

## Parliamentary Democracy and Revolutionary Tactics

In his book *Negative Integration and Revolutionary Attentisme* [*Negative Integration und revolutionäre Attentismus*], Dieter Groh<sup>1</sup> characterised the politics of German Social Democracy before the First World War as a combination of revolutionary wait-and-see strategy and negative integration. The Social Democrats continuously spoke of revolution and understood their politics as inherently revolutionary, but in practical politics they concentrated on parliamentary politics and reformist tactics. However, the revolutionary spirit did have an important function. It satisfied the revolutionary aspirations and hopes of the supporters and members of the party and, at the same time, remained harmless in its practical consequences, or contributed to the integration of the Social Democratic Party into the Wilhelminian German *Reich*. The propaganda of revolution also distinguished the party from other political forces and thus emphasised the specific role of the party in German politics. At the same time, the results of the parliamentary elections were interpreted by the leaders of the party to prove that the Social Democrats would, in the very near future, gain a majority in parliament and become a dominating and decisive force in German politics.

Revolutionary attentisme had as its precondition an evolutionist conception of social development and history, a conception of the law-like development of bourgeois society towards the pending downfall of capitalism and the introduction of socialism. Socialism was regarded as a necessary outcome of the economic development of capitalism, and thus the socialist revolution was expected to be an unavoidable and almost automatic outcome of this development. All the Social Democrats had to do was to wait and be ready for the moment to take over political power in the state.

Karl Kautsky was the main theoretical representative of this ‘centrist’ conception of the ripening of the revolutionary conditions within capitalism, and August Bebel was his counterpart in practical politics and in the leadership of the party. The expectation of the coming revolution had as its counterpart an orientation towards reformist politics in all practical issues – long before

---

<sup>1</sup> Groh 1973.

this revisionism was to become an acknowledged force inside the party and an independent faction within it. One could even claim that the socialist law introduced by Bismarck in 1876 forced the Social Democrats to concentrate on parliamentary politics by depriving them of other means of political activity, and it was thus an important precondition for the centrist conception of a revolutionary strategy:

In comparison to the Marxist conception of revolution, German social democracy's conception, which underlay its revolutionary attentism, was reduced to the objective moment from the outset – this did not only come about under the influence of revisionism. Marx did not prevent this and Engels even encouraged this conception. In contrast to Lassalle, who had inculcated his supporters with the idea that, when he spoke of general suffrage they should understand this to mean revolution, German social democracy had spoken of revolution since the 1870s, but it actually only meant the 'inevitable' ('with the necessity of a natural force') or 'nomological' progress towards socialism guaranteed by economic development and indicated by the growing number of party members and votes.<sup>2</sup>

The revolution was expected to be almost a natural-like event that was to be realised more or less regardless of the aspirations of an acting subject:

A development which could be promoted through agitation and organisation, because a revolutionary climax could be attained by the 'collapse' of the bourgeois state and society in line with historical and economic laws, something that was to a large extent unaffected by the will of active [*handelnd*] individuals. Because it increasingly lost a historical subject, the revolution appeared in the form of a natural phenomenon.<sup>3</sup>

Dieter Groh's interpretation of the political role of the German Social Democratic Party and its concept of revolution was closely related to an earlier interpretation by Erich Mathias. In his article *Kautsky and Kautskyanism* [*Kautsky und der Kautskyanismus*], published in 1957, Mathias analysed the function of the German Social Democratic Party before the First World War and Kautsky's theoretical contribution to the self-understanding of the party in particular. In his analyses, Kautsky's concept of Marxism was seen to be a logical con-

---

<sup>2</sup> Groh 1973, p. 57.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

tinuation of the traditional understanding of socialism by Marxists functioning under the socialist law in Germany. This conception was a consequence of a strict respect for legality and legal procedures in society: 'Our enemies will perish as a result of our legalism' was a typical slogan of the party leadership during the socialist laws.<sup>4</sup> One of the reasons explaining this self-understanding of the Marxism of the Second International was Engels's and even Marx's own evaluation of the role of the emerging mass parties in Europe and specifically in Germany since the 1860s. Kautsky developed his own interpretation of Marxism in close collaboration with Engels, who never criticised the understanding of Marxism by Kautsky and Bernstein, his close friends and collaborators in the late 1880s and early 1890s:

Engels was not aware of the limits of his pupils' ability to absorb his ideas. These pupils had drawn closer to Marxism along the path of *Anti-Dühring*, which had acted as a filter, but which only recalled the particles of the original system which appeared to seamlessly fit into the new generation's natural-scientific world view.<sup>5</sup>

In his introduction to Marx's *Class Struggles in France*, written in 1895 and regarded as his testament, Engels declared that 'the mode of struggle of 1848 is today obsolete in every respect'.<sup>6</sup> This statement was interpreted by both Bernstein and Kautsky as proving that the period of revolutionary upheavals was over; revolutions by small minorities were definitely outdated.<sup>7</sup> There was, however, an important difference in the interpretations of Kautsky and Bernstein. Whereas Bernstein was eager to interpret Engels's text as confirming that revolutions were unnecessary in general and only damaging to the cause of Social Democracy, Kautsky did not draw the corresponding conclusions. In his understanding, the new ideas in Engels's preface only legitimated the parliamentary tactics of the party. The coming revolution was to be committed by a parliamentary majority, but still the introduction of socialism was a question of a revolutionary takeover. Socialism could not be realised through a gradual growth into a democratic and righteous society.

According to Engels, the parliamentary democracy already established in England and America opened up new possibilities for the workers' movement; it opened up an era of peaceful transition to socialism. Even in Germany, the old

---

4 Mathias 1957, p. 156.

5 Mathias 1957, p. 157.

6 Engels 1974–2004f, p. 510.

7 Mathias 1957, p. 158.

style of revolution had become obsolete and the conditions for its realisation had changed: 'For here, too, the conditions of [the] struggle had changed fundamentally. Rebellion in the old style, street fighting with barricades, which decided the issue everywhere up to 1848, had become largely outdated'.<sup>8</sup>

The German workers were to be given the merit for two important achievements: first, they had organised a disciplined and strong party; and second, they had made effective use of general franchise:

But, besides, the German workers rendered a second great service to their cause in addition to the first, a service performed by their mere existence as the strongest, most disciplined and most rapidly growing socialist party. They supplied their comrades in all countries with a new weapon, and one of the most potent, when they showed them how to make use of universal suffrage.<sup>9</sup>

General franchise had become an effective new method in the struggle for socialism and it was expected to become all the more important. In this struggle, the German Social Democrats had proved to be of special importance, having become the avant-garde of international Social Democracy:

But whatever may happen in other countries, the German Social Democrats occupy a special position and thus, at least in the immediate future, have a special task. The two million voters whom they send to the ballot box, together with the young men and women who stand behind them as non-voters, form the most numerous, most compact mass, the decisive 'shock force' of the international proletarian army ... Its growth proceeds as spontaneously, as steadily, as irresistibly, and at the same time as tranquilly as a natural process ... To keep this growth going without interruption until it gets beyond the control of the prevailing governmental system of itself ... that is our main task.<sup>10</sup>

The impressive increase in social-democratic votes in Germany had made a strong impression on Engels. Only a few years earlier, he had expressed strong doubts about a possible democratic development in Germany. In his critique of the first draft of the Erfurt Programme in 1891, Engels had written:

---

8 Engels 1974–2004f, p. 519.

9 Engels 1974–2004f, p. 518.

10 Engels 1974–2004f, p. 524.

One can conceive that the old society may develop peacefully into the new one in countries where the representatives of the people concentrate all power in their hands, where, if one has the support of the majority of the people, one can do as one sees fit in a constitutional way: in democratic republics such as France and the USA, in monarchies such as Britain, where the imminent abdication of the dynasty in return for financial compensation is discussed in the press daily and where this dynasty is powerless against the people. But in Germany where the government is almost omnipotent and the Reichstag and all other representative bodies have no real power, to advocate such a thing in Germany, when, moreover, there is no need to do so, means removing the fig-leaf from absolutism and becoming oneself a screen for its nakedness.<sup>11</sup>

It is no surprise that Kautsky was even more enthusiastic about the increasing support for the party in the elections than Engels – and from this it was but a short way to Bernstein's absolutisation of parliamentary politics. The Erfurt Programme adopted by the party in 1891 was widely regarded as genuinely revolutionary and Marxist. Engels, whose critique was cautiously published for the first time in *Die Neue Zeit* in 1901, seems to have accepted the draft of the programme in general and only criticised certain details.<sup>12</sup> According to Mathias, the Erfurt Programme should be understood as a programme of an inherently reformist party, rather than as a revolutionary manifesto. The revolutionary expectations were mainly reduced to the natural and necessary development of capitalism and were supported – it may be added – by the expectation of the parliamentary majority shortly to be achieved. Once the majority of the seats in parliament were in the hands of the socialists, revolution would be easy. At the same time, the increase in the number of supporters for the party gave reason for the party to operate more cautiously. Bebel expressed this idea in the very meeting that approved the new Erfurt Programme in the following words: a party which has millions of supporters must operate more carefully than a sect which is without importance and without responsibility.<sup>13</sup> Increasing support and membership also brought with it the danger of an increasing segmentation of the party.<sup>14</sup>

