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From Orthodox Marxism to Parliamentary Democracy
New Interpretations of the German Social Democratic and Labour Movement, 1880-1933

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From Orthodox Marxism to Parliamentary Democracy:

New Interpretations of the German Social Democratic and Labour Movement, 1880-1933

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Massimo Salvadori, *Karl Kautsky and the Socialist Revolution 1880-1938*, Translated by Jon Rothschild (London: NLB 1979).

Gary P. Steenson, *Karl Kautsky, 1854-1938: Marxism in the Classical Years* (Pittsburgh, Pa.: University of Pittsburgh Press 1978).

Richard Breitman, *German Socialism and Weimar Democracy* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press 1981).

Peter Brandt and Reinhard Rürup, eds. *Arbeiter-, Soldaten- und Volksräte in Baden 1918/19*. Volume III of Quellen zur Geschichte der Rätebewegung in Deutschland 1918/19, edited by Kommission für Geschichte des Parlamentarismus und der politischen Parteien, Bonn (Düsseldorf: Droste Verlag 1980).

F.L. Carsten, *War Against War: British and German Radical Movements in the First World War* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press 1982).

THE HISTORIOGRAPHY OF THE German labour movement has a tradition of more than a century. Yet not until the past 25 years has it received the scholarly attention it deserves. Until the 1950s the political, psychological, and methodological prerequisites for an impartial and differentiated examination were lacking. Today the history of organized labour in Germany is well on its way to becoming one of the most preferred areas of research in modern German history.[1]

Astonishing about this recent spate of research are both its innovative approaches and continuing focus on themes that have dominated German labour historiography from the beginning. The scholarly preoccupation with

[1] Until 1945 the prevalent nationalistic and idealist traditions of German historiography were reinforced by the artificially promoted widespread middle-class distrust of the

Gerhard Bassler, "From Orthodox Marxism to Parliamentary Democracy: New Interpretations of the German Social Democratic and Labour Movement, 1880-1933," *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 12 (Fall 1983), 201-215.

"socialism and social movement" is as old as the German labour movement itself.[2] The persistence of this preoccupation may largely be attributed to the uniquely prominent role of the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) in the history of the German and European labour movement and that party's profound impact on modern German history. Historians have been puzzled by the SPD's transformation within the lifespan of one generation from a party with a revolutionary Marxist platform to a defender of bourgeois parliamentary democracy. They have pondered the relationship between ideas and vested interests in the labour movement in general and they question whether it was "the tragedy of Germany that political ideas could hardly ever adjust to existing interests" in particular.[3] Research has probed into the nature and function of socialist ideology on the one hand, and has attempted to identify the actual interests of labour on the other hand. Studies have explored the innate dynamics of labour organizations, especially their oligarchic and bureaucratic tendencies, and have speculated on the extent to which the unique environment of Imperial Germany influenced the nature of the official doctrine, the actual interests, and the organization of the German labour movement.

These questions were first raised in Imperial Germany by such astute observers of the labour scene as Franz Mehring, Eduard Bernstein, Robert Michels, Gustav Mayer, Werner Sombart, and Robert Brunhuber. The books to be reviewed here confirm the fact that the most recent scholarship is still looking for new answers to these elusive questions. Would an impartial biography of Karl Kautsky corroborate the much denigrated significance of orthodox Marxism, the official doctrine of prewar Social Democracy? Must we assume that the character and outcome of the 1917-19 revolutionary situation in Germany was determined by the fact that not socialism or opportunism but a deep commitment to parliamentary liberal democracy took precedence over any other aspiration of the German labour movement? These are, broadly speaking, the two main questions which the five works to be reviewed propose to investigate. A brief look at the changing evaluations of Karl Kautsky's place in history may serve as an illustration of some of the challenges historians of the German labour movement have been facing for almost a century.[4]

presumed revolutionary ambitions of the labour movement. From 1918 to 1945 the so-called "stab-in-the-back-legend" which blamed Social Democracy's alleged revolutionary activities for Germany's defeat in 1918 was widely accepted and officially upheld. For an indication of the volume and directions of post-World War II research see the comprehensive bibliography by Klaus Tenfelde and Gerhard A. Ritter, eds., *Bibliographie zur Geschichte der deutschen Arbeiterschaft und Arbeiterbewegung 1863-1914. Berichtszietraum 1945-1975*. Archiv für Sozialgeschichte, Beiheft 8 (Bonn 1981).

[2] Among the more scholarly works on this topic, Werner Sombart's book *Sozialismus und soziale Bewegung* was the bestseller. Between 1896 and 1924 it sold ten revised editions.

[3] K. Riezler, "Idee und Interesse in der politischen Geschichte," *Dioskuren*, III (1924) as quoted by Han Rothfels, "Ideengeschichte und Parteigeschichte," *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistegeschichte*, VIII:4 (1930), 764f.

[4] A personal acquaintance and student of Friedrich Engels from 1883 to 1895 and editor of the SPD's first theoretical journal after 1883, Karl Kautsky rose to fame as the foremost promoter, interpreter, and popularizer of Marxism in the pre-World War I German labour movement and the Second International. To virtually the entire prewar generation of Marxists he appeared as the heir-apparent of Marx and Engels and he counted such figures as Lenin, Trotsky, and Rosa Luxemburg among his students. Kautsky's main efforts were devoted to entrench "orthodox Marxism" as the SPD's official doctrine and to defend it against "revisionist" and "anarchist" deviations.

