German Social Democracy & E. Bernstein

1899

People:

Author: Max Nettlau

Tags: nouvelle paris april 10 1899, marxist fathers of the church, fathers of the church, german social democratic party, paris april 10 1899, trade unionism and co-operation, alliances with bourgeois parties, marx and engels, social democratic party, concentration of capital.

Text:

GERMAN SOCIAL DEMOCRACY & E. BERNSTEIN.

Social Democrats in nearly all countries begin to reap what they have sown. For years the propoganda of principles has had to stand back before the reckless strife for votes to conquer political and municipal power, as the phrase goes. Their ranks were swelled on one side by masses of voters, whose real convictions and prejudices remained for the greater part untouched; on the other side, by
politicians and selfseeking persons who were on the lookout for a party which would accept them as leaders. Among the inevitable consequences of these superficial flippant tactics are some apparent successes of a kind that makes sincere members of the party blush with shame--like the admission of Millerand, the French Socialist politician, to the Ministry which Galliffet, the slaughterer of the Paris workers in 1871, adorns; or the election of Social Democrats to the Bavarian Diet at the cost of a compromise with the Catholic party, which brought that party into power and means the handing over of public instruction to the priests, as happened in Belgium some years ago.

Another consequence is the increase of ponderous circumspection and diplomatic moderation all round, in order not to alienate the sympathies of particular bodies of electors; examples are furnished by the hopeless confusion of the German Social Democratic party in dealing with the land question and co-operation. It is, indeed, difficult to find even a State Socialist solution of these problems which will suit agricultural laborers and peasant proprietors, cooperators and small shopkeepers alike, all of whom form precious and influential elements of the army of voters. In other countries the question of temporary alliance with bourgeois parties comes to the front (in France, Belgium, Italy, etc.) leading necessarily to efforts to unite the greatest number or voters by all means, at the cost of any principle, in order to be able to enter such an alliance with the greatest possible strength and, consequently, to obtain the most favorable conditions.

Meanwhile, serious economic struggles are not encouraged. I do not deny that the momentary relative prosperity of industry and trade removes in some cases the primary cause of strikes, nor that the increasing solidarity and aggressiveness of the capitalists make a defensive attitude appear more practical to many just now; but it is quite natural, also, that those who represent the political interest of the party should, consciously or unconsciously, regret that energy and funds are used for economic struggles and diverted from the field of political action, and they will strive for the usual cheap political victories which leave the economic position altogether unaffected. The governing classes are quite cute enough to reap the benefit of such "tactics"; they have plenty of Galliffets to couple with all the Millerands who attain that cherished height of political power: a seat in a Ministry. At the same time, they are as implacable as ever in economic matters, federating
and preparing for defying and fighting trade unionism; witness the general lockout of organized workers in Denmark last summer, the threatening legislation against coalitions in Germany, the suppression of all right of combination among the Italian railway workers, etc.

This evolution, furthermore, foils the hopes of the believers in the doctrines of Karl Marx and Frederick Engels. The expectation that, with the enormous increase of Socialist votes and representatives, the real power of the workers would increase also, has not been realized; and Marxists are anxious to find out the reason of this deadlock. Here their intellectual isolation becomes a bitter obstacle to finding the truth. From their early days Marx and Engels, after transforming the main results of contemporary science and Socialism into an agglomeration of ideas--arranged in their peculiar way and thenceforward self-styled "scientific Socialism,"--erected what may be called a Chinese wall of prejudice around their system, and almost all intellectual progress of mankind during the past fifty or sixty years became an object of sneers and derision to the leaders of Marxism whilst remaining nearly unknown to the mass of their followers. This may appear strange to many; but the investigation of the original sources of Marxist ideas--familiar to readers of W. Tcherkesov's articles,--the Marxists' actions during all their history, the recent action of Edward Bernstein (a champion Marxist), and the attitude of the German Socialist party towards it only need closer examination to prove it.