---

11 Engels 1974–2004e, p. 226.

12 Engels 1974–2004e, pp. 225–40.

13 Bebel 1891–2, p. 57.

14 Mathias 1957, pp. 160–2.

According to Mathias, Kautsky's evolutionary conception of Marxism and its practical conclusions were well in accordance with the official party ideology of its time, as was already shown by Kautsky's theoretical foundation of the Erfurt Programme. Kautsky's leading position can already be deduced from *Social Democratic Catechism* [*Ein sozialdemokratischer Katechismus*] published in *Die Neue Zeit* in 1893.<sup>15</sup> The legend about the revolutionary Kautsky and his turning into a revisionist after the First World War can thus be seriously doubted. In the *Social Democratic Catechism*, the Social Democratic Party is characterised as a revolutionary party that does not, however, prepare a revolution.<sup>16</sup> The revolutionary goal principally accepted by the party in its programmes seems to be of no practical importance:

We know that our goal can be attained only through a revolution. We also know that it is just as little in our power to create this revolution as it is in the power of our opponents to prevent it. It is no part of our work to instigate a revolution or to prepare the way for it. And since the revolution cannot be arbitrarily created by us, we cannot say anything whatever about when, under what conditions, or what forms it will come.<sup>17</sup>

According to Kautsky, it is impossible to predict the nature of the future 'decisive' struggles: 'whether they will be bloody or not, whether physical force will play a decisive part [significant role], or whether they will be fought exclusively by means of economic, legislative and moral pressure'.<sup>18</sup> All we can say is that, in the last instance, the final goal is guaranteed by the objective economic development of capitalism. Despite this uncertainty, it is, however, more probable that the peaceful means of struggle will be dominant in the future revolutionary upheavals of the proletariat. The probability of the application of peaceful methods is increasing all the time because both the importance of the democratic institutions and the knowledge about economic and political development are increasing.<sup>19</sup> In conclusion, the Social Democrats have to do everything in their power to prevent all kinds of provocation:

---

15 Kautsky 1893–4.

16 Kautsky 1909a, p. 50.

17 Ibid; see also Mathias 1957, p. 163.

18 Kautsky 1909a, p. 50.

19 Kautsky 1909a, pp. 45–6.

The Socialists must, therefore, avoid, and indeed actively oppose, any purposeless provocation of the ruling class that might give their statesmen an opportunity to rouse a mad rage against the Socialists.<sup>20</sup>

Revolutionary enthusiasm is at present, however, even more important than ever. Revolutionary enthusiasm is the great moving force of a socialist movement. But there is a danger connected with the increasing strength and importance of the party: it becomes difficult to balance immediate tasks with the more important and decisive ones. It becomes difficult not to lose the future perspective, and to maintain the consciousness about the Social Democrats as a party of revolutionary struggle, as a party waging war against the bourgeois social order. The conclusion drawn by Kautsky from the above discussion is somewhat amazing: 'We can endanger the course of evolution only by being too peaceful'.<sup>21</sup> In other words, one must continuously speak of revolution in order not to have to make one.

According to Mathias, the main question in the discussion about the role of different methods of revolution did not concern actual parliamentary or reform politics. Kautsky's main problem was to integrate the different factions inside the party and to unify them into one organisation despite their practical and tactical differences. Thus the official ideology of the party made it possible to maintain the fiction of the revolutionary character of a unified party. The fiction of the revolutionary nature of the party was an essential element of the politics of integration. As a consequence, revolutionary Marxism is transformed into an undialectical theory of evolution, which trusts the objective relations and forces of development to realise socialism:

Fundamentally, even during the period of passionate struggles between them, both are nothing but aspects of the very same process of revision [*Revisionsbewegung*] which began with the early reception of Marxism and which proceeded from the crypto-revisionism of the Erfurt Programme to the outspoken revisionism which broke out in official party ideology, and in Kautsky's thought for the first time too, in the Weimar Republic.<sup>22</sup>

The real controversy (between Kautsky and Bernstein, or between revolutionary and revisionist Marxism) did not after all concern the right interpretation

<sup>20</sup> Kautsky 1909a, p. 55.

<sup>21</sup> Kautsky 1909a, p. 60 (translation modified BL); see also Kautsky 1909a, p. 167.

<sup>22</sup> Mathias 1957, p. 168.

of Marxism. The real reason why Kautsky and Bebel opposed revisionism inside the party was that it seemed to contradict the revolutionary aspirations and hopes of the masses, and not that it contradicted the practical political and tactical aims of the party. A revolutionary programme was important for the party because it guaranteed the integrity and unity of the party. As Kautsky had formulated it: 'Party unity is based on the uniformity of its tactics. If the latter is lost, then the former will soon break down'.<sup>23</sup>

According to Kautsky, revolutionary Marxism as presented by the party had proved victorious against Bernstein's revisionism – Bernstein's critique had brought about practically no changes in the party tactics or programme. Kautsky was convinced of the inadequacy of Bernstein's attempts to revise the programme and defended the revolutionary nature of Social Democracy, which did not, in any case, have any consequences in practical politics. In Kautsky's opinion, revolution was to be understood not as a forthcoming great social upheaval, but rather as a goal that must be postulated and proved theoretically. Having made the concept of revolution rather devoid of meaning – it was only a question of tactics – Kautsky was ready to conclude: 'In fact, precisely because of its theoretical basis, nothing is more flexible than the tactics of social democracy'.<sup>24</sup>

Kautsky was even willing to admit that there was not actually any great divergence of opinion among the disputants. Both were, in fact, aiming at social and democratic reforms. It is, however, important to discuss the final goal because it is closely connected with the question of the organisation and propaganda of a modern political party.<sup>25</sup> Bernstein's main mistake was not that he defended a reformist turn in practical politics. His mistake was that he totally abandoned the thought of revolution.<sup>26</sup>

According to Mathias's interpretation, Kautsky never abandoned the idea of a socialist revolution and the dictatorship of the proletariat as the final goal of the Social Democratic Party, but he interpreted the idea in a way that, in fact, transformed revolution into a peaceful development of capitalism into socialism and excised its dangerous connotations.<sup>27</sup> According to Mathias, the position was typical of the parties of the Second International:

---

23 Kautsky 1899a, p. 3.

24 Kautsky 1899a, p. 166.

25 Kautsky 1899a, p. 184.

26 See Kautsky 1914, p. 39.

27 Mathias 1957, p. 171.

This attitude was typical for the parties of the Second International, who looked after the specific interests of the workers but, incidentally, were in full agreement with the liberal bourgeois democracy on the big questions of practical politics. Carried by the genuine and robust class consciousness of the European workers of this period, they did not however see any need to emphasise the special position of the socialist party *vis-à-vis* all other parties.<sup>28</sup>

The politics of careful balance characterised as centrist, which was presented in practice by the leadership of the party and in theory by Kautsky, became more obvious after 1910. But it did not at this stage lead to a formation of clear factions of right, left and centrist wings inside the party. This centrist politics satisfied both the needs of the party as a democratic and reformist party of opposition and the aspirations of the radical section of its membership.<sup>29</sup> One of the consequences of the centrist strategy was an emphasis on the organisation as the connecting link between the everyday practice of the party and the final goal of socialism.<sup>30</sup> The organisation was to be preserved intact and strengthened by all means, and every increase in the strength of the organisation was interpreted as a real increase in its power. The passive waiting for revolution was legitimated either by the argument that the workers' organisation was not yet strong enough, or by the opposite argument that the organisation, being already strong, should not be endangered by any revolutionary adventures, the possible risks of which could not be calculated in advance.<sup>31</sup>

Kautsky's position in the lively discussion about the role of a mass strike was typical of this cautious and passive expectation of the outbreak of revolution. Kautsky could proudly state that as early as 1891 he was the only Marxist in Germany to defend the use of a political mass strike as a means of achieving important political goals; on the other hand, he immediately hurried to add that 'as long as current conditions in Germany do not change, a political mass strike is impossible'.<sup>32</sup> In the same context, Kautsky both defended the electoral struggle as the greatest possible mass action of the proletariat, and considered the elections an effective safety valve which could prevent a dangerous explosion.<sup>33</sup>

