

A modern outlook reviewing its history: Karl Kautsky and the French Revolution

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Karl Kautsky's interpretation of the French revolution, written in 1889, summarizes the progressive aspirations of the 19th century and glances hopefully towards the realization of such aspirations in the future 20th century.¹ The future conjectured in 1889 is now itself a part of a past suitable for historical scrutiny.

Kautsky's short book of less than a hundred pages was widely distributed among social democrats and Marxists during the first decades of its existence. In its chapters we may see both the consummation and the initiation of several currents of thought strongly marking the modern epoch. It signifies a consummation of the optimistic, progressive currents of the nineteenth century, largely constituted through different successive attempts at grappling with the French Revolution, viewing it increasingly as the anticipation of another revolution to come, from Saint-Simon to the Young Hegelians and the early socialists.

It also signifies the initiation of Marxism as a specific version of optimism, a Marxism consciously developed and applied as coherent scientific approach capable of comprehending concrete historical events.² Thereby it contributes a basic element in the classic Social Democratic world-view, or Second International Marxism, which gained great strength and self-confidence throughout Europe in the pre-First World War decades. Finally, it signifies the initiation of the specific Marxist interpretation of the French Revolution and, by implication, other similar events, as 'bourgeois revolutions' – an interpretation gaining great influence during the 20th century, both as a general understanding of World History and as an interpretative framework for academic historical

¹ Karl Kautsky, *Die Klassengegensätze im Zeitalter der französischen Revolution* (Stuttgart: Verlag von J.H.W Dietz Nachf., 1908 [1889])

² Of course, it was not the first Marxist piece of historical writing, considering for example Engels's articles on the German Peasant War, or Marx's instant history of the Second French Republic. But though both are rich in theoretical and interpretative elements, none of them systematically combine a systematically stated theoretical approach with a historical narrative. And Engels's work, being the only one of the two to dealing with a historical subject at some remove, openly based his entire narrative of events on Wilhelm Zimmermann's book on the Peasant War.

studies.³ In sum, Kautsky's interpretation of the Revolution may be seen as a distinctly modern outlook reviewing an important part of what it considers its own origin from the vantage point of a more advanced stage of development.

Yet, this piece of historiography remains virtually unattended, with only few and short exceptions. Most of the existing literature on Kautsky prefers to view him as either a political strategist or as a general social theorist, giving, at best, very brief treatments to his historical writings.⁴ Of course, he was both a politically active person and a social theorist, but focussing on these aspects of his activities exclusively tends to undervalue the autonomous contribution of history and the study of historical particulars to his thought and thereby to the development of Marxism. Only a few very brief studies investigate

³ Cf. Jean Jaurès, *Histoire socialiste de la Révolution française* (7 Vols., Paris: Éditions sociales, 1969-73 [1900-1904]), Georges Lefebvre, *Quatre-vingt-neuf* (Paris: Maison du livre français, 1939), Albert Soboul, *Précis d'histoire de la Révolution française* (Paris: Éditions sociales, 1972); E.J. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolution. Europe 1789-1848* (London: Cardinal, 1973). On the development of the historiography of the French Revolution: Olivier Bétourné & Aglaia I. Hartig, *Penser l'histoire de la Révolution* (Paris: Éditions La Découverte, 1989), Alice Gérard, *La Révolution française, mythes et interprétations (1789-1970)* (Paris: Flammarion, 1970), Jacques Solé, 'The Historiography of the French Revolution' (in: Michael Bentley, ed., *Companion to Historiography*, London & New York: Routledge, 1997, pp. 509-525), François Furet & Mona Ozouf, eds., *Dictionnaire critique de la Révolution française* (Paris: Flammarion 1988) 925-1084

⁴ Erich Matthias, 'Kautsky unter der Kautskyanismus: Die Funktion der Ideologie in der deutschen Sozialdemokratie vor dem ersten Weltkriege' (*Marxismusstudien*, 2nd series, 1957, pp. 151-197), Gary P. Steenson, *Karl Kautsky 1854-1938. Marxism in the Classical Years* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press 1978), Massimo Salvadori, *Karl Kautsky and the Socialist Revolution* (London: NLB, 1979), Reinhold Hünlich, *Karl Kautsky und der Marxismus der II. Internationale* (Marburg: Verlag Arbeiterbewegung und Gesellschaftswissenschaft, 1981), Werner Kowalski, ed., *Karl Kautsky. Referate und Beiträge der halleischen konferenz anlässlich des 50. Todestages* (Halle: Martin-Luther-Universität, 1990 Projekt Klassenanalyse, *Kautsky: Marxistische Vergangenheit der SPD?* (Berlin: VSA, 1976), Hans-Josef Steinberg, *Sozialismus und deutsche Sozialdemokratie* (Bonn – Bad Godesberg: Verlag Neue Gesellschaft 1971 [1967]) 45-86, Ingrid Gilcher-Holtey, *Das Mandat des Intellektuellen. Karl Kautsky und die Sozialdemokratie* (Berlin: Siedler, 1986), Harald Koth, „Meine Zeit wird wieder kommen...“: *Das Leben des Karl Kautsky* (Berlin: Dietz, 1993), Dick Geary, *Karl Kautsky* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987); John H. Kautsky, 'Introduction' (Karl Kautsky, *The Materialist Conception of History*, New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1988 [1927], pp. xxi-lxiv), John H. Kautsky, *Karl Kautsky: Marxism, Revolution & Democracy* (New Brunswick & London: Transaction Publishers, 1994), Jukka Gronow, *On the Formation of Marxism: Karl Kautsky's Theory of Capitalism, the marxism of the Second International and Karl Marx's Critique of Political Economy* (Helsinki: Societas Scientiarum Fennica, 1986), Beate Häupel, *Karl Kautsky. Seine Auffassungen zur politischen Demokratie* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1993). This is also the dominant tendency in Jürgen Rojahn et al, eds., *Marxismus und Demokratie. Karl Kautskys Bedeutung in der sozialistischen Arbeiterbewegung*, Frankfurt & New York: Campus Verlag, 1992. The most significant secondary literature on Kautsky in the main languages until 1985 is reviewed critically in Uffe Jakobsen, 'Karl Kautsky: ‚Renegat‘ og ‚Krypto-revisionist‘' (*Arbejderhistorie*, No. 25, 1985, 3-29) which unfortunately exists only in Danish. For a survey of approaches in both post-war Germanies, see Häupel, 17-39.

Kautsky's historical writings.⁵ Significantly, the most recent overall survey of Marxist historiography, Matt Perry's *Marxism and History*, leaves out Kautsky along with other socialist or Marxist historians of his generation, Franz Mehring, Jean Jaurès, Eduard Bernstein, Ernest Belford Bax and others.⁶ These contributions to historiography were seminal in shaping not only Marxism as a doctrine but also later generations of historians and social scientists. Yet, a closer investigation of them remains to be seen.

By studying Kautsky's approach to the French Revolution more closely we may contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the world-views and traditions of which it was a part, mapping some of the oft-ignored tensions inherent in this view. In particular, we may challenge dominant opinions on Kautsky's outlook and thus the genesis and character of Marxist thought, including Marxist thought on the French Revolution and on modern revolutions in general.

We shall proceed through an introduction of his general theoretical approach to history to a closer look at his specific interpretation of the French Revolution and finally to some considerations on the further consequences of inner tensions in his analytical frameworks in later analyses of history and society.

Evolutionism, historical forms and agency

For decades hailed as the chief Marxist theorist in the strong German Social Democratic Movement, Karl Kautsky fell into disrepute among revolutionary Marxists at the time of the Russian revolution of 1917. He never recovered his former status, and with the gradual demise of Marxism in the Social Democratic movement, his name was mainly evoked as part of the rhetorical rituals of the orthodox Communist movement parroting Lenin's

⁵ Beatrix Bouvier, 'Karl Kautsky als Historiker: Kautsky und die französische Revolution' (in *Rojahn*, 350-60), Manfred Hahn, 'Der Stammbaum. Karl Kautskys Entwurf der Geschichte des Sozialismus' (in *Rojahn*, pp. 361-369), Hans-Josef Steinberg, 'Karl Kautsky und Eduard Bernstein' (in Hans-Ulrich Wehler, ed., *Deutsche Historiker*, Vol. 4, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1972, 53-64), Paul Blackledge, 'Karl Kautsky and Marxist Historiography' (*Science & Society*, Vol. 70, No. 3, 2006, [unavailable at the time of writing; a manuscript version was kindly provided to me by the author]).

