

Marxism versus revisionism on the eve of the twentieth century

David North
2 September 2005

This lecture was delivered by World Socialist Web Site Editorial Board Chairman David North at the Socialist Equality Party/WSWS summer school held August 14 to August 20, 2005 in Ann Arbor, Michigan.

The triumph of Marxism

The growth of the European socialist movement and of the influence of Marxism on the working class during the last three decades of the nineteenth century are among the most extraordinary political and intellectual phenomena in world history. In late 1849 Marx and then Engels arrived in England as political refugees. During the next two decades Marx conducted his theoretical research into the laws of motion of capitalist society under the most difficult personal circumstances. We are provided a sense of what Marx endured in a letter that he wrote to Engels on January 8, 1863:

“The devil alone knows why nothing but ill-luck should dog everyone in our circle just now. I no longer know which way to turn either. My attempts to raise money in France and Germany have come to naught, and it might, of course, have been foreseen that £15 couldn’t help stem the avalanche for more than a couple of weeks. Aside from the fact that no one will let us have anything on credit—save for the butcher and baker, which will also cease at the end of this week—I am being dunned for the school fees, the rent, and by the whole gang of them. Those who got a few pounds on account cunningly pocketed them, only to fall upon me with redoubled vigor. On top of that, the children have no clothes or shoes in which to go out. In short, all hell is let loose...

“It is dreadfully selfish of me to tell you about these *horreurs* at this time. But it’s a homeopathic remedy. One calamity is a distraction from the other. And, in the final count, what else can I do? In the whole of London there’s not a single person to whom I can so much as speak my mind, and in my own home I play the silent stoic to counterbalance the outbursts from the other side. It’s becoming virtually impossible to work *under such circumstances*.”[1]

Just three days before this letter was written, Marx had completed the drafting of the main body of his monumental three-volume *Theories of Surplus Value*, an essential prologue to the writing of *Capital*, which he finished in August 1867.

Within 25 years of the completion of *Capital*, a work whose publication went virtually unnoticed by bourgeois economists of the day, Marxism had provided the theoretical inspiration and guidance for the growth of the first mass party in Europe. That this triumph occurred in Germany was not an accident. Marxism first found a mass audience within the working class of the country in which cultural and intellectual life had achieved a level of almost unimaginable brilliance during the era of the *Aufklärung* (Enlightenment).

The vast heritage of classical German philosophical idealism—represented most profoundly by Kant, Fichte and, above all, Hegel—passed in the aftermath of the 1848 Revolution through Marx and Engels into the working class. Indeed, Marx had foreseen the extraordinary role that philosophy—shorn of all idealist trappings, critically reworked on a materialist basis, rooted in nature and directed toward the study of the economic foundations of human society—was to play in the liberation of the German working class. He wrote in 1843:

“The weapon of criticism cannot, of course, replace criticism by weapons, material force must be overthrown by material force; but theory also becomes a material force as soon as it has gripped the masses. [2]

“As philosophy finds its *material* weapons in the proletariat, so the proletariat finds its *spiritual* weapons in philosophy... *The emancipation of the German* is the *emancipation of the human being*. The *head* of this emancipation is *philosophy*, its *heart* is the *proletariat*. Philosophy cannot be made a reality without the abolition of the proletariat; the proletariat cannot be abolished without philosophy being made a reality.” [3]

This passage was written just as Marx was embarking upon his critique of Hegel’s idealist philosophy. The extraction of the rational core of Hegel’s idealist system—that is, the reworking of the dialectic of categories and concepts, conceived by Hegel as the self-alienation and reconstruction of the Absolute Idea, on a materialist basis—constituted a theoretical-intellectual achievement of the greatest magnitude. However, the transcendence of Hegelianism could not be achieved with a critique that remained within the confines of speculative thought. Before Marx, the German philosopher Feuerbach had already laid the foundation for a materialist critique of Hegelianism. But the strength of Feuerbach’s criticism was limited by the predominantly naturalistic and mechanical character of his materialism. “Man” as conceived philosophically by Feuerbach lived in nature, but not in history. Such an ahistorical being lacked all social concreteness.

