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0521025052 - The Quest for Evolutionary Socialism: Eduard Bernstein and Social Democracy

Manfred B. Steger

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Introduction: the nature of Bernstein's quest

More than thirty years ago, Sidney Hook, the late historian of socialist thought, lamented the fact that “Eduard Bernstein has not yet come into his own.”¹ Though Bernstein, the “Father of Marxist Revisionism,” escaped the cruel fate of many of his socialist contemporaries who fell prey to historical oblivion, Hook’s lucid observation continued to remain true, at least in the Anglo-American context, until the late 1980s.

When I began my study of Bernstein’s life and political thought in 1989, Peter Gay’s important, but dated volume still represented the only full-scale Bernstein biography available in English.² Within the next three years, however, monumental historical changes gave my scholarly efforts new significance: the Berlin Wall crumbled, the Iron Curtain disappeared, and the Soviet Union dissolved. Indeed, the death of Marxism-Leninism rekindled lively discussions on the fate of socialism in general, including the ailing Western European model of social democracy.³ Critical questions abounded regarding the feasibility of any radically egalitarian reforms in our era of globally integrated capitalism. A century after the famous “Revisionist Controversy” of German social democracy,

¹ Sidney Hook, “Introduction,” in Eduard Bernstein, *Evolutionary Socialism*, trans. Edith C. Harvey (New York: Schocken, 1961), p. xx.

² *DDS*.

³ See, for example, William K. Tabb, ed. *The Future of Socialism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1990); Thomas Meyer, *Was bleibt vom Sozialismus?* (Reinbeck: Rowohlt, 1991); and *Demokratischer Sozialismus – Soziale Demokratie* (Berlin: Dietz, 1991); Robin Blackburn, “Fin de Siècle: Socialism after the Crash,” in *New Left Review* 185 (1991), pp. 5–66; Stephen Eric Bronner *Socialism Unbound* (New York: Routledge, 1990); and *Moments of Decision* (New York: Routledge, 1992); Christiane Lemke and Gary Marks, eds. *The Crisis of Socialism in Europe* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1992); Alex Callinicos, *The Revenge of History: Marxism and the East European Revolutions* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 1993); Joseph V. Femia, *Marxism and Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1993); John Roemer, *A Future for Socialism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1994); Ronald Aronson, *After Marxism* (New York: Guilford, 1994); Peter Beilharz, *Postmodern Socialism* (Melbourne: Melbourne UP, 1994); and Antonio Callari, Stephen Cullenberg, and Carole Biewener, *Marxism in the Postmodern Age* (New York: Guilford, 1994); and Michael Waller, Bruno Coppieters, and Kris Deschouwer, eds. *Social Democracy in a Post-Communist Europe* (Portland, OR: F. Cass, 1994).

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Bernstein's model of "evolutionary socialism" became once again the focus of heated debates.

Indeed, a number of new publications made accessible translations of both Bernstein's early and later writings.⁴ Other authors revisited the historical connections between the Wilhelmine Empire and the rise of German social democracy, as well as scrutinizing the various intellectual currents within revisionist Marxist thought,⁵ and still others probed the extent to which Bernstein's theoretical framework might provide badly needed impulses for the survival of a distinct political tradition stretching back 150 years.⁶

My study addresses these current debates on socialism arising from both the sudden collapse of Marxism-Leninism and the crisis of European social democracy. As I see it, Bernstein's neglected contribution to socialist theory speaks directly to the current process of rethinking the traditional project of the democratic Left. At the same time, this book seeks to answer the urgent need for a new Bernstein biography that incorporates recent scholarly developments on the topic. As a result, my study represents neither a conventional political history nor a traditional "historiography of political ideas," but an examination of the past and

⁴ See, for example, *MS; PS*, Till Schelz-Brandenburg, *Eduard Bernstein und Karl Kautsky: Entstehung und Wandlung des sozialdemokratischen Parteimarxismus im Spiegel ihrer Korrespondenz 1879–1932* (Köln: Böhlau, 1992). See also my *Selected Writings of Eduard Bernstein, 1900–1921* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities International Press, 1996).

