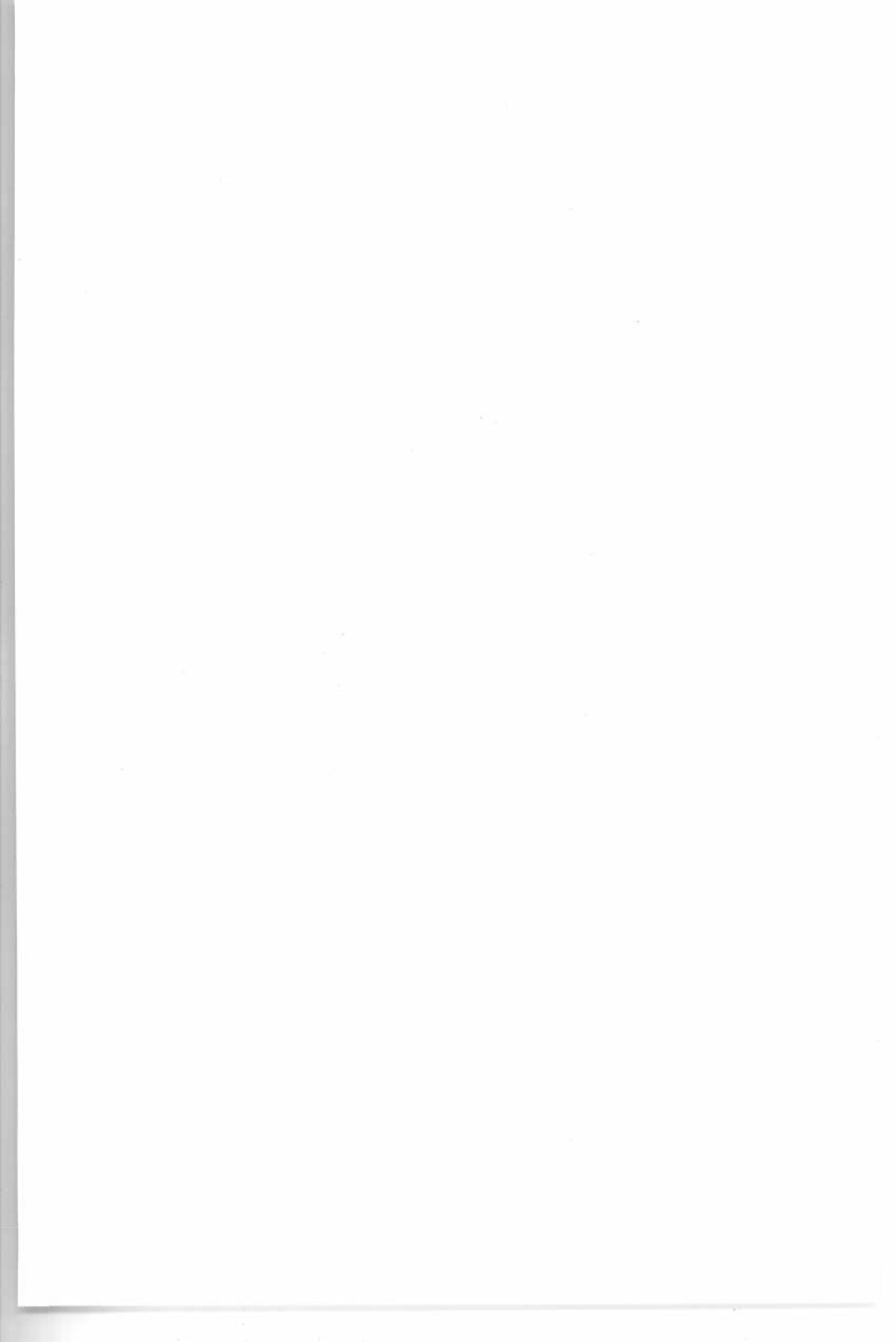# PART III

# LIMITS AND POSSIBILITIES OF DEMOCRACY

# ON THE INTELLIGIBILITY OF OLIGARCHY
# AND DICTATORSHIP

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## TWO CHALLENGES TO DEMOCRACY

Criticism of democracy was a permanent theme of intellectual discussion in the early 20th century Germany. In this essay I shall discuss two famous examples of this critique in this context, *Robert Michels'* theory of oligarchy and *Carl Schmitt's* theory of sovereign dictatorship. Neither one of them has lost its worth as an earnest challenge to the attempt to justify democracy.

My intention is not to appraise the merits and demerits of democracy, but — in the tradition of phenomenology — to understand the conceptual bases of oligarchy and dictatorship as moments of political action. I shall first try to reconstruct Michels' and Schmitt's own views on the foundations of oligarchy and dictatorship. I shall then appraise both views in light of a comprehensive approach towards the understanding and the intelligibility of politics and history, *Jean-Paul Sartre's* program in the *Critique de la raison dialectique* (for the difference between understanding and intelligibility, see esp. Sartre 1960, 160—162). This work contains a general program for intelligibility on the basis of a reflection of the experiences of the individual as well substantial discussions surprisingly close to the problematics of both Michels and Schmitt.