Edward Bernstein in various articles in the Neue Zeit and his book, The Basis of Socialism and the Task of Social Democracy (in German, Stuttgart, 1899, 188 pages), questioned the truth of several fundamental doctrines of Marxism and, further, advocated a change in tactic for the German Social Democratic Party. It is curious to note that he criticizes the same Marxist doctrines which W. Tcherkesov in his Pages of Socialist History first attacked, mainly 'the concentration of capital.' Domela Nieuwenhuis remarks on this coincidence in L'Humanité Nouvelle (Paris April 10, 1899, p. 472), and also "A Reader" in the Daily Chronicle (August 17 last). I would not recall this fact if Bernstein had mentioned the priority of this Anarchist critic at all. He is somewhat undecided as to the theory of value, which, during Marx's lifetime not to speak of Engels', had already been criticized inside the party; Marx, from whom a definite explanation was expected, remaining silent. Bernstein now mentions Jevons, Menger, Boehm Bawerk, hitherto so much held in
contempt by Marxists. He also looks closer at what the famous conquest of political power really means, and traces it back to Blanquist sources; here, again, alighting not very far from Tcherkesov's ideas, who traces it further back to the French political Radicalism of the thirties, if I am not mistaken.

Having gone thus far, he seems to me more original in challenging the theories of increasing misery of the masses and impending crises and social cataclysms leading to a final breakdown of the capitalist system at a given moment. He is inclined to see that the average wellbeing of the working classes increases, that periods of crises and depression tend to become scarcer and less acutely felt and that there is no sure prospect of a final crisis which would end in the social revolution, at all.

From this particular view of evolution he concludes that the working classes must begin to obtain political and social power in society now, giving up all dreams of a social revolution and sudden utopian changes. They must use the political machinery in central and local matters to the utmost--here he advocates Fabianism à l'outrance; they must also extend and fortify Trade Unionism and Co-operation; they must give up their attitude of stern negation to the inevitable demands of colonial expansion, etc.--which certainly means Imperialism--and soon. In fact, almost all he saw being done in England by so many independent movements he wants to see done in Germany by the one Social Democratic party, which is in no small degree startled by all these new tasks mapped out by Bernstein

That country, indeed, now reaps in these matters the result of the doubtful benefit of a united Socialist party. Initiative is lacking; the party is bulky and slow moving. Different local action would often be necessary, but as a rule is evaded if it should be of a more advanced character. Blunders in the reactionary direction, however, are not in frequent. This is easily explained: the more conscientious elements obey the party program, whilst the more indifferent easily relapse into reactionary ways. So the formal unity kills the initiative for progress, but leaves the way to reaction open. Examples abound: at every Congress reactionary provincial, local and individual actions are blamed, yet are always repeated (e.g. the Bavarian Budget voted by Socialist members of the Bavarian Diet, money for armaments
unopposed by Schippel in the parliamentary committee, money for church building voted by Stegmuller in Baden, etc.; but no advanced action (which would, also, surely be censured by some) is ever recorded.

To return to Bernstein. The serious part of the practical proposals he made, namely, the strengthening of the economic position of the workers, has also been made before by Paul Kampffmeyer, the present secretary of the Frankfort Trades Council, in a pamphlet (Mehr Macht, More Power) published in Berlin in 1898.

The great stress laid on the economic struggle by Bernstein is a step in the right direction; but it cannot be overlooked that he means to give up none of the empty political ambitions. His most talented defender at the Hanover Congress, Dr. David of Mayence, said distinctly: "He (Bernstein) says: it is false to conquer first political and afterwards economic power; the reverse is false also; both aims must advance side by side, causing and supporting each other mutually." And again: "Bernstein is of opinion that the processes of Socializing and of democratizing must go hand in hand. The trade unionist and political movements are inseparable."

