

Georg von Bunsen, “The Liberal Party in Germany” (November 1882)

Abstract

Georg von Bunsen (1824–1896) sat in the Prussian Landtag and the German Reichstag from the 1860s to the early 1880s. In 1880 he joined the Liberal Union [*Liberale Vereinigung* or “Secession”], after which he became a member of the German Radical Party [*Deutsche Freisinnige Partei*]. Bunsen’s wife, Emma von Birkbeck, came from a family of British bankers, and the couple lived for years in London, where, incidentally, their daughter Marie von Bunsen, a well-known writer whose works are excerpted elsewhere in this collection, was born in 1860. In this English-language essay published in the British *Fortnightly Review*, Bunsen offers a detailed account of the left-liberal movement in Germany in the 1880s and its future prospects. He discusses relations between his party and the other major parties of his day, including Social Democracy, which Bunsen equates with Nihilism. The author then offers thoughts about the difficulties of dealing with Prussian Minister President and German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck (1815–1898), of whom he writes: “We consider him to be in error absolutely and fundamentally regarding internal politics, and we oppose his system unmercifully. We believe him too old to change into what never was more, on his part, than a war-alliance with the Liberals”

Source

The Liberal Party in Germany.

[...] I will try to explain what is Liberal in Germany or at least tends to Liberalism, what is opposed to it, and what its chances may be. If in this attempt I shall speak only incidentally of other States in Germany, and almost solely of Prussia, my excuse must be that, by reason of her territorial extent, she has to deal with nearly all contrasts and problems exercising the German mind.

Boldly speaking, then, the citizen class of Germany, to which the intellectual strength of the nation mainly belongs, and the *peasant proprietor* class are Liberal. Both owe their presentation in days gone by, their gradual development and their final emancipation in Prussia, to that remarkable dynasty of Hohenzollern, who perfectly knew what they were about when they laid the foundations of lasting empire four hundred years ago on the sandy, barren soil of the North German plain. Finding the country in the hands of a crowd of anarchic and turbulent squireens, inclined to transform the yeomen into labourers, and to oppress the inhabitants of townships which depended upon their whims even for the possibility of trading, the reigning family stood forth at all times as born protectors of both peasant and burgher. By a number of enactments they secured to the former stability of his tenure, or at least preservation of peasant homesteads from being swept away; to the latter peace within the precincts of his domain and trade with his best customer, the yeoman. This fact of many centuries should never be forgotten by those who observe that the Liberal movement in Germany has none of its weapons directed against the Crown. Loyalty to their sovereign is not instinctive only but reasoning. The people know—and the superbly-radical Berliners know as well as any other set—that, glancing at a sufficiently long carve of national history together, the reigning dynasty will, on the whole, remain true to the general tendency towards social progress impressed upon its character by a succession of able and, some of them, great rulers. Even at the present moment, when the aged Emperor loses no opportunity of proving by acts as well as in conversation that he has “utterly” and “for good and all,” and “for life” “broken off all connection” with the Liberals, loyalty among the burgher and peasant classes has not suffered in the slightest degree, nor among their leaders either. There never was, probably, a more “faithful Opposition”

in any country than that now labouring, under such adverse circumstances and with no scant a measure of approval, in Prussia.

The innate and indestructible tendency, I said, of the country is towards progress. History proves it. The instinct of self-preservation seems to impose progress as a necessity. A glance at the map of Europe will suffice to show that, with frontiers stretching from Saarbrücken to Königsberg, with countries on one side so far advanced socially as Holland and Belgium, and (in some respects) France, and the dreary, barren despotism of Russia on the other, a balance has to be drawn which in its nature must be favorable to Liberalism, however long may be Prussia's backslidings, however painful the alternations between stagnation, retrogression, and advance. The very poverty of the soil and the rigours of climate in far the greatest part of Prussia form in themselves an additional incentive. We cannot—as the present King when Regent admirably expressed it in his address to the Liberal Cabinet of 1868, the first he ever summoned—“We cannot take our case like other nations in the quiet enjoyment of acquired wealth.” The specific characteristics of our manufacturing industry as distinguished from those of other nations tend towards the production of valuable but not bulky articles for *export*, thus making it dependent for its moderate prosperity upon unshackled trade. Willingly or unwillingly, let me repeat it, Prussia, and consequently Germany, can never retrograde very long, either socially or economically. The national and geographical difficulties of their very existence, the genius of history, so to say, sends them forward on advancing lines.

These facts and considerations should be sources undoubtedly of comfort to Liberals, whether indigenous or lookers-on. *But they are all I could enumerate.* On the other hand the gentle reader—if these pages should meet with any readers—will be appalled at the array of forces rising out of the ground on every side to confront Liberalism. If his heart does not fail within him, we can assure him that no more does ours; but he will, perhaps, understand our difficulties a little better.

Let us look, first, at two of the armies in the field, both of them not Conservative in name any more than in substance, yet as certainly opposed to Liberalism, the *Vatican party*, and the *Social Democrats*. Neither of these is represented in the government of the country. Both draw most of their strength from the lower social strata, and to the blind passions of these strata both are in the habit of appealing with demagogic unscrupulousness.

