

Revisiting Democratic Elitism: The Italian School of Elitism, American Political Science, and the Problem of Plutocracy

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Contemporary political science has fetishized a product of its own invention: the elite theory of democracy. American political science's understanding of "democratic elitism" is founded on a fundamental misreading of the Italian School of Elitism and Joseph Schumpeter's political thought. This essay historicizes the early phases of the interpretive tradition known as democratic elitism, represented by the following authors: (1) Gaetano Mosca, Vilfredo Pareto, Robert Michels, (2) Joseph Schumpeter, and (3) Robert Dahl. I not only track how the Italian School's concern over the threat of plutocracy was suppressed, and their aspirations for political transparency discounted by American political science, but also trace the shift, over time, in the literary dispositions that undergird what we now call "elite" or "minimal" theories of democracy. I argue that in contrast to the Italian theorists' and Schumpeter's pessimism, Dahl infused optimism into his understanding of representative government with pernicious consequences for democratic theory.

The twentieth century witnessed an explosion of synonyms for democratic elitism—an abundance that attests to the salience of the category. Minimalist, empirical, economic, proceduralist, Schumpeterian, pluralist, neopluralist, equilibrium, realist, and even "contemporary" all came to denote a model of democracy that champions election as an institutional mechanism, a model of democracy that simultaneously allows for popular participation while actively containing it. Democratic theorists spent the century debating whether this model provides an accurate description of our current political practice or a desirable normative ideal.¹ What is more, the prevalence of this model encouraged thinkers to identify themselves within the confines of a convenient binary: either as advocates of the elite model or as opponents favoring a more participatory alternative.

On some level the appeal of a binary between elite domination and mass participation makes sense. This binary may confirm for many that the timeless opposition between mass and elite lies at the heart of democratic politics (Ober 1989). Nevertheless, however attractive the opposition of elite rule/mass participation may be, this does not explain the prolif-

eration of democratic elitism as a formal regime type among contemporary political scientists. Both the theoretical and contextual conditions of possibility that enabled the elite conception of democracy to emerge are particular to the twentieth century. In fact, the historical genesis of democratic elitism currently remains undisputed: this model purportedly originated with the so-called Italian School of Elitism, composed of Gaetano Mosca, Vilfredo Pareto, and Robert Michels, who drew on experiences with failed mass party regimes like Italian parliamentarism and the Weimar Republic—a model refined by Joseph Schumpeter, in response to the twentieth-century rise of fascism and communism (see Held 1987; Higley and Burton 2006; Maloy 2008; Medearis 2001; Nye 1977; Purcell 1973; Shapiro 2003; Skinner 1973; Winters 2011).²

It is taken for granted that Mosca, Pareto, Michels, and Schumpeter are responsible for the century-old tradition known as elite democratic theory. Here, I offer a competing genealogy of this intellectual history, emphasizing moments of transition from the original authors' thought to our contemporary understanding of democratic elitism. I argue that those who interpret the Italian intellectuals as "elite theorists" dis-

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1. For elite models of democracy, see Almond and Verba (1963), Bobbio (1987), Lasswell, Lerner, and Rothwell (2010), Posner (2003), Przeworski (1999), Riker (1982), and Sartori (1965, 1987). For critiques of these elite theories, see Barber (1984), Davis (1964), Duncan and Lukes (1963), Etzioni-Halevy (1997), Ingham (2015), Mackie (2003), Pateman (1970), and Walker (2010).

2. For a notable exception on the Italian liberal tradition, see Urbinati (2015).

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tort their political thought and ignore one of their major concerns: containing plutocracy in the age of mass politics. Somehow, suspicious views of elite domination expressed by Mosca, Pareto, Michels, and even Schumpeter have, in the renderings of myriad interpreters—Seymour Martin Lipset, Robert Dahl, Peter Bacharach, Carol Pateman, and Adam Przeworski, among others—become celebrations of an elite-enabling and mass-constraining model of electoral politics and representative government.

I focus on the early phases of the evolution of this interpretive tradition represented by the following authors: (1) Mosca, Pareto, Michels, (2) Schumpeter, and (3) Dahl. My narrative tracks how the Italian School's concern over the threat of plutocracy was suppressed, and their aspirations for political transparency discounted. The Italian-affiliated intellectuals are not remembered as critics of plutocracy for a variety of reasons—most significantly because of a misreading of the pessimistic tradition to which they belong and the accompanying literary sensibility they expressed. Pessimism is a philosophical approach that emphasizes human limitations in order to provoke self-conscious confrontation with fundamental obstacles to human flourishing.³ Educated in the late nineteenth century—a time when pessimism reached its apex within European discourse—Mosca, Pareto, Michels, and in some respects Schumpeter, I contend, are better situated within the tradition of pessimism than the elitist one with which they are currently affiliated. Much like famed pessimists such as Nietzsche, Weber, and Ortega y Gasset, the authors discussed here offered pessimistic accounts of democracy and posited grim conclusions concerning the future of European liberalism that were mistaken for celebrations of oligarchic domination.

Of course, authors who subscribe to pessimism are not all the same, nor does one need to be aware of this philosophical discourse to appreciate the pessimism of a particular figure. In order to assess the value of various kinds of pessimism and other affective postures, I propose a mode of reading that focuses on what I call literary “sensibility” or “disposition” within a particular historical-intellectual context. To be clear, by disposition I do not mean a psychological condition or internal temperament; instead, I refer to a rhetorical tone and nuance detectable within a text. Dispositional readings can

alert us to such sensibilities, so that one may find in texts something critical that otherwise seems dispassionate or prescriptive, as was the case with the Italians and Schumpeter, or conversely, something that seems ambivalent but should be considered resigned or sanguine, as was the case with Lipset and Dahl.

Therefore, I will trace the shift, over time, in the literary dispositions that undergird what we now call “elite theories of democracy.” I identify the rhetorical sensibility expressed in each moment, contrasting Italian pessimism and Schumpeter's sardonic irony with Dahl's hopeful ambivalence. By isolating these dispositional expressions, I demonstrate the ways in which these different literary moods served as imperatives for various—and contrasting—political ends. I argue, somewhat counterintuitively, that the pessimism and irony expressed respectively by the Italian School and Schumpeter left open possibilities for democracy seldom recognized within the “elitist” model and that, conversely, Dahl infused optimism into his understanding of representative government with perniciously complacent consequences for subsequent democratic theory. Specifically, Dahl's hopeful ambivalence expressed in his “nouveau elitism” induced American political science to live content with narrow empirical orientations to democracy, constricted liberal institutional choices, and plutocratic tendencies. While Schumpeter's work undoubtedly provoked the perverted American reception of the Italian School, attention to the irony through which he conducts his analysis and conveys his political prescriptions, I aver, ought to change the way we perceive the elite “tradition.”

In what follows I complicate what we understand as “elite” democratic theory and question whether the purported “patriarchs” of this school deserve the name (Nye 1977, 47). Put differently, the analysis asks what is lost when we assume that their connection with contemporary scholarship on electoral politics and representative government is contiguous. I refer to the Italians as the forefathers of this tradition in deference to the common understanding of these thinkers and not to designate them as genuinely elitist in any normative way. On the contrary, I aim to convince readers that we ought to think of them not as elite theorists of democracy but rather as democratic theorists of elitism. In a discipline in which “elitist,” “minimalist,” and “Schumpeterian” are used interchangeably and pervasively, it is time that we recover how these terms came into existence before we pass judgment over their normative import. A genealogical recovery of their thought not only disrupts the habit of debating the empirical validity or normative desirability of contemporary elite models; such a recovery may also newly equip proponents of greater democratic participation, as well as others who fear the increasingly pernicious impact of plutocracy on democracies.

