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EDUARD BERNSTEIN

The Preconditions of Socialism

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Hence the Ten Hours’ Bill was not only a great practical success; it was the victory of a principle.

Karl Marx, Inaugural Address of the International
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Editor’s note

Eduard Bernstein’s famous polemic, Die Voraussetzungen des Sozialismus, was first published in 1899. It was reprinted several times in subsequent years and then, in 1921, Bernstein produced a revised and enlarged second edition. However, it was the first edition of 1899 that was at the centre of the controversy known as the Revisionist Debate, and that is the one that I have translated. There is already an English translation done by Edith C. Harvey and published in 1909 with the title Evolutionary Socialism. It reappeared in 1961 as a Schocken paperback, and two years later it was reprinted with an introduction by the late Sidney Hook.

Harvey’s translation was not intended as a scholarly work and she did not feel it necessary to supply the usual apparatus. Nor, for that matter, did she translate the whole book. Chapter 2 was omitted, as were large sections of the remaining four chapters. Indeed, something between a quarter and a third of the book was left out. Furthermore, in the parts of the book which Harvey did translate, many inaccuracies and other defects crept in. Nevertheless, her translation has served as a good first draft, and if the present translation is an improvement, then it is largely because I have been able to build on her labours.

The Introduction inevitably covers much the same ground as my Introduction to Marxism and Social Democracy; The Revisionist Debate 1896–1898 (ed. H. and J. M. Tudor, Cambridge, 1988) and my short piece on Bernstein in Robert Benewick (ed.), Dictionary of Twentieth Century Political Thinkers (London, 1992). I have, however, taken this opportunity to bring in some new material and to develop the analysis a bit further.
Editor's note

Material I have inserted in the text is enclosed in square brackets. Footnotes in the original are indicated by lower-case italic letters; my own notes are indicated by arabic numbers: both will be found at the foot of each page. I am very grateful to Raymond Guess and to my wife, Jo Tudor, for their helpful comments on various parts of this text. They have saved me from committing many errors. I am sure that at least as many remain, and for these I am, of course, entirely responsible.
Abbreviations


LVZ Leipziger Volkszeitung

MECW Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, Collected Works, 50 vols. (incomplete), London, 1975–

MESC Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, Selected Correspondence, Moscow, n.d.

MESW Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, Selected Works, 2 vols., Moscow, 1958


NZ Die Neue Zeit

Protokoll Protokoll über die Verhandlungen des Parteitages der Sozialdemokratischen Partei Deutschlands, Berlin, 1890–1913

List of abbreviations

Introduction

When, in the spring of 1899, Bernstein’s *Preconditions of Socialism* appeared, it caused a sensation. In effect, the book was a restatement and elaboration of the reformist standpoint Bernstein had been developing in a series of articles published during the previous two years. The controversy which these articles provoked had culminated in the rejection of Bernstein’s position at the Stuttgart Conference of the German Social Democratic Party in October 1898. However, many felt that the issue had not yet been laid to rest. Karl Kautsky in particular was profoundly dissatisfied and he therefore urged that Bernstein produce ‘a systematic, comprehensive, and carefully reasoned exposition of his basic conceptions, insofar as they transcend the framework of principles hitherto accepted in our party’.1 Bernstein agreed, and the result was *The Preconditions of Socialism and the Tasks of Social Democracy*. Hastily written and flawed as it was, it was to become the classic statement of democratic, non-revolutionary socialism.

The background

Bernstein was born in Berlin on 6 January 1850. His father was a locomotive driver and the family was Jewish though not religious. When he left school he took employment as a banker’s clerk. In 1872, the year after the establishment of the German Reich and the suppression of the Paris Commune, he joined the ‘Eisenach’ wing of

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Introduction

the German socialist movement and soon became prominent as an activist. In 1875 he attended the Gotha Conference at which the Eisenachers united with the Lassalleans to form what was to become the German Social Democratic Party.² It was not long before the party reaped the benefit of its newly found unity. In the Reichstag elections of 1877 it gained 493,000 votes. However, two assassination attempts on the Kaiser in the following year provided Bismarck with a pretext for introducing a law banning all socialist organisations, assemblies, and publications. As it happened, there had been no Social Democratic involvement in either assassination attempt, but the popular reaction against ‘enemies of the Reich’ induced a compliant Reichstag to pass Bismarck’s ‘Socialist Law’.