⁶ Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002

polemics against Kautsky the “renegade” or, for a briefer period, Stalin’s dismissal of Kautsky as a “fatalist”.⁷

The latter judgment has been dominant even among non-Stalinist or anti-Stalinist leftists, and it is often extended to what is summarily termed ‘Second International Marxism’. Lucio Colletti, for example, summarizes Kautsky’s approach as simply compressing “the historical-social world into the framework of cosmic-natural evolution”.⁸ In his recent survey of Marxists and the dialectic, John Rees categorizes Kautsky’s Marxism as a form of “fatalism” *tout court* and as part of the “first crisis of Marxism”.⁹ And in a few brief paragraphs, Matt Perry disposes of Kautsky and Bernstein as parts of the same “distortion of Marxism”, that is, “a biologically or technologically deterministic version of historical materialism”.¹⁰ Thus, eager to rescue notions subjectivity and agency for Marxism, most critical Marxist have seen no compelling reason to engage seriously with the writings of Kautsky and thus to challenge their understanding of him as a fatalistic and evolutionist interpreter of Marxism.

This reluctance, however, can only be justified in part.¹¹ In the following I shall argue that evolutionism was a constant feature of Kautsky’s Marxism, and that this often implied at least elements of fatalism. But at the same time, his interpretative framework contains other elements contradicting pure evolutionist fatalism, causing several shifts in the internal

⁷ V.I. Lenin, ‘The Proletarian Revolution and the Renegade Kautsky’ (*Lenin Collected Works*, Vol. 28, Moscow 1965 [1918], pp. 229-326), Josef W. Stalin, ‘Über die Grundlagen des Leninismus’ (*Fragen des Leninismus*, Moscow 1943 [1924]) 26.

⁸ Lucio Colletti, *From Rousseau to Lenin: Studies in Ideology and Society* (London: NLB, 1972) 72

⁹ John Rees, *The Algebra of Revolution. The dialectic and the classical Marxist tradition* (London & New York: Routledge, 1998) 138

¹⁰ Perry, 20, 22 Cf. analogous judgments on Kautsky in Projekt Klassenanalyse, Karl Korsch, *Die materialistische Geschichtsauffassung und andere Schriften* (Frankfurt a.M.: Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 1971), Predag Vranicki, *Geschichte des Marxismus*, Vol. 1 (2 Vols., Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1972 [1961]) 305-25, Leszek Kolakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism*, Vol. 2 (3 Vols., Oxford: Clarendon, 1981) 31-60, George Lichtheim, *Marxism. An Historical and Critical Study* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1964 [1961]) 259-277, S.H. Rigby, *Marxism and History: A Critical Introduction* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998) 65-6.

¹¹ Alan Shandro, ‘Karl Kautsky: On the Relation of Theory and Practice’ (*Science & Society*, Vol. 61, No. 4, 1997-98, pp. 474-501) defends Kautsky from traditional allegations of ‘fatalism’. Blackledge does likewise, albeit with more reservation.

balancing of elements in his method.¹² The more flexible approach consciously giving weight to ideas and social agency can be seen most clearly in his historical analyses from around the year 1890 and in the theoretical statements dating from the same period, as will be seen below. Thus, it is at least probable that the development of more flexible views was preconditioned or caused by his historical studies.

Born in 1854 and active in the Social Democratic movement from the 1870's on, Kautsky's theoretical writings do generally show an unusual degree of thematic continuity. His magnum opus, the more than 1,700 pages long, two-volume treatise on the materialist conception of history, was published in 1927, partly owes its size to the fact that the author repeatedly and at length quotes passages from his writings of the preceding five decades.¹³ The character and substance of this work thus reflect his life-long activity as a theorist rather than a political leader within the workers' movement. Its *purely* theoretical aims and its protracted style, however, have not only debarred this work from its intended influential prospects, but are also an indication of his increasing isolation from the concerns of day-to-day politics, in its turn signifying the decreasing concern with general social theory and particularly with Marxist theory within the Social Democratic movement, leaving the field open to Communist monopolizing.

The bulk of his writings, however, from the early 1880's till his death during flight from Nazi persecution of this Czech-born Marxist of Jewish ancestry, consist of theoretical, political and historical analyses written in a succinct style and with much more immediate connections with political practice.¹⁴

¹² As I will show below, Leszek Kolakowski is plainly in error when he claims that Kautsky's views on evolutionism did not change significantly during his entire career. [Kolakowski, 34-5] Paul Blackledge, on the other hand, echoes Lenin's judgment of Kautsky in emphasizing a rupture in Kautsky's attitude around 1910 from a relatively flexible approach to a "much more mechanical model of social development". [Blackledge] Though Blackledge is correct in noting this change, this tends to ignore the degree of an underlying evolutionist reasoning even in his most historical analyses, making it difficult to explain the rupture in Kautsky's thought. It also tends to ignore the fact that the explicitly mechanist or evolutionist elements were not a new discovery for Kautsky in 1910 but were parts of his theoretical apparatus prior to his encounter with Marxism.

¹³ Karl Kautsky, *Die materialistische Geschichtsauffassung* (2 Vols., Berlin: J.H.F. Dietz, 1929 [1927])

¹⁴ A bibliography of his writings is Blumenberg. Because of Kautsky's low level of popularity for many years most of his works are out of print, and only a few are available in English translation. A comprehensive collection of his writings does not exist.

According to Kautsky himself, his Marxism was inspired by Darwin and other evolutionist theorists popular at the time, including Ernst Haeckel and Ludwig Büchner, rather than by Hegel. He may thus be situated at the head of a widespread integration of popularized Darwinism into the socialist outlook of the Social Democratic movement during those decades.¹⁵ Kautsky's conception of Marxism was developed during the early 1880s through what he would later describe as an 'expansion' and 'modification' of the Darwinian approach.¹⁶

Such views lend themselves strongly to monist conceptions of continuity between nature and human society, or between the laws of nature and the laws of social, historical development. In his successive writings from that decade, however, the more explicitly Darwinian self-confessions are gradually subdued. This fact should be viewed in conjunction with his concurrent studies in historical subject-matters, resulting in quite thorough studies of, among other subjects, Thomas More, German social relations at the time of the reformation and peasant wars, as well as early Christianity, not to mention the analysis of the French Revolution to which we shall return below.¹⁷ This leads to an explicit, principled distinction in his theoretical writings between nature and society. In 1890 he states clearly on the difference between the development of the human species and the patterns of human history „that each of these fields of knowledge have laws of their own.“ Thus, ”Socialism and Darwinism (...) *have nothing to do with each other.*”¹⁸ Nonetheless, features of Darwinist evolution theory can be seen as persistent in his thought, and from around 1900 they are made more explicit again, as Kautsky is increasingly inspired by the French pioneer biologist Jean-Baptiste Lamarck.¹⁹

¹⁵ Kautsky *materialistische*, 17, Karl Kautsky, *Erinnerungen und Erörterungen* (S-Gravenhage: Mouton & Co., 1960 [1936, 1921]) 212-216. Cf. Walter Holzheuer, *Karl Kautskys Werk als Weltanschauung. Beitrag zur Ideologie der Sozialdemokratie vor dem Ersten Weltkrieg* (München: Verlag C.H. Beck, 1972) 19-22, Steinberg, 45-50, Steenson, 19, 24-30.

¹⁶ Kautsky *Erinnerungen*, p. 216

¹⁷ Kautsky, *Thomas More und seine Utopie*, (Stuttgart: Verlag von J.H.W Dietz Nachf., 1907), Kautsky, ‚Die Bergarbeiter und der Bauernkrieg, vornehmlich in Thüringen‘ (*Die neue Zeit*, Vol. 7, 1889, 289-97, 337-50, 410-7, 443-53, 507-15), Kautsky, *Der Ursprung des Christentums. Eine historische Untersuchung* (Stuttgart: Verlag von J.H.W Dietz Nachf., 1908)

¹⁸ Kautsky: ‚Sozialismus und Darwinismus‘ (1890), quoted in Steinberg, 52

¹⁹ Cf. Kautsky *Erinnerungen*, 221-2, 394

Accordingly, he presents Marxism as a universally applicable method, “the materialist method”, identical in principle with “the method of natural science”.²⁰ The materialist conception of history, he claims, “is based, on the one hand, upon a recognition of the unity of development in nature and society, but on the other hand it points to the particularity of social development within the general development of the world.”²¹

Thus, to Kautsky, the history of human societies is “but a particular case in history of life“. Human history is not identical with nature. It possesses laws of its own. Only, these should be seen in unity with the more comprehensive laws of nature.²² Consequently, his grand treatise from 1927 partly deceives those readers who, judging from the title, expected to be presented with a conception of *history*. Kautsky uses the whole first part – 900 pages – to consider matters *prior* to history. Likewise, within his writings as a whole, historiography proper only constitutes a quite small part.