3. While pessimism has been recognized as a German intellectual discourse (Beiser 2016), Dienstag (2006) brilliantly demonstrates that pessimism is, at the very least, a broadly European tradition that dates back to the Enlightenment, if not the Renaissance. Dienstag illuminates the pessimistic orientation as a philosophical response to modernity and rescues the orientation from neglect in Western philosophy. I believe that Mosca, Pareto, Michels, and Schumpeter are a part of the tradition as Dienstag describes it.

THE ITALIAN FOREFATHERS: PESSIMISM CONSTRAINS PLUTOCRACY

The Italian School shared not only a pessimistic view of political leadership but also a serious concern with plutocracy advancing under a democratic guise. Mosca, Pareto, and Michels were all driven by the desire to expose the prevalence of elite rule in modern popular governments, in order to better circumscribe oligarchic power and stem the growth of plutocracy. The following discussion briefly identifies some of the school's major preoccupations and general attitudes that have been forgotten or ignored. A reminder of their distrustful disposition toward elites reveals the extent to which their reputed heirs betray, and their purported critics distort, their original contributions.

Contextualizing the evolution of Mosca's *Elementi di Scienza Politica* helps make sense of his pessimism and its later obfuscation. *Elementi* debuted in 1896 as a treatise in conversation with nineteenth-century socialist philosophy. As Meisel accurately explains, *Elementi* offered a Marxist response "aimed at the naïve optimism of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment" (1958, 10). Mosca bemoaned that Marxism had "inherited that [Enlightenment] confidence" and sought to contest the progressive premise of history conceived in terms of class struggle (10). For Meisel, Mosca's cynical retort—that history is instead a graveyard of aristocracies—meant to highlight that "forever new elite formations eternalize the cycle of domination," to remind readers that exploitation exists no matter which economic modality dominates a given historical period (10).

Throughout the first two decades of the twentieth century, Mosca's identification of *la classe dirigente* (later known as the "ruling class") with a plutocratic elite became increasingly popular, especially among the early fascists. Professionally benefiting from its popularity, in the early 1920s Mosca decided to expand his treatment of *la classe dirigente*—a decision that helped him win life appointments to the University of Rome and the Italian Senate. However, at the same time he became concerned by the destruction of liberal safeguards and, consequently, began to distance himself from Mussolini—distance that culminated in a sensational denunciation of fascism, resignation from the Senate, and signing of the Manifesto of Anti-Fascist Intellectuals in 1925 (Femia 1993).

During the 25 years between the first two editions of *Elementi*, fascism changed the Sicilian student of socialism. No longer interested in socialist philosophy, Mosca felt that there was a larger threat to society than liberal plutocratic domination: in a word, the experience of fascism softened his attitude toward liberalism. While at the turn of the century he argued that parliamentary systems have "failed miserably" to inhibit the plutocratic transformations of liberalism, in the

1923 publication, after Mussolini's rise to power, Mosca attributed to the representative system the highest degree of "juridical defense" against elite domination ever attained in history (1939, 325). Mosca's experience with fascism and consequent change of heart led to a dramatic revision of his magnum opus in a way that obscures his original anxiety over plutocracy and liberalism.

And yet, even though Mosca's disdain for the liberal plutocratic nexus was far more explicit in 1896, his concern remains evident in the later edition. I unearth his critique of liberal plutocracy using the final version of *Elementi* to reveal his consistent analysis of plutocracy despite his evolving attitude and to demonstrate how the ruling class theory functions within *Elementi*, even in its most mature formation. On Mosca's pessimistic account of the inevitability of oligarchy, frank acknowledgment of plutocratic tendencies in liberal societies helps orient us toward the need for ever-increasing "multiplicities" of elites and the renewal of leadership from below—the "indispensable" element to anything that can be likened to human "progress" (1939, 415).

Mosca's ruling class theory contends that the composition of the ruling class changes when the management of the state requires capacities different from those made available by the status quo (1939, 65). *Elementi* insists that efforts to track changes in the makeup of ruling classes should be only one, albeit crucial, variable among others in the study of politics. While his endeavor at first appears to focus exclusively on a select group of elites, through the course of the book it becomes clear that he intends his analysis of the ruling class to serve as an analytic tool that may be used to study dynamics among all social classes at various historical junctures. The ruling class theory does not fixate on inevitable domination by a minority; it constitutes one technique among others employed in his more comprehensive study of political change.

According to Mosca, the ruling class theory does not create "labels for the various types of ruling classes" but bids us to "examine the contents of our bottles and investigate and analyze the criteria that prevail in the constitution of the ruling classes on which the strength or weakness of our states depend" (1939, 443, emphasis added). In this passage, Mosca instructs the reader to use the ruling class theory as a tool for inward reflection on our own polities—as a way to candidly assess our own "strengths and weaknesses" without deluding ourselves about who maintains power in contemporary society. He suggests that honest investigation and self-analysis can prompt the desire to change the constitution of the ruling classes for the better, as opposed to simply enumerating or "labeling" types of ruling groups to no constructive end. The ruling class theory thus offers a useful heuristic that promotes candid confrontation with existing structures of domination;

it does not simply serve to encourage a dispassionate assessment of irresistible political laws.

Mosca's rhetoric suggests that the ruling class theory can even serve as a subversive tool in disrupting the domination of a particular ruling class. He reminds the reader that given the "various ways in which the ruling classes are formed and organized [it] is precisely in that variety of type that *the secret* of their strength and weakness must be sought and found," as if to say that identifying this "secret" helps undermine or eliminate an undesirable elite (1939, 336, emphasis added). Add to this idea his view that the "democratic impulse"—that is, the constant "replenishing of ruling classes from the lower classes"—is the key to human advancement, and his drive to identify elite strengths and weaknesses reads much more like an exposé of minority domination that encourages democratic renewal of political leadership from below, rather than a celebratory promotion or resigned acceptance of elite rule (395). Taken together, his arguments advocate the demystification of elite power as a potential corrective to the insufficiency of liberal institutions in checking plutocratic tendencies—institutions that Mosca ultimately (after the advent of fascism) endorses but always admits are weak in the face of plutocratic tendencies that elude parliamentary regulation.

Mosca weaves a critique of plutocracy into his accounts of the ancient, medieval, and modern civilizations he assesses. The book treats plutocracy as an unavoidable tendency throughout history against which we must constantly be on guard and seek to contain, a normative orientation confirmed by condemnations of its presence in modern governments scattered throughout the text. He warns that electoral politics can never forestall or control plutocracy once these institutions are wedded to unrestrained capitalistic structures. The American context provides a paradigmatic example, he writes, in which nothing can prevent the rich from becoming more influential than the poor because the rich will always effectively pressure the politicians who control public administration (Mosca 1939, 325). For Mosca, America proves that liberal constraints do not "prevent elections from being carried on to the music of clinking dollars . . . or whole legislatures and considerable numbers of national congressmen from feeling the influence of powerful corporations and great financiers" (325). But the palpable pessimism in this critique of American plutocracy constitutes an encouragement toward reform—not a compulsion to compliance.

Pareto's acerbic denunciations of plutocracy make Mosca's warnings against the modern marriage of capitalism and electoral institutions seem restrained. Throughout his life, Pareto demonstrated a consistent interest in economic inequality and sought to combat the plutocratic tendencies of liberal capitalism (Aron 1965; Finer 1968). Unfortunately, his death

in 1923 precluded the opportunity to distance himself from fascism that Mosca had been afforded, and consequently, Pareto is often remembered as the more antidemocratic and "proto-fascist" thinker of the pair (Finer 1968, 440). Moreover, Pareto's cynical and aggressive rhetoric was easily misunderstood as exhibiting antidemocratic proclivities (Femia 2006, 2; Freund 1976, 1; Parsons 1937, 293).

