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The Union of Democracy and Socialism: Towards an Intellectual Biography of Karl Kautsky

Working Paper No. 21

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Prepared for Professor John Hall

Abstract: This inquiry seeks to establish that Karl Kautsky’s vision of social democracy considered and incorporated the best of his day’s socialist theory, leading to the creation of a powerful formula that has also proved enduring, leading towards the achievement of socialist goals. Karl Kautsky was influenced by his work with Karl Marx, Eduard Bernstein and Friedrich Engels. During his time with these noted thinkers he created a unique form of socialism that today is termed ‘social democracy’. Kautsky advanced the view that socialism could better survive when it integrated democracy. Socialism cannot have a period of dictatorship for implementation, but must always remain a democratic. Social democracy also notes that revolution must always remain a legitimate threat, even if it is not actually used.

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Key Words: Eduard Bernstein, Friedrich Engels, Karl Kautsky, Marxism,
Social Democracy, Socialism

Karl Kautsky's emphasis upon a union between democracy and socialism created an immensely powerful formula for working class rule. This inquiry seeks to establish that Karl Kautsky's social democracy integrated the wisdom of socialist theory of his day, leading to the creation of a powerful formula that could see ambitious aims of socialists achieved. Karl Kautsky was influenced by the great socialist thinkers of his time, and in particular, Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels and Eduard Bernstein. Marx and Kautsky were in contact with each other for a short time, but Kautsky borrowed heavily from Marx's thinking. Engels mentored Kautsky and taught him how to use history to help address the problems of his day. Bernstein and Kautsky began as friends, but their relationship soured and with time the two became intellectual rivals. These three noted thinkers exerted great influences on Kautsky's life and helped push him toward his intellectual and theoretical achievements.

While Kautsky learned from these noted thinkers, he did not agree with them entirely. Kautsky developed his own unique perspective on socialism that he used to create his great works. Kautsky was a lifelong socialist who spent his career attempting to aid and abet the evolution into its most advanced and effective form that combined a union between socialism and democracy. Kautsky also accepted that, when necessary, revolution could be applied as a formidable force.

1. Eduard Bernstein and Friedrich Engels' Influence on Karl Kautsky

Karl Kautsky grew up in a world of towering German intellectuals. These men helped shape governments, economic programs, and even inspired and helped lead revolutions promoting socialist transitions. Karl Kautsky idolized the German intellectuals of his time and sought to become one himself. Kautsky was fortunate enough to meet Karl Marx at a crucial juncture in his life, though the contact was short. Marx was thirty-six when Kautsky was born. Marx would die when Kautsky was only twenty-nine years old. Yet, mostly through his writings, Marx left enduring impressions on Kautsky that come through in his thinking and writing. However, other intellectuals who collaborated with Marx may have had a larger impact on Kautsky's works. While Kautsky had many influences in his intellectual work, the most important were Eduard Bernstein and Friedrich Engels.

Eduard Bernstein and Karl Kautsky's relationship proved complicated. Kautsky (1902, 1) explains in his autobiography how the two became close, and how their relationship turned "antagonistic". He explains that in 1881 when in London, he met Bernstein, as well as Marx and Engels. He describes these encounters as the turning point in his life. Bernstein was born in 1850 and was only four years older than Kautsky. They quickly gravitated towards each other and began to work together on social theory that was not necessarily reliant on Marx's contributions. As Kautsky explains "logical Marxism was always much too

uncomfortable a theory,” meaning that neither Kautsky or Bernstein wanted to work within the exact language, categories and terminology found in Marx’s writings.

Kautsky and Bernstein began the next stage of their relationship when Bernstein was the editor of *Sozialdemokrat* and Kautsky edited *Neue Zeit*. As Kautsky (1902, 1) writes, in these editor positions, the two were able to control the monthly stream of logical Marxism. Kautsky writes that “in 1890 the Socialist Law came to an end,” causing the end of *Sozialdemokrat*. This in turn caused “the transformation of the *Neue Zeit* from a monthly to a weekly organ, upon which Bernstein and [Kautsky] were to work together.” This forced closeness placed pressure upon their friendship. When Kautsky moved to Stuttgart to be closer to his editing obligations, Bernstein did not, and this appears when their relationship soured. Bernstein stayed in England, abandoning—as Kautsky saw it—Marxism itself. Bernstein took on socialism directly and focused on what he coined as ‘revisionist’ socialism. Kautsky stayed in his role as editor, yet never gave up on socialism in its most fundamental form. While Kautsky did focus on general changes for socialism and with a special emphasis on democracy, he remained a socialist his entire life and was a member of the Socialist Party.