---

28 Mathias 1957, p. 173.

29 Mathias 1957, p. 180.

30 Mathias 1957, p. 184.

31 Mathias 1957, p. 183.

32 Kautsky 1914, p. 298.

33 Kautsky 1914, p. 276.

In Kautsky's opinion, then, both radical demands and mass actions could in a similar way endanger the development of the organisation and the achievement of the final goal. The final struggle for power should thus be postponed until a non-predictable future. It would in any case take place of necessity. Kautsky's position – shared by the party leadership – was summarised by Mathias as follows:

For the party authorities, the solution to the most pressing problems of the time was resolved in the unimpaired, passive process of increasing the mesmerising number of votes – not in realising the power that the party represented.<sup>34</sup>

The combination of the ideology of integration and seemingly revolutionary vigour outlined by Mathias could be documented in more detail even in Kautsky's *The Road to Power [Der Weg zur Macht]*.<sup>35</sup> Constant worry about the revolutionary adventures endangering the future of the party and socialism are expressed throughout Kautsky's booklet. The transformation of capitalism into socialism was supposed to be guaranteed by the objective processes of development, the growing into socialism:

We are growing into socialism from two directions. One of these is through the development of capitalism, and the concentration of capital ... Today we have reached the point where banks and employers' organisations control and direct the greater part of capitalist enterprise in the most diverse countries. In this way the road is being prepared for the social organization of production.<sup>36</sup>

The centralisation of capital and property is, however, only one aspect of the growing into socialism. Kautsky was quite well aware of the dangers of objectivism, and he never got tired of emphasising the role of the subjective factor as the other side of development. Fortunately, there was another side to the same process, namely, a continuous increase in the proletariat and the increasing power of the workers' organisations:

This preparation for Socialism by the concentration of capital is however only one side of the process of gradual growth into the future state ... With

---

34 Mathias 1957, p. 192.

35 Kautsky 1909a.

36 Kautsky 1909a, p. 27 (translation modified BL).

the growth of capital the number of proletarians within society increases too. They become society's most numerous class. Simultaneously their organisations grow too.<sup>37</sup>

According to Kautsky, reformists acknowledge the objective process of transformation of capitalism into socialism. They do not, however, acknowledge the other component of this process: 'The growth that it describes is not the growth of a *single* element, but of *two* elements, and, moreover, of two very *antagonistic* elements – capital and labour'.<sup>38</sup>

Kautsky was eager to point out that this transformation does not take place without the conscious action of the proletariat. Human will is an essential element in social change and history; the growing into socialism cannot be an unconscious process. Class struggle results from the antagonistic will of the representatives of the social classes.<sup>39</sup> Will is thus, in the last instance, the basic motive force of the whole social process. Consciousness played an important role in Kautsky's thinking in another sense too. Increasing consciousness of the nature of economic processes also makes it possible for the proletariat to use its power more economically and effectively, and to save its resources:

Only through a *recognition* of the social process, its tendencies or aims, can this waste be ended, the strength of the proletariat concentrated, the workers brought together into great organizations united upon a common aim, with all personalities and momentary actions subordinated to the permanent class interests, and those interests, in turn, placed at the service of the collective social evolution. In other words, the theory is the factor that raises to the highest degree the strength which it is possible for the proletariat to develop. The theory does this by teaching the workers how to use the powers arising at any given stage of economic development in the most effective manner and by preventing the waste of those powers.<sup>40</sup>

While the conditions for socialism are ripening inside capitalism, the future destiny of the society is simultaneously determined by the relations of power between capital and wage labour. In Kautsky's opinion, in a developed capitalist state – as in England or Germany – the proletariat already has the power

---

37 Kautsky 1909a, p. 28.

38 Kautsky 1909a, p. 29.

39 Kautsky 1909a, pp. 43–4.

40 Kautsky 1909a, p. 44.

necessary to take over the government of the state, and the economic conditions already exist for the transformation from the private to the socialist ownership of property. Only one problem remains: the proletariat is in principle powerful, but it does not yet recognise its own social power, the consciousness of the working class is not sufficiently developed: 'But what the proletariat lacks is a consciousness of its own strength.'<sup>41</sup>

The task of the party is to assist the proletariat in becoming conscious of its real power. This can be done through theoretical schooling, but it can be done even more effectively through exemplary actions:

It is through its victories in the struggle against its opponents that the Socialist party most clearly demonstrates the strength of the proletariat and thereby most effectively creates a feeling of strength.<sup>42</sup>

Thus, the consciousness and theoretical knowledge of the proletariat is a decisive precondition for a successful socialist revolution, and it is the task of the party both to assist in the development of this consciousness and to decide when the consciousness and the feeling of power are sufficiently developed to accomplish the great historical mission.

Even though nothing definite can be said about the nature of the coming struggles, it can be predicted that peaceful methods will be more important than violent ones. In the future, the proletariat will have better opportunities for making use of economic, political and moral means of resistance than of directly violent ones.<sup>43</sup> Kautsky admitted that it is also true that sometimes democratic institutions have a tendency to pacify the social struggle in a bourgeois society. Sometimes they are even said to pacify the class struggle completely. This, however, is not true. But the new methods available do make it possible for the proletariat to economise its efforts:

Democracy cannot do away with the class antagonisms of capitalist society. Neither can it avoid the final outcome of these antagonisms – the overthrow of present society. One thing it can do. It cannot abolish the revolution, but it can avert many premature, hopeless revolutionary attempts, and render superfluous many revolutionary uprisings. It creates clearness regarding the relative strength of the different parties and

---

41 Kautsky 1909a, p. 45.

42 Kautsky 1909a, p. 46 (translation modified BL).

43 Kautsky 1909a, p. 51.

classes. It does not abolish their antagonisms, nor postpone their ultimate object, but it does operate to hinder the rising class from sometimes attempting the accomplishment of tasks of which it is not yet capable, and to keep the governing class from refusing concessions that it no longer possesses the strength to maintain. The direction of development is not thereby changed, but its course becomes steadier and more peaceful.<sup>44</sup>

It is rather characteristic that in the same context Kautsky proposed to name the Paris Commune, generally regarded as the great heroic revolutionary upheaval of the proletariat, as a warning example of a struggle in which the proletariat clearly was not yet ready to take power into its hands.<sup>45</sup> Kautsky warned the workers' movement that its enemy, the ruling class, was all but waiting for a confrontation in which it could destroy the whole proletarian organisation. The proletariat was, according to Kautsky, already conscious enough of these dangers, and it could postpone the decisive struggle until it really was strong enough to win it.<sup>46</sup> There is a danger in Kautsky's cautious strategy, which he was ready to admit, namely, that it might seem that the Social Democrats are no longer a party of revolution at all. This loss of revolutionary enthusiasm could endanger the achievement of its future goals. It may further sound paradoxical that even though Kautsky was continuously eager to warn the working-class movement of revolutionary adventures of all kinds, he nevertheless believed that the time was actually already ripe for a revolution.

In his book *Karl Kautsky and the Marxism of the Second International* [*Karl Kautsky und der Marxismus der II. Internationale*], Reinhold Hühnlich<sup>47</sup> defended Kautsky and his pamphlet *The Road to Power* as representing genuine revolutionary Marxism and criticised Mathias's earlier interpretation of the ideological role of Kautskyanism. According to Hühnlich, *The Road to Power* is not restricted to a specific theory of revolution and can consequently be read as a representative document of Second International Marxism. It also includes elements of a theory of imperialism and a description of the latest developments in capitalism. The alternative of war or socialism as presented at the end of the booklet is a final proof that Kautsky is not a reformist.<sup>48</sup> There is, furthermore, a new contribution to the discussion of the subjective conditions of Social Democratic action in Kautsky's book, one of its main theses

---

44 Kautsky 1909a, p. 52.

45 Ibid.

46 Kautsky 1909a, pp. 53–4.

47 Hühnlich 1981.

48 Hühnlich 1981, p. 157.

being the convergence of economic and political struggle under imperialism.<sup>49</sup> Hühnlich, however, admits that Kautsky did not in fact analyse the subjective conditions of revolution in detail; neither did he analyse the role of the different factions inside the working class and their corresponding interests. The only explanation given for the emerging reformist movement inside the party is the petit-bourgeois origins of the workers and changing economic conjunctures.<sup>50</sup>

According to Hühnlich, Kautsky's position definitely cannot be characterised as a reformist one – with an overtone of verbal radicalism – because he emphasised parliamentary action not only as aiming at reforms, but also as an important factor in the development of a revolutionary consciousness. Neither did he neglect the importance of action by the proletariat taking place outside parliament:

Especially when it came to so-called political issues of the day, social democracy therefore retained the perspective of the ultimate aim of socialism, which marked out the party's revolutionary character.<sup>51</sup>