The approach is not exegetic but problem-oriented. My key idea is that the problems of oligarchy and dictatorship are closely related to the core of the concept of the political but to different aspects (in this respect the essay can be read in the light of an earlier paper, cf. Palonen 1983). In oligarchy the relations between men are at a stage; in dictatorship that of the internal logic of political action itself. With this heuristic key I shall try to reconstruct the views of Michels, Schmitt and Sartre and to appraise the solutions to the problem of intelligibility.

MICHELS ON OLIGARCHY

Robert Michels speaks in his *Zur Soziologie des Parteiwesens in der modernen Demokratie* about oligarchy both as an »iron law» (Michels 1911, 362) and as a »tendency» (Michels 1911, e.g. 12). My interpretation is that only the latter form is correct and that even Michels himself fundamentally understood this. The phenomenon of oligarchy cannot be understood as a »sociological law» in the sense of »laws of nature» independent of intentions and consciousness of actors, but only as an internal tendency in political action.

> »Wer Organisation sagt, sagt ohnehin Tendenz zur Oligarchie.» (Michels 1911, 32)

This is perhaps the most famous sentence in Michels' book. Indeed it crystallizes his basic idea. As we see, the thesis does not assert identity between organization and oligarchy. The link between them is not a pure logical relation but a »tendency». However, this tendency is something more than a mere empirical connection, it is something »necessary». Michels asserts a kind of unity between organization and oligarchy, one not based on identity, rather on their opposite.

A clue for understanding a tendency of this kind can be found in the ambiguity of the concept of »organization». This word can be given both the »substantive» meaning of a ready-made »organization» and the »verbal» meaning of a process of organizing. My claim is that Michels' thesis makes sense only if »organization» is understood in the latter meaning.

A ready-made organization's relation to oligarchy could be either logical or empirical but not a necessary tendency. This is something to be understood only in relation to the process of organizing, as a tendency within this process. According to Michels, the relationship between organization and oligarchy is asymmetric: the process of organizing is primary and its internal tendency towards oligarchy a secondary, although necessary phenomenon. The »tendency towards oligarchy» is understandable as an internal structure of the organization process which turns it against its original intention.

This asymmetry is reflected in the asymmetry of Michels' research problems. He is not interested in the oligarchy of any organization per se, but the striking phenomenon for him is the appearance of the tendency towards oligarchy in radical and revolutionary organizations — and perhaps in its most marked forms just then. The core of his problematics is formulated in the following passage:

»Die sozialrevolutionären und demokratischen Parteien erblicken theoretisch ihren wesentlichen Lebenszweck in der Bekämpfung der Oligarchie in allen ihren Formen. Es entsteht die Frage, wie ist es zu erklären, dass sie die gleichen von ihnen befehdeten Tendenzen in sich selbst entwickeln.» (Michels 1911, 12)

For Michels oligarchy in conservative organizations is a »normal» phenomenon. He is exclusively concerned with the question of why this phenomenon manifests itself also in revolutionary organizations despite the policy of fighting oligarchic structures. Why is the general tendency of organizations stronger than the policy of overthrowing oligarchic structures?

This »why» can be understood both as a question of causality and as one of intelligibility, as a problem of the conceptual basis of the oligarchic tendency. The problem of intelligibility is discussed by Michels only in the few pages dealing with »technical and organizational explanations» for oligarchic tendency (Michels 1911, 21—23). The main part dealing with mass psychology, etc., is not concerned with the problem of constituting oligarchy but only with that of strengthening it.

Michels makes more precise his »unity of opposites» thesis with the following dramatic description of the basic situation of all left wing politics:

»Aber das politisch notwendige Prinzip der Organisation, welches die Skylla der den Gegner begünstigenden Organisationslosigkeit der Massen vermeidet, bringt alle Gefahren des Charybdis in sich. In der Tat, die Quelle, aus der sich die konservativen Wasserläufer in die Ebene der Demokratie ergiessen, um dort bisweilen verheerende Überschwemmungen zu verursachen, die die Ebene bis zur Unkenntlichkeit entstellen, heisst Organisation.» (Michels 1911, 22—23)

With this Odysseian metaphor Michels frankly describes a basic dilemma of all left wing politics. The tendency towards oligarchy is a necessary structure of »organized» politics, in the sense that its subjects, sooner or later, in some form or another, face the situation of being caught between Scylla and Charybdis, between the passivity of non-organization and the frozen activity of organization dominated by the tendency towards oligarchy.

But Michels says very little about the reasons why radical politics are obliged to confront this dilemma. The basic idea behind his argumentation could, however, be reconstructed as a kind of »dialectics of number». In other words, both organization and oligarchy are concerned with forms of relations between men, and these forms are for Michels obviously dependent on the number of people participating in the organization.

