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Democracy as a Goal of Union Organization: An Interpretation of the United States Experience

S. Muthuchidambaram

This paper presents a overall review and an interpretation of the vast existing literature on union democracy in the United States.

Introduction

Since 1940's when the issue of democracy versus bureaucracy in labor unions has moved into the foreground of attention, articles and books written on this problem have been so numerous as to create a feeling of frustration and hopelessness in reviewing the literature. One « Bibliographical Review » covering 1945-55 contains 429 items dealing directly or indirectly on « Trade Union Government, Its Nature and Its Problems » ⁽¹⁾. This « Review » excludes articles in Government Publications, semi-professional journals and union publications.

When Industrial Relations Research Association Index and Cornell Industrial & Labor Relations Review Index is added to the above « Review », the total number of publications on the subject, up to 1965, exceeds 1000. It is fair to say that anybody writing on « Union Democracy », may have almost nothing « original » to contribute. The following review of literature is to indicate the trend of thought, not exhaustive but selective in scope.

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⁽¹⁾ Daisy L. Tagliacozzo — « Trade Union Government : A Bibliographical Review: 1945-55 » — *American Journal of Sociology*, May 1956, Vol. LXI, No. 6 P. 554-581.

Review of Literature on Union Democracy

LITERATURE ON TRADE UNION THEORIES :

The primary literature in this field comes from trade union theorists, the Marxists and non-Marxists. With Perlman, theorizing on unionism has virtually come to an end. What followed is a variety of « *conceptual frame works* » on unions developed by Taft, Tannenbaum, Dunlop, Whyte, Harbinson, Dubin, Kerr, Siegel, Shister, Lipset, Lindblom, Lester, Rees, etc. In terms of method of study, the earliest preoccupation was with union constitutions, publications, etc., followed by questionnaires, interview guides and participant observation techniques. Some studies of union democracy were based on even projective techniques and attitudinal studies. In the recent past, interdisciplinary approach has become popular in theorizing on unions.

STUDIES ON TRADE UNION GOVERNMENT

Trade Union « government » has been analyzed in the literature in terms of *democracy versus centralization* and union governments have been classified by structure and function. The degree of union democracy has been described in terms of the *ideological characteristics* of the leaders. *Factionalism* seems to be another tool measuring union democracy. Other major factors considered in studies of this type are *union rules and regulations*, such as union security and right to work, disciplinary powers and appeals, administrative policies and discriminations, financial reports and elections. Concepts of « government », « compulsory citizenship », « treason » (i.e. unbecoming activity of a union member), « sovereignty » are used as analogy in explaining the control structure within unions. In fact, Albert Rees extends Stalin's concept of « capitalistic encirclement » as explanatory variable to justify rigid internal disciplines of the U.S. unions. ⁽²⁾

THE RANK AND FILE STUDIES

The recent studies of the attitudes of union members are in part a reaction to the earlier concentration on union regulations and in part a reflection of the concern with *membership participation* in unions, they were also stimulated to some extent by Perlman's concept of job-consciousness. The *apathy* of union members has been among the most widely discussed problems in the study of union democracy. The members of unions are found to be exercising « their inalienable right to be indifferent ».

⁽²⁾ Albert Rees, *The Economics of Trade Unions*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1962, Chapter X.

Studies of local unions analyze the *unique factors* which may in each case stimulate or discourage participation by the rank and file. How changes in the composition and attitudes of members can alter patterns of participation and threaten control is illustrated by some studies.

UNION LEADERSHIP STUDIES

This group of studies deals with the conflicting pressures on labor leaders; their values and attitudes toward their role; obstacles to their recruitment; patterns of their ascent; their attitudes toward the present economic and social system; and case studies of their careers. « Administrators », « social leader », « progressive », « mature » etc., are the descriptive terms used and degree of union democracy is explained in these terms.

COLLECTIVE BARGAINING STUDIES

The literature on collective bargaining is the most voluminous throwing light on union democracy, in terms of (a) changing trends in bargaining, (b) complexity of the bargaining and consequent need for specialization and expertise, (c) types and development of union-management relationships, (d) decision making process in bargaining, (e) needed degree of conflict to perform this function, (f) role of game theory and play acting, etc. In this area of studies environmental factors have been given due consideration in explaining the nature of union democracy.

