



'Disfigurations' of Democracy? Pareto, Mosca and the Challenge of 'Elite Theory'

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Abstract

Considering recent re-assessments of Pareto and Mosca, I discuss whether these thinkers' socio-political orientations contribute to the 'disfiguration' of democracy (in: Urbinati, *Democracy disfigured: opinion, truth, and the people*, Harvard, Cambridge, MA, 2014) or provide a resource for the renewal of democratic institutions. Femia (Pareto and political theory, Routledge, Abingdon, 2006) presents Pareto as being in the "Machiavellian tradition of sceptical liberalism," revealing the liberal potential of Pareto's realist political theory. Finocchiaro (*Beyond right and left*, Yale, New Haven, London, 1999) ameliorates the conservative consequences of Mosca's thought by reinterpreting him as a 'democratic elitist,' who holds a conception of political liberty "as a relationship such that authority flows from the masses to the elites." Highlighting the significance of internal tensions within each thinker's work foregrounded by these readings, between the causal primacy of psychic states and the 'mutual dependence' of social factors (Pareto), and between the elite principle and 'balanced pluralism' (Mosca), I ask whether the 'sceptical liberal' Pareto or the 'democratic elitist' Mosca elude Urbinati's unpolitical, populist and plebiscitarian 'disfigurations' of democracy.

Keywords Pareto · Mosca · Elitism · Democracy · Femia · Finocchiaro

1 Introduction

In *Democracy Disfigured*, Nadia Urbinati diagnoses three 'disfigurations,' which she terms 'unpolitical,' 'populist' and 'plebiscitarian,' that obstruct the operation of well-functioning democracies, understood as "government[s] by means of opinion" (Urbinati 2014, p. 2).¹ These immanent metamorphoses threaten, what for Urbinati is, (representative) democracy's essential feature, namely the 'diarchic' separation between the 'will' of sovereign citizens and the 'judgment' of public opinion.² The first 'unpolitical' disfiguration privileges the 'epistemic' moment of cognition and expert opinion. The second 'populist' disfiguration radicalises the 'acclamatory' aspect of opinion and polarises the public forum. Finally, 'plebiscitarian' democracy reduces public opinion to a passive 'ocular,' aesthetic and non-rational, role.

Urbinati's framework is a useful measure against which to re-examine so-called classical 'elite theory' and to consider the challenges to democracy in the twenty-first century. This article reviews established readings of Vilfredo Pareto and Gaetano Mosca (Aron 1950, 1974; Meisel 1962; Bottomore 1966; Finer 1966), as well as recent re-evaluations of their thought (Bellamy 1987, 2014; Finocchiaro 1999; Femia 2006). It assesses the extent to which the orientation provided to social and political theory by this 'Italian School' contributes to these 'disfigurations,' or, through their critique of existing democratic practices, is a resource for the renewal and extension of democratic institutions.

The discussion of Pareto and Mosca reflects on interpretative disagreements found in these expositions and considers the implications of these differences for their relationship to democracy. Disputing the contention that illiberal tendencies in Pareto's thought incline his work towards a proto-fascistic politics, Joseph Femia represents Pareto's

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² Urbinati understands 'will' as "the right to vote and the procedures and institutions that regulate the making of authoritative decisions," and 'opinion' as "the extra-institutional domain of political opinions" (Urbinati 2014, p. 2).

methodological individualism and hostility to speculative abstraction as being in the “Machiavellian tradition of sceptical liberalism” (Femia 2006, p. 128). Taking up the Paretian notion of ‘residues’ and its consequences for the Enlightenment conception of reason, Femia finds Pareto’s sceptical approach pre-figurative of some post-modernist themes that demystify uncritical narratives of progress. Contrary to less sympathetic readings (such as Bellamy 1987, 2014), this appears to reveal a liberal potential in Pareto’s thought conceived as a realist political theory. Revisiting the critique of Mosca advanced by Antonio Gramsci in his *Prison Notebooks* (1971, 1975), Maurice Finocchiaro (1999) reinterprets both thinkers’ views on democracy and elitism. Despite the traditional characterisation of Gramsci and Mosca as hailing from opposite poles of the Left–Right spectrum, Finocchiaro argues that they are proponents of the same tradition of ‘democratic elitism’ in political theory (distinct from that theorised later by Schumpeter et al.). In this view, both thinkers present a conception of political liberty “as a relationship such that authority flows from the masses to the elites” (Finocchiaro 1999, p. 206). This ameliorates the conservative consequences of Mosca’s thought. These readings chime with Natasha Piano’s account of the genealogy of ‘democratic elitism,’ in which she argues that the dominant interpretation of this Italian tradition (e.g., by Dahl and his successors) minimises Pareto’s and Mosca’s concern to contain “plutocracy in the age of mass politics” (Piano 2019, p. 525).

After reviewing these interpretations of Pareto and Mosca ‘against the grain’ of conventional wisdom, I reflect on them using Urbinati’s framework of ‘unpolitical,’ ‘populist’ and ‘plebiscitarian’ disfigurations of democracy. I ask whether the ‘sceptical liberal’ Pareto or the ‘democratic elitist’ Mosca manage to evade ‘disfiguring’ democracy, undermining Urbinati’s diarchic separation between the “free forum of public opinion” and the “governmental institutions that enact the will of the people” (Urbinati 2014).

2 ‘Elite Theory’ and Democracy

Raymond Aron affiliates Pareto with a generation (including Durkheim, Weber and, we might add, Mosca) that came of age in the second half of the nineteenth century during a period of relative peace and stability, remote from the world-wide conflicts that engulfed succeeding generations (Aron 1974, p. 11). Despite this, these thinkers understood themselves to be living through a moment of profound crisis and transformation of European society. For Aron, a major theme of their work was to identify this crisis as emerging from the changing relations between science and religion, and the corresponding notions of reason and feeling. While Pareto and his contemporaries endorsed the latest advances

in scientific thought, e.g. in Pareto’s emphasis on the ‘logico-experimental method’ (Pareto 1966, pp. 171–174), they recognised this progress as having unintended consequences resulting from the challenge that it posed to religious faith and established beliefs. They saw religious and moral feeling as a major factor in providing stability to the social order. While this generation might not have mourned the waning of traditional religion and morality, its decline left them with questions about what might provide coherence to collective life in its stead. In various ways, these thinkers attempted to reconcile the horns of this dilemma, which Aron characterises, on the one hand, as a “need for scientific precision” to analyse society, and, on the other, as a commitment to the notion that science cannot substitute for the social knitting effect provided by the “indispensable illusions” of belief systems (Aron 1974, pp. 12–13).

