Foreword

The main object of the present work is to provide support for the views the author developed in a letter to the German Social Democratic Party conference held at Stuttgart from 3 to 8 October 1898.¹

This letter reads:

‘The views I expressed in the series “Problems of Socialism” have recently been discussed in socialist papers and at socialist meetings; and the German Social Democratic Party conference has been asked to state its position with regard to them. In case this happens and the party conference complies with the request, I feel obliged to make the following statement.

‘The vote of a meeting, whatever its status, obviously cannot dissuade me from the views I have formed in the course of an investigation into social phenomena. I stated my views in Die Neue Zeit, and I see no reason to depart from them in any important particular.

‘It is, however, equally obvious that I cannot be indifferent to a vote of the party conference. It will therefore be understood that I am particularly anxious to defend myself against misrepresentations and erroneous conclusions drawn from my remarks. Since I am prevented from attending the conference myself, I hereby do this in the form of a written communication.

‘Certain parties have asserted that the practical implication of my essays would be that we abandon the taking of political power by the politically and economically organised proletariat.

‘That is an arbitrary conclusion and I emphatically dispute its accuracy.

‘I have opposed the view that we stand on the threshold of an imminent collapse of bourgeois society, and that Social Democracy should allow its tactics to be determined by, or made dependent upon, the prospect of any such forthcoming major catastrophe. I stand by this view in every particular.

¹ Protokoll, 1898, pp. 122–6.
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‘Supporters of this catastrophe theory base their view largely on the arguments of *The Communist Manifesto*. They are wrong in every respect.

‘The prognosis for the development of modern society outlined in *The Communist Manifesto* was correct insofar as it sketched the general tendencies of this development. It was, however, mistaken in various specific conclusions, notably in its estimate of the length of time which this development would require. This latter point has been recognised without reservation by Friedrich Engels, the co-author of the *Manifesto*, in his preface to *The Class Struggles in France*. But it is obvious that if the development of the economy took very much longer than originally envisaged, it would also assume forms and produce structures which were not, and could not have been, foreseen in *The Communist Manifesto*.

‘The intensification of social relations has not in fact occurred as the *Manifesto* depicts it. It is not only useless but extremely foolish to conceal this fact from ourselves. The number of property-owners has grown, not diminished. The enormous increase in social wealth has been accompanied not by a fall in the number of capitalist magnates but by an increase in the number of capitalists of all grades. The middle classes are changing in character, but they are not disappearing from the social spectrum.

‘The concentration of industrial production has still not taken place with consistently equal intensity and speed across the board. It does indeed bear out the prophecies of socio-political criticism in a great many branches of production, but in other branches it still lags behind them. In *agriculture*, the process of concentration is taking place even more slowly. Industrial statistics show an extraordinarily wide and varied range of enterprises. No class of enterprises shows any sign of disappearing from the scale. Significant changes in the internal structure of these industries and in their interrelations cannot conceal this fact.

‘Politically, in all the developed countries, we are seeing the privileges of the capitalist bourgeoisie gradually giving way to democratic institutions. Under the influence of these institutions and driven by the growing vitality of the labour movement, a social reaction has set in against the exploitative tendencies of capital. It is as yet timid and

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tentative, but it is there, and more and more sectors of economic life are coming under its influence. Factory legislation, the democratisation of local government and the expansion of its activities, the removal of legal restrictions on trade unions and co-operative organisations, the consultation of labour organisations in all work contracted by public authorities, all are signs of this stage of development. The fact that Germany still considers the possibility of gagging the unions indicates not its advanced but its retarded political development.

'The more the political institutions of modern nations are democratised, the more the necessity and opportunity for great political catastrophes will be reduced. Anyone who stands by the theory of catastrophe must seize every opportunity to resist and restrict the development I have outlined, as indeed the consistent supporters of this theory once did. But must the proletariat take power only by means of a political catastrophe? And does this mean the appropriation and use of state power exclusively by the proletariat against the whole non-proletarian world?

'If anyone wants to say that it does, let me remind him of two things. In 1872, Marx and Engels stated in their preface to the new edition of The Communist Manifesto that the Paris Commune in particular had proved that “the working class cannot simply lay hold of the ready-made state machinery and wield it for its own purposes”.