English readers will see that there is nothing new in Bernstein's tactics and will only wonder that they caused so much stir in the gigantic "scientific" party of Germany that was supposed to know everything. Yet this is only an example to show that they know nothing of what passes outside the pale of Marxism. Bernstein is the only influential Marxist who--having to remain in London as a proscript even after the fall of the Anti-Socialist law in 1890--peeped over the Chinese wall of Marxist doctrinairianism and actually rediscovered the modern labor movement for his fellow Marxists. They had for many years only heard of England as the place of residence of Marx and Engels; later on, of the lamented Avelings, and a country which had the happy destiny of furnishing the materials for Das Kapital, by Karl Marx. Later on, they were told that the Bloomsbury Socialist Society was the lever of the Marxist social revolution in England and that the great man in the English movement, besides the Avelings, was Will Thorne. Mr. Hyndman was alternately vilified when he was friendly towards the French Possibilists (Anti-Marxist Socialists), and praised to the skies when the Avelings joined the S.D.F. again. Fabianism was treated with the utmost contempt; the anti-political trade unions declared reactionary; cooperators treated as bourgeois,
and the I.L.P. suspected of leanings towards the Anarchists--the arch-enemy. The movements outside the Marxist camp in other countries were treated similarly; and the poor readers of the German Social Democratic press lived in a fool's paradise, thinking that the sainted families, the Avelings and Lafargues, assisted by Liebknecht, Kautsky, Jules Guesde, Iglesias and a few other "fathers of the church" (as they now call themselves) would soon set things right for them. Had not Engels and Bebel prophesied the breakdown of the present system for the year 1898, not to mention earlier predictions (1874, 1889, 1895)!! All other advanced movements and scientific researches were howled down by the bravi and hacks of the party. The astonishment of the German delegates at their recontre with Non-Marxist and anti-parliamentary Socialists at the London Congress of 1896 was unfeigned and genuine; until they came here most of them sincerely believed that Aveling was England!

So Bernstein's articles and book, commonplace as they are, acted like a thunderbolt. Bernstein-Apostata was one of the most polite epithets hurled at him. "With unmistakable herostratic animosity he throws the torch of criticism in the temple of Marxism, leaving no stone in its place," wrote a Stuttgart Socialist. Liebknecht called his book the "solemn renunciation of Social Democratic principles." Further amenities were used by Mesdames Zetkin and Luxemburg, the Russian Plechanov and many others. It was generally believed that at the Hanover Congress a moral stake would be erected to burn the heretic.

This, however, did not happen at that Congress, which ended in what Bernstein must consider is a satisfactory way to him. How this happened and what the true reasons were in my opinion, I will explain in the next and concluding article.

Nov. 16, 1899.

Bernstein's particular standpoint was already explained in a letter addressed by him to last year's Congress, held at Stuttgart (October 1898); but the discussion assumed no great proportions. An article by F. Domela Nieuwenhuis on this Congress in L'Humanité Nouvelle (Paris, April 10, 1899) is well worth reading. Early in 1899 Bernstein published his book, and since that time a brisk discussion has been going on, by articles and pamphlets; the hardest opposition came from
Polish and Russian Social Democrats, "Parvus," Miss Luxemburg, Plekhanov. Meanwhile, the principal "father of the church" of Marxism, Karl Kautsky, was hard at work until a few weeks before the Hanover Congress, when he published an elaborate refutation of Bernstein (*Bernstein and the Social Democratic Program*, in German, Stuttgart, VIII., 195 pp.) Kautsky follows Bernstein step by step, and demolishes to his satisfaction almost every assertion of Bernstein, word by word.

He deals minutely with Bernstein's repudiation of the dogma of the *concentration of capital*, and he--and Bebel at the Congress--quotes many statistics in favor of the old dogma. I confess for myself that this question, so far as actual proof by statistics is concerned, remains open to me. Statistics are unsatisfactory proof in many serious questions: we are often too prone to accept those favorable to our hypothesis without the fullest critical examination and closest inspection, reasoning away the importance only of those which contradict our argument. This criticism and weighing of statistics is done with great skill by Kautsky and Bebel; but might, no doubt, be overthrown by a still closer examination on the part of Bernstein. For the distance between statistics and real life is enormous, and permits ever so many possibilities of plausible explanation. The result is often, as in this case, satisfactory only to the investigator himself.

