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0521340497 - Marxism and Social Democracy: The Revisionist Debate 1896-1898

- Edited by H. Tudor and J. M. Tudor

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## Introduction

### Bernstein's Early Career

Eduard Bernstein began his political career in 1872 by joining the Social Democratic Workers' Party. He was then twenty-two years old. The party, which had its origins in the South German liberal movement, had been founded at the Eisenach Conference in 1869. By the time Bernstein joined, three years later, the Franco-Prussian War had come to an end, the Paris Commune had been suppressed, and a united German empire had been proclaimed with the king of Prussia as Kaiser. The joint leaders of the party, August Bebel and Wilhelm Liebknecht, were both professed Marxists and the party programme was based on that of the International. However, the party itself was far from being a thoroughgoing Marxist organisation. Many years later, Bernstein was to describe himself as having been, at this time, a radical democrat with socialist tendencies.<sup>1</sup> In this respect, he was fairly typical of the membership as a whole.

The Eisenachers' main rival for the radical vote was the General Union of German Workers founded in 1863 by Ferdinand Lassalle. The relationship between the two parties was not good. Despite a common commitment to social democracy, there were major disagreements between them on matters of both policy and principle. In general, the Lassalleans were pro-Prussian and saw socialism as being achieved by an alliance between the proletariat and the state against the liberal bourgeoisie, whereas the Eisenachers were anti-Prussian and saw socialism as being achieved by an alliance between the proletariat and the liberal bourgeoisie against the state. Nonetheless, in 1875, the two parties met at Gotha to compose their differences and form a single organisation.<sup>2</sup> The resulting programme was, of necessity, a compromise, and it was one in which the Eisenachers conceded more than Marx and Engels thought desirable. Engels, indeed, doubted whether the union would last for more than two years, and Marx flatly refused to endorse what he called "a thoroughly objectionable programme that demoralises the party."<sup>3</sup> In the end, how-

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ever, they came to accept the compromise as a *pis aller* and consented to give the new party their grudging support.

One of the considerations that led them to modify their view was the party's early and evident success. Contrary to Engels's expectations, Eisenachers and Lassalleans somehow managed to pull together, and in the Reichstag elections of 1877, the party polled 9 per cent of the vote, thus establishing itself as the fourth largest party in Germany. However, in the following year, two assassination attempts on the Kaiser provoked a surge of popular feeling against subversives, and the elections which Bismarck caused to be called in July returned a Reichstag which passed an Antisocialist Law effectively making the Social Democratic Party an illegal organisation.

By this time, Bernstein had become sufficiently conspicuous as a party activist to attract the attention of the police. He therefore fled to Switzerland, where he took a post as secretary to Karl Höchberg, a wealthy supporter of the party. It was at this stage that he read Engels's *Anti-Dühring* and became, by his own account, a convinced Marxist.<sup>4</sup> His new commitment soon made his continued association with Höchberg an embarrassment. In the autumn of 1879, Höchberg published an article (anonymously) criticising the party for having brought disaster on itself by alienating the bourgeoisie and relying too heavily on the proletariat. Marx and Engels produced a robust reply. The authors of the article, they argued, had understated the significance of the class struggle in a capitalist society and had consequently failed to appreciate that the emancipation of the proletariat could be achieved only by the proletariat itself. They were, therefore, petty bourgeois theorists who had no place in a proletarian party, and they should be expelled.<sup>5</sup>

It was widely assumed that Bernstein had contributed to the offending article, and so indeed he had, though only in a minor capacity.<sup>6</sup> In the event, he managed to convince Bebel that the article did not represent his true views, and in 1880 the two of them went to London to effect a reconciliation with Marx and Engels. The trip was a success. Armed with the approval of Marx and Engels, Bernstein returned to Zürich, where, in the following year, he became editor of the official party organ, the *Sozialdemokrat*.

It was as editor of the *Sozialdemokrat* that Bernstein established himself as a leading party theorist. He won the confidence of Marx himself, and after the latter's death in 1883, he became one of Engels's most trusted collaborators. Another of his associates at this time was Karl Kautsky, a fellow-exile and co-worker on the *Sozialdemokrat*. The two men soon found that they thought alike, and their

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journalistic collaboration formed the basis of a lasting friendship. In 1883, Kautsky struck out on his own by founding *Neue Zeit*, an independent Marxist theoretical review, and from this time onward his duties as editor occupied most of his attention. However, he continued to work with Bernstein, particularly in the matter of developing a common political position in response to the dilemma in which the party now found itself.<sup>7</sup> Needless to say, this position owed much to the influence of Engels.

