchantment with socialism (even in its syndicalist form) in Michels involves

²⁶ Michels, *Nationalismus, Nationalgefühl, Internationalismus*, op. cit., p. 107.

²⁷ Pasquale S. Mancini, *Della nazionalità come fondamento del diritto delle genti* (1851), preface by Francesco Ruffini, Roma: ed. de "La Voce", 1920.

²⁸ The 1902 article on nationalism was dedicated to the discussion of Ladislaus Gumplowicz's thesis *Nationalismus und Internationalismus im 19. Jahrhundert*, Berlin, Verlag Aufklärung, 1902. On the relationship between Michels and the Gumplowicz see T. Genett, "Lettere di Ladislaus Gumplowicz a R. Michels (1902-1907)", *Annali della Fondazione L. Einaudi*, Torino, XXXI (1997), p. 431-487.

²⁹ Michels, *Die Formen des Patriotismus*, cit., p. 28.

³⁰ Robert Michels, "Il problema coloniale di oggi e di domani", *Il Divenire Sociale*, 1905, n. 154, p. 308. The reference is to Eduard Bernstein's work, *Zur Geschichte und Theorie des Socialismus*, Berlin-Bern, J. Evelheim, 1901.

the abandonment of “class” as a fundamental link in his *Weltanschauung* and a new emphasis on the category of “nation”. This occurs in the years after his transfer from Marburg to Turin as political economy lecturer at the Faculty of Law and in parallel with the gradual acquisition of an increasingly strong identification with Italy and the Italians, leading to the application for naturalisation in 1913 and furthermore in 1915, with the proclaimed adherence to the cause of war in Italy, which provoked the break with Weber and with the German culture and sociology³¹.

A passage that transpires well, *inter alia*, is from the correspondence quoted with Gaetano Mosca. The letters to Mosca naturally move towards topics focused on patriotism, national identification, clearly favoured by the historical context, in the years of World War I and the postwar crisis. On May 24, 1915 Michels sent a circular letter to friends (as well as Mosca, who was then Vice Secretary for the Colonies in the Salandra Ministry) and the press in which he recalled his special attachment to Italy, his application for naturalization, his monitoring of the Irredentist cause of Trento and Trieste since 1902. It said: «In this solemn hour, full of hopes for Italy, but also fraught with dangers and struggles, I feel the need, friends, to say that I, unconditionally, and inseparably, am with you»³². Mosca honoured his choice, providing support to the practice of naturalisation at the competent government offices. In 1920, when it was on the way of approval, came the bestowing of his friend's testimony «that he, before, during and after the war [had shown] with his words and actions, a great affection for our country»³³.

The patriotism demonstrated by Michels is further highlighted by his assumption of responsibilities as president of a local branch of the Dante Alighieri Society in Basel, a city favourable to the Germanic cause, and the promotion of several initiatives in support of the Italian cause. It is well known that these choices earned him a palpable moral persecution in German, Swiss and Austrian newspapers³⁴. On November 17, 1915 he wrote to Mosca: «I have created here [...] a position bristling with thorns, that requires an unusual amount of courage and perseverance»³⁵. The letters with Mosca are convincing proof of the gravitas that Michels felt with regards to the increasingly important issues of national identification (not nationalism in the Corradinian sense, I repeat) and patriotism, which, moreover, even within the Michelsian scientific paradigm were assuming an amplitude undoubtedly superior to all other issues previously taken into consideration.

It is possible for us to constitute the hypothesis that from the period after the war, the national principle acted as a substitute in Michels' thinking for the democratic and the socialistic with a legitimising and constitutive function in the field of action and political thinking in general. There is then good reason to assume that in the first years of the postwar period, gradually, and in correlation

³¹ See the considerations made in Malandrino, “Lettere di R. Michels e di A. Hamon”, *op. cit.*, p. 503 ss.; Timm Genett, “Lettere di Roberto Michels e di Julius Springer (1913-1915)”, *ibid.*, XXX (1996), p. 533-555.

³² ‘G. Mosca’, Archivio Storico della Fondazione Einaudi, Torino, Archivio Roberto Michels.

³³ *Ibid.*, letter written by Mosca 25.9.1920.