⁵ See, for example, Veli-Matti Rautio, *Die Bernstein Debatte: die politisch-ideologischen Strömungen und die Parteideologie der Sozialdemokratischen Partei Deutschlands 1898–1903* (Helsinki: Suomen Historiallinen Seura, 1994); Nicholas Stargardt, *The German Idea of Militarism: Radical and Socialist Critics, 1866–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994); John H. Kautsky, *Karl Kautsky: Marxism, Revolution & Democracy* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1994); *EB*; Moira Donald, *Marxism and Revolution: Karl Kautsky and the Russian Marxists* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1993); Jack Jacobs, *On Socialism and the Jewish Question after Marx* (New York: NYU Press, 1993); Stanley Pierson, *Marxist Intellectuals and the Working-Class Mentality in Germany 1887–1912* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1993); H. Kendall Rogers, *Before the Revisionist Controversy: Kautsky, Bernstein, and the Meaning of Marxism 1895–1898* (New York: Garland, 1992); Peter Beilharz, *Labour's Utopias: Bolshevism, Fabianism, Social Democracy* (London: Routledge, 1992); Gary P. Steenson, *After Marx, Before Lenin: Marxism and Socialist Working-Class Parties in Europe, 1884–1914* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1991).

⁶ See, for example, Giles Radice, "The Case for Revisionism," in *The Political Quarterly* 59 (1988), pp. 404–415; Heinz Klegler, "Evolutionärer Sozialismus. Oder: warum noch einmal Bernstein lesen?," in *Widerspruch* 19/90 (1990), pp. 38–52; Stephen Eric Bronner, "Eduard Bernstein and the Logic of Revisionism," in *Socialism Unbound*, pp. 53–75; Horst Heimann, *Die Voraussetzungen des Demokratischen Sozialismus und die Aufgaben der Sozialdemokratie* (Bonn: Dietz, 1991); Doug Brown, "Thorstein Veblen Meets Eduard Bernstein: Toward an Institutional Theory of Mobilization Politics," in *Journal of Economic Issues* 25.3 (September 1991), pp. 689–708; and Peter Beilharz, "The Life and Times of Social Democracy," in Peter Beilharz, Gillian Robinson, and John Rundell, eds. *Between Totalitarianism and Postmodernity* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992), pp. 54–68. See also my "Historical Materialism and Ethics: Eduard Bernstein's Revisionist Perspective," in *History of European Ideas* 14.5 (1992), pp. 647–663.

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present interaction between the world of European social democratic politics and socialist political ideas. Indeed, my concerns are just as much hermeneutical, political, and normative as they are historical.

No doubt, German social democracy provides the inseparable social context of Bernstein's political theory. Torn from its historical soil, our understanding of his "evolutionary socialism" would remain woefully abstract, sterile, and clouded. Indeed, one might look upon Bernstein's life and thought as a microcosmic reflection of the first hundred years in the history of the German labor movement: he and his party underwent the same ideological development leading from a Lassallean socialist eclecticism to a Marxist purism, which, ultimately, culminated in a new eclecticism enriched by both traditions.

The natural starting point for an interpretation of Bernstein's political thought is his early critique of orthodox German Marxism, presented in his 1896–8 essays in the socialist journals *Neue Zeit* and *Vorwärts*, as well as in his more comprehensive 1899 study, *The Preconditions of Socialism*. However, it would be a grave mistake to neglect Bernstein's instructive later writings. Overlooking the fact that he himself repeatedly stressed the "theoretical progress," reflected in his later work,⁷ most scholars of European social democracy have often either trivialized his later oeuvre as "political journalism," or bypassed it altogether.⁸ "By 1900," so goes the verdict of his most prominent biographer, "Bernstein had done his theoretical work."⁹ This judgment is echoed in the comments of a recent observer who noted that, "[Bernstein] added nothing significant to the position he had developed in the 1890s."¹⁰ Such hasty pronouncements leave the reader with the erroneous impression that, besides his role as a vociferous critic of orthodox Marxism, Bernstein failed to provide new impulses to socialist theory. Nothing can be further from the truth. In fact, the more "constructive" dimension of Bernstein's political thought, concentrating on problems of democratization, political morality, international relations, and social reform, emerged in more detail only after his return from his London exile in 1901.

