

Aarhus Athens Austin Bay Area Berlin Bielefeld Boston Chicago Cincinnati Cologne Corvallis
Fairfax Frankfurt Houston Jakarta Jena Knoxville Leipzig London Los Angeles Manchester (UK)
Manchester (US) Melbourne Nashville New Haven New York Paris Philadelphia Pocatello Prishtina
Santa Cruz Sheffield Thessaloniki Tokyo Toronto Vienna



ABOUT CHAPTERS ANNOUNCEMENTS READING GROUPS MEDIA THE PLATYPUS REVIEW PUBLISHING

You are here: Platypus / Kautsky in the 21st Century

Kautsky in the 21st Century

Adam J. Sacks, Ben Lewis, Jason Wright, and
Chris Cutrone

Platypus Review 136 | May 2021

On Saturday, September 5, 2020, the Platypus Affiliated Society hosted a virtual panel discussion with Adam J. Sacks (professor of history at the University of Hong Kong and contributor to Jacobin), Ben Lewis (member of the Communist Party of Great Britain), Jason Wright (member of the Bolshevik Tendency) and Chris Cutrone (founding member of the Platypus Affiliated Society and professor of art history at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago). What follows is an edited transcript of the event. The full video of the discussion can be found at <<https://youtu.be/aL2TWNd1ntc>>.

Known as the “pope of Marxism,” Karl Kautsky was a leading figure of the Second International and the mass socialist parties of the 19th century. He became an incredibly controversial figure in Marxism after 1914, largely as a result of his opposition to the 1917 revolution. In recent years, he has resurfaced on the Left as an important intellectual, though his legacy remains in dispute. What can we learn from Karl Kautsky’s Marxism today?

Opening Remarks

Adam J. Sacks: I would like to make the figure of Karl Kautsky both more and less familiar to us in a three-part schema: cultural biography in three parts; philosophical background; and three points that I think are particularly relevant for today.

Karl Kautsky is of this critical intermediate generation between Marx and Engels, whom he actually knew himself, and the Frankfurt School. He was shaped by a moment in imperial Germany which, to make a comparison to today, would be closest to the People’s Republic of China. In other words, it was an incredible period of growth and prosperity, which was the corollary to his worldview of optimism. He

did not experience the First World War as an interruption of this belief in a greater idea of progress. He offers us a case study in Marxism as a continuation of Enlightenment thought.

Interestingly enough, the leader of German Social Democracy in the Second International was a Czech Jew. He came from Prague, and he married a woman from Vienna, Luise Kautsky. I would really like to take a moment to give her a place almost equal to him — I think, as in many times, women in that period were not given their due — for helping him to create his entire oeuvre. His family journey with Luise went from Prague to Vienna to Stuttgart to Berlin, and then ultimately to Amsterdam as a site of exile. He passed away after the Munich Agreement in 1938. His wife was a victim of the Holocaust: she died on a transport from Westerbork to Auschwitz, and his son survived slave labor working at the Monowitz plant in the Auschwitz complex for the company Bayer, which we might be familiar with for the production of aspirin. His son helped to create the party program of the post-war Austrian Social-Democratic Party. His worldview was very much that of a Central European.

His wife was a close confidante of Rosa Luxemburg, and interestingly, similarly to him, Luxemburg opted for the German Party as opposed to the Polish Social-Democratic Party. We owe Luise for the publication of letters with Rosa Luxemburg, as well as her own theoretical writings. She helped to refigure the role of a woman and the oeuvre of a political theorist in a way that doesn't conform to the "great man" idea.

The cultural background to understanding Kautsky's reception of the Bolshevik Revolution, was informed by a certain degree of cultural biases. For the Second International, the area of the world that was actually the most reactionary, and endorsed chauvinism and racism, was the late czarist empire which embraced in many ways the beginnings of what we now know as fascist ideology. This ultimately blindsided him from understanding the fact that, in areas outside of the core industrial region, movements of national liberation that involved modernizing tendencies did not conform to his own Central European worldview.

Kautsky grew into and was informed by the idea of a *Bildung*, of intellectualism that embraced a post-Hegelian idea. We might think of Kautsky, from the well-known perspective of the Soviet Union, as a kind of opportunist who castigated Soviet communism as something akin to pseudo-slavery, a minority rule. As someone who privileged intellectualism over the necessity of a vanguard party — we may be familiar with the critique that the Democratic Socialists resemble a grad school reading circle — Kautsky defended the professionalism of socialist intellectuals, as evidenced in particular in the *Sozialistische Monatshefte*, the monthly journal of theoretical thought, because he endorsed the idea that consciousness can and should come from outside the workers themselves, that intellectuals pursuing free theoretical thought are essential for the raising of consciousness.

Secondly, his era, in between that of Marx and the Frankfurt School, was most informed by Darwin. He was clear about the influence of Darwin as opposed to Hegel. What that means is the idea — we can use the term "scientism" — that laws can be apprehended, and that Marxism provides us with a method for apprehending rational scientific laws within the development of history. And therefore, it represents a kind of break with a Hegelian, almost theological idea of the spirit moving through history to pursue absolute freedom.

Kautsky is an important touchstone for *democratic* socialism today for his embrace of parliamentarism: he absolutely adhered rhetorically to the idea of revolution but believed that socialist revolution could

be pursued through civil liberties, the exercise of free elections. This was the generation after the Paris Commune, which believed that direct democracy in the sense of a *communale*—later in the Russian term a *soviet*—was not feasible with the growth of central planning in heavy industry, in bureaucracy, and therefore that socialists should be encouraged to enter into Congress. Kautsky would be a great admirer of the Squad. But the rhetoric of revolution was absolutely central. He shouldn't be confused with the revisionism of Bernstein, namely that there is no longer an eschatological assumption about the State.

Kautsky was a harbinger of the idea of immiseration. Today, the 1% has gained 20 times the income; unionism has gone down from 30% to 7%. Kautsky absolutely believed in the theory of the crisis of capitalism.

Kautsky, in a way that might seem unfamiliar to us today, objected to the idea of championing small business. He actually would have supported the idea that large, vast structures of production were the means for greater efficiency and for the improvement of the greatest number of citizens.

Kautsky was suspicious of the autonomy of trade unions, believing in their tendency to be economist and reformist. We have the example of the AFL's fundraising and lobbying today. He believed that a party should have an idea of revolution on top of that.

Lastly, Kautsky prioritized pacifism, anti-colonialism, anti-nationalism: he was a great voice in the idea that the single biggest threat for workers was the dream of settler colonialism. Thus, he was prophetic about the seduction of fascism. Think of the "American suburban lifestyle dream" as an example of internal settler colonialism. Kautsky saw how this kind of colonialist utopia was the greatest threat in the seduction of workers.

Ben Lewis: *From Revolutionary to Renegade, from Rejected to Rediscovered?: Kautsky in the 21st Century.*

I think that in order to understand what Kautsky *may* mean to us today in the 21st century, we need to have a look at where he came from. It's very important to stress that not only in *my* opinion was Kautsky a revolutionary, a continuator of Marxism, the main theorist of the SPD (Social Democratic Party of Germany, *Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands*), but he was seen as such by friend and foe alike. He was the leading theoretician of the SPD, which was an openly Marxist political organization with a program shaped by none other than Engels in the final days of his life.

Kautsky had a huge international influence through the *Neue Zeit*. He was the theoretical leader of the so-called Bebel-Kautsky tendency of the Second International, sometimes misleadingly known as "the Center," which emphasized revolutionary patience, long term strategy, and class self-organization – as opposed to bureaucratic or state-run institutions and educational self-help, which Lasalle emphasized – majority revolution, the importance of democracy, and opposition to participation in bourgeois governments, coalitionism or Millerandism. This is the young Kautsky. There's a lovely quote from Lenin in 1907 worth bearing in mind for what subsequently happens to Karl Kautsky and his legacy. Struve says, "Bebel and Kautsky, they're the shop opportunists." And Lenin answers, "Mr. Struve, when and where did I ever claim to have created any sort of special international trend in Social Democracy not identical with that of Bebel and Kautsky?"^[1] Kautsky was seen as a revolutionary thinker, not least by the Russian Bolsheviks and Lenin, who belonged openly to that tendency.