For nearly all practical purposes, the party was outlawed and, throughout Germany, it was actively suppressed. However, it was still possible for Social Democrats to stand as individuals for election to the Reichstag, and this they did. Indeed, despite the severe persecution to which it was subjected, the party actually increased its electoral support, gaining 550,000 votes in 1884 and 763,000 in 1887. Party conferences could still be held outside Germany, and party papers – such as, the official party organ, Der Sozialdemokrat, and Karl Kautsky’s political and literary review, Die Neue Zeit – could still be published abroad and smuggled across the frontier. In short, the party survived and, in certain respects, it even flourished.

Shortly before the ‘Socialist Law’ came into effect, Bernstein himself fled to Switzerland to take up a post as secretary to Karl Höchberg, a wealthy supporter of Social Democracy. A warrant subsequently issued for his arrest ruled out any possibility of his returning to Germany, and he was to remain in exile for more than twenty years.

It was shortly after his arrival in Switzerland that he began to think of himself as a Marxist.¹ In 1880, he accompanied Bebel to London in order to clear up a misunderstanding over his involvement in an article published by Höchberg and denounced by Marx and Engels

¹ See Bernstein’s account in his Sozialdemokratische Lehrjahre (Berlin, 1978), pp. 41ff; Roger Morgan, The German Social Democrats and the First International 1864–1872 (Cambridge, 1965), gives an excellent account of the German socialist movement prior to the Gotha Conference.

² Bernstein, Sozialdemokratische Lehrjahre, p. 72; Bernstein to Bebel, 20.10.1898, Tudor and Tudor, p. 324.
Introduction

as being ‘chock-full of bourgeois and petty bourgeois ideas’. The trip was a success. Engels in particular was impressed by Bernstein’s zeal and the soundness of his ideas.

Back in Zurich, Bernstein became increasingly active in working for *Der Sozialdemokrat*, and in the following year he succeeded Georg von Vollmar as the paper’s editor, a post he was to hold for the next ten years. It was during these years that Bernstein established his reputation as a leading party theoretician and a Marxist of impeccable orthodoxy. In this he was helped by the close personal and professional relationship he established with Engels. This relationship owed much to the fact that he shared Engels’s strategic vision and accepted most of the particular policies which, in Engels’s view, that vision entailed.

Engels, being convinced that the transition from capitalism to socialism could never be achieved by peaceful parliamentary means, argued that the main task of the party was to prepare for the inevitable revolution. However, to do this the party had first of all to survive, and that meant avoiding any action that might provoke the state into further acts of repression. It also meant using all available means to build up the strength of the party and increase its popular support. In the Reichstag, Social Democratic deputies should, therefore, adopt a position of intransigence within a framework of strict legality. Engels agreed that there was no harm in supporting measures that might improve the lot of the working man. But any measures that might strengthen the government against the people should be resisted. These included the programme of welfare legislation which Bismarck initiated in the 1880s and also such apparently innocuous measures as state subsidies for the construction of steamships.

For Engels, the danger was that a concentration on peaceful parliamentary activity might cause Social Democrats to forget their revolutionary objective. He therefore saw it as an important part of Bernstein’s task as editor of the official party organ to halt the spread of ‘phillistine sentiment’ within the party. Bernstein was glad to oblige.

* The party opposed the ‘steamship subventions’ because they formed part of Germany’s policy of colonial expansion. At the same time, the subventions gave employment to dockyard workers and were, for that reason, supported by many Social Democrats. For Bernstein’s account of the controversy see *Sozialdemokratische Lehrjahre*, pp. 155ff.
Introduction

In one leading article after another, he spelled out the case for intransigence.7

In 1887, the German government persuaded the Swiss authorities to close down Der Sozialdemokrat. Bernstein moved to London where he resumed publication from premises in Kentish Town. His relationship with Engels soon blossomed into friendship. He also made contact with various English socialist organisations, notably the Fabian Society and Hyndman’s Social Democratic Federation. It is clear that he was impressed by the liberal political climate that prevailed in England at the time.8 Indeed, in later years, his opponents routinely claimed that his ‘Revisionism’ was due to his having come to see the world ‘through English spectacles’. It is, of course, impossible to determine how far the charge was justified. For what it is worth, Bernstein himself denied it.9

In 1890 Bismarck fell from power. One of the factors that contributed to his downfall was the remarkable success the Social Democrats scored in the Reichstag elections of that year. They gained nearly one and a half million votes. Bismarck proposed to respond with further repressive measures, but the new Kaiser, Wilhelm II, favoured a policy of reconciliation. Bismarck accordingly resigned. Shortly afterwards, the ‘Socialist Law’ was allowed to lapse, and it was once again possible for Social Democracy to operate openly as a political organisation in Germany. However, the warrant which had been issued for Bernstein’s arrest remained in force, and Bernstein therefore stayed in England until 1901 when it was finally withdrawn.