Therefore, my study seeks to provide a more balanced assessment of Bernstein's political theory by giving equal weight to his two equally important creative periods. First, there is his early revisionism, dominated by his 1895–9 critique of the young, "Hegelian" Marx and his allegedly

⁷ *ES*, p. 41.

⁸ Susanne Miller, "Bernstein's Political Position 1914–1920," in Roger Fletcher, ed. *Bernstein to Brandt: A Short History of German Social Democracy* (London: Edward Arnold, 1987), p. 101.

⁹ *DDS*, p. 255. See also Thomas Meyer's similar assessment, *Bernsteins konstruktiver Sozialismus* (Berlin: Dietz, 1977), pp. 5, 33–34.

¹⁰ Tudor, "Introduction," in *PS*, p. xxxv.

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“Blanquist” tendencies. During this phase, Bernstein sought to reveal the fundamental weaknesses of orthodox Marxism while introducing the basic elements of his ethical reformism. Clinging to the idea that Marxist doctrine could be simply “revised” by “developing the evolutionary principle” inherent in the mature writings of Marx and Engels,¹¹ Bernstein actually ended up changing the entire *Gestalt* of Marxist socialism.

Second, in his more constructive later phase, Bernstein endeavored to expand and refine his evolutionary socialism by advocating an ethical social reformism which was designed to prepare and guide concrete political initiatives. Moreover, in his capacity as member of the German Reichstag for more than two decades, Bernstein was in the unique position to explore the crucial interface between theory and practice from both ends; an opportunity denied to most prominent socialist theorists, including Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, Karl Kautsky, Georg Plekhanov, and Rosa Luxemburg.

Yet, party theorists – particularly Kautsky and Luxemburg – played leading roles in questioning the “feasibility” of Bernstein’s evolutionary socialism. Indeed, there are but few figures in the history of socialist thought who have been more criticized than Eduard Bernstein. An autodidact, social historian, elected representative to the German Reichstag, editor, journalist, political thinker, and theoretical “heir apparent” to Friedrich Engels, Bernstein exchanged his early reputation as a committed Marxist socialist for far less noble distinctions, among them, “traitor of the working class” (Lenin) and “opportunistic philistine” (Luxemburg). Advancing an extensive critique of Marx’s and Engels’ “scientific socialism,” Bernstein forfeited his potential claim to socialist leadership by setting off the famous *fin-de-siècle* “Revisionist Controversy” in the German Social Democratic Party (SPD).

To the ears of his former friends and German party leaders August Bebel and Karl Kautsky, Bernstein’s liberal-sounding arguments not only recast their decidedly Marxist libretto, but clearly rang with the sentimental, ethical tones of “bourgeois” social reformists like Friedrich Albert Lange, John Stuart Mill, and Sidney Webb. Such “revisionist talk” bolstered their suspicion that Bernstein, living in his London exile for more than a decade, had acquired the insidious “British liberal disease” from his new Fabian and radical-liberal company. Mocking his model of “evolutionary socialism” and flatly rejecting his repeated calls for a class-transcending, left-liberal democratic alliance against Kaiser Wilhelm’s authoritarianism, the orthodox Marxist SPD leadership instead set out to create the damaging image of Eduard Bernstein, the “petty-bourgeois opportunist.”

¹¹ *PS*, p. 28.

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On the other hand, social-minded German intellectuals of various liberal shades, like Friedrich Naumann, Eugen Richter, Franz Oppenheimer, Lujo Brentano, Theodor Mommsen, and Max Weber, resented both Bernstein's suspicion of their market-based economics and his seemingly "exaggerated" commitment to "radical" forms of egalitarianism. Moreover, Bernstein's Kantian ethical ideals appeared to them to be far too flimsy for a *Realpolitik* based on more tangible values such as the defense of "national community" and "German national interests." Sacrificing genuine conceptual commonalities that could have well been translated into valuable political capital against the Imperial Government, national-liberal leaders instead chose to highlight their philosophical differences with Bernstein.