Now we get the Kautsky that most people here probably know: *The Renegade Kautsky*, an angry pamphlet written by Lenin in 1919, comes as a result of the shock of the SPD voting for war credits in 1914. Kautsky, although urging abstention to the Reichstag deputies that he was in constant dialogue with as the theoretical leader of the organization, loses out; they vote for war credits and Kautsky, who had a life-long emphasis on unity of the organization, seeks to uphold that unity in spite of his anger that there's now open support for the war effort. It's really the watershed moment for the political degeneration of the SPD from its original conception and organization – hostile opposition to the state – to being in tow with the state's war aims. Kautsky's refusal to split was pilloried by Lenin: "party unity means unity with the state", was Lenin's quite pertinent, accurate charge. It's worth bearing in mind what "renegade" means: for Lenin, it was Kautsky that broke with Kautsky. It was Kautsky who reneged on his former revolutionary politics, and Lenin then sought to uphold the revolutionary outlook of the international Bebel-Kautsky tendency in the face of its collapse, politically, theoretically, strategically.

Even after Lenin's angry accusations and taunts, and his break with Kautsky's new politics, he always said after all of his criticism, "How well Kautsky wrote when he was a Marxist!"^[2] One of the brilliant aspects of Kautsky's work is precisely his writing on Russia. Lenin and all sorts of Russian Social Democrats took a lot from that. He was seen as an honorary Bolshevik on many occasions for precisely taking the side of the Bolshevik faction of the RSDLP over Plekhanov and the Mensheviks on key questions of strategy in Russia before 1914. But that is not how Kautsky came to be remembered in the 20th century. Kautsky was marginalized in a number of significant pamphlets. After Lenin, three predominant schools portrayed Kautsky not as a revolutionary maverick who went wrong, but as a crypto-reformist who was useless from the outset with no positive influence on the Russian Revolution.

First, Cold War western historiography. Secondly, the Eastern Bloc's bastardization of Marxism and its Trotskyist mirror image: Stalin's rewriting of Bolshevik history, shown by David Brandenberger's recent scholarship, getting rid of positive references to Kautsky, and its Trotskyist mirror-image in [the Spartacist League pamphlet] *Lenin and the Vanguard Party*, which is the same argument in slightly different terms. Thirdly, the Neo-Hegelian distortion of Kautsky's legacy, which I argue downplays Kautsky's significance. For different reasons, but with similar outcomes, they all seek to create the widest possible gulf between Bolshevism – seen either as a positive, brilliant revolutionary thing or a mad semi-Asiatic crazy phenomenon – and Social Democracy, seen in the west as horrible reformism or sensible non-Bolshevik Social Democracy. They replaced the positive and negative sides, but that's fundamentally the driving force behind the marginalization of Kautsky's ideas. There were also influences on the New Left and Trotskyism, such as Korsch and Dick Geary's famous book on Kautsky, of which I'm very critical.

The recent revival of Kautsky is an excellent thing. More people are reading Kautsky, writing about him and translating his revolutionary work. We're still scratching the surface. Luise Kautsky was central in this. His output is tremendous. The recent scholarship exposes a lot of the 20th century mythmaking and shows him in a more positive light. Crucially, it shows the significance of his influence on the 1917 revolution. Lars Lih puts it pointedly: "Karl Kautsky is the architect of October 1917". That is provocative but profoundly true.

What can we glean from Kautsky, without being too instrumental about it? The Left urgently needs to rediscover the huge ambition and revolutionary realism of those around the Kautsky-Bebel tendency, which emphasised building mass parties of the working class, not just in the workplace but in all

aspects of society, creating a counterculture within society at large, so that the working class can learn through *Bildung*, through organization, to run society in a different way. That has completely been lost, which underlines how far away the Left has moved from the actual experience of Bolshevism, which was precisely in that trend of mass parties openly committed to working class rule.

The Left is at a crossroads. It seems a different world, looking back. Socialism and the basic ideas of Marxism were common-sense, among not just for the working class, but broader layers of society. We're not there. The only way to achieve some kind of breakthrough is to rediscover that kind of vision on the Left, not dismiss it as anti-Bolshevism.

We shouldn't be working through these tiny parties of a new type – the product of Stalin's pen – or competing through single issue campaigns, broad fronts or Left reformism. We are often told on the British Left that the road to socialism is bread-and-butter demands. No, we need to start from what is necessary, what needs to be done, as was the case with the Erfurt Program in 1891, when they were setting out that organization's theory and practice. "Where are we and where do we want to go? How do we get there?" That is not to say go back to the Erfurt Program like the Ten Commandments. I've located lots of problems with Kautsky's Marxism and the SPD, but we need to rediscover that positive aspect of our history.

While there's been a rediscovery of Kautsky, there is also a continued distortion and an instrumentalization of his legacy. We have to approach Kautsky's legacy with the caveat that there was a rupture in his thought. I am certainly not of the view that Kautsky's democratic socialism is the "democratic socialism" of Sanders and Corbyn. There are positive lessons to be drawn about using parliament, but we have to be clear that these were parties that were openly committed to socialist revolution and working-class rule, not getting into Congress and going from there.

Jason Wright: Kautsky in the 21st century is highly anachronistic since Kautsky's political relevance terminated, with that period of world history, that Eric Hobsbawm so aptly named the long 19th century, at the opening guns of World War I. One sympathetic biographer writes of Kautsky that though he did more to popularize and standardize Marxism, to create an orthodoxy, than any individual since Engels, no major movement in the world called itself Kautskyist.

Most of us in this meeting are or were members of ostensibly socialist organizations, and probably identified as Leninists. I'm not so sure about the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) today. The composition of our collective backgrounds makes a statement as to the continuing relevance of Lenin and Kautsky in the 21st century.

My first engagement with Kautsky, and probably yours as well, was within the context of trying to understand Lenin's references to him. Indeed, in addition to *The Proletarian Revolution and the Renegade Kautsky*, Lenin's well-known response to Kautsky's attack on the Soviet Union in his pamphlet *Terrorism and Communism*, two of Lenin's most important texts, *State and Revolution* and *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism* also contain substantial polemical passages aimed at Kautsky. One reason for this is the significance of Kautsky, as a distinct figure within German Social Democracy. He achieved the same level of recognition and moral authority as the German socialist founders, Liebknecht and Bebel. Yet uniquely among the Party's leaders, he was never an officer in a trade union or an electoral candidate in the Reichstag, and he never ran for party office. His highest elected position within the SPD was as a conference delegate. Nevertheless, in his paid position as

editor of the Marxist theoretical journal *Neue Zeit*, he was an integral part of the same SPD bureaucracy whose conservatism he frequently criticized. Not only did Kautsky have an influential voice among Germans, but due to his 35-year run as editor of the Second International, Kautsky's writings also proved a major influence on socialists around the world. Eugene Debs was won to socialism reading Kautsky while he was jailed in 1894 for his role in leading the American Railway Union strike.

Lenin pointed out, "an immeasurably larger number of Kautsky's works have been translated into Russian than into any other language. It is not without justification that German Social Democrats sometimes say jokingly that Kautsky is more read in Russia than in Germany." Yet I would also argue, contrary to Lenin's sometimes assertion that there was a difference between the pre-1909 and post-1909 Kautsky, that Kautsky's weaknesses run like a thread from the beginning to the end of his career. I would not contest that Kautsky made an important pedagogical contribution in spite of his weakness, nor would I contest that he was capable of being on the correct side of disputes within the Socialist Party and the Second International, though if one examines closely the history of his blocs with Bebel, Luxemburg, and others, one frequently finds that Kautsky took the right positions for the wrong reasons.

Two examples I see of this is Kautsky's role in the revisionist debate with Bernstein, where he doesn't challenge so much Bernstein's conception of parliamentarism or electoral reform, but rather the anti-theoretical implications of "the movement is everything." Kautsky to his credit isn't willing to junk the value theory or the notion of the declining rate of profit. But he hesitates and he needs to be prodded in the combat along with Bebel. He never adequately addresses Bernstein on the state.

In 1906, he blocked Rosa Luxemburg on the first mass strike discussion, following the Russian Revolution of 1905, on democratic grounds – he thought the issue should be debated in the party press. As Rosa Luxemburg was to discover in 1910 when the discussion erupted again, this was precisely because Kautsky wanted to argue against the conception of the mass strike. At that point, he suppresses her writings on it.