For Pareto and Mosca, their attempt to provide a foundation for a new science of politics was rooted in the notion, as Tom Bottomore explains, that “in every society there is, and must be, a minority which rules over the rest of society” (Bottomore 1966, p. 12).³ Mosca first articulated this assertion of elite rule in 1884 in his *Teorica dei governi e governo parlamentare* (Mosca 1968), and subsequently in two editions of his *Elementi di scienza politica* (Mosca 1896/1923).⁴ Pareto’s training as a mathematician is reflected in his *Cours d’économie politique* (Pareto 1896–1897) through his concern with the distribution of wealth, power and influence in society. Bottomore detects a shift from Pareto’s earlier interest in the diffusion of attributes of various types along a “normal curve” to the stark opposition in *The Mind and Society [Trattato di sociologia generale]* (Pareto 1916/1935) between two distinct camps, the ‘governing elite,’ those who “directly or indirectly play some considerable part in government,” and the masses (Bottomore 1966, p. 8). Pareto’s and Mosca’s attentiveness both to the internal structure of the “governing elite” (Pareto 1966) or the “ruling”/“political class” (Mosca 1939, 1966) and the relations between this elite and the masses emerges from their critique of existing democratic theory and is shaped by their experiences of parliamentary democracy.

As the son of a Mazzinian exiled in France, the young Pareto advocated democratic, republican and *laissez-faire* political ideas.⁵ However, during the period of *trasformismo* in Italian politics, Pareto became a critic of corrupt practices

³ Aron defines “the élite” as “the minority which, in any society, performs the function of ruling the community” (Aron 1950, p. 9).

⁴ I suspend adjudication on the ill-tempered dispute between Mosca and Pareto over the patrimony of the elite principle (Meisel 1962, pp. 14–15, 170–183).

⁵ See Finer (1966) and Bellamy (1987) for biographical narratives of Pareto and Mosca.

that he identified with parliamentarism. While Pareto displayed sympathy for 'popular socialism,' as Richard Bellamy indicates, he regarded the Marxist vision of a classless society as a "dangerous utopia" (Bellamy 1987, p. 19).⁶ Increasingly cynical in outlook, while recognising "profound" insight in Marx's conception of class struggle, by 1902 Pareto began to distinguish his own theoretical vision through a critique of socialism in *Les systèmes socialistes* (Pareto 1902, II, p. 405).⁷ However, S.E. Finer argues that Pareto's later work attests to a lasting preoccupation with the ideas of Marx. Thus, Finer sees Pareto's *Trattato* as an attempt to "reduce Marxist propositions to special cases of a much more general theory" (Finer 1966, p. 77). James Meisel suggests that Marx represents for Mosca a unique opponent who dislodged Mosca from his characteristic detached and scholarly approach into an impassioned denunciation (Meisel 1962, p. 169). Bellamy comments on the "remarkably Marxian" character of Mosca's argumentation, considering his position as a "committed critic of socialism" (Bellamy 1987, p. 39).

Given the association of socialist ideas with the extension of democracy by many at this time, it is unsurprising that an anti-democratic label is often applied to Pareto's and Mosca's thought.⁸ The association of classical 'elite theory' (via Robert Michels) with the anti-democratic collective and crowd psychology developed by figures such as Gustave Le Bon, Scipio Sighele, and Gabriel Tarde, reinforces this notion (Nye 1977; Bellamy 2014, pp. 224–231). Bellamy points to a dilemma confronting interpreters of Pareto's work, caught between two images: of a classical liberal economist valorising market mechanisms and individual rational choice and a socio-political theorist "exalting the use of force by an elite to impose its will on the populace," the latter invoked by Mussolini to legitimate fascism (Bellamy 1987, p. 12).⁹ Bellamy refutes the idea of a schism between Pareto's earlier economics and his later "crude and illiberal" views, emphasising the continuity of the "conceptual scheme he employed to interpret human behaviour" (Bellamy 1987, pp. 12–13). Consequently, Bellamy regards Pareto as adopting a 'moral relativism' that, while not itself

fascist, implicitly legitimated fascist and anti-democratic practices.¹⁰ In contrast, for Femia, Pareto "harboured a lingering admiration for the democratic ideal," and his framework is more inconsistent than dangerous in its relativism (Femia 2006, pp. 120–121).¹¹ Aligning with Cirillo (1983), Femia further argues that Pareto would have been a critic of fascism had he lived beyond 1923.¹²

Mosca's scepticism towards mass democracy evolved during his career. Mosca had declared in 1904 that his opposition to "pure democracy" was a product of his liberal beliefs (Mosca 1949, p. 35). He subsequently voted against the extension of suffrage in parliament in 1912. However, Mosca does not endorse Le Bon's conception that parliaments necessarily operate with the mentality of crowds, provided a *judicious* approach "of impartial, reasoned debate amongst independent, educated representatives" prevails among the personnel of which they are constituted (Bellamy 2014, p. 241). Thus, while Mosca maintains his anti-socialist impulse in his later writings, he re-assesses his opposition to democratic reform. According to Bellamy, Mosca "re-conceptualised democratic theory away from the notion of popular majority rule and towards modern-day doctrines of pluralism" (Bellamy 1987, p. 42). Finocchiaro rejects the anti-democratic perception of Mosca's "fundamental elitist principle," pointing to his articulation of this principle through a wider system of ideas, including his principle of "balanced pluralism" (Finocchiaro 1999, pp. 42–51).¹³ As we will see, this makes it difficult to associate his thought with the "anti-pluralist aspirations" of Urbinati's 'populist' disfiguration of democracy (Urbinati 2014, p. 132). Mosca's pluralism emerges from his diagnosis of socialism's failure to disperse power, and, as Bellamy explains, is "not only for the separation of church and state but also for a division between polity and economy and, within the state, between the bureaucracy and the government, as well as a measure of decentralisation" (Bellamy 2014, p. 243).