When in 1892 Kautsky triumphantly interpreted the adoption of his draft program by the Erfurt Congress (1891) of the SPD as the inevitable marriage of scientific socialism and the labour movement, his views were echoed by Marxist labour historian Mehring and by bourgeois economic historian Sombart in equally unequivocal terms.[5] The assumption that, in Sombart's words, "a step by step, uninterrupted and complete saturation with Marxist ideas was taking place in the German Social Democratic movement from where it was gradually spreading to other countries" appeared to be taken for granted.[6] Kautsky's credentials as the officially authorized executor of Marx's and Engels' ideological testament were not seriously questioned. It was widely assumed that he was critically updating and creatively adding on to the unitary and coherent conception of the world created by Marx and Engels.[7]

World War I and the revolutionary upheavals that accompanied it changed all that. Lenin and his associates began the reevaluation of Kautsky's accomplishments by denouncing him as a "renegade" for his views after the outbreak of the war and his opposition to the Bolshevik seizure of power.[8] The main thrust of the reappraisal of the 1920s, however, was directed against the philosophical foundations of Kautsky's brand of Marxism. In simultaneously published critiques of prewar orthodox Marxism, Karl Korsch and Georg Lukacs charged that Kautsky never really comprehended the crucial meaning of ideology, history, and the dialectic in Marx's thought. Marx and Engels conceived of socialism as a theory of revolution, as a living method, Korsch and Lukacs argued, and not as a set of scientific observations without any immediate connection to the political struggle of the proletariat. While Marx, furthermore, grasped the laws of development as laws linked with, and appropriate only to, specific historical conditions, Kautsky, in line with bourgeois ideology, transformed these laws into eternally valid laws of nature. By borrowing his concept of development from the positivist notions of late-nineteenth-century natural science, especially Darwin, Kautsky's orthodox Marxism allegedly missed the key point of the Marxian notion of dialectical change, namely the consummation of theory by its dialectical transcendence *(Aufhebung)* through the action of the proletariat. According to Korsch, Kautsky's faith in the downfall of capitalism as a process determined by the law of nature made him as much a revisionist as Bernstein. But while Bernstein at least encouraged reformist action, Kautsky's revolutionary rhetoric assigned a passive role to the working class.[9]

This devastating critique of Kautsky's orthodox Marxism became the basis for all subsequent investigations into the nature and purpose of the Marxist ideology of prewar Social Democracy. As early as 1928 Arthur Rosenberg con-

[5] Karl Kautsky, *Das Erfurter Programm in seinem grundsätzlichen Theil erläutert* (5th ed., Stuttgart 1907), 239.

[6] Werner Sombart, *Sozialismus und soziale Bewegung im 19. Jahrhundert* (1896), reedited by Fritz Klenner and Erich Pogats (Vienna 1966), 88, 90. Franz Mehring, *Geschichte der deutsche Sozialdemokratie* (1903-04), vol. II, reedited by T. Höhle (Berlin 1960), 674f.

[7] *Ibid.*, 581. Benedikt Kautsky in *Ein Leben für den Sozialismus. Erinnerungen an Karl Kautsky* (Hannover 1954) 8f. Werner Blumenberg, *Kämpfer für die Freiheit* (Berlin 1959), 97. Hermann Drill, "Karl Kautsky: 16. Oktober 1854 - 17. Oktober 1938," *Zeitschrift für Politik*, I (1954), 211-40.

[8] V.I. Lenin, *The Proletarian Revolution and The Renegade Kautsky* 1919, reedited (Moscow 1952.

[9] Georg Lukacs, *Geschichte und Klassenbewusstsein. Studien über marxistische Dialektik* (Berlin 1923). Karl Korsch, *Marxismus und Philosophie* (Leipzig 1923). Karl Korsch, *Die materialistische Geschichtsauffassung: Eine Auseinandersetzung mit Karl Kautsky* (Leipzig 1929). Karl Korsch, "Ausgang der Marx-Orthodoxie," *Gegner*, VI:4-5 (March 1932).

cluded that the official Marxist doctrine and the political immobilism it encouraged among labour leaders left the German labour movement and the Second International ill prepared for the outbreak of the war in 1914 and the revolutionary challenges in its wake.[10]

After World War II Rosenberg's theses furnished the take-off point for an in-depth reexamination of the labour movement's share of responsibility for the rise of the Third Reich. In a much noted study on "Kautsky and Kautskyanism" Erich Matthias came to the startling conclusion that the real function of Kautsky's ideology was to facilitate the organizational integration of the diverse social and political following of Social Democracy. The revolutionary rhetoric served mainly the purpose of tying the masses to the organization of the party and of neutralizing and sublimating the sometimes dangerously conflict-motivated energies of the rank and file. This, according to Matthias, was the true meaning of Kautsky's often quoted dictum that the SPD was "a revolutionary but not a revolution-making party."[11] Matthias argued that the actual impact of the Marxist doctrine on the SPD's policies and tactics was negligible and that Kautsky's "denatured" Marxism even outright encouraged reformist practices. The ultimate effect of the official "ideology of integration" was thus neither to revolutionize the German labour movement nor to dissociate from the mainstream of social and political life but rather to help it adapt to the environment of Imperial Germany.[12]

Subsequent research took up all the points of Matthias' thesis and placed them in a wider context. The parallel rise of orthodox Marxism and of a moderate reformist practice are shown to be specific responses to the mixture of permissive and repressive, advanced and backward conditions characteristic of Imperial Germany.[13] Deterministic Marxism not only corresponded to the rigid power constellation and, by suggesting that a socialist revolution could not be "made" but would "occur," unwittingly stabilized the status quo. Its fusion of radical images with reformist meaning also adequately expressed the movement's subculture and aptly reflected labour's "negative integration" into the dominant system of Imperial Germany.[14]

Hans-Josef Steinberg has documented the pervasive influence of the Darwinian doctrine of evolution and the near total ignorance of Hegel and his concept of the dialectic among the intellectual vanguard in the formative years of orthodox Marxism. The equation of scientific socialism with the "fatalistic" expectation of the socialist revolution appear to have been the only sense that Kautsky's turn-of-the-century generation of Marxists could make of Marx's and Engels' legacy in an intellectual climate dominated by faith in positivism, material progress, and natural science. Steinberg confirmed the widely

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[10] Arthur Rosenberg, *Die Entstehung der deutschen Republik* (Berlin 1928).

