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German Marxism and the Decline of the Permanent Revolution, 1870–1909

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Summary

This article discusses the development of German Social Democratic Party strategy in the fourth quarter of the nineteenth century and the first decade of the twentieth, as a result of the works of Friedrich Engels and Karl Kautsky. It ties the evolution of Marxist orthodoxy to the emergence of parliamentary democracy in different European societies. In particular, it discusses the way parliamentary conditions impacted on how the proletarian revolution was imagined. Revolution was newly defined as the establishment through parliamentary means of a new government representing a new social class. Also, the early Marxist strategy of ‘permanent revolution’, which had allowed proletarian-socialist minority rule, was abandoned.

Keywords: Engels; Kautsky; Marxism; parliamentarism; proletarian revolution; permanent revolution.

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1. Introduction

This article discusses the development of German Social Democratic Party strategy in the fourth quarter of the nineteenth century and the first decade of the twentieth, as a result of the works of social democratic leaders Friedrich Engels (1820–1895) and Karl Kautsky (1854–1938). It ties the evolution of Marxist orthodoxy to the emergence of parliamentary democracy in different European societies. In particular, it discusses the way parliamentary conditions had an impact on how the proletarian revolution was imagined. The early Marxist strategy of ‘permanent revolution’ was gradually abandoned.

Early ‘Marxism’ was a remarkably radical doctrine. The industrial proletariat was expected to seize power through an armed insurrection. Karl Marx (1818–1883) and his friend Engels believed that this momentous event could even occur at a time when

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the proletariat remained a minority of the population. To allow a minority proletariat to seize power, Marx and Engels designed a bold strategy, which they dubbed the 'permanent revolution'. In this scheme, other classes were expected to provide the momentum which the small working class was unable to generate on its own. The strategy rested on two pillars. First, the revolution was imagined as a process in two stages. The overthrow of feudal-absolutist rule by the bourgeoisie or the petty bourgeoisie would serve as a rapid triggering mechanism for the subsequent workers' revolution. Second, Marx and Engels advocated a coalition with the peasantry to provide the workers with the majority that they needed to complete their revolution successfully. The present article discusses the role played by Engels and Kautsky in the gradual abandonment of this strategy.

Engels took only the first step of this process. To his dying day he continued to advocate permanent revolution as the most promising strategy to bring a minority proletariat to power. But Engels was realistic enough to realise that the strategy had to be adapted to the new conditions of parliamentarism that existed in Imperial Germany, as well as in the French Third Republic. At Engels's hands, permanent revolution turned into a parliamentary strategy aiming for social democratic victory at the ballot box.

The second, decisive retreat from permanent revolution was undertaken by Kautsky, who decided that the whole idea of a minority proletariat seizing power and embarking on the socialist transition was an illusion. The 'pope of orthodox Marxism' concluded that the workers could no longer rely on their allies to provide revolutionary momentum. Over the years, Kautsky became convinced that under the new parliamentary conditions of late nineteenth-century Germany and France, the peasantry and the petty bourgeoisie received adequate representation and had turned into satisfied classes that were lost to the revolution's cause. This led Kautsky to the conclusion that a bourgeois or petty bourgeois revolution was now out of the question. The workers remained alone, and could therefore not make a successful bid for power until they were in the majority themselves. With Engels acknowledging the significance of parliamentary tactics, and Kautsky discarding the idea of proletarian-socialist minority rule, the permanent-revolutionary strategy as Marx and Engels had understood it came to an end.

This article claims no originality when it argues that Marx and Engels allowed proletarian revolutions in countries with weakly developed capitalism, in which the workers comprised a minority of the population. The opposite view, to the effect that the founding fathers of modern communism tied proletarian revolution to highly developed capitalist circumstances, is remarkably alive even today.¹ Yet, this latter

¹ For this point of view, in various shades and nuances, see for example John Plamenatz, *German Marxism and Russian Communism* (London, New York and Toronto, 1954), 121–35, 173, 217; George Lichtheim, *Marxism: An Historical and Critical Study* (London, 1961), 51–62, 122–29; Wolfgang Leonhard, *Sowjetideologie heute*, 2 vols (Frankfurt and Hamburg, 1962), II, 106–09; Andrew C. Janos, 'The Communist Theory of the State and Revolution', in *Communism and Revolution: The Strategic Uses of Political Violence*, edited by Cyril E. Black and Thomas P. Thornton (Princeton, 1964), 27–41 (30–31); Alfred G. Meyer, *Communism*, third edition (New York, 1967), 31; Shlomo Avineri, *The Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx* (London, 1968), 150–62, 185–220, 241, 250–58; Robert C. Tucker, *The Marxian Revolutionary Idea* (London, 1969), 100–01, 103–04, 122–26, 136–38; Wolfgang Leonhard, *Die Dreispaltung des Marxismus: Ursprung und Entwicklung des Sowjetmarxismus, Maoismus und Reformkommunismus* (Dusseldorf and Vienna, 1970), 36–37, 46–48, 55–56, 69, 125; G. A. Cohen, *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence* (Oxford, 1982), 203, 206–07; David McLellan, *Marxism after Marx: An Introduction* (London and Basingstoke, 1979), 2–3; Richard Pipes, *The Russian Revolution* (New York, 1991), 345–48;

view has been convincingly falsified in scholarly literature. The revolutionary strategies that Marx and Engels outlined for Germany and France are among the most closely studied elements of their thought and activity. We learn from the works of Reidar Larsson, Hal Draper, Richard Hunt, Alan Gilbert and Eric Hobsbawm that during the years 1843 to 1852 Marx and Engels designed various strategies of proletarian revolution for these two countries.² At the time, in France as well as in Germany, the industrial proletariat represented a small minority of the population. Larsson concluded long ago that between 1846 and 1852 Marx and Engels ‘devoted themselves almost wholly to drawing up theories precisely for “backward” societies: their native Germany and to some extent France’.³ Likewise, Gilbert bluntly concludes that Marx ‘never argued that the triumph of socialism in any particular country required that the proletariat be a majority (as opposed to a sizable portion) of the population’.⁴

The present article fills a gap in our knowledge of the history of the permanent-revolutionary strategy. As matters now stand, scholarly literature provides a detailed view of the permanent revolution in Marx and Engels during the 1840s and early 1850s.⁵ Also, in recent years we have formed a detailed picture of the events in Russia that led to a resurrection of permanent-revolutionary theorising among Russian and German social democrats during the first decade of the twentieth century.⁶ But there is little commentary or analysis when it comes to the intervening years. One gets the impression that the permanent-revolutionary conception simply faded away after the defeat of the 1848 and 1849 revolutions, only to be resurrected when Russia turned to revolution. I will treat Engels’s writings of the 1880s and 1890s as an important link between his and Marx’s earlier conceptions on the one hand and those of the next decade on the other.⁷

Turning then to the first decade of the twentieth century, I will take issue with the scholarly literature in which Kautsky is treated as an important early proponent of

Gary P. Steenson, *After Marx, Before Lenin: Marxism and Socialist Working-Class Parties in Europe, 1884–1914* (London, 1991), 20–21; John Plamenatz, *Man and Society: Political and Social Theories from Machiavelli to Marx*, revised edition, 3 vols (London and New York, 1992), III, 278–93; Richard Pipes, *Russia under the Bolshevik Regime, 1919–1924* (London, 1994), 501–02; Terry Eagleton, *Why Marx was Right* (New Haven, CT and London, 2011), chapter 2.

² Reidar Larsson, *Theories of Revolution: From Marx to the First Russian Revolution* (Stockholm, 1970), 31–49, 58–60, 125–27; Richard N. Hunt, *The Political Ideas of Marx and Engels: Marxism and Totalitarian Democracy, 1818–1850* (London, 1974), chapters 6–7; Hal Draper, *Karl Marx’s Theory of Revolution* (New York and London, 1978), II, 27, 169–288, 317, 358–452; Alan Gilbert, *Marx’s Politics: Communists and Citizens* (Oxford, 1981), chapters 2, 4, 7–12; Eric J. Hobsbawm, *How to Change the World: Marx and Marxism 1840–2011* (London, 2011), 63–69. See also Martin Hundt, ‘Zur Entwicklung der marxistischen Revolutionstheorie nach der Revolution von 1848/49’, *Marx-Engels-Jahrbuch*, 10 (1987), 31–64.

³ Larsson, *Theories of Revolution*, 9–11.

⁴ Gilbert, *Marx’s Politics*, 219.

⁵ See the works quoted in note 2.