Scope of This Paper

It is physically impossible to review literatures by authors with necessary footnotes in this paper of limited scope. And in fact, studies on union democracy evade categorization whatever might be the criteria of classification. There are too many « facts » and conflicting finding but there appears to be little reflection on these accumulated studies. It is not merely the lack of reflection and synthesis which is a major gap but the *normative orientation* involved in the subject and the *faithful acceptance* of the major assumptions on this problem.

Hence the theme of this paper is to re-examine the concept of « iron law of oligarchy » and reinterpret the same in terms of « growth and environmental » factors of union.

The Iron Law of Oligarchy

This theme was developed by Robert Michels in his *Political Parties*, which appeared in 1915⁽⁹⁾. While his prime concern was with the political

⁽⁹⁾ Robert Michels, *Political Parties*, Glencoe-Free Press, 1958.

arm of labor, the socialist parties, his conclusions have been grouped for all of labor organizations under « iron law of oligarchy ». The sub-title of his work is « A Sociological Study of the Oligarchical Tendencies of Modern Democracy ».

Michels traces the development of democratic organizations and their metamorphosis into oligarchies. The Michelian schema unfolds in a series of steps. At first there is control by the masses but physical limitations of time, space and even physiology soon produce a system based on delegation. Officials at first are closely tied to the will of the majority and can easily be removed from office. As the organization continues an elite develops, composed of its leaders. Technical specialization is called for and creates expert leadership. The leaders, who possess this expertise emancipate themselves from the mass and become independent of its control. Thus the oligarchical tendency manifests itself. « As a result of organization, every party or professional union becomes divided into a minority of directors and a majority of directed. »⁽⁴⁾ The membership must give up the idea of supervising the administration and the leader conducts an increasing amount of organization business. « Though it grumbles occasionally, the majority is really delighted to find persons who will take the trouble to look after its affairs. »⁽⁵⁾ Michels feels that a creation of a bureaucracy is indispensable to the conduct of the organization's business.

In the Michelian system however, centralization is not the only movement which is observable. Concurrently with the centralizing process is a move towards decentralization. « The idea of decentralization makes continuous progress, together with a revolt against the supreme authority of the central executive. »⁽⁶⁾ *The tendencies towards decentralization are not democratic however.* They are the work of a small group of leaders who rather than submit to the central executive withdraw to their own spheres of power. Such men would rather be big fish in a small pond than relinquish control. Their programs stress « autonomy ».

The movement towards decentralization does not conflict with the general model of oligarchy. These minority movements merely represent an effort to partition authority, « to split up the great oligarchies into a number of smaller oligarchies. »⁽⁷⁾ The dominance of oligarchy remains unchallenged.

⁽⁴⁾ *Ibid.*, p. 37

⁽⁵⁾ *Ibid.*, p. 58

⁽⁶⁾ *Ibid.*, p. 208.

⁽⁷⁾ *Ibid.*, p. 210.

Michels feels strongly that democracy has an inherent bias towards solving important matters in an authoritarian fashion. In fact, he equates the oligarchy which stems from democracy with a dictatorship and notes, « there is little difference between individual dictatorship and the dictatorship of a group of oligarchies. »⁽⁸⁾

From this analysis he has produced the famous and catch-all « iron law of oligarchy » which perhaps is neither iron nor law but a statement of central tendency.

Almost thirty years later, during the second World War, another observer examined the problems of democracy and bureaucracy in unions and reached similar conclusions.⁽⁹⁾ Herberg felt that while the union was created to protect the member from his boss, a need had developed to protect the member from the union. The union takes on a dual character. On one hand, it is a business-like service organization; on the other it represents the expression and vehicle of the laboring masses for « social recognition and democratic self-determination. »⁽¹⁰⁾ The great conflict develops between these two drives. As a business, dealing with business and administering its affair the union requires efficient bureaucratic administration. As a movement for social justice, the union requires democratic self-expression. Michels would argue that these two characteristics are irreconcilable. Herberg sidesteps the question somewhat. Though Herberg touches on « growth » problem, he has not explored it in detail. Thus in his analysis of the development of a union hierarchy, Herberg is quite close to Michels.

