Hans Delbrück, “Bismarck’s Last Political Idea” (1912)

Abstract

Between the time of Bismarck’s resignation in March 1890 and the publication of this essay by the historian and publicist Hans Delbrück (1848–1929) in 1912, evidence had gradually emerged about Bismarck’s plans to foment a crisis—a parliamentary, a constitutional, and possibly also a military crisis—that would have made his continuation in office indispensable to the young Kaiser Wilhelm II (1859–1941). The publication of personal memoirs by leading political figures at the time, including that of Germany’s third chancellor, Chlodwig zu Hohenlohe-Schillingsfürst (mentioned by Delbrück), made clear the extreme measures Bismarck contemplated at the time. His plans to do away with (or at least revise) universal manhood suffrage, to rid himself of an oppositional Reichstag, and to goad the Social Democrats into street violence were only the most sensational intrigues that unfolded behind the scenes. Historians in the 1960s and 1970s were still debating Bismarck’s alleged plans for a coup d’état in 1890.

Source

[…] In what way did the chancellor [in 1890] want to reform the voting rights for Reichstag elections?

[…]

In 1890, Bismarck was confronted with that Reichstag majority which was fundamentally hostile to him and which finally [in 1895] even denied him the mere human gesture of congratulations on his 80th birthday. In the final chapter of his “Thoughts and Memories,” he characterized the Center as the party which was “aiming to destroy the uncomfortable structure of a German Reich under a Protestant emperor,” and the Free Democrats as “crypto-republicans.” In 1887 he had once again succeeded in breaking the majority which those parties formed together with the Poles and Social Democrats, but there was no prospect of that succeeding again. The tower of the Center was unshakable, Eugen Richter at the head of the Free Democrats was unapproachable, and the Social Democrats grew and grew. Bitterly, the creator of universal suffrage complained about the lack of national spirit among the German people, but what could he do? “Get you home, you fragments,” he shouts to the factions on the final page of his “Thoughts and Memories” with Coriolan, turning from the people to the dynasties to whom he “makes amends.”

He spoke of a return to the old alliance[1] of a reduction of the empire to a mere customs and war alliance without an imperial diet, of a cold position of the imperial diet by leaning on the provincial parliaments, but among the manifold thoughts flying over and over, in which Bismarck thought of wringing out the “majority Windhorst-Richter-Grillenberger hostile to the Reich,” he finally stuck, as I already explained in 1908, to a change in the electoral law as the only mode that held out the prospect not merely of a provisional stopgap, but of a permanent, usable distribution of power. What should this change look like?

Neither a census, nor a class election, nor corporative orders, nor delegations from the provincial parliaments were to replace universal, equal, direct, secret suffrage. But an exceptional law was to deprive all notorious Social Democrats who, as it was formulated in the Anti-Socialist Law, “aim at the overthrow of the existing state or social order” of the right to vote and to stand for election, and in order to be able to carry this out and to let the given social dependencies take full effect, the *secret* ballot was to be replaced by the *public one.*

The restriction of the general right to vote would therefore […] not have been a general one, but would have consisted in the disenfranchisement of a particular party, namely the social democratic party, unless one wants to see in the publicity of the election also a general restriction of the right to vote, since it prevents the socially weaker ones everywhere from using the right.

It is easy to imagine the implementation of such a law. The authorities draw up lists of notorious Social Democratic revolutionaries, an impartial judicial authority decides on any complaints and vouches that the law is not extended to other parties. When all those thus proscribed are deprived of political rights, it is in the hands of the government whether to eliminate the Social Democratic party from the Reichstag altogether or to reduce it to a small group of more harmless ones.

The legal grounds for the exclusion of Social Democrats from political rights […] was often expressed by Bismarck, the old dike captain, with the sentence "what does not want to dike, that must give way." Anyone who does not recognize the legal foundations of the state cannot be appointed to its co-government. Social Democracy has no moral claim to the right to vote and to a seat in the Reichstag, since the latter is intended to work for the good of the Reich, but that party wants not the good but the destruction of this Reich.