The electoral success of the party opened up new prospects and caused many Social Democrats to reconsider their strategy. This caused a certain amount of turmoil within the party. On the left, a group of intellectuals, known as the Youngsters, mounted a campaign in which they warned against opportunism, deplored the party’s obsession with parliamentary success, and insisted that socialism could be achieved only by revolutionary means. They had reason to be concerned. The fall of Bismarck and the conciliatory attitude of the Kaiser had led many Social Democrats to think that socialism

7 For instance, the three articles by Bernstein from the Sozialdemokrat in Tudor and Tudor, chapter 1.
8 This is particularly evident in Bernstein’s My Years of Exile: Reminiscences of a Socialist (London, 1921).
9 Bernstein to Bebel, 20.10.1898, Tudor and Tudor, pp. 325–6.
Introduction

might, after all, be achieved by legislation and peaceful reform.

At the Erfurt Conference, held in the autumn of 1891, the leadership of the party managed to stave off the assaults from both left and right. The new party programme which the conference eventually accepted had been drafted mainly by Kautsky and Bernstein. It is therefore not surprising that the theoretical assumptions on which it was based and the general political strategy it prescribed were basically those of Engels. Engels himself did have one or two criticisms, but in the main he was profoundly satisfied with the result.10

Der Sozialdemokrat had ceased publication soon after the ‘Socialist Law’ lapsed. However, Bernstein’s distinguished record as editor, together with his restless active mind and his ready pen, brought him more than enough work as a journalist and author. His literary output during the 1890s was prodigious. At the same time, his views underwent a fundamental change. The change was slow, piecemeal, and difficult to detect. Engels, for one, noticed nothing.11 Neither did Kautsky. Indeed, Bernstein himself did not realise that he had shifted his ground until early in 1897. On his own account, the light dawned while he was giving a lecture to the Fabian Society on ‘What Marx Really Taught’. As he later put it in a letter to Bebel:

as I was reading the lecture, the thought shot through my head that I was doing Marx an injustice, that it was not Marx I was presenting . . . I told myself secretly that this could not go on. It is idle to attempt to reconcile the irreconcilable. The vital thing is to be clear as to where Marx is still right and where he is not.12

By this time, Bernstein had concluded that the main point on which Marx was ‘not right’ was his theory that the capitalist economy, riven by its own inner contradictions, would inevitably founder, thus providing the occasion for the revolutionary proletariat to seize political power and establish a socialist order of society. The difficulty was that, in the mid 1890s, the inner contradictions of capitalism were not much in evidence. Certainly, the terminal crisis so confidently predicted by Marx and Engels had not occurred and, so far as

11 It is true that in the 1890s Engels did occasionally express doubts about some of Bernstein’s articles but, as I have observed elsewhere, he objected to their tone and timing rather than to their content. Tudor and Tudor, p. 9.
12 Bernstein to Bebel, 20.10.1898, Tudor and Tudor, p. 325.
Introduction

Bernstein could see, it was not going to occur. It might well be that capitalism had a built-in tendency to suffer periodic dislocations. However, the development of a sophisticated credit system, the emergence of trusts and cartels, and improved means of transport and communication, had all enabled capitalism to eliminate, or at least control, the trade crises that had been so marked a feature of the economy in the earlier part of the century. Besides, Bernstein argued, there was no evidence that the means of production were being concentrated in fewer and fewer hands, or that cut-throat competition was eliminating large sections of the bourgeoisie, or that the proletariat was being progressively reduced to abject poverty. Indeed, capitalism seemed to be in rude good health and was likely to remain so for the foreseeable future. It was therefore idle for socialists to pin their hopes on an imminent collapse of the bourgeois social and economic order.

On the other hand, Bernstein observed, the advance of democracy in most industrialised countries had enabled working-class parties to enter the political arena, and there was a real prospect that significant progress could be achieved by parliamentary means. Indeed, the ‘victory of socialism’ might well be accomplished by the steady implementation of socialist principles through legislation and institutional reform. However, Bernstein was careful to insist that by ‘socialism’ he did not mean the communist ideal entertained by certain elements of the radical left. A modern industrial economy was, he argued, far too complex to be managed effectively by the state or by ‘society’, whatever that might mean. The state could regulate private enterprises but it should not own them. And it should not own them because it could not run them — or, at least, nothing like all of them. Loose talk about expropriating the expropriators was therefore dangerous nonsense. A socialist economy would inevitably include a large and thriving private sector.