[11] Quoted by Kautsky in "Verschwörung oder Revolution?" *Der Sozialdemokrat*, No. 8 of February 20, 1881, and in "Ein sozialdemokratischer Katechismus," *Neue Zeit*, XII:1 (1893-4).

[12] Erich Matthias, "Kautsky und der Kautskyanismus. Die Funktion der Ideologie in der deutschen Sozialdemokratie vor dem ersten Weltkriege," *Marxismusstudien*, II (1957), 151-97.

[13] Gerhard A. Ritter, *Die Arbeiterbewegung im Wilhelminischen Reich. Die Sozialdemokratische Partei und die Freien Gewekschaften 1890-1900* (2nd ed., Berlin 1963). Vernon L. Lidtke, *The Outlawed Party: Social Democracy in Germany, 1878-1890* (Princeton 1966).

[14] Guenther Roth, *The Social Democrats in Imperial Germany: A Study in Working Class Isolation and National Integration* (Totawa, N.J. 1963). Dieter Groh, *Negative Integration und revolutionärer Attentismus. Die deutsche Sozialdemokratie am Vorabend des ersten Weltkrieges* (Frankfurt/M., Berlin and Vienna 1973).

held suspicion that the great majority of the party members showed not the least interest in socialist theory and preferred to read pseudo-scientific, anti-clerical, anti-Christian, and anti-monarchical literary products as well as Darwinist popular science. Was this perhaps due to the fact, he wonders, that the masses were taught socialism as a dry and complicated science that was beyond their ability to comprehend, instead of as a practical task? The depreciation of Marxist theory in the party is attested by the fact that in the years before the war Kautsky and his so-called Marxist Center found themselves abandoned by the masses, the unions, the intellectuals, and virtually by the party leadership as well. The history of Social Democracy between 1890 and 1914 thus becomes for Steinberg "the history of the emancipation from theory as such."[15] From Sombart to Steinberg the argument appeared to have run its course.

I

AMONG THE FEW THINGS that Massimo Salvadori's and Gary P. Steenson's biographies of Karl Kautsky have in common is their effort to rescue Kautsky from the harsh judgement that the schools of interpretation from Lenin to Matthias passed on his historical role. Both biographers charge that historians have always treated Kautsky in relation to others and that, unlike his peers in the history of socialism, Kautsky has been singularly ignored as an independent figure in his own right. Both pay considerable attention to Kautsky's writings after 1914 in order to show that Kautsky's views remained consistent throughout his life. Steenson argues that Kautsky's Marxism was indeed orthodox in the literal sense of the word, while Salvadori suggests that Kautsky's notions of democracy, revolution, and socialism, far from being antiquated, are immensely relevant for our understanding of the evolution of socialist strategy in the West.

Salvadori's biography, whose original Italian edition appeared in 1976, charts much new territory. It reveals a hitherto ignored side of Kautsky's significance to us without concerning itself with Kautsky's private life, his political activities, or his philosophical premises. Based solely on Kautsky's published works that Werner Blumenberg's superb finding aid has made accessible in its entirety, Salvadori presents Kautsky as a seminal socio-political analyst of the complex problems posed to the workers' movement by the social evolution of the developed capitalist countries.[16] The acute relevance of Kautsky's analysis is attested by the current approach of the Western Communist parties to these problems. Salvadori defines the strategy of Eurocommunism, after the crisis of Leninism as a model of theory and practice and of the Soviet state as a model of organized power, "without the slightest polemical provocation as essentially 'Kautskyist.' "[17]

In his lucidly written and cogently argued review of the main themes of Kautsky's political writings with particular emphasis on Kautsky's approach to the relationship between socialism and democracy, Salvadori drives home four fundamental points. First, Lenin's and Trotsky's charges, that the once highly esteemed peerless master of the Marxist method had turned renegade after 1914 and betrayed the revolutionary conceptions of Marx as well as his own past, are

[15] Hans-Josef Steinberg, *Sozialismus und deutsche Sozialdemokratie. Zur Ideologie der Partei vor dem I. Weltkrieg* (Hannover 1967), 124.

[16] Werner Blumenberg, *Karl Kautsky's literarisches Werk. Eine bibliographische Uebersicht* (s'Gravenhage 1960).

[17] Massimo Salvadori, *Karl Kautsky and the Socialist Revolution, 1880-1938* (London 1979), 13.

completely unfounded. Kautsky could be accused of immobility, but not of having abandoned the fundamental lines of his conception of the revolutionary process, the dictatorship of the proletariat, and the socialist state. The positions that Kautsky had developed from the beginning of his political career in the 1880s were all such as to lead him inevitably to the sharpest opposition to the strategy and tactics of the Bolsheviks after 1917.

Secondly, Kautsky's consciousness of the socio-political problems confronting organized labour in advanced industrial society is pre-eminently representative of the Western Social Democratic experience. This experience has proven that the revolutionary perspectives and solutions of Marx and Engels, especially their models of 1848 and of the Paris Commune, as well as those of their revolutionary heirs Luxemburg, Lenin, and Trotsky, are inapplicable in the social context of highly developed modern industry. Recourse to violence, large-scale offensive actions by labour, projects of direct democracy, and plans to "shatter" the modern capitalist state are doomed to failure in a complex modern society depending on a system of central planning and economic coordination, a technical-administrative apparatus, and a professionally trained bureaucracy. The adoption of Kautsky's tenets by the Western Communist movement has borne this out.

