

On German Social Democracy

Rudolf Rocker

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To many people the current developments in Germany seem almost unfathomable. Only a few understand the character and true causes for the so-called “national revolution”. Above all there is amazement that a country that could call on an organized labour movement, the largest in the world, with a long history of growth behind it, that a country like that could have been defeated by Hitler’s supporters and brought to its knees at one fell swoop, without any serious resistance. In actual fact, the fascist victory was not achieved by surprise attack but was the logical outcome of a lengthy evolution, with a variety of factors at play.

Ever since the days of the First International, a huge change has taken place in the character of the labour movement in most European countries. Instead of the old socialist ideological factions waging an economic battle (organizations in which the vanguard of the International saw the building blocks of the society of the future and the natural agencies for overhauling the popular economy in accordance with the spirit of socialism) we had the current political labour parties and their parliamentary efforts alongside other parties, all within the parameters of the bourgeois State. The formerly socialist education of the workers whereby it was explained to them why they needed to capture the land and industrial ventures, has been gradually forgotten. In its place, the talk these days is of nothing but the conquest of political power in accordance with a movement definitively abiding by the capitalist current.

The new workers’ parties directed their activities primarily into drawing the workers into the parliamentary struggle and moving towards the gaining of political power as a precondition of achieving socialism in practical terms. Over time. The upshot of that was a brand-new ideology differing in its very essence from the socialist ideology of the First International. After swiftly taking first place among the labour parties in most countries, parliamentarism drew into the socialist ranks a majority of bourgeois and intellectual personnel on the look-out for a career in politics. The spiritual climate within the movement underwent even greater changes and all authentically socialist aspirations were little by little relegated to the background. A surrogate, that had nothing in common with socialism beyond the name, supplanted the First International’s constructive socialism.

And so, increasingly, socialism was drained of its nature as a novel cultural ideal that was called upon to prepare people mentally for the abolition of capitalist civilization and for making them capable of implementing this change in practical terms and that trend was not halted by the artificial borders of nation-states. In the catalogue of “leaders” of this new phase in the

movement, the ideology of the nation-state was increasingly blended with party ideology, to the point where one could no longer quite make out where one ideology ended and the other began. A habit developed of looking at socialism through the spectacle of so-called “national interests”. When all is said and done, the contemporary workers’ movement found itself being gradually subsumed as a necessary component part, into the structures of the nation state, providing it with an inner equilibrium which it had just lost. The drip-drip infiltration of capitalist society into the proletariat’s ideals was conditioned by the practical activism of the workers’ parties, an activism that necessarily impacted upon the ideology of their political leaders. The very same parties that once upon a time marched off to war to conquer political power under socialism’s colours, found themselves being obliged by the relentless logic of events to sacrifice one morsel after another of their erstwhile socialism to the State’s national policy. All undetected by their members, these same parties became tools, buffers between capital and labour, or turned into political lightning rods, protecting the capitalist economic system from looming catastrophe.

Germany never having had, broadly speaking, any form of workers’ movement other than social democracy, was additionally devoid of all revolutionary tradition, albeit that this trend ran very deep there. Then its sway was brought to bear on the movement in most other countries. The mighty organizational machinery of the German Social Democracy and its seeming successes in every election earned it huge undeserved prestige abroad. It was forgotten that none of this could shake capitalist rule. And as other socialist parties elsewhere, were increasingly directing their movements along the lines set by the German movement, they were more and more inclined to overstate the German Social Democracy’s influence and the might of its organization.

