

Karl Kautsky: From Marx to Hitler

Mattick, Paul
1939

Published in June 1939 in Living Marxism, vol. 4, no. 7. Later collected in the Mattick anthology Anti-Bolshevik Communism. From <https://www.marxists.org/archive/mattick-paul/1939/kautsky.htm>.

In the fall of 1938, Karl Kautsky died in Amsterdam at the age of 84 years. He was considered the most important theoretician of the Marxist labour movement after the death of its founders, and it may well be said that he was its most representative member. In him were very clearly incorporated both the revolutionary and the reactionary aspects of that movement. But whereas Friedrich Engels could say at Marx's grave that his friend "was first of all a revolutionist," it would be difficult to say the same at the grave of his best-known pupil. "As a theoretician and politician, he will always remain an object of criticism," wrote Friedrich Adler in memory of Kautsky, "but his character lies open, his whole life he remained true to the highest majesty, his own conscience."¹

Kautsky's conscience was formed during the rise of the German Social Democracy. He was born in Austria, the son of a stage painter of the Imperial Theatre in Vienna. As early as 1875, though not as yet a Marxist, he contributed to German and Austrian labour papers. He became a member of the German Social Democratic Party in 1880, and "only now," he said of himself, "began my development towards a consistent methodical Marxism."² He was inspired, like so many others, by Engels' *Anti-Dühring* and was helped in his orientation by Eduard Bernstein, who was then the secretary to the 'millionaire' socialist Hoechberg. His first works were published with Hoechberg's help and he found recognition in the labour movement through his editorship of a number of socialist publications. In 1883 he founded the magazine *Neue Zeit*, which under his direction became the most important theoretical organ of the German Social Democracy.

Kautsky's literary and scientific work is impressive not only because of the scope of his interests but also because of its volume. Even a selected bibliography of his writings would fill many pages, In this work comes to light all that seemed and all that was of importance to the socialist movement during the last 60 years. It reveals Kautsky was first of all a teacher, and that, because he looked upon society from a schoolmaster's perspective, he was well suited to his role as the leading spirit of a movement which aimed at educating workers and capitalists alike. Because he was an educator concerned with the 'theoretical side' of Marxism, he could appear more revolutionary than was consistent with the movement he served. He appeared an 'orthodox' Marxist who tried to safeguard the Marxian inheritance as a treasurer who desires to preserve the funds of his organisation. However, what was 'revolutionary' in Kautsky's teaching appeared revolutionary only in contrast to the general pre-war capitalist ideology. In contrast to the revolutionary theories established by Marx and Engels, it was a reversion to more primitive forms of thinking

¹ *Der Sozialistische Kampf*. Paris, November 5, 1938, p. 271.

² K. Kautsky, *Aus der Frühzeit des Marxismus*. Prague, 1935, p. 20.

and to a lesser appreciation of the implications of bourgeois society. Thus, though he guarded the treasure-chest of Marxism, he had not beheld all it contained.

In 1862, in a letter to Kugelmann, Marx expressed the hope that his non-popular works attempting to revolutionise economic science would in due time find adequate popularisation, a feat that should be easy after the scientific basis had been laid. "My life work became clear to me in 1883," wrote Kautsky; "it was to be designated to the propagandising and popularisation, and, as far as I am able to, the continuation of the scientific results of Marx's thinking and research."³ However, not even he, the greatest populariser of Marx, has fulfilled Marx's hope; his simplifications turned out to be new mystifications unable to comprehend the true character of capitalist society. Nevertheless, even in their watered form, Marx's theories remained superior to all the social and economic bourgeois theories and Kautsky's writings gave strength and joy to hundreds of thousands of class-conscious workers. He gave expression to their own thoughts and in a language nearer to them than that of the more independent thinker Marx. Though the latter demonstrated more than once his great gift for cogency and clarity, he was not schoolmaster enough to sacrifice to propaganda the enjoyment of his intellectual caprice.

When we said that Kautsky represented also what was 'reactionary' in the old labour movement, we are using that term in a highly specific sense. The reactionary elements in Kautsky and in the old labour movement were objectively conditioned, and only by a long period of exposure to an inimical reality was developed that subjective readiness to turn defenders of the capitalist society. In *Capital* Marx pointed out that "a rise in the price of labour, as a consequence of accumulation of capital, only means, in fact, that the length and weight of the golden chain the wage-worker has already forged for himself, allow of a relaxation of the tension of it."⁴ The possibility, under conditions of a progressive capital formation, of improving labour conditions and of raising the price of labour transformed the workers' struggle into a force for capitalist expansion. Like capitalist competition, the workers' struggle served as an incentive for further capital accumulation; it accentuated capitalist 'progress'. All gains of the workers were compensated for by an increasing exploitation, which in turn permitted a still more rapid capital expansion.

