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The Crisis of Socialism

Pëtr Kropotkin

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Our friend Domela Nieuwenhuis published in the *Societe Nouvelle* of Brussels (March and May 1894), two remarkable studies of German Social Democracy: “The Divers Courses of the German Social Democracy,” and “Socialism in Danger;” and he follows these two studies by a third “Libertarian Socialism and Authoritarian Socialism,” published in the September and October numbers of the same review.

In these articles, based entirely on what has been said and published by the chiefs of the party themselves, and entirely divested of the element of polemics, Nieuwenhuis has demonstrated how the party, by its very essence, is forcibly brought to become bourgeoisist [the mere representative of the well-to-do middle class] to abandon its socialistic program and to become more and more the password, not of the proletarians, but of the radical petty bourgeois. Formerly when the Anarchists said this to their social-democratic friends they were treated as calumniators. Today it is admitted in the official organ of the party, by one of its most esteemed chiefs, Bebel.

In these articles Nieuwenhuis shows clearly that – to use the words of Bebel—“this defilement and this debilitation (*Ver-*

waesserung) of the party” necessarily results from diverse causes: the principles themselves, enunciated in their program of Erfurt; authoritarian organization and authoritarian principles, and finally, the economic basis of the life of the party, – the emolument of the editors and agitators, and the “little socialist trade” practised on a big scale, which greatly increases numbers, but finishes by causing the petty bourgeois to dominate. It follows that when Vollmar, the chief of the “right” of the party, went so far as to turn completely over to bourgeoisism, even to voting in the Bavarian diet the budget of the government, and that an important faction of the democracy, with Bebel at the head, wished to censure him for it, the Congress passed a sponge over it by saying that his conduct was absolutely in conformity with the principles enunciated at Erfurt, at that time the constitution of the party; that it conformed in every point with all preceding parliamentary practices.

In other words: the development into bourgeoisism was foreseen; it was willed by the very enunciation of the principles. The moral “considerations” were only a far-off ideal, an ornament. Let us add here the absolute absence of the critical spirit. For fear of destroying the unity of the party, all criticism is eliminated in advance. Whoever dares to criticise, be it the principles or the theoretic ideas in vogue, the tactics, or the acts of any of the “men of trust” who constitute what has been called “the future dictatorship of the proletariat,” is immediately torn to pieces, thrown as prey to the journalists and orators whose capacities and degree of advancement are measured very often (according to the just remark of Richard Calwer) by their “venomous tongues;” (they do not discuss; they preach or they insult; again one of the distinctive features of the party.) Also, while economic ideas are gaining in depth, even in the bourgeois science, under the whip of socialistic criticism, and new questions and new perceptions are surging forward – as it always happens with science under the official seal, the science of the party is motionless. It is arrested at the “Communist

Complete revision of fundamental principles is demanded. Socialism, such as has been propagated up to our days, must change its plan entirely, under pain of disappearing.

It must become communistic again. And since, in becoming communistic, it cannot remain authoritarian without falling into absurdity, it must become anarchistic.

Manifesto,” which dates fifty years back, and at Marx’s “Capital”, which, whatever may be said of it, has had its day. Whether there be dissensions in the German Social-Democracy or not, whether there be divisions with outbreaks or no, scarcely interests us. The governmental socialist party is already divided into so many warring factions in France and England, that a division more or less would not make any difference. The German Social-Democracy is also divided – we are well aware of it: there are the Vollmar, Bebel, and Liebknecht factions, and still others. Exterior unity only is maintained – above all by the ever-renewed persecutions – and if this show of unity disappeared also, hardly anything would be changed. The essential thing for us, is this. This is, undoubtedly, a time of arrest in the development of Socialism. The time has arrived when the socialistic workers, after having been blindly ranged under this or that flag, put to themselves the question as to the essence of socialism. And this question, once put, they will be forced to treat it, to elucidate their ideas, to become exact. And we are persuaded, that if political events do not precipitate us too suddenly into the fiery furnace of wars and revolutions – which is very possible – governmental socialism, split everywhere into parties and divers factions, will be forced to change its tactics completely.

We see this renovation and rejuvenation coming, and we hail it with joy. We see, betrayed by a thousand various indications, the need of revising throughout the fundamental principles of governmental socialism penetrating further every day. And we are persuaded, by the thousand little facts which we observe in the movement, by the change of language even and the new ideas which permeate the socialist writings and discourses, that this need is making itself felt more and more. It only seeks its constructive formula to affirm itself in broad daylight.

Hence can we believe, can the workers believe, in this “revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat,” which formerly inspired so many millions of workers? Vague formulas, which constituted the “Communist Manifesto,” which they accepted in its poetic general-

ization without fathoming it, and which we have seen translated in Germany by the “men of trust,” in France by blanquisme – government, in a word, by the secret society. Does anyone believe in it now? Incapable of bringing to a safe harbour a single party, is this lie of a dictatorship of the proletariat capable of inspiring the masses? No, assuredly no.

Again, do they, in Germany itself, believe in the popular parliament – in the *Volkstaat* or popular State – represented by a parliament of electors, who will seize all lands, mines, machines, railways (leaving the inhabited houses and stores to their owners, according to the formula, or perhaps taking possession of them also) and regulating from Berlin the laws and customs concerning the possession of land, the price of the possession of machines, their supply of raw materials and their manufacture, the carrying of merchandise, exportation and foreign commerce, sending out “armies of agricultural workers” to tear down hedges and make the steam engine go under orders from Berlin, etc., etc.? Do they believe in this, as Marx and Engels believed in it in 1848, and as it was believed in in Germany after the success of the armies of Moltke, when men new nothing of the war but what the lying bulletins said of it? No, they believe it no longer, even in Germany. Certainly not in the Vollmar faction, not among those who have addressed the peasants and who have taken good care to mirror to them the ideal formerly preached by the authoritarian communists. And certainly they no longer believe it in Berlin where they have had a close view of what a parliament is, what it must be from its very essence, what it would be again after a revolution. As to France and England, the people do not believe too much in even municipal socialism; and at Paris they are suspicious even of the socialism of a revolutionary Commune.

And in the constructive economic ideal, a revolution almost as profound has, for twenty years, been taking place among the thinkers. Twenty years ago, not understanding any too well the terminology of Marx, one might still speak naively of the grand discovery of “surplus value,” and win applause by saying: “Surplus value to the worker!” But to-day he who hazards this tirade is speedily engaged in recollecting that surplus value means the exploitation of some one by another; that the worker will have none of it, and that the question is to know “what to do in order that all things may be produced in such quantities, that each may have his necessities gratified at his discretion and luxuries to satisfaction – that which is luxury today becoming the necessity of tomorrow!”

Finally, in Germany itself, the belief in the popular and socialistic state is greatly shaken. Not only is the impossibility of it perceived, but the people commence to understand that since they have parted with the idea of “the conquest of power” in the actual State, they will be forced to work for the maintenance of the State in general – that is to say, for the maintenance of the phase of civilization which, throughout all history, (the empire of Alexander, the Roman empire, and the modern empires) has corresponded to the destruction of all liberties, to the enslavement of the producer, to the formation of industrial and land monopolies – a phase which leads, inevitably, either to Caesarism or to the destruction of the State from top to bottom by the social revolution; and that, in the actual conditions, the chase after power must lead, has led, to the abandonment of socialism, to any and every accommodation with industrial exploitation, and to political and military servitude.

Well, these ideas, we say, have penetrated the masses. And this is why it is no longer a question of one simple division more, in the womb of the great governmental-socialist party.