I know we all evolve, but the initial appraisal by Marx and Engels of Kautsky is telling. Marx wrote in a letter to his daughter Jenny, "even Engels takes a much more tolerant view of this joker [Kautsky] since the latter gave proof of his considerable drinking ability. When the charmer – the little joker, I mean – first came to see me, the first question that rose to my lips was – are you like your mother?" – apparently, Marx and Mrs. Marx had read her novels— "Not in the least, he exclaimed, and silently I congratulated his mother. He's a mediocrity, narrow in outlook, otherwise (only 26 years old), a know-all, hard-working after a fashion, much concerned with statistics out of which, however, he makes little sense, by nature a member of the philistine tribe, for the rest, a decent fellow in his own way; I unload him on *amigo* Engels as much as I can."^[3]

Nevertheless, a strong working relationship develops between Kautsky and Engels in particular. Kautsky's main political development and opportunity occurs when he finds a wealthy benefactor in Hochburg who was employing Bernstein as his private secretary. He's won to Marxism before that meeting with Marx by studying *Anti-Dühring* with Bernstein and he returns, after some period of time working in London, to the *Neue Zeit* when the Anti-Socialist Laws are repealed. At that point, there's a need for a new party program: the Erfurt Program.

As comrades are aware, at the time of the SPD's founding from a fusion with the Lasalleans, there

were massive inconsistencies in the way that Wilhelm Liebknecht and the followers of Lassalle cobbled together this program. Marx identified significant confusions on the role of the State. Marx and Engels threatened to refuse to endorse it. Bebel was still in prison at the time, Liebknecht had been out for about a year. Marx wrote his *Critique of the Gotha Program* challenging what he considered to be the dangers of reformist illusions being bred by the sloppy formulations in the program. In 1891, as the legal party emerged, Liebknecht and Kautsky counter-posed separate programs. Engels sends the *Critique of the Gotha Program* to Kautsky and urges him to publish it. I think he hoped Kautsky would draw certain lessons from it. In the end, he did improve it, which Engels acknowledged, but he also carries over some of the same errors. “The political demands of the draft have one great fault. It *lacks* precisely what should have been said. If all the 10 demands were granted, we should indeed have more diverse means of achieving our main political aim, but the aim itself would in no wise have been achieved.”^[4]

Engels, like Marx in 1875, acknowledged the potential necessity of caution and defensive formulations but the weaknesses of the Erfurt Program lay not only in its omissions, but in its formulations. “In the long run,” Engels warns, “such a policy can only lead one’s own party astray. They push general, abstract political questions into the foreground, thereby concealing the immediate concrete questions, which at the moment of the first great events, the first political crisis automatically pose themselves.”^[5]

Engels means the omission of the dictatorship of the proletariat.

Ben Lewis points this out in his book on the Independent Social Democrats (USPD). Writing about the Halle Conference in 1920, he mentions that Zinoviev talks about the “Erfurtian sense” of the dictatorship of the proletariat. Lenin says Plekhanov was responsible for the superiority of the RSDLP program, saying at the Second Congress of the Comintern,

“The Erfurt Program says nothing about the dictatorship of the proletariat, and history has proved that this is no accident. When we were working out the party’s first program in 1902-3, we always had the example of the Erfurt program before us. Plekhanov, the same Plekhanov that said at the time: ‘Either Bernstein will bury social democracy or social democracy will bury Bernstein,’ laid special emphasis on the fact that the Erfurt program’s failure to mention the dictatorship of the proletariat was theoretically wrong and in practice a cowardly concession to the opportunists. And the dictatorship of the proletariat has been in our program since 1903.”^[6]

I believe it is fundamental to the understanding of Marx that under the dictatorship of the proletariat, classes initially remain, but all classes except the working class are subordinated to a government directed in the interests of the working class. Otherwise, you would not have a dictatorship. But the goal of the dictatorship is the abolition of classes, and its own historically necessary dissolution. The state can now make social decisions, for instance, to attract more workers to undesirable jobs like garbage collection via higher rates of reward. Initially the dictatorship of the proletariat is necessarily a temporary, transitional phase that is neither socialism nor communism. Socialism is the abolition of classes under the transitional period, where there are no classes, but the state lingers because the distribution of standards in society still remains unequal. The state directs production and administers products and services created by labor. Until sufficient reorganization occurs and the material basis for communism is achieved, the standard right of the citizen under socialism to resources is thus not true communism, but simply a fairer allocation of resources than under capitalism.

Virtually all the great crises in the history of the socialist movement stem from either the failure of the confidence in the agency of the working class, and consequently the desire to substitute some alien entity in its place, or the failure to comprehend the nature of the State. A fatal weakness at the heart of German Social Democracy is thus a link in a long chain that leads to many and various dead ends and betrayals: the rejections of the Bolshevik Revolution based on an abstract and idealistic conception of democratic rule; the SPD's entering into a government with the remnants of the Kaiser's regime, and failure to aggressively purge the military and police; the fatally flawed Stalinist conception of socialism in one country; Allende's tragic and deadly commitment to the Popular Front.

Within the Trotskyist tradition, certainly the abandonment of a program based on revolutionary Marxism by all manner of state capitalist theoreticians represented a similar regression to the level of the Second International. The same confusion on the state also characterizes, in its own way, the failure of so many post-Trotsky Trotskyists to first recognize the overturn of capitalist property relations in deformed workers' states, and then to recapitulate the same confusion at the point when counterrevolution triumphed.

I see that Kautsky has problems with the agency of the working class. As Joseph Seymour argued in *Lenin and the Vanguard Party*, you need to begin by looking at the beginning of what the party needs to be, and not a finished work.

Chris Cutrone: For me, the question of the legacy of Karl Kautsky's Marxism is not as a Marxist, but rather as *the* Marxist. He was the theorist, not of capitalism or socialism, but of the working class's struggle for socialism, the social and political movement and most of all the political party that issued from this movement and struggle. Kautsky articulated the historical and strategic perspective and the self-understanding of the proletarian socialist party. He helped formulate the political program of Marxism — the Erfurt Program in which the German Social-Democratic Party became officially Marxist — and explained it with particular genius. He was not a theorist of German socialism but rather of the world-historic social and political task of socialism, for the entire Second International.

He was rightly if ironically called the "Pope of Marxism," and this meant as a world political movement, indeed of the world party for socialism, in every country. For instance, his writings converted the American socialist Eugene Debs to Marxism. Lenin, Rosa Luxemburg, Trotsky and countless others learned Marxism from Kautsky. Kautsky provided the theoretical self-understanding and strategic vision for all Marxists and for the broader socialist movement led by Marxism throughout the world, precisely when Marxism was a mass form of social struggle and politics, and precisely when this was so in the core metropolitan advanced capitalist countries.

In this respect Kautsky was one of the greatest political leaders of all time, in all of world history. However, he was the leader of a movement that failed, for Marxism failed.

This makes Kautsky a peculiar historical figure and makes his thought — as we inherit from his writings — a specific kind of object and legacy. Kautsky explains something to us that no longer exists, namely the mass socialist political party and the class struggle for socialism of the working class, aiming for the world dictatorship of the proletariat taking over and transforming global capitalism.

Kautsky's Marxism summarized and appropriated the entire history and experience of the socialist workers' movement up to that point, namely, the radical tradition of the bourgeois revolution, the

industrial social visions of the Utopian Socialists, the unfinished tasks of the failed revolutions of 1848, the civil collective and social cooperative movements of labor organizers and anarchists, and the party as what Ferdinand Lassalle called the “permanent political campaign of the working class” aiming to win the “battle of democracy.”

But the history of socialism had exhibited antagonisms and conflicts between its various aspects and protagonists. The disputes within socialism were considered by Marxism such as Kautsky’s as not mere differences and disagreements, but rather expressed the self-contradictory character of the struggle for socialism and its tasks. The question was how the working class must work through such self-contradiction.

One catch-phrase from 19th century history preceding Kautsky was “social and political action.” Kautsky understood the proletarianized working class’s struggle for socialism to require both kinds of activity, and moreover sought to combine them in the political party for socialism and its associated civil-social movement organizations. This is what Kautsky and the greater Second International Marxism meant by “social democracy,” a legacy of the unfulfilled tasks of 1848, to achieve the “social republic.” Marxists understood this to require the independent political and social action of the working class leading the broader discontented, exploited and oppressed masses under capitalism.

Otherwise, the task of socialism in capitalism was liable to fall out into an antinomy of having to choose between social movement activism and political activity. It was Kautsky’s Marxism’s ability to comprehend and transcend this antinomy and achieve the combined tasks of both.

This is what the subsequent socialist movement since Kautsky’s time — since the failure of Second International Marxism — has foundered upon, starting at least as early as the 1930s Old Left of Stalinism and reformist Social Democracy, and especially since the 1960s New Left and its eschewing of the tasks of building the political party for socialism.

The historical wound of this history we face is that the Kautskyan political party both made the revolution and prosecuted the counterrevolution. Both Social Democracy and “Marxist-Leninism” — Stalinism — are descended from Kautskyan socialism — from this history of Marxism.