³⁴ See Malandrino, “Lettere di Roberto Michels e di Augustin Hamon”, p. 552; Genett, “Lettere di Roberto Michels e di Julius Springer”, *op. cit.*

³⁵ ‘G. Mosca’, photocopy of a letter written by R. Michels to G. Mosca, Archivio Storico della Fondazione Einaudi, Torino, Archivio Roberto Michels.

with the development of concrete political events that led to the rise of fascism, that the axiom of national patriotism shuttled Michels first into the hive of Mussolinism, and then on to fascism.

4. Mythologies of patriotism

I would like to return briefly to the writings of the period before the war, especially the essay *Pazifismus und Nationalitätsprinzip in der Geschichte* (1909), to the sociological studies on the history of patriotic thought of 1912-13, and to the demographic-political studies on Imperialism in Italy, which came out in 1912 in German and in Italian in 1914³⁶. Among the myriad variations of patriotism in history (local, monarchical, republican, "Verfassungspatriotismus", English, etc.) taken into account by Michels, the national to him represented its highest form. The comparison with national thought and national patriotism is no longer a simple "ethical right" for Michels, rather it stands as a "historical necessity", inescapable for every individual. In *Pacifism and the principle of nationality* Michels takes distance from the earlier, more naive democratic renaissance conception on a fundamental point. Previously the principle of nationality and patriotism are seen largely in a defensive way, with a view towards the gaining of independence. Now though – according to the needs of national power in the age of imperialism – Michels tends to emphasise more realistically the fact that they maintain and even gain more strength when considering their offensive-expansive functions, until the conquest of territories inhabited by different populations and therefore the inevitable creation of situations which, again, encounter the same conflict with the principle of nationality. Michels states in this regard a historical law as rigorous as, he claims, the iron law of oligarchy: the "law of transgression", which would govern the conduct of nations in international relations. It is a law, Michels believes, founded on and formulated by the psychological inclinations of the people. More than anything, this highlights the influence of Wilhelm Wundt, the founder of modern positive psychology, and his *Völkerpsychologie*³⁷. However a substantial theoretical debt is equally owed to Ludwig Gumplowicz – once again – the author of *Grundriss der Soziologie* (1905)³⁸, where the Polish master, speaking of the constant and natural movement that leads to "the expansion of the national states" at the expense of surrounding nations, admits that the annexations were inevitable because such an expansion is, we would say today, in the genetic code of nations. Furthermore, such annexations cannot be defined as "criminal", despite being morally reprehensible, because if this was so then the course of history would be nothing but an unrelenting narrative of crimes. Although it is at some cost for him to admit, Michels implicitly agrees

³⁶ Robert Michels, „Pazifismus und Nationalitätsprinzip in der Geschichte. Ein Beitrag zur Volkspsychologie“, *Politisch-Anthropologische Revue*, VIII (1909), p. 1-16; *ibid.*, „Die historische Entwicklung des Vaterlandsgedankens“, in *Verhandlungen des zweiten deutschen Soziologentages vom 20-22 Oktober 1912 in Berlin*, Tübingen, Siebeck, 1913, p. 140-184 (re-published in *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik*, 1913, B. 36, H. 1 e 2); *ibid.* *L'imperialismo italiano. Studi politico-demografici*, Milano, Società Editrice Libreria, 1914 (revised edition of „Elemente zur Entstehungsgeschichte des italienischen Imperialismus in Italien“, *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik*, 1912, B. 34, H. 1 e 2).

³⁷ Alongside the volumes of *Völkerpsychologie* (1901-1920), see Wilhelm Wundt, *Die Nationen und ihre Philosophie*, Leipzig, A. Kröner, but *Vorwort* is from March 1915.

³⁸ Wien, Manzsche k.u.k. Hof-Verlags-u. Universitäts-Buchhandlung.

with Gumplowicz when he says that not wanting to grant recognition of such trends would be an attitude stemming from “crass historical ignorance”³⁹.