⁶ See Larsson, *Theories of Revolution*, 182, 256–68; Winfried B. Scharlau, ‘Parvus-Helphand als Theoretiker in der deutschen Sozialdemokratie und seine Rolle in der ersten russischen Revolution (1867–1910)’ (University of Münster, Ph.D. thesis, 1964), chapters 7–8; Z. A. B. Zeman and Winfried B. Scharlau, *The Merchant of Revolution: The Life of Alexander Israel Helphand (Parvus), 1867–1924* (London, New York and Toronto, 1965), 64, 76–78; Baruch Knei-Paz, *The Social and Political Thought of Leon Trotsky* (Oxford, 1979), 18, 129–44, 152–74; Moira Donald, *Marxism and Revolution: Karl Kautsky and the Russian Marxists, 1900–1924* (New Haven, CT and London, 1993), 70–82, 95–102; Richard B. Day and Daniel Gaido, ‘Introduction’, in *Witnesses to Permanent Revolution: The Documentary Record*, edited and translated by Richard B. Day and Daniel Gaido (Leiden and Boston, MA, 2009).

⁷ For brief comments on Engels and permanent revolution in 1884 and 1885, see Day and Gaido, ‘Introduction’, in *Witnesses to Permanent Revolution*, edited by Day and Gaido, 14–16.

the permanent revolution and a forerunner of Lev Trotskii, a view to be found in the work of Moira Donald, and confirmed by Richard Day and Daniel Gaido.⁸ In his 1979 study of Kautsky's strategic thinking, Massimo Salvadori pointed to Kautsky's conclusion that the German petty bourgeoisie was lost for the revolution, which led Kautsky to reject Marx and Engels's strategy of permanent revolution as no longer relevant for Germany.⁹ I hope to show that Salvadori's approach is more helpful than Donald's in interpreting Kautsky's strategic views. This is not a simple question of focusing either on Kautsky's German policies or on his Russian ones. There is no denying that Kautsky dusted off and reintroduced the term 'permanent revolution' that he was familiar with from his reading of Marx and Engels, to conceptualise what was happening in Russia in 1905. Nonetheless, casting Kautsky as an early permanent-revolutionary misses the point. Rather, Kautsky's historical role was to purge German Marxism of the spirit of permanent revolution, which had remained alive in the party until Engels's death.

2. The 'Proletarian Minority Problem'

Marxist social philosophy suffered from a serious inconsistency that was never resolved. In his critique of Hegel's philosophy of right, written in 1843 to 1844, Marx acknowledged that Germany was a backward nation, a condition which seemed to create an insurmountable obstacle to the 'radical German revolution' that he hoped for. Revolutions, Marx explained, need a 'material basis'. But Marx optimistically assumed that this material basis was now in the process of formation, in the form of 'a class with *the most radical chains*'. Marx believed that the so-called *proletariat* was sufficiently developed to allow a radical, communist revolution in Germany.¹⁰ Marx and Engels were confident that the industrial workers would occupy an ever-increasing share of the population, because the new capitalist system made it increasingly difficult for the small producers to survive, driving them from the market-place into the factories. This process of class polarisation could only end, they thought, in a proletarian revolution. In *The German Ideology*, written in 1845 and 1846, Marx and Engels formulated as a precondition of the proletarian revolution that the process of alienation must have 'rendered the mass of humanity completely "property-less"'.¹¹

To see all of this in perspective we must realise that, at the time, the German proletariat represented a numerically tiny force. In 1850 the German industrial working class made up less than three-and-a-half per cent of the economically active population.¹² The same was the case in France. Even around 1870 the French and

⁸ Donald, *Marxism and Revolution*, 70–82, 95–102; Day and Gaido, 'Introduction', in *Witnesses to Permanent Revolution*, edited by Day and Gaido, xi, 40–44.

⁹ Massimo Salvadori, *Karl Kautsky and the Socialist Revolution, 1880-1938* (London, 1979), 79–90 (86), 100–08, 128–30. See also Hobsbawm, *How to Change the World*, 66.

¹⁰ Karl Marx, Introduction to 'Zur Kritik der Hegelschen Rechtsphilosophie', in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Werke* (hereafter *MEW*), 43 vols (Berlin, 1964–1973), I, 386, 390. All translations are my own.

¹¹ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, 'Die deutsche Ideologie', in *MEW*, III, 34.

¹² Out of an economically active German population of 15.8 million people in 1850, twenty-four per cent worked in the secondary sector, i.e. approximately 3.8 million people. An estimated 1.75 million people were engaged in *Handwerk*, and 1.5 million in *Verlag*, adding up to 3.25 million artisans. See Friedrich-Wilhelm Henning, *Deutsche Wirtschafts- und Sozialgeschichte im 19. Jahrhundert* (Paderborn, 1996), 351, 877, 885. This would leave us with 550,000 industrial workers.

German industrial proletariats continued to make up relatively small minorities of around ten per cent of the active population.¹³ The industrial proletariat in fact never attained the majority status that Marxists expected to see. Whereas in 1907 wage-earners made up seventy-six per cent of Germany's economically active population, the industrial proletariat's share remained under twenty-five per cent.¹⁴

Marx and Engels were very perceptive observers of the socio-economic conditions of their days, and very astute thinkers, and so must have understood the dramatic significance of all of this. The proletarian majority on which their revolutionary strategy depended simply did not exist. Much of what they later wrote on the subject of the strategy of the proletarian party can be understood as an attempt to deal with what I have called the 'proletarian minority problem'.

Intellectually, Marx and Engels dealt with the problem in a less than courageous way. They adapted their thought to the circumstances without however bringing the problem into the open. They frequently elaborated on the polarisation process, concluding that it would end in a proletarian revolution. But on closer reading, they never repeated their claim that without the process reaching the stage where the workers had become the majority, the revolution was doomed to failure, as they had suggested in *The German Ideology*.¹⁵ On several occasions Engels explained that the process of polarisation was inexorable only while capitalism still existed. In other words, either polarisation produces the revolution, or the revolution cuts short the process of polarisation.¹⁶

This leaves open the question of how large a segment of the population must be turned into proletarians in order for a successful workers' revolution to take place. One searches in vain for a clear answer to this question in the works of Marx and Engels, but it seems that they settled for a substantial minority. The closest we come is when in 1860 Marx identified 'the first precondition of a proletarian revolution' as the presence of 'an *industrial proletariat* on a national scale (*Stufenleiter*)'.¹⁷ In his 1874 and 1875 comments on Mikhail Bakunin's *Statehood and Anarchy*, Marx observed that a proletarian revolution was only possible in countries where the

¹³ From 1860 to 1865 there were an estimated 1.2 million industrial workers in France; see Michel Beaud, *Histoire du capitalisme de 1500 à nos jours* (Paris, 1981), 135, 187–88. According to information provided by Roger Price, the active population of France stood at 15.1 million in 1866; see Roger Price, *An Economic History of Modern France, 1730-1914* (London and Basingstoke, 1981), 168–69. For the figure for Germany in 1875, see Henning, *Wirtschafts- und Sozialgeschichte*, 351, 678.

¹⁴ In 1907, Germany had an economically active population of 28.1 million people. There were 10.1 million industrial workers and artisans. Artisans made up 11.3 per cent of all *Erwerbstätigen*. See Hans-Ulrich Wehler, *Deutsche Gesellschaftsgeschichte*, 5 vols (Munich, 1987–2008), III, 680–81, 773–74. This would make for an industrial working class of 6.9 million people. For the figure of seventy-six per cent, see Wehler, *Deutsche Gesellschaftsgeschichte*, III, 773.

¹⁵ See for example Marx and Engels, 'Deutsche Ideologie', in *MEW*, III, 69; Friedrich Engels, 'Grundsätze des Kommunismus', in *MEW*, IV, 363–64, 371–72; Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, 'Manifest der Kommunistischen Partei', in *MEW*, IV, 469–72; Friedrich Engels, 'Die preussische Militärfrage und die deutsche Arbeiterpartei', in *MEW*, XVI, 76; Friedrich Engels, 'Anti-Dühring', in *MEW*, XX, 261–62; Friedrich Engels, 'Anhang [zur amerikanischen Ausgabe der "Lage der arbeitenden Klasse in England"]', in *MEW*, XXI, 254; Friedrich Engels, 'Ludwig Feuerbach und der Ausgang der klassischen deutschen Philosophie', in *MEW*, XXI, 300; Friedrich Engels, 'Schutzzoll und Freihandel', in *MEW*, XXI, 374; Karl Marx, 'Das Kapital', in *MEW*, XXIII, 789–91. On this matter see also Hobsbawm, *How to Change the World*, 62.

¹⁶ See for example Friedrich Engels, 'Umriss zu einer Kritik der Nationalökonomie', in *MEW*, I, 522–23; Friedrich Engels, 'Die Lage der arbeitenden Klasse in England', in *MEW*, II, 232–33; Friedrich Engels, 'Zwei Reden in Elberfeld', in *MEW*, II, 536–37.