While frequently invoked in common as canonical figures (along with Robert Michels) of so-called classical 'elite theory', commentators (for differing reasons) have emphasised the need to distinguish Mosca's and Pareto's positions. Finocchiaro judges their association to have been unfortunate for Mosca, deeming him less susceptible to a

⁶ Pareto (1966, p. 138) contrasts this type with 'bourgeois' socialism.

⁷ Femia notes the "cynicism" Pareto had "once directed against the reactionary bourgeoisie was now turned against the workers and their phoney champions" (Femia 1995, p. 378). In both cases, Pareto's concern is the "spoliation" of one group by another, the seizing of goods by legal or illegal means, and a consequent destruction of wealth (Finer 1966, p. 16).

⁸ For Meisel, "old-style liberals" regarded socialism and democracy as "twins [...] up to no good" (Meisel 1962, p. vii).

⁹ For differing views on Pareto's relation to fascism, see Vander Zanden (1960) and Cirillo (1983).

¹⁰ Gregor (2005, p. 120) similarly argues that Mosca is an intellectual "pre-cursor" of fascism.

¹¹ Finocchiaro expresses doubts about the democratic aspects of Pareto's thought (Finocchiaro 1999, p. 262).

¹² Bellamy also acknowledges that, had he lived, Pareto might have regarded "Mussolini's regime as an archetypal 'demagogic plutocracy'" (Bellamy 2014, p. 241).

¹³ For Meisel, Mosca's later articulation of "juridical defence" through his theory of "balance of the social forces" is constituted by "the social mechanisms that regulate this disciplining of the moral sense" (Meisel 1962, pp. 144–148; Mosca 1939, pp. 126–127; Bellamy 2014, p. 241).

“one-sided emphasis on elites” (Finocchiaro 1999, pp. 17, 38). For Bellamy, while Pareto’s systematic construction of a ‘general sociology’ demonstrated “logical rigour,”¹⁴ Mosca’s “impressionistic” and intuitive account has a greater flexibility to explain diverse historico-political situations (Bellamy 1987, p. 34).¹⁵ Femia characterises Pareto as more “cosmopolitan and intellectually ambitious” than Mosca, although, as we will see, roots both in the “Machiavellian desire to penetrate beneath constitutional forms and pious political rhetoric” (Femia 2006, p. 101). Bellamy contrasts Mosca’s preoccupation with “social and organisational” concerns with the “psychological factors” (‘residues’) underlying Pareto’s analysis (Bellamy 2014, p. 241).¹⁶ Bottomore distinguishes between Pareto’s and Mosca’s respective concepts of ‘governing elite’ and the ‘ruling’ or ‘political class,’ suggesting that the former contrasts organised and unorganised groups, whereas the latter opposes dominant and subject groups (Bottomore 1966, p. 36). Thus, Mosca’s concept suggests subject classes possess potential for organisation, giving greater scope for the circulation of elites to be explained by the rise of new ‘social forces’. For Bottomore, this implies an affinity between Mosca’s ‘ruling class’ and the Marxian version of the same concept (Bottomore 1966, p. 37).¹⁷

Despite Pareto’s and Mosca’s hostility to Marxian socialism, we can frame their thought as the product of an oppositional relation with that tradition, i.e., the development of a ‘judicious’ approach of ‘balanced pluralism’ (Mosca) or of ‘mutual dependence’ of social factors (Pareto) via the rejection of the economic determinism associated with Marxism. This relation between the ‘Italian School’ and Marxian argumentation informs Femia and Finocchiaro’s re-appraisal of Pareto and Mosca. Their enduring engagement with Marxism can be linked to their obscured critique of plutocracy in the ‘age of mass politics’.¹⁸ This section has highlighted Pareto’s and Mosca’s concern with new relations between reason and feeling, described by Gramsci as the reciprocal “passage from knowing to understanding to feeling” (Gramsci 1971, p. 418). It indicated their evolving attitudes

towards socialism and democracy, and, finally, two distinct conceptions that are more judicious and pluralist than commonly assumed. Whether one accepts or rejects their outlooks, rendering Pareto and Mosca in their most plausible form is a boon for contemporary democratic theory. Before reflecting on the extent to which their thought is ‘disfiguring’ of democracy or a resource for its renewal, I will discuss Femia’s and Finocchiaro’s respective readings of Pareto and Mosca in more detail.

3 Pareto and ‘Sceptical Liberalism’

Femia argues that scholars have lavished little attention on Pareto compared to other ‘great’ political sociologists, such as Durkheim and Weber. The issue, suggests Femia, is partly the demanding nature of Pareto’s thought, particularly if familiarity with neo-classical economics is considered a pre-requisite for comprehending his social theory. For Aron, Pareto actively courted unpopularity by drawing attention to the gap between our “representations of the world” and an unpalatable reality (Aron 1974, p. 121).¹⁹ However, Pareto’s disinclination to make his work accessible also reflects his apprehension about causing “mass cynicism” by destroying illusions that underpin the social order (Femia 2006, p. 4). Thus, Pareto revives a conundrum attributed to Machiavelli’s *Prince*: if Machiavelli’s advice—that rulers maintain a public façade of morality while acting ruthlessly for reasons of state—were to circulate among the people it would no longer be effective.²⁰

Commentators argue that recognising the imprint of Machiavellianism on Pareto is “decisive” for an adequate interpretation of his thought (Aron 1974, p. 158).²¹ This influence is manifest in Pareto’s realist approach, which places “force and conflict at the heart of politics” (Femia 2006, p. 3). Aron defines this tradition of “Machiavelli and Machiavellianism” as:

An attempt to see through the hypocrisies of the social comedy, to single out the true feelings that motivate men, to understand the true conflicts that make up the fabric of historical evolution, and consequently to pro-

¹⁴ See also Runciman (1963) and Livingston (in Mosca 1939).

¹⁵ Thus, Gramsci refers to Mosca’s *Elementi* as an “enormous hotch-potch,” and his concept of ‘political class’ as “wavering and elastic” (Gramsci 1975, pp. 956, 972).

¹⁶ Aron distinguishes Pareto’s motivation from that of the “psychologist,” analytically classifying ‘residues’ (as “chief causes of non-logical actions”) as a guide to human behaviour, rather than studying sentiments in themselves (Aron 1974, pp. 125, 130).

