The Curious Case of the "Democratic Road to Socialism" That Wasn't There

written by Gil Schaeffer | April 24, 2020

In an article last year ("Marxism, the Democratic Republic, and the Undemocratic U. S. Constitution," *New Politics,* 7/30/2019) I argued that there are major political and historical blind spots and inconsistencies in current debates over socialist strategy. The main inconsistency is that all sides in this controversy continue to refer to the United States as a "capitalist democracy" at the same time they also grant that the U. S. has an "extremely undemocratic political system." Running along with this equivocation regarding the nature of the U. S. political system is a parallel historical neglect of the central importance of the goal of a democratic republic in the political thinking of Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Luxemburg. One reinforces the other: the inability to see the place of the democratic republic in the history and theory of Marxism is associated with an underestimation of the ideological and political importance of the struggle to make the U. S. a representative democracy.

One of the criticisms in this article was directed at Eric Blanc's proposition that the central strategic question facing socialists today is "How can class rule be overcome in a capitalist democracy?" His answer, purportedly derived from the pre-1910 writings of Karl Kautsky, is that "the path to anticapitalist rupture in conditions of political democracy pass[es] through the election of a workers' party to government."[1] I said that this formulation made no sense because pre-WWI Germany was not a democracy and neither is the U. S. today. However, I did not question whether Blanc's version of the pre-1910 Kautsky was accurate or not (I hadn't read any Kautsky for decades), only that this formulation, whatever its source, was not a useful guide for current political activity in the U. S. I went on to say that the main problem facing the left today is not how to overcome class rule in a capitalist democracy but how to get democracy in the first place, citing Rosa Luxemburg's support for the mass demonstrations demanding Prussian electoral reform and a democratic republic in 1910 as an example of a democratic tactic that differed from Kautsky's opposition to these demonstrations in favor of focusing on the 1912 election within the undemocratic Prusso-German monarchical state.

Seeking to expand on this theme, I submitted a second article in December that was returned with

the following comment by an editor: "The party that most of the much-derided '*Jacobin* socialists' advocate building, ASAP, is a party that would follow a strategy essentially laid out by Kautsky in *The Road to Power* (1909). This was Lenin's favorite work by Kautsky. This was the Kautsky who embraced the mass strike idea as articulated by Luxemburg. This isn't the Kautsky who sold out to the German labor bureaucracy and hence the SPD parliamentary leadership. You are conflating the two Kautskys." I found this comment puzzling because my main criticism was still directed at the content of Blanc's strategy, not at what inspired it, and also because it seemed to imply that Lenin and Luxemburg were associated in some way with a strategy of first winning an electoral majority in the Reichstag. Clearly, I needed to read *The Road*

to Power in order to sort out this puzzle.

Blanc says that Kautsky's strategy of a "democratic road to socialism" means that "Without winning a democratic election, socialists won't have the popular legitimacy and power necessary to effectively lead an anticapitalist rupture."[2] The first problem with this formulation is that it is not in *The Road to Power*[3]or any of Kautsky's other pre-1910 writings. Mike Taber pointed this out back in April,[4] and we will get to Blanc's response to Taber shortly; but first it would be good to go through what *The Road to Power* actually says.

