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# **The young Lipset on the iron law of oligarchy: a taste of things to come<sup>1</sup>**

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## **Abstract**

Lipset's 'Democracy in Private Government' was a remarkable publication for three reasons. It was his first attempt to challenge Michels' 'iron law of oligarchy' and would lead to a programme of research that that would culminate with the publication of the widely admired classic study *Union Democracy*. Second, the inspiration for this work came from Lipset's student days when he was a socialist activist trying to understand why leftist governments often failed to carry out substantial programmes of social reform. Third, although it was one of his earliest publications it bears all the hallmarks of the work that would subsequently make Lipset a giant of political sociology: the enthusiasm for classic sociological problems; the appreciation of history; and the ingenious use of the *small n* comparative approach. Finally, I would argue that Lipset's study of democracy within private government represents a missed opportunity for sociology though there are signs that this is being rectified in recent years.

Keywords: oligarchy; union democracy; Lipset; socialism; comparative method; social science.

## Introduction

When ‘Democracy in Private Government: A Case Study of the International Typographical Union’ was published in 1952 Seymour Martin (Marty) Lipset was a relatively unknown young American scholar holding a research grant at the Institute of Industrial Relations at the University of California. Though he had already completed a book on agrarian socialism (Lipset 1950) and published papers in the *Canadian Journal of Economics and Political Science* (Lipset 1948) and the *British Journal of Sociology* (Lipset and Bendix 1951), there seemed little to suggest that the then thirty year old academic would go on to become a towering figure in political sociology and political science. Indeed, his interest in unusual social phenomena, such as agrarian socialist government in the Canadian province of Saskatchewan (Lipset 1950) and democracy within a small craft-workers’ union (International Typographical Union), along with his penchant for publishing in non-American journals, might have suggested a relatively undistinguished career in the making. Instead, as we now know, he would build a reputation as an expert on democracy, social stratification, and American exceptionalism, become one of the most heavily cited of all social scientists (Marks 2007), and have the unique distinction of being the only person to be elected president of both the American Sociological Association (1992–93) and the American Political Science Association (1979–80). When he died in December, 2006, *The Guardian* described him as ‘the leading theorist of democracy and American exceptionalism’ (Marks 2007); *The New York Times* as ‘a pre-eminent sociologist, political scientist and incisive theorist of American uniqueness’ (Martin 2007); and *The Washington Post* as ‘one of the most influential social scientists of the past half century’ (Sullivan 2007).

Though ‘Democracy in Private Government’ has rarely been cited I would argue that it is of interest for at least four reasons. The first is that it was a preliminary paper from a body of research that would eventually result in the much admired classic of mid-century American sociology, *Union Democracy* (Lipset, Trow and Coleman 1956). Published in 1956, *Union Democracy* was also responsible for helping to launch the careers of two other exceptional sociologists, Martin Trow, who would later make a name in the sociology of higher education, and, in particular, James Coleman who would go on to become at least as influential as the senior author and instigator of the project.

Unfortunately, for the *British Journal of Sociology*, future references to Lipset's research on democracy within the International Typographical Union (ITU) would list the book rather than the earlier article, with the book eventually being declared a 'citation classic' by the ISI in 1988 (Lipset 1988). Even so, in his later years Lipset would write that he felt that the research, especially its theoretical emphasis on what is now known as civil society, was rather neglected by those scholars who (re)discovered the relationship between democracy and civil society during the 1980s and 1990s. He suspected that the ITU findings did not feed into this literature for two reasons: it was published back in the 1950s; and it dealt with the unfashionable topic of trade unions (Lipset 2004: 186).

### **From socialism to sociology**

The second reason why the 'Private Government' paper is of interest is because it was inspired by the radical leftist politics of the 1930s and 1940s. Though Lipset was inspired by political values he was always a good Weberian in the sense that he continually sought to separate his values from his analysis, findings and conclusions. Nonetheless, his research had political intentions in that he wanted to resolve or, at least, contribute to political discussions of his time. The union democracy project, and much of his early work, grew out of debates he had been involved in as a student when he was active in socialist politics. Indeed, Lipset had, at one point, served as the national chairman of a Trotskyist organization called the Young People's Socialist League, which was the youth section of the American Socialist party (Lipset 2004: 173). On entering City College, New York, he would join a celebrated group of anti-Stalinist student radicals who would eventually go on to become influential academics and public intellectuals. In addition to Lipset, the group included such luminaries as Daniel Bell, Nathan Glazer, Irving Howe, Irving Kristol, Philip Selznick and Peter Rossi (Lipset 2004: 177).<sup>2</sup>

In his autobiographical essay 'Steady Work' Lipset relates how he and other members of this group became pre-occupied with the question of why Marxist and social democratic parties in a wide range of countries appeared to be more concerned with gaining and maintaining power than undertaking any kind of significant programme of social reform (Lipset 2004: 177-180). The most striking example for someone who grew

up in the 1930s was, of course, the Soviet Union where a Marxist inspired revolution created a ruling elite that was characterized more by dictatorship than democracy.