It was also nonsense, Bernstein argued, to suggest that social care be extended to the point where the individual was completely relieved of any personal responsibility for his own welfare. Socialism, for


Bernstein, ‘The Social and Political Significance of Space and Number’, Tudor and Tudor, pp. 93–4; also present volume, p. 148.
Introduction

him, entailed extending the individual’s control over his own circumstances, and this meant ‘the implementation of cooperation across the board’. Socialist should therefore take a constructive view of the possibilities offered by trade unions, cooperative societies, and local government institutions. The objective of cooperative activity in these various organisations should be, not the class interest of the proletariat, but ‘the common good’. Bernstein never doubted that there were clashes of class interest in modern industrial societies, but he always insisted that there was also a fundamental common interest, or good, which took precedence over any ‘sectional’ interests. There was, incidentally, nothing particularly recondite about Bernstein’s notion of the common good. It was simply a parcel of goods ranging from freedom of speech down to efficient street lighting. Bernstein was, in short, what Hyndman liked to call a ‘gas and water socialist’.

Starting in 1896, the year after Engels died, Bernstein developed these views, partly in a series of articles published in Die Neue Zeit under the title ‘Problems of Socialism’ and partly in an extended polemical exchange with the English socialist, Ernest Belfort Bax. The controversy soon became general. Parvus, Franz Mehring, Rosa Luxemburg, and many others joined in; and, at the Stuttgart Conference in October 1898, Bebel came out against Bernstein, and Kautsky broke his silence with a powerful speech denouncing Bernstein’s views. It was, as I have already remarked, in response to this that Bernstein wrote The Preconditions of Socialism.

I do not intend to go through the book point by point. However, it might be helpful if I said something about the general nature of the political doctrine the book contains. In particular, are we to regard Bernstein’s ‘Revisionism’ as a form of Marxism or as something completely different? Let us begin by looking at Bernstein’s own account of the matter.

17 Tudor and Tudor, pp. 287ff.
Introduction

Bernstein’s critique of Marxism

In his letter to the Stuttgart Conference (reproduced in the preface to his Preconditions) Bernstein cited Marx and Engels in support of his position, emphasising particularly the views Engels had expressed in his introduction to the 1895 edition of Marx’s The Class Struggles in France. Here, Bernstein observed, Engels had argued that the time for violent revolution had passed and that Social Democracy would flourish ‘far better on legal methods than on illegal methods and overthrow’. Indeed, he went on, ‘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.’

This was, at best, misleading. Engels had not abandoned his conviction that a violent revolution was inevitable. He had, however, come to the conclusion that a decisive political crisis would occur before capitalism suffered its otherwise inevitable economic collapse; and his main concern was that the party should not be provoked into taking any action which might enable the authorities to carry out a pre-emptive strike.

In other words, Engels was thinking in terms of strictly legal and parliamentary activity within the framework of a revolutionary strategy; and he was clear that the strategy had to be a revolutionary one because, for him, it was axiomatic that the bourgeoisie would not sit back and allow the proletariat to legislate capitalism out of existence. His expectation was that, if anything of the kind looked likely, the authorities would try to prevent it by staging a coup d’état. It would then fall to Social Democracy to stage a popular uprising in the name of constitutional legality. However, any such uprising would be crushed if the army came out on the side of the government. It was therefore imperative that Social Democracy use the electoral system to increase its popular support, particularly in areas of heavy military recruitment. Hence the importance of universal suffrage.

It is true that the revolutionary basis of Engels’s position was not

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18 Present volume, p. 4.
19 The main reason for his caution was that recent developments in military technology meant that, as he put it: ‘The era of barricades and street fighting has gone for good; if the military fight, resistance becomes madness’, Frederick Engels, Paul and Laura Lafargue, Correspondence (Moscow, n.d.), vol. III, p. 208.
Introduction

made explicit in the 1895 Introduction. At the time, the German government was actively considering legislative measures against the Social Democrats; and Engels accordingly tried ‘not to say anything which might be used as a means to assist in the passing of the Umsturzverlage in the Reichstag’.21 Indeed, the embattled leaders of the party subjected the text to yet further editing before they published it in the party press.22 However, even the text thus bowdlerised was capable of interpretations other than the one Bernstein proffered in his letter to the Stuttgart Conference. Rosa Luxemburg, for one, was able to detect its revolutionary intent; and she did not have the benefit of personal acquaintance with its author.23

In fact, Bernstein was well aware that he had put forward a one-sided account of Engels's position. Accordingly, in the first two chapters of The Preconditions of Socialism, he tried to provide a more adequate analysis of the relationship between his own standpoint and that of Marx and Engels; and he began by examining what could be meant by calling socialism ‘scientific’.