Pareto's legacy is defined by his purported "elitism" for a few reasons. First, he was the first to employ the term "elite" in a prominent fashion. More fundamentally, the elite/mass paradigm forms the guiding element of his economic models. For example, the law of vital few, which showed that 80% of the land in Italy was owned by 20% of the population, seemed to suggest that nothing could change this inherent division between masses and elites (Pareto 1897). His theory of elite circulation—the idea that regime change occurs when one group of elites replaces another—did not appear encouraging, either. As Femia explains, "in his determination to 'unmask' the hypocritical elitism and tawdry self-seeking elites of liberal 'democracy,' he was a match for any left-wing firebrand," but the problem lay in the finality of his economic laws (2006, 138). Pareto's economic work is broadly characterized by the elite/mass partition, but myopic focus on these models occludes the way that his critique of liberalism complicated these categories.⁴

Indeed, Pareto expresses consistent disgust in the way that liberal government has become plutocracy's handmaiden. He denounces modern parliamentary systems as "the effective instrument" of "demagogic plutocracy" and effectively treats them as inseparable entities (Pareto 1984, 92). For Pareto, demagogic plutocracy denotes a system in which representative institutions allow plutocrats—that is, "rich speculators" (industrialists, merchants, financial operators, etc.)—to con the "democracy of workers" into joining a "partial alliance" with them against landowners and farmers (or rentiers), "thereby pulling the wool over [the worker's] eyes" (91–92). Pareto's social classification thus defies the simple elite/mass paradigm that his legacy attributes to him; it identifies more nuanced categories to describe the ways that parliamentary systems

4. Bottomore (1966, 12) laments that Pareto did not appreciate the "heterogeneity of elites," even though Pareto often said that the unity of the ruling class was a Marxist fairy tale. For others, Pareto denies agency to anyone but elites, thereby dividing society between elites and the masses (Bachrach 1980). Some argue that Pareto's interest in crowd psychology confirms that the division of elites and masses characterizes his thinking (Nye 1977). Others maintain that Pareto's division of human activity between the logical and nonlogical not only divides society in two categories but also legitimized authoritarian politics (Bellamy 1987). Still others, albeit aware that Pareto's categories were complicated, nevertheless understood this paradigm as the crucial one (Samuels [1974] 2012).

afford speculators the “upper hand over the state and [means] of exploiting other social classes” (91–92). The dominant class-based binary that animates his political writings is not one of elites versus masses but rather the distinction between speculators and rentiers.

Pareto’s thought intensifies two tendencies of the Italian School. First, Pareto understands parliamentarism and the plutocracy that it enables to be an inherently deficient system, particularly in comparison to agricultural modes of subsistence (1984, 93–94). Throughout his oeuvre, he insists that the “recombinatory” quality of electoral regimes necessarily breeds plutocracy, in modern and ancient popular governments alike: “there is nothing in the present state of affairs to prevent the plutocrats from continuing to make fat profits, just as the general prosperity of the Roman plutocracy was in no way jeopardized by the corn doles” (95–96). Capitalism’s acute “recombinatory” quality, Pareto declares throughout his career, just makes matters worse (Femia 2006, 108; Pareto 1935).

Second, Pareto demonizes plutocracy, anthropomorphizing it to such an extreme that it becomes the greatest nemesis of political life per se. Plutocracy’s use of parliamentary government is the most insidious problem that we face, he writes, because it creates room for the “devious” measures that speculators use to dupe the masses (Pareto 1984, 95). It is striking, given retrospective charges of elitism, that his analysis does not impute to the masses an inherent cognitive incapacity for participating in politics. Rather, he stresses protracted, deliberate efforts on the part of speculators to “gull” the lower classes and everyone else outside of the speculating class into supporting their own self-interested ends—a vulnerable group that includes the “investors and savers” who are presumably elites themselves (95). For Pareto, the speculators that reign through modern representative governments are the perpetrators of injustice; he warns that if parliamentary institutions remain unreformed, there will be no remedy for the impending political tragedy (95–96).

Michels (1962) reproduces this tragic depiction of the parliament-plutocracy nexus and pessimistic attitude toward elites. Like Pareto, Michels worries about the insidious effects of plutocratic parliamentary regimes and continually accuses political leadership of engaging in deliberate and dishonest machinations to oppress the masses (142, 165, 310). His vitriol for “the chiefs” is no less cutting than Pareto’s, stressing that leaders sow disunion within the parties and betray democratic aspirations (164). In addition Michels explicates another dimension of minority domination: he explains the reasons for political passivity among the masses and absolves the latter for adopting such an orientation (164). He complains that the chiefs ignore all “legal, logical, and economic bonds which unite the paid leaders to the paying masses”—thereby reject-

ing the idea that leaders are held accountable through electoral competition (169). The masses, he continues, “are sulky, but never rebel for they lack power to punish the treachery of the chiefs” (169). Put differently, it is not that the majority are epistemically incapable of knowing that they are being exploited; rather, their oppression and powerlessness inhibit them from doing anything about it.

Michels not only absolves the masses for their passivity in rhetorical asides. Along with charging elites with corruption and dishonesty, two crucial aspects of his argument undermine the unfavorable view of the masses that later interpreters attribute to him: he declares (1) that the chiefs are in no way genuine *aristoi* or even intellectually superior to the crowd (Michels 1962, 93) and (2) that the masses are not politically passive primarily because they are stupid, gullible, or incapable but rather because their oppression makes them grateful to those “who speak and write on their behalf” (92). Nor is this gratitude, for Michels, demonstrative of a form of stupidity; it instead serves as an understandable palliative for their oppression by offering them some semblance of hope amid otherwise bleak prospects for emancipation. More importantly, in a world where “megalomaniacal” leaders desirous of flattery have the power to substantively alter their quality of life, Michels says that mass gratitude bordering on cult veneration makes sense (364). After all, the chiefs will champion popular positions only if they are compensated with the “hero-worship” that in a rather “comical” sense they presume to deserve (97). Michels suggests that while the masses may be somewhat complicit in their own subjection, this complicity certainly does not indicate any significant cognitive deficiency, nor does it make them responsible for it.

Contrary to how we remember Michels’s (1962) text, he does not merely seek to confirm early twentieth-century crowd psychology theories and apply them to the masses of the political sphere.⁵ Rather, he uses those studies in order to psychologize leadership and explain how the leaders in modern popular governments, who begin on equal footing with the masses, develop “autocratic” personalities as they become professional politicians (364, 10). In fact, the guiding question of the work asks how leaders, who arise “spontaneously” and initially serve an “accessory” and “gratuitous” function become, over the course of time, “irremovable” (364). The bulk of the book seeks to deconstruct the psychology of leaders in a

5. Although favorable reconstructions of *Political Parties* appeared in the immediate postwar period, they virtually all identified Michels as an anti-democratic thinker influenced by the “social psychological” propositions of his time (Cook 1971, 776; Lipset 1955). Beetham (1977) argues that Michels’s fascist sympathies are directly linked to the argument in *Political Parties*, partially through such theories. Nye’s (1977) attempt to connect Michels to crowd psychologist Gustave LeBon is also cited regularly in the literature.

way that not only undermines their formal superiority but also rationalizes the gratitude of the led in a way that does not indicate the latter's cognitive incapacity or responsibility for their own subjection.