However, Michels' argument is different from the so-called »law of great numbers» and also from the so-called »law of turning quantity into quality»,

even if both ideas are included in it. His starting point is an assumption relying on the »force of the masses» which could be reconstructed on the basis of the idea »to be more numerous is to be more powerful». This is the basis for the necessity of common action, of »organization», as a means of emancipation:

> »Nur indem die Proletarier sich zur Masse zusammenballen und ihrem Aggregat eine Struktur verleihen, enthalten sie politische Widerstandskraft und soziale Würde. Die Bedeutung und Grösse der Arbeiterschaft liegt lediglich in ihr Zahl.» (Michels 1911, 22)

The unconditional validity of this assumption is not doubted by Michels and admittedly just the necessity of organizing the workers gives strength to his assertion of the oligarchic tendency. The originality of Michels lies in a clear insight that the growth of the number of the participants in organizations should be judged also from the viewpoint of the internal relations between those participants. The »dialectics of number» begins by an understanding that the growth of the number of members means both a greater strength outwards and a new passivity inwards — with a tendency that the latter aspect »grows more rapidly» and questions even the intended strength outwards.

The tendency towards oligarchy thus means a kind of »devaluation» of the force of organizing from within. The »necessity» of this tendency lies in that it cannot be extinguished (even if it can be diminished or postponed) by clever forms of organization or by counter-measures against oligarchy. The oligarchic tendency is something which, sooner or later, in some form or another, works its way through these kinds of empirical obstacles or changes them to forms in which it manifests itself (cf. the discussion of »prophylactic» measures in anarchism and syndicalism in Michels 1911).

Let us take a closer consideration of the manifestations of the »dialectics of number». When only the number of participants is counted, the contribution of individuals in an organization is regarded only as a quantitative one: quality and intensity of their engagement is not considered. The significance of this fact for the internal relations between members in the organization lies in the relative devaluation of the participation as far as the number of the participants grows.

To participate as a rank-and-file member, »as a number», in a mass movement is not so different from being non-organized from the individual's point of view. On the other hand, the more »numbers» an organization counts, the fewer chances each one of them has to form the policy of the organization. Thus the greater the number of members in an organization, the less they are able to understand the reason for participating personally and intensively in the politics of the organization.

Structures like these justify Michels' conclusion:

»Die Impotenz der direkten Demokratie resultiert zunächst wie die Potenz der indirekten — aus der Zahl.» (Michels 1911, 26)

With this conclusion Michels asserts that organization and oligarchy have the same conceptual basis. The tendency towards oligarchy is to be understood as »internal» specifically in this sense.

My interpretation is that Michels himself understood that the basis of intelligibility of the tendency towards oligarchy is the »dialectics of number». But are these dialectics really »deep enough» to be a foundation for intelligibility?

It appears that Michels still sees the connection between the organizing process and oligarchic tendency as too direct. The number alone does not turn masses of workers into a »labour movement»; »organization» as a process is not additive but a process of mediation. It is also doubtful whether the significance of the number is linear, as Michels seems to assume.


## SARTRE ON THE »LEAP» BETWEEN THE SECOND AND THE THIRD

In Jean-Paul Sartre's description on the conditions and the forms of »group praxis», we easily detect a structural similarity with Michels' Scylla-and-Charybdis dilemma. But Sartre uses a multilevel approach based on a more formal discussion of relations between men in political action. His *Critique* can thus be read both as a criticism of Michels and as an »answer» to him which develops a more nuanced »theory of oligarchy».

In a Sartrean perspective, Michels' conception of oligarchy appears as too voluntaristic and too mechanistic as well. Michels does not reflect the conditions of organization among the masses: the mere consciousness of the need of organization is not enough and even it cannot be present in all situations. So the very act of organizing, in Sartre's words, the transition from the »exis» of a collective into the »praxis» of a group, becomes problematic.[1]

Michels' view appears mechanistic in its linear assumption of the growth of the number. Even Sartre uses a kind of »dialectics of number» but his originality lies in the assumption denying the linearity in the growth of the number in a specified way. Describing the relations between men in terms of ordinal numbers Sartre claims that there is a *qualitative leap* between the »second» and the »third».

Generally speaking, Sartre's intensive concern with the relational problematics between men is linked with his program of understanding politics and history from the forms of individuals' experiences and actions. The relational

approach allows him to avoid both the atomistic forms of »individualism» and also all kinds of supra-individual assumptions about groups and societies. In *Critique* his general problem of intelligibility is to understand even extreme forms of reification and alienation on the basis of a combination of individuals' actions on the material world and their relations to each other (cf. Sartre 1943, 464—482, where he still sees the triad as a basis of an object but not of a subject relation).

The key idea of the *Critique* concerning the relations between men is that the »second» and the »third», i.e. the dyadic and the triadic aspect, are equally constitutive:

> »La formation binaire, comme relation immédiate d'homme à homme, est fondement necessaire de toute relation ternaire; mais inversement celle-ci, comme médiation de l'homme entre les hommes, est le fond sur lequel la réciprocité se reconnait elle-même comme liaison réciprocique.» (Sartre 1960, 189)

For Sartre all forms of relations between men are based on dyadic and triadic relations. The couple, »the 'second'—the 'third'», forms a nexus on which rely all more complex relations with their different links to the actions on the material world. In these relations the character and the significance of action depends on the internal link of the dyadic and triadic aspects to one other.