It had become clear that the party was in no position to challenge the armed might of the state and that individual acts of terror would accomplish nothing except provoke further repressive measures. At the same time the prospects of parliamentary activity looked bleak. It was not that such activity was utterly impossible. The Antisocialist Law did indeed ban all party meetings, publications, and fund-raising activities; but it did not prevent Social Democrats from being elected, as individuals, to the Reichstag, nor did it limit freedom of speech in Reichstag debates. This meant that the party could maintain a public presence inside Germany, provided that it confined itself strictly to a limited range of parliamentary activities. But the trouble with parliamentary activity in Bismarck's Germany was that it was unlikely to accomplish anything remotely resembling fundamental change. Elections to the Reichstag were, indeed, conducted on a broad and equal franchise, but the powers of the Reichstag itself were very restricted. It could not, for instance, dismiss the government, nor could it force legislation upon it. In fact, it was possible that, by taking part in parliamentary work, Social Democrats would simply help shore up the very system they were supposed to pull down.

This, then, was the problem. The revolutionary road was suicidally dangerous, and the parliamentary road was, at best, an exercise in futility.<sup>8</sup>

Engels provided the solution. Capitalist society, he argued, had two dominant characteristics. Firstly, as an economic system, it suffered from structural defects which could not be eradicated and which would, indeed, grow worse until the system as a whole ceased to function and collapsed. Secondly, it was a society characterised by an irreconcilable conflict between the two major classes, proletariat and bourgeoisie, in which (as in all contests) the final goal of both parties was victory. For the bourgeoisie, this meant the preservation of the economic system which enabled them to exploit the proletariat, whereas for the proletarians it meant the destruction of the system in which they were exploited and its replacement by one in which they were not. In the nature of the case, the eventual collapse

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of capitalist society, and thus the defeat of the bourgeoisie, was inevitable, but this of itself would not ensure the victory of the proletariat. A socialist society would have to be erected on the ruins of the capitalist system, and to accomplish this the Social Democratic Party would have to seize political power and use it to build the society of the future. In the meantime, it was the duty of the party to do whatever might serve as a means to this ultimate end; in the prevailing circumstances, Engels argued, this duty required the party to take an active part in the parliamentary process, for only in this way could the party increase its strength, propagate its principles, and, above all, survive. Engels, in short, advocated parliamentary activity, not as an end in itself, but as a means to an end, i.e. as a temporary tactic within a long-term revolutionary strategy. And it was, to his mind, crucial that parliamentary activity should be understood in this way, and in no other.<sup>9</sup>

It has been suggested that this advocacy of peaceful parliamentary means to revolutionary ends was “an attempt to put an ideological cover on the psychological and political stresses engendered by the German workers’ pariah-like position in the German Empire.”<sup>10</sup> This may indeed have been the effect, though it is unlikely to have been the intention; but it should be noted that the policy had other advantages to recommend it. Not only did it actually make sense in terms of Marxist theory, it also offered something to both moderates and radicals within the party thus providing a basis on which the party could unite, and it was largely for this reason that it became in time official party policy. Of course, it could not possibly satisfy everyone. Staunch parliamentary democrats disliked the revolutionary rhetoric, revolutionary anarchists distrusted the emphasis on parliamentary activity, and Lassalleans found much in the policy which could not be reconciled with their principles. Opposition from within the party was therefore inevitable, and the task of fending it off fell chiefly to Bernstein in his capacity as editor of the *Sozialdemokrat*.

The anarchists were comparatively easy to deal with. In 1880 the secret party conference at Wyden expelled their two most prominent representatives, Johann Most and Wilhelm Hasselmann.<sup>11</sup> This, however, only provoked Most to intensify his campaign against the party leadership. Bernstein generally considered it a waste of time to rebut Most’s views, but anarchist agitation could not be completely ignored.<sup>12</sup> With the Social Democrats pursuing a policy of strict legality, it was all too easy for the anarchists to present themselves as the only genuine revolutionary opposition to a repressive government. Bernstein responded as the occasion arose by carefully spelling out Marx’s