The importance of this question for the prospect of revolution seems to me to be overrated. To say that if the number of capitalists increases the revolution will never come, seems to me as absurd as to expect the automatic downfall of the present system by the extinction of individual capitalists as a consequence of the concentration of capital. What really matters is not the number of capitalists, but that of persons--comprising the vast numbers of overseers, foremen, managers, etc.--whose interests, be it only in appearance even, are divided from those of the workers. I believe that as long as one single capitalist exists he will try, by the offer of a superior remuneration, to divide his workers into two classes and to profit by their discord. So a struggle will have to be gone through in any case, be the number of actual possessors of wealth large or small. Capitalism is as ripe for destruction today as it ever was and ever will be, if only the workers themselves felt disposed to attack it seriously.
The possibility of this serious attack depends on the spread of ideas and on the revolutionary spirit. This begins to be recognized, and Bernstein's criticism of the Materialist Conception of History (following upon that of W. Tcherkesov) is a symptom of the growing lack of confidence in purely economic development is a motive power of revolution. Such criticism is, by the way, already met with in some of the writings of Michael Bakounine, who, whilst accepting Marx's theory to a large extent, yet says, speaking for instance of religions: "I think that all religions were but the posterior sanction of facts already accomplished. Once established as systems by human conscience and as official institutions of society religions become, undoubtedly, themselves the cause of new facts and of new political and social relations which, in the course of their further development, in the end modify and often even destroy the original religion or transform it into another religion which--whilst being apparently the negation of the preceding one--is in reality, at least in this negative way, nearly always its product" (1868). And again, writing in 1872: "He (Marx) does not take into consideration the other elements of history, such as the evident reaction of political, legal and religious institutions upon the economic situation,"....(fully printed in La Société Nouvelle, July 1894, pp. 24-5; s. Life of Bakounine, note 2421).

Kautsky's book, then, and Bebel's six hour speech were the most serious weapons used to defend the old Marxist position. Bebel strained every nerve that Marxism might die game, and may often have scored against Bernstein, which not imply, however, that he was right if viewed from a broader, libertarian standpoint.

He affirmed the progressive evolution of the party as shown by the rejection of long cherished dogmas in the course of time, such as: the iron law of wages, labor the source of all wealth, all other parties form a compact mass of reactionists, and the demand for State-supported co-operative associations. What Bernstein put forward had been said by bourgeois and also by Socialist writers for many years. Marx himself, he maintains, was aware of the numerical growth of capitalists side by side with the concentration witnessed in actual industrial production; "with the accumulation of capital the number of capitalists more or less increases," are Marx's words (Capital, vol. I.). Incidentally, Bebel mentions the growing necessity for intensive cultivation in agriculture (Protokoll, p. 104). The theory of increasing misery does not, according to Marx, exclude the growth of rebellious spirit, of
combinations and organization among the workers by which economic concessions are forced from the bourgeoisie. Bebel agrees with Bernstein that the class struggle proceeds in milder forms (a rather optimistic view in the presence of massacres of strikers, immense lockouts, exceptional laws, etc.!), but maintains that class contrasts become sharper and are acutely felt. He considers the working classes to be fully prepared to take over productive industry themselves, and rejects Bernstein's deprecatory and discouraging remarks to the contrary. "A fighting party, he said, wants to win and for this it requires enthusiasm, the spirit of sacrifice and of fight; these are taken away if artificial stress is laid on difficulties on all hands, if we are constantly told: "be cautious; do behave nicely; be good children in order not to frighten the dear middle classes," etc. This sounds right enough, and Bebel, being in good strain, sweeps away the "ethical" arguments against expropriation, ending with words: "so we stand by expropriation; this we won't give up" (storms of applause).