But rather than engaging and trying to work through the problematic legacy of Kautsky’s Marxism, socialists and the greater Left — and indeed democracy — has drawn back and retreated from it — avoided it.

The reason the question of Kautsky’s legacy specifically as well as that of Marxism more generally returns periodically is that it represents the unfinished work and task of history that must still be worked through.

In one way or another, we must engage the tasks — and contradiction — of social and political action in capitalism that points beyond it to socialism. So long as this task remains, we will be haunted by Kautsky’s Marxism.



Karl Kautsky

RESPONSES

AS: Regarding Kautsky as an ideal for democratic socialism today, there was his conception of optimism and progress, and the idea that socialism is actually a scientific idea, which can be perceived through a rational means of study. In a way, this prefigured Gramsci's idea of hegemony. With the growth of more representative institutions and the state as a model of provision for more and more people, there is a gradual process of domination – not negative or positive – which over time is something that is within the reach of socialists, political activists, politicians, and intellectuals.

To counter Ben's idea of Kautsky as prefiguring the Bolshevik Revolution, while he had a certain Russophobic stereotype of Bolshevism as a renewed czarism, revolutions that were modernizing, that took upon both a nationalist liberation and a socialist exterior, did not compute with his vision of a post-industrial socialist point of view.

Socialism can be infused and grown through a consciousness of a kind of progress, and an ideal of human optimism. That continues an essentially Enlightenment idea. Bernie actually brought back into the discussion today, echoing Kautsky, the idea of revolution as a horizon point. It might be a heuristic device, but it's a point on the horizon that we must stay focused on.

BL: Kautsky does see socialism in a sense a victory of reason, of Enlightenment, of progress, but this cannot be separated from the political party, the worker's party of social and political action, guided by an unashamedly Marxist program. Even the renegade Kautsky, who defended coalitions with liberal

governments, stressed that we need an independent political party to carry out political action.

It strikes me as very ahistorical to then say, "Oh, okay, you've got the Democratic Party." Is it a workers' party? I know it can exploit trade unions, but the idea that the SPD, even in its more hollowed out form, is in some way analogous to the Democrats today is severely problematic. That's not to say that people can't do work there and influence things, and clearly what's happening in America is important. But Kautsky haunts America as much as he does Britain by asking, how does the working class organize as a political party to go beyond the ephemeral, day-to-day of the class struggle, that will not go away until it can set itself some program? It's not a woolly reference point to the future. The SPD became a Sunday School of socialism rather than the guiding principles of its program. You talk about Bernie. Even Bernstein would look at that and say, "Come on, really? Is that where we're going?"

You could even read Kautsky in March or April 1917 talking about the coming nature of the Russian Revolution, the key question being how to keep the peasantry on board. In the 1920s, even in 1918, Kautsky was very critical of the dissolving the Constituent Assembly, becoming fiercely anti-Bolshevik. But in terms of October 1917 itself, Lenin and others were absolutely clear: this is the culmination of the Bebel-Kautsky strategy that we've been looking to.

Jason, you say "we all evolve". I don't think the IBT and its subsequent splits *are* evolving. That's a problem for me, because the *Vanguard* stuff, the Joseph Seymour stuff, it's just repeating what you've said before without engaging in the new stuff. Go and look at *Stalin's Master Narrative*. You can see that Stalin goes line for line and removes *any* reference to Kautsky that's positive, any reference to the Second International, and the arguments are basically exactly the same as those of Joseph Seymour. You're still arguing very much within the framework of the 20th century You have to be careful of instrumentalization and of repetition.

Engels' critique of the Erfurt Program was aimed at Liebknecht's draft. Kautsky didn't like that draft and Engels didn't like the draft. Engels sends off a very annoyed letter. Kautsky did not refuse to print that letter. Liebknecht died ten years later, and only then did they actually have access to this letter for the first time. Kautsky printed it straight away without comment in *Neue Zeit*.

JW: In discussions in *Jacobin* and the CPGB that have occurred around Kautsky, Jim Creegan or Charlie Post made an analogy that Rosa Luxemburg saw the working class as an irresistible force but Kautsky saw the working class as an immovable object. Kautsky's biographer Steenson sees a tension in Kautsky's thinking between determinism and voluntarism and he tries to trace it back to Marx and he really tries to pin it on Engels because he's from the school of thought that Engels represents some sort of mechanical deviation from Marx. I think the tension is inherited from the determinism of the Darwinian outlook. It's a passivity; he at times overcame it, but ultimately completely succumbed. I don't think that is present in Marx. Marx has a revolutionary appetite, because he wants to transform and change the world, his program is grounded in that. That's precisely what Kautsky is ultimately missing.

Lars Lih thinks he made an incredible discovery, that Lenin cribbed the idea that revolutionary consciousness coming from outside the working class from Kautsky. Lenin was never trying to hide that! He says he learned Marxism from Kautsky! To defend Seymour's *Lenin and the Vanguard Party*, that conception is not the end for Lenin, it's the beginning. Lenin ostensibly accepts the idea that the Socialist Party in each country should be a party of the whole class, but in practice he's actually

purging the party. By the time the Bolsheviks emerge as a party and not just a fraction of the RSDLP (Russian Social Democratic Labor Party), and by the time that the Russian revolutionary opportunity occurs, it is a very different organism than the German Socialist Party. That flexibility led him in April 1917 to do a switch. You know, there are echoes of the concept of permanent revolution, whether Lenin had actually sat down and read *Results and Prospects* or not.

CC: I want to address evolution and gradualism, as well as voluntarism versus determinism, which I would not consider to be two sins that one must avoid, but rather the expression of a real contradiction, a real antinomy in capitalism. Capitalism itself exhibits the character of either determinism or voluntarism. To pick up on that idea of “irresistible force and immovable object”: they are two sides of the same thing. Capitalism inevitably produces a proletarianized working class. In that sense, it is both an immovable object and an irresistible force, if we understand the working class to be a crisis in capitalist society, in bourgeois society under conditions of capitalism. The existence of the proletariat is actually a crisis for capitalism. That speaks to the issue of gradualism, evolution and progress. Certainly, after postmodernism, it is necessary to somehow recover the notions of history, progress, world history, and universal history, as opposed to postmodernism’s flattening of history. Nonetheless, I think that the Marxist understanding of history and historical progress is not so linear.

Adam said “scientistic.” Why not scientific? Scientistic implies a kind of science-ism, which would be a problem. It would be unscientific. For science to reify itself would be a problem for science. So, a scientific approach to the struggle for socialism, or scientific socialism, is not just about the matter of voluntarism versus determinism. Primarily, it is a matter of politics and the revolution, meaning that the lesson that Marx and Engels drew, and that Kautsky follows – which is why he is the leading theorist of German Social Democracy – is about the failures of 1848: what they say about democracy and what they say about liberal democracy in particular. In other words, the division between the liberal bourgeoisie and the working class in the revolutions of 1848 proved fatal for democracy, whether in France or in Germany. So, the lesson that was drawn is that the democratic aspirations of the working class must be met, that they are a source of real conflict in the political realm, in democracy. The working class has to win the battle *of* democracy, not the battle *for* democracy. It’s not about adding economic democracy to political democracy. It would be a *Jacobin* kind of perspective to say that we have political democracy but not economic democracy. No, under capitalism we really don’t have political democracy either. And the limits of democracy are demonstrated in the history of revolution since 1848.

Does Kautsky use the term “dictatorship of the proletariat” in the Erfurt Program? No. But what are we to make of that? What he does insist upon is the independent political action of the working class, and that this is revolutionary.

It is not about progress from political to economic democracy, nor progress in the gradual socialization of democracy, which is the Bernstein view. I wouldn’t want to caricature that view either. I thought Ben Lewis was correct that even Bernstein wouldn’t embrace the DSA. The DSA is sub-Bernstein – let alone the Labour Party or the Democratic Party in the United States – but the DSA itself and Momentum in the Labor Party are sub-Bernsteinian because Bernstein also thought that the independent role of the working class was crucial.

Kautsky is the theorist of the independent social and political action of the working class and the need for a proletarian socialist party, and, as such, he expresses an enduring necessity in capitalism. Even

when there really isn't a socialist movement or socialist parties, the question comes up of democracy and capitalism versus a kind of arbitrary statism and a kind of anarchist civil-social realm. It poses the task of what Marxists used to call proletarian socialist revolution. Kautsky is the theorist of that. I'm not saying that's not a complicated question or that there aren't complicated questions which come up within that task, but, fundamentally, he was the theorist of that task.