Thus, while insisting on the primacy of matter over thought, Feuerbach could not, on this basis, account for the complexity and diversity of the forms of human consciousness. In particular, he was unable to provide an explanation for changes in consciousness as manifested in the course of mankind’s historical development.

The Europe and Germany in which Hegel was born in 1770 and Feuerbach in 1804 were transformed by the upheavals of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars. But how were such events to be explained? Were they simply the product of the ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity? And even if one were to acknowledge the power of these ideals, from whence did they arrive? The answer given by Hegel—that these ideals arose as logically-determined moments in the self-alienation of the Absolute Idea—was all too inadequate as an explanation of concrete historical processes. Only on the basis of a study of the history of man as a *social being* did it become possible to derive, on a materialist basis, the origins and development of *social consciousness*.

The essential elements of the materialistic conception of history were

developed by Marx and Engels in the course of three extraordinary years—between 1844 and 1847. During that time they wrote the *Holy Family*, *The German Ideology*, *The Poverty of Philosophy*, and, finally, *The Communist Manifesto*. During the next 20 years, Marx's study of political economy, resulting in the writing of *Capital*, provided the theoretical substantiation of both the dialectical method of analysis and the materialist conception of history. In 1859, by which time Marx's work on political economy had reached a very advanced stage, he summarized the "guiding principle" of his theoretical work as follows:

"In the social production of their existence, men inevitably enter into definite relations, which are independent of their will, namely relations of production appropriate to a given stage in the development of their material forces of production. The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness. At a certain stage of development, the material productive forces of society come into conflict with the existing relations of production or—this merely expresses the same thing in legal terms—with the property relations within the framework of which they have operated hitherto. From forms of development of the productive forces these relations turn into their fetters. Thus begins an era of social revolution. The changes in the economic foundation lead sooner or later to the transformation of the whole immense superstructure. In studying such transformations it is always necessary to distinguish between the material transformation of the economic conditions of production, which can be determined with the precision of natural science, and the legal, political, religious, artistic or philosophic—in short, ideological forms in which men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out. Just as one does not judge an individual by what he thinks of himself, so one cannot judge such a period of transformation by its consciousness, but, on the contrary, this consciousness must be explained from the contradictions in material life, from the conflict existing between the social forces of production and the relations of production." [4]

Even after nearly 150 years, the penetrating force of the ontological and epistemological principles advanced in this passage is overwhelming. How petty, intellectually immature and, to be blunt, stupid the cynical postulates of post-modernism appear when read alongside Marx's elaboration of the driving force of history and the foundation of human social consciousness in all its complex forms. Like that other staggering achievement of 1859, Darwin's *Origins of the Species*, the theoretical conceptions advanced by Marx in his preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* marked a critical milestone in the intellectual development of mankind. Indeed, there exists a profound internal connection between the two works. It is not simply that with these works Marx forever transformed the study of history and Darwin the study of biology and anthropology.

That is, of course, true, and that is no small achievement. But these works are more than that. By 1859, in the work of Darwin and Marx, the human species had finally arrived at the point when it became able to comprehend the law-governed processes of its own biological and socio-economic development. The intellectual prerequisites had now emerged for man's conscious intervention in the heretofore unconscious processes of his own biological and social evolution.

The growth of socialist influence and the bourgeois counteroffensive

Though at first slowly, the influence of the theoretical work of Marx and Engels made itself felt. The First International, founded in 1864, provided, despite the bitter conflict with the Bakuninites, an important forum for the spread of Marxist ideas. In August 1869 the Sozialdemokratische Arbeiterpartei was founded at a conference in Eisenach. This party was not based on a theoretically consistent Marxist program. Lassallean conceptions exerted—and would continue to exert for many years—substantial political influence upon the German working class.

