

Why the Government Cannot Ignore the Social Question: A Conservative View (January 29, 1872)

Abstract

By the 1870s, the problem of “pauperism”—already much debated before 1848—had been redefined as the “social question.” It received attention from political parties across the entire political spectrum, but those on the left usually took the lead in criticizing government inaction. In this memorandum written for Chancellor Bismarck in 1872, we get an unorthodox right-wing perspective. Here, the high public official and conservative politician Hermann Wagener (1815–1889) suggests that a do-nothing policy would spell disaster—for society, but also for Bismarck’s government itself. Wagener argues that passing additional laws to repress Social Democratic and Catholic activists would involve the government in a dangerous two-front war. Instead, Bismarck should seize the initiative and propose tangible remedies to help those most in need. A fundamental reordering of hierarchical social relationships, however, is the last thing this conservative would have recommended (or Bismarck would have accepted).

Source

Since in my most humble opinion the way in which social issues are approached these days is not the proper one, I would allow myself the liberty of respectfully submitting to Your Highness a short summary of the measures that I, on the contrary, deem necessary. [...]

It seems to me [...] an extremely dangerous endeavor to propose taking up the battle against the ultramontane and socialist parties simultaneously, thus driving the socially oriented people further, and more irrevocably, into the clerical camp. However justified and necessary it may be to forcefully apply the existing laws in all respects, thereby keeping all external elements, including those pursuing anti-national aims, away from the social movement, I would nonetheless consider it a decisive political mistake to subject socialist leaders to emergency laws on account of their social advocacy, particularly without also doing something substantial to satisfy the just efforts of their followers.

The most recent reports of developments in the close circle of the International leave no doubt that, within the English and German section, the national element has not only gained predominance but has also begun to reject the confusion of social advocacy and politics—and this has resulted in a complete rift between the Anglo-German section on the one hand and the Franco-Russian section on the other.^[1]

It would be very regrettable if this development were not exploited by the Reich government, which could thereby remove the social movement from the hands of anti-national agitation. [...]

The most recent reliable reports from Great Britain and the United States show that in England, for instance, the regular nine-hour workday is hardly viewed as a question of legislation any longer, and the trade unions already feel strong enough to push these working hours through independently. Moreover, as is generally known, the U.S. Congress has formed a commission to assess the situation of the working class with a view to appropriate legislation. That the latter also constitutes an election maneuver will probably add to the significance of the initiative rather than detract from it.

According to my most respectful opinion, the German Reich government ought to follow these events and, in particular, make a start with a thorough survey of its own. Here, I would have to assume, of course, that developments in this field would be given the utmost degree of publicity. Additionally, with

respect to the selection of persons to be questioned, it would be necessary to base the findings on a broad foundation and to listen to those people who are justly regarded as thorough researchers in this field. [...]

Considering all the experiences of history, it would be hopeless to want to fight a powerful idea merely with material means, and, with respect to the extremely powerful Catholic-clerical idea, there is currently only one idea that can be used as a political counterweight with any prospect of success—and that is the social idea. Thus, without claiming to anticipate events, I believe that the next phase of European history will unfold in the matrix of mutual interaction between these two ideas.

The practical measures I would propose to begin with are as follows:

1. Establishing a commission following the American example, with the purpose of preparing and initiating legislation in this field;
2. Supplementing the questioning of experts already begun by the Ministry of Trade, aiming at the broadest possible extension and publicity;
3. Practical action with the Institute of Factory Inspectors or—if another designation might be more acceptable—the employment offices.

In the expansion of the latter institution, in particular, there is the possibility of establishing an organization that, in political terms, would not only be a match for the Catholic Church, but would also be superior to it. With respect to the material currents of the present day, the “social Kaiser” has a stronger position than even the “social Pope.” [...]

At the moment, the mass of the population is wavering, unsure of the direction in which to turn. So far, the international agitation has not gained a broader basis, although here and there one can detect the intention to create opportune martyrs for it.

Where the masses turn, however, will be of crucial significance not just for politics and parliament, but also for the character of the army. The army will only be completely and permanently reliable if the workers, who make up the main contingent [of it], are won over and bound to the idea of the Reich through its very benefits and performance.

NOTES

[1] A reference to the conflicts between the followers of Karl Marx and those of the anarchist Michael Bakunin in the First International that led to the dissolution of this organization. Secondary commentary from Ernst Schraepler, ed., *Quellen zur Geschichte der sozialen Frage in Deutschland. 1871 bis zur Gegenwart*, third revised edition. Göttingen: Muster-Schmidt, 1996, p. 52. See source information at the end of this document.

Source: Hermann Wagener, Memorandum [*Denkschrift*] on the Social Question, written for Chancellor Otto von Bismarck, January 29, 1872, in Horst Kohl, ed., *Bismarck-Jahrbuch* 6 (1899): pp. 209–14; reprinted in Ernst Schraepler, ed., *Quellen zur Geschichte der sozialen Frage in Deutschland. 1871 bis zur Gegenwart*, 3rd rev. ed. Göttingen: Muster-Schmidt, 1996, pp. 51–54.

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