Thirdly, Kautsky's assessments of the prospects of the collapse of capitalism, though essentially deterministic up to 1914, became increasingly realistic thereafter. His wartime analysis of imperialism, for instance, led him to predict a postwar revival of capitalism instead of an imminent confrontation with the ruling classes. Quite apart from his conviction that revolution could not be grafted onto a society in ruins and that the annihilation of capitalism as a result of the war would also bankrupt the heirs of capitalism and nullify their inheritance, he believed that the decline of Europe and the rise of the United States to world dominance would result in "ultra-imperialism." Since imperialism was defined as merely a policy of capitalism and the end of the war was expected to bring a powerful advance of democracy expressing itself internationally in a Society of Nations, the preconditions existed for the renunciation of imperialist rivalry, for the establishment of freedom of trade, and for the expansion of the forces of production. Kautsky imagined ultra-imperialism to be a sort of international collective planning based on a general agreement to exploit peacefully the backward zones and on the international division of labour. As early as 1915 he foresaw that

> in the future, the best and most fruitful means of extending the internal market lies not in the expansion of the national state in the direction of the formation of a multi-national state, but in the union of diverse national states, with equal rights, into a league of states. The league of states and not the national state constitutes the shape of the great empires needed by capitalism to realize its ultimate, highest form, within which the proletariat can assume power.[18]

Kautsky's admission that there might be no objective limits to the continuation of capitalism reduced the prospects for socialism to a mere possibility to be realized by a will for a different order, by political organization and by alliances with parts of the bourgeoisie and petit bourgeoisie. The socialist revolution, though still historically necessary, was no longer an inevitable certainty.

Salvadori's fourth and most persuasive point is Kautsky's consistent and unwavering advocacy of political democracy as the road to and ultimate form of the socialist revolution. Political democracy was the *sine qua non* of socialism, the necessary and decisive condition for its growth. From the beginning of his political career Kautsky defined the dic-

[18] *Ibid.*, 196f.

tatorship of the proletariat as a labour government based on free elections, the respect of political and civil liberties, the use of parliament for introducing socialist measures, and constitutional control of a centralized administrative-bureaucratic apparatus of government. Kautsky believed firmly that, even though the end of capitalism could not be predicted, the need for and strength of democracy as the most normal and rational form of capitalist society would continue to grow in proportion as the class nature of capitalism was creating the objective basis for socialism. The proletariat needed democracy to express itself, to become conscious of its exploitation, to organize its struggles, and to breathe real life into the possibility of socialism. Kautsky's deep faith in the liberal, parliamentary form of democracy provided the foundation for his outspoken critiques of the Leninist and Stalinist regimes as well as of Fascism.

With regard to Bolshevik Russia Kautsky was the first to note that the economic ruin and absence of democracy gave rise to the rule of a "new class" of functionaries and bureaucrats in a system that he labelled "state capitalism."[19] Kautsky's leitmotif was that without a democratic organization the socialization of the means of production lost its socialist significance since its management would be entrusted to a despotically organized minority that annulled the meaning of socialization. Fascism, by the same token, was bound to be short-lived and would be followed by a return to liberal democracy. Kautsky argued that fascism was brought about by exceptional circumstances and could not represent the destiny of capitalism. Modern industrial society required that formal rules of free bargaining regulate the relations among social forces. It was simply inconceivable to Kautsky that the advance of democracy in the modern state could be halted.

[19] *Ibid.*, 272.

Salvadori concedes that Darwinian influences helped shape Kautsky's Marxism and that, philosophically speaking, he was no original thinker. But this should not detract from the fact that "Kautsky was a sensitive and sometimes very keen observer of new phenomena of social development, which could not simply be 'read' through the eyes of Marx and Engels."[20] Kautsky deserves credit for the originality of his valid Marxist analyses of the labour movement's options in post-Marxian industrial society.

Gary P. Steenson's portrait of "Kautsky-as-Marxist" is unaware of Salvadori's findings.[21] Despite the similarity of focus the contrast between the two biographies is so strong that one is inclined to wonder whether these do in fact deal with the same person. Based on interviews with Karl Kautsky, Jr., and on archival research in Amsterdam and Stanford, Steenson attempts to present a chronological panorama of Kautsky's career and writings. Four of the book's six chapters are devoted to the period up to 1914. In those four chapters the parts that deal with Kautsky's personal life and relationships are the most interesting and valuable. Here we learn, for example, that on occasions between 1885 and 1910 when Kautsky appeared inflexible and dogmatic, this may be attributed to pressures from Engels and Bebel urging him to adopt such a stance. In the last two chapters, unfortunately, the story of Kautsky's personal contacts is severely slighted. Only 33 out of 254 pages are devoted to the period after 1918.

Concerning Kautsky's theoretical development Steenson rehashes the widely-held notions, that Kautsky added nothing of significance to Marxism as a socio-economic theorist or revolutionary

[20] *Ibid.*, 18.

[21] Gary P. Steenson, *Karl Kautsky, 1854-1938: Marxism in the Classical Years* (Pittsburg 1978), 5.

ideologist, that he opposed reformism until 1914, and that "he failed to translate theory into practice" and was unable "to see the logic of the practice he could not *influence*."[22] The analysis of Kautsky's thought and positions on socialist strategies and tactics is of uneven quality and frequently unconvincing. The author appears to have difficulties identifying the central themes and basic concerns of Kautsky's writings, especially after 1914. The discussion in chapter VI of the various issues raised by the war, such as nationalism, democracy, and imperialism, and of Kautsky's positions with regard to the growing divisions in the Social Democratic movement is unsatisfactory and confusing. *Nationalitätenstaat* is translated as "nationalistic" state instead of as multinational state.[23] Such references to Kautsky's brand of Marxism as "not incorrect" (181), "not simpleminded" (194), "reasoned and relatively cautious" (228), "highly rationalistic and analytical" (218) and "not differ[ing] from Engels' on any essential points" (100) do little to help clarify the issues at stake.