A marginal case is one where the »third» has been »absorbed» by the »second» and has thus lost its autonomous significance (Sartre 1960, 398). This is realized in a situation where the actors experience both the others and also themselves as »others for each other», i.e., alien both for the others and for themselves. This situation is described by Sartre as follows:

> »Chacun est identique à l'Autre en tant qu'il est fait par les autres, Autre agissant sur les Autres.» (Sartre 1960, 314)

This situation, where the triadic aspect is absorbed by the dyadic, is the basic relational structure of the experience of »seriality». The relation between people as »members» in a series is like one between numbers. In terms of action these people form a »collective», a heap of people collected together by a factor (like a factory) which is alien to all of them and which keeps them in serial relations with each other. The seriality is the structure of inaction, making both individual and united action against the status of a passive collective impossible.

In relational terms, the point of Sartre's description of seriality is that the relation between the »second» and the »third» is »internal», even if it is not reciprocal (Sartre 1960, 197). The status where the »third» is absorbed by the

»second» is no stable one, for the »third» may regain its significance. This is the relational basis for a break from seriality. But the reappearance of the »third» is bound with a specific situation of action, where people in a series are threatened by a new »common danger» of losing even the minimal advantages present in the actual series. The significance of the »liberation» of the third is for Sartre decisive:

> »Or le danger commun, en constituant la Chose ouvrée, comme totalité totalisante, ne supprime d'abord la sérialité, ni au niveau de l'individu isolé ni à celui de la réciprocité: il arrache chacun à son Etre-Autre en tant qu'il est tiers par rapport à une certaine constellation de réciprocités; en un mot, il libère la relation ternaire comme libre realité interindividuelle, comme rapport humain immédiat.» (Sartre 1960, 398)

The liberation of the »third» means the liberation of a »human» relation within a reified one. It then is possible to turn the common flight from the threated situation into an active flight, to break with the collective (and form a group). The regaining of autonomy of the triadic aspect is decisive for formation of that new form of experience called »group praxis», in Michels' terms, »organization» of individuals for united action.

To act as a »third» in the process of dissolution of series and formation of group means that the individual acts as an initiator, a mediator and a regulator towards others. He holds a certain distance not only to the collective but also to the group in which he, however, participates himself:

> »Ainsi . . . je ne suis intégré totalement au groupe decouvert et actualisé par la praxis ni totalement transcendent. Je ne suis pas une partie d'une totalité-objet et il n'y a pas, pour moi, de totalité-objet transcendente: en fait le groupe n'est pas mon objet: il est la structure communitaire de mon acte.» (Sartre 1960, 403)

The special significance of the »third» leads Sartre to a different »dialectics of number» than Michels'. The »third» brings a moment of intensity and personal engagement even into the participation of the group praxis. Above all, Sartre does not and cannot rely on a simple »force of the masses». When the group is created through an »activist» revolt within the collective it cannot rely on the force of all the »members» of the collective but only on those who personally engage in the break with the serial structure, i.e., act at least to some extent as a »third» themselves. For Sartre it is obvious that a group is always smaller than the collective from which it is recruited. There are also structural limits concerning distance for a group in the process of »fusion»: it is always »here and now» (cf. e.g. Sartre 1960, 418). Personal engagement demands a kind of personal element in the triadic relation to others that cannot be extended *ad infinitum*.

Transition from collective to group means thus that even the force of the number is replaced by the intensity of the activity. But within the activity intense enough for group formation the growth of the number becomes significant as Sartre clarifies with his example of the importance of the number of participants in a demonstration (Sartre 1960, 405).

Sartre also tries to show how the status of being »like a number» has a totally different meaning in a group than in the collective. To enlarge the number of the participants in a group appears as an »internalization of the number», where the quantity itself is experienced by everyone as a form of intensity (Sartre 1960, 422). When the number is a conscious instrument of the group, it itself is »multiplicité non quantifiable» (Sartre 1960, 424).

That the group in itself is an unstable phenomenon is a result of the individual and relational foundations of the group praxis:

»Un groupe *n'est pas* . . . : il se totalise sans cesse et disparaît par éclatment (dispersion) ou par ossification (inertie).» (Sartre 1960, 429).

This quotation contains a Sartrean version of the Odysseian dilemma of the group action. In order to maintain itself (not to dissolve into a collective again) the group has to change its form — and even this way it cannot stabilize itself but dissolves itself through the slow form of ossification, directly analogous to the Michelsian tendency towards oligarchy. Even in this process the triadic relation plays a constitutive role worth a closer interpretation.

Between the dyad and the triad there are no reciprocal relations but the »third» is also an »embryo of hierarchy» (Sartre 1960, 197). Acting as a »third», as an initiator, mediator and a regulator, contains per se a potential of hierarchy towards others. The internal development of the group praxis means a step-wise actualization of this potential and simultaneously a relative change in the significance of the »third» from a liberating to a hierarchic moment in the group praxis. This ambivalence of the triadic relation when it constitutes both the group praxis and its relative self-devaluation is for Sartre the common basis of »organization» and »oligarchy».