Hühnlich did not accept Mathias's interpretation of *The Road to Power*, especially because in his opinion Mathias did not pay any attention to the wider contexts of the book. Kautsky's slogan 'we are a revolutionary party but not making a revolution' [wir sind revolutionäre, nicht aber eine Revolutionen machende Partei] cannot be interpreted as exemplifying Kautsky's verbal radicalism. In the chapter under discussion, Kautsky was essentially criticising on the one hand fatalistic, and on the other hand voluntaristic, conceptions of socialism, and no conclusions can be drawn about either Kautsky's attentisme or reformism.<sup>52</sup>

*The Road to Power* argued not only that the general conditions for revolution and socialism are present at the moment, but also for the immediate actuality of revolution.<sup>53</sup> Thus there cannot be any talk of a premature revolution, as proved by the political situation since the 1890s. Furthermore, the possible outbreak of war would only function as a catalyser of revolution. This thesis should be enough to prove that Kautsky was a representative of the genuine left wing

---

49 Hühnlich 1981, p. 159.

50 Hühnlich 1981, p. 161.

51 Hühnlich 1981, p. 162.

52 Hühnlich 1981, p. 163.

53 Hühnlich 1981, p. 165.

of Social Democracy and not a reformist after all. According to Hühnlich, Kautsky cannot be accused of attentisme either, because he was not satisfied with expecting a revolution to start; he also formulated a consequent democratic programme of action. The democratisation of the German Reich was supposed to lead to a transformation stage of the society, and even more important, Kautsky emphasised the role of non-parliamentary action (mass strikes, May Day demonstrations, and so on) as important forms of struggle. Kautsky's position was consequently not defensive but offensive. It proposed offensive methods of struggle and did not just emphasise the role of organisation and enlightenment. Hence, Kautsky's position cannot be characterised as representing negative integration.<sup>54</sup>

Hühnlich does, however, admit that there is one weak point in Kautsky's argumentation concerning the future society and state: Kautsky understood the dictatorship of the proletariat in purely political terms and his defence of the revolutionary process remained mainly negative. Kautsky did not recognise the task of crushing the bourgeois state machinery; nor did he discuss in which way the state machinery could be transformed from an organ of capitalists into one of the propertyless, from an organ of repression into one of emancipation. This weakness was, however, shared by all the other representatives of the Second International, and Kautsky should not be criticised for it alone.<sup>55</sup> In Hühnlich's analysis, Kautsky thus genuinely represented the left wing within the Social Democratic theoretical spectrum, and he cannot be identified as an ideologist of integration and attentisme.

Hühnlich's defence of Kautsky and Kautskyanism is justified to the extent that the context of argumentation in *The Road to Power* should really be taken into account. If Kautsky had only presented his idea of the revolutionary nature of the Social Democratic Party in this context, Hühnlich's defence of Kautsky would be well grounded. The conception presented in *The Road to Power* can, however, be discussed in the wider context of Kautsky's thinking, and in this context Mathias's argumentation is more convincing: no one is actually denying that Kautsky continuously spoke of the ripening conditions for revolution and fundamentally identified himself as a revolutionary Marxist. Nor will anyone deny that at least in principle Kautsky defended non-parliamentary methods of struggle and understood the role of parliament as an organ making the revolutionary transformation possible. It is more the strange combination of revolutionary vigour and cautiousness in practical politics that caused Math-

---

54 Hühnlich 1981, pp. 165–7.

55 Hühnlich 1981, p. 168.

ias and Groh to interpret Kautsky's position in terms of negative integration and revolutionary attentisme.<sup>56</sup> Hühnlich is, of course, right in emphasising that Kautsky did present some kind of a democratic action programme that stressed both parliamentary reforms and the role of demonstrations which were supposed to support the demands for reforms. Reforms were, furthermore, supposed to increase the strength of the proletarian organisations and function as a measure of this very same strength. And, of course, Kautsky considered socialism as the final goal of the workers' movement and studied its conditions. A revolutionary period was opening up; the workers should, on the other hand, be careful not to take the initiative into their own hands under the pretext of endangering their organisation and present achievements. The organisation is both an indicator and an instrument of the power of the workers' movement, the strength of which is not, however, realised in practical politics. The democratic action programme is evaluated by the criterion of strengthening the organisation, and all the demands and achievements are measured by this criterion. Kautsky certainly was a revolutionary in demanding the socialist revolution, but the only connection between the immediate tasks of the movement and its final goal is provided by the organisation; once the organisation is sufficiently developed the socialist revolution will be realised. Until then, all political demands and achievements must serve this very purpose. It is this idea which Mathias called organisational patriotism.<sup>57</sup>

---

56 Salvadori recalled that there were other more influential historical factors contributing to the integration of Social Democracy into bourgeois society than the theoretical position represented by Kautsky, but even Salvadori does not deny Mathias's general interpretation: 'We have seen that a cautious conclusion was typical of Kautsky, who theorized the inevitability of escalating social conflict in general historical terms, yet constantly retreated to a passive attentisme when it came to the concrete conjuncture in Germany' (Salvadori 1979, p. 90). It may be that Mathias had a tendency to interpret Kautsky's work as a direct factor leading to the integration of Social Democracy into the bourgeois state. It seems more reasonable, however, to read Mathias as claiming that Kautsky's scientific socialism was only an expression and perhaps the most prominent expression of the dilemma facing a growing revolutionary mass party at the turn of the century.

57 It is not difficult to find enthusiastic statements about the role of organisation in Kautsky's writings: 'The proletarian does not find happiness in the greatness and power of his own personality, but in that of the organisation to which he belongs ... With the development of his organisation he [the worker] strides successfully forward. Yet organisation means nothing other than the subordination of the individual worker to the whole, the restriction of his personal freedom' (Kautsky 1904-5, p. 345).

Kautsky's discussion of parliamentary democracy and struggle in other contexts can be used to give further support to Mathias's thesis – despite the fact that Mathias did not especially analyse Kautsky's conception of democracy and parliament and its role in Kautsky's theory of revolution.

Parliamentary democracy was understood by Kautsky as having a twofold role in the socialist strategy. On the one hand, it formed the ideal training ground for the development of the proletarian organisation and party, it was essential for the development of consciousness too. On the other hand, parliament functioned as an indicator of the strength of political parties in society; it showed when the time was ready for a socialist revolution or, in other words, when the proletariat formed the majority of society. Even though Kautsky by no means denied the importance of mass action or demonstrations and their propagation for agitational purposes, he warned against their premature use; their use could lead to provocation – before the Social Democrats could be sure of winning the final struggle which, once again, was best shown by their success in elections. While Kautsky did not at this stage regard parliamentary politics as the exclusive form of proletarian political activity, he did regard it as its principal form of activity. Parliamentary democracy was not yet synonymous with proletarian rule in general – as it was practically to become after the Russian Revolution in 1917 – but it constituted the institution within which the final struggle was to be fought. It was also the institution through which the working class was to exercise its political power.

Mathias was not the first to point out Kautsky's position as representing attentisme and leading to integration – even though the terms were not used. In a discussion of the role of the general strike – a discussion which was very vivid after the first Russian Revolution in 1905 – Anton Pannekoek characterised Kautsky's position in very similar terms. Pannekoek claimed that Kautsky neglected the importance of mass actions as promoters of revolution. And Kautsky's answer to the critique was also characteristic of his position. In a series of articles published in *Die Neue Zeit* in 1912–13, Pannekoek analysed the basic difference of opinions as follows:

The question as to *how the proletariat gains the fundamental democratic rights* which, once its socialist class consciousness is sufficiently developed, endow it with political hegemony, is the *basic issue underlying our tactics*. We take the view that they can only be won from the ruling class in the course of engagements in which the latter's whole might takes the field against the proletariat and in which, consequently, this whole might is overcome. Another conception would be that the ruling class

surrenders these rights voluntarily under the influence of universal democratic or ethical ideals and without recourse to the means of coercion at its disposal – this would be the peaceful evolution towards the state of the future envisaged by the Revisionists.<sup>58</sup>

Kautsky's mistake was that he did not represent either of these conceptions. In Pannekoek's opinion, Kautsky seemed to think, on the contrary, that the final takeover of political power was something altogether different from the practical politics of the Social Democrats:<sup>59</sup>

We inferred from his statements that he conceived the conquest of power as the destruction of the enemy's strength once and for all, a single act qualitatively different from all the proletariat's previous activity in preparation for this revolution.<sup>60</sup>

Further, Pannekoek accused Kautsky of restricting the activity and initiative of the masses on the pretext of strengthening the organisation and the potential power of the party. Pannekoek's accusation thus closely resembled that of Mathias. According to Pannekoek, Kautsky's reasoning was faulty and led to unbearable conclusions. The masses do not transfer part of their energy and their revolutionary willpower to an organisation, the proletarian party, in order to diminish it. On the contrary, the party should represent the general will and

---

58 Pannekoek 1978, p. 62.

59 Rosa Luxemburg's discussion of a mass strike can also be understood as a critique of the party leadership, Kautsky included: 'The mass strike, as shown to us in the Russian Revolution, is not a crafty method discovered by subtle reasoning for the purpose of making the proletarian struggle more effective, *but the method of motion of the proletarian mass*, the phenomenal form of the proletarian struggle in the revolution ... The mass strike is rather the common denomination, of a whole period of the class struggle lasting for years, perhaps for decades' (Luxemburg 1970 [1906], pp. 168–9). And further: 'In the case of the enlightened German worker the class consciousness implanted by the social democrats is *theoretical and latent*: in the period ruled by bourgeois parliamentarism it cannot, as a rule, actively participate in a direct mass action; it is the ideal sum of the four hundred parallel actions of the electoral sphere during the election struggle, of the many partial economic strikes and the like. In the revolution when the masses themselves appear upon the political battlefield this class consciousness becomes *practical and active* ... Six months of a revolutionary period will complete the work of the training of these as yet unorganised masses which ten years of public demonstrations and distribution of leaflets would be unable to do' (Luxemburg 1970, pp. 194–5).