Any science, he argued, consists of a pure and an applied part. Pure science is ‘constant’ in the sense that it consists of principles which are ‘universally valid’. Applied science, however, consists of propositions which are generated by applying the principles of pure science to particular sets of circumstances; and these propositions are valid only so long as the circumstances remain unchanged. Applied science is thus ‘variable’ in that its claims can be rendered invalid by a change in circumstances.

At this point we would have expected Bernstein to characterise the theory of the inevitable collapse of capitalism as part of Marx’s applied science. This would have enabled him to reject the theory as having been superseded by recent economic and social developments while still insisting that the principles of Marx’s pure science (the materialist conception of history, the theory of surplus value, etc.) remained intact. He could then have vindicated himself as a good Marxist by arguing that he rejected, not the principles of Marxism, but only the obsolete applications of those principles to particular

21 Ibid., p. 368.
22 Engels himself felt that the changes made him ‘appear as a peaceful worshipper of legality at any price’, and this, he declared, created ‘a disgraceful impression’. Engels to Kautsky, 1.4.1895, MESC, p. 568; MEW, vol. XXXIX, p. 452.
Introduction

cases. This, however, he did not do. Indeed, he went out of his way to reject this strategy and to insist that Marx’s general theory of capitalist development belonged squarely ‘in the domain of pure science’. So to reject this theory was to reject a fundamental principle of scientific socialism.

Bernstein, however, saw this apparently drastic conclusion as being subject to one important qualification. For him, the activity of the pure scientist was necessarily open-ended. As he put it: ‘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.’ In other words, the principles of pure science could be modified without being rejected. Thus Marx’s claim that the contradictions of capitalism lead inexorably to its downfall is true of capitalism today no less than it was when Marx first formulated it. However, we now know that it is true only as a ‘tendency’, for subsequent scientific investigation, much of it conducted by Marx and Engels themselves, has revealed other tendencies which counteract, but do not eliminate, the contradictions of capitalism. Similarly, Marx and Engels had often made the materialist conception of history look like a form of economic determinism. But, particularly in their later work, they recognised that political and ideological factors could influence economic developments and that economic factors were the determining force only ‘in the last instance’. And so forth.

Bernstein’s general point was that scientific truths are not to be regarded as doctrines cast in bronze. Science is an activity of investigation in which certain criteria are acknowledged, namely, ‘empirical experience and logic’, and which is therefore a critical and continuing activity. So to treat even the purely theoretical parts of Marx’s doctrine as being authoritative is to be not scientific but doctrinaire. Marx and Engels themselves had revised their theory, thus demonstrating its scientific character; and the scientific socialist should, Bernstein suggested, follow their example. In Bernstein’s view, therefore, ‘the further development and elaboration of Marxist doctrine
must begin with criticism of it’. It was only by virtue of such criticism and development that scientific socialism could vindicate its character as being genuinely scientific. In this sense, Bernstein argued, we can say that ‘it is Marx who in the end carries the point against Marx’.  

The difficulty was that Marx himself had, in fact, not ‘carried the point against Marx’. Neither he nor Engels had seen what was, on Bernstein’s analysis, the plain implication of the various modifications they had introduced into their original theory. To the very end they had continued to insist that capitalism was doomed to collapse and that socialism could be achieved only by revolution. Why was this? According to Bernstein, the answer was simple. It was because they were never able to free their thinking from the straitjacket of Hegelian dialectics. Time and again the results of their painstaking scientific research were annulled by an a priori deduction dictated by the Hegelian logic of contradiction. It was this, Bernstein argued, that accounted for the Blanquist element in Marxist thinking. Class conflict and revolution were, quite simply, built into the intellectual presuppositions of Marx and Engels. Had they been able to transcend these presuppositions they would, Bernstein hinted, have come to much the same conclusions as he himself had done.  

However, while Bernstein was right to draw attention to the place of dialectics in Marx’s thinking, there was something odd about his depiction of it as an extraneous element incompatible with any genuinely scientific approach. For Marx and Engels, it was precisely its dialectical character which made their theory scientific rather than ideological. Reality itself was inherently dialectical, and any thinking which did not reflect this fact could not be called scientific. But Bernstein was clearly operating with a different notion of science. His paradigm was the natural sciences, not (as it was for Marx and Engels) history; and his view of science was distinctly positivist in character. However, as he himself was well aware, this raised the question of the relationship between scientific theory and political practice. In particular, it raised the question whether the objectives or goals of a political movement, such as socialism, could be scientifically established. And this brings us to the core of the difference between Bernstein and his Marxist opponents.

