Karl Marx's Critique of the Gotha Program (April/May 1875)

Abstract

When the two wings of the German Social Democratic movement fused at the Gotha Congress in 1875, forming the Socialist Workers' Party of Germany, Karl Marx (1818–1883) strongly opposed the new program. In the "marginal notes" [*Randglossen*] to the Gotha program, reproduced below, he explained his objections, criticizing the influence the late Ferdinand Lassalle (1825–1864) and his followers had exerted on the new party. Marx's critique was written in April and May 1875, before the Gotha congress was actually held (May 22–27, 1875). Marx asked that his opinions be distributed among a number of sympathetic socialist leaders, but some of these were unable to participate in the congress because they were in prison. The final program contained many points that Marx considered inopportune (or worse). Even Marx's followers did not consider it helpful to publish his devastating critique until 1891.

Source

[…]

IV.

I come now to the democratic section.

A. "The free basis of the state."

First of all, according to [section] II [of the Gotha Program], the German Workers' party strives for "the free state." Free state—what is this?

It is by no means the aim of the workers, who have got rid of the narrow mentality of humble subjects, to set the state free. In the German Empire, the "state" is almost as "free" as in Russia. Freedom consists in converting the state from an organ superimposed upon society into one completely subordinate to it; and today, too, the forms of state are more free or less free to the extent that they restrict the "freedom of the state."

The German Workers' party—at least if it adopts the program—shows that its socialist ideas are not even skin-deep; in that, instead of treating existing society (and this holds good for any future one) as the *basis* of the existing state (or of the future state in the case of future society), it treats the state rather as an independent entity that possesses its own intellectual, ethical, and libertarian bases.

And what of the riotous misuse which the program makes of the words "present-day state," "present-day society," and of the still more riotous misconception it creates in regard to the state to which it addresses its demands?

"Present-day society" is capitalist society, which exists in all civilized countries, more or less free from medieval admixture, more or less modified by the particular historical development of each country, more or less developed. On the other hand, the "present-day state" changes with a country's frontier. It is different in the Prusso-German Empire from what it is in Switzerland, and different in England from what it is in the United States. The "present-day state" is therefore a fiction.

Nevertheless, the different states of the different civilized countries, in spite of their motley diversity of form, all have this in common: that they are based on modern bourgeois society, only one more or less capitalistically developed. They have, therefore, also certain essential characteristics in common. In this sense, it is possible to speak of the "present-day state" in contrast with the future, in which its present root, bourgeois society, will have died off.

The question then arises: What transformation will the state undergo in communist society? In other words, what social functions will remain in existence there that are analogous to present state functions? This question can only be answered scientifically, and one does not get a flea-hop nearer to the problem by a thousand-fold combination of the word "people" with the word "state."

Between capitalist and communist society there lies the period of the revolutionary transformation of the one into the other. Corresponding to this is also a political transition period in which the state can be nothing but *the revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat*.

Now the program does not deal with this nor with the future state of communist society.

Its political demands contain nothing beyond the old democratic litany familiar to all: universal suffrage, direct legislation, popular rights, a people's militia, etc. They are a mere echo of the bourgeois People's party, of the League of Peace and Freedom. They are all demands which, insofar as they are not exaggerated in fantastic presentation, have already been *realized*. Only the state to which they belong does not lie within the borders of the German Empire, but in Switzerland, the United States, etc. This sort of "state of the future" is a present-day state, although existing outside the "framework" of the German Empire.

But one thing has been forgotten. Since the German Workers' party expressly declares that it acts within "the present-day national state," hence within its own state, the Prusso-German Empire—its demands would indeed be otherwise largely meaningless, since one only demands what one has not got—it should not have forgotten the chief thing, namely, that all those pretty little gewgaws rest on the recognition of the so-called sovereignty of the people and hence are appropriate only in a *democratic republic*.

Since one has not the courage—and wisely so, for the circumstances demand caution—to demand the democratic republic, as the French workers' programs under Louis Philippe and under Louis Napoleon did, one should not have resorted, either, to the subterfuge, neither "honest" nor decent, of demanding things which have meaning only in a democratic republic from a state which is nothing but a police-guarded military despotism, embellished with parliamentary forms, alloyed with a feudal admixture, already influenced by the bourgeoisie, and bureaucratically carpentered, and then to assure this state into the bargain that one imagines one will be able to force such things upon it "by legal means."

Even vulgar democracy, which sees the millennium in the democratic republic, and has no suspicion that it is precisely in this last form of state of bourgeois society that the class struggle has to be fought out to a conclusion—even it towers mountains above this kind of democratism, which keeps within the limits of what is permitted by the police and not permitted by logic.

That, in fact, by the word "state" is meant the government machine, or the state insofar as it forms a special organism separated from society through division of labor, is shown by the words "the German Workers' party demands as the economic basis of the state: a single progressive income tax," etc. Taxes are the economic basis of the government machinery and of nothing else. In the state of the future, existing in Switzerland, this demand has been pretty well fulfilled. Income tax presupposes various sources of income of the various social classes, and hence capitalist society. It is, therefore, nothing remarkable that the Liverpool financial reformers—bourgeois headed by Gladstone's brother—are putting forward the same demand as the program.

[…]

Source of English translation: Karl Marx, Critique of the Gotha Programme, Marx-Engels Internet Archive, http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1875/gotha/ch04.htm

Source of original German text: Karl Marx, “Randglossen zum Programme der deutschen Arbeiterpartei, April/Mai 1875,” in *Die Neue Zeit* 9 (1890/91), excerpt pp. 572–74; reprinted in Hans Fenske, ed., *Im Bismarckschen Reich 1871–1890*. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1978, pp. 138–40.

Recommended Citation: Karl Marx’s Critique of the Gotha Program (April/May 1875), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/forging-an-empire-bismarckian-germany-1866-1890/ghdi:document-1845> [May 17, 2024].