¹⁷ Karl Marx, 'Herr Vogt', in *MEW*, XIV, 450.

industrial workers occupied 'at least an important position among the popular mass'.¹⁸

All of this left Marx and Engels in a quandary, for how could a minority proletariat be expected to be able to seize power and hold on to it? The permanent revolution can be read as the solution for this proletarian minority problem. The first of two main strategic conclusions to be drawn by Marx and Engels was that, however much they despised the political mentality of the peasants, the proletariat needed to join forces with this class. Without the support of the peasantry, a revolutionary majority would remain nothing more than a fantasy. Marx and Engels expected the French and German proletarian parties to convince the peasants that socialism would provide better protection of their interests than the capitalist market and its vagaries ever could.¹⁹

Second, Marx and Engels suggested a triggering mechanism, in which the proletarian revolution would be set off by a preceding democratic one, spearheaded against absolutism and feudalism, in a relatively short period of time. Permanent revolution can be defined as the idea that the revolution comes in two successive stages that occur without significant interruption.²⁰ The strategy came in varieties. During the years 1843 to 1852 Marx and Engels imagined the democratic revolution in Germany, which was supposed to trigger the proletarian one, in three different ways. In the first variety, the democratic revolution was assigned to the proletariat itself. The working class might come to power immediately, and gain support for its revolution from other classes by posing as the national advocate of democratic reform. Once in power, the workers might use the momentum to quickly move on and take up their socialist tasks. In the second and third varieties, the democratic revolution would be carried out either by the bourgeoisie or by the urban petty bourgeoisie.²¹

The most well-known instance of the second strategy concerns the scenario that Marx and Engels painted for Germany in their 1848 *Communist Manifesto*: the proletarian revolution must be preceded by a 'bourgeois revolution' against feudalism and absolutism, which was to be expected imminently and which would serve as the 'immediate prologue of a proletarian revolution'.²² The *locus classicus* for the third strategy was contained in Marx and Engels's March 1850 address to the Communist League. On this occasion they suggested that instead of the bourgeoisie, which had betrayed their expectations during the 1848 to 1849 *Springtime of the Peoples*, now

¹⁸ Karl Marx, 'Konspekt on Bakunins Buch "Staatlichkeit und Anarchie"', in *MEW*, XVIII, 632–33.

¹⁹ See for example Karl Marx, 'Die Klassenkämpfe in Frankreich 1848 bis 1850', in *MEW*, VII, 19–21, 62, 84, 87–89; Friedrich Engels, 1870 Foreword to 'Der deutsche Bauernkrieg', in *MEW*, VII, 534–35, 537; Karl Marx, 'Der achtzehnte Brumaire des Louis Bonaparte', in *MEW*, VIII, 201–02, 204; Karl Marx, 'Der Bürgerkrieg in Frankreich', in *MEW*, XVII, 341–44; Marx, First draft of 'Bürgerkrieg', in *MEW*, XVII, 551; Marx, 'Konspekt on Bakunins Buch', in *MEW*, XVIII, 632–33; Marx to Engels, 16 April 1856, in *MEW*, XXIX, 47.

²⁰ For similar definitions of the permanent revolution, see Draper, *Karl Marx's Theory*, 201, 203; Larsson, *Theories of Revolution*, 31.

²¹ In Larsson and Draper all three strategies fall into the category of permanent revolution; see Larsson, *Theories of Revolution*, 24–37, 125–27; Draper, *Karl Marx's Theory*, 27, 169–288, 380. However, for Day and Gaido, only the first variety, in which the proletariat carries the democratic revolution, counts as such; see Day and Gaido, 'Introduction', in *Witnesses to Permanent Revolution*, edited by Day and Gaido.

²² Friedrich Engels, 'Die Bewegungen von 1847', in *MEW*, IV, 502.

the ‘petty bourgeois democrats’ must seize power, in order ‘to make the revolution permanent’; that is, until the proletariat took over from them.²³

As we will presently see, in his later years Engels forgot all about the first strategy of immediate democratic-proletarian revolution. For him, permanent revolution exclusively came to signify a proletarian seizure of power in the immediate aftermath of a bourgeois or petty bourgeois revolution. Engels expected that a petty bourgeois radical government would create enough momentum to enable a proletarian government to get its turn. It was this strategy that Engels adapted to the conditions of parliamentarism under which the German and French social democrats now had to operate, and that Kautsky came subsequently to reject.

3. Friedrich Engels: Permanent-Revolutionary Parliamentarism

In Volker Berghahn’s interpretation, the Prusso-German constitutionalism formulated in the *Reich* Constitution of April 1871 ‘brought together three features – absolute monarchy, representative parliament, and democratic plebiscite’. But according to Berghahn, the balance of power was tipped in favour of the emperor. The *Reichstag* could veto the bills the government introduced, but it was the emperor who nominated and dismissed the government. The emperor could also dissolve the *Reichstag*. Nonetheless, significantly, Germany now had a national assembly elected by universal male suffrage.²⁴ The Social Democratic Party gained impressive results in the elections. The party’s share of seats grew from three per cent in 1871 to seven per cent in 1887. In 1890, the year when Bismarck’s *Sozialistengesetz* was annulled, the social democrats’ share jumped to twenty per cent, reaching a spectacular twenty-three per cent in 1893. With a result of one hundred and ten seats in the elections of 1912, the social democrats became the largest party.²⁵

The question of the degree and nature of the integration of the Social Democratic Party into German political life before and after 1890 is a complex one.²⁶ But it was clear to all that the party could only profit from participating in the elections. The goal was to score such a strong result that it would be difficult for the emperor not to allow the

²³ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, ‘Ansprache der Zentralbehörde an den Bund vom März 1850’, in *MEW*, VII, 245–46, 248. For references by Marx and Engels to the permanent revolution, see Karl Marx, ‘Zur Judenfrage’, in *MEW*, I, 357; Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, ‘Die heilige Familie’, in *MEW*, II, 130; Friedrich Engels, ‘Der magyarische Kampf’, in *MEW*, VI, 166; Marx, ‘Klassenkämpfe in Frankreich’, in *MEW*, VII, 89; Marx and Engels, ‘Ansprache der Zentralbehörde’, in *MEW*, VII, 248, 254.

²⁴ Volker R. Berghahn, *Imperial Germany, 1871–1914: Economy, Society, Culture, and Politics* (Providence, RI and Oxford, 1994), 190–93. See also Wolfgang J. Mommsen, *Imperial Germany, 1867–1918: Politics, Culture, and Society in an Authoritarian State* (London, 1995).

²⁵ Berghahn, *Imperial Germany*, 335–36. For a detailed analysis of the electoral process and results in Imperial Germany, see Jonathan Sperber, *The Kaiser’s Voters: Electors and Elections in Imperial Germany* (Cambridge, New York and Melbourne, 1997).

²⁶ See Guenther Roth, *The Social Democrats in Imperial Germany: A Study in Working-Class Isolation and National Integration* (Totowa, NJ, 1963); Werner Conze and Dieter Groh, *Die Arbeiterbewegung in der nationalen Bewegung: Die deutsche Sozialdemokratie vor, während und nach der Reichsgründung* (Stuttgart, 1966); Vernon L. Lidtke, *The Outlawed Party: Social Democracy in Germany, 1878–1890* (Princeton, 1966); Dieter Groh, *Negative Integration and revolutionärer Attentismus: Die deutsche Sozialdemokratie am Vorabend des Ersten Weltkrieges* (Frankfurt, Berlin and Vienna, 1973); Hans-Josef Steinberg, *Sozialismus und deutsche Sozialdemokratie: Zur Ideologie der Partei vor dem 1. Weltkrieg*, fifth edition (Berlin and Bonn, 1979); Gary P. Steenson, ‘Not One Man! Not One Penny!’: *German Social Democracy, 1863–1914* (Pittsburgh, 1981); Vernon L. Lidtke, *The Alternative Culture: Socialist Labor in Imperial Germany* (New York and Oxford, 1985); Marcel van der Linden, ‘The National Integration of European Working Classes (1871–1914): Exploring the Causal Configuration’, *International Review of Social History*, 33 (1988), 285–311; Dieter Groh and Peter Brandt, ‘Vaterlandslose Gesellen’: *Sozialdemokratie und Nation 1860–1990* (Munich, 1992).

formation of a socialist government. This is not to say that the party leaders were blind to the danger that the socialist electoral results might trigger a military coup. Engels, Kautsky and other leaders August Bebel and Wilhelm Liebknecht were aware of this possibility, in which case the seizure of power by the working class would require bloodshed after all. Though reluctant, Engels and his closest comrades would have been prepared to meet this challenge. In this sense they remained revolutionaries at heart.

Nonetheless, parliamentary tactics became of enormous significance in the party's activities after 1870. The turn toward parliamentarism was more natural for the German social democrats in view of the events in Paris in 1871. The Paris Commune, which Marx and Engels saw as a proletarian dictatorship, was drowned in blood. This tragedy made European revolutionaries wonder whether the armed uprising and the barricades continued to represent a viable strategy. Under the new system established in France, the elected parliament became a more powerful institution than in Germany. Under the constitution adopted by the French Third Republic in 1875, the president was the most powerful figure. He appointed ministers, was granted legislative initiative and could dissolve the Chamber of Deputies. But he remained an elected figure, to be appointed by the two chambers, the Senate and the Chamber of Deputies, both of which had legislative initiative. The Chamber of Deputies was elected by universal male suffrage.²⁷ Just like their German comrades, French socialists could not afford to ignore parliamentary politics.