As a result of this ideological inflexibility toward Bernstein's political vision in both socialist and liberal camps, decades passed without the formation of a firm democratic alliance against the autocratic rule of "Iron and Rye" in Germany. Sporadic attempts to reach out across the political spectrum (like Naumann's courageous rallying cry for a united liberal-socialist bloc with decidedly nationalist leanings) foundered on the perpetual factionalism among German liberals and the SPD leadership's rigid adherence to a "well-tested strategy of splendid isolation" – its refusal to form political coalitions with any parts of the German "bourgeoisie."¹²

In the meantime, Bernstein's theoretical model of "evolutionary socialism," or "liberal socialism,"¹³ languished in a political no-man's land. Yet, largely atheoretical SPD *Praktiker* ("pragmatists") shrewdly used his initiative in their efforts to link his attack on orthodox Marxism with their own instrumentalist agenda. Thanks to their skillful tactical manoeuvres, Bernstein's "revisionism" acquired even more negative connotations, eventually becoming synonymous with "socialist imperialism" and a form of "philosophical eclecticism," which Rosa Luxemburg seethingly characterized as "a pile of rubbish, in which the debris of all systems, the pieces of thought of various great and small minds, find a common resting place."¹⁴ The echoes of such assessments can still be heard today in Cornel West's equally sharp criticism that "Bernstein . . .

¹² For an excellent discussion of this topic, see Beverly Heckart, *From Bassermann to Bebel: The Grand Bloc's Quest for Reform in the Kaiserreich, 1900–1914* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1974).

¹³ Bernstein's definition of socialism as "organized liberalism," and his general fondness for the liberal ideals he expressed on many occasions, permits such wording without violating his theoretical design. Expanding on Bernstein's arguments, the Italian socialist Carlo Rosselli used the term "liberal socialism" as the title of his 1930 book. See Carlo Rosselli, *Liberal Socialism*, ed. by Nadia Urbinati (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1994). Throughout this book, the terms "evolutionary socialism" and "liberal socialism" will be used interchangeably.

¹⁴ Rosa Luxemburg, *Reform or Revolution?* (New York: Pathfinder, 1973), p. 57.

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neither formulated a philosophical justification for socialist ethical ideals nor gave these ideals any substantive content.”¹⁵

While Marxists of various schools have been instrumental in setting the framework for downplaying Bernstein’s contribution to socialist theory, many non-Marxist scholars, too, have not been much kinder in their respective appraisals. Criticizing the “eclectic nature of his theoretical enterprise,”¹⁶ such observers point to Bernstein’s allegedly “insufficient grasp of basic philosophical principles” as the underlying reason for his “negligible theoretical contribution to socialist thought.”¹⁷ Save for a few exceptions,¹⁸ it seems that most historians of German social democracy have tacitly agreed that Bernstein’s political theory does not warrant extensive research efforts. As a result, his central role in German social democracy has received only scant attention, and the exploration of Bernstein’s life and thought as a whole has suffered neglect.

Contrary to this dominant line of argument, my study does not consider the degree of Bernstein’s philosophical sophistication as the key variable in evaluating his significance as a political thinker and politician. Rather, as the main thesis of this work, I argue for Bernstein’s pivotal role in the history of socialist thought on the grounds of his model of “evolutionary socialism” – his pioneering reconceptualization of the relationship between liberal and socialist political theory. I seek to both illuminate and critically evaluate Bernstein’s attempts to change his party’s theoretical self-understanding in order to facilitate a greater degree of cooperation with liberal progressives and thus mobilize German society in the name of democracy. Seen from Bernstein’s perspective, the official acknowledgment and appreciation of existing theoretical and political points of contact between socialists and liberals was the indispensable precondition for the creation of a new, more democratic (and thus more “socialist”) Germany.