But during the decade that followed, Marxism achieved a dominant position among the socialist-minded workers of Germany. The efforts of the Bismarckian regime to suppress the Social Democratic Party proved counterproductive. In elections held in 1890, after 11 years during which the state had enforced its so-called "Anti-Socialist" laws, the SPD gathered 19.7 percent of the vote. The emergence of the working class as a mass political force, led by a party whose program proclaimed the death-knell of the bourgeois order, could not but have a far-reaching impact on the general intellectual as well as political outlook of the ruling class.

By the 1880s, the bourgeoisie could not ignore the growing and increasingly powerful influence of Marxism in European political and intellectual life. It recognized that so mighty a challenge to the existing social order could not be left to Bismarck and his political police. Nor were simple denunciations of socialism sufficient. The struggle against socialism inevitably assumed a more sophisticated ideological form. In various and diverse fields—economics, sociology and philosophy—intellectual representatives of the bourgeoisie began to grapple with Marxism, seeking to find weaknesses in its theoretical foundations. One persistent element of the new criticism, associated with the revival of Kantian philosophy, was that Marxism falsely presented itself as a science.

The new opponents argued that Marxism could not be a science because its undeniable association with a political movement deprived it of the objectivity and detachment that is the prerequisite of scientific research. The sociologist Emil Durkheim wrote that Marx's research "was undertaken to establish a doctrine... far from the doctrine resulting from research... It was passion that inspired all these systems; what gave birth to them and constitutes their strength is the thirst for more perfect justice... Socialism is not a science, a sociology in miniature: it is a cry of pain." [5] The liberal Italian historian Benedetto Croce argued along similar lines that Marxism could not be a science because its conclusions were the product of revolutionary political passions. [6]

For more than a century, the bourgeois-liberal attack on the validity of Marxism has been centered on the denial of its scientific character. This criticism involves invariably a falsification of what Marx and Engels meant when they claimed to have placed socialism on a scientific foundation. At no time did they claim that they had discovered laws which govern socio-economic processes with the same exactness as the manner in which the laws discovered by physicists determine the movement and trajectory of planetary and interstellar phenomena. No such laws exist.

However, this in no way detracts from the scientific character of Marxism, which must be understood in the following sense. The socialism of Marx and Engels distinguished itself from the schemes and ideas of an earlier generation of utopian thinkers, who could not establish a necessary and objective relation of causality between the existing conditions of society and their own plans for its reform and regeneration. This limitation was overcome by Marx and Engels—first, with the elaboration of the materialist conception of history, and, second, with the discovery of the laws of motion of the capitalist mode of production. That these laws manifest themselves as *tendencies*, rather than in fully predictable and recurring sequences, expresses not a limitation in Marxism, but rather the essentially heterogeneous and internally contradictory character of objective social reality.

Broadly speaking, the discovery and demonstration of the decisive role

of economic processes and relationships in human society made possible the demystification and conscious understanding of history. The categories developed, enriched and employed by Marx in the course of his investigation of capitalism—such as *labor power*, *value*, *profit*—were abstract theoretical expressions of real objectively existing socio-economic relationships.

The claim that political partisanship is incompatible with scientific objectivity is a sophistry. The validity of research is neither excluded by partisanship nor guaranteed by indifference. Partisanship is not an argument against the scientific and objective character of Marxism; it would have to be shown that partisanship compromised the integrity of the research and led to demonstrably false conclusions.

By the mid-1890s, the impact of the persistent bourgeois critique of Marxism made itself felt within the socialist movement. Eduard Bernstein, one of the most important figures in the German Social Democratic Party, began—at first cautiously and then with the sort of unrestrained enthusiasm that is usually exhibited by political renegades—to voice his objections to the revolutionary program of Marxism. Given the prominent position that Bernstein held in the German and international socialist movement—he was the literary executor of Friedrich Engels—it was unavoidable that his critique of Marxism became a political *cause célèbre*, provoking internal struggles within socialist parties throughout Europe. The scale of the conflict over Bernstein's "revisions" of Marxism, which Bernstein himself had not expected or even desired, signified that the dispute had deep social, rather than purely personal roots.