60 Pannekoek 1978, p. 62.

power of the proletariat, and as such, it should strengthen and not diminish the total power of the proletarian movement:

*The initiative and potential for action which the masses surrender by doing so is not in fact lost, but re-appears elsewhere and in another form as the party's initiative and potential for spontaneous action: a transformation of energy takes place, as it were.*<sup>61</sup>

Kautsky misunderstood the relation between the party and the masses. He wanted to restrict the power and activity of the masses in order to strengthen the power and activity of the party. The result could only be the opposite:

If the party saw its function as restraining the masses from action for as long as it could do so, then party discipline would mean a loss to the masses of their initiative and potential for spontaneous action, a *real* loss, and not a transformation of energy. *The existence of the party would then reduce the revolutionary capacity of the proletariat rather than increase it.*<sup>62</sup>

Kautsky's answer to Pannekoek's critique was typical. On the one hand, he wanted to defend himself as being a radical revolutionary. He agreed with Pannekoek on the importance of actual struggle in increasing the activity and power of the revolutionary organisation: 'That is to say, we both are also agreed that proletarian organs of power are organisations of struggle which grow, flourish and prove themselves in struggle'.<sup>63</sup> The only serious difference between the disputants as understood by Kautsky was that whereas Pannekoek was ready to endanger the organisation even in struggles without the guarantee of success, Kautsky was willing to risk the organisation only insofar as success was certain:

But Pannekoek understands struggle to mean struggle in general and not, like me, victorious struggle. For him, the main thing is the spirit that animates the organisation, and for him this spirit is spurred on by every struggle, whether victorious or not.<sup>64</sup>

---

61 Pannekoek 1978, pp. 72–1.

62 Pannekoek 1978, p. 73.

63 Kautsky 1912–13, p. 438.

64 Kautsky 1912–13, pp. 438–9.

Even though Kautsky did not explicitly state it, the logical conclusion was that since one never can be sure of the results of a struggle in advance – at least not until the proletariat forms the majority of the population and proves its power in parliamentary elections – one should restrain from any struggle that might endanger the integrity and organisation of the party. Participation in political struggles and the presentation of one's own demands to other political forces is only justifiable insofar as it supports the organisational growth of the workers' party.

Kautsky's position in the discussion about the use of mass strike as a weapon was also typical. He warned the party not to use this weapon recklessly – as he thought Pannekoek was suggesting: 'Our party has unequivocally made it known that it is not willing to turn to the mass strike at every possible opportunity'.<sup>65</sup> Kautsky did not in principle deny the use of mass strike or other mass actions as a weapon. But he trivialised the whole question and stated that it was self-evident that mass actions belong to the arsenal of the party: 'To demand mass actions from our party today is simply to demand that it does the obvious, to demand that it moves'.<sup>66</sup>

The debate between Kautsky and Pannekoek on the general strike showed Kautsky's twofold position rather clearly: on the one hand, he was all too ready to accept the use of a mass action as a political weapon, but on the other, he made the point harmless by stressing, first, that care should be taken to not use it recklessly, without the certainty of success, and second, that there was not in fact any real disagreement between him and Pannekoek on the subject. Kautsky had, in fact, always approved of the use of mass strike as a political method. Thus, Pannekoek's defence of the use of mass actions did not, in fact, add anything new to the tactics of Social Democracy. They had always been part of the agitation and propaganda of the party. Kautsky was, then, on the one hand revolutionary, while on the other he denied the actuality and possibility of political action aiming at a revolution. There could hardly be a clearer manifestation of revolutionary attentisme.

In his pamphlet *Internationality and the War*,<sup>67</sup> Kautsky explicitly discussed the new situation caused by the World War and its consequences for the International. Kautsky was not willing to admit that the outbreak of war would indicate bankruptcy for the policy of the International. On the contrary, the theory of Social Democracy had, in fact, been verified. Marxists had predicted

---

65 Kautsky 1912–13, p. 445.

66 Ibid.

67 Kautsky 1915.

the necessary outcome of the war as a consequence of the imperialist politics of the major powers. If the politics recommended and propagated by the Marxists had been adopted, war could have been avoided. Thus the Social Democrats had been right from the very beginning.<sup>68</sup>

However, Kautsky did not just try to legitimate the strategy and theoretical conclusions of Social Democracy; he even tried to make them more adequate under the present conditions. The most important new idea was included in the proposal that Social Democrats do not necessarily have to condemn war in general; there are just wars, wars that can be defended and supported by the Social Democrats. Everything depends on the motives of the participants in the war:

Things look different, when, in taking sides, we proceed not from the interests of our own state, but from the interests of the entire world proletariat and ask ourselves: whose victory offers better prospects for the advance of our cause, not just in our own state, but around?<sup>69</sup>

Thus one could say that a class standpoint acts as the criterion for just or unjust wars. Kautsky's position in relation to the strategy of the International was very characteristic: On the one hand, the politics of the International were in fact correct even before the war, and they proved to be correct even during the war. On the other hand, the International could not play any active role in opposing the war once it had been declared. The International was basically an instrument of peace, not one of war. Kautsky's position was thus paradoxical: the International was in possession of the right theory and strategy, which, however, proved altogether ineffective:

That means, it [the International] is not an effective instrument in war-time, it is basically an *instrument of peace* – and it is such in a dual sense. It can only unleash its full power in times of peace. And to the extent that it is able to unleash its full power, it constantly works for peace.<sup>70</sup>

Thus there did not seem to be any chance of opposing the war once it had been declared. The International was at its strongest during peace; and indeed, it was the best instrument for maintaining peace, but paradoxically it was not suited

---

68 Kautsky 1915, p. 6.

69 Kautsky 1915, p. 8.

70 Kautsky 1915, p. 38.

to opposing war.<sup>71</sup> Because opposing a war seems to be doomed to failure, it should be possible to further differentiate the strategy and to take a stand on questions of war in a differentiated way. According to Kautsky, it was thus justified to defend one's own nation against an alien aggressor that demands the annexation of areas of one's own country. A distinction should thus be made between a defence war and a war of aggression. And he came to the conclusion that a defence war is always justified.

Kautsky, however, claimed that the peace efforts of Social Democracy are not at all futile even if they are unable to prevent or stop a war. They have in any case an immense propagandistic effect:

Yet whatever the immediate practical success a peace programme of the International may have on the establishment of peace conditions as well, its enduring propagandist success will have to be tremendous, and it will be all the more tremendous, the deeper and more general the desire for peace is after the war, and the more clearly the policies of the International appear to be the only ones that can save the world from another war. It is precisely because of our internationality that we will then achieve our greatest successes, and precisely for this reason that each and every one of us will best secure and promote the flourishing of their nation.<sup>72</sup>

Participation in and active support of the war effort by the Social Democrats can, in principle, then be in accordance with a major opposition to any war and a striving for permanent peace. One of the reasons for this is that it is not possible to oppose a war directly – a position already presented by Kautsky earlier – it is first necessary to abolish the economic and political causes of war, and then the war itself becomes unnecessary:

If we do that, then taking sides will not prevent the International from carrying out its historic tasks in a united and unified manner: the struggle for peace and class struggle in times of peace.<sup>73</sup>

---

71 Kautsky 1915, p. 39. In discussing Kautsky's attitude to the danger of war and to the possibility of preventing the outbreak of war in general, Pannekoek formulated Kautsky's position as follows: 'Kautsky poses the contradiction: only when we rule is the threat of war abolished; as long as capitalism rules, the war cannot by any means be prevented ... Kautsky overlooks the process of revolution, within which, by the active emergence of the proletariat its own power is gradually built up and the rule of capital crumbles away, bit by bit' (Pannekoek 1911–12, p. 616).