In the German, as in the Prussian Parliament, the Vaticanists command about one-fourth of all the votes. The *Centrum* party, as they are pleased to call themselves in Parliament, shows a sprinkling only of Protestants, adherents all of them of the Duke of Cumberland, whose accession to regal power in Hanover they favour with so blind a partisanship as greatly to endanger his chances of succession to the throne of Brunswick as heir to the present aged Duke. A highly estimable set of men withal, and sadly out of place apparently among members devoted to, and on their knees before, a foreign potentate, the King-Pope, an unpardoning enemy for centuries past and for all ages to come, of heretical dynasties in every clime or country.

This Romanist brigade would be a very serious danger under all circumstances to the Unification of Germany under a Protestant Emperor. It became doubly so with a leader like Herr Winthorst, that small, shortsighted yet quick-eyed, squirrel-like stage-manager, who, assisted by able coadjutors, partly of the learned professions, partly aristocratic, marshals his troops with the most astounding versatility of mind. His actions are of course directed by the Roman Pontiff, or, more correctly, by those occult powers which overawe the Roman Pontiff. Yet no eye has ever traced the wires by which he is pulled to right and to left, you hear nothing but the cries and cravings of Catholic consciences, of German citizens that are persecuted and that should be protected, nothing but stern, unflinching obedience to the dictates of the constitution. Most people suspect that Winthorst, the former Hanoverian Minister of Justice, and at present legal adviser of that and other ex-sovereigns, is more of a Welfish partisan than of an Ultramontane. Yet not a single word of the witty and many-sided parliamentary debater can be adduced

as a proof that Welfish sentiments reign supreme in his mind. Rapid as lightning to catch at an interjection, utilising every casual remark as a peg on which to hang some weighty saying, he certainly fails at times when attempting to pronounce a long well-sustained oration. But it never happens to him to fail in riveting the attention of a House not exactly partial to him. He knows how to flatter Bismarck, and even to pat him complacently on his back occasionally. Yet few men in either the German or the Prussian Parliament command powers of fiercer invective, or so cool an assertion of superiority as was shown when the puny assailant, turning his large round head towards the dreaded Chancellor, said: — “That man ought to rise early in the morning who intends to outwit me.”

[...]

Here, then, is one body of men in the country, of ancient traditions yet not Conservative, subversive in fact, a foreign power, and certainly anti-Liberal. The *Social Democracy* are another. Though foreign in its origin, a German type of Communism is peculiar to them, the high-priest of which, Herr Marx, in London, enjoys the rare good fortune, after having been pushed into the background by Lassalle, the Statesman-Socialist, to find his principles accepted at last, just as he had propounded them so far back as in 1848. This hybrid of tyranny, laziness, and greed undoubtedly fills the brains at present of several hundred thousand operatives, not at all moral outcasts, however great the crimes for which occasion only seems to fail them. With the Conservatives as a party they have but little in common except their detestation of the rising middle classes and their preference for despotic rule—the only form, as I need not here explain, in which communities can be governed on the principles of Marx. It is on these two grounds that, strange as it may appear to many, Bismarck and the Social Democrats act in unison. In the earliest years of Bismarck’s government it could already be observed how he welcomed in Lassalle a man capable of organizing those masses which would, he thought, succeed in counteracting the hated “bourgeois” class when no other forces seemed sufficient for that purpose. Bismarck’s taciturn private secretary, Herr Lothar Bucher, is an ex-Socialist, united with his master, if by nothing else, by their common intense hatred of parliamentary government of the English type. Complete liberty of speech, incredible in so police-ridden a capital as Berlin, was allowed about the year 1864 to Schweitzer and other Communist revolutionaries when they prophesied “another Robespierre who would do that great man’s salutary work;” yet not as he had done it, “in the interest of the *bourgeoisie*, but by chopping off the heads of the *bourgeois*.” Latterly, again, after having done his best to shatter the Socialist organization with, one would think, not a vestige left of his old leanings, Bismarck has shown himself adept in their peculiar phraseology, unusual among statesmen. “Give him the tobacco monopoly,” was said by his acknowledged myrmidons, “that he may use the profits thereof as the *patrimony of the disinherited classes*.” Persons who have read however little of Communist teachings, may shudder at the purport of such a threat to society coming from such a quarter, yet they cannot remove the fact that words like those were used. Nor are their importance and their possible future consequences effaced by another fact in the life of this extraordinary man, viz. that the “patrimony of the disinherited” has not been mentioned again for some time past, and that “capitalism” even has been received back into favour by the chilling-a-liners, called “reptiles,”^[1] who write at Government dictation.

Enough has been said to explain why Liberalism, the burgher party, is everywhere confronted by this Nihilistic school wherever it turns. Unfortunately, the combat can no longer be, as it ought to be, for the benefit of the country, a hand-to-hand fight. Who would denounce a party so long as it is proscribed, gagged, starved, persecuted? [...] Besides a number of parrots who say their say by rote, they possess shrewd organizers like Liebknecht, Marx’s plenipotentiary, and eminent debaters and dialecticians like Bebel, a turner by profession. I doubt their believing, any of them, in the bare possibility of organizing, i.e. governing a large country of forty-five millions in accordance with their principles. But they would consider a month’s or a week’s pandemonium like the Paris Commune (which Bebel glorified in the first German Parliament of 1871), with themselves commanders-in-chief (as an empyrean of bliss worth contending for. And meanwhile they wield great power. [...])