¹⁷ Likewise, Meisel suggests Mosca’s ‘social forces’ are proximate to Marxian thought (Meisel 1962, p. 12).

¹⁸ Pareto’s and Mosca’s absorption of this theme represents an early example of, what today we might call, post-Marxism (like their contemporary Benedetto Croce).

¹⁹ For example, exposing “humanitarian” concern for others as the “rationalisation of self-interest” in disguise (Bellamy 1987, p. 32).

²⁰ We can also read Machiavelli’s text in ironic or republican modes that intend such subversive or transformative outcomes.

²¹ Burnham (1943) counts Pareto among his pantheon of “modern” Machiavellians, including Sorel and Mosca.

vide a vision stripped of all illusion as to what *really* constitutes social life (Aron 1974, p.16).²²

For Bellamy, this Machiavellian concern with the “use of force and persuasion” to maintain power is a source of relativism in Pareto’s thought, since “no political goal could be regarded as more rational than any other” (Bellamy 1987, p. 30). Indeed, Femia suggests that Pareto’s guiding thought, from *Les systèmes socialistes* onwards, was the “paramountcy of the non-rational in human affairs” (Femia 2006, p. 9).

The co-ordinates of Pareto’s theoretical framework emerge from the opposition outlined above by Aron between the competing demands of scientific (‘logico-experimental’) analysis and non-rational, albeit socially useful, belief systems.²³ Aron suggests that Pareto’s criticism of “metaphysical rationalism” derives from an experimental rationalist perspective that pragmatically recognises the limitations of a progressive Enlightenment conception of “scientific reason” (Aron 1974, p. 168). While Pareto believes that modern scientific advances have led to a general historical increase in “the proportion of logico-experimental conduct,” he maintains an aversion towards imposing exhaustive “scientific reason” as a principle of social cohesion (Aron 1974, p. 169).²⁴ This stems in part from his pessimistic view of a historical correlation between scientific progress and the rise of an egoism corrosive to the community and social equilibrium. The combination of scepticism and pragmatism informing this experimental rationalism would make a useful contribution to Urbinati’s consideration of the ‘unpolitical’ epistemic disfiguration of democracy (Urbinati, 2014, p. 81). For Femia, Pareto is caught in an ambivalent position between his desire to dissolve all ‘metaphysical’ theories, and his contention that they constitute a “necessary source of human action” (Femia 2006, p. 97). In the *Trattato*, Pareto provides a scientific classification of the quasi-rational explanations, which he terms ‘derivations,’ that human beings provide for this non-rational behaviour (‘non-logical actions’) (Pareto 1935).²⁵ The latter originate, according to Pareto, in “definite psychic states, sentiments, subconscious feelings, and the like” (Pareto 1935, p. 88). The concrete manifestations of these states provide a set of data from which we can derive certain regularities in human

²² Note Arendt’s concern with excessive forms of politics driven by unmasking hypocrisy (Arendt 1990, p. 99). See Femia (2006, p. 99) on Machiavelli’s and Pareto’s shared contempt for hypocrisy.

²³ For Pareto’s “logico-experimental” conception of science, see Aron 1974, p. 115. Femia (2006, pp. 16–30) distinguishes Pareto’s “rational scepticism” from Comtean and Spencerian positivistic scientism, noting the latter’s tendency to convert science into a “metaphysical entity”.

²⁴ Aron suggests Pareto would have rejected Durkheim’s “scientific morality” (Aron 1974, pp. 13, 116).

²⁵ Femia compares Pareto’s ‘derivation’ to Mosca’s ‘political formula’ (Femia 2006, p. 112).

thought and action, which Pareto refers to as ‘residues.’ While human beings derive satisfaction from ‘derivations,’ because they enable the belief that our actions are rational, Pareto suggests that the primary tendencies in human behaviour and thought are determined by these ‘residues.’²⁶

For Aron, this dualistic schema of human behaviour, itself based on the “duality between logical and non-logical actions,” gives rise in turn to Pareto’s distinctive contributions to ‘elite theory,’ his dualistic typology of elites and his cyclical theory of the “circulation of elites” (Aron 1974, p. 183). This represents another Machiavellian influence in Pareto’s thought, namely Pareto’s adaptation of Machiavelli’s fox-lion metaphor to analyse the characteristics of different types of ‘governing elites.’²⁷ The former type corresponds to those rulers with a preponderance of Class I residues (“the instinct of combinations”), and the latter to those with a surfeit of Class II (“the persistence of aggregates”). The former vulpine elites govern by consent, through their innovative character and persuasive cunning, whereas the latter conservative leonine elites rule by force, relying on their strength and a steadfast resolve. Pareto conceives a continual historical process of growth and decay of governing elites, punctuated by revolutionary “floods” that bring new elites to power, summarised in his dictum: “history is a graveyard of aristocracies” (Pareto 1935, p. 1430). In this cycle, the governing elite, with the ‘residues’ that equipped them to take power, tend to lose their vigour over time. They are confronted by new circumstances, requiring different ‘residues,’ rendering them unable to maintain a social equilibrium.²⁸ The established elite are challenged by new elites of a different type that embody the ‘residues’ required by the new situation. Bargaining might postpone their overthrow, particularly if they are able to combine the qualities of coercion with consent. Yet, ultimately, for Pareto, the cyclical nature of the “interplay between [...] ‘circumstances’ and the distribution of psychological qualities” prevails (Femia 2006, p. 74). The Machiavellian lesson, as Femia notes, is that “virtues become vices when circumstances change” (Femia 2006, p. 105).

This typology poses a challenge to Pareto’s claim to determine ‘residues’ in a scientific manner, i.e. to distinguish the process of abstraction of ‘residues’ from its entanglement with distorting ‘derivations.’ As Femia acknowledges, the interpretation of actual historical elites in terms of foxes and lions involves value-laden judgments about “the meaning

²⁶ While Pareto sometimes uses ‘residues’ as shorthand for ‘sentiments or instincts,’ they are intermediaries between sentiments and expressions or acts (Aron 1974, p. 128).

²⁷ On Machiavelli, Mosca and Pareto, see Meisel 1962, pp. 262–285.