The best explanation that Lipset could find for Stalinism and the failures of social democracy was Robert Michels' *Political Parties* (Michels 1962 [1915]), a book that had been recommended to him by a fellow student radical, Philip Selznick. Michels, a former student of Weber's set himself the task of resolving a common paradox: why is it that groups or organizations that have been established, at least in part, to promote democratic values, should so often have leaders who hold their offices for 'life'? Michels' answer was that oligarchic domination is inevitable within large-scale organizations regardless of how democratic or autocratic they may have been when founded. In a now well-known quote, Michels proclaimed: 'It is organization which gives birth to the dominion of the elected over the electors, of the mandataries over the mandators, of the delegates over the delegators. Who says organization, says oligarchy' (Michels 1962 [1915]: 365).

According to Michels' theory, oligarchical tendencies arise within voluntary associations, such as trade unions and political parties, because direct participation by every member in every decision is simply not possible. 'Representative democracy' and the demands of organization invariably produce a small group of leaders who enjoy high levels of power, status, and income. The tragedy of these sometime radical leaders is that no matter how much they wish to promote 'democracy' they find it difficult to step aside and relinquish these privileges. Furthermore, in clinging to office they find that they can take advantage of their position to fend off potential opponents. Specifically, they can use their office to make their views known, to give legitimacy to those views, and to control the channels of communication within the organization. As a relatively small group, the leaders also find it easier to organize themselves into a cohesive group compared to their opponents who may often come from different sections of the membership. Finally, the leaders benefit from a phenomenon that Michels described as the apathy of the 'masses'. Few members have any interest in organizational politics and those who do either have strong feelings of gratitude towards the leaders or see little point in changing.

Though often overlooked, Michels also described a second tendency. In their desire to remain in office, the leaders, and consequently the party, frequently become more conservative in nature. The original goals of the party, for instance, become more modest,

partly because of a natural tendency for operational goals to supplant purposive or political ones. Similarly, the tactics of the party or union become less radical as leaders do not wish to risk high office through spectacular defeats. What was particularly striking for young socialists was the fact that Michels had based his observations on the German Social Democratic Party. If the ‘iron law’ held for a political party that valued democratization then Michels had all the more reason to proclaim a universal law that held across the political spectrum.

Though Lipset was greatly impressed by *Political Parties* he happened to be familiar with a trade union that was a striking counter-example to oligarchical rule. This union, which happened to be his father’s International Typographical Union (ITU), had a competitive two party political system that led to regular changes in the leadership. In a revealing essay on the *Union Democracy* project Lipset recalls how his father, a printer and life-long union member, would take his young son along to monthly meetings of the New York local (Lipset 1964a). Lengthy discussions about union politics were also a feature of the Lipset household (Velasco 2004: 585). Being intimately familiar with the workings of the ITU Lipset was able to turn this knowledge into a paper on why the ‘iron law of oligarchy’ was not a ‘law’ for a course on social organization led by one of the giants of American sociology, Robert K. Merton.

Fortunately for Lipset, Merton was impressed by the paper and it subsequently became the main part of his application for a fellowship that enabled him to finish his PhD at Columbia University without having to seek outside employment. It was this paper that was subsequently extended and published in the *British Journal of Sociology* in 1952 (Lipset 1964a: 99-100). An even longer version of this historically-oriented material, including the table on election returns, appeared in chapter 3 of the subsequent *Union Democracy* book.

In sum, Lipset’s research on trade union democracy, and, indeed, his earlier work on agrarian socialism in Canada, was motivated by his background in socialist politics (Lipset 1994: 200). Like others of his generation he would gradually make the transition from socialism to sociology. By the mid-1950s Lipset had lost his enthusiasm for socialism along with many others who lived through the Second World War, the Holocaust, Fascism, and Stalinism (Velasco 2004: 589-590). His fellow student at City

College, Nathan Glazer, who would also make the same journey remarked that ‘in the mid- and late 1940s there was something about sociology – for those of us who were socialists and were becoming sociologists – that undermined faith’ (Glazer 1990: 190-191). Whatever the reason, Lipset’s early work was much too sophisticated, both in terms of theory and method, to wither in the same way as his socialism.