In this sense, Bernstein’s attempted synthesis of liberalism and socialism remains relevant for ongoing discussions on the “end of socialism,” for it illuminates the central predicament of socialist theory which continued to haunt the socialist project throughout the twentieth century: its inability consciously to embrace the libertarian legacy of the Enlightenment. As the normative preconditions for any socialist society, Bernstein

¹⁵ Cornel West, *The Ethical Dimensions of Marxist Thought* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1991), p. 176.

¹⁶ See, for example, Leszek Kolakowski, “Bernstein and Revisionism,” in *The Main Currents of Marxism*, Vol. II: The Golden Age (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1978), p. 111; and Roger Fletcher, “The Life and Work of Eduard Bernstein,” in Fletcher, *Bernstein to Brandt*, p. 52.

¹⁷ *DDS*, p. 298.

¹⁸ For example, Heimann, *Die Voraussetzungen des Demokratischen Sozialismus und die Aufgaben der Sozialdemokratie*; and Michael Harrington, *Socialism Past & Future* (New York: Arcade, 1989), p. 276.

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emphasized above all the establishment of political democracy. Insurrectionary departures from the evolutionary mode of liberal social change were not only viewed as the dangerous excesses of “romantic utopians,” but represented outright threats to the survival of personal liberty. In fact, Bernstein never failed to emphasize the idea of “democracy” in his party’s self-identification with the label “social democracy,” thereby propounding the notion of an “evolving liberalism” guided by basic rational and humanitarian ideals.

Bernstein encountered such ethically motivated forms of liberalism in the writings of German neo-Kantians like Johann Jacoby, Friedrich Albert Lange, Eugen Dühring, Karl Vorländer, and Conrad Schmidt. Moreover, he showed great sympathy for the British tradition of radical liberalism stretching from Jeremy Bentham, J. S. Mill, and Richard Cobden to late-nineteenth-century Fabians like Sidney and Beatrice Webb and George Bernard Shaw.¹⁹ Exiled in London for twelve years, Bernstein gradually appropriated England’s rights-based political language, emphasized the primacy of individual self-realization, and praised personal liberty as the paramount ingredient of any democratic social order. Though partially supporting Marx’s radically egalitarian scheme for a rational regulation of economic production, Bernstein regarded socialism as an “heir” to Kant’s and Mill’s political tradition rather than a completely new model fundamentally opposed to liberalism.

Like the “New Liberals” L. T. Hobhouse and J. A. Hobson, who sought to instill a new social-liberal ethos in a young generation of British reformers, Bernstein provided strong arguments for the necessary “modernization” of existing liberal doctrine. Yet as a German social democrat, Bernstein’s task was infinitely more difficult, for he had to address German socialists who had barely escaped Bismarck’s political repression

¹⁹ See, for example, Erika Rikli, *Der Revisionismus: Ein Revisionsversuch der deutschen marxistischen Theorie, 1890–1914* (Zürich: Girsberger Verlag, 1936); Helmut Hirsch, ed. *Ein revisionistisches Sozialismusbild*, 2nd edn. (Berlin: Dietz, 1976); Pierre Angel, *Eduard Bernstein et L’Evolution du Socialisme Allemand* (Paris: Didier, 1961); DDS; Hans-Josef Steinberg, *Sozialismus und deutsche Sozialdemokratie* 4th ed. (Berlin: Dietz, 1976); Erika König, *Vom Revisionismus zum “Demokratischen Sozialismus”* (Berlin: Akademie, 1964); Hans-Jörg Sandkühler and Rafael de la Vega, eds. *Marxismus und Ethik* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1974); Meyer, *Bernsteins konstruktiver Sozialismus*; Detlef Lehnert, *Reform und Revolution in den Strategiediskussionen der klassischen Sozialdemokratie* (Bonn: Verlag Neue Gesellschaft, 1977); Helga Grebing, *Der Revisionismus: Von Bernstein bis zum “Prager Frühling”* (Munich: Beck, 1977); Bo Gustafsson, *Marxismus und Revisionismus* (Frankfurt: Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 1972); Helmut Hirsch, *Der “Fabier” Eduard Bernstein* (Berlin: Dietz, 1977); Herbert Frei, *Fabianismus und Bernstein’scher Revisionismus 1884–1900* (Bern: Peter Lang, 1979); Roger Fletcher, *Revisionism and Empire: Socialist Imperialism in Germany 1897–1914* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1984); and James Kloppenberg, *Uncertain Victory: Social Democracy and Progressivism in European and American Thought 1870–1920* (New York: Oxford UP, 1986).