²⁸ Underlying Pareto’s two types of elites in the political cycle is a dualistic social class division of “speculators” and “rentiers” in economic circulation (Finer 1966, pp. 59–62).

and significance of human behaviour” (Femia 2006, p. 62). Aron concurs that Pareto’s sociology is full of “value judgement,” contrasting with his “vaunted aim” of distinguishing “pure science” from “displays of sentiment” (Aron 1974, p. 167). Bellamy views Pareto as generalising his own “bitter characterisation of Italian politics” into “universal laws of human behaviour,” with unfortunate consequences that legitimise the “very attitudes which he had previously sought to condemn” (Bellamy 1987, p. 25). For Bellamy, following Benedetto Croce, Pareto’s analysis of human motivations claims to provide a value-free description of human behaviour, but in fact isolates chosen facts and motives. Far from neutral, the analysis endows “his own ideological leanings with a spurious scientific status” (Bellamy 1987, p. 27).

Throughout history and across different societies, according to Pareto, ‘derivations’ change continually providing a great variety of justifications for action. By contrast, ‘residues’ are a relatively stable presence in human experience. For Aron, Pareto’s effort to catalogue the classes of ‘residues’ and ‘derivations’ amounts, albeit provisionally, to “a kind of equivalent in his system for a doctrine of human nature as such a doctrine is manifested in social life” (Aron 1974, p. 142). Pareto’s foregrounding of generalised psychic states and dispositions in the motivation of human thought and action, with the corresponding precedence of ‘residues’ over ‘derivations’ in his thought, gives rise, according to Femia, to a tendency towards relativism (also noted by Bellamy), “at least with respect to moral and philosophical precepts or theories” (Femia 2006, p. 37). The primacy Pareto ascribes to psychic states as a motive for action relates to his aforementioned engagement with Marxian thought and his appropriation of the Marxian “priority of practice over theory” (Femia 1995, p. 375). Does Pareto’s theory of human behaviour substitute the economic determinism ascribed to Marx with a one-sided determination of human action by psychic states? The characterisation of Pareto’s thought by some commentators implies that his disillusion with “pure economic theory” as a means to explain human behaviour gives rise to an “inverted image” of this economics in his social theory (Bellamy 1987, p. 22).

Sympathetic readers of Pareto’s *Trattato*, like Aron and Femia, argue for a complex account of the motive factors of society. For Aron, Pareto’s theory is based on a “formula of mutual dependence” between four main variables shaping social dynamics, namely interests, ‘residues,’ ‘derivations,’ and social heterogeneity (Aron 1974, p. 161).²⁹ Pareto conceives the social whole as determined by the “reciprocal determination” of each of these aspects acting in turn

upon the other (Pareto 1935, p. 1433). While this represents Pareto’s response to the economic (or interest) determinism ascribed to Marx, it is not a simple inversion of a mono-causal process. Rather, as Femia explains, Pareto grasps society’s complexity by “substituting relationships of cause and effect for relationships of interdependence” (Femia 1995, p. 375).³⁰ Nevertheless, Femia identifies a tension within Pareto’s thought between the primacy of relatively stable psychic states (determining human behaviour) and society as a “system of mutually interdependent phenomena” (Femia 2006, p. 117). On the one hand, the primacy of ‘residues’ underlies Pareto’s endorsement of the elite principle, due to the “substratum of human psychology” that makes minority rule a permanent feature of human societies. On the other hand, Femia suggests that the logic of “reciprocal determination” involves social context and the “logic of social roles,” which means, “changing circumstances can create new patterns of thought and behaviour” (Femia 2006, p. 117).³¹

This internal tension between the primacy of ‘residues’ and the ‘formula of mutual dependence’ has consequences for Pareto’s critique of existing ‘democracies,’ which he saw as a form of “demagogic plutocracy” (Pareto 1935, p. 1587). The primacy of residues, taken in isolation, implies a “permanent substratum of human psychology that renders democracy impossible” (Femia 2006, p. 117). However, the logic of Pareto’s “reciprocal determination,” suggests Femia, is that the “extension of democratic practices” could encourage innovative fox-like Class I tendencies among the masses, making them more capable of governing themselves (Femia 2006, p. 118). This underexplored view of Pareto concerning the self-activity of citizens is quite alien to the passivity engendered by Urbinati’s ‘plebiscitarian’ disfiguration of democracy (Urbinati 2014, p. 171). For Femia, this tension implies a measure of incoherence in Pareto’s thought, arising from his efforts to avoid lapsing into psychological reductionism. For Aron, the *Trattato* is, on the one hand, insufficiently psychological in its treatment of ‘residues,’ stopping short of an investigation of sentiments themselves. On the other, Aron believes Pareto’s analysis of the ‘circulation of elites’ is overly psychological in its reduction of historical complexities by interpreting all elites through the frame of the same opposing sets of ‘residues’ (Aron 1974, p. 180). Pareto’s classification of elites, operating either through force or cunning, collapses the diversity of forms of government into dualism, and thus fails to “represent

²⁹ Pareto understands social heterogeneity as the differentiation of human beings into “social strata and elites” by “virtue of their psychic make-up” (Finer 1966, p. 14).

³⁰ Femia notes affinities between Pareto’s decentralised conception of determination and the ‘structural’ Marxism of Louis Althusser and Nicos Poulantzas (Femia 2006, pp. 153–4).

³¹ Gartman (2007) reveals a homologous debate regarding determinism and autonomy with regard to Bourdieu’s social theory.

reality in all its complexity” (Aron 1950, p. 142). The modes of renewal, transformation, and disintegration of elites are more varied than Pareto acknowledges. His translation of human behaviour into ‘residues,’ constrains him to an “intermediary level” that is neither “particularly psychological nor specifically historical” (Aron 1974, p. 178). Consequently, Pareto’s formal sociological generalities of human nature are somewhat lacking in explanatory power.