The first chapter of *The Road to Power* is titled "The Conquest of Political Power." Here Kautsky summarizes the "fundamental principles laid down by Marx and Engels in the *Communist Manifesto*" (p. 6). These principles are that "the Socialists, as the champions of the class interests of the proletariat, constitute a revolutionary party, because it is impossible to raise this class to a satisfactory existence within capitalist society…" (p. 5). The Socialists are also revolutionary because "They recognize that the power of the state is an instrument of class domination…and that the social revolution for which the proletariat strives cannot be realized until it shall have captured political power" (pp. 5-6). The strategic objective of conquering state power is what differentiates the political socialism of Marx and Engels from the Utopian Socialism of Owen and Fourier, the antipolitical theories of Proudhon and the anarchists, and the revisionist-reformist theory of a "growing into socialism" without a political transformation (p. 6). These are the ABC's of orthodox Marxism on which Kautsky, Luxemburg, and Lenin agree. Then Kautsky meanders for forty pages on the problem of why the revolution hasn't happened yet before turning to a discussion of current day strategy and tactics. He repeats that "The social transformation for which we are striving can be attained only through a political revolution, by means of the conquest of political power by the fighting proletariat. The only form of the state in which Socialism can be realized is that of a republic, and a democratic republic at that" (pp. 49-50). The democratic republic as the state form of working class rule (also called the dictatorship of the proletariat) was also taken straight from Marx and Engels.[5] However, Kautsky continues, even though we know that the proletariat's "victory and the overthrow of capitalism is inevitable,…we are manifestly unable to say whether they will be bloody or not, whether physical force will play a decisive part, or whether they will be fought exclusively by means of economic, legislative and moral pressure" (p. 50). This distinction between the fundamental goals of the socialist movement, which are known with certainty, and the inherent uncertainty regarding the methods required to achieve those goals was standard orthodoxy, too. (Lenin, for example, writing from within Tsarist Russia in 1899, held that "the programme of 'working-class socialism' speaks of the winning of political power in general *without defining* the method, for the choice of method depends on a future which we cannot precisely determine."[6] [Emphasis in original]) So, Blanc is right in his argument against certain Leninists that Kautsky at this point remained true to the fundamental principles of Marx and Engels[7]; but principles don't implement themselves. The next question is what specific tactics did Kautsky propose to realize these fundamental principles.

Proceeding in his typical methodical style, Kautsky considers several possible political and tactical scenarios, without committing to any one in particular. Without question, Kautsky's preference is for the slow, steady, legal, peaceful progress offered by participation in parliament (pp. 46-7, 50-4); and he does envision the possibility that the increasing electoral strength of the Socialists might trigger an attack on the existing political rights of the working class (pp. 47, 96), which would then lead to an escalation of extra-parliamentary conflict up to and including a mass strike (pp. 20, 95, 137). This hypothetical scenario is the closest approximation to Blanc's "democratic road to socialism" in *The Road to Power.* But Kautsky also goes on to argue that the growth of the Socialists' electoral strength within the existing German constitutional system has not resulted in any increase in power or influence for the Socialists because the Reichstag has no real power under

the monarchy (pp. 97-8). Acknowledging this dilemma, Kautsky then argues that "Power must first be conquered for it [the Reichstag]. A genuine parliamentary regime must be established. The imperial government must be a committee of the Reichstag" (p. 98). Blanc does not mention this distinction between a parliament without legislative power and a genuine parliamentary regime with power, yet the tactics of socialists would have to differ depending on which type of regime they found themselves in. Kautsky himself gives some hint of how the tactics in a "battle for the ballot" differed from those in a "battle of the ballot" (p. 46). For example, inspired by the 1905 uprising in Russia, Kautsky relates how the German Socialists threw their "full force into the fight for suffrage, especially in Prussia, where it led to street demonstrations, in January, 1908, something that had not been seen in Berlin since 1848" (p. 20); and he fully expects similar battles for suffrage reform to come with increasing frequency "in which mass-strikes may be used as an effective weapon" (p.95). These battles for a "genuine parliamentary regime" would not be defensive battles within the existing parliamentary set-up but offensive battles seeking to expand democratic powers and establish a new regime. In 1909 such an offensive "battle for the ballot" was still a largely hypothetical scenario requiring no immediate practical commitment on Kautsky's part; but just a year later, with the outbreak of mass demonstrations and strikes in Prussia by local Social Democrats demanding political reform because they had lost patience with the existing regime, a choice had to be made. Luxemburg chose to support these mass demands for a new parliamentary regime while Kautsky opposed them and followed the SPD leadership down the electoral road to a parliament lacking any real power.