Let us then turn to Engels. In the years 1882 to 1885 Engels, who lived in Great Britain but served as a highly respected adviser to the German Social Democratic Party, sent off a veritable torrent of letters to party comrades to acquaint them with his strategic insights. In a September 1882 letter to Eduard Bernstein he accused French Marxist Jules Guesde of failing to understand that a country must undergo 'its historically inevitable stages of development'. The socialists could not move 'from the republic à la Gambetta to socialism, without passing through a republic à la Clemenceau'.²⁸ As the leader of the Radical Party, Georges Clemenceau represented the petty bourgeois element for Engels, who believed that Radical government would open the road to workers' power. It was impossible, Engels informed Bebel in an October 1882 letter, to imagine the revolution as a 'great decisive battle, a complete victory in one blow'.²⁹

In an August 1883 letter to Bernstein, Engels insisted that the revolution would require an 'accelerating process of development of the masses spanning several years'. The coming German revolution would result in the establishment of a 'bourgeois republic', which however represented a mere 'short transitional moment'. The bourgeois republic would help the socialists bring about '*the conquest of the great majority of workers for revolutionary socialism*'. Engels expected that the 'thorough [...] self-destruction (*Selbstruinerung*) of all centre parties' would take no more than one or two years.³⁰

The point foremost in Engels's mind was that the workers could not be won over to socialism before the petty bourgeois forces had in practice disgraced themselves in

²⁷ See Jean-Marie Mayeur and Madeleine Rebérioux, *The Third Republic from its Origins to the Great War, 1871–1914* (Cambridge and Paris, 1984), 23–25.

²⁸ Friedrich Engels to Eduard Bernstein, 22 September 1882, in *MEW*, XXXV, 366.

²⁹ Engels to August Bebel, 28 October 1882, in *MEW*, XXXV, 381–82.

³⁰ Engels to Bernstein, 27 August 1883, in *MEW*, XXXVI, 54–55. See also Engels to Bernstein, 24 March 1884, in *MEW*, XXXVI, 128.

the eyes of the workers. The following year, Engels explained that the strategy he advocated was nothing but the old permanent revolution. In a March 1884 article he reminded his readers that the revolution must create circumstances in which ‘the people developed themselves further through their own struggles’. Referring to the French revolutionary Marat, Engels explained that in 1848 he and Marx ‘did not want to see the revolution terminated but to be declared permanent’. They had concluded: we can ‘only engage in the struggle for the achievement of our real party goals, when the most extreme party of those officially existing in Germany is in power; we will then form the opposition’.³¹ In a June 1884 letter to Bebel, Engels repeated his hopes for a ‘gradual shift to the left’, to bring Clemenceau to power in France. As was the case in 1848, the social democrats were still the ‘opposition of the future’. They could not win over the masses from the most extreme, liberal parties, ‘as long as the latter do not have the opportunity [...] to come to power and show that they are unable to achieve anything’.³²

German party leaders were not convinced. In November 1884 Bebel wrote to Engels that in Germany ‘bourgeois radicalism’ was dead, and that there could be ‘no more talk of a bourgeois radical intermediate stage’.³³ But Engels stuck to his guns. In December 1884 he replied to Bebel, insisting: ‘It is not to be expected that we will have the majority of the electorate, i.e. of the nation, already behind us at the moment of crisis’. There was no avoiding letting the ‘most extreme *bourgeois* party’ take power first, in order to let it disgrace itself.³⁴

In October 1885, Engels explained that the permanent-revolutionary policy he and Marx had formulated in March 1850 was ‘of interest even today; even now the petty bourgeois democracy is still the party that [...] must be the first to come to power in Germany, as the saviour of society from the communist workers’.³⁵ In the same month, Engels insisted in another letter to Bebel that with the bourgeois and petty bourgeois ‘radicals’ in power, they will prove ‘their inability to lead the country’, and ‘then things will move quickly’.³⁶

³¹ Friedrich Engels, ‘Marx und die “Neue Rheinische Zeitung” 1848–49’, in *MEW*, XXI, 21–22. See also Engels to Johann Philipp Becker, 15 June 1885, in *MEW*, XXXVI, 327; Engels to Bernstein, 8 October 1885, in *MEW*, XXXVI, 365–66.

³² Engels to Bebel, 6 June 1884, in *MEW*, XXXVI, 159–60. For Marx in 1853 about the German proletariat as the ‘*opposition party of the future*’, see Karl Marx, ‘Enthüllungen über den Kommunisten-Prozess zu Köln’, in *MEW*, VIII, 461.

³³ Bebel to Engels, 24 November 1884, in August Bebel and Friedrich Engels, *August Bebels Briefwechsel mit Friedrich Engels*, edited by Werner Blumenberg (London, The Hague and Paris, 1965), 198–99. Bebel was responding to letter from Engels written on 18 November 1884: see *Bebels Briefwechsel mit Engels*, 196.

³⁴ Engels to Bebel, 11 December 1884, in *MEW*, XXXVI, 252. In view of Engels’s reply, Hobsbawm’s suggestion that Bebel’s 24 November 1884 letter may have convinced Engels that the possibility of a direct transition to socialism in some developed European countries lacks plausibility; see Hobsbawm, *How to Change the World*, 66. See also: Bebel to Engels, 12 October 1886, in *Bebels Briefwechsel mit Engels*, 294–95; Engels to Bebel, 23 [and 25] October 1886, in *Bebels Briefwechsel mit Engels*, 298.

³⁵ Friedrich Engels, ‘Zur Geschichte des Bundes der Kommunisten’, in *MEW*, XXI, 220.

³⁶ Engels to Bebel, 25 October 1885, in *MEW*, XXXVI, 379. For other letters and writings in which Engels explained his policies, see Friedrich Engels, ‘Die Situation’, in *MEW*, XXI, 226; Engels to Paul Lafargue, 12 October 1885, in *MEW*, XXXVI, 369; Engels to Laura Lafargue, 27 August 1889, in *MEW*, XXXVII, 265; Engels to L. Lafargue, 29 October 1889, in *MEW*, XXXVII, 295–96. In Gary Steenson’s interpretation of the policies proposed by Engels, ‘a succession of ever more leftist, bourgeois governments’ would successively fail to solve society’s problems and pave the way for socialist government. Steenson does not discuss the fact that Engels treated these policies in terms of the permanent revolution; see Steenson,

Engels realised that, as a minority, the workers could not seize power without the support of the peasant and petty bourgeois masses. In an 1882 letter to Bebel, he had attacked their party comrade Georg Vollmar's treatment of all non-socialist parties as a 'single reactionary mass'.³⁷ Engels had been referring to Marx's 1875 critique of the programme of the Social Democratic Party adopted in Gotha in the same year. Marx had rejected the article in the programme that defined 'all other classes' as 'only one reactionary mass' in opposition to the workers. According to Marx, the workers' party had a duty to win over the 'artisans, small industrialists etc. and *peasants*'.³⁸ This remained Engels's view. In an important November 1894 article he made the proletarian conquest of power in France and Germany dependent on convincing the peasantry of the advantages of socialism.³⁹

In the last years of his life Engels began to have doubts concerning the need for a petty bourgeois intermediate stage. In a letter to Engels dated 25 June 1893, Bebel complained that the 'artisans, hucksters and small peasants' were 'narrow-minded', and that the 'bourgeoisie as a whole' had become uninterested in 'bourgeois freedoms'.⁴⁰ This time Bebel seemed to have convinced Engels that it was futile to bank on petty bourgeois radicalism. Two days later, Engels informed French socialist Paul Lafargue that 'the bourgeois parties in Germany are so finished that we must move directly from the monarchy to the *social republic*'.⁴¹ However, in January 1894 Engels advised his Italian comrades to aim for a 'bourgeois republic' first. This was more than a comment on Italy: 'Since 1848 the socialists have been most successful when they applied the tactic of the *Communist Manifesto*'. Engels called it his 'general tactic' to let the radicals discredit themselves first, a tactic he followed throughout his whole life and which he felt had never failed him.⁴²

Finally, in his March 1895 foreword to Marx's *The Class Struggles in France 1848 to 1850*, Engels explained that, under the new circumstances of universal suffrage, the ballot box represented a surer road to power than the barricades.⁴³ Engels repeated that he and Marx had always believed that the 'great decisive struggle' would be fought in a 'single long and changeful period of revolution', with one minority after another seizing power, ending in proletarian victory. The victorious workers would be speaking on behalf of the majority of the people, but they, too, would have been a minority.⁴⁴ Engels now admitted that in the period of 1848 to 1871 he and Marx had been mistaken to assume that German and French capitalism were developed enough to be overthrown. Only now had capitalism reached the level of development where

After Marx, 6, 26–32 (26). Day and Gaido do mention Engels's 1884 and 1885 references to the permanent revolution. However, in their interpretation Engels was *warning against* petty bourgeois, radical government, rather than *calling for it*; see Day and Gaido, 'Introduction', in *Witnesses to Permanent Revolution*, edited by Day and Gaido, 14–16. In my opinion, Day and Gaido's interpretation is incompatible with Engels's writings throughout these years.