Even the class struggle of the workers could serve the needs not of the individual capitalists but of capital. The victories of the workers turned always against the victors. The more the workers gained, the richer capital became. The gap between wages and profits became wider with each increase of the 'workers' share'. The apparently increasing strength of labour was in reality the continuous weakening of its position in relation to that of capital. The 'successes' of the workers, hailed by Eduard Bernstein as a new era of capitalism, could, in this sphere of social action, end only in the eventual defeat of the working class, as soon as capital changed from expansion to stagnation. In the destruction of the old labour movement, the sight of which Kautsky was not spared, became manifest the thousands of defeats suffered during the upswing period of capitalism, and though these defeats were celebrated as victories of gradualism, they were in reality only the gradualism of the workers' defeat in a field of action where the advantage is always with the bourgeoisie. Nevertheless, Bernstein's revisionism, based on the acceptance of appearance for reality and suggested by bourgeois empiricism, though at first denounced by Kautsky, provided the basis for the latter's own success. For without the non-revolutionary practice of the old labour movement, whose theories were formed by Bernstein, Kautsky would not have found a movement and a material basis on which to rise as an important Marxian theoretician.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

⁴ *Capital*. Vol I, p. 677 (Kerr ed.).

This objective situation, which, as we have seen, transformed the successes of the labour movement into just so many steps toward its destruction, created a non-revolutionary ideology which was more in harmony with the apparent reality, and which was later denounced as social-reformism, opportunism, social-chauvinism, and outright betrayal. However, this 'betrayal' did not very much bother those who were betrayed. Instead, the majority of the organised workers approved of the change of attitude in the socialist movement, since it conformed to their own aspirations developed in an ascending capitalism. The masses were as little revolutionary as their leaders, and both were satisfied with their *participation* in capitalist progress. Not only were they organising for a greater share of the social product, but also for a greater voice in the political sphere. They learned to think in terms of bourgeois democracy; they began to speak of themselves as consumers; they wanted to take part in all that was good of culture and civilisation. Franz Mehring's *History of the German Social Democracy* typically ends in a chapter on 'Art and the Proletariat'. Science for the workers, literature for the workers, schools for the workers, participation in all the institutions of capitalist society – this and nothing more was the real desire of the movement. Instead of demanding the end of capitalistic science, it asked for labour scientists; instead of abolishing capitalistic law, it trained labour lawyers; in the increasing number of labour historians, poets, economists, journalists, doctors and dentists, as well as parliamentarians and trade-union bureaucrats, it saw the socialisation of society, which therewith became increasingly its own society. That which one can increasingly share in one will soon find defensible. Consciously and unconsciously the old labour movement saw in the capitalist expansion process its own road to greater welfare and recognition. The more capital flourished, the better were the working conditions. Satisfied with action within the framework of capitalism, the workers' organisations became concerned with capitalism's profitability. The competitive national capitalistic rivalries were only verbally opposed. Although the movement was at first striving only for a 'better fatherland', and was later willing to defend what had already been gained, it soon reached the point where it was ready to defend the fatherland 'as it is'.

The tolerance that Marx's 'followers' displayed towards the bourgeois society was not one-sided. The bourgeoisie itself had in its very struggle against the working class learned to 'understand the social question'. Its interpretation of social phenomena became increasingly more materialistic; and soon there was an overlapping of ideologies in both fields of thought, a condition increasing still further the 'harmony' based on the actual disharmony of class frictions within a rising capitalism. However, the 'Marxists' were more eager than the bourgeoisie to 'learn from the enemy'. The revisionist tendencies had developed long before the death of Engels. The latter, and Marx himself, had wavered and displayed moments in which they were carried away by the apparent success of their movement. But what with them was only a temporary modification of their essentially consistent thinking became 'belief' and 'science' for that movement which learned to see progress in larger trade-union treasures and greater election votes.

After 1910 the German social democracy found itself divided into three essential groups. There were the reformists, openly favouring German imperialism; there was the 'left', distinguished by such names as Luxemburg, Liebknecht, Mehring and Pannekoek; and there was the 'centre', trying to follow traditional paths, that is, only in theory, as in practice the whole of the German social democracy could do only what was possible, i.e. what Bernstein wanted them to do. To oppose Bernstein could mean only to oppose the whole of the social democratic practice. The 'left' began to function as such only at the moment it began to attack social democracy as a part of capitalist society. The differences between the two opposing factions could not be solved ideationally; they were solved when the Noske terror murdered the Spartacus group in 1919.