Upon what, then, rest the chances of Liberalism? We would answer—upon its vital, its saving truth.

Absolutism has had its day. As in Tuscany, so in Prussia, an enlightened, hardworking, law-abiding absolutism was undoubtedly a great blessing, and who knows but that it would prove a blessing even now in countries like Bulgaria, like Serbia, like Greece? But it could not preserve a throne in Germany as matters now stand; it could not find the financial means imperatively demanded in a modern State; it could not enforce or provide national defences; it could not, without peril to the Crown, concentrate all responsibilities upon one person; it could not satisfy that desire for self-government, which is, after all, by no means a despicable instinct of higher developed races.

Caesarism, monarchy's caricature and most dangerous enemy, threatens Germany, through Bismarck's mistaken internal policy, with considerable social evils. There is nothing new in his recent schemes. They are of the *Bas-Empire*. They are copied from Napoleon III.'s attempts to win over to the House of Bonaparte the operative classes among whom he had espied a growing dislike to the powerful French *bourgeoisie*. Like his, the Bismarckian policy, although backed by a much-beloved Sovereign's late approval, will fail, and all the more so, as the excuses for it are wanting in our country. No self-seeking, bloated *bourgeoisie* has any existence in Germany. There lives in the common people a very strong habit of Protestant self-dependence. What American would deny the fact after having observed our immigrants as they land on the Atlantic shore? Why eradicate, by acting Providence, that manly trait, instead of cultivating it? Germans, like Englishmen, require no more than to see every legal obstacle to action removed, a free highway before them, a field open upon which to hammer out each his particular fortune. However, Caesarism will not simply fail, but during its tentative reign will produce harm unspeakable in a country of scant resources, and requiring all the self-poised energies of a Spartan population. Can Caesarism teach a nation how to conquer for itself a moderate, yet, somehow, well-apportioned share in the industry and commerce of the world at a period of universal history when the United States of America and the British Colonies undergo a gradual transformation into great industrial centres? Will not Caesarism, when the day of inevitable breakdown arrives for its puerilities, engulf monarchy in the ruin of the educated classes, leaving many-headed Anarchy supreme?

To save Monarchy, by common consent the most appropriate form of government in a country almost encased with habitual breakers of the peace; to save Society which, whatever Bismarck may assert to the contrary, rests upon healthy development of the freedom of the individual; to draw the balance, as it were, between the advanced democracy of the West., and the informal despotism of the East, Liberalism only can be enlisted. The time *may* come when, repulsed after every fresh start, loath to see even its primary and least-doubted truths treated as airy myths, refused access to the moderating influences of responsibility, it may, as in other countries, become keenly radical. It has not at present any strong admixture of radical elements. German Liberalism admits what Emperor William was advised (needlessly enough) to proclaim afresh in the first days of the present year, that in German lands the Sovereign governs as well as reigns. Everybody, in fact, considers a strong executive necessary in the peculiar geographical position and political structure of our country, and in the present unstable conditions of Europe. I have an opportunity already, when mentioning Bavarian troubles, to show that a King's personal initiative in matters of primary importance for the welfare of the State, has, under circumstances, met with the assent, qualified, of course, by anxious thoughts of precedent, yet none the less honest, of Liberalism in various parts of Germany. No danger to monarchy, if I have described them as they are, save from among the enemies of Liberalism!

[...]

I have scarcely touched upon some of the many sides of my question. Yet the facts, perhaps too realistically stated in these pages, will suffice to carry conviction to every reader that on the one hand, and for some time to come, whoever expects to see Prussia or Germany governed in anything like a regular or equal alternation between Liberals and Conservatives will be mistaken—that a Liberal Cabinet,

if such a one be formed, will consist not so much of parliamentary celebrities, of whom there are few, as of statesmanlike members of the Civil Service—and that Liberalism will ever and anon, if backed by an enlightened Sovereign, force a Conservative Cabinet to introduce Liberal measures.

On the other hand, and speaking of a future, not, perhaps, so far distant, the party of unrest, of faith in the improvement of men, of law and organization, and consequent stability; the party of national unity without uniformity; the party that continues the saving traditions of the dynasty of Hohenzollern, holds the destinies of Prussia and of Germany in their hands. If the “heart of Europe” shall remain sound, if it be intended in God’s providence to continue unmoved by volcanic upheavals, if it be permitted to bring benefits to mankind, that party must obtain a share in the direction of its affairs.

Berlin, November 1882
Georg von Bunsen

NOTES

[1] Claiming Secret Service Money at the time of his greatest popularity (in 1867, I think), Bismarck explained to the Landtag the necessity felt by sportsmen and statesmen alike of following pernicious vermin by ferrets. The word he used, “Reptilian,” has stuck to a class of semi-official writers since then. – footnote by Georg von Bunsen.

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