Ibid., p. 28.  

Ibid.  

Ibid., pp. 37–8.
Introduction

The movement and the final goal

For Marx and Engels, revolution was a structural feature of the bourgeois order of society; and it was a feature which, according to Engels, had been revealed when philosophical idealism had been ‘driven from its last refuge, the philosophy of history’, thus clearing the way for ‘a materialistic treatment of history’. Henceforth, ‘socialism was no longer an accidental discovery of this or that ingenious brain, but the necessary outcome of the struggle between two historically developed classes – the proletariat and the bourgeoisie’. This outcome was ‘necessary’ for two closely related reasons.

First, on Marx’s analysis, capitalism, being based on the private ownership of the means of production, could maintain itself only by constantly undermining the very conditions of its own existence. In particular, ‘the centralisation of the means of production and the socialisation of labour’ would become increasingly incompatible with ‘capitalist private property’ until the point was reached at which the system would simply collapse. Since the root cause of the collapse was private property, capitalism could be replaced, if it was to be replaced at all, only by an economic and social order based on the common or social ownership of the means of production.

Second, since the proletariat was the exploited class in bourgeois society, the class interest of the proletariat could be nothing other than the replacement of the system in which it was exploited with one in which it was not. This meant abolishing private property in the means of production (which enabled surplus value to be extracted) and putting some form of common ownership in its place. However, this objective was not a mere ideal, a moral yearning for a better world. It coincided with the ‘necessary outcome’ of the historical development of capitalism. Like the coming of spring, it might gladden the heart, but it required no moral justification. It was simply an inevitability. In this sense, socialism was scientific. The final goal of the socialist movement could be shown to be ‘necessary’ by scientific analysis.

This view carried with it a number of implications for the way Marx and his followers understood political activity. To begin with,

31 Capital I, p. 929.
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because the proletariat was the revolutionary class in bourgeois society, any party representing the proletariat was necessarily a revolutionary party. It was revolutionary in the sense that its final goal was the final goal of the proletariat, namely, the seizure of political power and the establishment of a socialist society on the ruins of capitalism. If the party decided to represent other classes as well as, or indeed instead of, the proletariat, it would acquire a different class interest and therefore cease to be revolutionary. Conversely, if it abandoned the final goal it would cease to represent the proletariat and would, whatever its protestations, become the representative of some other class. In either case, it would lose its identity. The class character of the party and its revolutionary end were, in this way, meshed. The one entailed the other.

Furthermore, since the final goal lay in the future, political activity in the present could only consist in using whatever means lay to hand in order improve the party’s readiness to act when the time came. For most German Marxists in the 1890s this meant taking part in local and national elections, contributing to Reichstag debates, and promoting trade-union activity with a view to increasing the organisational strength and popular support of the party and heightening the revolutionary consciousness of the working class. However, it was repeatedly stressed that such activities were to be regarded as means and not as ends in themselves. They were, in other words, not inherently right or wrong. They were right or wrong depending on whether, in the given circumstances, they contributed to the achievement of the final goal. The final goal, however, remained constant, and it was the final goal that determined the character of the activity in question. As Liebknecht put it at the Erfurt Conference: ‘What is revolutionary lies, not in the means, but in the end.’ Taking part in a Reichstag election could therefore be a legitimate revolutionary tactic. It was, however, only a tactic, a temporary expedient which implied no commitment whatsoever to parliamentary democracy.

The notion of the final goal was therefore central to the way

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32 ‘For Social Democracy, democratic institutions are essentially means to an end, not ends in themselves’, anon., but probably Kautsky, ‘Das demokratische Prinzip und seine Anwendung’, NZ, 15, 1 (1896), 19. Or as Rosa Luxemburg put it: ‘For Social Democracy, there exists an indissoluble tie between social reforms and revolution. The struggle for reform is the means; the social revolution is its end’, Selected Political Writings, p. 32. See also Engels to Bernstein, 24.3.1884, MESC, p. 445; MEW, vol. XXXVI, p. 128.

33 Protokoll, 1891, p. 206.
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German Marxists in the 1890s understood their political activity. It united revolutionary theory with day-to-day political practice; it vindicated the party’s characteristic tactic of taking full part in the political process while resolutely avoiding any entanglement with other parties or classes; and it helped sustain morale in times of stress and persecution. So it is hardly surprising that party activists throughout the land sat up and took notice when, in January 1898, Bernstein declared: ‘I frankly admit that I have extraordinarily little feeling for, or interest in, what is usually termed “the final goal of socialism”. This goal, whatever it may be, is nothing to me, the movement is everything.’\(^3\) Bernstein was dismissing as irrelevant the very notion which, for Marxists at least, made sense of everything the party was doing.