With the outbreak of the war, the 'left' found itself in the capitalist prisons, and the 'right' on the General Staff of the Kaiser. The 'centre', led by Kautsky, simply dispensed with all problems of the socialist movement by declaring that neither the social democracy nor its International could function during periods of war, as both were essentially instruments of peace. "This position," Rosa Luxemburg wrote, "is the position of an eunuch. After Kautsky has supplemented the *Communist Manifesto* it now reads: Proletarians of all countries unite during peace times, during times of war, cut your throats."⁵

The war and its aftermath destroyed the legend of Kautsky's Marxist 'orthodoxy'. Even his most enthusiastic pupil, Lenin, had to turn away from the master. In October 1914 he had to admit that as far as Kautsky was concerned, Rosa Luxemburg had been right. In a letter to Shlyapnikow,⁶ he wrote, "She saw long ago that Kautsky, the servile theoretician, was cringing to the majority of the Party, to Opportunism. There is nothing in the world at present more harmful and dangerous for the ideological independence of the proletariat than this filthy, smug and disgusting hypocrisy of Kautsky. He wants to hush everything up and smear everything over and by sophistry and pseudo-learned rhetoric lull the awakened consciences of the workers."

What distinguished Kautsky from the general run of intellectuals who flocked to the labour movement as soon as it became more respectable and who were only too eager to foster the trend of class collaboration, was a greater love for theory, a love which refused to compare theory with actuality, like the love of a mother who prevents her child from learning the 'facts of life' too early. Only as a theoretician could Kautsky remain a revolutionist; only too willingly he left the practical affairs of the movement to others. However, he fooled himself. In the role of a mere 'theoretician', he ceased to be a revolutionary theoretician, or rather he could not become a revolutionist. As soon as the scene for a real battle between capitalism and socialism after the war had been laid, his theories collapsed because they had already been divorced in practice from the movement they were supposed to represent.

Though Kautsky was opposed to the unnecessarily enthusiastic chauvinism of his party, though he hesitated to enjoy the war as Ebert, Scheidemann and Hindenburg did, though he was not in favour of an *unconditional* granting of war credits, nevertheless, up to his very end, he was forced to destroy with his own hands the legend of his Marxian orthodoxy that he had earned for himself in 30 years of writing. He who in 1902 had pronounced that we have entered a period of proletarian struggles for state power, declared such attempts to be sheer insanity when workers took him seriously.⁷ He who had fought so valiantly against the ministerialism of Millerand and Jaurès in France, championed 20 years later the coalition policy of the German social-democracy with the arguments of his former opponents. He who concerned himself as early as 1909 with 'The Way to Power', dreamed after the war of a capitalist 'ultra-imperialism' as a way to world peace, and spent the remainder of his life re-interpreting his past to justify his class collaboration ideology. "In the course of its class struggle," he wrote in his last work, "the proletariat becomes more and more the vanguard for the reconstruction of humanity, in which in always greater measure also non-proletarian layers of society become interested. This is no betrayal of the class struggle idea. I had this position already before there was bolshevism, as, for instance, in 1903 in my article on 'Class – Special and Common Interests' in the *Neue Zeit*, where I came to the conclusion that the proletarian class struggle does not recognise class solidarity but only the solidarity of mankind."⁸

⁵ *Die Internationale*. Spring 1915.

⁶ *The Letters of Lenin*. London 1937, p. 342.

⁷ *The Social Revolution*.

⁸ K. Kautsky, *Sozialisten und Krieg*. Prague, 1937, p. 673.

Indeed, it is not possible to regard Kautsky as a 'renegade'. Only a total misunderstanding of the theory and practice of the social democratic movement and of Kautsky's activity could lead to such a view. Kautsky aspired to being a good servant of Marxism; in fact, to please Engels and Marx seemed to be his life profession. He referred to the latter always in the typical social-democratic and philistine manner as the 'great master', the 'Olympian', the 'Thunder God', etc. He felt extremely honoured because Marx "did not receive him in the same cold way in which Goethe received his young colleague Heine."⁹ He must have sworn to himself not to disappoint Engels when the latter began to regard him and Bernstein as 'trustworthy representatives of Marxian theory', and during most of his life he was the most ardent defender of 'the word'. He is most honest when he complains to Engels "that nearly all the intellectuals in the party ... cry for colonies, for national thought, for a resurrection of the Teutonic antiquity, for confidence in the government, for having the power of 'justice' replace the class struggle, and express a decided aversion for the materialistic interpretation of history – Marxian dogma, as they call it."¹⁰ He wanted to argue against them, to uphold against them what had been established by his idols. A good schoolmaster, he was also an excellent pupil.