That, in short, is the story of *The Road to Power.* It does not call for winning a majority in the Reichstag as the first step on the road to socialism, and it doesn't look like such a strategy can be found in any of Kautsky's other pre-1910 writings. As noted above, Mike Taber was the first to question Blanc on this issue; and Blanc responded with four citations in defense of his position.[8] The first is a quotation from Massimo Salvadori's study of Kautsky; but Salvadori's account is unreliable, attributing words to Kautsky's commentary on the *Erfurt Programme* ("the need to win a majority in parliament," "the conquest of a majority in parliament") that are not in Kautsky's text.[9] Blanc's second example refers to a 1909 statement by Kautsky to the effect that if socialist electoral activity threatened the supremacy of the bourgeoisie, then the bourgeoisie would certainly seek to roll back voting rights and restrict the power of parliament. Like Kautsky's similar scenario in *The Road to Power,* this was a statement of hypothetical possibility only. It was made in the course of a polemic with an advocate of pure-and-simple parliamentary reformism to justify the maintenance of extra-parliamentary working class pressure on the government, but it does not take up the substantive question of whether the existing parliamentary system actually is a threat to the bourgeoisie and does not propose that the primary aim of the Social Democrats should be the winning of an electoral majority under this regime. The third example is similarly ambiguous, Kautsky quoted as saying [in 1893] that "the hour is approaching where the proletariat…in Germany will conquer parliament with the aid of universal suffrage."[10] While this statement could possibly be construed as a call for winning a majority in parliament, Kautsky also says in the same article that the existing parliament in the German bureaucratic-military state is a "mere shadow of a parliament, not a real one" and that the establishment of real democratic legislative power will require the overthrow of military absolutism first. Whether winning a majority in the existing parliament is a prerequisite to the overthrow of absolutism is not addressed directly. Lastly, Blanc appeals to Darren Rosso's critique of Kautsky's parliamentarism[11] as the clinching evidence that Kautsky obviously did advocate winning parliamentary elections. The problem with this reference is that Rosso doesn't prove what Blanc thinks he proves because, one, Rosso also relies on Salvadori and, two, he mixes up the tactical question of how to participate in elections under an existing parliamentary regime with the separate question of whether a democratically elected parliament should be the institutional form of working class rule after the conquest of power, classifying both as expressions of a single undifferentiated parliamentarism. In contrast to these erroneous,

hypothetical, ambiguous, confused, and/or obscure citations, we have Kautsky's unambiguous 1912 statement in his polemic with Pannekoek that "The aim of our political struggle remains, as in the past, the conquest of state power by winning a majority in parliament and by raising parliament to the ranks of the master of the government."[12] Why is it so hard to find an equally straightforward statement prior to 1910? It seems the answer is that it doesn't exist. Oddly enough, Blanc himself seems to know this, having written back in 2016 that "in the years before 1910 he [Kautsky] did not generally posit that Marxists had to first win a majority in parliament before socialist transformation could be undertaken."[13] What's going on here? Why has Blanc reversed his appraisal of the content of Kautsky's pre-1910 strategic thinking? The answer is Bernie Sanders. Blanc freely grants that it was the upsurge in interest in democratic socialism arising from Sanders' 2016 campaign that has driven his search for a viable contemporary socialist strategy. But Blanc is too much of a Marxist to think that a straight electoral road to socialism is credible, hence the need to go back through Kautsky's writings "when he was still a Marxist" to pull out a scenario where a tactic of first winning elections is combined with and backed up by the threat of extra-parliamentary mass action.

Now, many traditional Marxists have already protested that Blanc's and *Jacobin*'s support for Sanders violates Marx's basic teachings on the state, revolution, and the necessity of working class ideological and organizational independence. Those are not my criticisms, at least not in the form in which they have been made so far. My criticism is that Blanc's narrowing of the full range of Kautsky's pre-1910 strategic commentary blocks out the distinction Kautsky made between a parliament with power and one without. It's not just that the purpose of elections, the level of institutional legitimacy, and the tactics of extra-parliamentary activity have to differ depending on what kind of regime one is confronting, but also that the very meaning of democracy is debased if this distinction is ignored. Under Blanc's framework, any kind of electoral system at all qualifies as a democracy, an equation that Kautsky rejected "when he was a Marxist" because German legislative institutions were a transparent mockery of basic democratic representation. That is why Kautsky envisioned the possibility that a "battle for the ballot" might break out and upset the Party's desire to confine its activities to a "battle of the ballot."

