

Heinrich von Treitschke, “Socialism and its Patrons” (1874)

Abstract

A leading *kleindeutsch* (“small German”) historian and university lecturer, Heinrich von Treitschke (1834–1896) was also a National Liberal member of the Reichstag. In this selection from his 1874 reply to Gustav Schmoller’s plea for robust social policies, Treitschke attacks Social Democracy and its “patrons” for aggravating workers’ desires through their social agitation. Treitschke describes inequality as an inevitable fact and pleads for the removal of barriers to allow the odd talent to rise up from the lower classes.

Source

The bourgeois society of a wealthy nation is always an aristocracy, even under a democratic constitution. Or to use blunt words that are much disdained but truthful—class rule (or more accurately, class order) necessarily results from the nature of society, just as the difference between rulers and subjects results from the nature of the state. Simply by virtue of its name, Social Democracy admits that it strives toward nonsense. [...]

No doubt, many a talent is being suffocated by this aristocratic condition of society. Nature is a royal economizer: it manages with a plentiful hand. By the hour, it produces countless new seeds in the plant and animal kingdoms that perish before their time; it provides its favorites among people with such abundance that one can brazenly claim that all great men in history were greater than their works; none of them was fully able to develop the gift of his nature. According to this, it is certain that at any time, greatly conceived beings live among the hard-working masses, and they are being prevented from revealing their innate nobility merely on account of the social order. The unrecognized genius likes to abandon himself to such melancholy thoughts. [...] But history operates in large numbers. As we turn searchingly from the tragic exception to the general rule, we recognize: the reason why the human race is designed with such great needs, why eking out an existence and satisfying the most basic of these needs requires such an incredible portion of its powers, is because at any given time only a small minority is capable of perceiving the true light of the idea with open eyes, while the masses only suffer the refracted ray.

[...] Our state does not grant any political right unless it is tied to a corresponding obligation; the state demands from all those wishing to participate in the administration of the community in any way that they first earn this power through property and education; it works unceasingly to disseminate and reinforce intellectual life; it even reduces the most universal of its civic obligations, military service, in favor of the powers of the mind by granting education a highly effective reward in the form of the *Freiwilligenjahr*.^[1] [...] Universal suffrage is a slap in the face to precisely these basic moral principles of the German state; it rewards the lack of education, arouses the arrogance of stupidity. In a state that knows how to honor culture like no other, anyone who has merely made the effort to be born receives, after the passage of some years, the highest political right of a citizen! How should the pauper who enjoys this privilege not reach the conclusion that in the social structure, too, birth constitutes a valid legal title that guarantees every person power without any type of effort? There is no doubt whatsoever that universal suffrage has promoted among the masses a fantastic overestimation of their own power and worth. The irreconcilable contradiction between the democratic equality of political voting rights and the necessarily aristocratic organization of society reveals the present state of social decay to the

man on the street with absolute clarity and turns him into a faithful follower of demagogues. In this country of top-rate education, universal suffrage amounts to organized licentiousness; to the recognized arrogance of superior foolishness; to the superciliousness of the soldier towards the officer, of the journeyman towards the master, and of the worker towards the entrepreneur. These devastating effects, however, have already materialized in abundance and can no longer be eliminated; abolishing the electoral law again would only provoke the long-awakened wantonness of philistinism even more vehemently. As it is, we are merely left to at least protect the foundations of our monarchical state, i.e., the district and municipal administrations, from being penetrated by republican principles—and to protest against the claim that rewarding a lack of education is the result of enlightened social policies. [...]