The British scholar V. L. Allen has dealt with the problem of trade union democracy in his book *Power in Trade Unions*.⁽¹¹⁾ Allen argues that unionism has the effect of extending democracy to industrial society but that unions themselves are not democratic. This is due to the fact that, « the end of trade union activity is to protect and improve the general living standards of its members and not to provide workers with an exercise in self-government. »⁽¹²⁾ To achieve the desired ends a monolithic bureaucratic type of organization is developed. Allen seems to agree that the primary goal of union organization precludes internal democracy. Inevitably the control of large organizations rests in the hands of a minor-

⁽⁸⁾ *Ibid.*, p. 401.

⁽⁹⁾ Will Herberg, « Bureaucracy and Democracy in Labor Unions », *Article Review*, September, 1943.

⁽¹⁰⁾ *Ibid.*, p. 407.

⁽¹¹⁾ V. L. Allen, *Power in Trade Unions*, London, 1958.

⁽¹²⁾ V. L. Allen, p. 15.

ity, even where the structure of the organization is desired to avoid this. Allen would rely on the size of the membership to keep the leadership in line. « A trade union leader who is in continual fear of losing his members will inevitably take steps to satisfy their wants. »⁽¹³⁾ In Allen's schema self-government becomes a means towards an end and not an end in itself.

A work which is often thought of as favorable to the prospects for internal democracy is *Union Democracy* by Lipset, Trow and Coleman.⁽¹⁴⁾ However, careful reading indicates that, in fact, a quite discouraging outlook for democracy is found. The development of democratic practices in the International Typographical Union was found to be largely *accidental*. « If some event in the early history had turned the other way, then present-day democracy in the union would have been less likely. The existence of democracy at present may be likened to a series of successive outcomes of casting dice, dice which are with each favorable throw more heavily loaded toward a favorable outcome in the next throw. »⁽¹⁵⁾ When the ITU Study is generalized a pessimistic conclusion is reached. It is suggested that the functional requirements for democracy cannot be met most of the time in most unions or other voluntary groups. The authors conclude, « The implication of our analysis for democratic organizational politics are almost as pessimistic as those postulated by Robert Michels. »⁽¹⁶⁾ Hence, Peter Magrath has argued that « in a very real sense the study of union government has not progressed much beyond Michels' analysis. »⁽¹⁷⁾

The Iron Law of Democracy and Other Interpretations

Four years before Peter Magrath's article appeared, Gouldner has suggested that *theories* tend to have a « metaphysical pathos » or a set of sentiments which limit our observations and formulation.⁽¹⁸⁾ We are so accustomed to certain ways of thinking that it becomes hard for us to conceive of alternative explanations. Gouldner argues that there might be an « Iron Law of Democracy » as well as « Iron Law of Oligarchy. » *This dialectical model recognizes the coexistence of both tendencies in an organization.* And in fact Lester's « As Union Mature » does not deny this

⁽¹³⁾ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

⁽¹⁴⁾ S. M. Lipset, et al, *Union Democracy*, Glencoe, 1957.

⁽¹⁵⁾ Lipset, et al, p. 394.

⁽¹⁶⁾ *Ibid.*, p. 403-404.

⁽¹⁷⁾ Peter Magrath, « Democracy in Overalls » — *I & LRR*, July 1959, p. 521.

⁽¹⁸⁾ Gouldner. « Metaphysical Pathos and the Theory of Bureaucracy » *Am. Pol. So. Review*, Vol. 49. 1955. p. 496-507.

possibility, similar evolution in other organizations has been suggested by Weber, Hoffer, Riesman, Rostow and others. These interpretations appear to be more dynamic and flexible.

Studies in social change not only confirms this relation between growth and democratic process but gives better explanation of « why » such democratic process is inevitable to create an organization. « *At a time people are in the process of creating a new organization, they are forced to solve problems which are quite new. Since there are no established patterns to go by, individuals must be free to create new ones — a true democratic process in terms of accepting creative ideas.* » ⁽¹⁹⁾

The studies evaluated up to this point indicated the *general tendencies* in organizational growth. But what has not been explained is the peculiarities of the U.S. trade unions. The following section deals with this problem.