Michels develops these two ideas (leader psychology and mass gratitude) consistently throughout the text, so much so that when he finally presents the "iron law of oligarchy" at the end of the book, they are built into his presentation of this so-called law: "Now, *if we are to leave out* consideration of the tendency of the leaders to organize themselves and to consolidate their interests, *and if we leave out* of consideration the gratitude of the led toward the leaders, and the general immobility and the passivity of the masses, we are led to conclude that the principle cause of oligarchy in the democratic parties is to be found in the technical indispensability of leadership" (1962, 365, emphasis added). While Michels concedes a certain passivity on the part of the masses, it sets in only after leadership has been consolidated and the led experience some gratitude, as if mass passivity is the direct result of these two phenomena. As a whole, Michels (1962) develops the first two "considerations" from the above-cited quote at the substantive expense of the third. It is both somewhat odd and perhaps telling that Michels, in his explication of the iron law of oligarchy, asks the reader to set aside two critical considerations that his entire book accentuates, namely, how exactly leaders collude with each other despite their expressly conflicting political agendas and the masses' tendency to express unwarranted gratitude for this so-called leadership. If we take the iron law of oligarchy at face value, then the technical indispensability of leadership, and hence oligarchy, can be granted only by "leaving out" the "considerations" that he says decisively affect organizational structure in modern society. The contention that mass passivity—rather than elite corruption—was the major object of Michels's disdain constitutes a striking perversion of his actual sentiments and general attitude.

More than any other text, Seymour Martin Lipset's introduction to *Political Parties* (Michels 1962) facilitated this perversion by refocusing Michels's critique away from elites and by ascribing positive normative assessments to Michels's account of oligarchy. Lipset contends that Michels chose to investigate socialist organizations only so that he could prove that even the most democratically leaning organizations are hypocritical and "as such found it difficult to believe in any sustained democratic ideologies or movements, even as lesser evils" (32). As a result, Michels's "view of society and organization as divided between elites and followers," according to Lipset, "led Michels to accept the idea that the best government is an avowedly elitist system under the leadership of a charismatic leader" (32). While Lipset may have anachronis-

tically projected this view onto the early Michels because of the latter's eventual association with Italian Fascism, this is, at least according to the letter of *Political Parties*, completely inaccurate. Not only does Michels claim that "we must choose democracy as the least of evils" and demand that humanity "recognize the advantages which democracy, however imperfect, presents over aristocracy" (370), but he also extols the virtues of democracy and its contribution to individual development and human flourishing (369).

Lipset ignores what I call the Italian disposition, which Michels explained more pointedly than any of his peers: the inclination to honestly expose the deficiencies of elite rule in order to encourage a greater striving for democracy and popular sovereignty (1962, 368). On a basic level, to deny the influence of leaders, Michels writes, is "to strengthen the rule of the leaders, for it serves to conceal from the mass a danger which really threatens democracy" (72). He reminds us that "nothing but a serene and frank examination of the oligarchical dangers of democracy will enable us to minimize these dangers, even though they can never be entirely avoided" (370). Lipset commits the exact "error" against which Michels warns in his closing chapter—that is, reading his work as a justification to "abandon the desperate enterprise of endeavoring to discover a social order which will *render possible the complete realization* of the idea of popular sovereignty" (368, emphasis added). Despite the tragic plutocratic qualities of parliamentary regimes, Michels emphasizes that his efforts aim to "throw light upon certain . . . tendencies which oppose the reign of democracy," so that these tendencies can be better combated, not passively accepted as *fait accompli* (368).

Mosca, Pareto, and Michels—also known as the Modern Machiavellians—offer biting critiques of elites, plutocracy, and oligarchy, frankly exposing elite domination so that democratic theory and practice might better control and contain it (Burnham 1943; Sartori 1965, 41). They quite self-consciously employed a pessimistic disposition, not because they were encouraging quietist acceptance of irresistible structures of hierarchical power. Rather, their pessimism is intended to motivate a kind of strategic vigilance against the plutocratic hierarchy they diagnosed as pervading liberal governments—and, more generally, strategic vigilance against the continuous threat of democracy devolving into oligarchy as a result of the consolidation of leadership.⁶ However, not all pessimistic dispositions are

6. Green derides contemporary liberal thinkers' "excessive sunniness . . . regarding the problem of plutocracy" and thereby revives a new variant of Italian pessimism (2016, 84). Green too understands plutocracy as an integral component of liberal-democratic states and consequently argues that we not only ought to strive to "reduce plutocracy" but also develop strategies that "retrospectively respond" to it (84). I contend that adopting such a pessimistic

the same or directed at identical ends. This difference in literary expression can already be seen in a comparison of Mosca and Pareto on the one hand and Michels on the other: Michels, an Italian-affiliated German, explicitly states the purpose of his pessimism in a way that his Italian counterparts would have never dreamed of admitting for fear of undermining their own pessimism. And as we will see, Schumpeter shares an equally pessimistic attitude toward elites as his forbearers. But his sardonic irony exhibits a completely different tenor of distrust for elites, one that manifests itself in a different kind of disappointment in them and one that necessitates different prescriptions for confronting the problem that liberalism poses to democracy.

SCHUMPETER'S DARE: SARDONIC IRONY AND MINIMALIZED DEMOCRACY

Schumpeter inherits and transforms the pessimistic orientation toward elites with his seminal work, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* (Schumpeter 1942). In this book, the Austrian economist explicitly appropriates many of the Italians' substantive concerns and methodological inclinations, that is, the plutocratic dimensions of modern liberal governments, democracy's inherent susceptibility to oligarchic threats, a focus on the symbols and myths that accompany twentieth-century democratic and socialist movements, and a historically and sociologically oriented methodology.

While Schumpeter approaches these topics with untempered pessimism, his antagonism toward elites is not expressed through the vigilant disposition characteristic of his predecessors. Schumpeter's pessimism is considerably more cynical in nature and sarcastic in expression. Throughout the text, he articulates disappointment in and contempt for his own class—specifically, in the intellectuals and politicians who have not lived up to their responsibilities as elites (i.e., as genuine *aristoi*) by failing to articulate coherent theoretical positions and political aspirations relevant to the historical moment. Given his claims in the rest of the work, combined with the palpable scorn he vents toward elites, I argue that part 4 should be read as Schumpeter's sardonic warning to elites that they need to rewrite “democratic” theory if they desire to preserve their place in the current hierarchy—an outcome he severely doubts them capable of achieving. Despite part 4's prescriptions, Schumpeter is not the unqualified elite champion we remember. Below I elucidate how his irony and

disposition in itself constitutes one such retrospective response, for it serves as an offensive/defensive strategy against the liberal plutocratic nexus that Mosca, Pareto, Michels, and Green detail with refreshing honesty.

sarcasm render his “alternate theory” of democracy a political prescription that should be taken with more than a grain of salt, given his expressions of contempt for governing elites.

Schumpeter inherits and transforms the Italian orientation with his “alternate theory,” that is, the theory that both admirers and critics agree became the essential core of the elite theory of democracy. Schumpeter (1942) elaborates the ways that liberal capitalism creates an environment in which elites compete for political rule among themselves and then dishonestly call this system “democracy,” as if parliamentary and representative institutions expressed popular sovereignty in a meaningful way. He portrays the “classical” democratic doctrine, that is, the idea that elections are a direct expression of the people's will, as an elite ruse, which elides the difference between electoral and legislative power and consequently inhibits even a modicum of popular control and elite accountability once the electoral moment has passed. By emphatically stressing the ways in which “classical” democratic theory does not match the practice of electoral politics, Schumpeter aggressively reveals the facticity of elite domination and the illusory democratic dimension of modern representative governments.

