

Kautsky's work for socialism

The passing of Karl Kautsky removes from the International Labour Movement one who, for more than half a century, was one of its most outstanding figures.

He was born eighty-four years ago, in what later became Czechoslovakia, at a time when the clash of growing capitalist rivalries in Central Europe expressed themselves in national struggles, particularly between Austro-Germans and the Czechs. Kautsky came under the influence of these struggles. The Paris Commune of 1871, however, exerted the profoundest influence and induced Kautsky to make a study of the early French Communist writers and social and historical questions. As a result, he joined the Austrian Social Democratic movement, through which he became acquainted with Marx and Engels, who exerted an influence on that movement from London.

His meeting with Marx and Engels in the early 'eighties undoubtedly dictated the course of Kautsky's interest in social and political questions for the rest of his life. He spent five years in London, studying under their guidance. From then on he was "Marxist", and when Engels died in 1895, he became literary editor of Marx's and Engels' works. He fulfilled this task with prodigious energy. His books and writings covered the whole fields of Marx's work and thought. As an exponent of Marxian theory he was supreme. His clarity and simplicity of expression were rare. Besides his work as literary executor he was an active journalist and edited Social Democratic newspapers for more than thirty years. His writings include works of an independent kind. *Foundations of Christianity*, for example, is a classic on the subject. It traces the origin of Christian beliefs to their social and historical roots, and as a Marxian analysis of the question it stands alone.

But it was in the transition from the theoretician to the practical politician that the value of much of Kautsky's great work was undone. In his work as a practical politician in the Social Democratic Party of Germany, Marxist principle was forsaken for political expediency. When the Social Democratic Party arose in Germany in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, little criticism could be made of Kautsky for his support of it. But when, with the passing of time, it evolved a purely reformist purpose, showed, in fact, that it was fulfilling the need of German capitalism for a reformist party, then Kautsky's position as a Marxist and as a member of the Social Democratic Party were in flat contradiction.

In 1900 he was responsible for the "Kautsky resolution" at the 1900 International Socialist Congress. That resolution stated that a Socialist could accept a gift of a seat in a capitalist cabinet in a national emergency. This was only a short step from supporting the German capitalist class in 1914, which he did, though certainly without the enthusiasm of the jingo. He apologised for this attitude on the grounds that Socialism is a power for peace, not against war. An apology which prompted the scathing comment from Rosa Luxemburg that the famous appeal of the Communist manifesto should now read, according to Kautsky's revision: "Workers of all lands, unite in peace and cut one another's throats in war!"

When the Russian upheaval occurred, and the issues connected with it were being debated, Kautsky was to the fore in the controversy. His differences with the Bolsheviks he brought out in one book in particular, *The Dictatorship of the Proletariat*, to which Lenin replied with *The Proletarian Revolution*. In this controversy it was Kautsky the Marxist and theoretician that was in evidence. He took his stand upon the sound Marxist position that Socialism could not be established in a country where the material conditions for its accomplishment did not exist. Those conditions are highly developed means of production, social in character but privately owned by a minority of the population (the capitalist class) and the existence of a large section of the population who are dispossessed of ownership in the means of production and depend upon the sale of their labour-power to the owning-class in order to live. Socialism as a practical question could only arise, therefore, where the workers were the majority of the population, and where the social character of production presented social ownership (Socialism) as a proposition which depended upon the desire by the workers for it. The desire for Socialism could not arise where the population were largely peasants who lived by ownership of small-scale means of production. Kautsky stated the position as follows:

"Every conscious human action presupposes a will: the will to Socialism is the first condition of its accomplishment. This will is created by the great industry . . . small production always

creates the will to uphold or to obtain private property in the means of production which are in vogue, not the will to social property, to Socialism”.

Kautsky’s analysis is the sound Socialist position, based on irrefutable logic. Its logical sequence led to unqualified support for democracy and democratic institutions. The “will” to Socialism depending upon the workers being a majority of the population, then only democratic institutions and methods would serve the real interests of the workers. In the absence of large-scale industry which would create the “will” to Socialism, then democracy would foster the growth of that industry; dictatorship would hamper it.

Strange as it may seem to-day, when erstwhile supporters of dictatorships are enthusiastic democrats, Kautsky’s position did not meet with support even among those who were outside the controversy and who called themselves Marxists. It brought out the worst side of Lenin as a controversialist. Kautsky’s reformist political recorded provided some excellent “Aunt Sallies” for Lenin’s abuse, and he certainly made use of them with effect—though they had nothing whatever to do with the merits of the debate. Kautsky’s arguments were answered with epithets. The quotations Kautsky used from Marx to support his arguments were largely evaded. Lenin attempted to interpret an isolated use by Marx of the phrase “Dictatorship of the Proletariat”, approval for the Bolshevik dictatorship. Kautsky’s analysis of the Russian question was scholarly and objective. It was never answered by Lenin or his associates. Kautsky gave Lenin credit for being Marxist. In fact, in Lenin’s favour it can be said that Socialism was not introduced in Russia simply because the absence of the material conditions made it a sheer impossibility. Lenin erred in interpreting Socialist theory to fit Russian experience. In doing so he misinterpreted Marx and obscured the meaning of the real place of the Bolshevik Revolution in history. Had Lenin placed the Bolshevik Revolution in its proper perspective as an object-lesson in history he would have contributed in a larger degree to working-class understanding, would have saved many from disappointment and disillusion when the high hopes they had placed in the movement failed to materialise.

Kautsky on the Russian question, as on social and historical questions in general, took his stand upon scientific objective analysis, in sharp contrast to the position he took up as a reformer and politician in the Social Democratic movement in Germany. Inside that movement he was like the scientist in church—he left his scientific weapons outside. It is not idle to speculate that had Kautsky applied the scientific methods to his practical politics, he might have had some influence on the course of recent German history. He might have fought reformism, coalitions and expediency politics. The support he would have received might not have measured well in comparison to the millions behind the Social Democrats, but, quite conceivably, it could have meant a virile, independent and uncompromising Socialist Movement. As it was, the tragic end of the great German Social Democratic Party is eloquent testimony to the unsoundness of a movement which for fifty years based its activities upon reformism, compromise and expediency politics, with which Kautsky was associated.

Kautsky’s life and work might perplex future historians of the working class. Yet, when against all his reformist politics is balanced the enormous work he did in spreading Socialist knowledge, it would lead to false conclusions to judge him on his political record. After Marx and Engels his name will live. His works will guide the class-struggle in the future. He will be read with respect long after the respectable mediocre preachers who masquerade as leaders of the British Labour Movement are forgotten.

Kautsky’s place in history is assured.

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