This emphasizes his strong conceptions of social objectivity and the lawfulness of historical development. In a shorter text from 1909 he states accordingly that the development of society proceeds with “necessity according to iron laws”, and that this development is conditioned by material causes, independently of the consciousness or will of the individual.²³ Thus, social revolutions and other forms of fundamental social change do not spring from the will, the intentions or the actions of individuals, but develop “with necessity under given circumstances.”²⁴ That is why, he adds, one may find *political* revolutions before the modern world but *social* revolutions only with the arrival of industrial capitalism.²⁵ In his writings, these conceptions of ‘circumstances’ and the ‘necessity’ flowing from them are linked to an evolutionist emphasis peculiar to Kautskyist Marxism: that

²⁰ Kautsky *materialistische*, Vol. 1, 65

²¹ Kautsky *materialistische*, Vol. 1, vii

²² Kautsky *materialistische*, Vol. 2, p. 630. Leszek Kolakowski is thus at least halfway mistaken when attributing to Kautsky “the belief that human human history (...) can be explained by the same laws [as natural history]“. This overhasty generalization seems to spring from the same author’s view that the unity of Darwinism and Marxism was practically unchanging in Kautsky’s thought. Kolakowski, Vol. 2, 40, 34.

²³ Kautsky, ‘Friedrich Engels, sein leben, sein Wirken, seine Schriften’ (1908), quoted in Holzheuer, 65

²⁴ Karl Kautsky, *Der Weg zur Macht* (Frankfurt a.M.: Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 1972 [1909]) 16

²⁵ Kautsky *materialistische*, Vol. 2, 420-1

every change in biological species as well as in society may be satisfactorily explained as adaptation to changed circumstances.²⁶

This privileging of material and social circumstances does not, however, exclude the significance of social agency. To the ‘revisionist’ Social Democrat Eduard Bernstein’s claim that Marxist materialism constitutes a doctrine of fatalism, “Calvinism without a God”, Kautsky retorts that historical “necessity” does not equal “fatalism”.²⁷ And clarifying his claim that the socialist order will arrive with ‘natural necessity’ he stresses the point that this concept should not be seen to imply a view of human beings as ‘dead puppets’. Instead, human agents should be viewed concretely, as “human beings with definite needs and passions, with physical and mental powers which they seek to apply to the utmost.”²⁸ The historically definite properties and the social action of human beings thus constitute a necessary link in the chain of social development, at the same time as they are subordinate to general laws.

Finally, Kautsky adduces that with the gradual progress of science in mapping the laws governing reality, the obstacles to true knowledge are gradually being surmounted, and an increasing amount of what was once considered unique is being reconsidered as results of general laws.²⁹ He thus confesses to a remarkably optimistic faith in science.

Accordingly, historical development is viewed as divided into distinct developmental stages, each of which has to exhaust its potentials before the next and more advanced stage may come into existence. In 1909 he thus cites Marx and Engels to the effect that the working class will only be able to successfully achieve political power after a long phase of capitalist development:

²⁶ Kautsky *materialistische*, Vol. 2, 630-1

²⁷ Karl Kautsky, *Bernstein und das sozialdemokratische Programm. Eine Antikritik* (Stuttgart: Dietz, 1899) 13, Kautsky: „Was kann und will die materialistische Geschichtsauffassung leisten?“ (1897), quoted in Holzheuer, 66. Cf. Kautsky *materialistische*, Vol. 1, 85-6

²⁸ Karl Kautsky *Das Erfurterprogramm* (Stuttgart: Dietz 1919 [1892]) 102

²⁹ Kautsky *materialistische*, Vol. 1, 86. This is part of a polemic against the Kantian conception that the basic conditions of our perception and understanding are permanent. Cf. Kautsky *materialistische*, Vol. 1, 50-109

Only where the capitalist mode of production has reached a high level of development does the economic preconditions exist for utilizing the state to transform the capitalist property of the means of production into social property.³⁰

In itself, this does not constitute a particularly controversial statement in the context of the classical Marxist writers at the beginning of the 20th century. No Marxist would claim that socialism could have been successfully constructed on the foundations of the relatively low level of social productivity, say, medieval Europe of the 15th century. But as Trotsky would stress at later point, the recognition that a certain level of development of social productivity constitutes an absolute requirement for socialism is not per se a recognition that every single nation state should proceed through the exact same succession of stages in order to develop social productivity: once the sufficient level of technology and social development exists, it does not have to be reinvented through the long processes of trial and error observable in the country of origin.³¹

Kautsky, however, tacitly identifies the argument concerning social productivity as such with a more specific viewpoint that social productivity must develop through particular social and political forms appearing in identical modes in one country after another. Thus, according to him, every single country must have its capitalist phase and its bourgeois revolution announcing the political dominance of the capitalist mode of production.³² This tacit identification of the development of social productivity with a succession of social forms reveals an equally tacit model of the ‘correct’ pattern of general, essential historical development.

This, however, does not preclude recognition of the fact that such a development may vary quite a lot in its detailed forms. Along with many other approaches to history and society at the time, he distinguishes sharply, though rarely explicitly, between an inevitable essential, general movement and more contingent forms and features of national development.

³⁰ Kautsky *Weg*, 16

³¹ Leon Trotsky ‘Results and Prospects’, (*The Permanent Revolution & Results and Prospects*, New York: Pathfinder, 1969 [1906])

³² Blackledge correctly notes that Kautsky went some way to challenging this assumption in his analyses of Russia and the USA. But he significantly never transgressed the essential definition of, say, the Russian Revolution as ‘bourgeois’. In this respect, his analysis was closer to Lenin’s contemporary analysis than to Trotsky’s – as Salvadori and Michael Löwy, *The Politics of Combined and Uneven Development: The Theory of Permanent Revolution* (London: Verso 1981), among others, have noted.

Criticising Werner Sombart's prediction of an 'English' type of capitalist future for the United States, he remarks that Marx's claim that the more developed country only shows an image of the future of the less developed country "can be accepted only with great reservations", since the intervening decades has changed the whole international situation, subsuming more countries under the capitalist mode of production.³³ Again, this emphasis on particular historical forms and on factors of international relations is strongest in the period containing the bulk of Kautsky's historical writings, from the end of the 1880's till *circa* 1910. And as we shall see below, this has consequences for changes in his social analysis and in his use of historical analogies. Our point of departure, however, is his study of the French Revolution.

Kautsky's account of the Revolution

This study was the result of studies carried out at the British Museum during the author's long stay in London 1885-88. It was originally published in 1889 in the pages of his influential magazine *Neue Zeit* to commemorate the centenary of the revolution itself. Subsequently it appeared in book format.³⁴ Historically, it was a seminal contribution to both the shaping of a Marxist mode of historical analyses in general and the ways of writing the history of the French Revolution in particular. Three decades later, Kautsky returned to this subject in a briefer account as part of his polemic against the Russian Bolsheviks.³⁵ Briefer summaries of his interpretation may be found throughout his writings.³⁶

It was not the first example of a social mode of interpretation within the history interpretations of the French Revolution. On the contrary, this mode of analysis was a part of the discourse of the French revolutionaries themselves, and it was systematically propagated as early as 1792 in the writings of Antoine de Barnave, drawing on a mode of

³³ Karl Kautsky, 'Der amerikanische Arbeiter' (*Die neue Zeit*, Vol. 24, 1905-6, 676-7). [English translation: 'The American Worker' (*Historical Materialism*, Vol. 11, No. 4, 2003, 15-78), 15-6]

³⁴ Kautsky *Klassengegensätze*

³⁵ Karl Kautsky, *Terrorismus und Kommunismus: Ein Beitrag zur Naturgeschichte der Revolution* (Berlin: Verlag Neues Vaterland, 1919). Cf. also Lenin *Renegade* as well as Leon Trotsky, *The Defence of Terrorism (Terrorism and Communism): A Reply to Karl Kautsky* (London: The Labour Publishing Co.).

³⁶ Cf., e.g. Kautsky *materialistische*, Vol. 2, 421

social interpretation heavily inspired by Adam Smith and the Scottish Enlightenment historians.³⁷ The first two seminal histories of the Revolution, François-Auguste Mignet's and Adolphe Thiers's respective presentations, both published during the 1820's, combined a narrative of events with a basic conceptual framework of social classes and class struggle.³⁸ Elements of social interpretation abound in the mid-nineteenth century interpretations by Alexis de Tocqueville, Louis Blanc, Karl Marx and many others.³⁹ And within the ranks of the German Social Democratic movement alone, the Revolution was a subject of great attention and political importance.⁴⁰

Nor did Kautsky's book bring forth radically new facts about the revolution. For its factual material, it was based mainly on presentations already available in French and German.⁴¹ The novelty of this book, then, consisted firstly in the fact that it is the first systematic Marxist interpretation of the French Revolution as a whole, secondly in the way it combines a structural mode of sociological interpretation with a historical narrative of the basic events and actors. Each chapter in his analysis presents a social institution, a social group or a front in the revolution or the war – e.g. the absolutist state, the sans-culottes, etc. Also, it presents what was at the time of its appearance a rather innovative insistence on systematically combining attention to the 'relative autonomy' of each of these institutions, groups or fronts with attention to their reciprocal interdependence and totality.