As I have already noted, bourgeois theoreticians—as a sort of ideological defense mechanism—had begun by the 1890s to respond aggressively to the growth of the socialist movement. But the impact of this counteroffensive was conditioned by significant changes in the world economic climate. The protracted economic depression that had begun in the mid-1870s had finally given way to a recovery of profit levels and a robust expansion in industry and finance. Though not without setbacks, the economic expansion which began in the mid-1890s persisted until the very eve of World War I. From a crudely empirical and positivist standpoint, the visible strengthening of the basic economic indices of capitalist production and trade, along with their positive and broadly-felt impact on the living standards of broad sections of the petty bourgeoisie and certain working class strata, called into question the Marxian analysis of the capitalist system—and, in particular, of the imminence of its revolutionary breakdown.

The massive industrialization of Germany in the aftermath of the Franco-Prussian War of 1870 and the formal establishment of the Empire in 1871 (which marked the completion under Bismarck of German unification) underlay the contradictions of the German workers' movement which made possible its extraordinarily rapid growth, its formal adoption of Marxism as the theoretical revolutionary basis of its program, and, also, the growth of revisionism. First, Germany's new industries developed on the basis of the most modern technologies within which a well-educated and highly skilled working class emerged. It was among this important stratum that Marxian conceptions found a receptive audience. Moreover, the thoroughly reactionary character of the Hohenzollern-Bismarckian state structure, which concentrated political power in the hands of a landowning elite steeped in the traditions of Prussian militarism and pathologically hostile to all forms of popular democracy, encountered no significant opposition from a timid liberal bourgeoisie.

The socialist movement was the real focal point of mass opposition to the state. The Social Democracy created a massive organizational network which embraced virtually every aspect of working class life. The SPD, under the leadership of August Bebel, represented what was known as a "state within a state." Indeed, while Wilhelm II was the Kaiser of the German Empire, Bebel—whose entire adult life, since the early 1860s, had been devoted to the building of the socialist movement, and for which he

had spent nearly five years in prison—was popularly viewed as the "Kaiser" of the working class.

The practice of the socialist movement, dating back to the difficult struggle against the anti-Socialist laws of the 1880s, had been concentrated on the systematic development and strengthening of its organization. The legendary talents of the German people in this particular sphere were enhanced by the theoretical insights provided by Marxism. Further, the growth of German working class organization was linked organically with the development of German industry. The tragic political implications of the profound internal connection between the German industrial-economic development and the growth of the German national labor movement was to become all too clear in the crisis of 1914.

However shocking the events of August 1914, they were prepared over a rather lengthy period. I will speak about this in greater detail somewhat later. But let me point out that certain characteristics of the Social Democratic movement, both in terms of organization and political practice, that were to lead to the tragedy of 1914 were already apparent by the mid-1890s.

While the acceptance of the Erfurt Program in 1893 had formally committed the SPD to a revolutionary transformation of society, the practice of the German socialist movement—determined to a great degree by the prevailing objective conditions in a period of rapid economic expansion—was of a predominantly reformist character. Trotsky would later say that in Hohenzollern Germany Marxism found itself in the peculiar position of reconciling a revolutionary perspective with a reformist practice. Within this framework, two spheres of activity were of exceptional importance: first, electoral activity, aimed at increasing social democratic representation in the German Reichstag and the various state parliaments; second, trade union activity—that is, the organization and representation of workers within capitalist industry.

In both spheres, the SPD achieved significant practical results. However, this came with what were, from a revolutionary-strategic standpoint, significant costs. The work of the parliamentary factions raised in innumerable forms the problem of the relationship between the maintenance of the political independence of the working class from the bourgeois state and the pressure to produce practical results. While the SPD was the largest political party in Germany, it was outnumbered in the Reichstag by the combination of its aristocratic and bourgeois opponents. On its own, it could do no more than vote as a parliamentary minority against government measures.