Cross-Cultural and Environmental Explanations

Cross-cultural studies of union democracy, by and large, confirms the notion that the U.S. trade unions are *comparatively less democratic, less means oriented, more end oriented and more modelled after the U.S. business corporations.* ⁽²⁰⁾ As Galenson makes it clear, the structure of union grows out of economy, the social and political history of a nation. In the U.S., the Wagner Act made a momentous option for the concept of exclusive jurisdiction. This decision has become a historical necessity, and an *ideological alternative (to eliminate radicalism) to « un-Americanism »*. This decision, along with a range of economic, historic and social factors, have given real power to the traditional American rejection of dual unionism. *Union has been accepted as a necessary evil, obviously a lesser evil than radicalism.*

⁽¹⁹⁾ Zollaschan and Hirsch, *Explorations in Social Change*, Houghton Mifflin Co., Boston, 1964, p. 462.

⁽²⁰⁾ (a) Lipset. *The Law and Trade Union Democracy*, Reprint No. 186 — Institute of I.R., University of California, 1962.

(b) Galenson. *Trade Union Democracy in Western Europe*, University of California, 1962.

(c) Lipset. *Value Patterns of Democracy — Comparative Analysis*, Reprint 207, University of California, 1963.

(d) Seidman. *Democracy in Labor Movement*, Bulletin 39, Cornell University, 1958.

(e) Kasselow. *Development of Western Labor Movement — Some Comparative Considerations*, Reprint 62, I.R.R.I., Wisconsin.

Thus, even the more dynamic growth interpretation becomes inadequate and this must be supplemented by environmental and cultural interpretation. The most significant factor in explaining the deviant nature (a deviation in degree if not in kind) of the U.S. unions, appears to be that of the U.S. pluralism based on pressure group philosophy.

If partially accepted institutions, (a necessary evil according to Galenson), like U.S. trade unions, are to survive among the other powerful, ideologically accepted, socially integrated pressure groups, power accumulation should become an end in itself; the pressure groups by definition are forced to sacrifice means for the sake of ends. This type of interpretation has been applied to the U.S. system as a whole, sometimes in qualified and sometimes in categorical terms, by an impressive number of journalists, academicians and political scientists.⁽²¹⁾ Some of them assert that pressure-group and internal-democracy within the group is a contradiction of terms. Even though one may not fully agree with this theme, it has some relevance in interpreting the internal democracy of the U.S. trade unions.

Democracy – Pluralism – Bureaucracy

Truman's « *Governmental Process* », Kornhauser's « *Politics of Mass Society* » and MacIver's « *Web of Government* », have given due consideration to this fundamental question while many others consider internal democracy as isolated issue of particular institutions. The above three writers agree that Marx was wrong : it is not the most highly developed capitalist systems which reveal the greatest social unrest, non-democratic trends and revolutionary tendencies. Instead, this has been the fate of the less developed countries of Europe and more so of Asia and Africa.

But, if Marx is wrong, will Weber prove to be right ? For Weber, bureaucratization, not class struggle, provides the central dynamic of the modern world.⁽²²⁾ It is widely believed that bureaucracy constitutes the strongest threat to social pluralism and liberal democracy in the highly industrialized countries where the borderline between bureaucracy and oligarchy has been narrowing. This view raises important issues about the future development of American society — how to temper the power, wealth and organizational expertise with justice and ideal ?

⁽²¹⁾ For an excellent treatment of this theme, refer to David Truman's « *The Governmental Process* », particularly the concluding chapter of this book. New York, Knopf, 1951.

⁽²²⁾ Weber. *Essays in Sociology*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1946, p. 49.