And in 1895, Friedrich Engels explained in detail, in his preface to The Class Struggles, that the time for surprise political attacks, or “revolutions carried through by small conscious minorities at the head of unconscious masses” had now passed and that a large-scale confrontation with the military would be the means of delaying, even reversing for a while, the steady growth of Social Democracy; in short, that Social Democracy would flourish “far better on legal methods than on illegal methods and overthrow”.

Accordingly, he defines the immediate task of the party as “to keep this growth [in electoral support] going without interruption”, i.e. “slow propaganda work and parliamentary activity”.

'Thus Engels who, as his statistical examples show, nonetheless managed to overestimate somewhat the speed with which things

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would develop. Shall we be told that, because he wished to avoid a situation in which the steady growth of Social Democracy secured by legal propaganda was interrupted by a political catastrophe, he abandoned the seizure of political power by the working class?

‘If no such objection is raised and his remarks are endorsed, then there are no reasonable grounds for offence at the statement that the task of Social Democracy, for a long time to come, will be, not to speculate on the great collapse, but to “organise the working class politically, train it for democracy, and fight for any and all reforms in the state which are designed to raise the working class and make the state more democratic”.”

‘That is what I said in my impugned article and what I still maintain with all that it implies. As regards the matter in question, it amounts to the same thing as Engels’s proposition, for democracy means that at any given time the working class should rule to the extent permitted by its intellectual maturity and the current stage of its economic development. Incidentally, in the place just mentioned, Engels explicitly refers to the fact that even The Communist Manifesto “proclaimed the winning of . . . democracy as one of the first and most important tasks of the militant proletariat”.”

‘In short, Engels is so thoroughly convinced that tactics geared to a catastrophe have had their day that he considers a revision to abandon them to be due even in the Latin countries where tradition is much more favourable to them than in Germany. “If the conditions of war between nations have changed”, he writes, “no less have those for the war between classes.”” Have we forgotten this already?

‘Nobody ever questioned the necessity for the working class to fight for democracy. The quarrel is about the theory of collapse and the question of whether, given the present economic development of Germany and the degree of maturity of its urban and rural working class, Social Democracy would benefit from a sudden catastrophe. I have answered this question in the negative and I shall continue to do so, because in my view a steady advance offers a more secure guarantee of lasting success than the chances offered by a catastrophe.

‘And as I am convinced that important stages in the development

of nations cannot be leapt over, I set the greatest possible store by the immediate tasks of Social Democracy, viz. the struggle for the political rights of the worker, the political activity of workers in towns and municipalities for the interests of their class, as well as the work of organising workers economically. It is in this spirit that, at one point, I penned the statement that the movement was everything to me, that what is normally called the final goal of socialism was nothing; and in this spirit I still endorse it today. Even if the word “normally” had not shown that the proposition was to be understood only conditionally, it was quite obvious that it could not express indifference towards the ultimate implementation of socialist principles, but only indifference – or, more correctly, lack of anxiety – to “how” things would ultimately take shape. At no time has my interest in the future gone beyond general principles, and detailed depictions of the future were never something I could read through to the end. It is present tasks and those of the immediate future which occupy my thoughts and energies; perspectives beyond that concern me only insofar as they suggest guidelines for the most effective action in this regard.

‘The seizure of political power by the working class and the expropriation of the capitalists are not in themselves final goals but merely the means to achieve certain goals and fulfil certain aspirations. As such, they are demands in the programme of Social Democracy, and nobody questions them. The circumstances in which they will be fulfilled cannot be predicted. We can only fight for their realisation. But the taking of political power cannot be achieved without political rights, and the most important tactical problem which Social Democracy has to solve at the present is, it seems to me, the best way to extend the political and industrial rights of the German working man. Unless a satisfactory answer can be found to this question, stressing the other one is ultimately no more than rhetoric.’