Dismayed by the outcry which his declaration provoked, Bernstein made several attempts to explain himself. In a statement published in Vorwärts, he said that he saw the final goal of socialism not as a future state of affairs but as the set of principles that governed the day-to-day political activity of the party. What he had really meant, he said, was therefore that “The movement is everything to me because it bears its goal within itself.”\(^4\)

As this clarification failed to satisfy his critics, he returned to the topic in his letter to the Stuttgart Conference, and again in the final chapter of Preconditions. His point in both places was essentially the same. He did not, he said, intend to express any “indifference concerning the final carrying out of socialist principles.”\(^5\) Indeed, he would “willingly abandon the form of the sentence about the final goal as far as it allows the interpretation that every general aim of the working-class movement formulated as a principle should be declared valueless”.\(^6\) But, while it was one thing to speak of the final goal as the implementation of certain principles, it was quite another to think of it as a future event or state of affairs. The future, Bernstein argued, was uncertain and could not be predicted. At some point in the future, the capitalist system might well collapse. But then again, it might not. In any case, the idea was at best a hypothesis – intellectually interesting, but of no practical import for current political problems. ‘I am’, Bernstein said, ‘not concerned with what will happen

\(^6\) Present volume, p. 5.
\(^7\) Ibid., pp. 5, 192.
in the more distant future, but with what can and ought to happen in the present, for the present and the nearest future. The question of tactics was, in other words, a question of assessing present circumstances with a view to determining what could be done by way of implementing the ‘general principles of Social Democracy’.

However, for Marx and his followers, political activity in a society riven by class conflict was not, and could not be, a matter of implementing a set of general principles. Principles might be paraded about on the public stage, but they were essentially a cover for class interest. In the last analysis, political activity was governed by the long-term strategic objectives of the various conflicting classes. And this, as we have noted, meant that a tactical move could not be understood as being inherently either right or wrong. What was right today could, if the circumstances changed, become wrong tomorrow. Political activity was therefore not a matter of following fixed rules or implementing principles regarded as valid in themselves; it was a matter of finding the means to a predetermined end, and ultimately it was the end that justified the means.

However, the various glosses Bernstein put upon his rejection of ‘the final goal’ made it clear that, for him, political activity was indeed governed by timeless principles which functioned as moral imperatives. Ends could therefore not be separated from means in the way his Marxist opponents supposed. For Bernstein, the end was not a remotely future consequence of what was done in the present; it was achieved directly in what was done. Thus a particular social reform, insofar as it implemented one of the principles of Social Democracy, was of value not just as a means but as an end in itself. As Bernstein put it, ‘There can be more socialism in a good factory act than in the nationalisation of a whole group of factories.’

In other words, for Bernstein, ends and means were implicated in one another such that the ends pursued could be inferred from the means adopted, for the end of a political act was nothing other than the principle manifest in it. It therefore made perfectly good sense for Bernstein to conclude that there was a contradiction between Engels’s advocacy of strict legality, on the one hand, and his revolutionary rhetoric on the other. And it also made sense for him to suggest that, since the party had adopted the peaceful tactics Engels

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38 Ibid., p. 5.

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recommended, it ought to ‘find the courage to emancipate itself from an outworn phraseology’ and ‘make up its mind to appear what it is today: a democratic, socialist party of reform’.40

Bernstein never went as far as Peuss who, at the Stuttgart Conference, roundly declared: ‘I find the whole concept of a final goal repugnant, for there are no final goals.’41 As Bernstein saw it, political activity properly understood was a union of realism and idealism, of pragmatism and principle; and where principle was involved there was indeed room for talk about final goals. But, he felt, even then such talk should be cautious and qualified.

Bernstein’s political vision

It is evident that Bernstein’s view of political activity presupposed an understanding of modern industrial societies that was radically different from that of Marx and his followers. Marx always insisted that, under capitalism, politics were ultimately and inevitably governed by class conflict. Bernstein was not prepared to be quite so categorical. He accepted that conflicting class interests were a factor in the politics of modern industrial societies, but, as we have already observed, he maintained that all classes also had a common interest in the maintenance and furtherance of civilised values, and it was this common interest which was, or ought to be, the objective of political activity. As he put it in one place, ‘while modern civilisation is much indebted to the capitalist economy, it is by no means exhausted by it’42 and elsewhere he declared that ‘the morality of developed civil society is by no means identical with the morality of the bourgeoisie’.43 For Bernstein, in short, the values of ‘developed civil society’ embraced and transcended all sectional interests and points of view.