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and were thus understandably suspicious of any “socialist” theory that implied some form of cooperation with the unreliable German bourgeoisie. Still, Bernstein insisted that the only path to democracy lay in uniting the ambitions of a politically dissatisfied “new *Mittelstand*” (middle class) of *fin-de-siècle* Germany with the working class’ traditional demands for profound constitutional, administrative, fiscal, and economic reforms. But if it was to happen at all, such a class-transcending alliance could not be achieved without first synchronizing the SPD’s theoretical guidelines with a concrete program of action.

For Bernstein, it was the primary task of the socialist intellectual to complement the necessary “modernization” of liberalism with the long overdue “modernization” of Marxist socialism – a project aimed at anchoring the labor movement in the altered socioeconomic conditions of the new century. Hence, Bernstein’s evolutionary socialism started as a *theoretical* enterprise: the untiring, empirically driven criticism of the “outmoded parts” of Marx’s model.²⁰ According to Bernstein, such criticism would actually facilitate the modernization of liberalism, since Marxism, too, was a fundamentally “evolutionary doctrine.” However, revising Marxist socialism also meant junking its remaining “utopian strains,” throwing out its metaphysical Hegelianism, and eliminating the “unscientific dogmatism” of Marxist popularizers.²¹ In other words, if Marxism was truly the historical science it claimed to be, then its representatives ought to acknowledge that changing empirical conditions necessitated periodic revisions of its theoretical assumptions and predictions.

Ultimately, Bernstein was bound to arrive at conclusions that put him squarely at odds with the founders. He disapproved of the priority of economics over politics; he rejected Marx’s celebrated dissociation of socialism from liberalism; and he parted with Engels’ contempt for “bourgeois” morality. Instead, Bernstein praised the “eternal ideals” of liberalism – the cultivation of refined tastes, the benefits of moral conduct, and the virtues of piecemeal reformism. Thus, long before most of his party comrades, he recognized both the obsolescence of certain Marxist ideas and the inadequacy of Marx’s method. He realized that revolutionary Marxism was a poor vehicle for eliminating the existing democratic deficit between Germany’s semi-feudal nexus of authoritarian social structures, values, and political attitudes and its accelerated process of economic modernization. Indeed, Bernstein was among the first nineteenth-century observers of industrial society who saw both the political importance of the

²⁰ See, for example, Bernstein’s conviction that “the first task of revisionism is theoretical, not practical” (*Protokoll über die Verhandlungen des Parteitages der Sozialdemokratischen Partei Deutschland, abgehalten zu Dresden 1903*, Berlin, p.397).

²¹ PS, p. 28.

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rise of white-collar employees and state officials, and the increasing social differentiation within the proletariat.²² Moreover, he insisted that Marxist doctrine could neither fully explain the remarkable adaptability of liberal capitalism nor make sense of the fact that the leaders of European social democracy were clearly more concerned with the organizational growth of the labor movement and the outcomes of the next elections than with the revolutionary overthrow of the ruling elites. Contrary to the ominous predictions of *The Communist Manifesto*, scores of ordinary workers and most of their representatives seemed to prefer the occasional “crumbs” from the capitalist table to the perils of an all-out class war.