Engels understood this early 'degeneration' of the movement only too well. In answering Kautsky's complaints, he stated, "that the development of capitalism proved itself to be stronger than the revolutionary counter-pressure. A new upsurge against capitalism would need a violent shock, such as the loss by England of its domination of the world market, or a sudden revolutionary opportunity in France."¹¹ But neither the one nor the other event occurred. The socialists no longer waited for revolution. Bernstein waited instead for Engels' death, to avoid disappointing the man to whom he owed most – before proclaiming that "the goal meant nothing and the movement everything." It is true that Engels himself had strengthened the forces of reformism during the latter part of his life. However, what in his case could be taken only as the weakening of the individual in his stand against the world, was taken by his epigones as the source of their strength. Time and again Marx and Engels returned to the uncompromising attitude of the *Communist Manifesto* and *Capital* as, for instance, in the *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, which was delayed in its publication in order not to disturb the compromisers in the movement. Its publication was possible only after a struggle with the party bureaucracy, which circumstance led Engels to remark that, It is in fact a brilliant thought to have German socialist science present, after its emancipation from the Bismarckian socialist laws, its own socialist laws, formulated by the officials of the Social Democratic Party.¹²

Kautsky defended an already emasculated Marxism. The radical, revolutionary, anti-capitalist Marxism had been defeated by capitalist development. At the Congress of the Workers' International in 1872 in The Hague, Marx himself had declared: "Some day the workers must conquer political supremacy, in order to establish the new organisation of labour ... Of course, I must not be supposed to imply that the means to this end will be the same everywhere ... and we do not deny that there are certain countries, such as the United States and England in which the workers may hope to secure their ends by peaceful means." This statement allowed even the revisionists to declare themselves Marxists, and the only argument Kautsky could muster against them, as, for instance, during the Social Democratic Party congress in Stuttgart in 1898, was the denial that the democratisation and socialisation process claimed by the revisionists as in progress in England and America, also held good for Germany. He repeated Marx's position as regards the

⁹ *Aus der Frühzeit des Marxismus*, p. 50.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 112.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 155.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 273.

eventuality of a more peaceful transformation of society in some countries, and added to this remark only that he, too, "wishes nothing else but to obtain socialism without a catastrophe." However, he doubted such a possibility.

It is understandable that on the basis of such thinking it was only consistent for Kautsky to assume after the war that with the now possible more rapid development of democratic institutions in Germany and Russia, the more peaceful way to socialism could be realised also in these countries. The peaceful way seemed to him the surer way, as it would better serve that 'solidarity of mankind' that he wished to develop. The socialist intellectuals wished to return the decency with which the bourgeoisie had learned to treat them. After all, we are all gentlemen! The orderly petty-bourgeois life of the intelligentsia, secured by a powerful socialist movement, had led them to emphasise the ethical and cultural aspects of things. Kautsky hated the methods of bolshevism with no less intensity than did the white guardists, though in contrast to the latter, he was in full agreement with the goal of bolshevism. Behind the aspect of the proletarian revolution the leaders of the socialist movement correctly saw a chaos in which their own position would become no less jeopardised than that of the bourgeoisie proper. Their hatred of 'disorder' was a defence of their own material, social and intellectual position. Socialism was to be developed not illegally, but legally, for under such conditions, existing organisations and leaders would continue to dominate the movement. And their successful interruption of the impending proletarian revolution demonstrated that not only did the 'gains' of the workers in the economic sphere turn against the workers themselves, but that their 'success' in the political field also turned out to be weapons against their emancipation. The strongest bulwark against a radical solution of the social question was the social democracy, in whose growth the workers had learned to measure their growing power.