This frustrating situation suggested no simple, let alone principled solution. But there were elements within the Social Democracy, particularly in South Germany, who did see a solution—in some sort of parliamentary alliance with the bourgeois liberals. This was opposed by the national leadership and Bebel refused to sanction this form of class collaboration in the national Reichstag, where he led the party's faction. But the pressure for practical collaboration with sections of the German bourgeoisie existed.

The other sphere of work, the trade unions, posed even greater problems. The SPD had during the 1870s and 1880s functioned as the midwife of German trade unionism. It provided the leadership and financing for the early development of the trade unions. But by the early 1890s, the relation of forces between the trade unions and the party began to change. The trade unions grew more rapidly than the party, and the latter became over time increasingly dependent upon the organizational and financial support provided by the former. The major trade unions in Germany were led by Social Democrats who retained formal adherence to the political line laid down by the Bebel faction in the SPD leadership. But the day-to-day work of the trade union leaders was, unavoidably, of a generally reformist character.

While the theoretical formulae employed by Bernstein were directly influenced by popular prevailing tendencies in bourgeois anti-Marxist

philosophy, the material impulse for Bernstein's revisionism was provided by the objective socio-economic conditions within Europe and Germany. Within this objective context, Bernstein's revisionism arose as a theoretical expression of the generally reformist practice of the German socialist movement. To the extent that these objective conditions and forms of practical activity existed, to a lesser or greater degree, in other countries, Bernstein's revisionism found an international response.

The revisionism of Eduard Bernstein

When did Bernstein's revisionism first emerge? There were many symptoms. Indeed, early in his socialist career, Bernstein had evinced a susceptibility toward diluting revolutionary Marxism with petty-bourgeois humanistic jargon. In the late 1870s Bernstein had aligned himself with Karl Höchberg, a wealthy patron of the young social-democratic movement who believed that socialism would have better prospects as a popular multi-class movement, appealing especially to the middle class on an ethical basis. Under pressure from Bebel and Engels, Bernstein retreated from this position; but, as is so often the case in politics, what first appear as youthful mistakes turn out to be early symptoms of a political tendency.

Later, Bernstein moved to England, where he developed very friendly relations with the representatives of the reformist Fabian movement. It seems very likely that his experiences in Britain, where labor reformism had spread like weeds in the aftermath of the collapse of revolutionary Chartism, made a profound impression on Bernstein. In wealthy Britain, with its stable middle class and deeply rooted parliamentary system, the prospects for a revolutionary overthrow of capitalism seemed to Bernstein highly remote.

In early 1895, Engels was deeply distressed when he discovered that his introduction to a new edition of *The Class Struggles in France*, written by Marx in 1850, had been edited by Bernstein and Kautsky in a manner which left the impression that the old revolutionary had become a disciple of a peaceful road to socialism. On April 1, 1895, just four months before his death, Engels wrote angrily to Kautsky:

"I was amazed to see today in the *Vorwärts* an excerpt from my 'Introduction' that had been *printed without my knowledge* and tricked out in such a way as to present me as a peace-loving proponent of legality *quand même* (at all costs). Which is all the more reason why I should like it to appear in its entirety in the *Neue Zeit* in order that this disgraceful impression may be erased. I shall leave Liebknecht in no doubt as to what I think about it and the same applies to those who, irrespective of who they may be, gave him this opportunity of perverting my views and, what's more, without so much as a word to me about it." [7]

In October 1896, a little more than a year after the death of Engels, Bernstein contributed an article on the subject of "Problems of Socialism" which marked the formal beginning of his open repudiation of the revolutionary program of Marxism. His article began by noting the rapid advance and growing influence of the socialist movement in Europe. Even the bourgeois parties had to pay attention to the demands advanced by the socialists. Though, Bernstein argued, these successes did not mean that socialism was on the verge of total victory, it had certainly become necessary to abandon the largely negative attitude taken by the socialist movement toward existing reality. In its place, the socialists had to "come forward with positive suggestions of reform." [8]

Over the next two years, culminating in the publication of *The Preconditions of Socialism*, Bernstein was to elaborate his critique of orthodox Marxism. These writings made clear that there was virtually no element of Marxism with which Bernstein was in agreement. He rejected

its philosophical debt to Hegel and its espousal of the dialectical method. Bernstein argued that the actual development of capitalism had refuted the economic analysis of Marx. In particular, Bernstein repudiated what he called "socialist catastrophitis," the belief that capitalism was moving as a result of internal contradictions toward extreme crisis. While acknowledging the possibility of periodic crises, Bernstein insisted that capitalism had developed, and would continue to develop, "means of adaptation"—such as the use of credit—through which such crises could be either indefinitely postponed or ameliorated.