Based on these assumptions, Michels formulated the “law of transgression”, a term he had not used before in this context, and of which he does not explicitly clarify to the origin. In my opinion, the phrase may borrow from moral-legalistic lexicon, in which the transgression is seen as a non-compliance with standards of behavior theoretically provided by the same application of the principle of nationalities, or from geographical lexicon, in which transgression refers to the organic and unstoppable spread of the sea surface (or lake) onto the mainland. Similarly, and inevitably, Michels opposes arguments in favor of a naïve pacifism with sentences such as the following: «ethnic patriotism degenerates and becomes a policy of conquest pursued by winners intoxicated by victory»⁴⁰. The wars of independence started by people in the name of the nationality principle run on the edge that leads to its denial for other people, because it is “*Hausgebrauch*”, made for the use and consumption of one’s needs. Despite this demonstration of realistic spirit, that if consistently applied should forbid him the way of the revival of the same faith in operating principles of nationality and self-determination at the end of World War I, Michels can not imagine other solutions in the field of international relations outside of their re-application, although he shielded himself from complaints by insisting it was the justest and most extensive possible. The fact that this view contradicts the “scientific” rules of transgression shows his difficulty in harmonizing – in the stage of maturation of the Italian-orientated patriotism – the scientist in him with the patriotic and political actor.

This is the same thing that happens when, in the studies on *The Italian Imperialism* that mark the passage to this third stage – that of moderate nationalism – and after having carried out a detailed analysis on Italian social-demographical and the migrational situation, he concludes with the assertion that these are the solid reasons for the moral and historical justifications for Italian expansionism. This is not only as it is a right founded solely or primarily on socio-economical considerations (to find a solution to overpopulation), but on a justified political ambition: «the proud feeling of being more than what the world believed, on a political, militaristic, cultural and spiritual level»⁴¹; as a rejection of the role of the ‘political Cinderella’, and as a means towards taking its rightful place among the other European nations. Michels’ expressive sobriety is far from Papini’s and Corradini’s pugnacious verbiage, despite espousing propositions and arguments common to both. It is recurrent in its prose that the invitation to expansion in territories already inhabited by people with an Italian heritage is paramount, following the Irredentist canon, as opposed to exalting the benefits of an African empire. This emerges from various texts written in the year before to the war, where it becomes clear that the main objective of the intervention should be in his opinion the redemption of Trento, Trieste, Fiume, and part of the Dalmatian peninsula. The aim, ultimately, is to establish “national homogeneity”⁴² through war (a means that he defines iniquitous, but inevitable), that should then be ratified by the affected

³⁹ Gumplowicz, *Grundriss der Soziologie*, cit., p. 260.

⁴⁰ Michels, *Nationalitätssprinzip*, p. 7.

⁴¹ Michels, *L'imperialismo italiano*, p. 178.

⁴² Robert Michels, “«Razze» e «nazioni» nella guerra attuale”, *Nuova Antologia*, 16th November 1914, p. 224.

populations via a referendum. 'The only hope lies in the intimate, serene, indissoluble union of two concepts that have been antagonised too many times: state homeland and national homeland', he states in the article on '*Race*' and '*nations*' in the actual war⁴³. He was aware that such a proposal had utopian connotations, but that such connotations were destined to be neutralised by the law of transgression, as recalled in the same article in the context of necessitating a 'trespassing' of nations from their territories of ethnical and cultural settlement. Michels is here seeking to reconcile the serene detachment resident to his scientific duty with his Italian patriotism, but he is not able to do so without distressing consequences for his scientific integrity.

It is opportune at this point to introduce his relationship with Pareto, whom he meets only at the end of 1913. When called by the University of Basel to teach Political Economy as a Senior Lecturer, he goes to visit him in Céligny with his daughter Manon. The meeting established a friendship, even between the grumpy professor and the youthful Manon, that stood for many years, consolidated over several visits during which Manon was left for weeks and sometimes months with Madame Régis and her spouse. There is a rich recalling of these events by Manon Michels - who at the time had become Mrs Einaudi after her marriage to Luigi Einaudi's first born Mario in 1933 - in a text published in the late Thirties in the US '*Atlantic Monthly*' called *Pareto as I knew him*⁴⁴, which is available in an unpublished Italian version with her father's hand written corrections. It is not possible to expand here on the endearingly human traits of Pareto's personality that transpire with great vitality, for example his attachment to animals and to his angora cats ("Pareto was independent, feline and superb also" remembers Manon), which emerge as a source of inspiration as well as affection.