The thesis that Kautsky's thought was not influenced by Darwinism and that it was, not even prior to 1914, deterministic and fatalistic is not borne out by the book. Steenson's contention that after 1885 Darwinism had disappeared from Kautsky's thinking is based solely on occasional assertions by Kautsky that natural laws could not be applied to the explanation of social conditions. It ignores important conflicting evidence from as late as 1927 and implicit even in Steenson's analysis of Kautsky's work *The Materialist Conception of History* which clearly acknowledges Kautsky's continued indebtedness to Darwin by its aim to integrate human history and its laws into a larger, more universal context including prehistory and the history of nature.[24] The argument conveniently overlooks the irrefutably documented consensus among the experts on this question and its relationship to Kautsky's notion of "historical necessity."[25] Equally unconvincing is therefore Steenson's proposition that Kautsky from as early as 1890 tied determinism in economics to voluntarism in politics and thus "preserved the ambiguous and elusive quality of Marx."[26] The passages that Steenson quotes (frequently out of context) to support his point of view do in fact support the well-founded consensus that in Kautsky's perspective the concrete actions of Social Democracy appeared to fulfill a necessarily predetermined verdict of the laws of social evolution. Kautsky's alleged voluntarism is difficult to reconcile with Steenson's thesis that the orthodox Marxist singularly failed to translate any part of his theory into practice.

Unlike Salvadori, Steenson traces Kautsky's unswerving commitment to liberal freedoms and parliamentary democracy only to the World War. Kautsky is shown as identifying with the democratic structure of the postwar German republic to the extent that as chairman of the socialization commission and in his writings he refused to endanger the republic's foundations by radical socialization measures. Kautsky fully agreed with the policies of the SPD and supported the need for coalition governments. How therefore Steenson could come to the categorical conclusion that Kautsky consistently failed to see his theoretical positions translated into effective action and despaired of ever seeing his ideals realized in his lifetime remains a puzzle to the reviewer.[27]

[22] *Ibid.*, 249.
[23] *Ibid.*, 182, 192.
[24] *Ibid.*, 236-339.
[25] See especially Korsch, *Die materialistische Geschichtsauffassung*, parts I-III, and Steinberg, 45-75. Also Sven Papcke, "Kautsky und der historische Fatalismus," *Jahrbuch Arbeiterbewegung*, III (1975), 231-46.
[26] Steenson, 98.
[27] *Ibid.*, 247, 253.

II

THAT KAUTSKY's pre-eminent commitment to liberal parliamentary democracy was no exception among the Social Democratic leadership in Germany is the key finding of Richard Breitman's important monograph on *German Socialism and Weimar Democracy*. It is based on extensive archival research in *Amsterdam*, *Bonn*, *Koblenz*, *Freiburg*, Dusseldorf, Berlin, and New York and argues persuasively that after World War I the SPD came to regard parliamentary democracy as the only secure pathway to socialism. From 1917 on, the SPD leadership placed highest priority upon the rapid establishment of parliamentary democracy. To this end they sought cooperation with the liberal and Catholic parties, deliberately neglected opportunities in 1918-19 to introduce socialist measures, formed coalition governments with non-socialists, accepted the need for joint business and labour efforts, and established a working relationship with the military. The Social Democrats became thus in effect advocates of pluralism throughout the entire Weimar period. The SPD remained willing to help stabilize the republic as a coalition partner or in opposition even when called upon to sacrifice most of their economic objectives and in the face of governments hostile to labour.

The analysis concentrates largely on the interaction between the leadership of the SPD and the parliamentary systems at the national and the Prussian state levels. Yet the evidence suggests that intra-party democracy provided for better channels of communication in the SPD than in any other party at the time and that the party leadership was on the whole representative of its membership or voting constituency. The SPD was concerned about internal dissent, the appeal of its rivals to the left and the lack of compromise by its non-socialist coalition partners. The party leaders always had to demonstrate that concessions to the bourgeoisie produced direct benefits to the working class in the short term and long run. When national economic policy in the mid-1920s began to alienate the Social Democratic electorate, the SPD withdrew into opposition from national government coalitions. This decision was facilitated by the compensation which control over the government of Germany's largest state afforded the SPD. The policy of constructive opposition, known as "toleration," of non-socialist national governments worked only as long as the SPD had alternate means of protecting the democratic republic against its enemies, namely through control of the government, the police and the administration of Prussia. The SPD had no alternative to this strategy. This became clear when Chancellor von Papen unilaterally removed the Prussian SPD government in 1932.

Even though Breitman finds few political parties "less responsible for the many failures of the Weimar Republic than the SPD," he speculates that nationalization of a few key industries during the revolutionary period or the promotion of alternate models to guide and direct the economy, such as the Wissell-Moellendorff "common economy," would have served beneficial political and economic purposes and given Weimar democracy a better chance of survival.[28] How committed was the Weimar SPD to socialism considering its sacrifices for bourgeois democracy? Breitman submits that the SPD's faith in the advent of socialism was still nourished by the same confidence in the natural process of economic development as before the war. The attractiveness of parliamentary democracy is seen in large part as the result of the party's prewar belief that organizational and electoral success meant constant progress towards socialism. This deep-seated faith in evolutionary socialism is ultimately held responsible for the SPD's willingness to

[28] Richard Breitman, *German Socialism and Weimar Democracy* (Chapel Hill 1981), 194.

postpone indefinitely any nationalization plans in the face of liberal bourgeois opposition and to dismantle the economic controls of Ebert's government. This faith is held responsible for the SPD's suspicion towards alternate methods of regulating the capitalist economy and for the general underestimation of the difficulties the party faced.

