CHAPTER 7

Ubi Bene, Ibi Patria
Patriotism, Nationalism and Internationalism in Robert Michels’ Reflection

Federico Trocini

“When Science Will No Longer Be Bound to Countries”

Among the pages of a dense biographical portrait published towards the end of 1910, after having highlighted his peculiar intellectual features, stemming from the marriage between Latin and Germanic spirit, Achille Loria (1857–1943) did not hesitate to include Robert Michels (1876–1936) among “the most brilliant men” of the Italian scientific milieu of the time. Leaving the laudatory inflections aside, the portrait traced in those pages still offers a series of interesting cues to retrace the intellectual profile of this scholar, who was of German origins but “Italian by choice.” And, at the same time, it makes it possible to highlight some key aspects of his work. For the purposes of our enquiry, there is one specific cue that it is worth focusing on. I refer in particular to the passage where, having dubbed Michels a “wandering cleric,” the Mantua economist proceeded to invoke the following:

When a free and reciprocal exchange between the thinkers of the entire planet will truly take place, when science will no longer be bound to countries, but become a cosmopolitan branch of knowledge, [...] the Michels phenomenon will rise to become a universal and beneficial expression of a united humanity.

LORIA, 1910: 136; our translation

With reference to Loria’s words, in the following pages I will carry out an indepth analysis of the confrontation between the author of Political Parties (1911) and the national question. A confrontation that, as testified by a significant portion of both his writings and his vast correspondence, was not occasional, but, on the contrary, intense and decade-long.1

1 The most sizeable part of Michels’ correspondence – totalling over two thousand correspondents – is preserved in the Robert Michels Archive of the Luigi Einaudi Foundation of Turin (henceforth ARMFE).
In contrast both with those who, on the one hand, have accused classical sociology of showing a scarce interest towards the national problem (Smith, 1983: 19), and with those who, on the other, have criticized its leading exponents for remaining trapped in a “fetishistic conception” of the nation-state (Beck, [1997] 2000; [2004] 2006; Wimmer and Glick Schiller, 2002; Dingley, 2008), I aim to prove how Michels’ confrontation with the nation took place well beyond the narrowest limits of the “methodological nationalism.” And, by doing so, I also intend to shed light on that idealistic aspiration which appears to have constantly guided his actions both on the practical and on the theoretical level. I refer, more specifically, to that aspiration aimed at wedding, in light of the *ubi bene, ibi patria* principle, the love of the nation with the love of the world, so that the first became a prerequisite for the second and that there was no longer “any difference of substance, but only of degree” between patriotism and internationalism (Michels, 1904c: 155–156; 1906a: 31).

The following pages will therefore focus on a crucial, but to date mostly neglected, aspect of Michels’ reflection and, at the same time, examine whether, and to what extent, following Loria’s 1910 invocation, he effectively succeeded in becoming the standard bearer of a “science no longer bound to countries,” And, hence, keeping the historical context of the nation-state well in mind, if he also succeeded in: (a) conceiving the possibility of spaces alternative to it and placeable both within and beyond its borders; (b) suggesting a non-conflictual redefinition of the relationship between individual, nation and humanity.

With said objectives in mind, before focalizing the main conceptual nodes of Michels’ reflection, I will proceed to suitably contextualize them on the theoretical and historical plane. In the first place, this will mean understanding the relationship existing between the national question and the other themes at the heart of Michels’ sociological research. In the second place, it will mean shedding light on the various personal, political and scientific reasons that led Michels to develop a constant interest towards nation and nationalism. In the third and final place, it will mean retracing the evolution of Michels’ reflection on the national question in relation to his controversial biographic and intellectual itinerary, highlighting the elements of continuity and discontinuity.

For the purposes of what has been said so far, it will be essential to refer both to a few documents of Michels’ correspondence which have to date remained unpublished – including an important manuscript dating back to the 1930s – and to his most significant writings. Incidentally, the latter can easily be divided, at least for purposes of clarity, into three different groups: (1) the one dating back approximately to the first decade of the twentieth-century and most heavily influenced by socialism; (2) the one coinciding with the years of