

# Socialist “Revisionism”: The Immediate Tasks of Social Democracy (1899)

## Abstract

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Eduard Bernstein (1850–1932) was a leader of the Socialist Party and the main proponent of the “revisionist” version of Marxism. He put forth his views in a series of articles in Karl Kautsky’s *Neue Zeit* in 1896 and 1898. These articles formed the basis of his 1899 treatise, *The Preconditions of Socialism and the Tasks of Social Democracy* [*Die Voraussetzungen des Sozialismus und die Aufgaben der Sozialdemokratie*]. Bernstein denied the inevitability of “class conflict” and the collapse of capitalism. As a result, he argued that Marxists should pursue a more practical course, aiming for a piecemeal movement towards a socialist state within a parliamentary democratic system.

## Source

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[...] Without a certain measure of democratic institutions or traditions, the socialist doctrine of our day would not be possible at all. There might well be a workers’ movement, but no Social Democracy. The modern socialist movement, as well as its theoretical expression, is in fact the product of the influence exerted by conceptions of justice that came to fruition in – and achieved general acceptance through – the great French Revolution on the wage and work-time movement of industrial workers. That movement would also exist without these conceptions, just as there existed, without and prior to them, a popular communism derived from early Christianity.<sup>[1]</sup> But this popular communism was poorly defined and half-mystical, and without the foundation of those legal institutions and notions (which are, at least to a major extent, the necessary concomitants of the capitalist development), the workers’ movement would lack its inner cohesion. And that is very much like the situation that exists today in the Oriental countries. A working class that is without political rights and has grown up in superstition and with inadequate schooling will no doubt revolt from time to time and conspire on a small scale, but it will never develop a socialist movement. It takes a certain breadth of perspective and a fairly developed consciousness of rights to turn a worker who occasionally rebels into a socialist. That is why political rights and education hold a preeminent place within every socialist program of action. [...]

Does [...] Social Democracy, as the party of the working class and of peace, have an interest in maintaining the nation’s readiness to fight? From a variety of perspectives it is tempting to answer this question in the negative, especially if one starts with the statement in the *Communist Manifesto*: “The proletariat has no fatherland.” While this sentence might apply to the workers of the 1840s, without rights and excluded from public life, today, it has lost much of its validity, in spite of the enormous increase in the intercourse among nations, and will lose even more, the more the worker is transformed, under the influence of Social Democracy, from a proletariat into a citizen. The worker who has an equal right to vote in the state, the municipality, and so on, and is thereby a co-owner of the common good of the nation, whose children the community educates, whose health it protects, whom it insures against injuries, will have a fatherland without thereby ceasing to be a citizen of the world, just as the nations are coming closer together without thereby ceasing to lead lives of their own. It might seem very convenient if all people were to speak only one language one day. But what a stimulus, what a source of intellectual enjoyment would be lost to future generations. The complete dissolution of nations is not a pleasant dream, and is not to be expected within the foreseeable future. But just as it is undesirable for any of the great civilized nations to lose its independence, it cannot be a matter of indifference to Social Democracy whether the German nation – which has, after all, contributed and contributes its proper share to the civilizing labor of the nations – is eclipsed in the council of nations.

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Today, there is a lot of talk about the conquest of political power by Social Democracy, and it is at least not impossible, given the strength it has attained in Germany, that some political event in the near future will assign it a crucial role. But precisely under these circumstances, since neighboring countries are not so far advanced, Social Democracy – like the Independents of the English and the Jacobins of the French Revolution – would be compelled to be national to maintain power, that is, it would have to assert its ability to be the leading party, or class, by showing that it is capable of giving equal consideration to class interests and national interests.

[...]