72 Kautsky 1915, p. 40.

73 Ibid.

As the above discussion makes evident, Kautsky's main position and argument concerning the questions of war and peace was in line with his more general strategic position characterised by Mathias as a combination of revolutionary vigour and practical cautiousness, or as a combination of revolutionary attentisme and negative integration by Groh. In principle, Kautsky criticised both the economic and political causes of imperialism and condemned imperialism outright as a policy of war and violence. The only permanent solution to the contradictions of capitalism causing imperialistic policies and increasing armaments was the alternative proposed by the Social Democrats, namely, the realisation of socialism. On the other hand, no practical means were proposed for preventing the outbreak or preparations for war.

The above discussion of Kautsky's position as it came into appearance in different contexts seems thus to support Mathias's thesis. Steenson defended Kautsky against accusations of 'quietism' by claiming that 'Kautsky's position was not quietistic; he urged constant, vigorous participation in various endeavours, was particularly forceful in his demands for political activity, and argued that theoretical work was an integral part of socialist practice'.<sup>74</sup> And further:

His view of the party was that it was revolutionary in its opposition to the state and its aim for the future, but not 'revolution-making' because aggressive action not in accordance with objective conditions (that is, the strength of the German state) would only end in disaster.<sup>75</sup>

Even if one were to agree with Steenson that the objective conditions of revolution were in fact lacking in Germany and that Kautsky's cautiousness was only dictated by his sense of political realism, Steenson's argument does not solve the problem originally posed by Mathias; it was the paradoxical combination of revolutionary vigour and practical cautiousness that was pointed out by Mathias.

In this respect, Lichtheim's empathetic assessment of the role of Kautsky's thinking comes closer to the point. The very starting point of Lichtheim's analysis is the seemingly paradoxical situation in the German Social Democratic movement: at the very moment when the German Social Democratic Party had factually transformed itself into a radical-democratic opposition movement (after the abolition of the anti-socialist legislation in 1890), by adopting the Erfurt Programme in 1891 it proclaimed its undying antagonism to bourgeois

---

74 Steenson 1978, p. 153.

75 Steenson 1978, p. 154.

society.<sup>76</sup> Consequently, there was a widening gap between the theoretical analysis and the practical demands facing the party. In Lichtheim's opinion, the great merit of Kautsky's thinking consisted of this very paradox: he provided an essentially reformist party with a revolutionary programme without, however, altering the practice of the party. There is a real paradox in Kautsky's thinking and in the situation facing the movement, but 'the seeming paradox of an essentially pacific and gradualist movement equipped with a revolutionary doctrine loses much of its bewildering aspect when viewed against the background of Bismarckian and Wilheminian Germany'.<sup>77</sup> It was Kautsky's identification of the dictatorship of the proletariat and the socialist revolution with a democratic parliament having a socialist majority that resolved the paradox. In retrospect, one could even agree with Lichtheim's assessment that 'Kautsky was the theorist of the democratic revolution that occurred in Central Europe at the end of the war'.<sup>78</sup>

The most plausible explanation for Kautsky's cautiousness is that in his opinion it was not the objective conditions but rather the subjective element that was lacking in Germany and in Europe in general. The proletariat was unripe to accomplish a socialist revolution. The assumption of the unripe proletariat makes it sensible to emphasise the role of theoretical training and to demand the strengthening of party organisation – both tasks that could not be accomplished without a revolutionary doctrine. The seeming paradox in Kautsky's thinking becomes understandable once the role of the subjective factor is recognised. The socialist party must in principle be a revolutionary party. Otherwise it would not be able to organise a revolutionary proletariat. But it is of equal importance that the party should not try to make an untimely revolution and provoke its opponents; and a revolution is untimely – by definition – insofar as the proletariat is not ready to make it.

As Steenson pointed out, there was in Kautsky's theory of revolution a clear distinction between political and social revolution.<sup>79</sup> By first accomplishing a political revolution, the proletariat will later be able to realise a social one. Kautsky did not, however, problematise the relation between these two types of revolution. The political revolution was largely equal to the establishment of a parliamentary democracy with a Social Democratic majority. In this respect, one can agree with Lichtheim's formulation of Kautsky's position:

---

76 Lichtheim 1964, p. 260.

77 Ibid.

78 Lichtheim 1964, p. 270.

79 Steenson 1978, pp. 8–9.

As he saw it, the Socialist movement had in the meantime shed its Blanquist tendencies and become democratic, without for that reason ceasing to be revolutionary. Its rise to power necessarily implied a complete alteration in the class struggle, and this to Kautsky was what 'the revolution' meant ... This accomplished democracy could be relied upon to do the rest.<sup>80</sup>

Kautsky's idea of a socialist revolution and growing into socialism was thus closely connected with his conception of parliamentary democracy and parliamentary politics – a question that is hardly discussed by Mathias or Hühnlich in this context. The question of democracy, however, first made Kautsky's position understandable in a broader context. In *Parlamentarism and Democracy* [*Parlamentarismus und Demokratie*],<sup>81</sup> originally published in 1893, Kautsky criticised different forms of direct democracy and defended parliamentary democracy as the only adequate form of exercise of proletarian power. In this article, Kautsky clearly formulated a position which he defended in various contexts later on in his career. Parliamentary democracy is, according to him, the ideal form of exercising political power and it suits the purposes of the proletariat as well. Parliamentary activity also guarantees the best possible growing ground for a proletarian organisation.

The Social Democrats have, in fact, become the only genuine representative of democracy since liberals have deceived the cause of democracy. In the article *What Now?* [*Was nun?*], Kautsky wrote: 'A revival of liberalism is no longer conceivable, democracy can only be conquered by social democracy.'<sup>82</sup>

Social Democrats are, furthermore, the only real representatives of general social progress: 'We therefore now see that the proletariat's class interests make it the most decisive and, already today, the sole representative of social progress.'<sup>83</sup> The general progress of society is in the interests of the working class, whereas the capitalists only represent their specific interests:

80 Lichtheim 1964, p. 268.

81 Kautsky 1911a.

82 Kautsky 1902–3c, p. 398.

83 Ibid. Cf. Kautsky in *The Agrarian Question*: 'In other words: social development takes precedence over the interests of the proletariat. Social Democracy cannot protect proletarian interests which stand in the way of social development. This is not, of course, generally the case. The theoretical basis of Social Democracy consists in the recognition that the interests of social development and those of the proletariat coincide, and that the proletariat is therefore destined to act as the mainspring of social development' (Kautsky 1988, pp. 325–6). Earlier, capitalists represented the general interests of society; now their role

Instead it is becoming apparent that the interests of the workers and capitalists are increasingly divergent when it comes to trade policy too; at the same time, however, it is apparent that the interests of the workers increasingly coincide with the interests of the economic development of the entire nation, whereas those of the capitalists are increasingly becoming the specific interests of individual cliques who are damaging the further development of society as a whole.<sup>84</sup>

This evaluation of specific versus general interests was based on an analysis of the transformation of the capitalism of free competition into monopolistic capitalism governed by trusts and cartels introducing restrictions on trade and competition.

In 1915, Kautsky issued a warning to the critics of parliamentarism. It was, according to him, easy to criticise but difficult to make use of a parliament:

In that way, modern democracy developed, whose essential traits are parliamentarism, the press, and large party organisations encompassing the entire country. Nothing is easier than to criticise those institutions, and nothing is more impossible than to do without them in a modern democracy.<sup>85</sup>

Even though the Social Democrats are fighting for democracy, they are not simply bourgeois democrats; parliamentary democracy is not their final goal, but neither is it only a means to achieve a certain end. It is true that democracy makes it possible to achieve the final goal, socialism, but it is also an essential element of this very final goal:

As the lowest class in the state, the proletariat cannot assert itself [zu seinem Rechte kommen] otherwise than through democracy. But we do not share the illusions of bourgeois democrats that the proletariat will come into its own simply by attaining democracy. That only constitutes the ground on which the proletariat can struggle for its rights. In a

---

was inherited by the proletariat: 'In as far as the class interests of the proletariat represented society's *future*, these interests invariably coincided with those of the general interests of society' (Kautsky 1919b, p. 8).

84 It is interesting to note that, in this respect, Kautsky came to the same conclusion as Adam Smith in stating that a progressive development of society is favourable to workers but not to the capital owners (cf. Kautsky 1911b, p. 71; Smith 1970, pp. 357–8).

