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The Collapse of Counter-Revolutionary Socialism

Pëtr Kropotkin

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At this moment we are witnessing an interesting event. It is the collapse, in theory and practice, of the counterrevolutionary current which, under the name of social democracy, had ruled the roost in the european socialist movement for more than a quarter of a century.

In 1871 the French proletariat – until then the incubator of revolutionary socialism – underwent a terrible defeat. Without France the International could not exist and collapsed: its Latin federations, supported by some French revolutionaries, were barely enough to prevent triumphant reaction from reaching its final frontier: a Restoration in France, the total crushing of the proletariat.

Germany, until then recalcitrant to the teachings of French and English socialism, then became an incubator of socialism. After the war its bourgeoisie launched itself with youthful enthusiasm into large industry. Strengthened by the experience of England and

France, buoyed up by a widely developed system of primary and technical education, taking advantage of the powerful new means of communication, the German bourgeoisie made great strides in that direction. Not as fast, doubtless, as those being taken at the same time in the United States, or even in Japan, but enough to create in the great industrial centers an intelligent proletariat, imbued with republican democratic ideas (as in France before 1848), which then received an admixture (again, as in France before 1848) of vaguely socialist aspirations.

That movement has existed for a quarter of a century. It has won victories in the elections: it has had the time and the chance to affirm itself. So one can evaluate it coldly, by its results.

It is first of all an essentially democratic, *republican* movement. At one moment it had its urges towards Caesarism, with the appearance of William II; but they were soon dispersed by William himself. The attack against the autocracy of Bismarck and the Williams, the struggle against monarchical habits, customs, and laws (military service, laws of *lèse-majesté*, etc) form the most salient trait of the struggles of this party. They form the basis of its electoral programs, they fill up its newspapers, they, above all, preoccupy their members of parliament.

But, like the French republicans before 1848, the German republicans are for the most part theoretically socialists. Their socialism has as its theoretical basis the theories of Saint-Simonism (concentration of capital, dominant role of the economic factor, proletarianization of the masses, etc), and, as its goal – the statist socialism of Louis Blanc, in which, however, worship of the state, governmental centralization, hatred of the federative principal (which the German socialists due to their modern history are unable to imagine except in the particularist form of little kingdoms), discipline, and dictatorship, are grotesquely exaggerated. Only now making

their entry into that part of modern history which France has been going through since the Great Revolution, they are still at the stage of adoring Robespierre, the Jacobin clubs and the dictatorship, and they still mistrust, like Robespierre, the people's commune. And however much they talk to the first comer about the preponderant role of the economic factor, they prefer to fight on the political terrain, for the conquest of political power within the bourgeois state, mistrusting the direct economic struggle and the organization by trades of the unions of laborers, factory workers, and farmworkers.

Their socialism has obviously tried to differentiate itself from French and English socialism.

To succeed in Germany, especially after the war, it had to appear national, German. And it separated itself from the socialists, its predecessors, by seasoning itself liberally with the reactionary metaphysics of the philosopher Hegel.

Aided by their ignorance of the literature from before 1848, that allows the German socialists to dress up their Saint-Simonian statements in a pseudo-scientific jargon, incomprehensible to the masses, and even to pass off (as Tcherkesoff has demonstrated so well(1)) elementary propositions of the economists (for example, the law of wages) as "scientific discoveries" of the German spirit, as important as those of Darwin in biology.

Little by little, however, their socialism, which has added nothing, neither in theory nor in aims, to that of Louis Blanc, became what it necessarily had to become under the influence of the ideas of governmental centralization: not even a *state socialism*, but pure and simply *state capitalism, the centralized state becoming the single capitalist*.

They denied it in the Congresses of the German party. But the fact is there: the program which social democracy follows in Switzerland, where it is less distracted by political struggles, is

absolutely the system of *state capitalism* applied at this moment in Russia by the finance minister, Witte. What this party has tried to win through the “referendum” in Switzerland is exactly that: all the railways bought back by the state, the banks monopolized by the state, sale of alcohol to become a state monopoly — measures already realized almost completely by the Russian aristocracy. Every step in the direction of centralization, indeed even the “trusts” or bosses unions in America, is welcomed by the socialists of this school as a step forward *preparing the advent of the state as lone capitalist*.

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Finally, to achieve that end, German social democracy has necessarily become the policeman of Europe against any popular or individual attempt at revolution. It had to be. Feeling too weak to resist the serious persecutions on the part of a Bismarck, it had to try to persuade the bourgeoisie of its counterrevolutionary nature. It tried to persuade the German workers that the only way to “get there” was to prevent any popular uprising in Germany which might trigger reaction; that through elections *alone*, they, who had 2, 7, 9 deputies at the start could arrive *in so many years, before the end of the nineteenth century* 2 at a majority in Parliament, which would allow them to ‘carry out the revolution’ without spilling a drop of blood. As long as there were no ‘premature attempts’!

And, once more of necessity, to prevent the emergence of a revolutionary spirit in Germany the party had to denigrate any attempt at uprising, any demonstration of the spirit of revolt in the whole of Europe. The economic ‘laws’ of development, discovered by the German Darwins and unknown to the Latins, would do everything by themselves.

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You can understand what an enfeebling and demoralizing effect these theories, preached with all the metaphysical jargon in which they had been enveloped, with all the wisdom of people in sole possession of science, and all the fervor of people “who have only read

one book” — their bible, or rather its commentaries — you can understand what effect all that had to exert on the European socialist movement.

It was a “period of pause” — an intellectual pause as much as one of action. The party was certainly increasing in size in Germany, where the beauties of the Bismarckian regime, of militarism and of police bureaucracy were swelling the ranks of the republicans, while the ferocious capitalism of nascent industry awoke a hatred of capital. The number of malcontents was swelling, without increasing besides the economic might of the party.

But for the development of the socialist idea, for the elaboration of practical means of socialization, for the development of working class initiative and thought, for the gathering of forces in prospect of a forthcoming economic battle — it was a pause, stagnation, the triumph of formulas over reality, of passive obedience over the spirit of revolt.

Praise then to the French workers who, at their last trades union congress, have just ripped open the veil which was enveloping us. Finally, for the first time in thirty years, the French worker has freely spoken out. He has again spoken the language of his fathers, the language of the International, and, in words that are simple, clear, and full of good sense, declared his intention to take back control of the struggle, and to give battle on a field where this question will be decided: whose, in law, in fact, and by virtue of simple good sense, are the workshops, the factories, the fields, the riches of every kind? The boss’s, the State’s, or the working men assembled to make use of them?

At the same time there is also the complete collapse of the theories with which people have sought to obscure the intelligence of the working class. In Russia, where above all the theoretical struggle has taken place recently, there is the collapse, the retreat, with the wounded abandoned, of Marxism. But we will need to discuss that another time.