From this initial split, their relationship became strained and as Kautsky (1902, 1) puts it, “the antagonism is there, and is irreconcilable.” However,

Kautsky explains that he found their conflicts painful. Kautsky found their conflicts to be on an intellectual level, or “a conflict of principles,” while Bernstein found them to be on a personal level. Kautsky admits that this relationship was “antagonistic”; however, he notes that there were no hardened personal feelings. While Kautsky disagrees with Bernstein, both thinkers can take credit for what was achieved in their lifetimes. “I regard what we Socialists have achieved ... we can look on this quarter of a century with the satisfaction that we are considerably nearer our goal.”

Friedrich Engels and Karl Kautsky had a very different relationship to Bernstein and Kautsky. While they met at the same time, Kautsky and Engels remained friends throughout their lives. Engels was 34 years older than Kautsky, and had years of experience in assisting Marx in developing his ideas. When Kautsky was coming on the scene, he accepted that Engels’ generation supplied the leading intellectuals and had already developed ideas on advanced social theory. Because of this age gap, or his intellectual maturity, Engels would prove to be Kautsky’s most influential mentor and would shape his understanding of Marxism and would guide his studies of history.

Kautsky (1902, 1) explains that he and Engels had met in 1881 and began an intellectual friendship that took them through their careers. Kautsky writes “in 1885 I moved to London to be nearer Engels,” where they would study history and

political thought together. It was Engels' steady mentorship and his intellectual experience that helped Kautsky become a towering socialist intellectual. Engels taught Kautsky the importance of history in creating intellectual works, and for advancing socialist thought. Under Engel's mentorship, Kautsky became a scholar of history and this influence was behind some of his most influential intellectual writing. Kautsky would use this background in history to study and critique Marx and create his own theory of socialism that would go on to become one of the most influential and enduring forms.

2. Karl Kautsky on Marx and Communism

As noted above, Kautsky was born when Marx was already thirty-six years old. Their lives overlapped for twenty nine years, and for most of these years Kautsky was not involved in advancing intellectual thought. However, the two did know each other briefly. Kautsky (1902, 1) explains that the two of them met in 1881 in London, with Engels and Bernstein. While Marx died only two years later, Kautsky spent his entire career working within Marxism, endeavoring to solve problems of his day through relying upon Marxist theory. Kautsky did disagree with Marx on a number of issues, but still he worked within Marxist theory because of its relevance to the Socialist Party, of which Kautsky proved an energetic member.

In his book, *Social Democracy versus Communism*, Karl Kautsky (1946, 29 - 47) explains Marxism and what he believes Marxism means in the context of his personal relationship with Marx. Kautsky explains that Marx and Engels made it clear that they never wanted divisions or “sects” created among the Marxist schools or socialist schools. Instead, these two intellectuals thought that the most important thing was continuous learning. They attempted to persuade their followers to continue learning and never be satisfied with being complacent at a level of knowledge, to accept that “there was no ultimate knowledge.” This would move into socialist theory, as this intellectual endeavor could always be criticized and improved, never having one perfect form. This left a strong impact on Kautsky, who saw this as an invitation to take their works and improve upon them, or to critique them, in order to find a better form.

Kautsky and Marx differed in their approach, but agreed largely on the fundamentals of socialism. In his chapter on Marx, Kautsky (1946, 29 - 47) explains that both believed in a form of socialism, which would allow the working class to secure social freedoms. Marx grew up in the socialist era and created his own form of socialism which empowered the working class. Kautsky grew up in the era of socialism and the era of Marxism and believed, in part, in both. While they may have differed on their specific approaches to socialism, Kautsky and Marx both agreed that socialism was an essential goal for societies of the time.

They believed that transitioning from capitalism to socialism was *the* class struggle and achieving that goal would register as an enormous success.

Another key belief between Kautsky and Marx was that socialism could only succeed in democracy. Kautsky (1946, 29 - 47) identifies this belief in the second chapter of *Social Democracy versus Communism*, called “Marxism and the ‘Dictatorship of the Proletariat.’” It was an original belief among socialists that after a proletarian revolution, a period of dictatorship must be installed. The belief was that the proletariat would be simply too ignorant when they came into power, so the bourgeoisie could manipulate their way back into power through the democratic process. Kautsky and Marx made it clear that democracy would be the only true option after a proletarian revolution and that a dictatorship could never lead to proper socialism.

While Kautsky and Marx agreed upon certain aspects of their theories, there were also some fundamental disagreements between the two. Kautsky (1946, 29 - 47) outlines these disagreements throughout his book, *Social Democracy versus Communism*. While there are many, the key disagreement between Marx and Kautsky is that for Marx, communism is the answer. Kautsky, on the other hand, proposed what he termed “social democracy”. Kautsky explains that he does not believe in communism because of his belief that it does not promote a proper government structure. He explains that communism may support military

dictatorships and in turn, an economic system plagued by ongoing inefficiencies. Kautsky maintained that democracy proved the key, and that working with and within democratic structures was of major importance.