³⁷ Antoine de Barnave, *Introduction à la Révolution française* (ed. Fernand Rude, Paris: Librairie Armand Colin 1960 [1792])

³⁸ F.-A. Mignet, *Histoire de la révolution française* (Bruxelles: H. Dumont, 1844 [1824]). Adolphe Thiers, *Histoire de la Révolution française* (10 Vols., Paris: Furne et Cie 1839 [1823-27])

³⁹ Alexis de Tocqueville, *L'ancien régime et la Révolution* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1919 [1856]), Louis Blanc, *Histoire de la Révolution française* (Paris: Pagnerre, 1847-1867). Marx' central statements on the French Revolution have been published in François Furet, *Marx et la Révolution française* (Paris: Flammarion, 1986).

⁴⁰ Cf., e.g. Georgij Plekhanov: 'Wie die Bourgeoisie ihrer Revolution gedenkt' (*Die neue Zeit*, Vol. 9, 1890-1, 97-102, 135-40), and for intellectual contexts Beatrix Bouvier, *Französische Revolution und deutsche Arbeiterbewegung. Die Rezeption des revolutionären Frankreich in der deutschen sozialistischen Arbeiterbewegung von der 1830er Jahren bis 1905*, (Bonn: Verlag Neue Gesellschaft, 1982), and for a closely related context Dmitry Shlapentokh, *The French Revolution in Russian Intellectual Life. 1865-1905* (Westport, CT & London: Praeger, 1996), 138-46.

⁴¹ Kautsky himself mentions the historians Nicolai Kareyev (whose results he acquainted with through Engels), Lavergne, Hippolyte Taine, Louis Blanc and Heinrich von Sybel. Tocqueville is mentioned as a central figure in the correspondence around it, e.g. Engels to Kautsky, February 20, 1889, in *Marx Engels Werke* (Vol. 37, Berlin: Dietz, 1974), 154. Judging from the content of the book he must have drawn on several more writers than these.

Both of these features anticipate the basic methodological approach of later, more refined social interpretations of the Revolution, e.g. Georges Lefebvre's classic *Quatre-vingt-neuf* from 1939, which in turn influenced the presentations of the Revolution in other classics such as Albert Soboul's writings, E.J. Hobsbawm's *The Age of Revolution*, as well as a wide range of specialized studies.⁴² This also resulted in a more precise general notion of how to combine such features within Marxist historical analysis as a whole.

Kautsky's account achieved a significant degree of success upon its publication. The four editions in the original language appearing up until 1923 raised the number of single copies to 18,000 within the German speaking areas, to which one should add the unknown number of copies distributed in its at least eight different translations into foreign languages.⁴³ However, the very same novel features of interpretation and presentation which secured its success among some scholars and among those socialist militants of more theoretical inclinations also tended to limit its success among those of a less theoretical bent.

This becomes especially clear by comparison to the markedly longer, yet more widely read, history of the French Revolution by Kautsky's fellow Social Democratic leader Wilhelm Blos, published in 1888. Blos's project might initially appear parallel to Kautsky's project in claiming to reflect a materialist conception of history and in briefly presenting the succeeding phases of the Revolution as characterized by different constellations of class struggle. He even states, in conjunction with the general approach of Kautsky's and other Marxists, that the Revolution summoned the modern bourgeois society in which the bourgeoisie is the ruling class.⁴⁴ But that is all the general theory there is in his book of more than 600 pages. Rather than a theoretically mediated interpretation or explanation Blos's book is mainly a narrative of events written in a traditional popular style for general

⁴² Georges Lefebvre, *Quatre-vingt-neuf* (Paris: Maison du livre français, 1939), Albert Soboul, *Précis d'histoire de la Révolution française* (Paris: Éditions sociales 1972 [1962]), E.J. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolution. Europe 1789-1848* (London: Cardinal 1973 [1962]), 73-126

⁴³ Bouvier, 'Karl Kautsky...', 355-6. Werner Blumenberg: *Karl Kautskys Literarisches Werk. Eine bibliographische Übersicht* (s-Gravenhage: Mouton & Co., 1960) 43-4

⁴⁴ Wilhelm Blos, *Die französische Revolution. Volkstümliche Darstellung der Ereignisse und Zustände in Frankreich von 1789 bis 1804* (Stuttgart: Verlag von J.H.W. Dietz Nachf., 1888) 1-2, 603

education among Social Democratic workers.⁴⁵ Yet, in contrast to Kautsky's much shorter and much denser book, Bloss's presentation appears quite often in the statistics of the libraries of the German labour movement from the fall of the Bismarckian Socialist Code in 1890 till the outbreak of the First World War.⁴⁶ Within Germany it sold three times as many copies as Kautsky's book, 47,000 from 1889 till 1923.⁴⁷ So, though Kautsky's impact was remarkable, Bloss' more traditional style seems to have had a stronger appeal among wider circles of Social Democratic workers, while Kautsky was presumably read primarily by the more politically educated, conscious Marxists.

Considerations of theory and principles introduce Kautsky's book. He insists that the development French Revolution, as every other development is explicable "in the final instance" not by the "will of human beings" but by "relations existing independently of human beings, even governing their lives".⁴⁸ For example, the Revolution was not primarily caused by the Enlightenment thinkers but rather by the conflict between the third estate and the two privileged estates. This conflict itself, however, was rooted in economic relations.⁴⁹ Thus, will and agency are distinguished sharply from a conception of the pressure of circumstances.

Essentially, according to Kautsky, the French Revolution was determined by a new, capitalist mode of production developing gradually under the old regime. The Revolution removed the fetters to the further development of capitalism.⁵⁰ Thus, in the final analysis, socio-economic relations determine the political superstructure best suited to their needs.

At the same time, however, the author strongly criticizes those vulgar Marxist approaches attempting to reduce the materialist conception of history to "a mere formula, a set pattern", in which history is presented as if only two classes existed, "two fixed, homogeneous masses, the revolutionary mass and the reactionary mass". Things are never

⁴⁵ Cf. also Horst Krause, *Wilhelm Bloss* (Husum: Matthiesen Verlag, 1980) 27ff, Friedrich Engels's criticism: Engels to Bebel, June 6, 1884, *Marx Engels Werke* (Vol. 36, Berlin: Dietz, 1977) 160.

⁴⁶ Steinberg, 129-42. Only a few scattered examples of such statistics have been preserved, but in general they present the same picture of the character of respective titles or types of literature popular in these libraries.

⁴⁷ Bouvier *französische*, 313

⁴⁸ Kautsky *Klassengegensätze*, 8

⁴⁹ Kautsky *Klassengegensätze*, 9

⁵⁰ Kautsky *Klassengegensätze*, 7, 53-4

that simple in concrete reality, he states. On the contrary, society is constantly developing into “an extraordinarily complex organism”.⁵¹

Accordingly, his account of the forms and course of the Revolution emphasizes a multiplicity of social class divisions at different levels of abstraction within each of the different juridical estates. This includes a designation of the bourgeois intelligentsia as a “class”, but at the same time as a part of the bourgeois class as a whole.⁵²

The absolute monarchy preceding the revolution is described as a product of a balance of forces between the rivalling leading classes, one attached to a feudal mode of production in gradual decline producing in its wake a court nobility directly attached to the monarchical state, another attached to a growing capitalist mode of production, based on money and commodity economy. This balance of forces gave the state an autonomous position *vis-à-vis* the social classes, but at the same time attached it to both of them. Since the further strengthening of the state as an autonomous force required the money that could be supplied through the new mode of production, the state had an interest in encourage trade and industry, in supporting the bourgeoisie and in removing the obstacles to economic innovations. On the other hand, the state was the greatest feudal possessor of land and thereby tied to interests pointing in the opposite direction, against reforms.⁵³

The privileged estates were divided internally. Beside the clergy there were several categories of nobles. The higher nobles, whose level of consumption in general greatly exceeded its income or its economic enterprise, had indebted themselves to the state, and many had attached themselves closer to it, attaining leading positions at the court. As a consequence, they generally supported the progress of absolutism. Opposite to these, the thriftier lower and middling nobility in the more backward provinces regarded themselves as the king’s equals and opposed the centralization of power in the monarchical state.⁵⁴ This latter group, later turning out to be the driving force behind the summoning of the estates general during the preludes to the Revolution, thus shared the aspirations of the third estate for a limited monarchy. At the same time, however, it was fiercely hostile to

⁵¹ Kautsky *Klassengegensätze*, 3, 4, 9

⁵² Kautsky *Klassengegensätze*, 42, 47

⁵³ Kautsky *Klassengegensätze*, 10-15. Cf. Kautsky *Terrorismus*, 16-17

⁵⁴ Kautsky *Klassengegensätze*, 15-20, 26

new economic thoughts and the progressing classes.⁵⁵ Finally a third group of nobles completely identified with the demands of the third estate and fought the old regime.⁵⁶

The third estate too was heterogeneous, containing “the sharpest contradictions, holding the most different of aims, the most different of means of struggle.”⁵⁷ Even among its upper strata, the bourgeoisie, the representative of the new mode of production, disclosed differing internal social categories. Many representatives of burgeoning capitalism took a reactionary stand, especially when their most immediate interests were tied to the existing system through investments, assets or privileges. So the upper financial bourgeoisie had strong interests in maintaining the existing state and in the thriftier parts of the nobility, to whom it had lent huge amounts of money. Likewise, many mercantile and industrial capitalists had inherited an interest in maintaining the state that had bestowed it with privileges and monopolies on, e.g., foreign trade or manufactures.⁵⁸ However, the pressure from especially British competition made it increasingly necessary for the bourgeoisie as a whole to abolish the guild system and the bureaucratic regulations of economy. Thus, immediate individual interests of some parts of the bourgeoisie came into conflict with the interests of the bourgeoisie as a whole.