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doctrine of the proletarian revolution, and it was perhaps here that his orthodoxy as a Marxist thinker was most clearly evident.<sup>13</sup>

The moderates presented a more difficult problem. Social Democratic deputies in the Reichstag were, naturally enough, inclined to stress the value and importance of parliamentary activity. Engels, on the other hand, insisted on the need to combat what he called “philistine sentiment within the party” by constantly emphasising the fundamentally revolutionary objectives of the party.<sup>14</sup> Bernstein was, on the whole, glad to oblige him in this matter. However, the embattled deputies felt that fiery revolutionary pronouncements in the party press made their position in the Reichstag even more difficult than it already was, and they accordingly made various attempts to bring the *Sozialdemokrat* more directly under their control.<sup>15</sup> It was one of Bernstein’s major achievements as editor that he managed to maintain his independence without explicitly repudiating the principle that the official party organ ought to reflect current party policy.

However, the most complicated part of Bernstein’s task was to win the argument against the Lassalleans without jeopardising party unity. The issue was brought to the fore by the programme of social legislation which Bismarck inaugurated in 1881. Lassalle had been a strong advocate of state socialism, and many Lassalleans were therefore inclined to support Bismarck’s programme as being a step in the right direction. For Marx and Engels, however, any such move was out of the question. It was, as we have noted, a cardinal principle of theirs that the emancipation of the proletariat had to be achieved by the proletariat itself. It could not be achieved by a bourgeois state, and to suggest that it could was to deny the class character of the existing social and political order. Besides, one of the tactical imperatives on which Engels always insisted was that, while Social Democrats might use their parliamentary position to extend the rights and improve the conditions of the working class, they should resist any reforms which might, as he put it, “strengthen the power of the government against the people.”<sup>16</sup> In his view, this included anything which might give the government a positive role in the social and economic life of the community, and this was precisely what Bismarck’s social welfare policy was designed to do. Engels therefore urged that the party adopt a stance of intransigent opposition.

Bernstein agreed. However, he had no illusions as to the difficulty of putting the case across. In particular, the sheer number of Lassalleans in the party meant that direct attacks on Lassalle had to be conducted with circumspection. Bernstein’s normal tactic was to

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stress Lassalle's outstanding qualities as an agitator and then to suggest that it was, for this very reason, a mistake to treat his pronouncements as having the precision and rigour of scientific formulations; but where this approach plainly would not do, he had recourse to selective quotation in order to show that Lassalle had not in fact said what the Lassalleans thought he had said.<sup>17</sup> It was not a campaign in which Bernstein's intellectual integrity appeared to its best advantage. It did, however, help erode Lassallean influence and stiffen the party's opposition to Bismarck's social legislation.

Opposition to Bismarck's programme became official party policy at the Copenhagen Conference of 1883, and a year later the party polled more than half a million votes and gained twenty-four seats. However, the elections of 1887 produced a disappointing result. The party maintained its electoral support, but the number of seats gained dropped to eleven. Then, in 1888, Bismarck inflicted another blow by persuading the Swiss authorities to close down the *Sozialdemokrat*. Bernstein, finding himself once more *persona non grata*, went to join Engels in London, taking the *Sozialdemokrat* with him. In the event, the setback suffered by the Social Democrats proved temporary. In the elections of 1890, they polled nearly one and a half million votes and won thirty-five seats. It was a remarkable victory. In terms of votes (though not of seats), it made them the largest single party in Germany. It also effectively demolished the coalition upon which Bismarck had relied for support. He and the new Kaiser, Wilhelm II, had not been able to come to terms with one another, and now they could not agree on how to respond to the changed constellation of political forces that faced them. The Kaiser favoured a policy of reconciliation with the working class. Bismarck did not and was forced to resign. Shortly afterwards, the Antisocialist Law was allowed to lapse. As the party was now able to operate openly inside Germany, there was no further need for a clandestine party paper. The *Sozialdemokrat* accordingly ceased publication.

### Bernstein's Conversion

Bernstein himself was unable to return to Germany, for, although the party was now legal, the warrant issued for his arrest was still in force. He therefore stayed in England and devoted himself to writing and research. Over the next few years, he produced a three-volume edition of Lassalle's works, he wrote an important study of radical movements during the English civil wars, he served as London correspondent for *Vorwärts*, and he published a large number of articles

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in a variety of journals, most notably in *Neue Zeit*.<sup>18</sup> The effect of all this activity was to establish his reputation as a leading party theorist. However, it was precisely during this period, 1890–5, that his views underwent a fundamental change.