[...] German Social Democracy really is as “black” as most educated newspapers have described it. It deserves attention as a symptom of serious social evils but does not present us with a single viable thought that could be negotiated, that could be integrated into our social order. Envy and greed are the two most powerful levers it applies to turn the old world upside down; it feeds on the destruction of every ideal. If the patrons of socialism praise the fact that, in addition to barefaced agitators, demagogues for hire, and a long train of thoughtless followers, the party also includes many truly selfless apostles, even some impassioned poets, then that praise merely serves to prove, once again, how very thoroughly the present moment has become caught in the bonds of Social Democracy’s sensual, materialist ideology. Doesn’t anyone still see how unnatural it is that such a doctrine—one that denies any ideal that would allow an honest man to fully develop his own personality—should be capable of sparking his enthusiasm? And how severely damaged any sense of duty must be, right down to the roots, if the idealism of envy and the fervor of desire were able to spread among us? [...]

[...] The learned friends of socialism usually point out reassuringly that the Social Democratic worker was at least learning how to think. With this, they only prove that they have inadvertently become infected with the sensualist moral philosophy of socialism, which seeks the roots of virtue in the shaping of rationalism, in the so-called Enlightenment. If the dissatisfied man on the street, who is not yet used to the new forms of economics, hears it daily proclaimed that the entire social order is based on injustice, that force must destroy what force has created; and if, moreover, the preachers of this doctrine refer to the historical constructions of moderately liberal professors, then the worker may perhaps indeed gather some bits of knowledge from such instruction. However, would the creature beating in every human heart not be inclined to suck rich nutrients from such enticing teachings as well? Is it a coincidence that Social Democracy has a crowd of faithful followers in every jail? Does a party that advocates physical violence, day after day, bear no part of the blame for the horribly rampant coarseness of the masses, for those cowardly fatal stabbings that have become so common in the factory districts of the Lower Rhine that people barely pay attention? The very foundations of all communal life are being threatened by Social Democracy, those simple conceptions of discipline and decency that ought to be beyond dispute among well-mannered people. The teachings on society’s injustice destroy the worker’s firmly held sense of honor, so that breaches of promise and poor and dishonest work are hardly considered disgraceful any more; instead, they arouse a diseasedly mistrustful oversensitivity to any justified reproach. [...]

Such a coarsely sensualist political tendency has no conception of a fatherland, no sense of the personality of the national state. The notion of national customs and tradition, this moving force of history in our century, remains incomprehensible to socialism. [...] Everywhere, socialism goes hand in hand with unpatriotic cosmopolitanism and slack commitment to the state. Switzerland has almost completely escaped the socialist movement, not merely because it lacks any big urban centers but because a strong Swiss confederate patriotism is alive among the mass of the people.

The learned friends of socialism like to point to the English Chartists, who also began with cosmopolitan dreams and nonetheless learned how to submit to the fatherland in the end. In this context, though, they

overlook the fact that England's island population, with its ancient state unity and brusque national pride, has powers of resistance that our empire—incomplete and open to foreign influence—lacks. What they also overlook is that Chartism was genuinely English from the start, while German Social Democracy is controlled from abroad by a mob of homeless conspirators. Is there any sign that in the decade since its founding, Social Democracy has drawn closer to the idea of the national state in any way? No, it has actually opposed this notion in a more hostile manner from year to year. [...]

Thus socialism alienates its comrades from the state and the fatherland, offering instead of this community of love and respect, which it destroys, a community of class hatred. The nature of the modern state presses for a balancing of class differences. Today, among all social strata, class-consciousness figures little when compared with the consciousness of citizenship and patriotism. It is only among the lower classes that a violent form of agitation endeavors to foster a boastful kind of class pride. And by what means! No Persian pasha has ever been flattered more sycophantically than the “actual people” have been by Social Democracy. All of the despicable tricks of French radicalism from the 1840s are being mustered to arouse an indescribable arrogance among the masses. [...]