³⁷ Engels to Bebel, 28 October 1882, in *MEW*, XXXV, 381–82.

³⁸ Karl Marx, 'Kritik des Gothaer Programms', in *MEW*, XIX, 23. For the passage in the programme see Wilhelm Schröder, *Handbuch der sozialdemokratischen Parteitage von 1863 bis 1909* (Munich, 1910), 468.

³⁹ Friedrich Engels, 'Die Bauernfrage in Frankreich und Deutschland', in *MEW*, XXII, 486, 498–99.

⁴⁰ Bebel to Engels, 25 June 1893, in Bebel and Engels, *Bebels Briefwechsel mit Engels*, 697–98.

⁴¹ Engels to P. Lafargue, 27 June 1893, in *MEW*, XXXIX, 90.

⁴² Friedrich Engels, 'Die künftige italienische Revolution und die Sozialistische Partei', in *MEW*, XXII, 439–42. See also Friedrich Engels, 'Der internationale Sozialismus und der italienische Sozialismus', in *MEW*, XXII, 478–79.

⁴³ Friedrich Engels, 1895 Introduction to Marx's 'Klassenkämpfe in Frankreich', in *MEW*, XXII, 518–26.

⁴⁴ Engels, 1895 Introduction to Marx's 'Klassenkämpfe', in *MEW*, XXII, 513–15.

socialism became possible.⁴⁵ Nonetheless, Engels continued to believe that ‘victory in *one* great blow’ remained impossible, and that the workers remained in need of allies. The French socialists, he insisted, needed ‘the great mass of the people, i.e. the peasants’ for their victory. Likewise, the German social democrats could not become the ‘decisive power’ without winning the votes of ‘the major (*grösseren*) part of the middle strata of society, the petty bourgeoisie and small peasants’.⁴⁶

There was something odd about the strategy advocated by Engels. He was suggesting that he was merely repeating his and Marx’s earlier injunctions, to the effect that a workers’ revolution could only be triggered by a bourgeois (1848) or a petty bourgeois (1850) one. But what kind of ‘revolution’ did Engels have in mind? In the old days, he and Marx had imagined the bourgeois classes seizing power through an armed uprising. But this was no longer what he was dreaming of in the 1880s and 1890s. He did not expect Clemenceau to order his followers to man the barricades, but rather to be elected into office. Engels expected the inevitable unmasking of the radicals to subsequently lead to an immediate, massive electoral shift towards the social democrats, thereby creating favourable conditions for the formation of a socialist government. Revolution came to mean the formation of a new government, supported by a new parliamentary majority that expressed the will and interests of a new social class.

4. Kautsky and the Proletarian Minority Problem

Whereas Engels adapted social democratic strategy to parliamentary conditions, he left the other pillar of the strategy intact. To the end, he never doubted that a minority proletariat would be able to seize state power, provided that the workers would enter into an alliance with the urban petty bourgeoisie and the peasantry. In 1895, the year of Engels’s death, Europe began to recover from a long economic depression. A new period of prosperity dawned. This and the German Social Democratic Party’s impressive parliamentary results formed part of the background of Eduard Bernstein’s innovative Marxist writings. The so-called ‘revisionism’ debate was triggered by a series of articles that Bernstein published in *Die Neue Zeit*, the world’s most prestigious Marxist journal, beginning in 1896. Many of the issues at stake are of no relevance here, but Bernstein’s claims that, contrary to Marx’s predictions, the share of private owners and the middle class in the population were growing instead of diminishing, and that small productive units were not always being outstripped by large-scale production, are.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Engels, 1895 Introduction to Marx’s ‘Klassenkämpfe’, in *MEW*, XXII, 515–16.

⁴⁶ Engels, 1895 Introduction to Marx’s ‘Klassenkämpfe’, in *MEW*, XXII, 515, 521–24.

⁴⁷ For the work considered the best compilation of his ‘revisionist’ views, see Eduard Bernstein, *Die Voraussetzungen des Sozialismus und die Aufgaben der Sozialdemokratie* (Stuttgart, 1899). For Bernstein’s revisionism see Erika Rikli, *Der Revisionismus: Ein Revisionsversuch der deutschen marxistischen Theorie (1890–1914)* (Zurich, 1936); Peter Gay, *The Dilemma of Democratic Socialism: Eduard Bernstein’s Challenge to Marx* (New York, 1962); Bo Gustafsson, *Marxismus und Revisionismus: Eduard Bernsteins Kritik des Marxismus und ihre ideengeschichtlichen Voraussetzungen*, 2 vols (Frankfurt, 1972); Helmut Hirsch, *Der ‘Fabier’ Eduard Bernstein: Zur Entwicklungsgeschichte des evolutionären Sozialismus* (Berlin and Bonn, 1977); *Bernstein und der Demokratische Sozialismus*, edited by Horst Heimann and Thomas Meyer (Berlin and Bonn, 1978); Francis Ludwig Carsten, *Eduard Bernstein, 1850–1932: Eine politische Biographie* (Munich, 1993), chapters 3–4; Manfred B. Steger, *The Quest for Evolutionary Socialism: Eduard Bernstein and Social Democracy* (Cambridge, 1997).

After Engels's death, editor of *Die Neue Zeit* Kautsky was counted as the main theoretician of German orthodox Marxism. As a good friend of Bernstein's, he hesitated to openly take issue with him. Only in 1899 did Kautsky really engage himself in the struggle for doctrinal purity.⁴⁸ Kautsky could not ignore Bernstein's observation that the process of proletarianisation was not proceeding along the lines predicted by Marx. The proletarian minority problem began to deeply trouble Kautsky from the late 1890s onwards.

The main reason for this was that Kautsky came to see the proletariat as the only remaining revolutionary class in German society; the bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie he believed had become fundamentally reactionary. This left the workers out in the cold, for under these circumstances it was unclear how this class, as a minority in German society, could ever be victorious. In the 1907 edition of his *The Social Revolution*, originally published in 1902, Kautsky added a passage in which he made the following observation concerning the 'bourgeois classes, that is those standing on the basis of private ownership of the means of production' in the developed societies of Western Europe:

Ever more, all of them form a closed phalanx against the proletariat. Under such circumstances this [class] can remain confident of its victory only in the case when it becomes the mass of the nation itself.⁴⁹

This is the earliest instance that I have discovered in Kautsky's work where, in so many words, he draws the conclusion that the proletarian revolution depends on a proletarian majority.

Let us see how Kautsky arrived at this conclusion. In the years before he intervened in the revisionism debate, Kautsky remained in line with Marxist orthodoxy, as it was then defined. An unsigned article in *Die Neue Zeit* in the early 1890s held that in most European states the proletariat made up only a 'substantial minority of the population'. However, the article continued, the proletariat carried the most weight in the productive process, was the most courageous class, and dominated the cities. Also, 'fortunately the slogan of the "reactionary mass" is wrong'. The peasant and petty bourgeois classes formed an 'unreliable element', but if 'it casts itself on the side of the proletariat at a decisive moment, then is it very well possible that by this step it will cause the ship of state to capsize'.⁵⁰

Even though they were not actually becoming proletariat, Kautsky believed that the petty bourgeois classes were nonetheless subject to a process of proletarianisation.

⁴⁸ For Kautsky's critique on Bernstein, see for example Karl Kautsky, *Bernstein und das Sozialdemokratische Programm: Eine Antikritik* (Berlin and Bonn, 1976, first published in 1899). For Kautsky's role in the revisionism debate, see Gary P. Steenson, *Karl Kautsky, 1854–1938: Marxism in the Classical Years* (Pittsburgh, 1978), 116 and further.

⁴⁹ Karl Kautsky, *Die soziale Revolution*, second edition (Berlin, 1907), 59–60.

⁵⁰ Anonymous, 'Der Entwurf des neuen Parteiprogramms', *Die Neue Zeit*, 9.II (1890/1), 749–58 (751–52). See also Karl Kautsky, 'Das "Kapital" von Rodbertus', *Die Neue Zeit*, 2 (1884), 385–402 (388); Anonymous, 'Die Aussichtslosigkeit der Sozialdemokratie', *Die Neue Zeit*, 3 (1885), 193–202 (198–99). In July 1893 Kautsky concluded that the time might come when 'social democracy gains the majority of the people also in countries in which the wageworkers do not make up the majority'; see Karl Kautsky, 'Die direkte Gesetzgebung durch das Volk und der Klassenkampf', *Die Neue Zeit*, 11.II (1892/3), 516–27 (517–18). In a July 1897 article Kautsky observed that social democracy would be powerless 'when its opponents joined against it as one reactionary mass'. Fortunately, Kautsky thought, government policies were alienating the bourgeoisie and the liberal parties, who he hoped would join the struggle for democracy; see Karl Kautsky, 'Die preussischen Landtagswahlen und die reaktionäre Masse', *Die Neue Zeit*, 15.II (1896/7), 580–90 (584–89).