More specifically the process of »devaluation» of the group praxis is for Sartre non-linear, too. It contains definite formal stages of development, each of them based on an attempt to »re-vitalize» the group praxis through a new creative form of triadic relation. But every »invention» of this kind contains in this process more hierarchy and less liberation than the earlier one.

In the first »group-in-fusion» stage Sartre sees no conflict between individual freedom and group praxis. The praxis of the others is experienced as a multiplication of one's own powers to act. The key to this marginal situation is specifically the »third»:

»Par sa praxis, et en elle, le tiers affirme dans le groupe l'indistinction de l'acte individuel et l'acte commun.» (Sartre 1960, 419)

Another structure of the »liberating third» is the absence of leadership in the »group-in-fusion», for »everyone is the third for each other» (Sartre 1960, 408—409). The triadic position circulates among the participants of the group so that to act as an initiator, mediator or regulator for common action does not mean any permanent authority. When someone seizes the opportunity and cries »Á la Bastille!», to follow this cry does not mean obedience (Sartre 1960, 408).

The »group-in-fusion» is, however, a merely transitory stage in the group praxis. Soon after the avoidance of the threat the group »begins to reflect on itself» and starts to worry about its preservation and then new structures appear (cf. Sartre 1960, 432—435).

The group as »object for itself» is called by Sartre the »oath group» (groupe assermenté). Every individual freely limits his own future freedom by an oath: the members of the group are given the license even to kill the other, in his own name, if he becomes a traitor of the group. The oath affirms the equality, the »brotherhood» of the group members. As for »brothers», the group members are still everyone »the third for each others». But the reverse side of the brotherhood is »fraternité-terreur» against the traitors and re-negades (for the term, cf. Sartre 1960, 455—459). The execution of this terror leads to a specialization in the group on the basis of control and punishment.

In this way, division of labor and hierarchy creeps into the group, and the oligarchic potential of the »third» actualizes itself. It is perhaps no accident that the next pure stage in the formal development of group praxis is called by Sartre simply »organization» or »organized group» (Sartre 1960, 459—462).

In summarizing the comparison between Michels and Sartre we see that both of them view the basis for »organizing» and »oligarchic tendency» as the same, although Sartre achieves a more complex and formal interpretation of this common basis. Sartre uses the concepts of »organizing» and »organization» both in the wider and also in the narrower sense. If »organizing» is a synonym for the formation of a group praxis in general, the tendency towards oligarchy is present from the beginning of the process. When »organization» is under-stood as a special stage in the development of the group praxis, Sartre asserts that the hierarchic potential of the triadic relation actualizes itself precisely at that stage.

SCHMITT ON SOVEREIGN DICTATORSHIP

The discussion related to Michels assumes implicitly that oligarchy is something concerned with the relations between men in political action. But we may ask whether oligarchy or — more generally — antidemocratic structures appear only at the relational level. Are they not contained in the internal structure of political action? To claim that it is so is the core of Carl Schmitt's thesis of sovereign dictatorship.

In order to understand the problematics of action in politics let us first discuss the general problem concerning its continuous and discontinuous aspects. This problem has, of course, been known even since the era of the Eleatic philosophy of space and time. It appears on various levels: in history as a dualism of events and processes, in action as a dualism between single acts and tendencies and specifically in politics as a dualism between decisions and »involutions»[2] which »devaluate» the decisions. (Tendencies and »involutions» are to be understood as special forms of processes. The more general term is also used here instead of these).

The ability to »realize» a decision in politics is of course countered by the action of the »counter-subject» and by the fact that a correlate of the discontinuity of decisions is a relatively stable »policy» — a kind of decision about tendencies to be followed.[3] But when these dimensions are contained in the very framework of the political situation, they are also to be taken into account when making decisions. The involution does not concern the »realization» of decisions but the very significance of the act of deciding is denied by it.

We can discern two different cases of involution. In the first one, the significance of a decision runs counter to its intention, so the decision is »turned against itself»: to decide or not to decide means no difference in the result. But there may be a still stronger case where a decision is »overruled» to the extent that it is turned into a moment affirming a tendency instead of countering it.

Michels' theory of oligarchy appears primarily if not exclusively to be concerned with the first type of involution. My interpretation is that he does not consciously reflect upon the decision problematics, and therefore does not grasp the more radical possibility of involution: according to Michels, only a policy is overruled by tendencies, while the decisions to adopt a policy and to organize the workers are considered rather trivial. In an action perspective these decisions, however, appear as constitutive moments, to which both policy and oligarchic tendency are related.

Carl Schmitt's problem situation could be interpreted such that men in the

contemporary world are living in an ocean of processes and tendencies where the very possibility of making a decision not to be »devaluated» by these tendencies and processes is questioned. How to make a strong, conscious decision possible? Schmitt personalizes the question in the form, »who is able to make a decision»? The core of Schmitt's answer is: only the sovereign dictator.