In wanting to talk about the place of the democratic republic in the history of Marxism and its relevance for political strategy today, I did not expect I would first have to defend Kautsky against misrepresentations. Even though Kautsky at his best isn't good enough, he couldn't have played the role of chief custodian of Marxist doctrine for two decades if he had advocated from the beginning the strategy attributed to him by Blanc. Until 1910 Kautsky was engaged in a balancing act. On one hand he preserved in his doctrinal writings Marx and Engels' warning that the German Social Democrats had to find some way to advance the legally forbidden demand for a democratic republic against the semi-absolutist German state and on the other he tolerated the Party's concentration on elections to a powerless parliament. In 1910 this balance was upset by the eruption of mass demonstrations for real democracy. In reaction, Kautsky came down hard both theoretically and tactically on the side of the conservative party leaders while Rosa Luxemburg concluded that the time had finally arrived for the Party to make the long postponed demand for a democratic republic the center of its political activity. As noted in the first article, Blanc is silent on this 1910 dispute between Kautsky and Luxemburg. His exclusive focus is on differentiating his conception of a democratic road to socialism from what he calls Leninist insurrectionism. We can leave aside for now whether Blanc's characterization of Leninism is accurate or not because Luxemburg's advocacy of a democratic republic in 1910 is in a different political category altogether. Far from believing that Germany was on the verge of a revolutionary uprising, Luxemburg was merely trying to resurrect the traditional Marxist demand for full democracy that had been conspicuously missing from the SPD's official *Erfurt Programme* for almost twenty years. If Blanc's sidelining of this central demand of classical Marxism were just a personal idiosyncrasy, it wouldn't need more

comment; but Blanc's and *Jacobin*'s promotion of the early Kautsky as the embodiment of the best of classical Marxism is part of a larger current of recent historical interpretation that has its source in the concept of "Erfurtianism" conjured up by Lars Lih in his *Lenin Rediscovered:* What Is to Be Done? *In Context.*[14]

Lih writes that "I have coined the term 'Erfurtian' to describe the bundle of beliefs, institutional models and political strategies that constituted orthodox Marx-based Social Democracy….An Erfurtian is someone who accepts the SPD as a model party, accepts the Erfurt Programme as an authoritative statement of the Social-Democratic mission, and accepts Karl Kautsky's tremendously influential commentary the *Erfurt Programme* as an authoritative definition of Social Democracy. On all accounts, Lenin was a passionate Erfurtian." (p. 6) Lih, echoing what Neil Harding established more than forty years ago[15], is right that Lenin was an orthodox Marx-based Social Democrat and that *What Is to Be Done?* has been misunderstood by Marxists and non-Marxists alike for the greater part of a century, but he is wrong to equate orthodox Marxism with Erfurtianism or to claim that Lenin was an Erfurtian. It is astonishing, first of all, that Lih would write a six hundred page book seeking to equate orthodox Marxism with the *Erfurt Programme* without once mentioning Engels' criticism of that programme for failing to call for the overthrow of the Prusso-German military state and the establishment of a democratic republic. Lih fails to engage with this suppressed issue within German Social Democracy because he defines orthodoxy merely as allegiance to what Kautsky called the "merger formula," i. e., "Social Democracy is the merger of socialism and the worker movement." This formula sets the standard for orthodoxy too low because it does not take into account Marx and Engels' equally important writings on the programmatic demands and political tactics needed to challenge and ultimately break through the restrictive legal barriers of an undemocratic political order. On the programmatic demand for the democratic republic, Engels was the voice of Marxist orthodoxy, not the *Erfurt Programme.*