This statement was followed by a brief polemical exchange between myself and Karl Kautsky, an exchange to which Victor Adler, in the Wiener Arbeiterzeitung, also contributed.* This induced me to make a further statement, published in Völkisch on 23 October 1898, from which the following extract might be of interest:

‘In Völkisch, Karl Kautsky and Victor Adler, replying to my article “The Conquest of Political Power”, expressed a view they had

already conveyed to me by letter, namely, that a comprehensive exposition, in book form, of the standpoint I developed in “Problems of Socialism” was much to be desired.\footnote{Ibid., pp. 312 and 314.} I have, until now, resisted the advice of these friends, because I took the view (which I still hold) that the drift of these articles is completely in line with the general development of Social Democracy. However, as they have now restated it in public, and as various other friends have expressed the same wish, I have decided to give effect to the suggestion and to develop my conception of the aim and the tasks of Social Democracy systematically in a book . . .

‘Adler and others have taken offence because I held out the prospect of a relaxation in class conflict as democratic institutions develop; and they believe that I am seeing things through English spectacles. This is most definitely not the case. Even assuming that the proposition that “the more highly developed country shows the less developed an image of its own future”\footnote{Capital I, p. 91.} has suddenly lost its validity, and also taking full account of the differences between developments in England and on the Continent (of which I am, after all, not altogether ignorant), my view still rests on manifestations on the Continent, which may at most have been temporarily lost sight of in the heat of battle, but which can not be ignored for long. Everywhere in the more advanced countries we see the class struggle assuming more moderate forms, and our prospects for the future would hold little hope if this were not the case. Needless to say, the general course of development does not rule out periodic setbacks. But if, for example, we consider the attitude towards strikes adopted by a growing proportion of the bourgeois public, even in Germany, if we think how many strikes, even there, are dealt with in a quite different and much more sensible manner than was the case ten or twenty years ago, then it can not be denied that there is progress to be recorded here. While this does not mean that “miracles will happen tomorrow” – to use Marx’s phrase – it does, in my judgment, indicate a more hopeful path for the socialist movement than the one provided by the catastrophe theory; nor need it impair either the enthusiasm or the energy of the activist. I am sure that Adler will not disagree with me on this point.

‘There was a time when my ideas would have met with no opposi-
tion in the party. If things are different today, I see in this only an understandable reaction to certain current phenomena, which will pass away when these phenomena themselves disappear and leave room for a return to the awareness that, with the growth of democratic institutions, the more humane attitude, which is slowly but surely gaining ground in the rest of our social life, cannot fail to extend to the more significant conflicts between the classes but will ensure that they too manifest themselves in a more moderate form. Today we use ballot papers, demonstrations, and similar means of exerting pressure to accomplish reforms which a hundred years ago would have required bloody revolutions.’

‘London, 20 October 1898’

The following work has been composed in the same spirit as these remarks.

I am well aware that it deviates in several important particulars from the views to be found in the theory of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels – whose writings have exercised the greatest influence on my views as a socialist, and one of whom – Friedrich Engels – not only honoured me with his personal friendship until his death but also showed beyond the grave, in his testamentary arrangements, a proof of his confidence in me.\textsuperscript{12} This difference in our ways of seeing things is not of recent date; it is the product of an inner struggle which lasted for years, and I have in my hand the proof that this was no secret to Friedrich Engels. Moreover, although I must protect Engels from the imputation that he had become so narrow-minded as to exact from his friends an unconditional adherence to his views, it will be understood from the foregoing why I have, until now, done everything possible to avoid expressing my disagreement as a critique of the doctrine propounded by Marx and Engels. Until now, this was all the easier because, as regards the practical questions at issue here, Marx and Engels themselves considerably modified their views in the course of time.

All that has changed. I now find myself in dispute with socialists who, like myself, have come from the school of Marx and Engels, and I must, if I am to defend my views, show them the points where the doctrine of Marx and Engels seems to me to be particularly erroneous or self-contradictory.

\textsuperscript{12} Bernstein was named, along with Bebel, as Engels’s literary executor.
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I have not shunned this task, but, for the personal reasons already mentioned, I have not found it easy. I openly admit this in order to prevent the reader from reading any uncertainty in the subject-matter into the clumsy and hesitant form of the first chapter. I stand by what I have written with firm conviction. However, I have not always managed to find the precise form and arguments by means of which my thoughts would have gained the clearest expression. In this respect my work is far behind many a work published by others on the same subject. In the last chapter, I have rectified some omissions in the first chapters. Further, as the publication of the work was somewhat delayed, the chapter on cooperatives has undergone some additions in which repetitions could not wholly be avoided.