Breitman's monograph whose erudition, organization, and style are equally impressive, makes a major contribution to the ongoing debate about the extent of labour's responsibility for the failure of Weimar democracy. To the accusations by historians that at the revolutionary cradle of the Weimar Republic the Social Democratic leadership either outright betrayed their principles, were not up to the challenge, or feared Bolshevism or the chaos, Breitman responds with the persuasive insight that the SPD leaders seized with eagerness and determination the opportunity to establish parliamentary democracy on a broad liberal-bourgeois and interdenominational basis. Their strategy of cooperation with non-socialist forces, developed before the Revolution, made them reject the need for structural changes to anchor liberal democracy more solidly. In 1918 they argued that they lacked the sanction of parliament, in 1919 that they lacked a parliamentary majority, and that the opportunity, if needed, would present itself again under more favourable circumstances.

The question whether it might have been possible in the revolutionary upheaval of 1918-19 to lay the foundations for a democratic order more liberalized than the Weimar system, arose from the rediscovery in the 1960s of the workers' and soldiers' councils of 1918-19. Our knowledge of the German council movement — its origins, structure and aims — is based on a series of superbly edited monographs and publications of primary sources by the Kommission für Geschichte des Parlamentarismus und der politischen Parteien in Bonn. *Arbeiter-, Soldaten- und Volksräte in Baden 1918/19* is the fourth major edition of primary sources on the revolution of 1918-19 and the second collection of materials dealing with the activities of the councils on the regional and local levels.[29] Although, due to the lack of a similar invaluable collection of unpublished documents as distinguished the preceding volume on the Wurttemberg councils, this edition had to draw heavily on the detailed reports in the daily press, it manages to convey a surprisingly clear and differentiated picture. Among the documents included are reports of all the general meetings of the workers' and soldiers' councils on the state level and of some on the regional, urban, and rural levels; illustrations of the types of radical change envisaged and of the councils' changing aims and functions; and finally evidence of the extension of the council movement to the peasants, middle class, intelligentsia, and the unemployed. The editors chose Baden as a special case because this traditionally most liberal of the German states with the most reformist-oriented Social Democratic movement would be expected to have a smoother transition to parliamentary democracy than the rest of Germany.

The picture that emerges from the documents and the editorial comments confirm this expectation in several respects. Despite widespread discontent and shock at the unexpected turn of military fortunes, no revolutionary mood was dis-

[29] The three major editions of sources are: Susanne Miller and Heinrich Potthoff, eds., *Die Regierung der Volksbeauftragten 1918/19*, 2 vols. (Düsseldorf 1969); Eberhard Kolb and Reinhard Rürup, eds., *Der Zentralrat der Deutschen Sozialistischen Republik 19.12.1918-8.4.1919* (Leiden 1968); Eberhard Kolb and Klaus Schönhoven, eds., *Regionale und lokale Räteorganisationen in Württemberg 1918/19* (Düsseldorf 1976). The basic monographs are: Walter Tormin, *Die Arbeiterräte in der deutschen Innenpolitik 1918-1919* (Düsseldorf 1962); Peter von Oertzen, *Betriebsräte in*

cernible in Baden until news of revolution in Kiel and Munich began to spread. The origins of the revolutionary movement in Baden can be traced to the large numbers of troops garrisoned in the state. Among these appeared the first councils of soldiers' deputies. Their first demands included release of political prisoners and jailed deserters, abolition of censorship and unfair disciplinary measures by officers, and no more troop transports to the front nor defensive manoeuvres until the conclusion of an armistice. They were generally modelled after the demands of the mutinous Kiel sailors. By occupying strategic places and public buildings, assuming control over the police and proclaiming themselves guarantors of law and order, they triggered the collapse of the established authorities. With one or several days' delay workers' councils were formed in a variety of ways, usually by initiative and out of the existing SPD and trade union organizations. The workers' council of the state capital, Karlsruhe, appeared only after a new state coalition government of three bourgeois parties with the two socialist parties (SPD and USPD) had come into existence and, in contrast to the Karlsruhe soldiers' council, it had only local ambitions. The initiative for proclaiming Baden a republic and for the abdication of the Grand Duke on 23 November, came from the soldiers' councils. After their general political initiatives in the first days of the revolution, the soldiers' councils' main preoccupation continued to be demobilization and military reform, particularly the promotion of the newly created defense units known as *Volkswehren*, while the workers' councils became the main protagonists of political, economic, and social reforms.

In Baden the composition of the workers' and soldiers' councils as well as their relationship with the state and local organs of government tended to be less confrontationist than in other parts of Germany. The councils' successful efforts to include representatives from wide segments of the non-proletarian middle and lower strata of the population (farmers, clerks, civil servants, teachers, the free professions, even businessmen) as well as members of non-socialist parties, was reflected in the designation "workers', peasants' and people's councils" which they gave to their congresses. The documentation of the activities of non-proletarian councils of citizens *(Bürgerräte)* and of representatives of the arts *(Kunst- und Kulturrat)* indicates their endorsement of the revolutionary changes and of the general objectives of the workers' and soldiers' councils. The councils' relationship with the various levels of government were on the whole free from conflict and mutually beneficial. In return for effectively maintaining law and order the councils were officially granted the right to "control" — though not to intervene in — the government and administration of the state and to protect the achievements of the revolution.

The aims of the workers' and soldiers' councils in Baden were identical to those in the rest of Germany. At first they wanted overwhelmingly the establishment of a parliamentary democratic republic, that is they rejected a direct democracy based solely on councils, as well as "any kind of dictatorship from the right as well as from the left."[30] In the new order there were to be no more class privileges, nor any authoritarianism or militarism of the old kind. Before the elections to the constituent assembly on 6 January 1919,

der Novemberrevolution. Eine politikwissenschaftlichen Untersuchung über Ideengehalt und Struktur der betrieblichen und wirtschaftlichen Arbeiterräte in der deutschen Revolution 1918/19 (Düsseldorf 1963); and Ulrich Kluge, *Soldatenräte und Revolution. Studien zur Militärpolitik in Deutschland 1918/19* (Göttingen 1975).