In his 1892 *The Erfurt Program*, he admitted that the number of small enterprises did not decrease, but claimed they were subject to a process of ‘degeneration (*Verkommen*)’. The position of the small traders, small peasants, and educated employees became ever more dependent and insecure. The ‘proletarian condition (*das Proletariethum*)’ was pervading the whole society in terms of ‘living and working conditions’.⁵¹ This was the position Kautsky fell back on in the debate with Bernstein, arguing that even though the number and share of small producers was indeed increasing in agriculture and trade, the surviving small-scale enterprises were in a miserable, delapidated condition.⁵²

This analysis could have served to underscore the promising nature of the revolutionary coalition of proletariat and petty bourgeoisie. But, intriguingly, in the final years of the nineteenth century Kautsky’s confidence in the revolutionary potential of the middle strata took a nosedive. Political factors dominated his considerations. On 30 March 1898 the lead article of *Die Neue Zeit* observed that a year ago the party had hoped that the ‘bourgeois opposition’ would brace itself ‘just once more’ for resistance against the absolutist state. Unfortunately, however, the centre and liberal parties had decided in support of the construction of a German navy. There followed this remarkable conclusion: ‘The working class has no other support in the whole world but itself, and the more exclusively it seeks its salvation in its own ranks, the more surely it will prevent all attacks by its mortal enemies’.⁵³ In November 1898 Kautsky confirmed that ‘the sinking middle strata are abandoning the ship of democracy’ together with the capitalist class. There followed a logical but shattering conclusion:

only *one* [class] remains decidedly democratic: the proletariat. And this [class] is still a minority [...]. It does grow quickly in number and strength, but the same factors that allow it to become stronger, effect an even faster growth of the reactionary tendencies of the other classes of society. And so [...] we have entered a period of reaction, which must become deeper until it has either created such unbearable conditions that even the bourgeois classes rebel against them or until the proletariat has become strong enough to overthrow them on its own.⁵⁴

This had far-reaching consequences for the way Kautsky imagined the revolution. In *The Social Revolution* he wrote that the petty bourgeoisie had turned from an ally of the proletariat and a revolutionary ‘crack troop of the bourgeois democracy’, to a support strut for ‘reactionary democracy’. The reason for this was that under the

⁵¹ Karl Kautsky, *Das Erfurter Programm in seinem grundsätzlichen Theil erläutert* (Stuttgart, 1892), 25–28, 31–32, 48, 50, 53, 56.

⁵² See for example Karl Kautsky, *Die Agrarfrage: Eine Übersicht über die Tendenzen der modernen Landwirtschaft und die Agrarpolitik der Sozialdemokratie* (Hanover, 1966, first published in 1899), 294–300, 441; Kautsky, *Bernstein und das Sozialdemokratische Programm*, 60, 64; Kautsky, *Die soziale Revolution*, 30–35; Karl Kautsky, ‘Sozialismus und Landwirtschaft’, *Die Neue Zeit*, 21.I (1902/3), 685–88, 677–88; Karl Kautsky, ‘Allerhand Revolutionäres’, *Die Neue Zeit*, 22.I (1903/4), 652–57 (654); the 1904 foreword to Kautsky, *Das Erfurter Programm*, fifteenth edition (Stuttgart, 1919), xi, xiv–xix. See also Karl Kautsky, ‘Finis Poloniae?’, *Die Neue Zeit*, 14.II (1895/6), 513–25 (516–18).

⁵³ Anonymous, ‘Flottengesetz und Zentrum’, *Die Neue Zeit*, 16.II (1897/8), 33–36 (33, 35–36). See for a similar argument Anonymous, ‘Zum Gedächtniss der Märzrevolution’, *Die Neue Zeit*, 16.I (1879/8), 737–40 (738–39). A 13 April 1898 lead article argues that a ‘principled line’, separating the Social Democratic Party from all bourgeois parties would serve to prevent them from joining up against the Social Democratic Party; see Anonymous, ‘Der erste Wahlaufruf’, *Die Neue Zeit*, 16.II (1897/8), 97–100 (98–100).

⁵⁴ Karl Kautsky, ‘Das böhmische Staatsrecht und die Sozialdemokratie’, *Die Neue Zeit*, 17.I (1898/9), 292–301 (292–95).

new, more democratic conditions the bourgeois and petty bourgeois classes knew themselves to be represented by the state. This led to the new situation that, whereas formerly revolutions united ‘the popular masses against the government’, now they would assume the form of a ‘struggle of one part of the people against the other’.⁵⁵ In 1903, Kautsky concluded that the turning point had been reached as far back as the failed proletarian uprising in Paris in June 1848, which had frightened the bourgeois classes. ‘Since June 1848 a bourgeois revolution that could become the prelude to a proletarian revolution is no longer possible in Western Europe. The next revolution can only be a proletarian one’.⁵⁶

In his 1909 *The Road to Power* Kautsky explained that during the period of 1848 to 1870 the conditions for revolution had been fundamentally changing. The mass of the petty bourgeois and peasant populations in Western Europe had become satisfied classes. ‘With the new political rights, especially the vote, the petty bourgeoisie and small peasants possessed very effective instruments to influence the governments and to achieve all kinds of material concessions from them’. These classes had achieved what they ‘had continuously aspired to since the Great [French] Revolution’. Under these conditions, Kautsky concluded that the social democrats, including Engels, had been wrong to continue to think in terms of a ‘petty bourgeois-proletarian revolution’ led by the workers. The revolution could only be ‘a proletarian, anti-capitalist one’. Kautsky concluded that in Europe ‘only one class remains revolutionary, the *proletariat*’. Finally, ‘the slogan of the “reactionary mass” has come true’.⁵⁷

With his heroic proletarian isolationism Kautsky seemed to condemn the workers, who after all remained a minority segment of society, to defeat. But he discovered a way out of this predicament with a magic trick. He came up with a new definition of the proletariat, and in this way liberated the workers from their position as embattled minority in one stroke, even though only on paper.

In his 1899 *Bernstein and the Social Democratic Program*, Kautsky had taken issue with his friend’s remark that one could hardly view the majority of the German population as proletarians. Kautsky countered that in 1895 the ‘self-employed’, whom he identified as ‘the *non-proletarians*’, formed twenty-seven per cent of the economically active population. ‘The non-self-employed workers (*Arbeiter*) therefore make up much more than seventy per cent, almost *three quarters* of those economically active. That is already a strong “absolute majority”’.⁵⁸ Thus for the first time Kautsky claimed that the proletariat *was*, after all, a majority in German society, something he had denied only one year before. A few years later he concluded that the proletarians, whom he now identified as the ‘wageworkers (*Lohnarbeiter*)’

⁵⁵ Kautsky, *Die soziale Revolution*, 30–35, 52–53. See also Karl Kautsky, ‘Was nun?’, *Die Neue Zeit*, 21.II (1902/3), 389–98; Karl Kautsky, ‘To What Extent is the *Communist Manifesto* Obsolete?’, in *Witnesses to Permanent Revolution*, edited by Day and Gaido, 173–74. Day and Gaido reproduce the 1905 English translation of an earlier 1903 article.

⁵⁶ Kautsky, ‘To What Extent’, in *Witnesses to Permanent Revolution*, edited by Day and Gaido, 178. See also Salvadori’s comments on this article; Salvadori, *Karl Kautsky*, 86–87. For Kautsky on Marx and Engels’s supposed overestimation of the revolutionary potential of the bourgeois classes, see also Day and Gaido, ‘Introduction’, in *Witnesses to Permanent Revolution*, edited by Day and Gaido, 19.

⁵⁷ Karl Kautsky, *Der Weg zur Macht* (Frankfurt, 1972), 71–73, 76, 111. According to Ingrid Gilcher-Holtey, this was the first instance of Kautsky accepting the ‘one reactionary mass’ formula. See Ingrid Gilcher-Holtey, *Das Mandat des Intellektuellen: Karl Kautsky und die Sozialdemokratie* (Berlin, 1986), 229. For Gilcher-Holtey’s comments on Kautsky’s turn to proletarian isolationism, see Gilcher-Holtey, *Das Mandat des Intellektuellen*, 223 and further.

⁵⁸ Kautsky, *Bernstein und das Sozialdemokratische Programm*, 186–87.

plus the ‘not well-off self-employed’, made up sixty-eight per cent of the German population.⁵⁹ In May 1903 Kautsky presented his new definition of the proletariat. He also implied that a majority share of the population for that class was the norm in highly developed capitalist countries:

the proletariat [...] not only forms [...] the large majority of the population in a modern industrial state—two thirds to three quarters—it is also the only class to live exclusively from its own labour and not also from the exploitation of others.