In principle, what has been said above has already indicated the perspective from which Social Democracy must take a position on questions of foreign policy under the current conditions. While the worker is not yet a full citizen, he is also no longer so bereft of rights that national interests can be a matter of indifference to him. And while Social Democracy is not yet in power, it does assume a position of power that imposes certain obligations on it. Its word carries considerable weight. Given the current composition of the army and the complete uncertainty about the moral effect of small-caliber firearms, the Reich government will think ten times before it hazards a war against the determined opposition of Social Democracy. Thus, even without the famous general strike, Social Democracy can speak a very weighty – if not decisive – word in favor of peace, and it will do so as often and as vigorously as is necessary and possible, in keeping with the time-honored motto of the International. Moreover, in accordance with its program, in cases where conflicts arise with other nations and direct resolution is not possible, it will advocate that these differences be settled through arbitration. But nothing commands it to support the renunciation of Germany's current or future interests, if, or because, English, French, or Russian chauvinists take offense at the relevant policies. Where we are not dealing with partiality or special interests of certain circles on the German side, which matter naught to the people's welfare or are actually deleterious to it, where important interests of the nation are, in fact, at stake, internationalism cannot be a reason for yielding weakly to the pretensions of foreign interests. [...]

Of greater importance than the question of pressing the demands that are already on the program is the question of adding to the program. In this regard, practice has put a series of issues on the agenda, some of which – when the program was created – seemed too far off in the future to be of any immediate concern to Social Democracy, some of which, however, were not sufficiently recognized for their full significance. They include the agrarian question, questions of municipal politics, the question of cooperatives, and various questions of industrial law. The great growth of Social Democracy in the eight years since the drafting of the Erfurt Program, its effects on domestic politics in Germany, as well as the experiences of other countries have made a more intense engagement with all these issues absolutely necessary, and, in the process, some of the views that were once held have been substantially revised.

As far as the agrarian question is concerned, even those who believe that the peasant economy is doomed have altered their views considerably as to the time it will take for this to occur. And while profound differences of opinion on this point have played a part in the more recent debates on the kind of agrarian policy that Social Democracy should endorse, in principle these debates have revolved around the question of whether – and if so, then up to what point – Social Democracy should lend support to the peasant as such, that is, as an independent entrepreneur, against capitalism. [...]

[...] In my mind, [...] the chief tasks of Social Democracy vis-à-vis the rural population can be divided into three groups, namely:

1. Opposition to all remaining remnants and pillars of land-holding feudalism and the struggle for democracy in municipality and district. That is, support for the abolition of entail, manorial holdings, hunting privileges, and so on. [...]

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2. Protection and relief for the agricultural working classes. This includes worker protection in the narrower senses: abolition of the regulation for domestics, limitation on working time for the various categories of wage-workers, health policy, education, and such measures as would provide tax relief to the small farmer. [...]

3. Struggle against the absolutism of property and support for the cooperative system. This category includes demands such as “limitation on the rights of private ownership of the soil in order to promote: 1) separation, the abolition of the aggregation of land, 2) land cultivation, 3) the prevention of epidemics, [...] the reduction of excessive land rents through courts established for that purpose, [...] the construction of healthy and comfortable housing for workers by the municipalities, the facilitation of co-operative unions by legislation, [...] the right of municipalities to acquire land through purchase or expropriation and to lease it to workers and workers’ cooperatives for low rent.”

The last demand brings us to the question of cooperatives. [...] The issue today is no longer whether or not there should be cooperatives. They exist and will exist, whether Social Democracy likes it or not. To be sure, it could and can slow the spread of workers’ cooperatives through the weight of its influence on the working class, but it would not be doing a service to itself or the working class. There is likewise little to recommend the rigid Manchester system, which is often held up within the party against the cooperative movement and justified with the explanation that no socialist cooperatives can exist within capitalist society. Instead, the important thing is to take a certain position and to be very clear about which cooperatives Social Democracy can recommend and morally support in accordance with its means, and which it cannot. [...]

[...] Where the economic and legal preconditions are in place, Social Democracy can allow the establishment of workers’ consumer cooperatives for workers without any concerns, and it would do well to give them its full goodwill and to support them wherever possible. [...]