85 Kautsky 2011d, p. 797.

democracy, the proletarian emancipation-struggle does not cease, it just assumes different forms.<sup>86</sup>

Democracy is, further, closely connected with the idea of a national state. The ideas of both democracy and national state presuppose that the opinion of the majority of the population is taken into account before any social changes are introduced:

Democracy and the idea of the national state, which is closely related to it, require that the status quo should not be altered without the support of the affected peoples.<sup>87</sup>

The idea of parliamentarism as the basic instrument of proletarian power was not by any means new to Kautsky. A similar argumentation can already be found in the *Erfurt Programme*.<sup>88</sup> In the hands of the bourgeoisie, a parliament is destined to remain an instrument of the bourgeoisie, but as soon as the working class takes part in parliament, its nature is changed. It is no longer exclusively a bourgeois instrument of political power. In *Parliamentarism and Democracy*, the same idea was expressed even more explicitly: a parliament can just as well function as an instrument of the dictatorship of the proletariat as of the bourgeoisie.<sup>89</sup> A democratic state is, furthermore, the ideal field of struggle for the fighting proletariat:

The fighting proletariat has so much confidence in social development, so much confidence in itself that it fears no battles, not even those against superior forces; it merely demands a battlefield on which it can move around freely. This battlefield is provided by the democratic state. The final decisive battle between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat can be most easily fought out there.<sup>90</sup>

---

86 Kautsky 2011d, p. 800.

87 Kautsky 2011d, p. 802.

88 'Not only does the proletariat therefore not have any reason to stay away from parliamentarism; on the other hand, it has every reason to exert all its energy to increase the power of parliaments in relation to other government departments and to increase its parliamentary representation as much as possible. Along with the freedom of the press and the right to organise, universal suffrage should be regarded as one of the conditions of a thriving proletariat' (Kautsky 1910b, p. 188).

89 Kautsky 1911a, p. 121.

90 Kautsky 1911a, p. 125.

In order to fight an organised state power, the proletariat must likewise be organised. And organisation is favoured by a parliament to which the proletariat has access. Election campaigns are the best means of organising and uniting the proletariat despite its different occupations and places of residence:

The election campaigns to this parliament, as well as participating in the struggles of this parliament, prove to be powerful methods of bringing together the proletariat of the whole country, without distinction of occupation or residence, for united action, and into a unified body that bestows the working masses the maximum strength that it is able to develop in these conditions.<sup>91</sup>

In conclusion, it could be said that in Kautsky's analysis parliamentary democracy is an important institution for two main reasons: it is the ideal arena for struggle and for developing the organisation of the proletariat, but it is also an essential element of the dictatorship of the proletariat, interpreted as rule by the majority, without violating the rights of the minority.

In an article published in *Vorwärts*,<sup>92</sup> Kautsky criticised the definition of democracy proposed by Bernstein. Bernstein proposed to translate democracy as the nonexistence of any class rule, as a state of society in which no class has a privilege over the others or the whole of society. However, this definition is not adequate. According to Kautsky, even in democratic states there is class rule:

Bernstein identifies the absence of political privileges with the absence of class rule. Do those of us in democratic states not have the same class rule as in non-democratic states, indeed a class rule that is on occasion even greater? What Bernstein wanted to say with the absence of class rule was obviously nothing other than the equal rights of all people in the nation [*Volksgenossen*].<sup>93</sup>

This definition is not complete at all. In Kautsky's opinion, there is another side to democracy that is more important than equality of rights of the people:

If we are to speak of democracy, then in addition to equal rights the *government must be submitted to the will of the people*. Bernstein has com-

---

91 Kautsky 1911a, p. 137.

92 Kautsky 1899b, p. 3.

93 Ibid.

pletely disregarded this aspect of democracy, and yet in practice it is becoming more and more important for us.<sup>94</sup>

The development of democracy has in recent years led to the equality of rights of citizens and general franchise, including the working class.<sup>95</sup> This is not, however, enough. The control of the governmental institutions by the people is the decisive question. Without this control, there cannot be any democracy. Even though Kautsky did not say so explicitly, the precondition for the control of the government by the people was the achievement of the majority in parliament – which, on the other hand, presupposed equality in the political rights of the people. Thus there was not after all such a great difference between Kautsky's and Bernstein's respective conceptions of democracy.

Kautsky's conception of parliamentary democracy seemed to undergo a definite change after the First World War and the Russian Revolution. Closer study of his writings during this period does, however, show that the change was not, after all, a crucial one.<sup>96</sup> Now, Kautsky not only claimed that a democratic state is an ideal institution for the purposes of the proletariat to measure and increase its potential power and also to exercise it. A centralised parliament

---

94 Ibid.

95 As pointed out by Pannekoek, Kautsky's eagerness to defend parliamentarism as a means of realising socialism was somewhat out of place in Imperial Germany, where the democratic rights were in fact strongly restricted: 'If parliamentarism and democracy are dominant, if parliament commands the whole of state power and the majority of the people command parliament, then the political-parliamentary struggle, i.e. the gradual winning over [*Gewinnung*] of the majority of the people by parliamentary praxis, education and electoral struggles, would represent the straight path to the conquering of state power. Yet these conditions are absent; they cannot be found anywhere – least of all in Germany. They have to first be created through struggles over the constitution: above all by securing the democratic right to vote' (Pannekoek 1911–12, p. 245).

96 After 1918, Kautsky's energies were primarily devoted to an ideological polemic against Bolshevism (see Salvadori 1979, p. 251). According to Salvadori, 'Kautsky could be accused of immobility, but not of having abandoned the fundamental lines of his conception of the revolutionary process, the dictatorship of the proletariat, and the socialist state' (Salvadori 1979, p. 253). In *Die Erhebung der Bolschewiki* of 1917, written shortly after the Russian Revolution, Kautsky was 'reaffirming his classical point of view: defence of universal suffrage and political democracy on the one hand, insistence on the role of socialists in bringing the social weight of the toiling masses to bear within political democracy and representative institutions on the other hand' (Salvadori 1979, p. 224). In other words, 'capitalist development, proletarian strength and democracy together constituted the preconditions for a new socialist regime' (Salvadori 1979, p. 229).

elected by the people in a free election is also the ideal form of proletarian government. The dictatorship of the proletariat established in Soviet Russia, and propagated by Lenin and others as the real democratic state of the proletariat, is in reality only a caricature of democracy. The only real change in Kautsky's conception of democracy was, after all, that whilst he earlier rather unproblematically approved of the dictatorship of the proletariat and characterised the future state as representing it, he now fought the Russian dictatorship with democracy. The difference was not, however, so considerable, because even before this he had identified the dictatorship of the proletariat with parliamentary democracy and democratic methods of government. Dictatorship was equal to rule by a proletarian majority in parliament. In *Terrorism and Communism*, Kautsky made his position quite clear:

At the same time in which Marxism became the dominant social doctrine, democracy had taken root in Western Europe, and had begun, as a result of its struggles there, to form a sound foundation for political life. In consequence of this, not only were the enlightenment and organisation of the proletariat facilitated, but also its insight into economic conditions as well as into the relative power of the classes increased. Hence all fantastic adventures were eliminated, as also was civil war, as a means of class struggle.<sup>97</sup>

Democracy is an ideal form of government because it makes it possible and necessary for different classes and individuals to formulate their own interests as the general interest of society and to evaluate the arguments and propositions presented by every party and member of society:

The best means of education are provided for them in a democracy, in which absolute freedom of discussion and publicity are essential. But this imposes on every party the obligation to strive for the emancipation of the souls of the people; and to put every member of the community in a position to examine the arguments of all sides, so that, by such means, each may arrive at some independent judgment.

Finally, class struggle takes over from democracy its best features; for in democracy each party addresses itself to the whole social community. Each party certainly defends definite class interests; but it is compelled to show every side of these interests, which are intimately connected with the general interest of the whole social community.<sup>98</sup>

---

97 Kautsky 1920b, pp. 145–6.

98 Kautsky 1920b, p. 175.

Kautsky acknowledged that even in democracy there is an element of coercion as well, but this coercion represents the will of a majority against a minority. During the transformation of capitalism into socialism, the proletariat, which as the majority has taken over state power, must exercise its power in the form of coercion against the class of capitalists. However, this kind of coercion has nothing in common with the dictatorship of the proletariat as propagated by Lenin in Russia.<sup>99</sup> The democratic exercise of power by the majority also guarantees the rights of the minority – as Kautsky had already stated.

That this form of compulsion is incompatible with democracy Lenin does not attempt to show. He seeks rather to make it compatible, by a sort of conjuror's trick, by attempting to show that, since compulsion must be exercised by the great masses upon individual capitalists in order to bring about Socialism, and since such Socialism is perfectly well compatible with democracy, every form of compulsion which might be applied with a view to introducing Socialism is compatible with democracy, even if it should represent the absolute power of single individuals over the masses.<sup>100</sup>

Lenin had misunderstood the idea of democracy in identifying it with its opposite, the dictatorship of some individuals over the rest of the population.