Q&A

Adam, perhaps you are avoiding the issue of liberalism by calling it "Enlightenment." You describe the idea of progress today as increasing "provision," by which you presumably mean "provision from the State." Now, it's not clear that is progress at all. In fact, it would be inimical to the kind of liberal politics that Marxism sought to take up. Really, when I think about "the Squad," Alexandria Ocasio Cortez (AOC), the DSA, and "leftism" more generally today, it seems like the emphasis on increasing provision is based on a pessimism about humanity, our ability to solve our social problems, and our ability to advance society such that an increasing role of the state is required. I don't think that's the progress that Kautsky or Marxism had in mind. So, I'd like you to clarify what is meant by progressive provision and how you see that in Marxism and classical liberalism.

AS: For Kautsky, as a post-liberal thinker, the word "Enlightenment" does not in any way mean more than a kind of cultural disposition, as opposed to an embrace of any kind of free-market liberal idea. On the other hand, the idea of "provisionism," in the sense of a Bismarckian-socialist White Revolution or a kind of proto-corporatism – which I think we're familiar with in the so-called socialist component of the fascism – was a major blind spot for Kautsky himself. I don't think he quite realized that the development of the welfare state could actually disable what for him was an idealist, intellectual, scientific notion of socialism. He was extremely keen on the denunciation of middle-class fellow-travellers. This is something quite active today in contemporary politics in the US. In other words, the idea that trying to make economist gains, small gains for workers on the level of trade-unionism, actually repels potential liberal voices in the middle class. In that sense, Kautsky was quite keen on the idea that the slippery tendencies of middle-class fellow-travellers would easily slip into a kind of reactionary position. Let me reiterate the idea of dictatorship which we have danced around. Ultimately, for Kautsky, socialism is the vehicle for the future development of democracy. Therefore, the ultimate betrayal within Bolshevism was the embrace of a dictatorial suppression of civil liberties, which for him were the ultimate vehicle for the realization of socialist aims.

CC: Bakunin's criticism of Lassalle and also of Marxism was that, despite their best intentions, Marxism would become a tail of progressive liberalism – and there was an actual progressive party, for instance, in Germany. Bakunin tended to pigeonhole Marx and Engels as specifically German socialists, downplaying their more world-historic significance in a kind of catty way, but this gets us to the issue of Marxism and the independence of the working class.

The issue of liberalism is really about civil society versus the state. It's not about the state of adopting so-called "free-market" policies. *Classical* liberalism assumes that politics does not actually encompass all of society, that we live in a civil-social society rather than a political society. And, therefore, there is a necessity not only of independent working-class political action but also of independent working-class social action. In that way, the working-class would jealously guard its civil liberties, its liberal rights under capitalism. In other words, it would jealously guard its prerogatives with respect to liberal

democracy, which doesn't mean "free-market-ism", but something like the independence of labor unions from the state, state policy, and administration.

Not only did the Kautskyan party, and its program, have something different in mind, but it actively opposed the welfare state. Nowadays, I wouldn't say it's just "Bismarckian White Revolution;" it's reformist social democracy, as we get from the 20th century. When Bernie Sanders is pressed on what he means by socialism, he brings up the western European social-democratic welfare state. According to Kautsky, that is just progressive liberalism. It's not some kind of soft socialism. It also isn't really social democracy. It betrays not only socialism, but liberalism, too, because it is statist. In other words, progressive liberalism doesn't have to be the Prussian absolutist state that Bismarck is the Iron Chancellor of. Instead, it is now the run-of-the-mill social-democratic welfare state of the 20th century, and people like Corbyn, Sanders and "the squad" want to put it back together again, against neoliberalism. We have to be careful about these terms that are really anachronistic when we think of the Marxism of the Second International and Kautsky.

Kautsky and Marxists of his time were clearer about the relationship between socialism and liberalism, the role of liberal democracy and civil liberties, and independent civil-social organization in the struggle for socialism by the working class. So, it doesn't have to be the "corporatist state," in the sense of a union of corporations and labor unions in the state. It doesn't have to be nationalism. At a more fundamental level, it's also about the rather limited notion of the role of the state. We just assume today that socialism is statism. This is not at all the case for Kautsky or for his students, like Lenin.

The necessities of the Russian Revolution are a terrible example to try to read back into what was originally meant by Marxism. Rosa Luxemburg, for instance, said, of course Lenin and Trotsky are good comrades, but circumstances are forcing them to do things in Russia that we will not be able to underwrite. How much truer of forced collectivization, Stalinism, and crash industrialization? This is the image we have of socialism, and it's just fundamentally false. This is actually not something Kautsky neglected: it's something he actively understood and opposed, with respect to the capitalism of his time, of the late-19th and early-20th century, the era of monopoly capitalism and imperialism – the imperialism of the capitalist state. This was not something that only revealed itself later. It's something that was well understood at the time and that we capitulated to in the 20th century.

Are there any aspects of Kautsky's critique of the Bolsheviks from 1918 to 1922 that are salvageable?

BL: The dictatorship of the proletariat for Marx and Engels would take the form of the democratic republic, as Jason is right to stress. It had particular features, which can also be found in particular demands of the Erfurt Program. In large part, it drew on the experience of the Paris Commune, which, despite its rather exotic name in English, was basically a local Paris city council that elected a bunch of socialists. So, that's what they saw as the dictatorship of the proletariat. It was not in any way counter-posed to majority revolution or majority rule.

The best of Kautsky is clear about the meaning of the dictatorship of the proletariat and why, for example, socialists joining in the government in the Third Republic are completely wrong. It's statism, apologizing for capitalism. In 1922, Kautsky's own understanding of the dictatorship of the proletariat shifted. We have to bear in mind that he was no longer the Kautsky of 1905. When he's critiquing the Bolshevik regime, he's not just doing so on the basis of the measures it has to take to stay in power in the face of imperialist intervention; he's actually defending a left-wing capitalist government, à la the

coalition government of the early Weimar Republic.

For Marx and Engels and for Kautsky – I echo Chris on this – it was the self-action of the proletariat organized in the political party with a Marxist program, and through that organization they were going to prepare themselves for the dictatorship of the proletariat, the democratic republic.

JW: When I listen to Ben or speakers from the CPGB on the issue of the crisis of the Left, I often feel there is a nostalgia for what has been lost. Of course, we would all like to see a socialist party of 800,000 people or whatever the USDP had when it broke up, but the real issue is, what does that culture mean? To me, it's not something that can organically grow from within and take over the state, which is ultimately that way Kautsky saw it happening, and that's why I mentioned the immovable object.

I agree with Ben that there is a shift in Kautsky, even from reading the limited amount I can read in English. However, the German social democratic culture was an alternative culture, a counterculture based on the fact that this was a minority within society. It was protective of the fact that they didn't go to church and were excluded from other sorts of social gatherings, perhaps by the stigma of their beliefs. It counterbalances that by offering them a culture. But that itself is not some sort of prelude to dual power the way that a flying picket squad is in a strike, or a worker's militia is, or the way that the Soviets or the workers' councils are.

To address something that Chris said, I don't actually disagree that there is a symmetry between Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Kautsky that way. Luxemburg thought spontaneity would renew the social-democratic party. Kautsky thought that the German working class couldn't be stopped, no matter what. Of course, tragically, he lives to see Nazism, but I'm not convinced he draws the lesson of it, actually. There are certain writings where he implies that the Bolshevik counter-revolutionists, as he thinks of it, are actually worse because it's done in the name of the working class. We can understand that, but it's a very liberal conception, ultimately.

CC: The later Kautsky turns against the Bolshevik Revolution. He sees a Thermidorian role played by the Bolsheviks, in the sense that he thinks the Russian Revolution has been limited to a bourgeois revolution. And so, he sees the Bolsheviks as being both Jacobins and a kind of Thermidorian reaction bound up into one.

There are all sorts of problems with the way that Kautsky tries to make sense of the Russian Revolution. We should also not only pay attention to the fact that he condemns the role of the Bolsheviks in the October Revolution, the dismissal of the constituent assembly, in particular. But, later, he says: well, maybe the Bolsheviks were justified after all. In other words, he expects them to fail, he expects them to fall from power. So, when they don't, his attitude is that they must have been justified by history, by their success.

That points to a philosophical problem: the problem of progress, faith in progress, and faith in humanity: a kind of affirmative view of history. He was against the gamble that the Bolsheviks made in the October Revolution, but then that opposition softened, and he came to affirm it in a particular way once the gamble seemed to pay off. He tried to limit it, however, to a democratic or a bourgeois revolution in Russia, which is taking on a Napoleonic phase with Stalinism, or something like that. He also gave a snarky eulogy of Lenin in 1924, in which he says, maybe Lenin is the greatest political leader of all

time, to which he adds that caveat, “as a Russian revolutionary in a backward country.” In other words, Lenin might be the greatest political leader of all time as a bourgeois revolutionary. And, as we know, socialism is supposed to go beyond the bourgeois revolution.