### **Lipsetian analysis**

The third reason for revisiting ‘Democracy in Private Government’ is because it shows many of the trademarks that would subsequently be associated with Lipset’s work: his fondness for the sociological classics; his appreciation of history; and his ingenious use of the *small n* comparative approach to social research. Lipset’s enthusiasm for the classics was far from being the kind of exegetical approach associated with that strand of social theory concerned with the history of ideas. Although he admired Michels’ work, Lipset’s interest was really in classic sociological problems rather than authors. Furthermore, he also had a remarkable talent for identifying and persisting with theoretically and socially meaningful questions that could be made the subject of empirical research.<sup>3</sup>

Lipset’s orientation to sociological theory was emphatically of the ‘middle-range’ kind recommended by his mentor and former teacher, Robert Merton. For Merton, the principal use of middle-range theory in sociology is to guide empirical inquiry. Though middle-range theory involves abstractions, these are capable of being turned into propositions that can be tested through the use of empirical evidence. Yet each theory is more than a mere empirical generalization or an isolated proposition that identifies a relationship between two or more variables. Middle-range theory is, in the end, a set of assumptions from which logically related sets of propositions can be derived to explain empirical uniformities (Merton 1968: 39-41). When viewed in these terms, *Union Democracy* is a classic example of middle-range theory.

Towards the end of ‘Democracy and Private Government’ Lipset lists a number of factors that ‘make for a competition of alternative governments’ including ‘the existence within the larger locals of a large number of private social and athletic clubs which provide independent sources of power and influence, and opportunities for the training of



new leadership' (Lipset 1952: 58). This feature of the ITU would be given much greater prominence in the book where it became part of an extended analysis of the role of the printers' 'occupational community'. Using survey data, Lipset et al. found that the irregular hours of work (often night work) and their marginal social status (on the border between the white-collar middle class and the manual working class) led them to socialize together outside of work. This resulted in the creation of an ITU occupational community based around printers' clubs and associations (such as baseball leagues, bowling groups, veterans' organizations, ethnic associations, newspapers etc). In addition to providing budding union officials with political skills, these subgroups also served to foster links between the printers, the union and the two factions through regular meetings and the circulation of newsletters (Lipset, Trow and Coleman 1956: 106-140; 145-150; 365-371).

In developing the argument about the relationship between voluntary organizations and politics Lipset and his colleagues drew on another classic foundational text in sociology, namely Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*. (de Tocqueville 1966 [1835]) At that time Tocqueville was also examining a unique case, the democratic, post-revolutionary republic known as the USA. In trying to understand why democracy took hold in the United States in a way that it had not in France, Tocqueville emphasized the role of 'secondary powers' – institutions that were independent of the state and served to encourage political involvement, communication, and the generation of new ideas. Crucially, these institutions enjoyed a high degree of autonomy and, as the evidence on the ITU Locals indicated, they provided fertile ground for opposition groups who wished to (re)build their organization, recruit and train new leaders, and even provide a competing record of office. Today, these points are widely recognized in discussions of civil society and the role that it plays in both fostering democracy and acting as a bulwark against totalitarianism. Sadly, as Lipset noted, *Union Democracy's* pioneering empirical analysis of this topic remains strangely neglected (see Lipset, Trow and Coleman 1956: 74-82).

None the less, the essential point is that it was social theory that initiated the research, generated the hypotheses and helped to explain the results. Coleman, who began the project as a PhD student, would later write that one of the things he learned from working

with Lipset was that theory and evidence come together only if one starts with a problem and then uses that to sort the data. In elaborating on the point Coleman noted that one of the distinguishing features of the research was the use in the book of the then new methods of quantitative analyses. Although statistical analyses appear throughout *Union Democracy* it was, according to Coleman, ‘the framework of ideas from social theory’ that generated the hypotheses (Coleman 1992: 95).