Nothing shows the revolutionary character of Marx's theories more clearly than the difficulty to maintain them during non-revolutionary times. There was a grain of truth in Kautsky's statement that the socialist movement cannot function during times of war, as times of war temporarily create non-revolutionary situations. The revolutionist becomes isolated, and registers temporary defeat. He must wait till the situation changes, till the subjective readiness to participate in war is broken by the objective impossibility to serve this subjective readiness. A revolutionist cannot help standing 'outside the world' from time to time. To believe that a revolutionary practice, expressed in independent actions of the workers, is always possible means to fall victim to democratic illusions. But it is more difficult to stand 'outside this world', for no one can know when situations change, and no one wishes to be left out when changes do occur. Consistency exists only in theory. It cannot be said that Marx's theories were inconsistent; it can, however, be said, that Marx was not consistent, i.e. that he, too, had to pay deference to a changing reality and, in non-revolutionary times, in order to function at all, had to function in a non-revolutionary manner. His theories were limited to the essentials of the class struggle between bourgeoisie and proletariat, but his practice was continuous, dealing with problems 'as they came up', problems which could not always be solved with essential principles. Unwilling to retire during the upswing period of capitalism, Marxism could not escape functioning in a manner contrary to a theory resulting from the recognition of a real and always present revolutionary class struggle. The theory of the everpresent class struggle has no more justification than the bourgeois concept of progress. There is no automatism keeping things rolling uphill; instead, there is combat with changing fortunes; there is the deathlock of the struggle and the utter defeat. Mere numbers of workers opposed to the powerful capitalist state at times when history still favours capitalism do not represent the giant on whose back the capitalist parasites rest, but rather the bull who has to move in the directions his nose-stick forces him to go. During the non-revolutionary period of the ascending capitalism, revolutionary Marxism could exist only as ideology, serving an

entirely different practice. In this latter form it was again limited by actual occurrences. As a mere ideology it had to cease existing as soon as great social upheavals demanded a change from an indirect to a direct class collaboration ideology for capitalistic purposes.

Marx developed his theories during revolutionary times. The most advanced of the bourgeois revolutionists, he was the closest to the proletariat. The defeat of the bourgeoisie as revolutionists, their success within the counter-revolution, convinced Marx that the modern revolutionary class can be only the working class, and he developed the socioeconomic theory of their revolution. Like many of his contemporaries, he underestimated the strength and flexibility of capitalism, and expected too soon the end of bourgeois society. Two alternatives opened themselves to him: he could either stand outside the actual development, restricting himself to inapplicable radical thinking, or participate under the given conditions in the actual struggles, and reserve the revolutionary theories for 'better times'. This latter alternative was rationalised into the 'proper balance of theory and practice', and the defeat or success of proletarian activities became therewith the result of 'right' or 'wrong' tactics once more; the question of the proper organisation and of correct leadership. It was not so much Marx's earlier connection with the bourgeois revolution that led to the further development of the Jacobinic aspect of the labour movement called by his name, but the non-revolutionary practice of this movement, because of the non-revolutionary times.

The Marxism of Kautsky, then, was a Marxism in the form of a mere ideology, and it was therewith fated to return in the course of time into idealistic channels. Kautsky's 'orthodoxy' was in truth the artificial preservation of ideas opposed to an actual practice, and was therewith forced into retreat, as reality is always stronger than ideology. A real Marxian 'orthodoxy' could be possible only with a return of real revolutionary situations, and then such 'orthodoxy' would concern itself not with 'the word', but with the principle of the class struggle between bourgeoisie and proletariat applied to new and changed situations. The retreat of theory before practice can be followed with utmost clarity in Kautsky's writings.

The many books and articles written by Kautsky deal with almost all social problems, in addition to specific questions concerning the labour movement. However, his writings can be classified into Economy, History and Philosophy. In the field of political economy, not much can be said about his contribution. He was the populariser of the first volume of Marx's *Capital* and the editor of Marx's "Theories of Surplus Value", published during the years from 1904 to 1910. His popularisations of Marx's economic theories do not distinguish themselves from the generally accepted interpretation of economic phenomena in the socialist movement – the revisionists included. As a matter of fact, parts of his famous book "The Economic Doctrines of Karl Marx" were written by Eduard Bernstein. In the heated discussion waged at the turn of the century concerning the meaning of Marx's theories in the second and third volume of *Capital*, Kautsky took very small part. For him the first volume of *Capital* contained all that was of importance to the workers and their movement. It dealt with the process of production, the factory and exploitation, and contained all that was needed to support a workers' movement against capitalism. The other two volumes dealing in greater detail with capitalist tendencies towards crises and collapse did not correspond to immediate reality and found little interest not only by Kautsky but by all Marxian theoreticians of the upswing period of capitalism. In a review of the second volume of *Capital*, written in 1886, Kautsky expressed the opinion that this volume is of less interest to the workers, as it deals largely with the problem of the realisation of surplus value, which after all should be rather the concern of the capitalists. When Bernstein, in the course of his attack upon Marx's economic theories, rejected the latter's theory of collapse, Kautsky defended Marxism by simply denying that Marx ever had developed a special theory pointing to an objective end of capitalism, and that such a