Kautsky identified the proletariat as ‘the wageworkers including the smallest peasants, the individual producers (*Alleinmeistern*) and the small cottage producers (*Hausindustriellen*)’; that is, all those exclusively depending on their own labour.⁶⁰ Compared to traditional Marxism, this constituted a breathtaking case of ‘revisionism’. For Marx, to be a proletarian one’s income must depend on the sale of one’s labour power, which is not the same thing as not participating in the exploitation of others. In effect, Kautsky merged proletarians and independent small producers into a new proletariat. Turning all of those who were dependent on wages and salaries into proletarians, rather than only the manual workers in industry, represented another new departure in Marxism.⁶¹

Thus, whereas the counterrevolutionary turn of the petty bourgeoisie and the peasantry had seemed to deprive the workers of the developed capitalist societies of their revolutionary majority, Kautsky newly assured them of that majority by redefining the proletariat itself as the majority. Now, Kautsky could safely formulate the principle that in such societies the proletarian revolution depended on the workers having achieved majority status; which, as we have seen, is what he did in 1907.⁶²

5. Kautsky and the Permanent Revolution

In interpreting Kautsky’s strategic innovations, it needs to be noted that he did not really abandon the idea of revolution in two stages per se. Kautsky expected the German workers, upon seizing power, first to democratise the state and then to proceed to socialist reform.⁶³ It would seem, then, that, while rejecting varieties of permanent revolution that foresaw a succession of bourgeois and proletarian stages, Kautsky was embracing the more radical permanent-revolutionary formula that Marx and Engels had advocated during the mid-1840s as well as during a short period in 1849 and 1850.

⁵⁹ These numbers included family members of the economically active population. See Karl Kautsky, ‘Klasseninteresse – Sonderinteresse – Gemeininteresse’, *Die Neue Zeit*, 21.II (1902/3), 240–45 (244–45). See also Karl Kautsky, ‘To What Extent’, in *Witnesses to Permanent Revolution*, edited by Day and Gaido, 171–85 (174); Kautsky, *Die soziale Revolution*, 60; Kautsky, *Weg zur Macht*, 65–66, 69.

⁶⁰ Kautsky, ‘Klasseninteresse – Sonderinteresse – Gemeininteresse’, 261–74 (261–62).

⁶¹ For Kautsky’s ‘nominal, maximalist definition of the proletariat’ see also Gilcher-Holtey, *Das Mandat des Intellektuellen*, 229. Kautsky may have been inspired by an 1871 remark by Marx to the effect that the Paris Commune represented ‘all classes of society that do not live from the labour of others’; see Marx, First draft of ‘Bürgerkrieg’, in *MEW*, XVII, 553–54.

⁶² In his 1909 *The Road to Power* Kautsky called the proletariat only ‘the most numerous class’, but the proletarian majority remained inherent in his argument. Kautsky observed that ‘For a long time the proletariat did not form the majority of the population’. He recollected that the Social Democratic Party had counted on the ‘petty bourgeois democracy’ to help the workers reach a revolutionary majority. But this was no longer feasible, Kautsky insisted, since the ‘bourgeois democracy’ had stopped being an opposition party. See Kautsky, *Weg zur Macht*, 46, 63.

⁶³ See for example Karl Kautsky, ‘Noch ein Wort zum Parteitag’, *Die Neue Zeit*, 21.II (1902/3), 748–53 (751); Kautsky, *Die soziale Revolution*, 61. Compare with Kautsky, ‘Die direkte Gesetzgebung’, 517–18. See also Gilcher-Holtey, *Das Mandat des Intellektuellen*, 226.

At that time they had suggested making the German democratic revolution directly dependent on the workers rather than on the bourgeois classes.

Yet, this conclusion would miss the main point of where Kautsky was taking Marxism. In theory, his new model of permanent revolution was radical enough, but the strategy was exclusively designed for highly developed capitalist countries where the workers had come to comprise the majority of the population. In other words, the prospect of socialist transformation in countries that remained in an earlier stage of capitalist development was cut off. This represented a fundamental break with the permanent revolution as Marx and Engels had understood it.

Kautsky's fame as advocate of permanent revolution can be attributed to his comments on the 1905 Russian Revolution. The events of Bloody Sunday in January of that year, when tsarist soldiers opened fire on a peaceful crowd gathering in front of the Winter Palace in St. Petersburg, threw Russia into turmoil. Demonstrations, strikes and armed uprisings continued into 1906. Kautsky dug up Marx and Engels's 1850 calls for a 'revolution in permanence', a slogan, he argued, which was applicable to Russia. Kautsky thought that the Russian conditions of 1905 and the German conditions of 1848 were in many ways comparable. In an article on the subject of the relevance of the *Communist Manifesto*, written and rewritten in the years 1903 to 1906, Kautsky argued that the Russian social democrats lived under conditions that 'greatly resemble those of Germany on the eve of the revolution of 1848'. As was the case in the West, the Russian bourgeoisie had become 'reactionary', so the 'initiative for a revolution can only emanate from the industrial proletariat, even if it does not yet lead to its exclusive domination'.⁶⁴

It bears mentioning that, from a Marxist perspective, Kautsky's comparison between Germany in 1848 and Russia in 1905 made good sense. As we have seen, in 1850 the German industrial working class comprised less than three-and-a-half per cent of the economically active population. Nonetheless, Marx and Engels predicted a proletarian victory and the beginning of a socialist transition to follow immediately after the bourgeois or petty bourgeois revolution. In comparison, the Russian industrial working class was in relative terms slightly more numerous, comprising as it did about six per cent of the economically active population in 1913.⁶⁵ Proceeding from these simple figures, then, the German strategy of the mid-nineteenth century might have been applicable to Russia early in the twentieth century. But that was not the direction in which Kautsky's thinking was taking him.

Kautsky advocated an alliance of the Russian proletariat with the peasantry. He assumed that, whereas in the West the middle strata were by now fundamentally satisfied, the peasants in Russia were not. Kautsky thought they could be mobilised to participate in the democratic revolution, in order to provide it with a very radical spin. All the same, though, backward Russia could not move onto the socialist stage. In February 1905 Kautsky observed that the revolution would have the proletariat for

⁶⁴ Kautsky, 'To What Extent', in *Witnesses to Permanent Revolution*, edited by Day and Gaido, 179, 183–84.

⁶⁵ In 1913, Russia had 3.1 million industrial workers in factories and mines; see Olga Crisp, 'Labour and Industrialization in Russia', in *The Cambridge Economic History of Europe*, edited by M. M. Postan and others, 8 vols (Cambridge, 1966–1989), VII, part 2, 308–415 (332). The Russian active population of 1913 is estimated at fifty million; see Roger Munting, 'Industrial revolution in Russia', in *The Industrial Revolution in National Context: Europe and the USA*, edited by Mikuláš Teich and Roy Porter (Cambridge, New York and Melbourne, 1996), 329–49 (331).

its main ‘motive force’, but even so it could only have ‘bourgeois results’.⁶⁶ According to Kautsky, the historical role of the Russian industrial proletariat consisted ‘not in laying the foundations of a socialist society, but in advocating the interests of democracy in a more ruthless, “radical” way than all other classes’.⁶⁷

The ‘*revolution in permanence*’ advocated by Kautsky in July 1905 was self-limiting. He allowed the Russian proletariat to radicalise the democratic revolution to the utmost degree, but in economically backward Russia ‘this hegemonic position of the proletariat can only be temporary’.⁶⁸ A 1 November 1905 lead article of *Die Neue Zeit* suggested that with the ‘revolution in permanence’, the Russian proletariat could expedite its struggle for emancipation by enforcing reforms such as universal suffrage, freedom of the press and organisation, and a shorter working day. Nonetheless, the workers could not ‘skip the historical stages of development and establish a socialist commonwealth in the twinkling of an eye’.⁶⁹

Kautsky proceeded from the assumption that the peasants could not be made to understand that socialist reforms would be in their interest. In answer to a question by the Russian Marxist and Menshevik Georgii Plekhanov, Kautsky wrote that in Russia, too, the time of ‘*bourgeois* revolution, that is, revolutions in which the bourgeoisie formed the motive force’, was over and the peasantry was now the workers’ main ally. But socialism in backward Russia was ‘unthinkable’, even if the Russian social democrats ‘temporarily’ came to power in an alliance with the peasantry:

It is [...] not to be expected that the peasants become socialists. Socialism can only be constructed on the basis of large-scale enterprise; it contradicts the conditions of small-scale enterprise too much to be able to arise and assert itself among a predominantly peasant population.⁷⁰

Once again, this suggested that socialism would become a viable option only in highly developed capitalist societies, where the workers have replaced the peasants as the predominant element. Kautsky adopted the term permanent revolution from Marx and Engels, but without the socialist sting that was formerly in its tail. The uninterrupted progression from the democratic stage to the socialist stage, which had been the whole point in Marx and Engels, was missing.