#### *An appreciation of history*

‘Democracy in Private Government’ is distinctly historical in orientation. Much of the early part of the paper is spent detailing the origins of the two major factions within the ITU, the Progressives and the Independents. Both had their origins in secret societies that emerged within the union shortly after it was founded in 1850. The societies sought to preserve the union at a time when there was large-scale unemployment among printers, when activists were being fired, and when union members betrayed each other for the sake of a steady job. Over time they sought to place their members in positions of influence to prevent employer spies and lukewarm union members from diluting union goals. Following some splits in the 1920s, the opposing factions formed two parties and the secret societies were dissolved.

The major divide between the two parties was over the degree of militancy in union tactics. The Independents advocated a conciliatory approach in dealings with employers while the Progressives were more likely to favour strikes and other forms of industrial action. As Lipset noted, this division was of theoretical significance because its very existence challenged Michels’ claim that political parties and unions had a tendency towards oligarchy and, consequently, conservatism. In other words, the tendency towards ‘bureaucratic conservatism’ was held in check by the presence of an opposition party ready to seize on any error made by the incumbent leaders. Moreover, Lipset argued that there are occasions when union leaders have to act radically rather than conservatively because, in his view, the ‘law’ of organization is not conservatism but survival. Drawing on historical examples, Lipset noted how the Independents were voted out of office after the Second World War because they had given a conciliatory reaction to the restrictions of the War Labor Board. By contrast, the Progressives responded with increased

militancy when faced with the restrictions of the Taft-Hartley Act in 1947 (Lipset 1952: 59).

Lipset's use of historical evidence in 'Private Government' was partly to make a general theoretical point and partly to provide a greater understanding of how the two party systems emerged in the ITU. The latter is significant because Lipset would not let the need for theoretical generalities prevent him from drawing attention to historical specifics when he set himself the task of understanding a particular social phenomenon. Like Tocqueville, Lipset also recognized the importance of understanding the 'point of departure'. For Tocqueville, it was the arrival of the English colonialists with their laws, customs, and religion that set the mould for the future of American democracy. For Lipset, it was the secret societies of the mid-nineteenth century that laid the foundations for the two party system of the twentieth century.

Lipset's use of history in 'Democracy and Private Government' was the first of many occasions when he would stress the importance of the historical starting point. *The First New Nation*, for instance, starts in the eighteenth century and examines the role of George Washington and other founder figures, in addition to the typical Lipsetian focus on structural factors (Lipset 1964b). Washington, for instance, helped institutionalize the democratic process as president by remaining above controversy and by setting an important precedent in retiring from office without having been defeated. Similarly, his later work on American exceptionalism included history alongside social, economic and political factors when it emphasized the role of the American revolution in promoting individualistic and anti-statist values (Lipset 1990; Lipset 1996).

### ***The importance of comparison***

The ITU study has been widely praised for its research design, which is often cited as a classic example of what can be achieved with a single or 'deviant' case (George and Bennett 2005: 215-6; Rueschemeyer 2003: 308-9; Yin 2003: 43-44). Where a theory is stated in deterministic terms, such as Michels' 'iron law of oligarchy', a single exception, such as the ITU, can prove the theory wrong (Mahoney 2007: 125; Rueschemeyer 2003: 310). Furthermore, such deviant cases may also be used to understand the reasons why they do not conform to the existing theory and, ideally, generate hypotheses for further

research. Significantly, this argument has become quite important for those who wish to retain a role for qualitative or *small n* studies within the social sciences at a time when quantitative or *large n* approaches appear to be in the ascendancy (e.g., Rueschemeyer 2003).<sup>4</sup>

However, a common misconception about the ITU case is that the authors used it to refute Michels' iron law (e.g., Hakim 2000: 61). Certainly, the 'Private Government' paper claimed that: '...the "iron law of oligarchy" as Michels presented it is not a "law" (Lipset 1952: 59). Yet both the paper and the book go on to argue that oligarchy is endemic in large-scale organization and while there might be

...much more variation in the internal organization of associations than the notion of an iron law of oligarchy would imply... the implications of our analysis for democratic organizational politics are almost as pessimistic as those postulated by Robert Michels. (Lipset, Trow and Coleman 1956: 405).

Here they emphasized some, but not all, of the original factors listed by Michels: the overwhelming power held by the incumbent officers (e.g., over financial resources and internal communication); the low levels of interest among ordinary union members; and the reluctance of leaders to give up positions of high status, power, and income.