It is not just a matter of position-taking, of determining what Kautsky’s position was on the Russian Revolution and on the role of the Bolsheviks. It gets to deeper issues of understanding.

Dictatorship brings up the issue of political rule, and, as Engels said, political rule is authoritarian, especially in a revolution. It is, but that’s not the be-all-and-end-all. The question is, what’s the role of that political rule in a socially transformative process? In other words, what’s the role of that in achieving socialism? So, I’ll say that both for Kautsky before the crisis of World War I and for the Kautsky of the crisis of the Russian Revolution and the German Revolution the goal of socialism was to overcome the necessity of the state, to overcome the necessity of political rule that capitalism made necessary. In that way, it harks back to classical liberalism and a withering away of the state. The first theory of the withering away of the state is liberalism. And I would say Kautsky and Lenin, Kautsky and his followers, agreed with the perspective that the goal is to overcome the need for political rule.

The need for political rule in capitalism is the Bonapartist capitalist State, and the need for political rule in the proletarian socialist revolution is still a function of capitalism. So, understood according to the critique of the Gotha program, or Lenin’s *The State and Revolution*, when the working class takes power, you’re still living under capitalism. And, insofar as capitalism is overcome, the necessity of such political rule and the necessity of the state, per se, withers away and is overcome. That’s the goal. It sounds like utopianism to us today, but actually they had a reason to believe that this was practically feasible, and their entire strategy was based on this. And, by the way, it also means the withering away of the need of the party. The party exists to make the revolution. After that its particular necessity dissolves, faster than the dictatorship of the proletariat dissolves.

Jason said that Seymour’s point in Lenin and the Vanguard Party is that while Lenin is grounded in Kautsky, Lenin develops. But that misses the crisis of the party in Marxism – the growth of the party was not only progress, but a symptom of capitalism – which Marxists like Luxemburg and Lenin took to be a symptom of the ripeness for revolution. Ben, how do you respond to Jason’s point that there was a crisis of the party, and how did Marxists deal with that?

BL: The crisis of the Left is where we are today. Where does it come from, and how is it historically conditioned? Regarding the potential within the growth of a proletarian party for a self-undermining process that can reinforce capitalism, I’m not so sure.

What exactly was the culture of the SPD? How did it turn into an organization that was fiercely opposed to any interaction with the state – the Bismarckian state, the Kaiserreich – and then actively support it? If you look at the post-WWII scenario, where any attempt to establish independent labor parties or communist parties was co-opted, I don’t think that applies to the SPD in the particular state in which it found itself. Even in 1914, for all intents and purposes, there wasn’t full integration into the state or the war effort: a lot of soldiers were “red” as Bebel said. I’m not nostalgic for what went. This was defeated. It was defeated horribly. It was one of the biggest defeats suffered by the working class of our century.

All I’m saying is that I’m optimistic about the Kautsky revival because this 20th-century consensus is starting to fall apart. And that to me is positive because it allows us to reconsider some of the dogma

we have inherited in the mother's milk of the far Left. It allows us to ask, what was it about this organization that was important, where did it go wrong, and what can we learn from it? It seems to me that what's happened until very recently is that it's just been dismissed tout court.

The more fundamental point is that if we are to go beyond the current state of crisis – for all sorts of reasons, given the defeats of the 20th century – it's worth thinking about the sense of ambition that these movements possessed. They didn't just start off with bread-and-butter issues: they started with a conviction that this is the epochal transition from capitalism to socialism. And they asked the question, what does that mean? They tried to apply Marx and Engels, for good and for ill, to that question. To me, that's the only way there's going to be some kind of breakthrough. That's the only way that socialist ideas can become *mass* again. So, in terms of the crisis of the Left, I do not think that the more epochal trend applies concretely to the SPD. I don't think it applies to the SPD in 1890-1914, but it certainly does apply slightly more from 1919 to 1931 or 1933, because then there is clear integration of the organizations into the capitalist state.

Is the professionalism and intellectualism of socialist leaders like Kautsky, really at odds with the idea of a vanguard party for the socialist movement? For example, is Kautsky's conviction that trade unions should not be independent, but rather subordinated to Socialist Party discipline, not an example of a judgment that is both theoretical and strategic and that only had a bearing in so far as the second international mass Socialist Party was a structure with an inherent division of labor that depended on theoretical leadership and party discipline?

Did Kautsky do more than draw upon his evolutionary interpretation of Marxism to systematize an ideology corresponding to the situation a pre-1914 SPD powerful as a subculture but unable to take power? This ideology did not survive the catastrophe of World War One and the failure to take and hold the initiative after the November 1918 revolution. So, is Kautsky now just a figure of historical interest? Even in terms of Marx's theory, Kautsky would seem to have little to offer of lasting value. Hilferding is much more important in this respect.

AS: Kautsky really provides the strongest defense for the independence of intellectual freedom and intellectual autonomy. And I think that's the clear difference between a Leninist vanguard idea, as opposed to Kautsky's idea that socialism as an independent science that has objective validity, which is universal. It's not limited to a particular identity politics or subject position. Nevertheless, it still must retain an idea of rigor, professionalism and freedom of thought, which is different from the professionalism of active revolutionaries, who prioritize a kind of praxis of revolutionism as opposed to an objective science that actually exists in the world and simply needs to be awoken.

That is a more universalist idea. This is perhaps part of the reason why New Left thinkers did not find Kautsky tremendously compelling for developing a vanguardist protagonist of revolution that was based on a multiplicity of identities – the other, the subaltern, the neglected. Today, the principal priority of a large scale, organized involvement that takes the form of political activism and a party is why we look now to Kautsky as a model for the work that we need to do that actually moves beyond identity politics, beyond neoliberalism, and actually tries to find a new reality, so that we can decipher for ourselves universally why socialism is a future towards which we must develop. Any kind of idea of progress must proceed in that direction.

JW: Talking of this sort of scientific view of Kautsky, what I find so magnificent about the thinking of

Trotsky is that he sort of anticipates the idea of punctuated equilibrium in discussions of evolution. His conception of the role of the vanguard party from Lenin is something that is prepared to make the correct intervention in circumstances on its own. But it's more than that.

I found it very interesting that, in his book on the Halle Conference, Ben Lewis is critical of Rosa Luxemburg for leaving the USPD prematurely. From my perspective, it's too late. It's really in 1914 when the betrayal is committed. Perhaps Ben agrees with me there. The enduring legacy of Leninism, why it remains relevant today, and why I would totally agree with both Ben and Chris, is to say that the politics of Bernie Sanders is sub-Kautsky. This is not a model that we can look to. This is something that even Bernstein would have objected to as misleading the working class. This is where I think I do disagree with Ben; I think the old lessons are still relevant. I think that that still is the model that we need to use. I don't want to fetishize discussing the dictatorship of the proletariat. And I don't think that Marx and Engels were insisting on that either in the *Critique of the Gotha Program*, or Engels' critique of the Erfurt Program, but I think they were saying that what was wrong was that there were ideas that lead away from the conception of the dictatorship of the proletariat. You can talk about it in a different term in terms of a workers' government, you can use a defensive formulation, but you have an obligation not to create illusions in the bourgeois state. That is how I am a little different from some of the other panellists.

CC: It's about the necessity of a political act, namely revolution. And I think that's why we can't just talk about the objective necessity of socialism. Rather, we have to think about how society is tasked by capitalism. What kind of needs does capitalism generate that are going to be met one way or another? They will be met through an interventionist state, a capitalist state. And I would say that it's important to say that it's a capitalist state rather than bourgeois state, meaning it's a state that takes up the task of maintaining capitalism. And the capitalist state can be populated by workers. You can have a workers' state dedicated to the maintenance of capitalism, of course. So instead of the sociological composition of the political rule, it is about the strategic vision, the historical goal and the political tasks and in what spirit they're taken up.

I would say there was a party that made an intervention in 1914, the SPD made an intervention in 1914, and it made the wrong intervention. It sought to defuse the pre-emptive counterrevolution of the German war effort. And I think even people like Ebert and Scheidemann thought in terms of Lenin's question of who's using whom. They thought that they were going to get the better of the Kaiserreich. In other words, they thought that by supporting the war, they'd actually undermine the Kaiserreich and inherit it, which of course they did. So, there was a party capable of making an intervention, it was the SPD. It just made the wrong intervention, not on some moral principle of pacifism, but ultimately it became used by capitalism and by the capitalist state after 1918. Where they might have thought that the state depended on them for the war effort and they might have gotten the better of it in the end. That's a complex question about the end of World War One and the specific conditions therein. It's not that there wasn't a party. It's not like Lenin made the only party in the world that was capable of a political intervention. But the question is the instrumentality of the party versus what its actual historical vision and goals and strategy are, which, again, is not just the party; it's the party facilitating the working-class taking power. I would say that it is a vision of taking over capitalism, appropriating it, and transforming it.

It is about a political act in which a socialist party with a vision of achieving socialism takes up the

political tasks that are otherwise taken up by capitalist parties. In other words, the tasks – rather than the objective necessity of socialism – the political tasks and the social tasks, that capitalism poses will be taken up by someone in some way. The question is, in what direction and with what goal?

Improving the working class in capitalism – what does that even mean? I want to make reference to Vivek Chibber’s “Our Road to Power”, in which he laid out the DSA’s differences from Kautsky. He said that in Kautsky and Lenin’s time the capitalist state belonged to the bourgeoisie. Therefore, the role of the state was different and it was reasonable for them to have a vision of revolution, in which working-class organization and party takes over from the capitalist state and achieves socialism. But since then, the role of the state is more democratic. There’s more participation from other classes in comparison to Kautsky and Lenin’s time, and the state plays a greater role. We’re more dependent on the state, so we can’t smash the state. We have to be elected to office and take power that way. I would say, no, fundamentally, the state is the same today as it was in Kautsky and Lenin’s time. And that road to power is not a road to power at all. At least in terms of the task of socialism, it is a map for workers to maintain capitalism – at best. Really, we’re talking about petty bourgeois democratic politicians who are aiming to take over the Labour Party or the Democratic Party. That’s what “our road to power” meant there. It is important to register the huge gulf between that and the vision that Kautsky had.

To my knowledge, Kautsky was much less of a central figure in the New Left. Of course, there are exceptions, Andrew Arato, Joseph Seymour. What has changed from the New Left to the following generations, Gen X and Millennials, that made Kautsky a figure in the history of Marxism that modern leftists have turned to?

CC: I would say, just take a stab at that last portion of the question. There might be a mistaken return to Kautsky that’s going on as a response to neoliberalism. But again, what that tends to do is domesticate Kautsky or tailor Kautsky, to a certain extent. It turns him into a kind of radical social democrat in the 20th century mode, a kind of intransigent 20th century social democrat, and that’s a falsification. We have to be on guard for that. There’s a kind of neo-social democracy afoot as a response to neoliberalism. And that’s why all the confusion around Corbyn and Sanders can arise as it does. And Kautsky can be a misapprehension and mistaken symbol of that in some way.

You mentioned Vivek Chibber’s “Our Road to Power” and how you explain his conception of the state really reminds me of Ralph Miliband and his writings on the state that are taken up by Chibber and Jacobin. So, returning to the question of the New Left versus now, why is it that they’re appropriating Miliband but also appropriating Kautsky, whereas the New Left didn’t seem to feel the need to appropriate Kautsky?

CC: Miliband responded to the same crisis of the Labour Party that the New Left responded to. And I would dare say that Miliband was better than his followers today, because he at least recognized the problem of the Labour Party. And that was before the Labour Party really was able to come to power in the way that it did subsequently. Efraim Carlebach has written on “The Sickness of Labourism,” Miliband’s famous essay and what it might mean to us today.^[7]

There are two moments. There’s a pre-neoliberal moment and a post-neoliberal moment. There’s a pre-New Left moment and a post-New Left moment, in which the question of social democracy and of labor politics and capitalism comes up. And the specter of older Marxism, the specter of actual socialism, does get raised in both of those moments, both in the early 60s and nowadays, as a kind of

pre-neoliberal and post-neoliberal historical haunting of the question. “What do we mean by socialism, again?”

You can say that neoliberalism comes out of the failure of official social democracy, and that neoliberalism’s failure then makes one want to go back to that official social democracy of the 20th century and do it right this time – with more race, gender and sexuality inclusiveness or something like that. That is where Kautsky comes up. It’s a question of what was meant originally by socialism? And how can we use this to take the parts of socialism that we like and avoid the parts that we don’t like and bring it up to date in some way? We can tailor Kautsky. We can say he was more democratic than Lenin, and that means he’d be more inclusive. Whereas for me things like the people of color caucus in the DSA is just a miniature version of the Democratic Party’s ethno-constituency racketeering. The Left mimics the capitalist politics that it tails. People hear that “Leninism is so monolithic and so dogmatic,” and then people say, “and that must mean straight white male”. What we would find is that Kautsky is just as monolithic and dogmatic, so to speak, but also that the older socialist tradition was also quite inclusive in its political party and its civil-social organizations, but just without the rhetoric that we have from the New Left and from neoliberalism. It’s unfortunate that Kautsky gets remembered in a particular way. And we do have to be on guard for the conditions under which he is remembered today, which is as a post-neoliberal anti-neoliberal, amid the nostalgia for 20th century social democracy.

Given the discussion on the squad, how did Kautsky see Debs? And how is Debs critically different from Sanders or Corbyn today in light of Kautsky?

JW: Eugene Debs would not recognize AOC or Bernie Sanders as socialists today. Whatever Debs’ weaknesses may have been, he drew a very distinct class line. He was willing to suffer for his politics. He would not have countenanced caucusing with the Democrats voting for many of the policies that AOC and Bernie Sanders have voted for. We have to remember that Debs was in prison for his opposition to World War One, which I want to link back to Kautsky. Kautsky cited that the key experience in his autobiographical fragments that converted him to socialism was witnessing what happened in the Paris Commune. And one of the models that I am sure he would have been aware of and had in front of him was that Bebel and Liebknecht were imprisoned for their opposition to Germany’s war on France. They were tried in a frame-up trial first that attempted to accuse them of trying to free French prisoners and created some sort of rear-guard military action. When that failed in court, they were convicted for their writings. But many people believe, as I think we believe today, that Bebel was actually prosecuted because he had voted against war funding in the Reichstag. Kautsky knew that when they went to take that vote on war funding in 1914, and he put the unity of the party over that principle that he had known about since his youth.

Ben Lewis actually brings this out in his book and it’s brought out in Stinson’s biography of Kautsky. When the German revolution occurs, they offer Kautsky a position to go and investigate the history of German diplomacy and secret diplomacy and what caused World War One. I mean, what were the tasks of the day, what was necessary? If we are to believe that something *could have* happened from the Socialist Party entry into the government, then what was Kautsky doing? He had to have known about the Freikorps. He was in fact harassed and briefly arrested, which was the only prosecution he ever faced before the Nazis came to power as a potential threat. He did not insist on an attempt to purge the police or the military apparatus of the Kaiser’s loyalists. That is a dissonance. Kautsky, of course, was an eternal optimist. One of his optimisms was that he believed that the Second

International could immediately be resurrected. He thought that one indication that internationalism had *not* died, I kid you not, is that he received many birthday cards from socialists all over the world. That's to utopianism! Whatever his contributions were in say *The Road to Power*, there's not a lot of lessons there really. It's good to know the history, to understand Lenin's context and to understand the link between the First International to the Third International that the Second International represented. But Kautsky should not be a model today.

CC: I would say it is more than a background for Lenin. I would say that Lenin didn't have to rewrite *The Road to Power*. In other words, Lenin just took it for granted. For Lenin and Luxemburg, it's not as if they would have gone back and offered something fundamentally different from *The Class Struggle*, *The Social Revolution* or *The Road to Power*. They would've just taken it for granted and ran with it. It's not a footnote, it's really foundational. And, by the way, that's why someone like Vivek Chibber has to say, "no, our 'road to power' is different", and to group Kautsky and Lenin together and say, "we depart from both of them."

BL: I absolutely concur with Jason on Kautsky's role. This is a time when a new government is being formed and they think, "What can we do with Kautsky? Well, we want socialist representatives in the war ministry but we don't really want them doing anything because that might cause problems while we're still on the Eastern front and in Finland. Let's pack Kautsky up and get him to study something to keep him out the way." This comes back to the question of the legacy of Kautsky. This is Kautsky: the renegade. This is Kautsky the thinker who has collapsed as a revolutionary thinker in many ways and as a revolutionary actor. This comes back to Chris's, good points about why Kautsky may have become popular in today's context. There is in Britain, for example, a kind of harking back to social democracy that actually goes back some time. Recall the "spirit of '45"-inspired Left Unity project. I forget when Left Unity was founded, maybe 10 years ago, but it has been for a while now that the spirit of '45, state intervention, Britain's finest hour, still looms large.

I agree with Chris that it is a response to the neoliberal tear up of welfare provision. And in that sense, it's a natural or historical response. It is problematic to draw Kautsky as a figure for that. I've seen in various *Jacobin* articles Kautsky and Ralph Miliband equated. And I think, well, you know, it's a different time. It's a different movement. They're different people. That's what we have to understand.

The interesting thing here is that Adam and Jason, from two different perspectives, agree on Lenin and vanguardism. Adam is saying that the good thing about Kautsky fundamentally is that he wasn't a vanguardist, Leninist. And Jason says that the good thing about Lenin was that he was a vanguardist. As I've pointed out, this is why the old issues are still relevant. They do matter. The historical roots of Bolshevism as an organization, certainly up to 1917, is in essence the application of the Bebel-Kautsky tendency, the mass proletarian party, the alternative culture, the democratic revolution, which means you need to have at least the peasantry on-side in some form to make revolution. And even that wasn't the end goal. It was intimately linked to the German center tendency, because they thought, "Our revolution doesn't even matter unless the Germans follow suit as well." That has been lost.

The sad thing about it is Jason is a very heroic, hardworking anti-Stalinist, but a lot of the things that he says about Lenin's vanguardism, Lenin's anti-schism, come from the pen of Stalin himself.

Regarding the German revolution, it's worth thinking that the German workers did take power in 1918 for all intents and purposes, but the SPD political leadership gave it back. The German state collapsed

as Bebel and Kautsky and others had been predicting for a long time. That's an interesting development in itself.

I'm delighted that people are talking about Karl Kautsky, that people are quoting me, but often, it is to quite nefarious ends. Kautsky is an incredibly controversial figure. We cannot say, "In 1891 he did this, ergo in 1918 he did that." There were developments in his thought. I think he collapsed as a thinker. And in that sense, the consensus of the 20th century, which I alluded to in the discussion around Kautsky's dismissal, has not been broken, because we still get comments like Jason's, which repeat the Eastern bloc version of it, and we still get the *Jacobin*-ization of Kautsky as a good democrat, so let's get elected to office. Kautsky was clear, and I think he was right to say this, that a socialist government can be formed by the election of an SPD government. But he was also clear that there were other ways that could happen. You can look at the experience he talks about with workers' states. He was very influenced by the Paris Commune. He disagrees with Luxemburg on the nature of the mass strike and the tactic, but Lenin agrees with him against Rosa Luxemburg. So, these are not cut and dry questions. There is a two-sided thing going on here that reflects Kautsky's distorted double-sided life itself, from revolutionary to renegade.

AS: Let me propose a somewhat controversial idea. I almost think of Kautsky along the lines of an icon like Gandhi. In other words, a pacifist anti-colonialist, who represents the road not taken, ultimately. In other words, in the post-Cold War environment where the term socialism itself is allied to a kind of dictatorship authoritarianism, Kautsky represents a humanist, vibrant socialism that's attuned to aesthetics, to culture, to counterculture, and ultimately a kind of supra-culture that goes beyond identity politics. That really speaks to our moment today where we've lost this kind of shared narrative. This is the appealing idea of the road not taken, which we can reconnect to for socialism in the future. **IP**

Transcribed by Luc Bronder-Giroux, David Faes, Erin Hagood, and Rana Urek.

Edited for brevity and readability by Erin Hagood.

[1] V.I. Lenin, "Two Tactics Social-Democracy in the Democratic Revolution," in *Collected Works*, trans. Abraham Fineburg and Julius Katzer, ed. George Hanna (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1977), 9:15-140. Available online at <<https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1905/tactics/index.htm>>.

[2] V.I. Lenin, "'Left-Wing' Communism: An Infantile Disorder," in *Collected Works* trans. Abraham Fineburg and Julius Katzer (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1977), 31:17-118. <<https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1920/lwc/>>

[3] Karl Marx, "to Jenny Longuet: 11 April, 1881", in *Marx and Engels Correspondence*, trans. Donna Torr (New York: International Publishers, 1968). Available online at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1881/letters/81_04_11.htm>

[4] Frederick Engels, "A Critique of the Draft Social-Democratic Program of 1891," in *Marx Engels Collected Works*, (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1990), 27:217. Available online at <<https://marxists.architexturez.net/archive/marx/works/1891/06/29.htm>>

[5] Ibid.

[6] V.I. Lenin, "The Second Congress of the Communist International," in *Collected Works*, trans. Julius

Katzer (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1965) 31:213-263. Available online at <<https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1920/jul/x03.htm>>

[7] See: Efraim Carlebach, “Last illusions’: The Labour Party and the Left,” *Platypus Review*, (June 2017), available online at <<https://platypus1917.org/2017/06/05/last-illusions-labour-party-left/>> and Efraim Carlebach, “Labour Once More,” *Platypus Review* (February 2020), available online at <<https://platypus1917.org/2020/02/01/labour-once-more/>>.

Share this:



Like this:



Be the first to like this.

Related

[The “truth” of Kautsky: Comments on “Kautsky in the 21st century”](#)
September 1, 2021
In "2021"

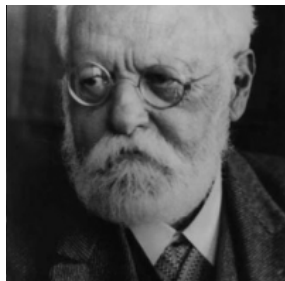
[Ep 26: On 1776 and reading the Renegade Kautsky](#)
June 29, 2020
In "2020"

[Introduction](#)
November 18, 2009
In "Benjamin Blumberg"

Related posts



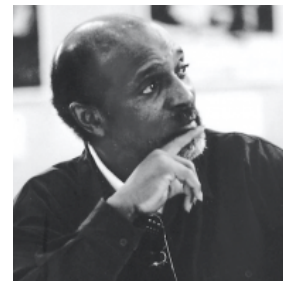
Afghanistan: After 20 and 40 years



The “truth” of Kautsky: Comments on “Kautsky in the 21st century”



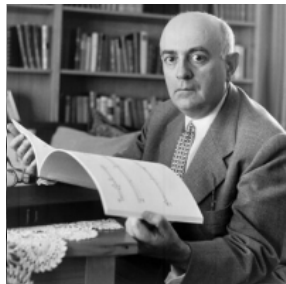
To look beyond the border fence: Reflections on “What is capitalism, and why should we be against it?”



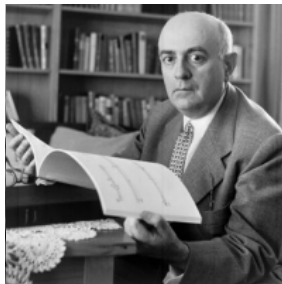
Beyond racial capitalism: Black Marxism and the question of modernity



What is capitalism, and why should we be against it?



*Platypus Frankfurt
Lesekreis Sommer 2021:
Adorno - Negative
Dialektik*



*Platypus Jena/Rheinland
Online-Lesekreis Sommer
2021: Adorno - Negative
Dialektik*



*Einen roten Stern
gebären!*

Leave a Reply

Enter your comment here...

Chapters

- [Aarhus](#)
- [Athens](#)
- [Austin](#)
- [Bay Area](#)
- [Berlin](#)
- [London](#)
- [Manchester \(UK\)](#)
- [Manchester \(US\)](#)
- [Nashville](#)
- [New Haven](#)

- [Bielefeld](#)
- [Boston](#)
- [Chicago](#)
- [Cincinnati](#)
- [Cologne](#)
- [Corvallis](#)
- [Fairfax](#)
- [Frankfurt](#)
- [Houston](#)
- [Jakarta](#)
- [Knoxville](#)
- [Leipzig](#)
- [New York](#)
- [Oxford](#)
- [Paris](#)
- [Philadelphia](#)
- [Prishtina](#)
- [Santa Cruz](#)
- [Sheffield](#)
- [Thessaloniki](#)
- [Tokyo](#)
- [Toronto](#)
- [Vienna](#)

The Platypus Affiliated Society

The Platypus Affiliated Society, established in December 2006, organizes reading groups, public fora, research and journalism focused on problems and tasks inherited from the “Old” (1920s-30s), “New” (1960s-70s) and post-political (1980s-90s) Left for the possibilities of emancipatory politics today.

Founding Documents

[What is a platypus?](#)

[Statement of Purpose](#)

[A Short History of the Left](#)

[The Left is dead! Long live the Left!](#)

[The Platypus Synthesis](#)

[The Decline of the Left in the 20th Century](#)