That Kautsky’s Russian permanent revolution did not include the socialist transition is generally acknowledged in literature.⁷¹ The main reason why it is nonetheless possible for Kautsky to go out of focus here lies not so much in any

⁶⁶ Karl Kautsky, ‘Die zivilisierte Welt und der Zar’, *Die Neue Zeit*, 23.I (1904/5), 614–17 (615). Compare with Kautsky, ‘Allerhand Revolutionäres’, 620–27 (623–27).

⁶⁷ Karl Kautsky, ‘Die Bauern und die Revolution in Russland’, *Die Neue Zeit*, 23.I (1904/5), 670–77 (675–76).

⁶⁸ Karl Kautsky, ‘Die Folgen des japanischen Sieges und die Sozialdemokratie’, *Die Neue Zeit*, 23.II (1904/5), 460–68 (461–62). Compare with Karl Kautsky, ‘Old and New Revolution’, in *Witnesses to Permanent Revolution*, edited by Day and Gaido, 531–36 (531–32).

⁶⁹ Anonymous, ‘Die Revolution in Permanenz’, *Die Neue Zeit*, 24.I (1905/6), 169–72 (169, 171).

⁷⁰ Karl Kautsky, ‘Triebkräfte und Aussichten der russischen Revolution’, *Die Neue Zeit*, 25.I (1906/7), 324–33 (331–33). See also Karl Kautsky, ‘Die Agrarfrage in Russland’, *Die Neue Zeit*, 24.I (1905/6), 412–23 (414); Kautsky, *Die soziale Revolution*, 59–62. On the counterrevolutionary petty bourgeoisie and the revolutionary peasantry in Russia, see Kautsky, ‘Old and New Revolution’, in *Witnesses to Permanent Revolution*, edited by Day and Gaido, 532–34. On the counterrevolutionary character of the East European petty bourgeoisie, see Kautsky, ‘Triebkräfte und Aussichten’, 328–29.

⁷¹ See for example Larsson, *Theories of Revolution*, 256–68; Salvadori, *Karl Kautsky*, 88, 100–06; Donald, *Marxism and Revolution*, 72–73.

inadequate reading of his work as in the mistaken assumption that Marx and Engels had *not* entertained a socialist perspective for relatively backward countries with a minority proletariat.⁷² Once it is understood that this was precisely what their permanent revolution *was* about, we are led to conclude that, despite his permanent-revolutionary perspectives for Russia, Kautsky was retreating from Marx and Engels's radicalism rather than groping his way back to it.

6. Conclusion

The parliamentary conditions that arose in Germany and France after 1870 created a new political environment for the social democrats. Though they remained committed to the revolutionary transformation of their societies, the way they expected to bring this about became transformed by the conditions under which they operated. Parliamentarism impacted on social democratic strategy in at least two ways.

First, as can be traced in Friedrich Engels's works, revolutions by the bourgeois or proletarian classes were newly framed in terms of electoral victories. Revolution came to mean the formation of a new government, supported by a new parliamentary majority that expressed the will and interests of a new social class. The crushing defeat of the Paris Commune also contributed to social democratic reconsideration of the respective merits of the ballot box and the barricade. This reconsideration belatedly came to expression in Engels's 1895 comments on the obsolescence of the street battle. These parliamentary tactics were adopted by the German party.

Second, we have seen that Karl Kautsky made a new, negative assessment of the petty bourgeois classes in developed capitalist countries with parliamentary institutions and universal male suffrage. Kautsky concluded that the vote tended to turn the liberal bourgeoisie, the urban petty bourgeoisie, and the small peasants into satisfied classes without revolutionary ambitions. Overall, his analysis was not unrealistic. Change had come not only due to the introduction of universal male suffrage, which in France had existed since 1848; after 1870, the chances of mobilising large masses for revolutionary rebellion in Western Europe had also markedly decreased due to the solution of the questions of Italian and German unification. Marx and Engels's revolutionary strategy had been based on the assumption that the small proletarian minorities of continental Western Europe could surf the waves of rebellion of the peasant and urban petty bourgeois masses. This strategy they believed had been pioneered successfully by the big bourgeoisie. Permanent revolution expressed the hope that communist parties could manoeuvre themselves into power and even convince the other parties to follow them to socialism, in the heat of national struggles in which vast masses were on the move. With the economic progress and political reforms of the latter decades of the nineteenth century this kind of popular

⁷² According to Donald, Kautsky's proletarian-peasant democratic revolution in a backward country represented an unorthodox 'new analysis' compared to Marx and Engels; see Donald, *Marxism and Revolution*, 72, 82–84. Likewise, according to Steenson, the view that the socialist revolution needed an industrially advanced capitalism represented the 'standard Marxist view of the course of modern history'; see Steenson, *Karl Kautsky*, 136. However, Larsson treats Kautsky's Russian strategy as the renaissance of earlier Marx-Engels formulas; see Larsson, *Theories of Revolution*, 256–68. Day and Gaido, too, treat Kautsky's Russian permanent revolution in the historical tradition of Marx and Engels, but they do not discuss the significance of Kautsky's rejection of the two-step bourgeois-proletarian revolution in Western Europe; see Day and Gaido, 'Introduction', in *Witnesses to Permanent Revolution*, 1–16, 40–44.

revolution became an illusion. Kautsky was only unrealistic in the sense that he failed to understand that the proletariat too was in the process of being integrated into society. In other words, that there was not just one revolutionary class left; there were none.

Kautsky's conclusions undermined the very foundations of the Marxist revolutionary strategy, which had always made the victory of the workers dependent on the contributions of other classes. A disillusioned Kautsky saw no other alternative than revolution by the proletariat alone. That, again, made it inevitable for him to conclude that the situation was only ripe for socialist revolution under highly developed capitalist conditions, when the polarisation process had run its course to turn the majority of the population into workers.⁷³ Instead of the old model of popular revolution involving many classes in complex configurations, Kautsky predicted a simplified and polarised revolutionary process setting bourgeoisie and proletariat, both very loosely defined, against each other.

It might not have been illogical for Kautsky to leave open the possibility for a workers' minority in weakly developed countries, such as Germany had been in 1848 and Russia was in 1905, to engage in a project of socialist transition. After all, in such countries democratic reform would not yet have trapped the peasant masses in the nets of the counterrevolution. However, according to Kautsky, even though the peasant majority of such countries might indeed nurture democratic sympathies, they could never be converted to socialism. Thus, the whole idea of proletarian-socialist minority government became anathema in social democratic Marxism.

Kautsky was not the only Marxist to distance himself from proletarian-socialist minority rule. Other Marxists too were moving in this direction in the late nineteenth century. Alexander Parvus-Helphand is a case in point.⁷⁴ The 'father of Russian Marxism' Plekhanov may have been the very first Marxist to formulate the thesis that the proletarian revolution needs a proletarian majority, a thesis that he presented in 1885.⁷⁵ We would do best to see Kautsky's work as part of a shifting climate of social democratic opinion.

The final rejection of the idea that the proletariat might come to power and embark on the transition to socialism, before industrial capitalism had turned this class into society's majority, was highly significant for the later development of the Marxist discourse. Twentieth-century social democrats framed their objections against the communist dictatorships precisely in these terms. It was, they argued, the *premature* nature of the socialist takeovers in Russia, China and other socio-economically backward countries that made these regimes turn into dictatorships.

⁷³ In Leszek Kolakowski's terms, Kautsky formulated a 'principle of "maturity"', meaning that socialism could only grow on a foundation of mature capitalism. See Leszek Kolakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism: Its Origins, Growth and Dissolution*, 3 vols (Oxford, 1978), II, 43, 45, 47.

⁷⁴ In December 1901 Parvus defined the '*dictatorship of the proletariat*' as follows: 'the proletariat, which already makes up the numerical majority of the nation [...], takes control of political power'; see Alexander Parvus-Helphand 'Der Opportunismus in der Praxis', *Die Neue Zeit*, 19.II (1900/1), 786–94 (786). On Parvus and the proletarian minority problem see Winfried Scharlau, 'Parvus-Helphand als Theoretiker', 121, 201–02.

⁷⁵ In 1883 Plekhanov argued that the Russian democratic revolution would serve as immediate prologue to the proletarian revolution; see Georgii V. Plekhanov, 'Sotsializm i politicheskaia bor'ba', in *Sochineniia*, edited by David Riazanov, 24 vols (Moscow and Leningrad, 1923–1927), II, 86. However, in 1885 he argued that the second proletarian revolution would have to wait until the working class occupied a majority position among the population; see Georgii V. Plekhanov, 'Nashi raznoglasiia', in *Sochineniia*, II, 287, 303, 307–08, 310, 312, 323–26, 337–38.

For, so the argument went, if the workers' party comes to power in a country where the workers lack the strength needed for the socialist transition, the party will tend to substitute for them. Twentieth-century social democrats most likely honestly believed that they were faithfully reproducing the tenets of orthodox Marxism. In fact, Marx and Engels had been perfectly prepared to accept the possibility of socialist transition in societies with relatively underdeveloped capitalism. They would not have recognised the modern social democratic line of argument as their own. It testifies to the convincing power of Kautsky's Marxism that he was no longer recognised as its author.

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