In such circumstances, the actual leading role in the revolution had to be assigned to the intelligentsia. This “class”, as Kautsky terms it, lived by intellectual work, comprising among others lawyers and journalists. It belonged to the capitalist bourgeoisie through innumerable family connections, through its social position and its conditions of existence. But at the same time it was aloof from those immediate particular business interests that kept other parts of the bourgeoisie from acting in a revolutionary way. Through its theoretical approach, therefore, the intelligentsia could formulate the general interests of the bourgeoisie as a whole.⁵⁹

However, the revolutionary part of the bourgeoisie could not carry out this revolution on its own. It had to ally with especially the lower strata of the urban population, the sans-

⁵⁵ Kautsky *Klassengegensätze*, 20-1

⁵⁶ Kautsky *Klassengegensätze*, 23

⁵⁷ Kautsky *Klassengegensätze*, 35

⁵⁸ Kautsky *Klassengegensätze*, 34-36, 39-40

⁵⁹ Kautsky *Klassengegensätze*, 46-48

culottes.⁶⁰ The sans-culottes, Kautsky points out, were a heterogeneous mass of guild masters, common guild craftsmen, independent craftsmen and a *Lumpenproletariat* of beggars and the like. Yet, to a certain degree they constituted one really revolutionary mass, and the most important turning-points of the Revolution, this mass was the central driving force.⁶¹

Kautsky is also eager to emphasize that the sans-culottes in spite of their poverty did not constitute a modern industrial proletariat, and that judged by their mode of income and by their mentality and ideals, they constituted a petty-bourgeoisie. Still, they wanted to put an end to not only feudalism, but also exploitation from the big capitalists. This was an impossible project, the author claims: the conditions for abolishing capitalism did not exist yet.⁶²

Nevertheless, as the war against the counterrevolutionary forces escalated, the sans-culottes gradually turned from being the allies of the bourgeoisie to being its “masters”.⁶³ This change, however, came at a price: The Terror, initiated in the circumstances of war and social polarization, was strengthened through the contradiction between their aspirations and the historical possibilities.⁶⁴

This contradiction between the anti-capitalist intentions of the sans-culottes and the historical necessity of the further development of capitalism also explains why it was impossible for the sans-culottes to stay in power. “Circumstances made everything untenable which stood in the way of the capitalist revolution,” Kautsky claims. The end

⁶⁰ While in this early account Kautsky does not focus much on the struggles of the peasants and the tensions between town and country, these subjects are more central to his later account from 1919. This is probably due to the general increase in attention to the rural aspects of the French Revolution, being initiated at a scholarly level around 1900 by particularly the Russian historian Nicolai Kareev and the Ukrainian historian Ivan Luchisky and emphasized as part of a general leftist interpretation by Kropotkin in 1909. Ivan Loutchisky, *L'état des classes agricoles en France à la veille de la Révolution* (Paris: Librairie Ancienne Honoré Champion, 1911), Nikolai Karéiew, *Les paysans et la question paysanne en France dans la dernier quart du XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: V. Giard & E. Brière, 1899), Peter Kropotkin, *Die französische Revolution 1789-1793* (2 Vols., Frankfurt a.M.: Verlag Freie Gesellschaft 1978 [1909]).

⁶¹ Kautsky *Klassengegensätze*, 51, 48. Cf. Kautsky *Terrorismus*, 21-2

⁶² Kautsky *Klassengegensätze*, 51-2, 54, 34-5. Cf. Kautsky *Terrorismus*, 21

⁶³ Kautsky *Klassengegensätze*, 53

⁶⁴ Kautsky *Klassengegensätze*, 54. This point is stressed more in Kautsky *Terrorismus*, pp. 23-34, in order to draw parallels with the current situation in Soviet Russia.

result was that the pressure of the sans-culottes contributed decisively to fighting back the counterrevolution and the feudal reaction standing in the way of capitalist development, but it stood helpless against the progress of capitalism. Kautsky notes the paradoxicality of anti-capitalist forces stepping in to save the bourgeois capitalist revolution: “There is an enormous irony in the fact that what the capitalists had never succeeded in doing, their most embittered antagonists carried though on their behalf, but unwillingly.”⁶⁵

Thus, on the one hand, Kautsky points to a range of particular collective social agents as well as their respective aspirations and wants. On the other hand, he strongly emphasizes a long capitalist phase of development as an absolute historical necessity: “The needs of the time,” he notes in a comment on the small segments of the intelligentsia who developed elements of socialist thought, “dictated the surmounting of the feudal fetters to the development of commodity production.” That is why there was no prospect for socialism.⁶⁶ Overcoming capitalism requires a previous long-term flowering of the capitalist mode of production whose reign was only just commencing in the French Revolution.

The very same development of capitalism pushing the revolution forwards therefore also meant the division and defeat of the foreign and counterrevolutionary belligerent powers, at first to the revolutionary government, then to Napoleon:

The very same development that lead to the Revolution also deprived the privileged strata of the moral and intellectual properties that had made them capable of standing energetically and firmly against this Revolution.⁶⁷

As a sort of theoretical conclusion, Kautsky repeats at the end of his book that history cannot be reduced to struggles between advancing and declining classes, because every conflict, within the third estate as well as within the old privileged estates, functions as “a lever of the revolution.”⁶⁸

⁶⁵ Kautsky *Klassengegensätze*, 55

⁶⁶ Kautsky *Klassengegensätze*, 46

⁶⁷ Kautsky *Klassengegensätze*, 79

⁶⁸ Kautsky *Klassengegensätze*, 80

Theory and history: Capitalism and feudalism

This latter statement reveals both the generally objectivist character of Kautsky's view of history and a tension within his overall approach to historical problems. History, in his view, is an objective evolutionary progress through certain stages of development, succeeding each other with objective necessity. This notion of a strong objective historical necessity, meaning unavoidability, shows itself in this book mainly through his conception of capitalism as an agent evolving and unfolding in spite of the wills and actions of human beings. The growth of capitalism is the overarching evolutionary social fact supplying the history of the French Revolution with its essential meaning, equalling its 'bourgeois' character.

On the other hand, Kautsky explicitly and emphatically rejects simplified schemes of history as consisting in 'revolutionary' classes successively defeating 'reactionary' classes. This leads him to chart in detail multiple social classes arising not from their relation to the 'mode of production' in any narrowly technical or economic sense but from their position within a broadly conceived social totality of economic, social and juridical determinations.

Yet, the author's *explanation* of events and of the relations between classes always refers to the conflict between of a declining feudal mode of production in decline and a progressing capitalist mode of production. Kautsky's alternative to a simplified conception of collective social agency as a driving force in history, then, is a multiplicity of social actions that do possess a causally necessary role, human beings not being "dead puppets", but do not have any impact on the essential pattern of historical development.⁶⁹ In his conceptual universe, 'time' has its own 'needs', and 'relations' and 'circumstances' – in precisely such abstract terms – dictate the development of a capitalist mode of production.

He characteristically avoids any historical concretization or account of 'capitalism', the concept most essential to his interpretation of the Revolution, beyond the most general and

⁶⁹ At one point Kautsky even throws doubt upon the absolute necessity of the revolution as he stresses something as particular as individual character traits. He notes that the trade-off between feudal and capital forces demanded clarity and firmness of character in the monarch. Thus, "a character so spineless by nature" as Louis the Sixteenth necessarily created confusion within the state. Kautsky even hints that this resulted in the Revolution. [Kautsky *Klassengegensätze*, 15] This is not far from concluding that the French monarchy might have suffered a different fate if this man had had more firmness in his character, whatever that means. However, this remark about the monarch is a one-off affair in this context.

vague designations of it as a social mode characterized by ‘commerce’ and ‘industry’.⁷⁰ Its precise laws, its precise character and its concrete historical forms of development in France or on a world-historical scale are not being touched upon. Thus, history is viewed as progressing in one general evolutionary direction, and this general direction in itself explains all other patterns of development. Particular historical forms, human aspirations, relations and social actions are in fact conceived as standing besides the conception of the social structure, its objectivity, dominance and essence-defining character.