Bernstein was later to say that he did not realise the extent to which his new position “touched on the very foundations of Marxism” until January 1897 but that, in retrospect, his change of ground could be detected already in the articles he wrote during the spring of 1890.<sup>19</sup> There is something to be said for this account. The remarkable result of the Reichstag elections in 1890 certainly caused Bernstein to reconsider the tasks and prospects facing the party. His main conclusion was that, since the party had become a major power in the land, its supporters expected to see positive results on a number of specific issues. The party had an obligation to fulfil these expectations, and this could only mean an increased emphasis on parliamentary activity. At the same time, Bernstein made it clear that the party remained a proletarian party committed to the revolutionary transformation of society. Care should therefore be taken to work only for those reforms which might increase the power of the people against the state, and the danger of “parliamentary cretinism” would have to be guarded against.<sup>20</sup> In short, Bernstein’s orthodoxy was still basically intact.

At the Erfurt Conference of 1891, the party finally committed itself to the broad position advocated by Engels. A move from the moderates, led by Georg von Vollmar, to bring the party into a closer relationship with the liberals was rejected, and an attempt by the radical left (the so-called Youngsters) to reduce the party’s emphasis on parliamentary activity was quashed.<sup>21</sup> The conference then proceeded to adopt a new programme based on drafts prepared by Bebel, Kautsky, and Bernstein. Engels had been determined to take this opportunity to “settle accounts between Marx and Lassalle,” and the new programme was, in this respect, almost entirely to his satisfaction.<sup>22</sup> As a statement of principles, objectives, and immediate demands, it was unmistakably Marxist in character.

Bernstein’s main contribution had been to help formulate the short-term tactical objectives of the party while Kautsky concentrated on the long-term strategic aims. The division of labour was significant. As time passed, Bernstein was to become increasingly preoccupied with the achievement of piecemeal reforms, and this was to be accompanied by a growing distaste for the excesses of revolutionary rhetoric. Indeed, the radical left soon became his principal target, and his polemics were not always conducted in a comradely spirit.<sup>23</sup>

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His approach to the moderate or reformist element in the party was more circumspect. He was not directly associated with the attempt by Vollmar and others to broaden the electoral support of the party by modifying the programme to attract the peasant vote. He was, however, becoming increasingly flexible on the question of compromise with other parties, and, in 1893, the Prussian state elections gave him an opportunity to clarify his views. Prussia operated a three-class franchise, which meant that the workers, who fell mainly into the third class, commanded only one-third of the voting power although they outnumbered the other two classes combined. The party's policy was to boycott elections held under so patently unfair a system. However, Bernstein argued that, despite the handicap, the Social Democrats might win a reasonable number of seats, if they were prepared to enter into electoral alliances with the liberals. It was, he argued, a simple case of finding the right means to the end, and there was nothing sacrosanct about the means. "What made sense yesterday," he said, "can be nonsense today."<sup>24</sup> It all depended on the circumstances. Intransigence made excellent sense where there was nothing to be gained from compromise, but to refuse a compromise which might give the party an advantage without reducing its independence or betraying its principles was not only foolish, it was a dereliction of duty.

All of this was perfectly acceptable. However, flexibility about the means presupposed a measure of clarity about the ends, and it was this that Bernstein's article lacked. There was, he agreed, a danger that "from being a means to an end, parliamentarianism might be turned into an end in itself."<sup>25</sup> But although this would have to be watched, it did not mean that the party should retreat into virtuous isolation and passively await the final collapse of capitalism. Such a collapse depended on so many factors that its occurrence was virtually impossible to predict; for this reason, Bernstein argued, it would be irresponsible to let the expectation of a revolutionary crisis prevent the party from "doing whatever is necessary to foster the interests of the working class."<sup>26</sup>

This relegation of the revolutionary crisis to a place of secondary importance was a major departure from Bernstein's earlier position, and the fact that it passed unnoticed was probably due to the heated controversy which Bernstein provoked on the more immediate issue of participation in the Prussian state elections. Parvus came out in favour of his proposal.<sup>27</sup> But Max Schippel mounted a vigorous counter-attack. "No compromise with the most wretched of electoral systems," he thundered, "no compromise with any other party, no compromise



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with the policy of compromise!"<sup>28</sup> In the event, the party conference in the autumn of 1893 decided to continue boycotting the elections.