Conclusion

Professor Laski sums up the basic issue of our problem in these words :

We built a powerful society without adequate thought for the purposes to which its *power* was to be devoted. We built a wealthy society without adequate concern about the objects upon which its *wealth* should be expended. We thought that *justice* would be the inherent consequence of our acquisition of power and wealth. What we forget is that societies are not bound together by material conquests, their unity is found in *equal* devotion to a common ideal. ⁽²³⁾

This writer is in general agreement with Laski's thesis. The major pressure groups in the U.S. seem to have extraordinary power, enough wealth, but inadequate common ideals and hence they are more end-oriented at the cost of means, in popular parlance the « American pragmatism ». After all, the trade union is just one among them. Questioning the fundamentals of the U.S. society may appear to be odious to many American intellectuals, but to a foreigner this line of reasoning appears to be more realistic, particularly in finding an explanation for the existing difference between the U.S. trade unions and the European ones, though the difference may be in degree. ⁽²⁴⁾

LA DÉMOCRATIE SYNDICALE : UNE INTERPRÉTATION DE L'EXPÉRIENCE AMÉRICAINE

INTRODUCTION

Depuis les années '40, la démocratie syndicale a fait l'objet de nombreuses études et donné lieu à une vaste littérature. On va tenter ici d'identifier les grandes tendances dans les lignes de pensée à ce sujet.

BRÈVE REVUE DE LA LITTÉRATURE SUR LA DÉMOCRATIE SYNDICALE

Littérature sur les théories du syndicalisme

En termes de méthodologie utilisée, les premiers théoriciens étaient surtout préoccupés par la revue des constitutions et publications syndicales alors que leurs successeurs utilisaient les questionnaires, les interviews et les techniques d'observation participante. Certains employèrent même des techniques projectives et des enquêtes d'attitudes. Plus récemment, l'approche interdisciplinaire est devenue la nouvelle mode en théorie syndicale.

⁽²³⁾ Laski. *Democracy in Crisis* — University of North Carolina Press, 1933, p. 264.

⁽²⁴⁾ For a clear exposition of the crisis in the value system and goals in the U.S., see J. K. Galbraith, *The New Industrial State*, Houghton Mifflin Co., Boston, 1967; pp. 171-78; 386-87; 398-99; 346-53 and 407-9.

Les études portant sur le gouvernement des syndicats

Le gouvernement des syndicats a été analysé en termes de démocratie versus centralisation et ce au moyen des outils suivants : les caractéristiques idéologiques des leaders, le factionalisme et les sortes de règles syndicales.

Les études sur le membership

Moussées par l'intérêt sur les règles syndicales, ces études reflètent la préoccupation de la participation des membres à la vie du syndicat.

Les leaders syndicaux

Ces études portent surtout sur la personnalité, compétence et ascendance des chefs syndicaux.

Les travaux sur la négociation collective

La littérature sur la négociation collective est la plus volumineuse portant sur la démocratie syndicale.

LE CONCEPT DE « IRON LAW OF OLIGARCHY »

Ce thème a été développé par Michels dans son *Political Parties* de 1915 où il y retrace le développement des organisations démocratiques et leur métamorphose en oligarchies en ce sens que les leaders-experts s'émancipent de la masse et deviennent indépendants de son contrôle. Michels croit que la création d'une bureaucratie est indispensable à la conduite d'une organisation. En plus, l'auteur ajoute que la décentralisation inévitable représente une tendance qui est loin d'être démocratique parce qu'elle est le fait de sous-groupes de leaders qui se donnent des sphères de contrôle. C'est la dominance de l'oligarchie. Will Herberg présenta des conclusions à peu près similaires dans les années '30. Allen toucha un peu à cet aspect anti-démocratique des syndicats en avançant que les unions ont comme effet d'accroître la démocratie dans la société industrielle, mais qu'en soi elles ne sont pas démocratiques.

L'étude du syndicat international des typographes faite par Lipset, Trow et Coleman suggère que les exigences fonctionnelles de la démocratie ne peuvent pas être rencontrées la plupart du temps dans la plupart des syndicats ou autres associations volontaires.

Alors y a-t-il eu progrès depuis l'étude de Michels ?

L'ENVIRONNEMENT ET LA CULTURE COMME FACTEUR D'EXPLICATION

Des études comparatives démontrent que les syndicats américains sont moins démocratiques, moins orientés vers les moyens à utiliser, plus pragmatiques et plus modelés sur les entreprises américaines.

CONCLUSION

Les groupes de pression aux États-Unis ont un pouvoir extraordinaire, une richesse suffisante, mais ils sont caractérisés par un manque d'idéaux communs et sont ainsi plus orientés vers le coût des moyens à utiliser. En un mot, c'est le pragmatisme américain.