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# Robert Michels and the Iron Law of Oligarchy

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# Robert Michels and the Iron Law of Oligarchy

**Abstract**
[Excerpt] Resource mobilization, a dominant theoretical approach to the study of social movements for many decades, points to social movement organizations (SMOs) as a focal point for efforts to understand the variations in both the impact and fate of social movements. SMOs, like other types of political organizations, are expected to represent members' common preferences for some specified social change, acting to bring about such change through influence on formal political decision-making, or on general behaviors of the members of a polity, or on both. In this context, the classic analysis offered by Robert Michels ([1911] 1962) of typical evolutionary processes in the governance of political organizations, and the impact of such processes on organizations' goals, is very relevant to scholars of social movements. Early studies of social movements often drew heavily on Michels' work, documenting and fleshing out the nature of the evolutionary processes he posited, and the transformational consequences for social movements. Concern with movement transformation has been less dominant in contemporary work, despite a lack of evidence that such processes are any less operative in current movement organizations. Below, the key processes involved in what Michels' referred to as the "iron law of oligarchy" are sketched, followed by a brief discussion of some of the implications of this analysis for social movement researchers.

**Keywords**
social movement organizations, SMOs, Robert Michels, iron law of oligarchy

**Disciplines**
Politics and Social Change

**Comments**

**Suggested Citation**

Tolbert, P. S. (2010). *Robert Michels and the iron law of oligarchy* [Electronic version]. Retrieved [insert date], from Cornell University, ILR School site: http://digitalcommons.ilr.cornell.edu/articles/397/

**Required Publisher Statement**

Copyright held by Wiley-Blackwell. Final version to be published as: Tolbert, P. S. (in press). Robert Michels and the iron law of oligarchy. In D. Snow, D. Della Porta, B. Klandermans & D. McAdam (Eds.), *Blackwell Encyclopedia of Social and Political Movements*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.

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# Robert Michels and the Iron Law of Oligarchy

Forthcoming, Blackwell Encyclopedia of Social and Political Movements (eds., David A. Snow, Donatella Della Porta, Bert Klandermans and Doug McAdam)

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Resource mobilization, a dominant theoretical approach to the study of social movements for many decades, points to social movement organizations (SMOs) as a focal point for efforts to understand the variations in both the impact and fate of social movements. SMOs, like other types of political organizations, are expected to represent members' common preferences for some specified social change, acting to bring about such change through influence on formal political decision-making, or on general behaviors of the members of a polity, or on both. In this context, the classic analysis offered by Robert Michels ([1911] 1962) of typical evolutionary processes in the governance of political organizations, and the impact of such processes on organizations' goals, is very relevant to scholars of social movements. Early studies of social movements often drew heavily on Michels' work (e.g., Messinger, 1955; Sills, 1957; Zald and Denton, 1963), documenting and fleshing out the nature of the evolutionary processes he posited, and the transformational consequences for social movements. Concern with movement transformation has been less dominant in contemporary work, despite a lack of evidence that such processes are any less operative in current movement organizations. Below, the key processes involved in what Michels' referred to as the "iron law of oligarchy" are sketched, followed by a brief discussion of some of the implications of this analysis for social movement researchers.

Drawing on his own disillusioning experiences as a member and supporter of a socially liberal political party in early 20th century Germany, Michels described a number of conditions and processes that inevitably impelled (in his view) even the most democratically-committed organizations to become divided into a set of elites, or oligarchs, with their own set of distinctive interests in the organization, and the rest of the membership, whose labor and resources are exploited by the elites. The first condition precipitating the drift to such an oligarchical system is, ironically, success in recruiting new members to the organization's cause. As organizations grow, the ability of members to participate equally in organizational decisions becomes progressively more difficult, both because it is hard to find a place and time for all members to assemble and because decision-making is significantly slowed – not infrequently to a standstill – as the number of decision-makers increases. The usual response is to such problems is delegation of responsibility to a relatively small subset of members for formulating and recommending lines of action. Although members may attempt to maintain democratic control by demanding extensive explanations for leaders' proposals and maintaining ultimate voting rights on these, a number of forces militate against such control.

First, as a very large body of research on organizations has documented, increases in organizational size lead to increases in complexity – the creation of separate, specialized

positions and units to carry out different tasks – as well as to increases in rules and formal processes. Thus, effective administration requires both hard-to-gain, specialized knowledge of these aspects of the organization (Michels referred to this as "administrative secrets"), and what are often scarce organizing talents, such as the ability to manage interpersonal relations and to conduct logistical planning. This limits the ability of rank-and-file members to challenge leaders' recommendations or decisions, and to replace them; thus, power increasingly inheres in the leadership.

Moreover, once ensconced, leaders are likely to acquire vested interests in maintaining their positions in the organization. As with complexity and formalization, increasing organizational size also typically leads to the creation of full-time administrative positions; thus, office-holding becomes a means through which incumbents make their livelihood. Michels argued that this, in turn, makes it likely that the leaders will ultimately recognize their common interests in maintaining their positions within the organization, and develop a sense of solidarity with one another (becoming, in Marxian terminology, like a *classe fur sich*). As such, they are inclined to act cohesively in fending off criticisms and warding off displacement efforts by the membership. If serious challenges are not readily suppressed, the leaders may resort to cooptation of individual rank-and-file members, thus effectively hobbling lower-level resistance. Because their continued position also depends on the survival of the organizations, Michels also suggested that leaders of once-radical protest organizations are likely to guide them in an increasingly conservative direction, to minimize chances of state or general social sanctioning, and the ultimate disbanding of the organization. Given these commonplace evolutionary developments in organizations, Michel was led to the famous, pessimistic conclusion ([1911] 1962: 365), "He who says organization, says oligarchy."

As noted at the outset, Michels' analysis has provided the basis for a number of classic studies documenting the evolution and transformation of social movements; it has also generated efforts to define conditions that may mitigate the postulated evolutionary processes (see Lipset, Trow and Coleman, 1956; Rothschild-Whitt, 1979). (For an extended discussion of Michels' arguments and the implications for studies of hierarchical economic organizations, see Tolbert and Hiatt, 2009). It has been revisited, although somewhat less directly, in research and debates on the advantages and disadvantages of the use of professional employees by social movement organizations (e.g., Jenkins, 1977; McAdam, 1983; Staggenborg, 1988). A key implication of

Michels' work for social movement researchers, however, has been given only limited attention: the need to understand sources of variations in governance arrangements, and their impact on SMO decision-making processes and outcomes. Some progress has begun to be made on this front (e.g., Carmin and Balser, 2002; Jasper, 2004; Osterman, 2006), and recent studies have explicitly called for more work (Minkoff and McCarthy, 2005), but it remains an important, largely unexplored legacy of Michels.

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