On the question of whether Lenin was an Erfurtian, that can be settled by comparing the *Erfurt Programme* to the programme adopted by the Russian Social Democrats in 1903. The Russians, following Marx, Engels, and Plekhanov's draft programmes of the mid-1880's, declared that the Party "takes as its most immediate political task the overthrow of the Tsarist autocracy and its replacement by a democratic republic, the constitution of which would ensure: 1. Sovereignty of the people—that is, concentration of supreme state power wholly in the hands of a legislative assembly consisting of representatives of the people [elected by universal, equal and direct suffrage] and forming a single chamber." Lih doesn't mention this foremost demand of the Russian programme in his book and argues instead that the goal of the Russian Social Democrats in overthrowing the autocracy was merely to obtain the "freedom" that the Germans enjoyed under their constitutional monarchy. (pp. 4, 6, 8-9) This definition of "freedom" substitutes the goal of Russian liberalism for that of the Social Democrats. For Lenin and the newly formed Russian Social Democratic Party, the definition of political freedom was the establishment of a democratic republic because they believed that anything less than full democracy did not constitute real political freedom but only a modified form of tyranny.

Once Lih gets away from trying to prove that Lenin was an Erfurtian rather than an orthodox follower of Marx, Engels, and Plekhanov, *Lenin Rediscovered* has some very important things to say about the theory and content of Lenin's agitational writings, the arguments in *What Is to Be Done?,* and the difference between what Lih calls Lenin's concept of a revolutionary democratic party vs. competing theories of a "class" party. Lih sums up Lenin's political ideology and strategy with an epigram: "If you were willing to fight for political freedom, you were Lenin's ally, even if you were hostile to socialism. If you downgraded the goal of political freedom in any way, you were Lenin's foe, even if you were a committed socialist." (p. 9) Lih's conclusion is similar to Harding's: "Lenin's argument was that workers did not have to come to socialist consciousness in order to acquire

political consciousness." (vol. 1, p. 122) Both of these characterizations of Lenin are accurate as far as they go, but both can be made more precise by emphasizing that for Lenin the words "freedom" and "political" were equivalent in meaning to "democratic republic."

Both Blanc and Lih are of the opinion that the history of Marxism in Russia isn't much use in understanding the political dynamics of Western socialist and working class movements because Russia was an absolute monarchy without freedom of speech or parliamentary institutions. This conclusion also seems to be roughly consistent with Lenin's own early acceptance of the formula that Russia was only at the stage of a democratic revolution whereas Western Europe had reached the socialist stage. On the level of the clandestine tactics required to circulate political literature within the Tsarist police state, there is nothing objectionable in this conclusion; but the programmatic demand for a democratic republic is another story. Marx, Engels, Kautsky in words, and then Luxemburg in deeds believed that the establishment of a democratic republic in Germany and in all the other countries of Western Europe was the political precondition for the transition to socialism. In Russia, Lenin also believed that the democratic republic was the precondition for, if not immediate socialist policies, policies that would lead toward socialism as quickly as possible. Programmatically, the goal of a democratic republic was a Marxist universal, equally applicable in any country with or without parliamentary institutions and regardless of the level of economic development. Although neither Harding nor Lih seems to be aware of it, their historical work explaining Lenin's theory of political agitation and democratic consciousness has brought to light the fundamental elements of a political programme that is still fully applicable to the U. S. today. Our aim should be the same as Lenin's: to pull together a political party whose most important immediate objective is to fight for a democratic constitution.

I'll end with a few comments on how this analysis differs from the dozen or so other articles on Blanc and/or the Sanders campaign that have been published in *New Politics* since the beginning of the year. On the main point, only Lois Weiner raises the idea that "'In the present situation, one person one vote has become a radical demand.'" I agree, with the qualification that "the present situation" has been going on for more than two hundred years. The only reason we even have to debate whether to support Sanders or work within the Democratic Party is because we don't have a system of equal proportional representation that would allow us to vote directly for a party that represents our views. Weiner and many other people recognize this dilemma. The question is what to do about it. Weiner jumps from a recognition of the need for one person one vote to the conclusion that our most pressing need is to build a "new electoral vehicle" to carry on Sanders' policies and principles. On this I disagree. I think we should stay focused on the problem of one person one vote and that our most pressing ideological and political need is to form a party around the demand for full democracy. That party would not be primarily electoral.