But, as usual, he instantly turns round and proceeds: "We need not use force."...."It is not the revolutionists who bring about revolutions, but this is always done by the reactionists" (great applause), etc. This double-faced talking is the essence of German Social Democratic propaganda, and Bebel emphasizes this in saying later on: "I repeat that we are essentially a revolutionary party. This does not mean that we should reject reforms when we can get them. This is proved by our program: not in vain this program contains a principal and a practical part" (Hear, hear!), Prot. p. 125. And Dr. David (Bernstein's champion) said shortly after: "By what means do we try to stir up in the masses at election time? Quite instinctively, without renouncing Socialist principles, we are led to insist mainly on practical, familiar, palpable advantages." This speaker considers the shortening of the hours of labor as "expropriation" because it deprives the capitalist of the right to make use of his machinery for profit after certain hours; upon which Mrs. Zetkin ironically declared the muzzling of dogs to be Socialism also in the Davidian sense, because it reduced the rights of property. I mention these examples to show the continuous juggling with words, the misuse of "revolution," "expropriation," etc., for quite indifferent or reactionary measures. The principal and the practical part of the program, excluding each other to every friend of logic, present ample opportunities for such tricks.
Bebel proposed a lengthy resolution, declaring that no change in principles or tactics was necessary, expressing platonic sympathy with Co-operation and admitting the principle of temporary alliances with bourgeois parties for electioneering purposes to obtain an extension of political rights and social reforms.

A long debate followed. Dr. David, of Mayence, stood up for Bernstein; Liebknecht was hardest against him, and many others brought their little bundle of wood to enlarge the heretic's stake. But there was, after all, little spirit in these attacks; most seemed impelled by an uneasy conscience to explain painfully that things were not quite so bad with them (in the matter of retrograde tactics) as Bernstein had depicted, and cheered each other up in this way.

This went on in a dull way until the real masters of the party, the cynics Vollmar and Auer, two Bavarians, considered that their turn had come. Vollmar is the chief of the Bavarian Socialists, the recent allies of the Clerical party, and Auer is the quasi permanent secretary of the Berlin executive of the party, a man who is of decisive influence in so many of the personal and financial questions that affect the hundreds of editors, printers, party officials, etc., all over the north of Germany. Where Auer's power ends, that of Vollmar, the southern leader begins; and vise versa. These two men are unscrupulous politicians who care not two straws for principles nor the idols mentioned by tradition or prestige. When Auer, dragging in private conversations, ridiculed Bebel's prophecies, Bebel retaliated by revealing the dreadful fact that Auer had called Marx and Engels "popes" in private conversation also, and in his speech at the Congress Auer spoke of the (Marxist) "fathers of the church." He also said: "I cannot get on with the dialectical method and the way all these things are described; black there becomes white and white becomes black, and in a higher sphere a gray mixture results from them which leaves you in blank amazement." ...."I am no Marxist," he had said before, "in the sense in which the Marxist fathers of the church have developed that thing up till now, those fathers of the church to which Bernstein belonged for all these years." "But," he said, later on, "this is what I am: I am an enthusiastic adherent of the doctrines of Marx and Engels as far as my intellect could grasp them."

Vollmar sneered at the customary attacks against the reactionary wing of the
party: himself, Auer, Schippel, W. Heine, Bernstein. "The stake was already prepared; but the matches would not catch fire, and force was lacking to throw them on the stake." "Year by year I am placed on the proscribed list; but up till now this has been good for my health. I am not at all complaining." Thus spoke the man who, last year, said that the Paris workers of the time of the Commune would have done better by going to sleep than by proclaiming the Commune of Paris! He concluded by scarcely veiled threats against the sticklers for dogmas, those who insist on adherence to principles (Protokoll, p. 216).

These two men behaved at the congress like Brennus did at Rome: Væ victis! Auer, who sports rough language, said that he had written to Bernstein: "Dear Ned, you are an ass; for such things [as are expressed in Bernstein's book] are not said but done,"(p. 208) meaning: be as reactionary as you like in practice, only keep up appearances in public utterances.

And he played out the trump up his sleeve when he concluded his speech with an extract from a letter of Bernstein's--using more polite language in return--saying: "Dear friend Auer, with the usual necessary grain of salt I shall vote for Bebel's resolution."

Under these circumstances Bebel's resolution, intended to smash up Bernstein for ever, was voted by 205 against 34 on the third clause, admitting alliances with bourgeois parties, and by 216 against 21 (vote on the entire test). The minority opposing the third clause mainly hailed from Berlin and surrounding districts.