The problem with this ruse, according to Schumpeter, is that its lack of credibility has become too apparent; the distance between liberal practice and democratic ideals renders adherence to electoral politics unconvincing and unappealing to even the historically most committed adherents of capitalism and liberal democracy—the bourgeoisie (Schumpeter 1942, 161). At least, Schumpeter says, the masses are coherent in their consistent disdain for liberal capitalism; these institutions no longer speak to the “hearts and minds” of the general public for reasons that transcend the desire for pecuniary gain (384). In this regard, he expresses more vitriol for the cognitive incapacity of the elites than of the masses: the masses admirably exhibit a certain consistency in calling for institutions that are morally and ideologically compatible with their values. Elites incoherently advance a theory and practice of democracy that contradicts their professed commitment to a socialist future and their own pecuniary interest in preserving liberal capitalism (190, 153). Elites, Schumpeter complains, are ill equipped intellectually to navigate a smooth political transition to socialist institutions, despite the overwhelming commitment that all social classes (including the elites themselves) have expressed for this economic framework (153, 161, 190, 203, 247, 321, 322, 384).

Schumpeter enjoins future political theorists to close this cavernous gap between classical theory and modern practice by adopting an alternative “theory of competitive leadership.” This alternate theory elaborates his initial definition of modern democracy as a procedure, adding to it the notion that

individuals attain the power to make political decisions “by means of a competitive struggle for the people’s vote” (Schumpeter 1942, 269). Although it may be tempting to understand the alternate theory as Schumpeter’s ideal political model, I contend that it should be viewed as a description of how democracy operates under liberal capitalism rather than as a prescriptive best case or as a reliable account of democracy in a dawning socialist age. Indeed, he explicitly argues no more than this: since his alternate account of democracy more accurately depicts the way that “democracy” has operated historically, it is the most plausible option in any attempt to foster and maintain what we now call “democracy” given current political and economic tendencies (171, 200). Taking into account the information that we have concerning liberal capitalism, Schumpeter claims, his alternate theory is a more honest depiction of the purported “democracy” that we practice and uncritically celebrate (269). He simultaneously describes present political practice and, consequently, suggests a change in theory to align with the actual workings of representative institutions if elites are committed to preserving their place in the precarious current social hierarchy.

In other words, by proposing the theory of competitive leadership, Schumpeter sardonically challenges his readership to redefine democracy on the basis of how we practice politics in liberal representative governments; the tone is sardonic because the preceding sections of his book explain why democracy and liberal government are rather incompatible. Yet this change in democratic theory must occur, he writes, because “the friction” between democratic ideals and liberal representative practice imposes on the masses and elites a burden so great that the entire system might collapse (Schumpeter 1942, 302). Since Schumpeter’s audience consists of the politicians and intellectuals he identifies as the elites that are responsible for causing democracy to deviate from its classical principles and practices, he urges these elites to call a spade a spade and describe the system accurately—without resorting to the fallacious theoretical construct they currently rely on to legitimate it. Schumpeter suggests that his alternate theory could potentially stave off the imminent rejection of capitalism and liberal institutions altogether.

I call this challenge the Schumpeterian “dare” to forsake hypocrisy over liberal theory and practice. The dare, directed at “elites” widely construed, is carried out via irony and other rhetorical cues and consists of three substantive parts: (1) a challenge to redefine democracy such that popular sovereignty can only be measured at electoral moments, (2) the application of economic language to the political sphere such that our orientation toward capitalism and representative government is entirely consistent, and (3) the encouragement of more empirically grounded political studies, despite his am-

bivalence over the complications posed by such endeavors (Schumpeter 1942, 123).

But why is the alternate theory, or the dare, so obviously ironic and sardonic in expression? Because Schumpeter (1942) self-consciously undermines every component of the alternate theory presented in the work’s other sections. The theory’s first premise demands that democracy be considered a procedure, but his more pervasive claim is that democracy is a transformative ideal (Medearis 2001; Schumpeter 1942, 266). The theory contends that there is no such thing as “The People” or “The People’s Will,” and therefore sovereignty should be redefined exclusively in terms of electoral outcomes. Yet throughout the text Schumpeter creates an analogous category of “hearts and minds” and “things and souls”—a collective entity that exhibits a clear and definitive will to do away with capitalist institutions (1942, 63, 162, 220, 297, 301). The greatest issue with liberal capitalism, Schumpeter argues, is that these institutions do not adequately address the values, desires, and preferences of an increasing majority of individuals, and he belabors how this notion of popular sovereignty has the power to profoundly direct social, economic, and political change (199, 223, 324). His proposition to liken elections to the economic market seems at best disingenuous considering his biting critique of the uncompetitive, plebiscitary nature of elections that liberal capitalism has hitherto engendered, as his “sketches” of elections—and especially British parliamentarism—demonstrate (275, 305).

If one reads the work in its entirety, it becomes less inviting to take the theory of competitive leadership seriously. When read after parts 1–3, part 4 exudes what Marjorie Perloff (2016) calls “Austro-Modern ironic skepticism”: a profound skepticism about the power of government to reform human life and the power of language to convey meaning, primarily expressed through irony. For Perloff, the Austro-Modernists—Kafka, Wittgenstein, Musil, Roth, Kraus, Canetti—all mourn that language no longer transmits transparency and meaning. I would include Schumpeter in this heritage in that he too makes a mockery of words like “democracy” and of the ease with which, in modernity, one can redefine such words to indicate their very opposite.

In this manner, Schumpeter employs the “Modern Machiavellian” method so aggressively that he transforms the purpose that it, in the hands of his Italian antecedents, was intended to serve. His juxtaposition of the ideals of the classical doctrine and the realities of the alternate account exposes the brutality of elite domination, detailing the facts of minority rule in liberal capitalist society such that it seems to be a force too irresistible to oppose. This pessimistic honesty produces the opposite effect of what the Italian theorists intended. They sought to expose elite domination so that neither

elites nor masses could delude themselves into thinking that it was acceptable and, most importantly, so that no one could ever be induced into thinking that such elitism could be considered democratic. Schumpeter, however, radicalizes this exposé to such an extent that elite power seems insurmountable. Unlike the efforts of the Italians, the result of Schumpeter's exposé challenges democratic theory to embrace empirical studies and reject participatory and egalitarian aspirations—at least in the liberal capitalist present. He portrays minority domination in such a cynical light that the only option seems to be surrender to elite rule, compelling readers to take Schumpeter up on his dare and identify elite domination as part and parcel of modern democracy.

Postwar scholarship did just that. As historian Nils Gilman puts it, readers accepted the alternate theory of democracy at face value “while occluding those elements that were pessimistic about the future or critical about modernity” (2007, 48). In response to Schumpeter's dare, American political scientists reinterpreted nonvoting and political noninvolvement as an expression of support of the political system and began to understand “Schumpeterianism” as the equation of democracy and liberal competitive elections (47).⁷ While a few scholars were attuned to Schumpeter's sardonic irony, the majority took (and continue to take) Schumpeter's dare very seriously—in fact, too literally.⁸ Perhaps this explains Schumpeter's own dismay over his “little volume's” success (1988, xviii). I speculate that he believed his irony was vulgarized and misunderstood. Although paradoxically, the dare's vulgarization seems to have procured the ends Schumpeter ultimately desired: popular rejection of liberal capitalism became a thing of the past.