[30] Peter Brandt and Reinhard Rürup, eds., *Arbeiter-, Soldaten- und Volksräte in Baden 1918/19* (Düsseldorf 1980), 448.

structural and personal changes in the administration and armed forces, amounting to a radical democratization of these institutions, were considered more urgent than socialization measures, because the government and newly elected parliamentary bodies were expected to undertake economic reforms. When these expectations were disappointed and the newly elected coalition government moved to reduce the influence of the councils and then to get rid of them (the soldiers' councils were dissolved in May 1919), the councils became radicalized. They came increasingly under the influence of the previously negligible radical left of the Independent Social Democratic and Communist parties (USPD and KPD), formed so-called action committees, and issued the slogan of a second revolution establishing a council republic. This radicalization, however, was accompanied by their rapidly declining power and loss of mass appeal. By summer of 1919 the councils had virtually disappeared.

On the whole, the documentation of the revolutionary developments on the regional level of Baden appears to confirm the national model of the German Revolution of 1918-19. It was characterized by a spontaneous mass movement which, organized in the workers' and soldiers' councils, demanded from a Social Democratic government "nothing more and nothing less than a consequential implementation of Social Democratic policy."[31] This policy, according to the more or less clearly articulated objectives of the councils all over Germany, was understood by a wide spectrum of the population to go beyond a mere overthrow of the monarchy and the military dictatorship. The council movement aimed at a comprehensive democratization of the lower levels of the administration and the military, at a new relationship between employer and employee in the form of an economic partnership *(Mitbestimmung)* and the socialization of "ripe" industries, such as mining.[32] Was its failure a tragic case of misunderstanding between the SPD leadership and its mass following about the nature of Social Democratic policy?

F.L. Carsten in his latest book *War against War* does not think so. From the perspective of a comparison of British and German radical movements in World War I Carsten came to the conclusion that the workers' and soldiers' councils never became a national movement, that their objectives were not really revolutionary, and that their raison d'être disappeared when Ebert implemented their principal aim of parlimentary democracy. The actual number of revolutionaries remained "pitifully" small and were unable to influence the course of events. Carsten views the German Revolution as the culmination of a movement of revolt against the suffering, injustices, and deprivation of freedom caused by the war. It was triggered by the military defeat and carried from the front to the rear and not vice versa. Had morale in the German forces not cracked under the impact of the impending Allied victory and had the military leaders not openly admitted defeat by requesting an armistice, there would have been no revolution in Germany.

Carsten argues that in Britain as in Germany political opposition to the war was negligible from the beginning. In 1914-15 the governments' failure to control food prices and war profits enabled small groups of initially isolated radical socialists to stir up peace demonstrations and industrial unrest. During 1916, in spite of growing intra-party opposition to official SPD policy and a mass demonstration against the trial of Karl Liebknecht,

[31] *Ibid.*, CXV.

[32] Reinhard Rürup, *Probleme der Revolution in Deutschland 1918/19* (Wiesbaden 1968), 21 ff. *Allgemeiner Kongress der Arbeiter- und Soldatenräte Deutschlands vom 16. bis 21. Dezember 1918 im Abgeordnetenhause zu Berlin, Stenographische Berichte* (Berlin 1919), 171f.

most strikes in Germany were caused by shortages of essential foodstuffs, "were for higher wages and had no political purposes," while in Britain the Independent Labour Party's (ILP) fight against conscription was unable to start a mass movement.[33] In 1917 the Russian Revolution had considerable repercussions in both countries, but Carsten attributes this largely to the longing for peace and the appeal of the Soviet slogan of "peace without annexations and indemnities." He ascribes mutinies in the German navy and in the British army in 1917 entirely to non-political causes such as issues of food, leave, absence without leave, and to general war-weariness. As cause for the Berlin strike of April 1917, where in open imitation of the Russian example the first German workers' council was formed, the announced reduction of the bread ration is singled out. For the political mass strike movement in Germany, which peaked in the nation-wide strike of January 1918 and involved more than one million workers, two factors are held responsible: first, the organizational efforts of the forty so-called Revolutionary Shop Stewards who had strong grass roots among the highly paid and skilled workers in the metal industry and close contacts with the USPD, and secondly, the stalemate at the Brest-Litovsk peace negotiations. The demands of the workers' council, formed jointly by the Revolutionary Shop Stewards, the SPD and the USPD, included peace, lifting of the state of siege, thorough democratization of all public institutions, and the full democratic franchise for Prussia, but no socialist measures. Carsten suggests that the January strike was not intended to and could not bring the overthrow of the government but was meant as a reminder of Germany's war-weariness and an indication that the earlier mood of political unity had disappeared. Among the German people an increasingly bitter mood, open hostility to the government, and anti-monarchist feelings were registered during 1918. But the German people's desire for peace at any price was in Carsten's judgment not the expression of a revolutionary situation.

In Britain shop stewards in opposition to union leaders also formed unofficial strike committees and led strikes in May 1917 that threatened to paralyze Britain's war industries. But their causes and aims were purely economic. The British shop stewards' motives were syndicalist, that is their movement was apolitical, and only a minority aimed at terminating the war. There was no cooperation between them and the Union of Democratic Control or the No-Conscription Fellowship. While the USPD grew in membership and militancy the reverse was true for its British equivalent, the ILP as well as for the small British Socialist Party, both of which stagnated during the war. Strikes in Britain declined in importance after May 1917, had no political purpose, and were not directed against the war. The people in Britain, Carsten concludes, suffered less from the war, the nation rallied more behind the war effort, and there was a more widespread determination among the working class to see the war through. As the German opposition to the war turned into a revolution, the British left was drowned in a wave of jingoist enthusiasm.