To understand this thesis, let us look at Schmitt's intellectual horizon. The origins of his »decisionism» can be traced to his Habilitationsschrift *Gesetz und Urteil*. Here Schmitt is concerned with the purely juridical problem of understanding juridical decisions: he rejects the subsumption model which understands the judge's decisions only as interpretations of the law in single cases and stresses the irreductible autonomy of the judge's decisions. Therefore, it is less important whether the judge's decision is »right»; that it is made by him is important (Schmitt 1912, 63).

In *Gesetz und Urteil* the decisions of the judges are, however, controlled by an assumption of how »another judge of competent schooling» would have decided. In his writings after the First World War Schmitt turns from jurisprudence to politics and takes away from the decision situation both the legislation and the peer group of judges. The political actor has to make a decision himself, without any possibility of relying on earlier decisions, principles, or on discussion with others about the course of action. His decision is

> »eine reine, nicht räsonnierende und nicht diskutierende, sich nicht rechtfertigende, also aus dem Nichts geschaffene absolute Entscheidung.» (Schmitt 1922, 83)

Related to my reconstruction of Schmitt's general problem situation, the point of this kind of a »pure decision» is that only a »pure» decision is able to break off the processes and tendencies, i.e., only a pure decision is not liable to devaluate itself. The ability and readiness to decide is dependent on the understanding of the »purity» of decision making, the dramatic break with all kinds of stabilizing, continuous aspects of the situation, which give the illusion of lessening the »burden» of decision.

But who is able and ready to make such a decision? No democratic and egalitarian »decision makers» are ready for it since their whole activity depends on discussion and reasoning. Only a dictator who does not have to cast any side-long looks is able and ready to take a decision. But the concept of sovereign dictator — as distinguished from a mere commissary dictator (cf. Schmitt 1921) — is not a position external to the situation but rather is defined by his dramatic decision:

»Souverän ist, wer über den Ausnahmezustand entscheidet.» (Schmitt 1922, 11)

While Michels suggests that an »involution» of democracy results »from the back», through the oligarchic tendency, Schmitt claims that only a dictator is able to make genuine dramatic decisions. Does a decision perspective lead to a view that any democracy is a priori impossible?

Schmitt's critique of the »progressive» thinkers of the 18th and 19th century is basically founded on the view that they are not conscious of the need for decision making: for them man is good and history a process of progress (cf. Schmitt 1919 and Schmitt 1922). In this respect Schmitt is right; without the discontinuous aspect of decision one fails to understand politics as an open and novel action situation (cf. Palonen 1983).

The sovereign dictator as a paradigm for political agents may, however, be questioned on other grounds. Above all, Schmitt's concepts of »decision» and »situation» appear problematic.

In the decision situation as described by Carl Schmitt there is no genuine self-reflection between several alternatives for action. »Decisiveness» in acting is *a priori* preferred to hesitating in the choice. The agent does not really choose his course of action in the decision situation; he »has already chosen» his course and the problem is only in affirming this decision in a situation where he is facing the strong tendencies to be broken.[4] No wonder that counter-revolutionary thinkers for Schmitt are the purest »decisionists» (cf. esp. Schmitt 1922, 69—84).

In other words, Schmitt says nothing about an open situation of new choices. He is not interested in questions of »what to choose» or »how to choose», but only in the question of who is ready and able to make a decision. The earlier questions are no simpler problems for a sovereign dictator than for others.

The sovereign dictator for Schmitt appears as the most obvious candidate for making decisions in the face of »drifting» tendencies and processes. But by using the sovereign dictator as a paradigm for politics the decision situation itself is extremely simplified: the only real question appears to be who is able to become the dictator. We may ask how different this situation is from the drifting world of processes and tendencies for the decision consciousness in politics.

Another aspect of Schmitt's decisionism is his interpretation of decision as a choice of a definite course of action. In other words, deciding means for Schmitt the *closing* of an open situation, a declaration of a state of emergency in order to put an end to »chaos and anarchy» (Schmitt 1922, 18—19), to suppress subversive tendencies and to re-create a real »political unity» (poli-

tische Einheit).

There is something odd in this view. Decision for Schmitt is something based on a maximal openness – in order to suppress all openness in the future. A sovereign decision is – in the ideal case – simultaneously the final decision: a return to an order where no further decisions are needed. But even this kind of decision turns in a certain sense against itself. This fact is grasped by Schmitt when he talks about his favorite thinker, *Donoso Cortes* and other counter-revolutionary »decisionists»:

>»Sie steigern das Moment der Dezision so stark, dass es schliesslich den Gedanken der Legitimität, von dem sie ausgegangen sind aufhebt.» (Schmitt 1922, 83)

Contrary to Schmitt's asymmetric view focusing on the closing aspect of the decision, we could stress that a decision also creates new openness. Even if at the level of facts the case may be definitely decided in a certain way, this very decision would also shift the horizon of possibilities by transition into a new decision situation. No matter what the direction of the decision is, this decision as a transitory moment between situations also creates new openness for the actor in a new situation.

In Schmitt's terms this appearance of the new openness as a by-product of a decision is just an involution of the decision. But it is nevertheless no argument against this possibility. On the contrary, we could see the critical limits of Schmitt's paradigm of decision by a sovereign dictator in his voluntarism which does not do justice to the open character of the political situation. It tries rather to close it by a dictation from above. What is needed is a view of the decision aspect of politics which admits the permanent character of the danger in involution and also does justice to the opening aspect of the decision.