Schumpeter thus radicalizes Italian pessimism and alters its ultimate purpose. Yet ironically, his successors managed to reverse the actual methodological and substantive relationship between Schumpeter and the Italian School, such that Schumpeter came to represent a more genuinely democratic alternative to the Italian theorists. To name just a few iconic examples, Norberto Bobbio (1987), Harold Lasswell (Lass-

7. This simplistic notion of “Schumpeterianism” pervades political science discourse. Przeworski has always defended “minimalized,” “Schumpeterian” democracy in some “limited” form (1999, 2010). Shapiro has acknowledged that Schumpeter was “distrustful of political elites” (2016, 99) but still understands Schumpeterianism as the equation of democracy and elections. Pettit finds Schumpeter responsible for the “more or less standard” view that democracy does not enable popular direction beyond occasional electoral accountability (2012, 22).

8. Appreciation for his irony seems confined to Schumpeter scholars, and his pessimism, for the most part, eludes American political science. For a discussion of his pessimism in an albeit different register, see Foucault (2008). For discussions of his sarcasm, see Schneider (1975) and Swedberg (1991).

well et al. 2010), and Giovanni Sartori (1965) transformed Schumpeter's theory of competitive leadership into the “elite” or “minimalist” theory of democracy and, in doing so, argued that Schumpeter was less “elitist” than the Italian theorists. As late as 1997, Bernard Manin echoes these views when he states that “the epithet ‘elitist’ ill befits [Schumpeter's] theories” because “it mistakenly connects them to the elitist conceptions of Gaetano Mosca or Vilfredo Pareto” (1997, 161). Although Manin remains vague about why, exactly, Schumpeter should not be considered an elite theorist but rather a reconstructed democratic one, he clearly participates in the intellectual tradition of distinguishing the anti-elitist Schumpeter from the substantially elitist Italian School despite substantial evidence to suggest that, if anything, the reverse is in fact the case.

Mosca, Pareto, and Michels clearly held pessimistic views of political leadership and expressed a lack of faith in the ability of liberal institutions to combat plutocracy. And yet, they later were cast not only as enemies of democracy but also as the forefathers of an intransigently elitist theory who would have rejected any reformation of democracy capable of combating elitism or plutocracy such as the “minimalist” notion of democracy attributed to Schumpeter. This perversion of their contributions is bizarre. Nevertheless, despite this role reversal, all four intellectuals engaged elite rule as a result of their suspicious views of political leadership. The Italians worried that leaders perverted the democratic process; Schumpeter expressed suspicious views of the elite leadership's competence in organizing politics for the future. And while anti-elitist pessimism remained consistent among them, the tone of their respective pessimisms resulted in different conclusions that should not be divorced from their expressed political prescriptions.

ROBERT DAHL: AMBIVALENT BUT HOPEFUL POLYARCHY

Dahl's work is paradigmatic of a midcentury American political science movement I call “nouveau elitism.” As the most successful expositor of this school of thought, Dahl's prolific contributions to American political science leave an indelible mark on our perception of the Italian School and Schumpeter's thought. Although Dahl borrows heavily from the Italians to develop “polyarchy” as a legitimate regime type, his pluralist system is more elitist than the normative model originally staked out by his forbearers. Dahl's pluralism, and nouveau elitism generally, bears closer resemblance to what we remember the Europeans to have advocated than what Mosca, Pareto, Michels, and even Schumpeter actually argued. Dahl consistently attempts to distance himself from elite theory, but his writings appropriate Mosca, Pareto, Michels, and Schumpeter's partial conclusions on representative governments,

transforming them into a more idealistic, democracy-friendly model in which elite domination is somewhat paradoxically deemed desirable. Dahl's development of polyarchy represents a reconfiguration of the European theories in a more dispositionally optimistic light.

Dahl introduced polyarchy as a new addition to the Aristotelian regime types, explaining why we should not consider representative institutions problematically oligarchic despite certain appearances to the contrary. This first iteration of polyarchy grafts elements of Michels's and Schumpeter's thought onto Dahl's own in the effort to reclassify modern representative governments as polyarchies. Dahl first draws on Michels's speculation about the need for ruling elite only as a result of increased specialization and bureaucratization in the modern age—not because of anything inherent to political organization as such (Dahl 1956, 73). Second, he endorses Schumpeter's contention that in modern representative governments, “the rule of popular sovereignty” is most “closely approximated” in electoral moments (66). In light of these two appropriations, and in response to the challenge posed in *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, Dahl classifies regimes by analyzing political systems according to different temporal moments within the electoral process: pre-voting, voting, postvoting, and interelection periods (84). Only on this basis, he argues, can one determine a particular regime's democratic character, that is, by judging the extent to which it fulfills certain metrics of popular sovereignty at various junctures in the voting cycle.

Dahl thus defines polyarchy as a system that exhibits various degrees of popular sovereignty at different stages, but this criterion does not in itself distinguish polyarchy from oligarchy. In order to make such a distinction, Dahl combines the Schumpeterian trope of electoral competition with Mosca's insistence on the “multiplicities” of elites; in so doing, Dahl casts election as a more democratic institution than it is currently considered. Electoral competitions among elites, he claims, “vastly increase the size, number, and variety of minorities” who influence the political process (Dahl 1956, 132). One can therefore distinguish polyarchy from other regimes by the criterion of “minorities rule” in the plural—“not minority rule” in the singular, which characterizes oligarchy (132). Although Dahl complains of the inordinate power that elites exert, he ultimately glorifies competitive elections among myriad elites as the element that renders polyarchy an impressive, dynamic political system—quite certainly, he argues, the best of all possible and imaginable alternatives (81, 150).

The glorification of elite competition arises again in Dahl's next major work, *Who Governs?* (Dahl 1961). In his case study of New Haven, CT, Dahl advances his view that, even though

American government is controlled by a ruling elite composed of select professional politicians and socially prominent citizens, it should not be considered an oligarchy. The argument here is similar to the one presented in his earlier work, but the emphasis on elite accountability derived from electoral competition draws on different elements of the Europeans' thought—specifically, Mosca's and Pareto's understanding of pluralities of minority groups who exercise control in a given society. Dahl contends that polyarchy cannot be considered oligarchy because in the former multiplicities of elite groups with access to different political resources compete for power. He traces a history of the ruling classes from the patrician era of the American Republic when inequalities were “cumulative,” that is to say, when wealth, social standing, education, and political power were all in the hands of the same group (11, 21, 85). America's peculiar history of industrialization and immigration resulted in a “gradual and peaceful revolution” (227) away from these circumstances, he argues, when power passed through the hands of different elites until it created a multiplicity of groups with competing political resources—a system characterized by “dispersed inequalities” (11, 227). Dahl thus fuses a Paretian focus on the resources of elites with a historical example of how elites were replenished from the lower classes in a way that evokes what Mosca described as the “democratic impulse.”

As a result of this peaceful revolution, Dahl argues, the United States enjoys a system of “executive” leadership with professionals acting as competitive “political entrepreneurs,” as opposed to the “petty sovereignties” that dominated in the colonial era and in Europe (1961, 309). Throughout this narrative, Dahl takes up Schumpeter's famous political economism to apply the economic language of competition to the political sphere in order to make a case for American exceptionalism. Yet, crucially, Dahl's history of a slow evolution in the makeup of elites contravenes Mosca and Pareto's doubts that varied groups of elites accessing different pots of resources would be enough to eliminate a system's oligarchic or plutocratic dimensions. At this juncture, Dahl can be likened to Mosca and Pareto in that all three study the transformation of the elite composition throughout history and focus on a plurality of minority elite groups. However, while the Italians consider the consequences of minority rule to be tragically antidemocratic, Dahl imbues his narrative with a tempered optimism regarding the compatibility of elite rule and quasi-democratic government.