Bismarck had already developed this idea in a letter to Tiedemann in 1878;[2] then he expressed it shortly before the crisis, on December 15, 1889, against Prince Hohenlohe[3] and again soon after, on October 30, 1892, against Director Kaemmel, who visited him in Friedrichsruh.[4] He told him: "In Rome, *aquae et igni* was *interdictus*, whoever placed himself outside the legal order, in the Middle Ages this was called outlawing. One would have to treat Social Democracy similarly, take away its political rights, its right to vote. I would have gone that far."

If we now know from [Otto von] Helldorff, the leader of the Conservatives who was close to him at the time, that the Chancellor once told him in high excitement and in the utmost seriousness, "I want to spend the last years of my life making amends for the gravest mistake I have committed," namely, the introduction of universal suffrage,[5] we can now hardly doubt that the "making amends" was to consist precisely in the publicity of the vote and in the disenfranchisement of the revolutionaries.

In an almost surprising way, the old Bismarck comes back into harmony with the new one, and out of the apparent contradiction that the statesman who created universal suffrage wanted to abolish it again, the constancy of the great individuality rises. Hermann Oncken has recently shown in these *Jahrbücher* (October issue 1911) how Bismarck, in the time of conflict, rolled the idea of replacing class suffrage in Prussia by octroying the general, equal, direct right to vote. It is true that Bismarck later disavowed such plans in the strongest possible terms in a Reichstag speech (September 17, 1878), but Oncken's evidence is so clear that a contrary statement fifteen years later under a completely changed political situation cannot well make it go away. Even later, e.g., in a conversation with [Franz von] Rottenburg,[6] Bismarck positively declared his support for universal suffrage and did not use it opportunistically merely as a means of struggle in 1866 to lift Austria out of the saddle of democracy. If, at the end of his career, he called it a mistake, this could easily be justified by the fact that experience had taught him better, but now we see that it is not even necessary to go that far, that the principled defense of universal suffrage, which can still be found in the "Thoughts and Memories" (II, 58), is quite compatible with the modification that he now intended. He wanted to keep what was useful of it, and he had always been in favor of the public vote. He had once justified universal suffrage at its introduction (in a letter to the ambassador Count Bernstorff of April 19, 1866) on the ground that it would bring the supreme power into contact with the healthy elements which form the nucleus and mass of the people; "in a country with monarchical traditions and loyal sentiments, universal suffrage, by removing the influences of the liberal bourgeoisie class, will also lead to monarchical elections." In a letter to the Hanoverian envoy Platen in 1865, he had used the phrase: "if, for example, I could send 100 workers from my estate here in Prussia to the ballot box, they would vote every other opinion in the village to death."[7] These 100 farm workers,

who are completely bound to the directives of their employer in public voting, he by no means thought to take away their right to vote in 1890. The general right to vote was not to be restricted in principle, but only in practice, by means of an exceptional law and by publicity. Thus, only the newly emerged power of the urban factory workers, who had withdrawn from the influence of their employers, was excluded, but the voting weight of the rural masses remained and thus the counterweight against the liberal bourgeoisie, whose domination was just as undesirable to him as the Social Democracy, and which he had thought to fight down in 1863 precisely by the introduction of the general equal but public right to vote. The basic outlook and mood of the statesman of the conflict period of Wilhelm I and Wilhelm II remained the same, and so did his desire to assert himself by a violent coup.