He was, however, aware that a particular class might obtain a monopoly of political power and use its monopoly to enforce its class interest against the interests of other classes and against the common interest. Indeed, a conspicuous example of this had been Germany at the time of the ‘Socialist Law’. And he accepted that when the

40 Present volume, p. 188.
41 Peukull, 1898, p. 89.
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working class was, in this fashion, systematically excluded from the political arena, then it had no option other than revolutionary class struggle. However, where democracy had been achieved and all classes enjoyed the same civil and political rights, then it was possible for the legitimate demands of the workers to be satisfied by ordinary political means and for compromises to be struck on the basis of the common interest. The first objective of the socialist movement should therefore be the achievement of full democracy, and it is significant that Bernstein defined democracy as ‘the absence of class government’.

So, while Bernstein agreed that class conflict might be a feature of a developed civil society, he denied that it was in any way the definitive feature. For him, the state was not necessarily, or even normally, the instrument of class rule. Instead, it was the means by which barbarism and inhumanity could be eliminated and the moral principles of advanced civilisation could be imposed on all aspects of public life. This, for Bernstein, was the ultimate political objective of Social Democracy. It was an objective which differed from that of the liberals only in being more comprehensive and consistent in its conception. Socialism was, according to Bernstein, ‘the legitimate heir’ of liberalism, and, he added, there is ‘no really liberal thought which does not also belong to the elements of the ideas of socialism’.

As Bernstein himself remarked, one of his ablest critics was Rosa Luxemburg. In the run-up to the Stuttgart Conference, she had attacked his position in a series of articles under the title ‘Social Reform or Revolution?’, and when his Preconditions appeared she returned to the fray. Her object was to show that Bernstein’s enterprise was not to be understood as a ‘revision’ or up-dating of Marx’s ‘proletarian’ standpoint. It was, rather, a defection to the standpoint of ‘the progressive, democratic petty bourgeoisie’. That this was not immediately obvious was, she argued, due largely to the fact that any new movement ‘begins by suiting itself to the forms already at hand, and by speaking the language which was spoken’. For this reason, she suggested, differences in substance tended to be obscured by

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44 Present volume, pp. 140, 143.
46 Ibid., p. 200.
48 Ibid., p. 53; ibid., p. 370.
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similarities in form and language. Although she frequently mentioned this feature of the debate, she gave only one example by way of illustration. In * Preconditions* Bernstein drew attention to the fact that the word *bürgertich* means both ‘civil’ and ‘bourgeois’, and that this ambivalence had given the false impression that, in calling for the abolition of ‘bourgeois’ society, socialists were demanding an end to ‘civil’ society. In fact, he said, nothing could be further from the truth. ‘Social Democracy does not wish to break up civil society and make all its members proletarians together; rather, it labours incessantly to raise the worker from the social position of a proletarian to that of a citizen, and thus to make citizenship universal.’50 To this, Rosa Luxemburg replied: ‘When he uses, without distinction, the term “citizen” in reference to the bourgeois as well as the proletarian, thus intending to refer to man in general, he in fact identifies man in general with the bourgeois, and human society with bourgeois society.’51 Her description of Bernstein’s standpoint as ‘bourgeois’ begged the question, for it presupposed the very point he was questioning, namely, the class character of civil society. However, she was quite right in suggesting that Bernstein’s attempts at linguistic clarification were symptoms of a profounder change in his standpoint. They were, she argued, symptoms of the fact that his view was no longer scientific but ideological, and by this she meant that it was an idealist view.

Bernstein’s idealism, she contended, was a direct and necessary consequence of his denial that capitalist development inevitably leads to a general economic collapse, for this amounted to denying that socialism was ‘objectively necessary’, and it was precisely the ‘objective necessity’ of socialism that constituted its scientific character.52 Bernstein had certainly argued that, with the rejection of the breakdown theory, socialism would lose none of its persuasive force. ‘For’, he said, ‘what are all the factors we have mentioned as tending to suppress or modify the former crises? Nothing else, in fact, than the preconditions, or even in part the germs, of the socialisation of production and exchange.’53 This, Rosa Luxemburg argued, was misleading. If cartels, trade unions, and the credit system were

50 Present volume, p. 146.
51 *Selected Political Writings*, pp. 127–8; RLGW, vol. 1, 1, p. 440.
52 *Selected Political Writings*, p. 58; RLGW, vol. 1, 1, p. 376.