Dahl (1961) reiterates the claim that polyarchy cannot be identified with oligarchy despite the presence of a dominant elite because leaders are rendered accountable to the populace through elections. While Dahl expresses this familiar defense of representative institutions, he also undermines this posi-

tion: Dahl indicates that the accountability of leaders in the American context is determined by the extent to which the populace adheres to the “democratic creed” and the extent to which leaders attempt to exploit it (95, 317–18, 324). Not only does Dahl attribute the success of politicians like his beloved Mayor Lee to such “political entrepreneurship,” but the last chapter concedes that blind American adherence to the democratic creed makes polyarchy, in the form of competitive elections, stable (309). In this sense, the answer to the question “who governs?” seems to be the democratic creed and the politicians who use it, thereby undermining his effort to accentuate the democratic-friendly dimension of polyarchy and minimize its oligarchic character.

While this tension appears to parallel the Europeans’ views—they all heavily stress the importance of a national myth of democracy—it is important to note that Dahl’s presentation of these myths dramatically deviates from those of his predecessors. On the one hand, Mosca, Michels, Pareto, and even Schumpeter provide historical accounts for why something like a democratic creed cannot be separated from the institution of election in a way that exposes the oligarchic dimension of representation. Furthermore, they discuss the myth of democracy as a part of a crucial process of demystification, which they believe poses a threat to the status quo of minority domination by depriving corrupt elites of the myths or symbolic structures that help preserve their legitimacy. Dahl, on the other hand, rather incongruously makes a similar point simply as a minor qualification within an otherwise overwhelmingly positive appraisal of the American development of electoral competition. Through this change in rhetorical expression, Dahl divorces his predecessors’ pessimistic suspicions from his own more sanguine presentation of electoral competition.

By omitting any explicit discussion of the Italian School while implicitly replacing their suspicious conclusions with a more optimistic view, Dahl appears to distance himself from their school of thought. Subsequently, in the 1960s, he attempts to inoculate his polyarchic model from aggressive critiques of *nouveau* elitism, and he vociferously denies any association on his part with elitism of any kind. Dahl (1958) attempts to debunk all elite theories, including those of the Italian and Schumpeterian variety, because they are unfalsifiable; in other words, the theory that a ruling elite exists can always be cast into a form that “makes it impossible to disprove” (462). The idea that a ruling elite controls political decision making cannot be “controverted by empirical evidence,” thereby rendering it an “unscientific” and unusable theory (462). He asserts that any evidence for the existence of a ruling elite in the United States “or in any specific community” has not been properly examined (463) “because the

examination has not employed satisfactory criteria to determine what constitutes a fair test of the basic hypothesis” (469).

In other words, Dahl rejects the project of identifying elite domination because it employs a patently unscientific methodology. This methodological criticism seems to undermine any parallel critics might pose between Dahl and the Italian School or Schumpeter, and it simultaneously raises the methodological bar so high that a “successful” discussion of elites is nearly impossible. On this score, consider Mosca’s protest against any scientific standard employed to judge social theories because it inhibited honest discussion of elites and the identification of their power and privileges (Mosca 1939, 47). Dahl invokes social scientific standards to ward off efforts at exposing minority domination, and so he insulates his own theories against charges of elitism.

In this vein, Dahl (2010) responds to Walker’s (2010) accusation that Dahl is an “elite theorist of democracy,” that is to say, one who does not express confidence in the epistemic capacity of the masses to participate in politics. Dahl sullies Walker’s credibility by revealing the latter’s poorly cited generalizations, bypassing any response to Walker’s substantive criticisms with a call for a separation between normative and empirical inquiry in democratic thought so that “shallow” critiques like Walker’s can be avoided (Dahl 2010, 98). This charge seems strange considering the fact that Dahl employs both approaches and would continue to do so in the effort to further develop his idea of polyarchy. Nonetheless, the article demonstrates Dahl’s effort to quash any perception of his thought as elitist, or even as “pessimistic,” through methodological appeals as opposed to substantive engagement.

Despite his efforts, these rebuttals proved insufficient to dispel Dahl’s association with elitism and to allow him to escape charges that his model does not recognize that some groups (i.e., economic elites and corporations) are too strong vis-à-vis other groups and vis-à-vis the state to make polyarchy a feasible quasi-democratic, nonoligarchic regime. Consequently, after his colleague Charles Lindbloom’s (1977) critique of pluralism, Dahl (1985) admits that polyarchy, and capitalism in polyarchical regimes, threatens popular sovereignty. Dahl (1984) concedes as much when he declares that if democratic accountability is morally defensible in the political realm, it must also be a normative aspiration in the economic sphere. Scholars mark this period as the beginning of Dahl’s turn to democratic socialism (Krouse 1982; Mayer 2001). This bifurcation of the pre- and post-1980s Dahl allowed him to disassociate his model from the *nouveau* elitism that I contend he always espoused.

Despite Dahl’s concession that polyarchy may undermine popular sovereignty, I argue that this “socialist turn” did not substantively alter his democratic theory. Dahl superficially

co-opts criticisms impelling him to extend democratic principles to business enterprises while he continues to advance the same basic premises of the polyarchal regime that he first articulated in the 1950s. Even in his magnum opus, *Democracy and Its Critics*, which combines a history of democratic thought with contemporary normative prescriptions, Dahl enumerates polyarchy's virtues and advances a modern, dynamic, pluralist polyarchy as the desirable basis of a purported "third transformation" in democratic practice (Dahl 1989, 313).

Many view the incredibly influential and critically acclaimed *Democracy and Its Critics* as emblematic of Dahl's "democratic socialism" because he targets the Italians—whom he calls "theorists of minority domination"—as the main object of his critique. Although Mosca, Pareto, Michels, Marx, Lenin, and Gramsci all qualify as theorists of minority domination, Dahl focuses on Mosca, Pareto, and Michels. The thrust of his criticism is that these theorists do not adequately weigh the extent to which elections make elites accountable to the demos (Dahl 1989, 276). Curiously omitting Schumpeter from this discussion, Dahl claims that these theorists make the "elementary mistake" of not applying the theory of economic competition to the public sphere (275). "Even Pareto," he complains, "who as an economist insisted that competition would inevitably force firms to adapt their products to the preferences of consumers, failed as a sociologist to apply a similar notion to the party competition he acknowledged occurred in the electoral marketplace" (275–76).

This critique sounds very much like the Dahl of the 1950s and 1960s who extolled electoral competition and often applied economic categories to the political sphere (Dahl 1989, 275–76). Yet, by the end of the work, things change inexplicably. In the last chapter devoted to his normative prescriptions for the advancement of democracy, he argues that we must abandon the standard "theoretical perspective" of treating human beings like consumers, and we must resist applying economic principles to the political sphere (325). Dahl further argues that the future of democracy rests on an economic order that "serves not merely consumers but human beings in all the activities to which an economic order may contribute" (325). He suggests that advancing his "theoretical vision of democracy" will be a tall order because it "runs counter to more than a century of intellectual history in Europe and English speaking countries" on this score (325).

So, which one is it? Can the free enterprise, capitalist paradigm be applied to the political sphere and democratic theory or not? Instead, should a more socialist one be adopted? Is the substantive problem with theories of minority domination that they "give little weight" to accountability achieved through the competition of political elites? Or, should we completely reject

this economic model of thinking for a more comprehensive political, social, personal discourse? Dahl never addresses this conflict that he establishes between his lifelong arguments and his more recently expressed normative aspirations. Be that as it may, his parting words give the impression that Dahl's position has substantially evolved from his first writings.