Carsten ploughed through a mass of published and unpublished primary sources in British and German archives and hopes that the facts he unearthed and presents with a minimum of interpretation and analysis will speak for themselves. The chapter on "political strikes in Germany," for example, describes strike after strike in chronological sequence from April 1917 to January 1918 all over Germany and Austria with no effort to summarize their causes and aims, forms and features anywhere. The panorama of

[33] F.L. Carsten, *War Against War: British and German Radical Movements in the First World War* (Berkeley and Los Angeles 1982), 89.

detail unfolding is indeed overwhelming and contrasts conspicuously with the omission of the more recent literature on the topic and the failure to evaluate one's findings in the context of current research.[34] In view of the obvious contrasts between the German and the British anti-war movements and the fact that more than three quarters of the book deals with the German side, it is difficult to see how the technique of comparison could serve any other purpose than that of making a point about the German movement without reference to other authorities. The large number of impressive studies of the German Revolution of 1918-19 and its background do not bear out Carsten's claim that this book breaks new ground.[35]

III

THE ISSUES RAISED BY the publications reviewed epitomize in a sense the persistent controversy over the dichotomous relationship between "socialism and social movement" with regard to the revolutionary situation of 1917-19. F.L. Carsten, with his efforts to refute the "stab-in-the-back-legend" by reversing it, and to judge the revolutionary situation solely by its outcome, argues from the perspective of the earliest critical interpretations, advanced in the late 1920s and again after 1945.[36] This school of thought concluded that the 1918 Revolution was destined to fail because Ebert's Social Democratic government had only a choice between two equally undesirable alternatives — "the social revolution in alliance with the forces that aimed at a proletarian dictatorship or the parliamentary republic in alliance with the conservative elements and the old officer corps."[37]

Research into the early history of German communism, inspired by the controversial findings of East German historiography, convinced a younger generation of Western historians that German communism was not identical with Bolshevism and that neither of them constituted a force that had to be taken seriously in 1918.[38] This realization triggered a barrage of critical interpretations of Ebert and his Government of People's Deputies, charging them with everything from weakness and incompetence for their failure to achieve even the moderate reforms that appeared possible, to betraying the socialist cause. Gary P. Steenson's biography of Kautsky joins their chorus while Massimo Salvadori and Richard Breitman attempt to exonerate the Social Democratic leaders from these charges by identifying their deep-seated commitment to parliamentary democracy.

That in 1918-19 the establishment of a more liberalized or social democracy was

[34] Conspicuously missing is any reference to Kolb's, Rürups, and von Oertzen's work which analyzes carefully the political strike movement in 1917 and January 1918. Von Oetzen, *Betriebsräte*, compares the British and German shop-stewards movements. Missing is an awareness of the more or less recent research on the impact of the Russian Revolution, such as Arno J. Mayer, *Wilson vs. Lenin: Political Origins of the New Diplomacy 1917-1918* (New Haven 1959); Peter Lösche, *Der Bolschewismus im Urteil der deutschen Sozialdemokratie 1903-1920* (Berlin 1967); Helmut Neubauer, ed., *Deutschland und die Russische Revolution* (Stuttgart 1968); Charles L. Bertrand, ed., *Revolutionary Situations in Europe, 1917-1922: Germany, Italy, Austria-Hungary* (Montreal 1977), etc.

[35] Carsten, 7 and claim on dust cover.

[36] See footnote 1, and Karen Fries Thiessenhusen, "Politische Kommentare deutscher Historiker 1918/19 zu Niederlage und Staatsumsturz," in E. Kolb, ed., *Vom Kaiserreich zur Weimarer Republik* (Cologne 1972), 349-68.

[37] Karl Dietrich Erdmann, "Die Geschichte der Weimarer Republik als Problem der Wissenschaft," *Vierteljahreshefte für Zeitgeschichte*, III (1955), 7.

[38] See G.P. Bassler, "The Communist Movement in the German Revolution, 1918-1919: A Problem of Historical Typology?" *Central European History*, (1973), 233-77.

a realistic alternative to the conservative republic of Weimar, is the thesis of the most recent school of interpretation represented by Peter Brandt's and Reinhard Rürup's edition of *Arbeiter-, Soldaten- und Volksräte in Baden 1918/19*. This school views the workers' and soldiers' councils as the products and not the initiators of the revolution.[39] As the spontaneously and democratically created vehicles of a revolutionary mass movement, a movement to which the traditional labour organizations remained unresponsive, the German councils manifested a new social consciousness of labour aiming at a participatory and an equitable democracy in a parliamentary framework. The innovative form of organization, borrowing the forms and symbols but not the contents of the Soviet model of 1917,[40] is interpreted as an expression of the desire to restore the unity of the socialist movement as well as of labour's distrust of the traditional bureaucratic structures of government, parties, and unions to implement the desired democratization of the administration, army, and economy.[41] The council's overwhelmingly Social Democratic composition, their eagerness to cooperate with the government towards these objectives and their self-programmed dissolution, attest to the revolutionary challenges and possibilities of 1918. For the purpose of determining the revolutionary character of the events, however, "the question whether the aims of the councils were consistent and realistic is as irrelevant as the question whether they produced any lasting results."[42]

[39] See Eberhard Kolb, "Rätewirklichkeit und Räte-Ideologie in der deutschen Revolution von 1918/19," in E. Kolb, ed., *Vom Kaiserreich zur Weimarer Republik*, 165-84.

[40] See G.P. Bassler, "A Reconsideration of the Impact of the Russian Revolution on the Revolutionary Movement in Germany, 1917-1918," *Historical Papers* (1976), 67-92.

[41] This aspect is particularly emphasized by von Oertzen, *Betriebsräte*. See also the review by Helga Grebing, "Konservative Republik oder soziale Demokratie? Zur Bewertung der Novemberrevolution in der neueren westdeutschen Historiographie," in E. Kolb, ed., *Vom Kaiserreich zur Weimarer Republik*, 386-403.

[42] Peter Brandt and Reinhard Rürup, eds., cxiv.