In particular, the election results of Social Democracy prove how destructive an effect the doctrine of class hatred is beginning to have. Good-natured scholars laud it as a praiseworthy sign of the German workers' pride that in our country “workers” have been elected to the Reichstag several times already, while in France such success has only occurred twice, in Britain only once before. They fail to notice that with such praise they are heading exactly towards the enlightened views of the French revolutionary minister Carnot. The latter told French voters in spring of 1848 that the old opinion about property and education strongly befitting members of parliament was reactionary superstition. This reactionary superstition, however, is an inalienable basic idea of the constitutional state. The normal situation always persists, namely that the elected always rank above their average voters. If socialist workers cast their votes today, as a matter of principle, for semi-educated men who are incapable of coping with the obligations of a member of parliament and are incapable of effectively representing the views of their constituency in parliament, then such behavior is by no means a sign of proud class conviction; instead, it is merely an effect of dogged class hatred, which cannot comprehend that a non-worker may also look after the interests of workers. And in the end, this mode of operation cannot be sustained with consequence anyway. A working-class party also requires educated leaders; almost none of history's dangerous demagogues belonged to the “people” whom they were flattering, and the heads of German Social Democracy are “bourgeois” themselves.

Enough said, Social Democracy is a party of moral dissipation, political licentiousness, and social strife. [...]

So now I am asking: Is this a party we can negotiate with? By way of its blunt criticism, it has drawn our attention to many a defect in our social life; and through its vile sensuality it has shown us where the eudaemonism that ruled economics in the past will lead eventually. Except for these two inadvertent contributions, Social Democracy deserves no credit. It aims at the rule of the fist; we favor the rule of education. We are further removed from it in every respect than from the Catholics' ultramontanism. Just as we are telling the latter: first, you had better recognize the sovereignty of the state, and then we can reach an understanding about individual issues in dispute, we must also call out—and still more decisively—to the Social Democrats: first, you had better submit to the traditional social order. This demand, of course, stipulates: first, become the opposite of what you are today. Conditional recognition does not get you anywhere in the face of fanaticism, it merely delivers clean grist to its dirty mill. [...]

We must not be seen as insensitive to the sufferings of the people just because we refuse to exchange tender romantic glances with the boastful leaders of a crude mob movement. It also seems unnecessary, when discussing social issues, to talk constantly as if we were in a state of fever, as if the emancipation of the fourth estate were the “question” of the century. This emancipation does not lie ahead of us—it has

already happened and simply needs securing. The German state will best resolve its social responsibility if it proceeds as calmly and modestly as it did years ago with respect to the reform laws of Stein and Hardenberg, the establishment of the Customs Union, and all the liberating deeds of Prussian history. [...]

No matter how generously the state may grant political rights to the lower classes, the fact remains that they are unable to govern themselves. They may receive the right to vote, but only in rare exceptions will they become eligible for election. Moreover, there is nothing to criticize here, for parliament is not supposed to represent class interests as such but rather the self-governing bodies connected through the community formed by the discharge of duties; and these bodies encompass all classes. No matter how humanely society strives for the welfare of the lower classes, the artisan will nonetheless live at best in a modest little house, the landowner in a castle. Consequently, by means of this elevation of the lower social strata, one will never reach the goal of balancing out desires, which, according to Aristotle's lovely phrase, is more important than balancing out possessions.

Far more secure is the other path leading to the alleviation of class differences: the removal of barriers that prevent a person born into poverty from rising into the circles of the propertied and the educated. If state and society know to appreciate the infinite value of talent, they can never do enough toward this end—this goal opens up an extensive, almost immeasurable field for them. Even if it is impossible for the vast majority of people to share in all the delights of culture, any strong and nimble mind should nonetheless retain the hope of rising above the ranks of this majority. The state should not merely unleash people's work capacity and give the pauper the right to rise above his class; by means of good elementary schools and easy access to advanced education, the state ought to take care as well that genuine talents may actually take advantage of that right. This is the only way in which fresh blood reaches the upper classes, the only way in which we may more or less accomplish that balancing out of desires. [...] Free competition between everyone for the assets of civilized behavior, the full extent of which may only be achieved by a small minority at any time—that is what I understand by reasonable equality. [...]

NOTES

[1] The *Freiwilligenjahr* was an abbreviated one-year term of volunteer military service designed for those who wished to attend university—trans.

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