For the rest, the work may speak for itself. I am not so naive as to expect that it will forthwith convert those who have disagreed with my previous essays; nor am I so foolish as to demand that those who share my point of view in principle should subscribe to everything I have said. In fact, the most doubtful aspect of the work is that it encompasses too much. When I came to speak of the tasks facing us today, I was obliged, unless I wanted to embark on a sea of generalities, to enter into all kinds of detailed questions over which differences of opinion are unavoidable even among those who otherwise think alike. And yet, want of space compelled me to lay stress on certain main points by indicating rather than demonstrating them. However, I am not concerned that others should agree with me on every particular question. My concern, and the main purpose of this work, is to strengthen equally the realistic and the idealistic element in the socialist movement by opposing what remains of the utopian way of thinking in socialist theory.

London, January 1899

Ed. Bernstein
Chapter I

The basic tenets of Marxist socialism

(a) The scientific elements of Marxism

With these discoveries socialism became a science. The next thing was to work out all its details and relations.

Engels, *Anti-Dühring*

Today, German Social Democracy accepts as the theoretical basis of its activity the social doctrine which Marx and Engels worked out and called scientific socialism. That is to say that, although Social Democracy, as a fighting party, represents certain interests and tendencies, although it seeks to achieve goals set by itself, it does, in the final analysis, determine these goals in accordance with knowledge capable of objective proof, that is, knowledge which refers to, and conforms with, nothing but empirical experience and logic. For what is not capable of such proof is no longer science but rests on subjective impulses, on mere desire or opinion.

In any science, we can distinguish between pure theory and applied theory. The former consists of cognitive principles which are derived from the sum total of the relevant data and which are, therefore, regarded as universally valid. They are the constant element in the theory. An applied science is based on the application of these principles to particular phenomena or to particular cases of practice. The knowledge gained from this application, and put together in propositions, provides the principles of an applied science. These constitute the variable element in the system.

Constant and variable are, however, to be taken only conditionally. Even the principles of pure science are subject to changes which, however, occur mostly in the form of limitations. With the advancement of knowledge, propositions previously regarded as having absolute validity are recognised as conditional and are supplemented by new cognitive principles which, while limiting their validity, simultaneously extend the domain of pure science. Conversely, particular
propositions in applied science have continuing validity for certain cases. A principle in agricultural chemistry or electrical technology, insofar as it has been proved true, always remains correct, whenever the preconditions on which it rests are once again satisfied. But the great number of elements that enter into constituting these preconditions and their manifold possibilities of combination produce an infinite variety of such principles and a constant shifting of their importance in relation to one another. Practice creates ever new materials of knowledge and, so to speak, daily changes the picture as a whole, continually letting what were once new acquisitions slip into the category of obsolete methods.

A systematic extraction of the pure science of Marxist socialism from its applied part has not so far been attempted, although there is no lack of important preliminary work for it. Marx's well-known exposition of his conception of history in the preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* and the third part of Friedrich Engels's *Socialism, Utopian and Scientific* should be singled out as the most important statements. In the preface just mentioned, Marx presents the general features of his philosophy of history or society in propositions so concise, definite, and free of all reference to particular forms and phenomena that nowhere else has it been done with equal clarity. No essential thought in Marx's philosophy of history is omitted.

Engels's work is partly a more popular rendering of Marx's principles and partly an extension of them. Reference is made to particular phenomena in the development of modern society, characterised by Marx as bourgeois, and its further path of development is sketched in greater detail, so that in many places one can indeed speak of applied science. Certain of these details can therefore be removed without any damage to the basic theory. But as regards the main principles, the exposition remains sufficiently general to qualify for the pure science of Marxism. This is also warranted, and required, by the fact that Marxism purports to be more than an abstract theory of history. It purports to be also a theory of modern society and its development. If we are making hard-and-fast distinctions, we can indeed classify this part of Marxist theory as applied doctrine, but for Marxism it is an absolutely essential application, without which it would lose nearly all significance as a political science. The general or main propositions of this theory of modern society must therefore be ascribed to the pure doctrine of Marxism. Although the present