The catalogue of Pareto’s opponents (“humanitarians, decadent bourgeois,” rational philosophers and moralists) illuminates the diverse interpretations of his thought (Aron 1974, p. 171). Meisel explains the difficulty of distilling Pareto’s ambivalent legacy, since “in addition to being considered the bourgeoisie’s answer to Marx, Pareto could claim to have been, like Marx, one of its most effective grave-diggers” (Meisel 1962, p. 9). Aron characterises Pareto’s style as that of an “ironic pessimist,” regarding him as the “spokesman for a pessimistic or cynical way of thinking which, fortunately, no one has ever believed in altogether, not even Pareto himself” (Aron 1974, pp. 18, 175). Femia acknowledges Pareto’s pessimism, but presents him as a sceptic, motivated by searching doubts rather than misanthropic cynicism. Thus, Femia characterises Pareto’s position as a form of “sceptical liberalism,” tracing its origins back to Machiavelli (Femia 2006, p. 127). For Femia, this entails a commitment to the “ethical primacy of the individual” underpinning Pareto’s anti-utopianism and anti-universalism (Femia 2006, pp. 5, 127). Femia points to evidence that Pareto’s preferred form of government is a form of democracy (Femia 2006, p. 120). Referring to Switzerland, Pareto argues that one can find the “best government now in existence” in “forms of direct democracy” (Pareto 1935, p. 1568). From where does this preference arise? To highlight the distinctiveness of Pareto’s ‘sceptical liberal’ position, Femia compares his critique of Enlightenment notions of ‘reason’ and ‘progress’ with post-modernist rejections of grand narratives. Whereas post-modernism seeks to “dissolve cognitive and evaluative norms,” Pareto retains a “recognition of objective cognitive norms” enabling him to “provide some rational grounding for accepting or rejecting different conceptions of the good” (Femia 2006, p. 135). This position allows Pareto “rationally to justify adherence to a particular moral or political vision while still dismissing all attempts to validate that vision as a universal truth” (Femia 2006, p. 136).

The “living heart of Paretian thought,” in Aron’s estimation, is the unpalatable idea that the ‘derivations’ that are more selfish and less honest are those which are often more useful for society. For Bellamy, Pareto’s only viable solution to the threat of spoliation from class struggles emerging in a market economy is a turn to authoritarianism (Bellamy 1987, p. 30). Aron argues, *pace* Bellamy and others, that Pareto is not a “doctrinaire of authoritarian régimes,” but

rather sees “democratic élites” as the “least dangerous for individual liberty” (Aron 1974, p. 174). Femia reads Pareto as exhibiting a duality of “subversive and conservative” aspects (Femia 2006, p. 138). The unorthodox Pareto developed in this section, despite or because of his pessimistic negation of ‘demagogic plutocracy,’ opens the latent potential of an extension of democratic practices.

4 Mosca and ‘Democratic Elitism’

For Finocchiaro, Mosca belongs to a tradition of ‘democratic elitism’ that treats the concepts of ‘democracy’ and ‘elitism’ as not only compatible but also interdependent. Finocchiaro, following Mosca, redefines the notion of democracy in a realist register, as a “special relationship between elites and masses such that elites are open to renewal through the influx of elements from the masses” (Finocchiaro 1999, p. viii). Finocchiaro also reconstructs Mosca’s various expressions of his ‘fundamental elitist principle,’ first in his 1884 *Teorica*, as a “principle of minority rule,” and later in the *Elementi* as a “principle of unequal power,” and finally, in the 1925 republication of the *Teorica*, as a “methodological principle of leadership” (Finocchiaro 1999, p. 24).

While Mosca’s elitist principle has been “widely perceived as antidemocratic,” Finocchiaro notes that it represents an objection to existing *theories* of democracy, rather than to the acceptability of well-functioning democratic institutions and practices (Finocchiaro 1999, p. 26). Mosca conceives democracy in a quantitative manner, as a tendency in history linked with an opposing ‘aristocratic tendency.’ The former measures the “social mobility” between governed and governors, whereas the latter indexes the stability of “social control and political power” among the inheritors of the extant ‘ruling’ / ‘political class’ (Finocchiaro 1999, p. 42). While Mosca criticises the excesses that arise from an unrestricted democratic tendency, he nevertheless regards that tendency as intertwined with a critical notion of “progress” in human society (Mosca 1939, p. 415). This division accompanies two other pairings in Mosca’s analysis, between ‘autocracy’ and ‘liberty,’ and between ‘feudalism’ and ‘bureaucracy,’ which constitute his classification of governments.³² In the former pairing, political liberty is conceived “as a relationship such that authority flows from the masses to the elites” (Finocchiaro 1999, p. 206).³³ In the latter, Mosca expresses a sceptical, ambivalent view with regard to bureaucratisation in modern societies (Finocchiaro

³² This is Mosca’s corrective to established classifications of Aristotle and Montesquieu (Finocchiaro 1999, p. 46).

³³ *Pace* above-mentioned Machiavellian influences, Mosca traces his definition of liberty to Guicciardini (Finocchiaro 1999, p. 43).

1999, pp. 45–46). In each case, Finocchiaro points out that the *leitmotif* of Mosca's thought (and also, he will suggest, Gramsci's) is a profound "judiciousness," namely a "concern with avoiding one-sidedness and extremes" (Finocchiaro 1999, p. 47).³⁴ This 'judiciousness' is manifested in Mosca's thought in his principle of 'balanced pluralism,' conceived, in the particular case of the form of governments, as "an appropriate fusing and balancing of the differing but constant principles and tendencies which are at work in all political organisms" (Mosca 1939, p. 428). For Finocchiaro, this principle underpins various other elements of Mosca's system, such as his endorsement of mixed government, the separation of powers, checks and balances, the balance of social forces, Mosca's "counterrevolutionary principle, and his ideal of meritocracy" (Finocchiaro 1999, p. 61).

Contrary to received wisdom, Finocchiaro argues that Mosca's notion of 'balanced pluralism' is as significant for his thought as his elitist principle, if not more so. Thus, Finocchiaro suggests, "a balance of sorts can perhaps be forged between these two essentially by regarding elitism as an analytical explanatory principle and pluralism as a normative evaluative one" (Finocchiaro 1999, p. 22). This interpretation is quite distant from the "anti-pluralist aspirations" of Urbinati's 'populist' disfiguration of democracy (Urbinati 2014, p. 132). For some commentators, such as Ripepe (1974), the co-existence of Mosca's elite principle and his pluralism is simply a sign of inconsistency. Opposing this, Finocchiaro suggests that Mosca's 'balanced pluralism' lacks a unifying principle, and itself requires a counter-veiling tendency, namely the elitist principle (Finocchiaro 1999, p. 60). In sum, it is only possible to evaluate the nature of Mosca's elitist principle and by extension its relation to democracy when "understood and evaluated in the context of other analytical and normative principles" constituting his "theoretical system" (Finocchiaro 1999, p. 202).