## SARTRE ON THE DIALECTICS BETWEEN OPENING AND CLOSING THE SITUATION

The concepts of decision and situation are the intellectual link between Schmitt and »existential philosophy», even if the more exact contents of those concepts differ considerably. I have not found any discussion concerning Schmitt by French »existential phenomenologists», but Sartre has at least indirectly discussed some of Schmitt's key problems. In any case, the decision aspect is central for Sartre's philosophy of freedom:

>»Pour la realité-humaine, être c'est se choisir.» (Sartre 1943, 495)

Sartre's famous view that man is »condemned to freedom» (Sartre 1943,

612) and even obliged to »choose to be born» (Sartre 1943, 614) are militant expressions of his awareness of the significance of decisions in human action. On the other hand, his view has nothing in common with voluntarism when arguing that freedom is always a freedom »in situation» (Sartre 1943, esp. 538—546). The »realization» of choices is not important; freedom rather consists in the initiation of acts (Sartre 1943, 540). We could speak of Sartre's horizon model of a decision situation, where there is no attempt at total control of the solution and every act changes the horizon of action.

This philosophy of *L'être et le néant* can still be recognized in *Critique* but the phenomenological »brackets» are changed so that the empirical significance of choices is taken earnestly, forming then the core of the political aspect of freedom. In other words, Sartre is now conscious of the possibilities of involution in the decisions, which is especially expressed in his concept of »counter-finality» (cf. esp. Sartre 1960, 102). One of the main intentions of the book can thus be seen as an attempt to penetrate as deeply as possible the intelligibility of human freedom's self-domestication through these processes of involution of decisions.

From the action-perspective the concept of series describes a situation where human decisions are experienced as irrelevant or even as realizations of unfreedom. In a series, decisions may be repetitive but they also may somewhat differ from one another: the point is that this range of variation for decisions does not matter. The result is the same — the re-affirmation of the experience of seriality. Nor it is even significant whether this range of variation is experienced as a false hope or as total hopelessness (cf. esp. Sartre 1960, 351—377).

Still, we can argue that there are limits for this self-devaluation of decisions. The realization of a tendency through choices affirming this process is still something different from its realization independent of any choices. Even if the result of the serial process is »given», the way to realize this necessary tendency is not indifferent: it gives a minimum of autonomy for even insignificant decisions in result.[5]

A preservation of the consciousness of making even minimal choices is for Sartre obviously a condition for the break from the series and for the birth of group praxis. If awareness of decisions is lost, we hardly can imagine the kind of opportunity grasped in converting the common danger into a flight away from the collective — even if it is only the purpose of just »taking a breath». From this point of view the transition (or attempted transition) from collective to group means both a revaluation of the decision and a revision of the form of decision. The »affirmative» decisions submitted to seriality are »positive», closing decisions for a definite solution, whereas

genuine decisions revolting against the submission are decisions *breaking* with the process of seriality.

The decision against seriality is the paradigm for Sartre's view on decisions, as it reaffirms that freedom of decision which is present for the individual when bracketed from social relations (cf. Sartre's description of it in »materialist» terms in Sartre 1960, 165—177). This decision attempting to break with the collective is converse to the decision of Schmitt's sovereign to »restore the order» by a state of emergency. Those involved in a flight from a collective cannot have any definite views about where they are going — the stage of »group-in-fusion» excludes a definite goal — and they do not even exclude the presence of seriality in their actions and experiences. The point is that the decision to capture initiative, to break with the process of seriality, means a radical opening in the horizon of the agent's possibilities. Not new acts but new horizons are the decisive experience.

But even if Sartre and Schmitt have converse paradigms for decision situations (and correspondingly for political action in general), their position is not symmetric. Sartre's program of »intellection» certainly allows a dualist character of the decision. His view can be reconstructed so that the different emphasis on the opening and closing aspects of the decision refers to different decision situations.

This relativization of decisions helps to make more precise the formal history of the group praxis. This view is closely linked with the internal development of the significance of the triadic aspect on the relational side: these processes are rightly understood only if the »role» of the »third» is based on a description of corresponding decisions.

The devaluation of decisions in the course of group praxis is realized in two forms. The simpler one is the mere routinization of decisions which appears within each pure stage of the development in relation to the »initial decision» constituting the transition to that stage. This process of routinization is answered by a decision to move to a new stage in the group praxis. The other form of devaluation of decisions concerns just these counter-attacks against routinization. The formal structure of the initial decision is a similar break to the initial decision to break away from a collective, but the »opening power» of a decision diminishes and the »closure» becomes stronger with every new move to a new stage of development. Thus the formal internal history of group praxis is characterized by a tendency of decisions to move from the opening to a closing direction at two different levels.

The closure of decisions in the group is introduced already at the oath group level in »protecting» the group by trying to eliminate remnants of seriality from the actions of the members (cf. Sartre 1960, 439—452). Thus

the conscious decision to fight seriality contains already a turn towards the re-appearance of seriality in group praxis.