For it is obvious that a peaceful enforcement, either of the public vote or of the political disenfranchisement of the Social Democrats, was out of the question. The Cartel Reichstag (1887–1890), in which the Conservatives together with the National Liberals had the majority, had not even extended the Socialist Law to him in the desired way, much less would it have granted him the public vote and the disfranchisement of the Social Democrats, and again much less would the next Reichstag have done so, which now (1890) convened, and in which the Democrats together with the Center had the majority, and no resolution, however often repeated, on whatever electoral slogan, would have yielded such a majority. Not even the National Liberals and not even all the Free Conservatives would have been won over to it. [No, there was no way to get through Bismarck's way without force, and the decision to do so was all the easier for him because he believed that there would have to be military intervention against the Social Democrats in any case. As late as 1892, he had it explained in the *Hamburger Nachrichten* that it was precisely for this reason that he himself had proposed Caprivi for Prussian prime minister, not for the sake of his political views, but because it "depended on the personal bravery and other character traits of the individual". He had wanted to bring a conflict minister into office along the lines of Count Brandenburg in November 1848, who could at the same time have been the minister of justice, police and war. There was no other remedy against Social Democrats than "blood and iron," and the fact that no bloodshed had actually taken place by then (1892) did not prove that he was mistaken, because two years was too short a period for that.

How does all this fit into one another: artificially bringing about the fall of the Socialist Law, thereby inciting the Social Democracy to arrogance, the introduction of a great military bill, revolts and street fights in Berlin, the appointment of an iron arm as prime minister, the dissolution of the Reichstag, the proclamation of the emperor and the princes that the Reich could not exist in this way, the replacement of the secret ballot by the public one, and the disenfranchisement of the Social Democrats!

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What the consequence of the coup d'état policy would have been, I have already explained in the essay of December 1906, before I knew how Bismarck had conceived of the violent electoral reform, but nothing is changed by it, because the decisive thing lies in the act itself, the act of violence, the breach of the constitution. The Reichstag, purified by the exclusion of the Social Democrats, would perhaps have become a useful and reliable representation of the people for the defense and tax power of the Reich, but at the same time a completely worthless one, a mere voting machine, because a representation of the people requires that every kind of opposition that lives among the people be represented. Even the governing parties would no longer have remained what they were, since their existence depended at every moment on whether the government maintained the situation created by the coup d'état or whether it abandoned it or modified it in some other way. Admittedly, the proposition that only those who really want the good of a state should be called to co-government of that state is difficult to dispute, but it is opposed by the other proposition that a representation of the people must necessarily include all the parties that once exist. The exclusion of a certain party interferes much more deeply with the idea of a popular representation, violates the principle of universal suffrage much more than, say, a census or class suffrage. The restriction is even more sensitive, the extensibility of the concept of

"Reichsfeindschaft" even too dangerous. […] In Germany, too, a coup d'état policy in 1890, be it in this form, be it in that form, be it by "cold setting" the Reichstag and appealing to the particular states, be it by forcibly changing the electoral law, would have plunged the Reich into incalculable turmoil, would have made any healthy economic and social policy, any financial reform, the army reform, the creation of the fleet impossible. The mutilated Reichstag would have been only a decoration for pure absolutism. Hail to us that we have been saved from this ride into the abyss! Perhaps there are politicians who judge differently on this point and believe that if the Social Democracy had been eradicated from popular representation, the German Reich would have gone a better course than it actually did. There is no decision on this. In any case, however, even in my view Bismarck as a historical personality loses nothing in comparison with the older generation, which was no longer able to discover any positive thought in him at all. But it is not true that he was merely the old man who no longer knew what he should do and only nagged at the younger world that had succeeded him. He did not pass away in the slow dying and extinction of the Philistine, but the tragic end of the hero, who in a last great struggle comes into conflict with himself and his work, was destined for him and he prepared it for himself.

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NOTES

[1] Hohenlohe, *Denkwürdigkeiten* II, p. 320.
[2] *Ged. u. Erin*., vol. II p. 190.
[3] *Memoirs* II, 462.
[4] Published in *Grenzboten*, 1907, I 123.
[5] Published in *Pruss. Jahrb*., vol. 133, p. 336.
[6] *Deutsche Revue*, vol. 31, p. 277.
[7] Oncken, p. 130.

Source: Hans Delbrück, "Bismarck's Last Political Idea," *Preußische Jahrbücher*, vol. 147, issue 1 (January-March 1912): pp. 1–12.