So the affair ended, to use a German expression, like the Hornberger Schiessen, or, to use a parallel, like the French Socialist Congress held at Paris in December, 1899, to decide on Millerand's participation in a French Ministry. One resolution, voted by some 800 against 600, repudiated the participation of Socialists in bourgeois Ministries; and another resolution, voted by the great majority of the Congress, admitted this participation under exceptional circumstances, which will, of course, always exist in the minds of Ministerial candidates! So "the principle " was reaffirmed by a platonic resolution; at the same time, the actual conduct of the offenders against "the principle," Bernstein and Millerand, remains unchalleged.
What is the meaning of such votes—with which the accused himself heartily concurred, as Bernstein did and Millerand might have

"Bernsteinism," in the sense of paltry reform work, electioneering alliances and the horror of revolutionary action, is practiced all along in the German movement since its origin. Liebknecht and others insulted nearly every revolutionist; Bebel advocated a Russian war; Schippel voted for the new guns; Vollmar would have the Paris Communards sent to sleep and helped the Clerical party into power in Bavaria, by an electoral alliance, etc. The more all this is done, however, the less people like it talked about; and so Bernstein--after praising the revolutionary energy of the party for 25 years and being very popular--became the most hated man in the party when he finally said: We are all doing reformers' work; let us, then, give up revolutionary language and call ourselves what we indeed are: a party of Democratic reformers. The poor man did not know that in Social Democratic politics, as in modern society, the more a thing is true the less it must be mentioned! So he blurted out the open secret, hitherto revealed only by Anarchists, with delightful naïvete.

Once said it could not be unsaid; some were quick to make the best of it, and others will follow. I mean that, with the best personal intention, no doubt, he inevitably became the apologist of reactionary Socialism which has all along existed and prompted his own action. He furnished a textbook to the reactionists in his party, who, henceforward, need no longer be ashamed (on public occasions) of their acts, but can with a bold front refer their critics, the old idealists, to Bernstein. There is little power for good and considerable power for evil in his book; for the party is by its composition, constitution and principles unable to carry out to any extent the more sensible economic propositions of Bernstein (Co-operation, etc.) but it may sink far deeper in the mud of politics, Imperialism, etc., proposed by Bernstein. It cost him nothing to accept the uncolored and quite formal resolution, evidently the only one which this Congress would have accepted without the danger of a split, the dread of many, coming much nearer. For it is no longer dared to proclaim independent political action or to reject bourgeois alliances.

The same renunciation of independent political action was the outcome of the Paris Congress, the largest and most representative of all sections of Parliamentary
Socialists held in France (Dec. 1899).

This, then, means the failure of independent political action by the State Socialist parties of France and Germany. And the step they take in consequence of this is not a step forward out of the dirt of politics, but a step backward right into the bourgeois camp--electioneering alliances in Germany, participation in Galliffet's Ministry in France.

This shows that these parties, as such, have no fresh spirit in them, are rotten and doomed.

Marxism, the principal embodiment of these tactics, falls to pieces everywhere, and the withered forms of its last believers--Liebknecht, Bebel, Kautsky and a few others--look almost pathetic as the sun sets on them and their time is over. The rest, the bulk of the party, the labor politicians become bourgeois politicians again. This decay is inevitable and fatal; and Bernstein, the apologist of Social Democratic degeneration, is the merest episode in this evolution.

A hopeful sign is that economic movements, trade unionism and co-operation, here and there free themselves from their connection with Socialist politics, a connection which on the continent is closer even than here. But much remains to be done.

Our own conviction of Anarchism can but be strengthened by these spectacles, and our field of action becomes larger as many cannot but be disillusioned in the end by this evolution backward. Our old criticism of Social Democratic principles and tactics is fully justified by these events. We wish only that our propaganda would receive so much direct support as it is indirectly supported by this series of facts and by so many other facts we see when looking around as the outcome of authority--the root of all misery! _Var.

Dec. 9, 1899.

From : Anarchy Archives.
Chronology:

**December 09, 1899**: German Social Democracy & E. Bernstein -- Publication.


PDF file generated from:

http://www.RevoltLib.com/