The campaigning by Ferdinand Lassalle smoothed the way for the German labour movement, and his influence lingered into the years thereafter. Through his activities, Lassalle left a special imprint on German socialism, which made itself felt especially powerfully, and through he years leading up to the World War as well as in the wake of the so-called German “revolution” this was replicated. Lassalle was a life-long fanatical supporter of the Hegelian notion of the State and furthermore he espoused the thinking of the French statist socialist Louis Blanc. Lassalle’s successors believed so profoundly in the State’s “mission to liberate” that the German liberal press accused them of being “Bismarck’s patsies”. The accusers adduced no material evidence to back up these charges: yet Lassalle’s odd stance on the “social empire” made such an accusation quite understandable. Abroad, there were many who thought that Germany was a “marxist country”, if ever there was one, and this view was bolstered by the barbarous struggle that the new powers-that-be wage against “marxism”. But that was not the case. The number of genuine marxists in Germany was very small and Lassalle’s thinking influenced the Social Democracy’s political aspirations a lot more than the ideas of Marx or Engels. True, Marx did announce that the conquest of political power is the essential pre-condition for achieving socialism, but, from his viewpoint, once the State had accomplished its supposed purpose and done away with the class divisions within society and done away with the monopolies, its fate would be to fade away and make way for a society freed of authority. This was a miscalculation, entirely exposed as such by the Bolshevik experiment in Russia; since the State has emerged as not just the defender but also as the mainstay and creator of monopolies and class ascendancy in society. But even so, Marx foresaw the ultimate dismantling of the State, whereas Lassalle was an enthusiastic champion of the statist idea and ready to sacrifice all civil liberties to it. From Lassalle the German socialists have inherited their ardent belief in the State and most of their anti-freedom aspirations. From Marx all they have borrowed is his economic fatalism, a belief in the invincible power of economic cir-

cumstances. This belief, like any other version of fatalism, sapped the will of the popular masses and systematically dismantled their appetite for serious revolutionary action.

Bearing in mind the powerful influence that that embodiment of a militaristic, bureaucratic State, Prussia, wielded over German social life, thus we can grasp what the necessary outcome of the “educating” of the masses of the people upon which the social democrats concentrated was bound to be. That outcome gained substance with a precision and tragic clarity when the German revolution of November 1918 erupted. The German socialists, absorbed for years by run-of-the-mill parliamentary efforts had gradually lost all their spiritual baggage and were no longer capable of anything creative. The most influential social democratic leaders and especially Fritz Ebert, the German republic’s first president, strove by all means possible to snuff out the revolutionary sentiments at large among the popular masses in the wake of Germany’s defeat and did everything in their power to keep popular activity within the parameters of the law. To the very last, those leaders resisted any measures that they considered too radical and on the very eve of 9 November, the *Vorwärts* newspapers carried an article cautioning its patient readers against setting their sights too high, arguing that the German people had yet to reach the age when it might entertain dreams of a republic.

One can imagine what such a “revolution” might result in. Just a year after the 1918 coup d’état, the democratic bourgeoisie’s gazette, the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, expressed the view that in the history of the peoples of Europe there had never before been a revolution so impoverished in terms of creative thinking and energy as the German revolution. A revolution that grew of the irresistible ambition on the part of an oppressed people to cast off its shackles and pursue a brand-new future. But in Germany the revolution was foisted on to the people from outside. After the allied powers had announced that they were refusing to conclude a peace with the Hohenzollern dynasty [the republic] followed pretty much automatically. The people acted, not out of any inner conviction of its own, but under the lash of necessity. True, in Germany there was also a certain number of honest, determined revolutionaries striving to inject some added vigour into events and open up wider vistas for the revolution. But those revolutionaries represented a tiny minority and were unable to reverse the impact that a protracted education had had on the people. They were unable to rouse the millions of German workers banded together in the ranks of political and professional workers’ organizations. Never before had it been so obvious that within revolutionary movements the mentality prevailing among the masses of the populace is a factor that looms even larger than their technical organization. An organization that cannot command revolutionary enthusiasm and has no initiative of its own, is just a force to be reckoned with on paper and disappoints when put to the test. Which is exactly what occurred in Germany. The German working class had no real heavyweight revolutionary tradition. The only weapons with which it had any familiarity were parliamentary action and the entirely reformist activities of the workers’ trades organizations and it looked to those things alone for its salvation. Even universal suffrage, which in France and elsewhere had had to be extorted by means of revolutionary action, had been bestowed upon Germans by Bismarck as a gift, so to speak, without any special effort on their own part. And so the revolution was tainted from the outset and there was no spread of the sort of inner energy that is absolutely a requirement if there is to a radical transformation of the past.

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