Kautsky accepted that workers' soviets [*Arbeiterräte*] can play a limited role in exercising proletarian power in a period of transformation. They are not, however, suitable to take the place of parliamentary democracy in socialism.<sup>101</sup> Only a centralised parliament is able to represent the interests of the totality of the wage workers. The soviets, on the contrary, can only represent – at their best – the limited interests of the industrial workers in big industry.<sup>102</sup>

The communists in Russia claim that democracy is exclusively a form of the bourgeois exercise of power. However, this is not true. Democracy, understood

---

99 According to Salvadori: 'For Kautsky, the counterposition of councils to parliament masked the design of a dictatorship by a minority, disguised in the formula of a democracy distinct from parliamentary sovereignty, branded as bourgeois' (Salvadori 1979, p. 237).

100 Kautsky 1920b, p. 185.

101 In Kautsky's opinion, the workers' soviets can play a central role during the socialisation of production (see Kautsky 1919b, p. 11). But in the same speech, socialisation is mainly seen to contribute to the unity of the proletarian organisation: 'The most important thing is the unification of the proletariat – socialisation is most suited to unifying the mass of proletarians. For this reason alone it should be prioritised' (Kautsky 1919b, p. 15).

102 Kautsky 1920b, p. 229.

as including general franchise, does not in any way belong to the rule of the bourgeoisie. It was the proletariat who first fought for the general right to take part in elections, and the bourgeoisie was opposed to it.<sup>103</sup>

Democracy is thus the only constitutional form suitable for a higher form of society, a socialist society, and democracy is the form in which higher forms of social life can become a reality: 'Democracy is the only method through which the higher forms of social life, which signify socialism for civilised people [*Kultur Mensch*], can become a reality'.<sup>104</sup>

According to Kautsky, dictatorship belongs (exclusively) to an Asian form of socialism. Such socialism could also be called tartar socialism.<sup>105</sup> The line of argumentation presented by Kautsky in other writings dealing with the Russian Revolution was in general similar to that outlined above.<sup>106</sup> Kautsky claimed that democracy is not by any means compatible with dictatorship, not to speak of a higher form of democracy, socialist democracy. In *The Dictatorship of the Proletariat* [*Die Diktatur des Proletariats*], Kautsky explicitly stated that it is impossible to think of socialism without democracy: 'Without democracy, socialism as a way of liberating the proletariat is inconceivable'.<sup>107</sup>

In this writing, Kautsky formulated in a compact form his central idea of the essential role of democracy both in the struggle for socialism and in socialism too:

Democracy is an indispensable foundation for the construction of a socialist mode of production. And only with democracy can the proletariat attain the maturity it requires in order to carry out socialism. Last of all, democracy provides the most reliable way of gauging that maturity.<sup>108</sup>

Socialism cannot be realised in a country in which the proletariat constitutes only a small minority, as is the case in Russia. One cannot expect such a country to be ripe for the introduction of socialism. And democracy is necessary for the ripening of the subjective conditions for socialism. Only fanatics would deny this basic proposition. The majority of both the German and the international proletariat is, according to Kautsky, ready to accept it.<sup>109</sup>

---

103 Kautsky 1920b, p. 231.

104 Ibid.

105 Kautsky 1920b, p. 232.

106 Steenson 1978, p. 207.

107 Kautsky 1918, p. 5.

108 Kautsky 1918, pp. 19–20.

109 Kautsky 1918, p. 63.

It is understandable that Kautsky continuously connected socialism with democracy. He seemed to think that the proletariat already constituted the absolute majority of the population both in Germany and in other developed capitalist countries. In *Terrorism and Communism*, the proletariat is already said to form nine-tenths of the total population.<sup>110</sup> The economic development is supposed to guarantee not only the increase in the absolute number of the proletariat, but also the revolutionary consciousness and the will for socialism. As has already been pointed out, democracy was, however, not only a tactical question for Kautsky. There are more important reasons for him to support democracy: the rights of minorities must be respected in socialism as well.

One would expect Kautsky to discuss more systematically the problem of the development of revolutionary consciousness and to give some explanation as to why a socialist revolution has not yet taken place despite the overwhelming majority of the proletariat in the population. Why is the proletariat not yet ripe enough?

Kautsky's comments on this problem were, however, rather scattered and unsystematic. From time to time, he referred to the petit-bourgeois origins of the proletariat and the formation of a workers' aristocracy as factors preventing the development of revolutionary consciousness. For Kautsky, the problem was always reduced to a question of time: it is only a question of the time when the majority of the population will adopt the cause of socialism as its own.

Despite the great hopes placed in the proletariat, on various occasions Kautsky discussed the relation of the different groups or classes of the population to socialism and the possibility of a 'Bundnispolitik' [politics of alliance]. The possibility of a coalition government was denied in principle by Kautsky; the major contradiction of interests in society makes such a coalition impossible.<sup>111</sup> The problem of winning support from other groups of society for the Social Democratic programme and cause was mainly discussed in connection with the problem of the changing nature of capitalism and imperialism. The foundation of cartels and the introduction of high tariffs had aroused expectations among Social Democrats of the formation of new anti-capitalistic groups. However, Kautsky could already write, in *The Road to Power* of 1909, that these expectations had not been fulfilled:

Many of us expected that the trusts and combines of the capitalists, together with the tariff policy, would lead the middle class, who suffer

---

110 Kautsky 1920b, p. 229.

111 Kautsky 1909a, p. 12.

most from these things, into our ranks. The exact reverse has actually been the result. The agrarian tariff and the employers' associations came simultaneously with the trade unions. So it was that the handicraftsmen were simultaneously pressed from all sides.<sup>112</sup>

As a result of the development of trade unions, many former supporters of the proletarian party became its direct opponents. Further development of colonialism even increased the contradictions between the different groups in society:

In the great cities the enmity of the middle classes to the proletariat was increased still more by their antagonistic positions on the questions of imperialism and colonial policy. Whoever rejects the Socialist position has nothing left but despair unless he believes in [the] colonial policy. It is the only prospect before the defenders of capitalism.<sup>113</sup>

It would also be wrong to promise small proprietors a different future from that factually reserved for them due to the iron law of economic development.<sup>114</sup> Their future is to become wage workers too, and the Social Democrats cannot, even for agitational purposes, offer them any other alternative or try to prolong their existence as small proprietors.<sup>115</sup> The small proprietors are thus bound to become the natural enemies of the Social Democrats, even though the alternative offered to them by the Social Democrats is objectively the best possible one, as they are offered the prospect of becoming workers in socialist industry and of being saved from becoming wage workers in capitalism.

The development of imperialism would, however, also seem to offer new possibilities for agitating new groups to join the ranks of social democracy. Petit bourgeoisie, intellectuals and peasants do not objectively have any interests of their own in imperialism. And even industrial capitalists, in principle, favour democracy and oppose the increase in state expenditure caused by imperi-

---

112 Kautsky 1909a, pp. 103–4.

113 Kautsky 1909a, p. 106.

114 Kautsky denied principally any support for small proprietors of any kind: 'A social democratic agrarian programme for the capitalist mode of production is an absurdity' (Kautsky 1894–5b, p. 617). According to Salvadori, in Kautsky's opinion 'any reform that conflicted with the laws of capitalist development would remain without real effect' (Salvadori 1979, p. 55).

115 Kautsky 1988, p. 327.

alism.<sup>116</sup> There would seem to be a new opposition emerging against the big magnates of financial capital and agrarian exploiters, among the rest of the people.<sup>117</sup> Despite the acknowledgement of this potential opposition against imperialism, Kautsky was forced to admit that in practice the class of wage workers is the only consistent opponent of capitalism. And the only alternative left to those who do not wish to support Social Democracy is imperialism.

The same position as regards the potential support to be expected from the petit bourgeoisie that characterises Kautsky's later writings can already be found in the Erfurt Programme: Social Democrats have no right to fight for the immediate interests of proprietors, however small and poor they may be, because Social Democrats cannot oppose the general, necessary economic development. Such an attempt would be doomed to failure. They can, however, improve the position of peasants and petit bourgeoisie as consumers. Such an attempt would furthermore favour the general development of society and the cause of socialism:

The better the position of the small farmer or small capitalist as a consumer, the higher his standard of living, the greater his physical or intellectual demands, the sooner will he cease the struggle against big industry by starving himself in order to compete with it. If he is accustomed to a good living he will rebel against the privations incident to a protracted struggle, and will all the more sooner prefer to give up his hopeless fight and prefer to take his place among the proletariat.<sup>118</sup>

One should not, however, expect too much of this support of non-proletarian groups for the cause of socialism. The only secure and sincere recruits of Social Democracy come from the ranks of the proletariat. As stated by Kautsky in the Erfurt Programme, only the proletariat has nothing to lose in the present society:

Thus far the only favorable recruiting ground for the socialist army has been, not the classes which still have something to lose, however little that may be, but the class of those who have nothing to lose but their chains, and a world to gain.<sup>119</sup>

---

116 Kautsky 2011d, p. 810.

117 Kautsky 1911b, p. 78.

118 Kautsky 1910b, pp. 214–15.

119 Kautsky 1910b, p. 164.