Kautsky’s interpretation of the Revolution, then, is characterized by a tension between theory and history. On the one hand, he has a deductive, universalist, positivist approach from which he derives the essential world-historical, macro-sociological and meaning of the French Revolution as a ‘bourgeois revolution’. In this respect he continues Enlightenment rationalist, universal approaches to concepts and is quite close to conceptions of social objectivity in a more conservative contemporary sociologist as Émile Durkheim. On the other hand, his writings show elements of an inductive, historicist approach through which he maps the more detailed forms of development in the Revolution as a historical event. In these aspects he is somewhat closer to ambitions within the sort of contemporaneous historicism associated with, among others Friedrich Meinecke, deriving from earlier figures such as Leopold von Ranke and Johann Droysen and based on a rejection of the Enlightenment ideas of universal theories, categories, norms and values. Only, Kautsky never leans sufficiently towards the latter mode of enquiry to ever doubt or test his theoretical assumption of the bourgeois character of the Revolution.

Marx and Engels were more markedly critical of universalist concepts than Kautsky. In general, they demanded concrete studies of historical facts and developments “under definite conditions” and “in every single case”.⁷¹ Having read an early draft of Kautsky’s analysis of the Revolution, Engels heavily criticized the author’s use of abstract concepts from the standard Marxist vocabulary, including “indeterminate remarks and mysterious suggestions about the new modes of production“. Such remarks, he added, were always radically separate from the facts, and in Kautsky’s unmediated use of the terms they

⁷⁰ A more elaborate, though hardly less ambiguous, account of this process can, however, be found in his *Thomas More*.

⁷¹ Karl Marx & Friedrich Engels, ‘Die deutsche Ideologie’, (*Marx Engels Gesamtausgabe*, part I, Vol. 5, Berlin: Marx Engels Verlag 1932 [1846]) 16, 15

presented themselves as instances of “*pure abstraction*“ obscuring rather than clarifying the matter.⁷² In the final version, Kautsky has obviously attempted to replace such concepts of pure theory by reference to facts, yet he has not been completely successful in all parts of the book, and the whole logic of his argument is centrally based on precisely those concepts.

The victorious bourgeoisie and the state

The general tension between universalist theory and particularist history in Kautsky’s interpretation particularizes itself in other internal tensions with a more immediate connection with the historical events of French Revolution. This can be seen in his analysis of the central revolutionary agent of his analysis, the bourgeoisie.

As ‘revisionist’ historians of the Revolution have been eager to point out in their ongoing polemics against the Marxist-inspired ‘classical social interpretation’ since the 1960’s, the role and character of the revolutionary bourgeoisie is a thorny problem. Criticising Georges Lefebvre’s interpretation of the French Revolution as bourgeois, Alfred Cobban noted in 1964 that the spokesmen of the Revolution were not an advancing industrial or commercial bourgeoisie, but generally a class of declining *officiers*, lawyers etc.⁷³

Kautsky is obviously aware of contradictions in the assumptions of the revolutionary bourgeoisie as a revolutionary subject. In his considerations on the character of the intelligentsia he finds a solution which is straightforward, yet much more than an attempt to ‘cover up’ an implausible theory: The revolutionary bourgeoisie, he emphasizes, was not capitalist entrepreneurs tangled up in individual business interest, but a fraction of the class, the intelligentsia, whose position at a distance from particularistic business interests was precisely the feature enabling it to state and carrying through the demands of the bourgeois class as a whole. Paradoxically, the Revolution was bourgeois-capitalist, in a sense, in spite of the capitalist bourgeois.

It is significant that Kautsky did not write this to counter revisionist challenges fashionable a bit less than a century later. He wrote this in a context in which the bourgeois-capitalist

⁷² Engels to Kautsky, February 20, 1889, *Marx Engels Werke*, Vol. 37, 155

⁷³ Alfred Cobban, *The Social Interpretation of the French Revolution* (Cambridge: At the University Press, 1964) 67

character of the Revolution was the only perceived interpretative alternative idealist or voluntarist interpretations of the Revolution as a result of Enlightenment philosophy. Among Social Democrats, the bourgeois social character of the Revolution seems to have been universally accepted by those who bothered enough to consider the question. Bloss's lip-service to this theory in the pages of a book otherwise so little concerned with such matters is an indication of this. In this context of such general assumptions, Kautsky's differentiated class analysis meant a significant advance on simplistic two-class analyses.

This analysis of the bourgeoisie also implies a notion of political rule somewhat transcending his own explicit definitions of the state. French absolutism is defined here as "the state form in which state power is not directly the instrument of class rule."⁷⁴ This implies that such autonomy is an exception, a temporary deviation from the normal character of the state as, precisely, an instrument of the ruling class. This is also the message conveyed by Friedrich Engels, the originator of the theoretical approach to absolutism as a result of a balancing of forces between rivalling ruling classes.⁷⁵ It is possible to draw parallel conclusions from Marx's analysis of French Bonapartism in which the conception of the state is also somewhat at odds with the 'instrumentalist' theory of the state usually associated with Marxism.⁷⁶

And yet, Kautsky also explicitly recognizes a more active role to the state in general, stating that "the form of the state determines the ways and means by which the different classes attempt to safeguard their interests, it determines the form of the class struggle."⁷⁷

However his analysis of the basic contradiction between the business interests of individual capitalists and the interests of the bourgeois class as a whole tends to go even further, implying that even the capitalist state cannot fulfil its basic function of serving the interests of the ruling class as a whole if the state apparatus is governed directly at the *behest* of the capitalist bourgeoisie. In order to fulfil its functions adequately, it must be governed by a

⁷⁴ Kautsky *Klassengegensätze*, 10

⁷⁵ Engels *Ursprung*, 167. Engels, 'Zur Wohnungsfrage' (*Marx Engels Werke* Vol. 1, Berlin: Dietz 1960 [1873]) 258

⁷⁶ Karl Marx, 'Der achtzehnten Brumaire des Louis Bonaparte' (*Marx Engels Werke*, Vol. 8, Berlin: Dietz 1960 [1852], 115-207)

⁷⁷ Kautsky *Klassengegensätze*, 10

group of people capable of acting on *behalf* of the bourgeoisie as a whole and often in direct confrontation with groups of individual capitalists, analogously to the intelligentsia in the French Revolution.⁷⁸

In more general theoretical terms, the view of the state's autonomy is stated in his large dissertation on the materialist conception of history. The historical chapters in the latter are no longer arranged according to social agents, classes and class struggles as in his early analysis of the French Revolution, but according to the development of the state. If the written history of all hitherto existing society, in the words of the *Communist Manifesto*, is the history of class struggles, then, Kautsky holds, one "may just as well claim that it is the history of the states."⁷⁹ This position is rather less orthodox than Kautsky is willing to admit. It can be supported in the Marxist classics by Engels's claim that the state came into existence together with class division.⁸⁰ But while Engels clearly views the state as an *effect* of class division, Kautsky presents the state rather as the most central and general historical *cause* of progress: "private trade, money, knowledge, art and industry as occupations, as well as urban civilisation, have all grown from the state." All of them are "effects of the state."⁸¹

This conception is apparently connected with certain political conclusions, and as Karl Korsch noted in his critique of Kautsky's dissertation, it seems to culminate in the bourgeois revolutions creating the modern states, rather than culmination in, say, the modern labour movement.⁸² That is, it culminates in the state rather than in social agents. Kautsky notes that while the pre-modern states developed towards less and less liberty, the modern states during the 19th century progressed towards increasing degrees of liberty.⁸³ The modern state form is itself, he notes, tied to the development of industrial capital and democracy.⁸⁴ Accordingly, the bourgeois revolutions were the last *violent* changes in the character of the states, and the socialist transformation of society will proceed through a

⁷⁸ The distinction between the state functioning at the behest of the ruling class and functioning on its behalf was developed in Ralph Miliband, 'State Power and Class Interests' (*New Left Review*, No. 138, 1983, 57-68)

⁷⁹ Kautsky *materialistische*, Vol. 2, 42

⁸⁰ Cf. Engels *Ursprung*, 25-173

⁸¹ Kautsky *materialistische*, Vol. 2, 259

⁸² Korsch, 72

⁸³ Kautsky *materialistische*, Vol. 2, 775

⁸⁴ Kautsky *materialistische*, Vol. 2, 437

peaceful conquest of existing state structures.⁸⁵ To a much larger extent than previous social formations, socialism will grow organically from all previous history, through continuity rather than ruptures with existing social structures. This is sharply demarcated from any untimely and voluntarist introduction of socialist ideals ahead of the long capitalist phase of development initiated through the bourgeois revolutions – such untimely and voluntarist endeavours as Kautsky has observed in the meantime in the October Revolution in Russia.⁸⁶

However, the aspects of his state theory indicating autonomy rather than heteronomy seem to undermine the very assumption that a revolutionary transition – in the form of a violent uprising – should be necessary and thus explicable through such macro-social considerations. If the state is already changing before the revolution, reflecting changes in the class composition of society, then why should the road of reform not be sufficient for capitalism? In other words, Kautsky's views on this tend to undermine his belief in the necessity of the French Revolution in the form of a violent rupture.