Despite his long, prolific career, Dahl's oeuvre still constitutes a defining moment in the scholarly literature on democratic theory. His development of polyarchy appropriates and optimistically refashions the Europeans' thought in a palatable way for positivistically inclined, postwar American political science throughout changing intellectual and disciplinary trends, but he does so at the cost of distorting their contributions. Mosca's, Pareto's, Michels's, and Schumpeter's pessimistic exposure of oligarchic elements of electoral competition are transformed by Dahl's hands into the optimistic system of polyarchy, a model supposedly more amenable to popular sovereignty than oligarchy—in fact, the best of all possible alternatives and one that can even be interpreted as a regime type friendly to democratic socialism.

DISPOSITIONAL READING: THE DECISIVE DISTANCE BETWEEN PESSIMISM AND OPTIMISM

Despite Dahl's distortions of the Europeans' thought and his criticisms of his fellow nouveau elitist contemporaries, he is not independently responsible for inventing the school of thought that we know today as democratic elitism. It is unlikely that nouveau elitism would have ever turned into "democratic elitism," and gained footing in American political science, had it not been for the panicked response of participatory democrats to Dahl's general popularity (and to the influence of Lipset, Lasswell, Berelson, Sartori, et al.). Alarmist responses were widespread, and many scholars developed suspect genealogies that connected Dahl to Mosca, Pareto, and Michels—the fascist "precursors" of democratic elitism—through the "minimalist" Schumpeter's influence (Bachrach 1980, 10; Pateman 1970).⁹ In their efforts to criticize forms of political inquiry that they considered undemocratic or undermining of popular sovereignty, participatory democrats did the following things: like the nouveau elitists, they accepted Schumpeter's dare to refashion the study of de-

9. Bachrach (1980) monumentally shifted the perception of elite theory. This widely read work attributes certain "normative" aspirations to the European theorists, transforming the way in which their moral preoccupations were interpreted. His genealogy of democratic elitism strips the Italians of their concern over plutocracy and repackages their contributions so that later participatory democrats would use these thinkers as paradigmatic examples of the elitism expressed by the American political science establishment.

mocracy in a narrow way, and, consequently, they solidified “the elite theory of democracy” as a conservative school of thought that supposedly originated with the Italian School.¹⁰

But even if Dahl is not entirely responsible for inventing democratic elitism as we now understand it, his role in the American reception of elite theory cannot be overstated. The way in which he appropriates the Europeans’ partial conclusions and transforms them into an optimistic ode to representative government laid the groundwork for later perversions of their thought. This redescription of Mosca, Pareto, Michels, and Schumpeter occurred in three phases of Dahl’s career:

1. During the 1950s and 1960s, the extent to which Dahl relies on Mosca, Pareto, and Michels establishes sufficient continuity to confirm that his thought descends from their work. Consequently, his submerging of their explicit preoccupation with plutocracy beneath a related but distinct concern over political oligarchy becomes imperceptible, so much so that scholars became inclined to blame the Italian theorists, and not American political science itself, for reorienting the debate away from plutocracy and toward oligarchy (Winters 2011, 2–3, 8).
2. Dahl infused more hope into his presentation of representative institutions: his early career developed elite explanatory models to demonstrate that modern popular government is less “democratic” than Americans suppose but also to excuse this reality by arguing that modern “democracies” still ought to be considered popular regimes because they are more free and democratic than their present communist and previous fascist antagonists. Dahl’s hope for the prospects of fulfilling popular sovereignty despite the oligarchic quality of representative institutions distances his thought from the pessimistic orientation of both the Italian School and Schumpeter; it gave the impression that Dahl offered a conservative alternative to Soviet communism, but one that was distinctly more progressive than the preceding theories of elitism.
3. While the early Dahl distanced himself from all four Europeans through methodological critique, his work

10. Exponents of democratic theory, typified by Lane Davis, Graeme Duncan, Steven Lukes, William Connolly, and Sheldon Wolin, obsessively debated whether Bachrach’s vision of the elite model provides either an accurate empirical depiction or an appropriate normative ideal, but they all ignore the question of whether he constructed an accurate depiction of “the model” itself. For a sampling of this debate, see McCoy and Playford (1967).

in the 1980s professes to change course in a way that seems to fully sever any possible connection between his thought and his predecessors. Nevertheless, as I demonstrate above, this purported normative re-orientation toward “democratic socialism” did not substantively alter the commitments to electoral and economic paradigms that he articulated in the 1950s and 1960s.

As previously mentioned, Dahl calls Mosca, Pareto, and Michels “theorists of minority domination.” This is certainly a wonderful moniker for the Italian School. These theorists studied the ways that elites dominate political processes, in order to expose these tendencies and consequently to advance democratic theory and the asymptotic fulfillment of popular sovereignty. But for half a century, Dahl relied only partially on their conclusions and ignored critical parts of their arguments in ways that made the Italians conveniently attractive enemies for postwar American political science. What is more, it encouraged audiences to perceive Dahl’s polyarchy/pluralism model as a more democratic, albeit still “elitist,” regime type. Herein lies the birth of democratic elitism.

Once Dahl was considered to be the paragon of a democratic kind of elitism, the Italian intellectuals came to be seen as proponents of oligarchy who celebrate the way in which liberal political institutions contain mass/popular participation. This perversion of their thought was primarily facilitated by a willingness to ignore their melancholy dispositions and pessimistic philosophical inclinations. I have aimed to underscore the mood expressed in each historical moment discussed above because rhetorical disposition should not simply be interpreted as a decorative literary technique—on the contrary, disposition substantively affects content. While we intuit this to be true, it is too often deemed acceptable to focus on explicit, expressed political prescriptions while dismissing literary tone. Of course, Mosca, Pareto, Michels, and Dahl all ostensibly study minority domination. Yet if we do not appreciate the contrast between the Italian School’s efforts to combat the tragic effects of minority domination on popular governance, on the one hand, and nouveau elitism’s qualified endorsement of the oligarchy that modern representative institutions constitute, on the other, then the difference between the two collapses. It then becomes tempting to assimilate all of these authors into one school of thought despite their conflicting conclusions, until we eventually forget that any intellectual and political differences exist at all.

Moreover, had American political scientists taken Schumpeter’s sardonic irony seriously, they might have interpreted his thought in a different way in the postwar period. Schumpeter did indeed forever change the way that American demo-

cratic theorists conducted their research: his dare encouraged even the greatest champions of popular sovereignty to accept a constrained vision of democracy and conduct their research along empirical lines. While commentators have noted the distinct sarcasm palpable in all of Schumpeter's works (see n. 8), they fail to see that Schumpeter's (1942) sardonic irony makes clear that he is no apologist for his class. What if, instead of accepting his sardonic challenge to rewrite democratic theory along the lines of liberal political practice, readers interpreted his lack of faith in governing elites to offer more—not less—credibility to institutions that might facilitate greater popular participation? At the very least, the fact that Schumpeter emphasized the hypocrisy of liberal democratic theory and practice, and that he himself eschewed a strictly empirical approach, ought to be taken into consideration—especially if his challenge was to be taken up assiduously by subsequent American democratic theorists.

In the end, attention to rhetorical disposition undermines our belief in the existence of a cohesive category of political thought known as democratic elitism and unsettles our received notions concerning Mosca's, Pareto's, Michels's, and Schumpeter's orientations toward representative government. Most importantly, appreciation of their literary sensibilities ought to encourage a return to the Italians who wrote in a historical moment marked by plutocracy much like our own. In addition to offering insights on the relationship between plutocracy and electoral government, recovering their pessimistic, vigilant outlooks may help us develop our own dispositional strategy that emboldens future democratic containment or reversal of plutocratic domination.

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