Although Lipset acknowledged that he spent much of his career investigating 'left wing outliers' (Lipset 2004: 198), such as the ITU, his understanding of these deviant cases showed him to be a master of what political scientists call the *small n* comparative method. His underlying logic was essentially that of the 'most similar systems design' (Przeworski and Teune 1982) in that he sought to compare cases that shared a range of common features, in an effort to hold some factors constant, while highlighting other different or unique features that were associated with the phenomenon he was trying to explain. This characteristically Lipsetian approach is, of course, now well-known through his work on American exceptionalism. To explain, for instance, why the US had different patterns of governance and class relations he compared it to other English-speaking former colonies of Great Britain (Lipset 1964b; Lipset 1996). In seeking to explain the old Werner Sombart question of why the USA never had a mainstream socialist party he compared it with its near neighbour Canada which has a long and vibrant history of

democratic socialism (Lipset and Marks 2000; Sombart 1976). For Lipset, the value of this approach was that it enabled him to better understand his own country by showing where it was similar to and how it differed from other countries. In a succinct and much cited methodological directive he said: ‘those who know only one country know no country’ (Lipset 1996: 17).

The comparative method also makes a brief but highly effective appearance in ‘Democracy in Private Government’. In a wonderful example of the difference between social scientific thinking and ‘common sense’ he first asked members of the ITU why it had a two-party system when most other unions did not. Their response was that it was either due to the historic traditions of chapel and union democracy or because the printers were relatively highly educated compared to other craft unions. Lipset then proceeds to argue on the basis of a ‘control’ or comparable case that both hypotheses were wrong. The ‘control’ was the International Pressmen’s Union (IPU) which had originally been part of the Typographical union in the nineteenth century and shared the same historical traditions and institutions, such as chapels. Furthermore, they worked alongside the ITU members in print shops across the USA, had similar personal characteristics, and earned broadly similar wages. But rather than having similar levels of internal democracy Lipset reports that the International Pressmen’s Union was ‘one of the most dictatorial unions in America’. One IPU group of leaders, for instance, held office in the union for more than thirty years until its more prominent members died. Another was repeatedly elected without opposition while many locals were denied the right to chose their own officers and some locals were even suspended for opposing the policies of the leaders (Lipset 1952: 55-56). With these simple observations Lipset demolished the commonsensical explanations put forward by his subjects. As an analytical strategy, it was based on nothing more than judicious comparison with a comparable case. Yet it would, none the less, be a strategy that he would repeat in *Union Democracy* (Lipset, Trow and Coleman 1956: 395-399) and, indeed, to great effect throughout his distinguished career.

### **The fall and rise of research on union democracy**

It is quite possible that the sociology of trade unionism and industrial relations had its ‘Golden Age’ in the first two decades after World War II. In the US, James Coleman,

Alvin Gouldner, Seymour Martin Lipset, C. Wright Mills, Martin Trow and William F. Whyte were among the sociologists, now known primarily for contributions in other areas, who were studying trade unions during this period (Strauss 1977: 216). Within Britain, Joe Banks, Bob Blackburn, A. H. (Chelly) Halsey, David Lockwood and Michael Mann began their careers with studies of workers, trade unions, and industrial relations before moving on to other subjects for which they are better known. Of course, this could be interpreted as meaning that the subject of industrial relations is in decline and that trade unionism is no longer of interest to young economic sociologists, possibly because it is no longer at the forefront of public attention in the way that it was in the postwar era.

Indeed, as I indicated earlier, Lipset himself also claimed that the civil society type argument presented in *Union Democracy* may have been neglected in part because it was based on a study of trade unions. However, I would also argue that it reflects a failing in sociology as a social science. Science advances through the development, testing and revision of theoretically derived hypotheses and, ultimately, through the steady, incremental accumulation of knowledge. *Union Democracy* was a path-breaking and provocative study that ought to have been succeeded by a series of studies that would have identified the conditions associated with oligarchy, democracy and possibly even dictatorship, in other kinds of voluntary organizations. Instead, it was left on a pedestal, widely admired, but rarely imitated. Others have speculated on the reasons for this failing in sociology and it may be that sociologists neither refute, refine or confirm ideas; instead, they become bored with them and move onto the next 'hot topic' (see also Davis 1994: 180-181). By contrast, the topic has fared much better in political science where there is now an extensive literature on the distribution of power within political parties (e.g., Kavanagh 1985; McKenzie 1955).