While the relational aspect is strategically interested in the stage of »organization», the decision aspect sees the last stage in the formal development of group praxis, »institution», in a key position. Especially the state as a paradigm institution, as a »manipulating group» (Sartre 1960, 612—613) is based on the idea of »quasi-sovereignty», i.e. on decisions of people partly inside, partly already outside the group itself (Sartre 1960, 588—589). The decisions of this quasi-sovereign aim at strengthening the existing seriality, i.e. at the prevention of emergence of opportunities for breaking with the collective.

In this terminology again there appears a similarity with the converse position, Schmitt's paradigm for the decision situation. Sartre's program is able to make the Schmittian sovereign's decision intelligible as a decision situation exclusively oriented to the closure of the situation and »located» there where the group praxis turns to prevent the appearance of new groups.

Conversely, it appears interesting to complete Sartre's view on decisions with Schmitt's idea of closing the situation by defining friend and foe and by determining the intensity of this conflict relation (cf. Schmitt 1932). In the Sartrean perspective this kind of definition of a diffuse conflict situation by closing the fronts through a decision of a quasi-sovereign signifies both a further closure of even those minimal possibilities of choice allowed within a collective and a challenge which may be interpreted just as that new danger which provokes attempts to flee and break away from the collective.

Compared with the relational aspect by Sartre we now also see the primary significance of the decision aspect. Every liberation of the »third» may be understood as the relational correlate of the liberating decisions while the tendency towards hierarchy through the »third» is the relational correlate of the »closure» of decisions.


## CONCLUSION: AGAINST »PROGRESSIVISM»

Advocates of democracy may feel consoled with my discussion. Michels' and Schmitt's challenges to democracy have been situationally relativized with the help of Sartrean categories. But this has not given any positive remedies against oligarchy and dictatorship, of course.

Michels' view on the »dialectics of number» is based on the insight — largely absent in traditional theories of democracy — that the number of subjects in politics is significant for the form of their internal relations in »organized» action. Sartre's idea is that there is a break between the »second»

and the »third» which radically modifies the conditions and internal forms of common action, while Schmitt's conception of sovereign dictatorship challenges merely the relational approach to political action.

But the real merit of all three approaches concerns the time perspective of political action. Michels, Schmitt and Sartre agree in rejecting that tradition of political strategy dominant since the 18th century which could be called »progressivism». In this tradition politics is, if not a natural process of evolution, a successful process for realizing certain programs by efforts which continuously grow stronger. If dramatic discontinuous acts are allowed, i.e., changes of program or of organization or even »revolutions», — these are understood as »leaps forward», as steps longer than others in the same process. They have no autonomous significance for dramatic decisions and situations, but they are »functionalized» into steps in a process, the progressivist tradition tends in this sense to »functionalize» all politics.

Michels' theory of oligarchy is a Trojan horse against this progressivism. By its voluntarist and mechanistic reliance on politics and organizations, it starts with typical progressivist assumptions. By asserting a tendency towards oligarchy as necessary even in progressive organizations, Michels sees that »progress» is countered by »regress» from the beginning. The politics of progressivism is therefore self-destructive.

Schmitt's decisionism with the sovereign dictator as paradigm of politics is a most dramatic expression of a keen, perhaps overdramatized, awareness of the illusory character of progress. Faith in the spontaneous process of progress is self-deception. When thinkers as radical as *Bakunin* commit themselves to the myth of progress, Schmitt sees his »last hope» in counter-revolutionaries. But Schmitt's paradigm of a strong decision in order to »restore order» leads to a new suppression of time in politics with its implicit (if not unambiguous) idea of eternal order.

Sartre's program of intelligibility does more justice both to decisions and involutions and acts and tendencies in politics, in understanding the different aspects of the »dialectics of time» in politics. But its macro-structure is asymmetric »in favour of» the breaking moments of politics. In this sense, it is just a converse figure of thought compared with that moderate progressivism allowing »leaps forward». It seems that Sartre's description of the birth and development of the group praxis has double significance: it is not only a construction of a program for intelligibility, but by using largely traditional terminology of »development», it also is a parody of the »progressivist» view of politics.

NOTES

1 This anti-objectivism is also clearly present in Sartre's writings about daily politics in all stages of his itinery of engagement, see esp. Sartre 1946; 1952–1954; 1969.
2 The term »involution» is borrowed from Agnoli 1967. It is correspondingly not used by authors discussed in the text.
3 The relations of decision and policy in politics may perhaps be compared with the Kuhnian concepts of »paradigm» and »normal science» (»normal politics»), with which Schmitt's dialectics between exceptional and normal situations has certain surprising similarities worth closer explication.
4 The »content» of decision is made more precise by Schmitt only in »Der Begriff des Politischen» as a definition of friend and foe and of the intensity of this relation, cf. Schmitt 1932, 26–28.
5 Sartre is in this respect obviously inspired by Maurice Merleau-Ponty's reflections about Bukharin's attitude towards his death during the Moscow trials, cf. Merleau-Ponty 1947.

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