Not hesitating to turn his skepticism on the proletariat itself, Bernstein offered a more empiricist assessment of advanced capitalist society, of the sort we have come to associate with the work of Max Weber. Indeed, Weber’s famous 1918 essay on socialism reiterates many “revisionist” arguments made by Bernstein twenty years earlier.²³ Both Bernstein and Weber emphasized the central importance of politics and parliamentary democracy in adjusting society to the forces of modernity. In their view, such a process was neither a ruptural event in the Marxist sense, nor a return to the organic bonds of the traditional *Gemeinschaft*. Insisting that the utopias of the past could not be salvaged from the process of modernization – not even as the scientific-romantic idyll of “free associations of free producers” – Bernstein anticipated a future society in which liberal and socialist currents would be forced to coexist for a very long time within the framework of an “organized liberalism.”²⁴

The articulation of this new vision represented no small theoretical feat. Despite his fervent rejection of Hegel’s dialectical method, Bernstein’s quest for evolutionary socialism assumed an almost Hegelian character in its desire simultaneously to “modernize” Marxist socialism and bourgeois liberalism through their mutual *Aufhebung* (“uplifting”) in a new theoretical synthesis. Inherently open-ended, Bernstein’s model was critically shaped by the concrete political problems of more than three decades. In good Aristotelian fashion, he sought to locate the slippery “middle way” of avoiding both an illiberal utopianism that leaves no room for doubt, error, and correction, and the empty pragmatism of cynical careerists whose social reformism had become devoured by cold instrumental concerns. Over and over again, Bernstein struggled to provide a more timely version of the old Marxist search for “some rational

²² Gerhard A. Ritter and Klaus Tenfelde, *Arbeiter im Deutschen Kaiserreich, 1871 bis 1914* (Berlin: Dietz, 1992), p. 426.

²³ Max Weber, *Political Writings*, eds. Peter Lassman and Ronald Speirs (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994), pp. 272–303.

²⁴ *PS*, p. 150.

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criterion for drawing the line between the visionary dreamer at one end and the petty bourgeois at the other.”²⁵ In many instances, however, his theoretical synthesis translated into politically unpopular compromises which failed to satisfy the main socialist and liberal players of conflict-ridden Germany.

Yet, there – in the midst of the concrete political dilemmas of both Wilhelmine and Weimar Germany, and not limned by the serene poetics of a purely philosophical enterprise – we encounter again the central theme of Bernstein’s quest: “What must social democrats do to make possible, and cautiously extend, democracy in industrially advanced countries?” Applied to the illiberal conditions of his homeland, Bernstein’s *leitmotif* represents an early socialist variant of the vexing “German Question,” so persuasively rendered by Ralf Dahrendorf as “Germany’s persistent failure to give a home to democracy in its liberal sense.”²⁶ By rejecting Bernstein’s theoretical blueprint, nationalist revisionists, orthodox Marxists, and radical revolutionaries missed a great opportunity to make Germany’s political culture more hospitable to liberty and democracy. Ultimately, both socialists and liberals failed to resolve the painful discordance between their classical doctrine and the demands of advanced capitalism. From the Left, Eduard Bernstein offered such a necessary theoretical vision of ideological modernization; this road not taken points to the implication of social democracy in the ensuing twentieth-century tragedy of German politics.

Having set the stage for the ensuing arguments, it might be useful first to offer the reader a short chapter outline of my study. For the sake of maintaining a lively narrative, I decided to divide Bernstein’s life and thought along more or less chronological lines into three main parts.

The initial three chapters of Part 1 furnish the basic features of Bernstein’s life, set against the historical and political background of German liberalism and social democracy. I focus mainly on events that contributed to the formation of Bernstein’s personality and his political outlook – the broad scope of his intellectual interests and his remarkable early party career as an editor and political journalist. Concurring with Austrian social historian Julius Braunthal, who pointed out that Bernstein was “much more of an intellectual than a politician,”²⁷ I contend that Bernstein’s theoretical achievements far outshine his abilities as a party

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

²⁶ Ralf Dahrendorf, *Society and Democracy in Germany* (New York: Doubleday, 1967), p. 14. See also Fritz Stern, *The Failure of Illiberalism* (New York: Columbia UP, 1992).

²⁷ Julius Braunthal, *History of the International 1864–1914*, trans. Henry Collins and Kenneth Mitchell (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd., 1966), p. 262.