A derivative tactical question about any new left party is whether it makes sense to operate within the Democratic Party. Charles Post and Ashley Smith argue strongly for complete separation. Kit Wainer and Mel Bienenfeld, Andrew Sernatinger, Natalia Tylim, and Daniel Johnson, although they do not argue explicitly for complete separation, all agree with the criticism that participation in the Sanders campaign has sucked energy away from the more important job of building independent mass working class struggles in workplaces and communities. Donna Cartwright, Robert Gabrielsky, Alan Maass, Danny Katch, Sophia in a comment on Post and Smith, and Todd Chretien push back against being lumped together with the winning-is-everything electoralists and hold that the Sanders campaign aided mass movements and helped expand the left. In this debate, I'm on the side that thinks Sanders did give a positive jolt to the movement and pushed it to think more deeply about the kind of party we need. Still, the Sanders supporters' ideas about the program and tactics needed to move toward the formation of a new party can't seem to get past overly general calls for socialist unity and an ill-defined expectation of a "dirty break" from the Democratic Party sometime in the

future.

As for the advocates of building the mass independent class struggle of the working class in communities and workplaces, their politics verge on syndicalism. Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Luxemburg's definition of the highest form of class struggle was the political demand for a democratic republic, not for struggles in workplaces and communities or for general propaganda advocating socialism. Electoral campaigns that advocate full democracy in an undemocratic political system do not detract from the class struggle of the working class, they are an integral part of the class struggle of the working class for political power.

[1] Eric Blanc, "Why Kautsky Was Right (and Why You Should Care)," jacobinmag.com,4/2/2019.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Karl Kautsky, *The Road to Power,* (Samuel A. Bloch: Chicago, 1909) searchable at archive.org.

[4] Mike Taber, "Kautsky, Lenin, and the transition to socialism: A reply to Eric Blanc," johnriddell.com/2019/04/06.

[5] Hal Draper, "Marx and the Dictatorship of the Proletariat," *New Politics*, Vol. 1, No. 4, Summer 1962 (available at marxists.org).

[6] V. I. Lenin, "A Retrograde Trend in Russian Social-Democracy," *Collected Works,* 4th ed., vol. 4, p.276.

[7] In addition to "Why Kautsky Was Right…," see especially Blanc's "The roots of 1917: Kautsky, the state, and revolution in Imperial Russia," 10/13/2016/johnriddell.com

[8] Eric Blanc, "The democratic road to socialism: A reply to Mike Taber," johnriddell.com/2019/04/11.

[9] I reread the text of *The Class Struggle* at marxists.org and did word searches in several PDF's without finding any such wording. The passage in question can be found in Massimo Salvadori, *Karl Kautsky and the Socialist Revolution: 1880-1938* (Verso Books: Brooklyn, NY, 1990) pp. 35-6.

[10] Blanc's link does not connect with his quotation. The quotation is from the article, "Kautsky on referenda," that originally appeared in *Weekly Worker,* Issue 1100, 03/31/2016. The link for a PDF of the full issue is at the bottom of the page.

[11] Darren Rosso, "Kautsky: the abyss beyond parliament," Marxist Left Review, No. 14, Winter, 2017.

[12] Kautsky quoted by Lenin in *The State and Revolution,* Chapter VI, "Kautsky's Controversy with Pannekoek."

[13] See note 7 above, Blanc, "The roots of 1917…,"

[14] Lars Lih, *Lenin Rediscovered,* (Haymarket Books: Chicago, 2008).

[15] Neil Harding, *Lenin's Political Thought,* 2 vols., (St. Martin's Press: New York, 1977, 1981).