concept was merely an invention of Bernstein. The difficulties and contradictions of capitalism he searched for in the sphere of circulation. Consumption could not grow so rapidly as production and a permanent over-production would lead to the political necessity of introducing socialism. Against Tugan-Baranowsky's theory of an unhampered capitalist development proceeding from the fact that capital creates its own markets and can overcome developing disproportionalities, a theory which influenced the whole reformist movement, Kautsky set his underconsumption theory to explain the unavoidability of capitalist crises, crises which helped to create the subjective conditions for a transformation from capitalism to socialism.¹³ However, 25 years later, he openly admitted that he had been wrong in his evaluation of the economic possibilities of capitalism, as "from an economic viewpoint, capital is much livelier today than it was 50 years ago."¹⁴

The theoretical unclarity and inconsistency that Kautsky displayed on economic questions, were only climaxed by his acceptance of the once denounced views of Tugan-Baranowsky.¹⁵ They were only a reflection of his changing general attitude towards bourgeois thought and capitalist society. In his book "The Materialistic Conception of History," which he himself declares to be the best and final product of his whole life's work, dealing as it does in nearly 2000 pages with the development of nature, society and the state, he demonstrates not only his pedantic method of exposition and his far-reaching knowledge of theories and facts, but also his many misconceptions as regards Marxism and his final break with Marxian science. Here he openly declares "that at times revisions of Marxism are unavoidable."¹⁶ Here he now accepts all that during his whole life he had apparently struggled against. He is no longer solely interested in the interpretation of Marxism, but is ready to accept responsibility for his own thoughts, presenting his main work as his own conception of history, not totally removed but independent from Marx and Engels. His masters, he now contends, have restricted the materialistic conception of history by neglecting too much the natural factors in history. He, however, starting not from Hegel but from Darwin, "will now extend the scope of historical materialism till it merges with biology."¹⁷ But his furthering of historical materialism turns out to be no more than a reversion to the crude naturalistic materialism of Marx's forerunners, a return to the position of the revolutionary bourgeoisie, which Marx had overcome with his rejection of Feuerbach. On the basis of this naturalistic materialism, Kautsky, like the bourgeois philosophers before him, cannot help adopting an idealistic concept of social development, which, then, when it deals with the state, turns openly and completely into the old bourgeois conceptions of the history of mankind as the history of states. Ending in the bourgeois democratic state, Kautsky holds that "there is no room any longer for violent class conflict. Peacefully, by way of propaganda and the voting system can conflicts be ended, decisions be made."¹⁸

Though we cannot possibly review in detail at this place this tremendous book of Kautsky, we must say that it demonstrates throughout the doubtful character of Kautsky's 'Marxism'.¹⁹ His connection with the labour movement, seen retrospectively, was never more than his participation in some form of bourgeois social work. There can be no

¹³ *Neue Zeit*, 1902, No. 5

¹⁴ K. Kautsky, *Die Materialistische Geschichtsauffassung*. Berlin, 1927. Vol. II, p. 623.

¹⁵ The limitations of Kautsky's economic theories and their transformations in the course of his activities are excellently described and criticised by Henryk Grossman in his book *Das Akkumulations- und Zusammenbruchsgesetz des kapitalistischen Systems* (Leipzig, 1929), to which the interested reader is referred.

¹⁶ K. Kautsky, *Die Materialistische Geschichtsauffassung*. Vol. II, p. 630.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 629.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 431.

¹⁹ The reader is referred to Karl Korsch's extensive criticism of Kautsky's work, *Die Materialistische Geschichtsauffassung. Eine Auseinandersetzung mit Karl Kautsky*. Leipzig, 1929.

doubt that he never understood the real position of Marx and Engels, or at least never dreamed that theories could have an immediate connection with reality. This apparently serious Marxist student had actually never taken Marx seriously. Like many pious priests engaging in a practice contrary to their teaching, he might not even have been aware of the duality of his own thought and action. Undoubtedly he would have sincerely liked being in reality the bourgeois of whom Marx once said, he is “a capitalist solely in the interest of the proletariat.” But even such a change of affairs he would reject, unless it were attainable in the ‘peaceful’ bourgeois, democratic manner. Kautsky, “repudiates the Bolshevik melody that is unpleasant to his ear,” wrote Trotsky, “but does not seek another. The solution is simple: the old musician refuses altogether to play on the instrument of the revolution.”²⁰