The pressure from below

Another point of tension between theory and history in his analysis concerns his analysis of the sans-culottes. Here he is stressing his point that history is not determined by human will or through actions in a historical void, but in definite historical circumstances, leaving only a certain amount of feasible solutions, *in casu* a speedy development of capitalism or a short-term rescue of feudal remnants.

Though Kautsky the socialist must of course have some normative sympathy for the egalitarian aspirations of the sans-culottes, Kautsky the historian and social theorist cannot allow himself to be lead astray by such sympathies; he must be guided by reason. Consequently, he is not particularly interested in developing any hermeneutic or sympathetic understanding of the sans-culottes's views, mentalities, discourses or projects. Rather than writing 'history from below', in the sense current among many social historians

⁸⁵ Kautsky *materialistische*, Vol. 2, 431

⁸⁶ Cf. Kautsky *Terrorismus*

of the 20th century, he is writing 'history from above' with elements of sympathy for the lower classes who were significant in shaping the detailed forms of the Revolution but could not gain any significant influence on the essential, objective movement of History.

Yet, even this limited historical place allows the lower classes does point beyond conservative conceptions of these classes as a mere nameless 'rabble'.⁸⁷ To that effect, his approach does point towards later, more systematic efforts at claiming a central role for the lower classes, e.g. more detailed history of the French Revolution published by Peter Kropotkin in 1909.⁸⁸ Kautsky quotes Kropotkin's work several times in his later return to the question of the French Revolution in the aftermath of the Russian Revolution of 1917.⁸⁹

This attitude contains an unresolved tension: why does Kautsky insist on emphasizing and differentiating human agents in the first place, if the immediate forms of the Revolution resulting from such anti-capitalist forces did not and could not have any consequence for the essence of history? His initial critique of vulgar Marxist teleology, of pure philosophy presenting itself as History, is contradicted by his own mode of reasoning about History. Viewed in this way, his basic argument is thus based on an unproven assumption, a *petitio principii*: the assumption of a correct succession of social modes in each country, regardless of the interaction of the national with the international level.

⁸⁷ Cf., e.g., Hippolyte Taine, *Les origines de la France Contemporaine: La Révolution*, (6 Vols., Paris: Librairie Hachette, 1929-30 [1878-1884]). For a short overview from the viewpoint of later 'history from below': George Rude, Rudé, 'Interpretations of the French Revolution' (in: Harvey J Kaye, ed., , *The Face of the Crowd. Selected Essays of George Rudé*. London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1988) 80-106 – which, significantly, does not mention Kautsky.

⁸⁸ Kropotkin developed an analysis of the Revolution slightly different from Kautsky's. According to him, the Revolution contained two currents necessary for its victory: The revolutionary thoughts of the bourgeoisie and the revolutionary actions of the peasants and the urban proletarians. These currents were coincident, but not concordant. During the revolution the initial bourgeois ideals of equality and liberty was transformed into an urge to liberate production from the surveillance of the state and to achieve liberty in order to exploit the workers who thereby lost their liberty. The population in general, on the other hand, did not have the same clarity of its social aims, being marked by confusion and inherited prejudice. [Kropotkin, Vol. 1, 1-13]

⁸⁹ Kautsky *Terrorismus*, pp. 22-3 and *passim*

Paradoxically, Kautsky's basic analysis has been widely accepted and is echoed in, e.g., Albert Soboul's later analysis of the sans-culottes.⁹⁰ In addition, both Kautsky and Soboul may claim the authorization of Marx himself in this analysis. After all, it is he who claims that the Terror of 1793-94 was "only a *plebeian manner* of dealing with the *enemies of the bourgeoisie*," and that as long as the material conditions necessary for superseding capitalism did not yet exist, a "proletarian" victory such as the one in 1794 would become merely "an element in the service of the *bourgeois revolution* itself".⁹¹ From the necessity of a high level of social productivity as a prerequisite for building socialism it is certainly possible to conclude that every single country in turn will have to pass through a long stage of capitalist development essentially the same everywhere. It is also possible to derive from this the claim that a given revolution must be 'bourgeois' or pro-capitalist, regardless of what the non-bourgeois class forces does or intends to achieve. But neither of these conclusions will follow by necessity from Marx's statements.

Indeed, as particularly Trotsky showed a decade and a half later, it was possible to derive quite different conclusions from Marxism. Shifting the focus from a national to an international level, Trotsky stressing significantly more the weight of particular historical forms, traditions and actions, not only in his Russian present but also in emphasizing the very fact that sans-culotte power was possible even in the circumstances of France in the 1790's.⁹² This, of course, does not necessarily imply that either Kautsky or Trotsky was right or wrong in their respective interpretations. But it does illustrate that Kautsky based his argument on some significant general assumptions that remained unproven in his analysis, perhaps even unrealized by himself.

⁹⁰ Cf. Albert Soboul, *Les Sans-culottes parisiens en l'an II: Mouvement populaire et gouvernement révolutionnaire 2 juin 1793 – 9 thermidor an II* (Paris: Librairie Clavreuil, 1958)

⁹¹ Karl Marx, 'Die Bourgeoisie und die Kontrerevolution' (*Marx Engels Werke*, Vol. 6, Berlin: Dietz 1959 [1848]) 107. Karl Marx, 'Die moralisierende Kritik und die kritisierende Moral' (*Marx Engels Gesamtausgabe*, part I, Vol. 6, Berlin: Marx Engels Verlag 1932 [1847], 298-327) 306.

⁹² Cf. Trotsky, 67

1789, the ‘German road’ and Russia

This leads us to a final point: the relation between Kautsky the scientist and Kautsky the engaged political figure. His account of the French Revolution is neither pure politics, nor apolitical historiography. Though it is clearly occasioned by a general politically motivated interest in the Revolution and by its centenary, he insists on the specificity of the historical agents and on a basic difference between the historical temporality of the subject matter and his own time. At the same time, this is a piece of engaged history, an example of the *use* of history within a context of the social and political action of the Social Democratic labour movement. The extent to which the author’s political engagement constructs its subject matter is, however, unaccounted for by his own general approach to social and historical science.

The interest in the French Revolution found in the writings of Kautsky and other Social Democratic writers of the period reflect an analysis of Germany as a politically backward country, in which the tasks of a ‘1789’ remain to be solved – and in which, indeed, they will be solved. As early as 1881 Kautsky dismissed the social reforms and the ‘state socialism’ of chancellor Bismarck as an inadequate attempt at preventing a revolution against the *Reich*, comparable to the French minister of finance Necker’s attempts at reforming the *ancien régime* in the years leading up to 1789. Thus, Germany was confronting its ‘1789’.⁹³

But what Kautsky envisages is the ‘essence’ of 1789 under different historical circumstances and forms significantly less radical than those of the French Revolution. Correspondingly, in his analysis of the real ‘1789’ eight years later he tones down the significance of active human beings in the historical precedent and emphasizes the difference between the violence of previous revolutions and the peacefulness of the ones to come. In the German *Reich*, at its advanced economic stage with a highly developed industrial capitalism, there will be no need for the desperate, radical actions of the masses that drove the French Revolution towards its terrorist phase. At such a high level of socio-economic development, the German ‘1789’ will proceed by peaceful means. The German Social Democratic party was, according Kautsky’s own phrase from 1893, “a revolutionary,

⁹³ Cf. Kautsky: ‘Der Staatssozialismus und die Sozialdemokratie’ (1881), quoted in Salvadori, 21-2. Cf. also Franz Mehring’s more elaborately stated, but parallel analyses of this issue, presented concisely in Walter Kumpmann, *Franz Mehring als Vertreter des historischen Materialismus* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz 1966).

but not a revolution-making party”.⁹⁴ The ‘revolutionary’ content in this claim was, of course, the desire for social change. Yet, if the power of human will and action and the desire to realize revolutionary aims through *making* revolution, then the concept ‘revolution’ hardly had any content of meaning demarcating it from concepts of ‘evolution’ or ‘reform’. Much evidence indicates that this was not only Kautsky’s personal position or any accidental expression but indeed an expression of a perceived harmony between socialist aims and the objective evolution of society so wide-spread in different parts of German Social Democracy at the time.⁹⁵ This should be related to the actual situation of the German Social Democrats, being the largest single political force in the European worker’s movement, yet existing for many years in political isolation due to the Anti-Socialist Law, which made it possible for quite a few years to combine a radical and revolutionary rhetoric with a quite reformist practice.⁹⁶ In this regard, Kautsky’s success as the theoretical spokesman of German Social Democracy is an indication of how adequately he expressed the actual historical situation of the party and the labour movement as a whole in Germany. The unresolved tension in his analysis between the determinism of social structure and the action of human beings is thus at the same time an unresolved tension between concepts of evolution and revolution or between reform and revolution, not only in the past under scrutiny, but in Kautsky’s own present as well. What he aims at, in spite of his radical rhetoric, is less revolution, more evolution. One may even retrace the basic structure of his theoretically founded distrust in the action and will of the *sans-culottes* in a corresponding distrust of the revolutionary action of German workers who should rather trust the objective evolutionary processes of social history for the realization of their wider social desires.⁹⁷