Finocchiaro discusses various objections to Mosca's elitist principle, e.g. Meisel's characterisation of the 'ruling'/'political class' as mythological, since it "directs attention to a single aspect of the social process which is slated to epitomize and symbolize the working of the whole" (Finocchiaro 1999, p. 37). Finocchiaro also acknowledges the cogency of Gramsci's criticism of the lack of clarity in Mosca's concept of 'political class' (Finocchiaro 1999, p. 36). While Bottomore endorses Gramsci's view of Mosca's 'political class' as a "puzzle," he contends that Mosca's conception of 'social forces' that "influence and restrain" the 'political class' provides a sophistication to Mosca's conception of the elite as "representing" wider groups in society (Bottomore 1966, p. 11). As we have seen, Finocchiaro

seeks to allay many of the objections to Mosca's elitist principle that commentators have advanced by considering it in the context of the other principles of his system. For Finocchiaro, Mosca's commitment to the elitist principle is not "absolute and unqualified," but should be regarded as a 'tendency,' which must be understood in combination with other counter-veiling tendencies (Finocchiaro 1999, p. 56).³⁵

Finocchiaro acknowledges that his reading seeks to impose coherence retrospectively on Gramsci's and Mosca's positions, by "eliminating the contradictions" and "over-looking claims which cannot be integrated with the rest" (Finocchiaro 1999, p. 185).³⁶ Nevertheless, Finocchiaro provides an innovative image of Mosca characterised by a judicious and pluralistic balance between tendency and counter-tendency. Alongside Femia's reading of Pareto, one might consider Finocchiaro's suggestion that it would be theoretically fruitful to explore the relation between Pareto's "principle of the oscillation of tendencies" and Mosca's "balanced pluralism" (Finocchiaro 1999, p. 198). However, Finocchiaro hesitates regarding Pareto's democratic credentials, and whether the tradition of "democratic elitism" that he associates with Mosca and Gramsci can also encompass Pareto's thought (Finocchiaro 1999, p. 199).³⁷

5 'Disfigurations' of Democracy?

In view of their dramatically heterogeneous approaches to democracy—Pareto's 'sceptical realism' as against Urbinati's normative 'proceduralism' (Urbinati 2014, p. 8)—it may seem curious to employ a diagnostic developed by Urbinati to analyse the 'Italian School' presented above. Indeed, Urbinati distils the challenge facing contemporary democratic theory into the maxim: "disprove Pareto" (Urbinati 2014, p. 46). By this, Urbinati suggests that we must:

Question both the epistemic ambition of making public deliberation a terrain of competent knowledge, whose achievements have to be judged as science judges a technical task, and the realistic temptation of transforming political opinion into a warlike arena in which might makes its way through words and images and with the consent of numbers (Urbinati 2014, p. 46).

³⁵ Gramsci emphasises a similar philosophical innovation of the "law of the tendency," which he ascribes to David Ricardo (Gramsci 1975, p. 1247).

³⁶ Finocchiaro's methodology of reconstructing a coherent argument that may not exist in the texts themselves could be criticised from a Cambridge School perspective (Finocchiaro 1999, p. 185).

³⁷ Finocchiaro sees Pareto's system as "largely incommensurable with Mosca's," "substantively and methodologically" (Finocchiaro 1999, p. 27).

³⁴ Although, we might question Finocchiaro's implication that avoiding one-sidedness is always equivalent to moderation.

The structure of this project mirrors the bifurcation, seen above, characteristic of Pareto's thought, between his concern with the scientific determination of 'logical actions,' and, at the same time, his emphasis on the "paramountcy of the non-rational in human affairs" (Femia 2006, p. 9). It therefore seems appropriate to initiate some reflection on whether the versions of Pareto and Mosca presented by Femia and Finocchiaro match the "truncated, prejudicial, and wrong" view of democracy derived from established interpretations of their thought (Urbinati 2014, p. 16). In other words, we might ask to what extent the 'unpolitical,' 'populist' and 'plebiscitarian' disfigurations of democracy, identified by Urbinati, continue to implicate the readings of Pareto and Mosca outlined above.

Both Pareto's and Mosca's rejection of Platonic appeals to an ideal of "truth" (e.g., Finocchiaro 1999, p. 53) discline them towards the 'unpolitical' epistemic forms of democracy analysed by Urbinati. Both thinkers, particularly Pareto, seek a more scientific approach to political analysis, but their scepticism towards "process[es] of rationalisation of collective decisions" and the potentially harmful nature of appeals to 'universal truth,' might lead us to question whether they are in fact guilty of "annulling or narrowing the domain of *doxa*" (Urbinati 2014, pp. 91, 93). The Machiavellian inheritance, with its immanentist proclivity, channelled by these thinkers is not liable, unlike the protagonists of Urbinati's 'epistemic paradigm,' to locate "the criterion for judging what is good or correct outside the political process" (Urbinati 2014, p. 86). While we might take Pareto's assertion of the primacy of the non-rational in human behaviour as an exaggeratedly pessimistic view of opinion (and thus as 'disfiguring' of Urbinati's diarchic structure of democracy), the readings of both thinkers above emphasise their careful empirical classification and study of the content of *doxa*.³⁸ Indeed, Gramsci regards Mosca's primary contribution as arising from his close attendance to the "techniques of the politics of subaltern classes" (Gramsci 1975, p. 1607), providing what Finocchiaro refers to as a "three-dimensional elitism" (Finocchiaro 1999, p. 112).³⁹ Neither, as Piano notes, does Pareto's analysis "impute to the masses an inherent cognitive incapacity for participating in politics" (Piano 2019, p. 528), but rather emphasises

the durability of the complex process of the construction of their passivity. From this perspective, Pareto and Mosca would not automatically recommend entrusting controversial issues to panels of experts. Indeed, along with Urbinati, they might see democracy as best served "by keeping the processes of judgment and will-formation open to scrutiny and revision and the political arena open to competing visions and political groups" (Urbinati 2014, p. 127). Following Femia, Pareto's distinctive contribution is his valorisation of a 'sceptical' approach, including scepticism towards one's own beliefs, which arguably is, alongside pragmatism, a cultural pre-requisite for constructing the democratic "politics of compromise" advocated by Urbinati (2014, p. 139).⁴⁰ Likewise, Urbinati's concern to guard against the "disappearance of social moderation" resonates with Mosca's commitment to 'balanced pluralism' (Finocchiaro 1999, p. 202). Urbinati's account of 'moderation' to maintain a socio-political equilibrium draws inspiration from the Aristotelian tradition (Urbinati 2014, p. 140), which complements the 'judicious' readings of Mosca (and Pareto) above.