This, finally, brings us to Social Democracy’s municipal policy. For a long time, it, too, was the stepchild of the socialist movement, or one of them. [...] What does Social Democracy demand for the local municipality, and what does it expect from it?

If a socialist municipal policy is to be possible, Social Democracy must demand for the municipalities, alongside the democratization of suffrage, an expansion of the right of expropriation, which is still very restricted in various German states. It must also demand that their administration, especially of the security police, be completely independent of the state.

[...] Moreover, what has moved front and center, and for good reason, are demands pertaining to the development of municipal enterprises, public services, and the labor policies of the municipalities. As for the former, it will be necessary to raise the principled demand that all enterprises that concern the general needs of the members of the community and are monopolistic in character should be run by the municipality under its own control, and that the municipalities should, moreover, strive to constantly expand the range of services for their members. With respect to labor policies, we must demand that the municipalities, as employers of workers, whether on their own account or under contract, maintain, as the minimum condition, the wages and work hours accepted by the organizations of the workers in question, and that they guarantee these workers freedom of association. [...]

To be sure, Social Democracy is not entirely dependent on the franchise and parliamentary activity. It also has a large and rich area of work outside parliament. The socialist workers’ movement would exist even if the parliaments remained closed to it. [...] But with its exclusion from the representative bodies, the German workers’ movement would lose much of the internal cohesion that binds together its various parts today; it would take on a chaotic character; and in place of a calm and steady advance at a regular pace, there would be erratic forward movements, with the inevitable setbacks and weariness.

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This kind of development cannot be in the interest of the working class, nor can it strike as desirable those enemies of Social Democracy who have realized that the current social order has not been created for all eternity, but is subject to the laws of change, and that a catastrophic development, with all its horrors and devastations, can be prevented only if legislation takes into account changes in the relationships of production and exchange and in the development of classes. And the number of those who understand this is growing steadily. Their influence would be much greater than it is today if Social Democracy could muster the courage to emancipate itself from a phraseology that is indeed obsolete and give the impression that it wants to be what it is in reality today: a democratic-socialist reform party.

I am not talking about renouncing the so-called right of revolution, this purely speculative right, which no constitution can enshrine and no law book in the world can prohibit, and which will exist for as long as the law of nature forces us to die if we renounce the right to breathe. This unwritten law is no more affected by the fact that one takes a stance on the ground of reform, than the right of self-defense is renounced by the fact that we create laws to regulate our personal and property disputes. [...]

As for the rest, I repeat that the more Social Democracy decides that it wants to appear to be what it is, the more its chances of carrying out political reforms will increase. Fear is certainly a major factor in politics, but one would be mistaken to believe that the incitement of fear could accomplish everything. It was not when the Chartist movement was at its most revolutionary that the English workers attained the right to vote, but when the revolutionary slogans had died down and they allied themselves with the radical bourgeoisie to fight for the attainment of reforms. And if someone counters that something similar is impossible in Germany, I would urge him to read up on what the liberal press was writing about labor union struggles and worker legislation only fifteen and twenty years ago, and how the representatives of these parties spoke and voted in the Reichstag when issues of that nature had to be decided. Perhaps he would then agree that the political reaction is by no means the most characteristic phenomenon in bourgeois Germany.

## NOTES

[1] It happened repeatedly to me (and surely to others, as well) in earlier years that at the end of a political meeting, workers or artisans who had heard a socialist speech for the first time would come up to me and explain that everything I had said was in the Bible, and they could show me line by line. (Bernstein's note).

Source: Eduard Bernstein, *Die Voraussetzungen des Sozialismus und die Aufgaben der Sozialdemokratie*. Stuttgart, 1899. Chapter 4, Section D, p. 144 ff; reprinted in Ernst Schraepler, ed., *Quellen zur Geschichte der sozialen Frage in Deutschland. 1871 bis zur Gegenwart*. 3rd edition. Göttingen and Zurich, 1996, pp. 136–43.

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