In any event, the future of socialism, Bernstein insisted, should not be linked to the inevitability of a major crisis of the capitalist system. As Bernstein wrote to the Stuttgart Congress of the Social Democratic Party in 1898:

"I have opposed the view that we stand on the threshold of an imminent collapse of bourgeois society, and that Social Democracy *should allow its tactics to be determined by, or made dependent upon, the prospect of any such forthcoming major catastrophe*. I stand by this view in every particular. [9]

This was a central point: the essential issue was not a matter of predicting in precise and graphic terms the form that a "catastrophe" would take. No prediction, valid for all times and conditions, could be made. Rather, the critical question was whether or not there existed any objective and necessary connection between the development of socialism and actually existing internal contradictions of the capitalist system. If no such connection existed, then it was impossible to speak of socialism as a *historic necessity*.

What then, in the absence of necessity, provided the rationale for socialism? For Bernstein, socialism could and should be justified on a ethical and humanist basis—that is, as the application in the sphere of politics of Kant's *categorical imperative*, which includes the following injunction: "Act so as to treat man, in your own person as well as in that of anyone else, always as an end, not merely as a means."

Bernstein's efforts to establish an ethical basis for socialism were not original. Indeed, during the 1890s there existed a significant group of neo-Kantian academicians who believed that Kant's categorical imperative led logically to socialism. Some, like the prominent neo-Kantian philosopher Morris Cohen, argued that Kant must be considered, on the basis of his ethics, "the true and actual founder of German socialism." [10]

This was both wrong and naïve. The categorical imperative occupies in the sphere of ethical conduct the same place that common sense, in general, occupies in the day-to-day activities of the average person. Just as the application of common sense may produce quite satisfactory results in all sorts of undemanding situations, the categorical imperative may serve as a guide to acceptable behavior within a limited social framework. In the conduct of purely private and personal relations, it would be highly praiseworthy to treat one's fellow human as an end, rather than as a means. But in the public sphere, any sort of strict adherence to this imperative is highly problematic.

The universal application of this maxim in a society divided into classes is, in any serious political sense, impossible. Kant, who lived well before industrial capitalism had developed extensively in Germany, could not have understood that his central ethical postulate was objectively irreconcilable with the relations of production in a capitalist society. What else is the wage worker to the capitalist other than the *means* by which surplus value and profit are produced?

Within the German Social Democratic Party, there was originally great reluctance to publicly challenge Bernstein. It was the Russian Marxists, first Parvus and then Plekhanov, who insisted upon an open and all-out fight against Bernstein's revisions. Plekhanov, employing his well-known "take no prisoners" approach to theoretical polemics, wrote a series of devastating essays which exposed the bankruptcy of Bernstein's philosophical conceptions. These essays are among the finest expositions

of the dialectical method and the theoretical foundations of Marxism. Far better known is the brilliant polemical work by the 27-year-old Rosa Luxemburg, *Reform or Revolution?* In the first chapter, she concisely summed up the basic issue posed by Bernstein's attack on Marxism:

"Revisionist theory thus places itself in a dilemma. Either the socialist transformation is, as was admitted up to now, the consequence of the internal contradictions of capitalism, and with the growth of capitalism will develop its internal contradictions, resulting inevitably, at some point, in its collapse (in that case the 'means of adaptation' are ineffective and the theory of collapse is correct); or the 'means of adaptation' will really stop the collapse of the capitalist system and thereby enable capitalism to maintain itself by suppressing its own contradictions. In that case socialism ceases to be a historic necessity. It then becomes anything you want to call it, but is no longer the result of the material development of society.

