

Libertarian Socialism and Authoritarian Socialism

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1895

Thought ever marches onwards—and more rapidly than we imagine. One year at the present time is equivalent, so far as the development of ideas is concerned, to twenty-five years of the past, and few of us can keep pace with the world's intellectual progress.

The old struggle between force and freedom, which through the centuries has engaged human attention is far from being at an end. Everywhere it reveals itself in a different form, and in all quarters it may be encountered, in the moral and political spheres.

The principle of authority is the mastery of man by man, whatever may be the shape it assumes.

The principle of liberty implies the power of each individual to express his opinion freely, and to arrange his life in conformity with that opinion.

A man is preeminently an entity distinct from all others. and the being would be very mischievously actuated who would intentionally seek to destroy that individuality, the finest and noblest trait of human nature, or who would desire to make the characterful unit disappear in a featureless mass of mankind. Such a vile purpose would have for its end the complete destruction of all that tends to dignify humanity.

Man is, however, a social being, and as such he must necessarily take into consideration the rights and needs of his fellows living along with him in a community. Whoever considers the benefits of social life more important than those which could possibly accrue to him from a purely individual existence will readily yield to society a portion of his individuality. A free citizen will cheerfully deprive himself of many legitimate indulgences provided that his personality be not completely smothered and suppressed by collectivism.

It is very difficult, sometimes wellnigh impossible, to draw an accurate delimitation between the principles of authority and liberty. Due allowance must be made, both in respect of individuals and societies, for temperament, nationality, environment, and many other influences.

These two great contending principles, evident in every political agglomeration, are visibly busy in the socialist party. We easily find, without looking far afield, a Libertarian and an Authoritarian socialism.

Authoritarian socialism is made in Germany, and in that country it thrives the best. However, there are disciples of the school in every land where the proletariat has risen into consciousness. Yet we may fairly denominate it German.

Libertarian socialism, more akin to the hopes and spirit of the French people, has taken root in France, and spreads its branches over every nation where freedom has obtained a secure and well-established position. Some have tried to graft German socialism on the body of French socialism, and there even exists such a faction in France, which faction, illustrating the rule that a copy invariably exaggerates the original, is even more German than the Germans themselves. This group is known as the Marxists or Guesdists. A socialism of that kind, however, will never make headway to any considerable extent among the French people, who to accommodate themselves to German would first have to get rid of their untrammelled intellect. Now that is impossible, so a reactionary step is little to be dreaded. Countries where liberty is not altogether unknown—as is to-day the case in Germany, a land scarcely emancipated from feudalism—incline by intelligent preference towards French socialism. Among them may be named England, Holland, Italy, and Spain, while on the other hand, Austria, Switzerland, Denmark, and Belgium imitate the German model.

It would not be right to consider the foregoing a hard and fast division, for there may be found the nuclei of free socialism in authoritarian countries, and inversely the situation is similar. Nevertheless, in broad lines, our delimitation may stand as stated. In continuation of other articles that have appeared in these columns, to wit “The various tendencies of German Social Democracy” (1) and “Socialism in Danger” (2) we wish to follow the evident development of socialism up to date.

In my first article I set myself to show from authoritative quotations—for the evidence I used was borrowed from the party manifestoes—how, in the course of years, social democracy had lost its revolutionary character, and how it had become merely a reform party, not vitally dangerous to the possessing classes. The left wing of the party consisted of the “young men” or “independents”, who at first dared to make themselves heard, but at the congress of Erfurt, they were shut out as heretics. The right wing, led by Vollmar, received more lenient treatment. It was not advisable to excommunicate him or his adherents, for a very good reason. The group was too important and the partisans of Vollmar were too numerous. Between these two opposite fires the committee directing the destinies of the party found itself in a hot place. That committee consists of the sacred trinity, Liebknecht—Bebel—Singer, characteristically described by German social democrats as ‘the government’. By the powers that be, it is needless to say, they are regarded with favour as “moderate men”.

To these gentlemen Vollmar gave no end of trouble. It was his political attitude, as explained in some speeches of his at Munich, which, together with the massacre of the “young men”, supplied the bill of fare for discussions at the Erfurt Congress. At Berlin the subject of state socialism was on the carpet, and on that occasion Liebknecht and Vollmar surpassed themselves in the conquering business by dishing up a resolution to the taste of everybody. At Frankfort, debate waged round the socialist deputies to the Bavarian Landtag and their vote of approval of the budget. On each occasion Vollman came forth a conquering hero from these oratorical jousts. The socialist chiefs of North Germany failed to weaken his influence and to bring him into subjection. The contrary effect was produced: their party felt more and more dependent on the right wing.

To the charge of having wished to dictate anew line of policy to the party, Vollmar replied very truly that the action he had recommended “had already been followed since the suppression of the Law of Exception, in many cases, not only in the Reichstag but outside.”

Again, "I have not therefore invented, but espoused it; it has moreover been followed since the Halle Congress. Just as present it would be difficult to adopt any other policy. This clearly proves that I am in favour of our present tactics, authorised by the party mandate."

Another delegate, one from Madeburg, said: "I disapprove also of Vollmar's policy, but he has said nothing in my opinion but what has been carried into practice by the whole of that wing of the party." Auerbach of Berlin very logically added: "The actions of members of the Reichstag necessarily leads to the tactics of Vollmar."

And although Bebel, Liebknecht, Auer, and some others still insisted that the congress should adopt a resolution that should be explicit, although Liebknecht spoke very bluntly, and even demanded that the resolution drawn up by Bebel and amended by Oertel—a resolution disapproving the speeches of Vollmar and his new policy—should be adopted, and though he went so far as to say that if the motion of Oertel were not adopted, the opposition would be right, and in that case he himself would go into opposition,—and though Bebel himself demanded a square pronouncement, saying that if the motion of Oertel were [not? MIA] adopted, all he had to say was that in that case he had made his last speech to them—notwithstanding these brave words, Liebknecht did not go into opposition, and neither Bebel nor his friends quitted the party.

In the discussion on State Socialism, Vollmar and Liebknecht spoke in defence of it, although regarding it from opposite standpoints. Who does not remember the controversy in the party organs, and the amenities which these gentlemen hurled at each other? Yet they finished by clasping hands, and the two friendly enemies, Liebknecht and Vollmar, fraternised at the congress, where they compounded a resolution signifying reconciliation, dished up in brotherly agreement. We can recall that literary curiosity. Carefully smoothed over, sweetened, made palatable to every taste, that resolution is only a hotchpotch of hollow phrases, offending nobody.

Afterwards there came a bolt from the blue to disturb that blissful agreement. The deputies to the Bavarian Landtag, and among them Vollmar, intended to vote for the budget. Perhaps it was injudicious! For to vote in approval of a state budget is to grant confidence to the Government, and on the part of a social democrat such action is slightly inconsistent when that government has done all it can to oppose the designs of his party.

The quandary was brought before the Frankfort congress. Two resolutions were submitted to the congress. One, from the South German deputies, ran as follows:

"Considering that success in our struggle against state and social institutions now existing depends on the united action of the party;

"Considering also that a vote in approval of the whole financial programme in each of the different states of the empire is a matter of the greatest importance, to be decided according to local circumstances and convenience, and in agreement with the facts brought before the congress of the party held in Bavaria ;

"The congress simply endorses the resolutions 1, 3. and 4 proposed by Halle, Weimar, Brunswick, and Hanau."

All these resolutions imputed blame to the socialist deputies in the Bavarian Landtag.

Alongside these damnatory motions there was one proceeding from the most influential men of the party, Auer, Bebel, Liebknecht, Singer, etc., to the following effect :

The congress declares, "It is the duty of the parliamentary representatives of the party, both in the Reichstag and in the various Landtags, to sharply criticise and resist all the abuses and injustices inherent in the character of a class State, which is only the political form of an organisation erected to protect the interests of the governing classes; it is, besides, a duty of the

party representatives to use all available means to abolish existing abuses, and to originate other institutions conformable to our programmes. Moreover, as class governments and statesmen energetically labour to defeat all social democratic measures, and use every favourable means to bring to naught, if possible, the social democracy, it logically follows that our party representatives in the Landtags cannot give the governments their support, and that as approbation of the budget necessarily implies support, it is incumbent upon social democrats to vote against the budget.”

And what fate befell these resolutions? The first was rejected by 142 votes against 93. the second by 164 against 64. Nothing therefore was decided and the question was left without a solution: Yes, in spite of the pressure imposed by the redoubtable trinity. Bebel—Liebknecht—Singer! Far from losing prestige, Vollmar won all along the line. He went home strengthened by the sweet solace that he was supported by a large section of the party.

Bebel saw the danger and as soon as he had returned to Berlin he resolved to take off his coat and put up his fists. At a large meeting he showed his disappointment with regard to this congress, the most important that had been held since the formation of the party. The party, he virtually affirmed, may have possibly grown numerically, hut it has certainly deteriorated in quality. Some small, peddling upstarts, quite out of sympathy with social democratic principles and with internationalism, have crept into the party, to beget there a moderate section. Opportunism, permeation. threatened to destroy the party, For him, Bebel, a small party with determined principles was infinitely preferable to a numerous mob devoid of discipline. The existing state of things was to him very painful. He had even contemplated abandoning his place on the central council and had only retained it to gratify his colleagues and friends. Notwithstanding, he was bound by no pledge. and reserved to himself full liberty of caution in case the melancholy prospect did not improve.

We would like to know the opinion of Bebel—Bebel, who in the role of prophet. is so often lamentably deceived—on the article that he published shortly before the congress in the “Neue Zeit.” It seems to us that the reading of it should cause some slight embarrassment.

In that article Rebel said : “There might be differences of opinion on the matter of tactics, but dissensions regarding principles there were none. The party, numerous as it was, found itself solidly based on the rock of principles, as embodied in its programme. Whoever felt inclined to controversy on this head was a partisan either of the anarchists or of the bourgeoisie. The party would have nothing to do with him.

The proceedings of the Congress must have disillusioned Bebel, and the fact proves in any case how little he knows of what is occurring in the ranks of his party.

It is true that in the third article of a series published in the “Vorwärts”, Bebel confessed that, whereas he had set out for the congress in the best of spirits, he returned terribly crestfallen.

As for Liebknecht, he was so smitten with blindness that after the Congress he still boasted of the uninterrupted harmony of the party. He published in the “Vorwärts” a special article which proved to what an extent he had lost the power of appreciation. In it Liebknecht said : “The dissension so much reckoned on by our opponents disappeared after a free and relentless criticism, and in place of schism, invariably prophesied by our enemies, there has been, if possible, a closer union. The Bavarian matter, which was to lead to the dissolution of the party, or at least to unfriendliness between the Berlin leaders and the rebels of South Germany, was so easily made straight, thanks to the tact and good sense of the majority, that not the slightest bitterness survives on either side.”

Such an optimism surpasses belief, and if ever the saying that “All is for the best in the best of all possible worlds” has been illustrated, it has been made evident to the mind of the veteran, Liebknecht.

Among other matters the agrarian question came to the front in the congress. On this subject the position taken up by Vollmar and Schoulank was of so opportunist a character that they threw overboard socialist principle in the interest of “practical” propaganda. Socialism was administered to the peasantry homeopathically, that is, in the smallest possible doses. They were afraid of killing them with a big mouthful. And what tickles most an intelligent leader of the reports supplied, is that for purposes of medication all addresses were delivered to the small farmers—but nothing was said to the agricultural labourers, who do not own an inch of land, and could not honestly fill a flowerpot with the soil of their native country!

With undeniable smartness the “Frankfurter Zeitung” remarked in this connection: “With the exception of a few phrases, any radical-bourgeois party might adopt the Name programme.” In “La Reforme” M. Lorand expressed himself in almost the same language.

Vollmar was not slow to pick up the gauntlet thrown down by Bebel. He speaks of the “pronunciamento” of Bebel, and says, “The present time offers us a strange spectacle. In face of the enemy, marching upon us in serried ranks and prepared to attack us, we see one of our leaders rise up and throw a brand of discord, not among our opponents, but amidst our own troops.”

One of the veterans of the party, the deputy Grillenberger, took part in the dispute, ranging himself in the press, as at Erfurt, on this side of Vollmar. This controversy betrays the bitterness and irritation felt by both the factions. Vollmar said that “the reasons for the attitude of Bebel must be sought in his wounded vanity and in his want of critical insight and coolness, which have made him place—him, the leader of a democratic party—his own personality above the most sacred interests of the party, to the shame and injury of social democracy and to the great benefit and joy of our opponents.” Bebel, on the other hand, flings back in the teeth of Grillenberger his language “filthy and vulgar as the vocabulary of a hoodlum.”

These personalities are of no general interest, but they illustrate in quite a forcible way the wonderful “unity” of the party.

Bebel pretends that the peddling middle-class element, especially powerful in South Germany, weakens the party, and that Bavarian opportunism and permeation, systematically encouraged by Vollmar, are hostile to principle.

He admits, then, the importance of very important differences concerning principles, and according to him, Vollmar, Grillenberg, and their adherents find themselves in the dilemma of either joining the anarchists or the bourgeoisie. Now, Vollmar does not seem at all disposed to send in his resignation. Quite the contrary: he imagines himself, now as heretofore, to be in agreement with the principles of social democracy.

Bebel published in the “Vorwärts” four articles in which he explained his view and estimate of the opinion of Vollmar. The essay is interesting, and we believe it may be of some service to place some extracts from it under the eyes of a larger section of the public.

Bebel recalls how often already Vollmar has taken up the time of congresses with discussion of his policy, and how he has become a tower of strength for “all the lukewarm in the party, and for all the middle-class reformers outside.” He, who knows Vollmar, knows that the Bavarian champion “will some day, as he has done before, put the trumpet of extreme radicalism to his lips, just as now he fills the air with music, ‘quite softly, quite solely’, to allure Peter and Paul.

and we increase the rubbish of the party, if—Yes, if—? Here arises the question, and at present I do not wish to attempt an answer.”

Vollmer retorted, very justifiably, that what Rebel imputed to hem had already been said by Hans Muller—on the subject Of the deterioration of the party. With the superciliousness of superior person, Bebel repelled the base insinuation, and alleged that he had only seen Muller’s pamphlet at a distance, and scarcely knew what it contained.

In spite Of the solemn assertion of Bebel, we make free to doubt it. Here is an important criticism levelled against the whole party, made by a man whom Bebel himself described as an old hand, and we are desired to believe that the party leaders have not read it. It is quite too improbable, and if it were true, it would be inexcusable indeed, for as chief of a party. one is bound to take cognisance of everything which they he useful in the slightest degree to the party itself. And improbable also, for it is hard to admit that so sensational a pamphlet as that of Hans Muller has been allowed to pass wholly, or almost, unobserved. But I can easily imagine how disagreeable that pamphlet must have been to the big bugs of the party, for without indulging in personal tics, the author has demonstrated, proofs in hand. and from quotations taken from the acknowledged writings of the aforesaid great dignitaries. how much social democracy has deteriorated through bourgeois corruption and how much it has inclined to the moderate faction.

Alas, alas! Hans Muller has had the misfortune to be more discerning than the greet Bebel himself, and to perceive before his highness, the phenomena which are now apparent to the eyes of all. Was it not Bebel who, in that connection, made the remark that the material environment of a man’s life influences his opinions. He awoke to this mighty truth when made aware that Vollmar lives in a sumptuous villa on the bank of one of the Bavarian lakes. But the same remark has been made by others, and with as much justice, in reference to Bebel,

[TO BE CONTINUED]

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Retrieved on 28th November 2020 from www.marxists.org
Translated from the *Société Nouvelle* of September 1895 for *Liberty*. The second part of this article was not published in English as *Liberty* ceased publication after the December 1896 issue.

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