How do Pareto and Mosca relate to the 'populist' disfiguration of democracy?⁴¹ Another way of posing this question is to ask whether Pareto's 'sceptical liberalism' and Mosca's 'democratic elitism' result in a "mono-archic emendation of democracy" that, Urbinati argues, emerges from a combination of "power verticalization and the politics of personalisation" (Urbinati 2014, p. 153). Urbinati's diagnosis of populism as fundamentally a "strategic politics of elite transformation" appears to share some similarities with Pareto and Mosca's critique of plutocratic elites that disguise themselves as democrats (Urbinati 2014, p. 157). Having defined his position through a critique of the concentration of power under socialism, we can see Mosca as firmly opposed to, as Urbinati puts it, "populism's anti-pluralist aspirations" (Urbinati 2014, p. 132). Contrary to 'plebiscitarian' disfigurations that render subaltern groups as voiceless masses watching the actions of leaders, Mosca's conception of political liberty "depends on the existence of a balanced pluralism of social forces and of leading groups" (Finocchiaro 1999, p. 169). Directly opposite to the 'unpolitical' disfiguration, populism and plebiscitarianism is characterised for Urbinati by its "radical rejection of individual judgment in politics" (Urbinati 2014, p. 191). Can we describe Pareto and Mosca as sharing in this rejection? For

³⁸ Although, Pareto's ironic pessimism bears some resemblance to "Plato's sarcasm at the lover of the demos" (Urbinati 2014, p. 14). For Piano, the Italian School's pessimism is central to its contribution to opening "possibilities for democracy" through a "self-conscious confrontation with fundamental obstacles to human flourishing" (Piano 2019, p. 525).

³⁹ Gramsci compares Mosca's 'political class' with Pareto's *élite*, considering both as forms of the "attempt to interpret the historical phenomenon of intellectuals and their function in state and social life" (Gramsci 1975, p. 956).

⁴⁰ Femia defends Pareto's 'sceptical liberalism' against accusations of nihilism, while acknowledging its "politically indeterminate" character (Femia 2006, p. 134).

⁴¹ Here, Urbinati defines populism as "both a movement and a form of democracy" whose "true and radical target" is representative democracy; it is "a style of politics and a way of making a democracy more intensely majoritarian and less liberal" (Urbinati 2014, pp. 133, 149).

Femia, Pareto's "critique of demagogic plutocracy stemmed from a desire to safeguard liberal individualism against the encroachments of the leviathan state" (Femia 2006, p. 118). Indeed, Urbinati notes that she targets contemporary plebiscitarian theorists that endorse minority rule, rather than figures like Mosca that "lament the ruling power of the few despite the proclaimed triumph of the masses" (Urbinati 2014, p. 196).

Pareto's critique of 'demagogic plutocracy' can be read at face value as unrelentingly hostile to liberal democracy (Femia 2006, p. 105). His criticisms of "plutocracy advancing under a democratic guise," as Piano points out, have often been transformed into "celebrations of an elite-enabling and mass-constraining model" (Piano 2019, p. 525). While Mosca is well-known for his trenchant criticism of parliamentary systems and the "plutocratic transformation of liberalism," following the experience of fascism, he "attributed to the representative system the highest degree of 'juridical defence' against elite domination" (Piano 2019, p. 526). Reframing the tradition of these Italian theorists, Piano reveals that the later reception of Pareto and Mosca downplayed their concern for "political transparency" regarding plutocratic domination.⁴² Consequently, their pessimistic outlook provides overlooked resources for the renewal of democracy that can act "as a subversive tool disrupting the domination of a particular ruling class" (Piano 2019, p. 527). For Urbinati, democracy is not restricted to a "quest for political power," rather it is also "a claim for an extension of the values of equality and nondomination to those sectors of social life where those values are still impotent" (Urbinati 2014, p. 165).⁴³ The aforementioned resources of Pareto and Mosca, in particular their anti-plutocratic insights, contribute to Urbinati's "wider project of democratization" that "orient[s] itself also outside the space of political power and toward civil society at large" and "questions and challenges" the "existing distribution of power" (Urbinati 2014, pp. 165–6).

While making distinctive claims for their respective thinkers, Femia's and Finocchiaro's readings draw Pareto and Mosca into closer proximity with each other than these interpreters themselves might be willing to countenance. Both interpretations share a strong emphasis on the 'judiciousness' of their thought (e.g., Femia 2006, p. 112, Finocchiaro 1999, pp. 47, 151, 162, 169), while Femia develops

the 'sceptical' position found in Pareto. The emphasis on the balanced poise of their works stands in contrast with much of the traditional reception of their ideas and is less 'disfiguring' of democracy than hitherto acknowledged. When rendered in their 'sceptical' and 'judicious' forms, recognising the internal tensions animating their writings, I would suggest that Pareto and Mosca pose a philosophical challenge that is more conceptually productive than commonly assumed. Piano summarises the contribution of this 'Italian disposition' as "the inclination to honestly expose the deficiencies of elite rule in order to encourage a greater striving for democracy and popular sovereignty" (Piano 2019, p. 529). In this light, not as "elite theorists of democracy," but as "democratic theorists of elitism" (Piano 2019, p. 525), they warrant continued re-examination to address the unpolitical, populist and plebiscitarian challenges confronting democracy in the twenty-first century.

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⁴² Note Urbinati cautions about a "new opacity" under the pretence of publicity, the passive 'ocular' audience democracy arising from a 'transparency' that relates to symbols and personality rather than programmes and policies (Urbinati 2014, p. 210).

⁴³ Urbinati questions contemporary plebiscitarian theorists' confidence in the "constraining power of the market economy and the modern system of information and communication" (Urbinati 2014, p. 203).

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