⁹⁴ Kautsky: ‘Sozialdemokratischer Katechismus’ (1893), quoted in Helga Grebing, *Geschichte der deutschen Arbeiterbewegung* (München: DTV, 1970), 108

⁹⁵ Cf. Grebing, 92-3, 98-9, 112-3

⁹⁶ Cf., for discussions of this, Grebing, *passim*

⁹⁷ Also, his historical analysis of the intelligentsia as the revolutionary subject on behalf of the bourgeoisie as a whole, whether historically adequate or not, raises further questions. If the bourgeois revolution was not carried out by the bourgeoisie as a whole, but was carried out on its behalf by the intelligentsia attached to it, then there is no macro-historical precedent of the socialist revolution as the working class as a whole liberating itself. Should this also be carried out by an intelligentsia on behalf of the working class? Naturally, Kautsky could not be expected to confront this strategic issue within the framework of an historical

So though he along with other Marxists, Franz Mehring among others, despises ‘the German road’ of reform and calls for a ‘French road’ of revolution, his mode of analysis lend itself equally to a ‘German road’ to socialism, that is, to reform. Thereby Kautsky restates, in more orthodox Marxist terms, the much older ideas of a ‘German road’ current among a whole generation of German political commentators in the wake of the French Revolution.⁹⁸

However, at the same time as this contradiction of social structure and social action points towards a lasting commitment to radical reforms rather than revolutionary modes of action in his own country, the period of his historical writings is also closely tied to a more flexible and much less orthodox approach to other related questions of social change. This can be seen especially in the dramatic contrast between his position on the Russian Revolution around 1905 and his position of the Russian Revolution after October 1917.

Under the impression of the revolutionary movements in Russia in 1905 he states that the coming revolution in that country must be basically ‘bourgeois’ on the one hand, but that on the other hand the special socio-economic features of the country makes it necessary for this revolution to be carried out under the leadership of the working class, assisted by the peasants. For that reason, the Russian Revolution, according to Kautsky, will hardly result in a ‘normal’ bourgeois-democratic regime. Instead, it will be a ‘permanent revolution’ leading to a swift maturation of the Russian proletariat whose revolutionary actions could trigger corresponding movements in Western Europe.⁹⁹

Returning to the question of the Russian Revolution in 1916-17 such radical overtnes have disappeared. According to the elderly Kautsky, the proletariat may be the most energetic revolutionary force in the country, but because of the low level of development of the country and the working class the immediate task must be to build a democratic regime within the boundaries of the capitalist mode of production, not to let the workers conquer

analysis, but his analysis of the bourgeois revolutionary subject certainly tends to undermine one of the central causes for interest in the French Revolution on the part of the workers movement.

⁹⁸ For a concise sketch of such views, see Harold Mah, ‘The French Revolution and the Problem of German Modernity: Hegel, Heine, and Marx’ (*New German Critique*, No. 50, 1990, 3-20)

⁹⁹ This is summed up nicely in Salvadori, 101-8

economic or social power.¹⁰⁰ In the aftermath of the October Revolution he elaborates this position through a critique of the Bolshevik wager on a revolution beyond the limits of the 'bourgeois' one.¹⁰¹

The first analysis shows an emphasis on historical forms, human action, the force of ideas, international relations beyond the narrowly economic mode of production. The second shows an emphasis on general theoretical issues, on the determination of the economic levels, on social objectivity and the general theory of evolution rather than action. The analytical elements are the same, but their reciprocal balance is different, leading to two radically different complexes of thought.

Thus, Kautsky's analysis of the Russian Revolution proceeds from the same structural scheme as his analysis of the French. Both of these revolutions are consistently interpreted as 'bourgeois' as a consequence of the level of historical evolution on a national scale. But in both cases Kautsky's analysis has enough flexibility to provide analysis of different forms without ever challenging the definition of essentials. Once again, one may see a basic opposition between form and essence, between history and theory in his works.

Conclusion: Between objectivity and agency

In Karl Kautsky's view, the French Revolution was a bourgeois revolution, its 'bourgeois' character implying primarily the transition to capitalism reflected specifically as a rupture at the social and political level. This mode of production was personified by the bourgeoisie confronting an aristocracy representing the waning feudal mode of production. For Kautsky and his fellow Marxists at the end of the nineteenth century, this struggle provides both the prehistory and a precedent to the future transition to socialism through the struggle of the working class within a more fully developed capitalism. Thus stating the older liberal social interpretation of the revolution in new Marxist terms pointing beyond the author's present and towards a radically different future, Kautsky's book can be seen as

¹⁰⁰ Kautsky, 'Die Aussichten der russischen Revolution' (*Die neue Zeit*, Vol. 35, 1916-7, 9-20). Cf. Salvadori, 219-25

¹⁰¹ Steenson, 201-211. Cf. Salvadori, 251ff

a main initiator of a subsequently strong paradigm in the understanding of historical evolution in general, the French Revolution in particular.

At the same time, Kautsky's attempts at stating this orthodoxy in more concrete historical terms led to significant nuances and qualifications in his analysis. First of all, against simplified two-class notions of history he insists on a multiple differentiation of the classes. In particular, he stresses the fact that the bourgeoisie in the sense of capitalists *per se* did not carry through the revolution, and could not have done so, because their internal rivalry and conflicting individual interests were at odds with their macro-historical, collective interests as a class. Instead, the revolution was led by the intelligentsia, a 'class' within the bourgeoisie capable by virtue of its relative detachment from immediate business interests of formulating the interests of the bourgeoisie as a whole class.

Also, the actions of the lower classes are emphasized by the author as important for the victory and radicalisation of the French Revolution. But because of the bourgeois character of the revolution, the aims of social equality strived for by these social agents could not be actualised: their subjectively anti-capitalist actions were objectively pro-capitalist. This latter point can be seen as the first systematic statement of a basic analysis later propounded by Albert Soboul and other prominent scholars.

In these and other cases Kautsky's analysis shows a significant degree of flexibility in the analysis of particular historical forms. Thus, historical facts are recognized and confronted, even when they would seem to contradict his overall theory of the revolution. This provides for new explanations of historical particulars, e.g. the agency of the Revolution. However, such admissions of form have no consequences for his analysis of the *essence* of the French Revolution as a 'bourgeois revolution'. He never explains or expands the assumption most basic to his analysis of all the historical forms and features of the Revolution: its *capitalist* character.

Thus, the traditional view of Kautsky as an objectivist and evolutionist theorist should not be rejected, but needs serious modification in order to recognize the real internal tensions in his position. At the same time as objectivist evolutionary schemes prevalent in his mode of analysis, historicist modes of analyses also act upon his theoretical concerns, for several years abandoning explicit Darwinism from his theoretical apparatus for social analysis. Yet, this interaction of history and theory always remains at the level of the analysis of social forms, never absolving evolutionist theoretical assumptions about the

essence of ‘correct’ historical development. An implicit Darwinism remains at the heart of Kautsky’s approach, together with an ambiguous, partial but basic denigration of social agency and practice as macro-historical subjectivity which basically corresponds to the political self-understanding of German Social Democracy at the time as a ‘revolutionary’ party strongly rejecting notions of *making* revolution. In this regard, and despite his radical rhetoric, Kautsky’s thought contains significant and representative elements of the traditional view of a ‘German road’ of reform, not revolution, conceived in opposition to the ‘French’ abstractions leading to the voluntarist violence and rebelliousness of 1793-4.

Abstract

The doctrines of one of the main founders of Marxism, Karl Kautsky, are often depicted as schematically evolutionist, without room for social agency or particular historical forms. The field of French Revolution studies, once a stronghold of Marxism within the humanities, has seen a parallel but wider-ranging rejection of Marxism as such as being essentially the same. Though not completely without justification, both of these conventional rejections reflect insufficient study of Marxist, and particularly Kautskyan-Marxist, historiography. This article reconsiders Kautsky’s analysis on the French Revolution, originally published in 1889, in the light of such dismissals.

This little book summarizes the elements of what would become the main framework of the orthodox Marxist interpretation of that revolution, holding determinist and objectivist views on social structure and evolution. But it also contains significant and quite innovative elements of negation of such objectivist evolutionism. Thus, it holds that the ‘bourgeois’ character of the revolution does not imply revolutionary activity on the part of industrial capitalists but rather the agency of the bourgeois intelligentsia. It also emphasizes the activity of the lower classes as a significant factor in the development of the Revolution. Still, the objectivist evolutionism of the overall explanatory framework remains relatively untouched by such more subjectivist and historicist notions. This internal tension between historical particulars and general theories is indicative not only of Kautsky’s individual outlook but also of internal tensions in the outlook of the Social Democratic movement of his time for which he was the main theoretical spokesperson.