Recognising at the close of his life that the reforms of capitalism that he wished to achieve could not be realised by democratic, peaceful means, Kautsky turned against his own practical policy, and just as he was in former times the proponent of a Marxian ideology which, altogether divorced from reality, could serve only its opponents, he now became the proponent of bourgeois *laissez faire* ideology, just as much removed from the actual conditions of the developing fascistic capitalist society, and just as much serving this society as his Marxian ideology had served the democratic stage of capitalism. “People love today to speak disdainfully about the liberalistic economy,” he wrote in his last work; “however, the theories founded by Quesnay, Adam Smith and Ricardo are not at all obsolete. In their essentials Marx had accepted their theories and developed them further, and he has never denied that the liberal freedom of commodity production constituted the best basis for its development. Marx distinguishes himself from the Classicists therein, that when the latter saw in commodity production of private producers the only possible form of production, Marx saw the highest form of commodity production leading through its own development to conditions allowing for a still better form of production, social production, where society, identical with the whole of the working population, controls the means of production, producing no longer for profit but to satisfy needs. The socialist mode of production has its own rules, in many respects different from the laws of commodity production. However, as long as commodity production prevails, it will best function if those laws of motion discovered in the era of liberalism are respected.”²¹

These ideas are quite surprising in a man who had edited Marx’s “Theories of Surplus Value”, a work which proved exhaustively “that Marx at no time in his life countenanced the opinion that the new contents of his socialist and communist theory could be derived, as a mere logical consequence, from the utterly bourgeois theories of Quesnay, Smith and Ricardo.”²² However, this position of Kautsky’s gives the necessary qualifications to our previous statement that he was an excellent pupil of Marx and Engels. He was such only to the extent that Marxism could be fitted into his own limited concepts of social development and of capitalist society. For Kautsky, the ‘socialist society’, or the logical consequence of capitalist development of commodity production, is in truth only a state-capitalist system. When once he mistook Marx’s value concept as a law of socialist economics if only applied consciously instead of being left to the ‘blind’ operations of the market, Engels pointed out to him that for Marx, value is a strictly historical category;²³ that neither before nor after capitalism did there exist or could there exist a value production which differed only in form from that of capitalism. And Kautsky accepted Engels’ statement, as is manifested in his work “The Economic Doctrines of Karl Marx” (1887),

²⁰ L. Trotsky, *Dictatorship vs. Democracy*.

²¹ *Sozialisten und Krieg*. p. 665.

²² K. Korsch, *Karl Marx*. New York, 1938, p.92. See also: Engels’ Preface to the German edition of *The Poverty of Philosophy*, 1884; and to the second volume of *Capital*, 1895.

²³ *Aus der Frühzeit des Marxismus*, p. 145.

where he also saw value as a historical category. Later, however, in reaction to bourgeois criticism of socialist economic theory, he re-introduced in his book "The Proletarian Revolution and its Programme" (1922) the value concept, the market and money economy, commodity production, into his scheme of a socialist society. What was once historical became eternal; Engels had talked in vain. Kautsky had returned from where he had sprung, from the *petite-bourgeoisie*, who hate with equal force both monopoly control and socialism, and hope for a purely quantitative change of society, an enlarged reproduction of the *status quo*, a better and bigger capitalism, a better and more comprehensive democracy – as against a capitalism climaxing in fascism or changing into communism.

The maintenance of liberal commodity production and its political expression were preferred by Kautsky to the 'economics' of fascism because the former system determined his long grandeur and his short misery. Just as he had shielded bourgeois democracy with Marxian phraseology, so he now obscured the fascist reality with democratic phraseology. For now, by turning their thoughts backward instead of forward, he made his followers mentally incapacitated for revolutionary action. The man who shortly before his death was driven from Berlin to Vienna by marching fascism, and from Vienna to Prague, and from Prague to Amsterdam, published in 1937 a book which shows explicitly that once a 'Marxist' makes the step from a materialistic to an idealistic concept of social development, he is sure to arrive sooner or later at that borderline of thought where idealism turns into insanity.²⁴ There is a report current in Germany that when Hindenburg was watching a Nazi demonstration of storm troops he turned to a General standing beside him saying, "I did not know we had taken so many Russian prisoners." Kautsky, too, in this his last book, is mentally still at 'Tannenberg'. His work is a faithful description of the different attitudes taken by socialists and their forerunners to the question of war since the beginning of the fifteenth century up to the present time. It shows, although not to Kautsky, how ridiculous Marxism can become when it associates the proletariat with the bourgeois needs and necessities.