It seems pertinent to offer the following hypothesis: that Pareto's political thought in general (taken also as a methodological and scientific approach), and in particular on the theme of patriotism, quite probably served a paradigmatic function for Michels, of which the Rhine was well aware, so much so that he dedicated the volume of the *Prolegomena to patriotism* to the professor from Lausanne. When I say paradigmatic, I mean in the sense that it eventually clarified an important point: that the incompatible could not be conciliated, and so Michels concluded that the scientific approach and political action were at heart mutually exclusive. Michels believed in the universal recognition in operating the principle of "force", or, as Michels reiterated to the French libertarian socialist Augustin Hamon on May 24, 1915: "might is right"⁴⁵; and then there was national patriotism, an irresistible choice for the political actor and that, being founded on mythical components, in turn generated somewhat illogical actions and therefore operated differently to any scientific endeavors. As he states in the chapter on Pareto in *Bedeutende Männer* (1927), "[Patriotism according to Pareto] can not be completely explained under a scientific profile"⁴⁶. There is nothing to more to add. What in Pareto is a description of a complex phenomenon is summarised by Michels (and others) with a prescriptive and axiomatic adherence, and that is enough. The intention

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 227.

⁴⁴ Manon Michels Einaudi (1937) "Pareto as I knew him", in *Atlantic Monthly*, p. 336-346.

⁴⁵ Malandrino, "Lettere di R. Michels e di A. Hamon", cit., p. 508.

⁴⁶ Robert Michels, *Bedeutende Männer*, Leipzig, Quelle und Meyer, 1927, p. 127.

of approaching the Paretian conception more critically in a book entirely dedicated to the theme of patriotism – that is in the *Prolegomena* – doesn't seem visible. Pareto is seldom explicitly quoted, only in terms of consensus, however the opening chapter, one that acts as the conceptual basis for the entire paper, is significantly titled *The Myth Of Homeland*⁴⁷. Without forgetting the fascination that the young Michels had for Sorel, it is nonetheless necessary to underline that in this specific case, the ideas of the myths of origins (the 'from where' in Michels' erudite prose), and of the national mission (the 'where to'), are on one hand definitively Paretian, and on the other Weberian, especially given the stress placed on the charismatic character of the mission; of the phenomenon of national-patriotic messianism. Michels the scientist knows that such mythological apparatus is a self-referential arbitrary construction (just like any other in the matter), aimed at corroborating the national identity⁴⁸. But, as Pareto says and Michels reiterates, it is necessary to give strength to the peoples involved in a cyclical and infinite battle that always follows the same pattern: to widen one's territory, to dominate, to degenerate and collapse. Hence, the conflict of the principles of nationality and self-determination is overcome by the law of transgression by the objective alternation of history and by the unavoidability of the adaptation of subjective behaviours, once choices are made in the political field.

The fourth and last phase in Michels' patriotic thought is therefore developed, without further hindrances, following the inclination of the national-patriotic paradigm, aiming at a stable vindication of fascist nationalism (he then becomes a sort of itinerant cultural ambassador for the regime and the myth of the eternal Rome⁴⁹), in the awareness that it is an ideological choice (a 'derivation'), a consequence of the subjective remnant of his own experiences in the particular historical situation in which charismatic Mussolinian fascism represents, in his eyes, the only possible solution coherent to the national interest: that is the reconstruction and relaunching of Italy, of which he was a full citizen from 1921.

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⁴⁷ Michels, *Prolegomena sul patriottismo*, cit., p. 1-60.

⁴⁸ See Corrado Malandrino, "Patriottismo nazionale e patriottismo europeo: discorsi retorici o sostantivi? L'ipotesi del paradigma federalista-comunicativo", in G. Manganaro Favaretto (ed. By), *Popolo, nazione e democrazia tra Ottocento e Novecento*, Trieste, Edizioni Università Trieste, 2005, p. 375-405.

⁴⁹ Loreto Di Nucci, "Roberto Michels «ambasciatore» fascista", *Storia Contemporanea*, XXIII (February 1992), p. 91-103.