The few studies of trade unions that did appear during the 1960s and 1970s followed Lipset and colleagues in focusing on participation rates, closeness of elections and the existence of factions or parties within unions (see, for instance, Anderson 1978; Edelstein and Warner 1975; Martin 1968). Of these, the most influential was Edelstein and Warner's analysis of elections in the largest British and American unions which found that the incumbent leaders rarely lost elections. Though they identified the potential for democratic practice in union constitutions, especially where they lead to the dispersal or

decentralization of power, Edelstein and Warner acknowledged that few unions resembled the democratic ITU (Edelstein and Warner 1975).

A small number of Marxist scholars, notably in Britain, took up the related question of bureaucratic conservatism among union leaders. In contrast to Lipset and colleagues who emphasized the way internal bureaucratic pressures led union leaders to adopt conservative positions, Marxists emphasized external factors, such as the influence of employers, the state and the capitalist system generally. According to the Marxist perspective, as union leaders focus on economic goals, or so-called 'business unionism', they inevitably act to control their members on behalf of their employers by limiting their aspirations for change. The result is that unions may be more concerned with stabilizing the details of the relationship between labour and capital than with conducting a struggle against the domination of capital (Hyman 1975: 91). This argument gained some attention during the 1980s when Richard Hyman's 'bureaucratization of the rank and file' thesis led to a minor debate among British industrial relations researchers. Hyman claimed that from the late 1960s onwards British shop stewards increasingly acted in ways that contained as well as encouraged members' militancy (Hyman 1979: 57-60). By contrast, Eric Batstone argued that Hyman's thesis was based on limited evidence and that there was, in fact, little change from the early 1960s up until the 1980s (Batstone 1988: 92-93). Since then, academic interest in the question of bureaucratic conservatism has waned even among industrial relations scholars who have instead been trying to understand the dramatic decline in trade union organization and membership since the late 1970s (McGovern et al. 2007: 109-112).

However, the topic of union democracy itself has re-emerged in the past couple of decades starting initially in Britain before gaining the attention of a new generation of sociologists and political scientists in the USA. Somewhat ironically, the revival of British interest in a subject that was once so dear to socialists in the 1940s and 1950s owes much to the actions of Margaret Thatcher's neo-liberal Conservative governments. During the 1980s, Thatcher's governments set out to tame the unions partly by making them more democratic so that the more ideologically motivated and militant leftist leaders would be reigned in by the more instrumentally minded members. Accordingly, a series of Acts of Parliament were introduced to regulate their rights, responsibilities and

internal governance of trade unions. Rod Martin, one of the few British sociologists to retain a long-term interest in union democracy, undertook detailed assessments of the effects of this legislation with Roger Undy and other colleagues (Undy et al. 1996; Undy and Martin 1984). They found that it increased membership participation in some unions but generally failed to either encourage or discourage factional organization (Undy et al. 1996: 243). Furthermore, union government has not become more democratic, in the sense of being more capable of representing the interests of individual members. If anything, the effect has been neutral (Martin et al. 1995: 154).

The resurgence of interest in union democracy among American social scientists has, however, identified several further ‘deviant cases’ from the ‘iron law’ (see, for example, Cornfield 1989; Levi et al. 2009; Voss and Sherman 2000). Perhaps the most significant finding from this research is that the goals and tactics of unions previously considered oligarchical and conservative can be transformed in a radical direction. Essential elements of this transformation are the election of leaders with a more aggressive approach to union organizing, a change in organizational culture, and sustained pressure for change from the top of the union. Remarkably, this new social movement-oriented form of trade unionism seems better equipped to recruit new members, mobilize workers and engage in alternative and effective forms of industrial action including high-profile public demonstrations (Voss and Sherman 2000). Although still only a handful of cases, so-called social movement or community-oriented trade unions have been hailed as the most promising possibility for the revitalization of the labour movement in Britain as well as the USA (Voss and Sherman 2000; Wills 2001). One can imagine that Lipset would have been quite intrigued by such ‘left wing anomalies’.

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Rod Martin for comments on an earlier version of this paper. The usual disclaimer applies.

<sup>2</sup> Some members of this group, notably Glazer and Kristol, would later journey across the political spectrum and become proponents of neo-conservatism. Although Bell and Lipset would also be associated with neo-conservative ideas and groups, they were never comfortable with the label.

<sup>3</sup> Later questions included American exceptionalism (Lipset 1996), why the USA never had a mainstream socialist political party (Lipset and Marks 2000), and the political and social differences between the USA and Canada (Lipset 1990).

<sup>4</sup> The methodological appendix to *Union Democracy* makes a cogent case for generalizing from single cases (Lipset, Trow and Coleman 1956: 425–27).