This is a major split from Marx, who believed wholeheartedly in communism. For Marx, the solution to many of society's problems, lies in communism. Marx believed in multiple steps, from capitalism at first, all the way to communism. Marx believed in communism as a final step. Here Kautsky begged to differ. Kautsky fought against the idea of communism, and this differing represented the biggest split between the two men intellectually.

3. Karl Kautsky's Theory of Social Democracy

Karl Kautsky's *Social Democracy versus Communism* introduces his perspective on the idea of social democracy. In this book, Kautsky recalls a lifetime of work in the Socialist Party and many intellectual friendships with the socialist thinkers of his time. Kautsky explains his view of the socialist movements in Russia and Germany and other major relevant socialist events of his lifetime. Most importantly, in this book Kautsky offers up his intellectual opinion on many of the most popular forms of socialist theory, and discusses his views on social democracy.

Karl Kautsky (1946, 100 - 116) lays out the ways in which social democracy is the most powerful form of socialism. Kautsky's most important point is that communists in Soviet Russia faced the most powerful resistance from social democrats. He explains that when communism and traditional socialism are being implemented in the world, they tend to lead to dictatorships. The dictatorships that arise are against the working class and labor unions and therefore, work to suppress them. In Kautsky's mind, this negates everything that makes socialism a potentially promising economic theory. Kautsky explains that the only way to have an effective socialist system, is when the citizens within it are feel themselves free. Kautsky writes that when the working class and labor unions form into a social democratic party, they are in their most powerful form to challenge the ruling class. Kautsky explains that communists in Moscow "regard Social Democracy as their most dangerous enemy."

Kautsky (1946, 116 - 125) makes it clear that the most powerful weapon socialists have is democracy. He even goes so far as to stress that "the interests of the working class require democracy no less than Socialism." Kautsky emphasises the importance of democracy because of its unique power to bring about socialist change naturally. The working class people, if they are able to maintain a majority, would be able to bring about changes to the socialist system and their society to improve their lives. Contrary to this, a dictatorship or fascism does the opposite, it

takes away rights from members of the working class. In a dictatorship or fascist regime, members of the working class become transformed into the enemy and because power is consolidated against them, they have no ability to regain power.

To Kautsky (1946, 116 - 125) socialism needs democracy to survive. Democracy is the key to the existence of socialism and without democracy, socialism would succumb to the powers of the bourgeoisie class. Kautsky explains that democracy unites members of the working and middle classes, inviting these two groups to create a better society. If used correctly, it can achieve all of the goals of a socialist society and work towards a perfect socialist state. Without democracy, socialism would never be able to move towards its most effective form and would never be properly achieved or implemented.

Kautsky (1946, 116 - 125) makes it clear that even with democracy as the goal, revolution must always remain an option. If democracy fails or is not achieved immediately, the working class must always be willing to use revolution. This may remain just a threat, but it is by far the most powerful tool available against the bourgeoisie class. If there is a dictatorship that has become antagonistic to the working class, the working class must revolt and destroy the regime in favor of a democratic government.

Conclusion

This inquiry has sought to establish that Karl Kautsky's understanding of social democracy combined the best of his day's socialist theory, and created a powerful formula that could see the true goals of socialists achieved. Karl Kautsky was born into an age of some of the greatest political-economists that had deep intellectual and philosophical roots. He was involved in the Socialist Party at a young age and quickly became enamored by the sophistication of intellectual socialists. In spite of their age and generational differences, he crossed paths with Karl Marx who inspired enormous effects on his political thought. Friedrich Engels mentored Kautsky and taught him how to use history to strengthen his political theory. Kautsky also met Eduard Bernstein, and while they were friends for a time, they became rivals and challenged each other intellectually.

His contacts with these three thinkers appear to have engendered powerful effects on Kautsky's thoughts. Nevertheless, Kautsky's contributions to socialist theory remained his own and should be considered specific and unique. Kautsky was a staunch advocate of what he termed "social democracy". He advocated this system over Marx's brand of "communism" or Bernstein's "revisionist socialism". In Kautsky's social democracy, he emphasised the essentialism of democracy and held the use of revolution as a background threat that could be implemented when necessary. While Karl Marx and Eduard Bernstein might be better known today,

Karl Kautsky has arguably had a larger impact on world political systems. Today many of western Europe's economic and social systems can be rightly classified as social democracies. Hardly any communist states can be found in our world today. In short, the form of communism advocated by Marx, and revisionist socialism advocated by Bernstein, ran their courses and can be considered as essentially extinct in today's world.

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