Kautsky wrote his last book, as he said, "to determine which position should be taken by socialists and democrats in case a new war breaks out despite all our opposition to it."²⁵ However, he continued, "There is no direct answer to this question before the war is actually here and we are all able to see who caused the war and for what purpose it is fought." He advocates that "if war breaks out, socialists should try to maintain their unity, to bring their organisation safely through the war, so that they may reap the fruit wherever unpopular political regimes collapse. In 1914 this unity was lost and we still suffer from this calamity. But today things are much clearer than they were then; the opposition between democratic and anti-democratic states is much sharper; and it can be expected that if it comes to the new world war, all socialists will stand on the side of democracy." After the experiences of the last war and the history since then, there is no need to search for the black sheep that causes wars, nor is it a secret any longer why wars are fought. However, to pose such questions is not stupidity as one may believe. Behind this apparent naïveté; lies the determination to serve capitalism in one form by fighting capitalism in another. It serves to prepare the workers for the coming war, in exchange for the right to organise in labour organisations, vote in elections, and assemble in formations which serve both capital and capitalistic labour organisations. It is the old policy of Kautsky, which demands concessions from the bourgeoisie in exchange for millions of dead workers in the coming capitalistic battles. In reality, just as the wars of capitalism, regardless of the political differences of the participating states and the various slogans used, can only be wars for capitalist profits and wars against the working class, so, too, the war

²⁴ *Sozialisten und Krieg.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. VIII.

excludes the possibility of choosing between conditional or unconditional participation in the war by the workers. Rather, the war, and even the period preceding the war, will be marked by a general and complete military dictatorship in fascist and anti-fascist countries alike. The war will wipe out the last distinction between the democratic and the anti-democratic nations. And workers will serve Hitler as they served the Kaiser; they will serve Roosevelt as they served Wilson; they will die for Stalin as they died for the Tsar.

Kautsky was not disturbed by the reality of fascism, since for him, democracy was the natural form of capitalism. The new situation was only a sickness, a temporary insanity, a thing actually foreign to capitalism. He really believed in a war for democracy, to allow capitalism to proceed in its logical course towards a real commonwealth. And his 1937 predictions incorporated sentences like the following: "The time has arrived where it is finally possible to do away with wars as a means of solving political conflicts between the states."²⁶ Or, "The policy of conquest of the Japanese in China, the Italians in Ethiopia, is a last echo of a passing time, the period of imperialism. More wars of such a character can hardly be expected."²⁷ There are hundreds of similar sentences in Kautsky's book, and it seems at times that his whole world must have consisted of no more than the four walls of his library, to which he neglected to add the newest volumes on recent history. Kautsky is convinced that even without a war fascism will be defeated, the rise of democracy recur, and the period return for a peaceful development towards socialism, like the period in the days before fascism. The essential weakness of fascism he illustrated with the remark that "the personal character of the dictatorships indicates already that it limits its own existence to the length of a human life."²⁸ He believed that after fascism there would be the return to the 'normal' life on an increasingly socialistic abstract democracy to continue the reforms begun in the glorious time of the social democratic coalition policy. However, it is obvious now that the only capitalistic reform objectively possible today is the fascist reform. And as a matter of fact, the larger part of the 'socialisation programme' of the social democracy, which it never dared to put into practice, has meanwhile been realised by fascism. Just as the demands of the German bourgeoisie were met not in 1848 but in the ensuing period of the counter-revolution, so, too, the reform programme of the social democracy, which it could not inaugurate during the time of its own reign, was put into practice by Hitler. Thus, to mention just a few facts, not the social democracy but Hitler fulfilled the long desire of the socialists, the Anschluss of Austria; not social democracy but fascism established the wished – for state control of industry and banking; not social democracy but Hitler declared the first of May a legal holiday. A careful analysis of what the socialists actually wanted to do and never did, compared with actual policies since 1933, will reveal to any objective observer that Hitler realised no more than the programme of social democracy, but without the socialists. Like Hitler, the social democracy and Kautsky were opposed to both bolshevism and communism. Even a complete state-capitalist system as the Russian was rejected by both in favour of mere state control. And what is necessary in order to realise such a programme was not dared by the socialists but undertaken by the fascists. The anti-fascism of Kautsky illustrated no more than the fact that just as he once could not imagine that Marxist theory could be supplemented by a Marxist practice, he later could not see that a capitalist reform policy demanded a capitalist reform practice, which turned out to be the fascist practice. The life of Kautsky can teach the workers that in the struggle against fascist capitalism is necessarily incorporated the struggle against bourgeois democracy, the struggle against Kautskyism. The life of Kautsky can, in all truth and without malicious intent, be summed up in the words: From Marx to Hitler.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 265.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 656.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 646.