Engels himself was beginning to have doubts about Bernstein's articles. However, he objected not so much to their content as to their timing and their tone. Bernstein, he suggested, had lost touch with the masses and was pronouncing on a number of issues with the scholar's fine disregard for time and place.<sup>29</sup> It was a perceptive comment. Bernstein was indeed becoming increasingly academic in his approach. His hostility towards doctrinaire radicalism was broadening into a general dislike for all the slogans and certainties of the party activist. He was more than ever inclined to see the element of truth on both sides of the question, and his political utterances were increasingly couched in the language of scholarly caution. Bernstein was, quite simply, developing his critical sensibilities and beginning to question his own views.

When, in 1894, Engels finally published the third volume of Marx's *Capital*, Bernstein wrote a series of articles explaining the work to the readers of *Neue Zeit*. Although he concluded the series with the confident declaration that there could now be no doubt that socialism was a science, it was clear that he had found the work disappointing.<sup>30</sup> Engels described the articles as "very confused." He told Victor Adler, leader of the Austrian Social Democrats, that Bernstein was suffering from neurasthenia, was grossly overworked, and had not given himself enough time.<sup>31</sup> Whatever the truth of the matter, it was probably also the case that Bernstein had hoped for a convincing refutation of the criticisms levelled at Marx's economics by the marginalists, and had not found it. Bernstein did not tackle the problem directly until a few years later, and when he did, it was to argue that, although the marginalists had a case, there was no real contradiction between their theory and that of Marx.<sup>32</sup>

That autumn and winter, Bernstein settled some of his doubts. He became convinced that the undoubted tendency of capitalism to tear itself apart was balanced by an equal tendency to pull itself together. The rise of cartels, the extension of the credit system, and the rapidly improving means of transport and communication all served to reduce the likelihood and the severity of economic crises. Moreover, bourgeois society was becoming increasingly complex, and this could only have the effect of diminishing class antagonisms. Industry, taken as a whole, was not becoming concentrated into fewer and larger units, the middle classes showed little sign of declining in numbers, and the workers, far from becoming reduced to a common level of misery, were prospering and becoming increasingly differentiated. In

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short, there could be no question of capitalism collapsing in the foreseeable future.<sup>33</sup>

Bernstein never denied that capitalism might, some day, suffer a terminal crisis, but he now saw this eventuality as so uncertain and remote a possibility that it could have no bearing on the formulation of party policy. This being so, the ends or objectives of party activity would have to be found closer to home, and, for Bernstein, these ends were the ones the party was, in fact, already pursuing, namely the extension of popular rights and the material advancement of the working class. In other words, the traditionally peaceful and legal tactics of the party were to continue, but they were to be removed from their context in a revolutionary strategy.

In taking this view, Bernstein was not just asking the party to stop irritating the authorities by issuing strident revolutionary declarations. He was, as he put it, “touching on the very foundations of Marxism,” for his advocacy of piecemeal reform implicitly denied the class character of capitalist society. Capitalism, for Marx, rested on an irreconcilable conflict of interests between bourgeoisie and proletariat, and as there was ultimately no room for compromise, there could be no gradual or peaceful transition from capitalism to socialism. Reforms of the kind envisaged by Bernstein might change the form of capitalist exploitation, but they could never achieve the abolition of capitalist exploitation as such. To treat such reforms as ends valid in themselves (as Bernstein was coming to do) was to deny that a revolutionary seizure of power was necessary, and to deny this was to deny the class character of capitalist society. Bernstein had crossed the ideological divide separating revolutionary Marxism from democratic socialism.

Bernstein’s critics were later to claim that he had been seduced by the liberal political climate in England and had, as they put it, come to view Germany “through English spectacles.”<sup>34</sup> Bernstein himself denied the charge. He was not, he said, so easily influenced by his environment.<sup>35</sup> However, he did regard England as the most advanced country in the world, and he tended to see in England the image of Germany’s future. He was particularly struck by the way the English establishment had accepted the socialist movement as a legitimate participant in the give-and-take of normal politics, and it seemed to him that popular pressure channelled through democratic institutions had achieved reforms which were not just window-dressing but had changed the very nature of society. In England, at least, the capitalist system was being modified, and it was being modified in the direction of socialism. The situation was, he admitted,