"The dilemma leads to another. Either revisionism is correct in its position on the course of capitalist development, and therefore the socialist transformation of society is only a utopia, or socialism is not a utopia, and the theory of 'means of adaptation' is false. There is the question in a nutshell." [11]

Upon reading *The Preconditions of Socialism*, one cannot help but be amazed at the extent to which Bernstein seemed utterly oblivious to the ominous rumblings beneath the surface of *fin-de-siècle* capitalist society. He assumed with staggering complacency that the indices of economic development would proceed upward indefinitely, steadily raising the living standards of the masses. The idea of a major crisis appeared to Bernstein to be utter lunacy. Even the warnings that the new phenomena of colonialism and militarism would lead to a violent clash between massively armed capitalist states—one of the possible forms that the impending catastrophe might assume—was dismissed by Bernstein as panic-mongering. "Fortunately," Bernstein smugly noted, "we are increasingly becoming accustomed to settle political differences in ways other than by use of firearms." [12] This, on the eve of the twentieth century!

Despite the reluctance of the leaders of German Social Democracy, an open struggle against Bernstein views could not be avoided. Though he delayed taking up his pen as long as possible, Kautsky—the ultimate arbiter of all theoretical issues inside the German and European socialist movement—finally entered the lists against Bernstein, and soberly refuted his major points. At the Party congress of 1898 and at others in the years that followed, Bernstein's heresies were officially condemned. At a theoretical level, Marxism reigned supreme. But at another level, that of party practice and organization, the struggle against theoretical revisionism had no impact whatsoever.

When Plekhanov called upon the SPD to expel Bernstein, the proposal was rejected by the party leaders out of hand. There existed no great desire among party leaders to explore and expose the very real connection between revisionist theory and the SPD's practice and organization. To have done so would inevitably have called into question the relationship between the SPD and the trade unions which were, at least nominally, under the party's control.

There were many reasons why the SPD leaders did not relish the prospects of an open struggle against the practical forms of opportunism, especially those associated with the day-to-day practice of the trade unions. They feared that such a struggle could split the party, produce a rupture in the ranks of the working class, undermine decades of organizational progress, and even facilitate state repression against the SPD. These were weighty concerns. And yet, the consequences of the SPD's evasion of the struggle against political opportunism were profound and tragic.

Moreover, revisionism was not simply a German problem. It manifested itself in various forms throughout the Second International. In 1899, the

French Socialist Party was shaken when one of its leaders, Alexander Millerand, accepted an invitation from the French President, Waldeck-Rousseau, to join his cabinet as the minister of commerce. This event made all too clear that the logic of Bernsteinism led to class collaboration, political capitulation to the bourgeoisie, and the defense of its state.

Only in one section of the Second International, the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party, was the struggle against revisionism developed systematically and worked through to its most far-reaching political conclusions.

Notes:

[1] Marx and Engels *Collected Works*, Volume 41 (New York: International Publishers, 1985), p. 442.

[2] Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, Volume 3 (New York: International Publishers, 1975), p. 182.

[3] Ibid, p. 187.

[4] Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, *Collected Works*, Volume 29 (New York: International Publishers, 1987), p. 263.

[5] Quoted in H. Stuart Hughes, *Consciousness and Society* (New York: Vintage, 1977), p. 77.

[6] Ibid, p. 88.

[7] *Collected Works*, Volume 50 (New York: International Publishers, 2004), p. 86.

[8] *Marxism and Social Democracy: The Revisionist Debate 1896-1898*, ed. H. Tudor and J.M. Tudor (Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 74.

[9] Eduard Bernstein, *The Preconditions of Socialism* (Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 1.

[10] Quoted in Peter Gay, *The Dilemma of Democratic Socialism* (New York: Collier, 1970), p. 152.

[11] London: Bookmarks, 1989, p. 29.

[12] *Preconditions*, p. 162.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact