

## REINTERPRETING KAUTSKY

GILCHER-HOLTEY, INGRID. *Das Mandat des Intellektuellen. Karl Kautsky und die Sozialdemokratie.* Siedler Verlag, Berlin 1986. 352 pp. DM 68.00.

GRONOW, JUKKA. *On the Formation of Marxism. Karl Kautsky's Theory of Capitalism, the Marxism of the Second International and Karl Marx's Critique of Political Economy.* [Commentationes Scientiarum Socialium, 33, 1986.] The Finnish Society of Sciences and Letters, Helsinki 1986. 253 pp.

PANACCIONE, ANDREA. *Kautsky e l'ideologia socialista.* Franco Angeli, Milano 1987. 231 pp. L. 25.000.

In the introduction to his book *Wzlot i upadek Karola Kautsky'ego*, published in Kraków in 1972 and in an Italian edition in 1980,<sup>1</sup> Marek Waldenberg, undoubtedly one of the greatest and most objective experts on the history of German Social Democracy in general and on Kautsky's work in particular, wrote that Kautsky

[. . .] was the most influential ideologist of the Second International and of the SPD and, after Engels's death, the greatest authority within the framework of Marxism for almost twenty five years, so much that he was called "the pope of marxism" or "the red pope"; during that period Marxism was studied mainly through his writings. A good acquaintance with these is thus needed if one is to know the ideology of Social Democracy during the time of the Second International, and to understand an extremely important period in the history of Marxism.<sup>2</sup>

Further on Waldenberg stresses a crucial aspect of Kautsky's course, namely that

[. . .] only very few outstanding ideologists of Social Democracy underwent such a radical evolution of their political ideas with such farreaching consequences.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Marek Waldenberg, *Il papa rosso Karl Kautsky*, 2 vols (Rome, 1980).

<sup>2</sup> Waldenberg, *Il papa rosso Karl Kautsky*, vol. I, p. 3.

<sup>3</sup> Waldenberg, *Il papa rosso Karl Kautsky*, vol. I, p. 4.

I completely agree with these two points of view: in the first place Waldenberg stresses that Kautsky's work should be studied as a component of the "ideology" of Social Democracy (where ideology must be seen as the formation of a heritage of ideas developed to meet the requirements of practical action and based on the needs of a particular organization); in the second place he draws attention to the fact that Kautsky's ideology must not be seen as an abstract whole, but should be related to the changes it has undergone and the specific conditions that brought about these changes.

Analyzing an ideologist's work by placing it in the proper historical perspective is the only method of understanding the changes in that work, or the reasons for its continuity. Personally I agree with the methodological approach used by Waldenberg, although I follow a somewhat different course from his in evaluating the specific processes of change and the elements of continuity found in Kautsky's work.

On this subject one must first of all keep in mind that Kautsky himself always saw his role as being that of a scholar with no ambition to base his research on a new or independent scientific foundation. He was convinced that by then social science had found its lasting and most fruitful theoretical foundations and categories for interpreting historical reality in Marx's and Engels's works. What was required was a correct application of Marx's categories and method in order to understand actual historical developments and to interpret their meaning by bringing them back into the framework of Marxist categories. According to him this meant that the task of the socialist theorist was to clarify the *Richtung* of historical development, while the socialist politician (the practical man) had to base his actions on mobilization of the *Kräfte* made available for revolutionary action, and on comprehensive evaluation of the power relations between the various social and political currents.

Kautsky's ideal was to establish, within the proletarian movement, a balanced relationship (without confusion or blurring of roles) between Marxist science as established by Marx and Engels, the interpretation of this science on the part of socialist intellectuals (of which he felt himself to be a typical representative, which indeed he was), and the political practice of the party seen as an educational and organizational instrument. Kautsky was the first to give his ideal of "pre-established harmony" the status of an ideology of the Marxist socialist parties – and this seems important to me. In this respect he is the archetype of a family of Marxists, some of whom even had very different opinions and positions (like Lenin, for instance).

But Kautsky's life was so marred by a series of intensive crises which affected this ideal of "pre-established harmony", that in that same lifetime he had to cope with the problems engendered by the change, as well as those caused by the deviations from that ideal (from the debate on revision-

ism, on the agrarian question and so on, up to and including the great controversies of his old age). Hence the importance of studying Kautsky with a proper historical approach. Only this can help us to grasp the actual link between continuity and change in his theoretical and ideological production. Such study should, furthermore, not be limited by narrowing it down to the period when Kautsky held the place of “red pope”, that is to say when he had the role of official ideologist of the Social Democratic Party – something even outstanding scholars frequently do. If, in fact, it is true that Kautsky played a certain role up until the eve of World War I, and then another, it is also true that in both these phases he took up a leading position within the Marxist and socialist ideological debate. Of this both Lenin and Trotsky were well aware. The controversy between Kautsky and the two leaders of the Russian Revolution was certainly no less important than the one with Bernstein. Furthermore the analysis that the old theorist made of the Soviet State during the period of transition from Leninism to Stalinism is bound today to attract increasing interest, because at the time he clearly pointed out new problems coming to the surface.

I still believe that Kautsky cannot and should not be considered a great thinker, on the same level as Weber, Schumpeter or Pareto, as he did not introduce any really innovative idea in the field of theory. Nevertheless Kautsky was a very representative thinker, and one open to new problems. It is therefore not fair to dismiss him with a verdict of mental dullness as some would do, possibly availing themselves of the well-known judgement expressed by a caustic Marx.

Lately Kautsky's personality and works have been the object of a growing number of studies expressing a great diversity of interpretations. I will here deal with three recent works by Jukka Gronow, Ingrid Gilcher-Holtey, and Andrea Panaccione.

Gronow's analysis is centered on the categories Kautsky developed in his study of capitalist development. This analysis is carried out by following three basic lines which are, of course, strongly interrelated. The first of them is the discussion of various contributions made to the analysis of Kautsky's work (Matthias, Groh, Steinberg, Steenson, Hünlich, Projekt Klassenanalyse, and others, with the notable exception of Waldenberg). The second is a comparison between Marx's interpretation of capitalist development on the one hand, and Kautsky's on the other. The third is a critical reconstruction of the theoretical categories developed by Kautsky with regard to questions as revisionism, the theory of impoverishment, the role of intellectuals in developing revolutionary conscience, socialism as a science, the laws of capitalist development, imperialism, parliamentarism and democracy.

In my opinion this book generally succeeds in conducting a clear conceptual analysis of a whole series of key concepts in Kautsky's thought; in this

respect it is undoubtedly useful. But for the most part the text retains the character of an abstract theoretical discussion, which does not allow one to grasp the origin of the concepts themselves, their functional value, and the reasons for the change in perspective within Kautsky's works in conformity with the methodological approach fostered by Waldenberg and to which I previously referred.

The value of Gronow's study, which is at the same time its limitation, can easily be understood by noting how he illustrates the relationship between Marx's analysis of capitalism and the one Kautsky makes. Gronow records a difference between Marx and Kautsky in particular, and between Marx and Marxism of the Second International in general as follows:

While adopting only one element of Marx's critique of capitalist appropriation and private property, traditional Marxism understood capitalism as just another exploitative society in which the products of the labouring class are forcibly exploited by property owners. Thus Marxism totally ignored Marx's conception of capital as a rather specific relation of exploitation. And due to this neglect, the result of which was most drastically expressed in the theories of imperialism, Marxism came close to a radical version of the natural rights theory. Capitalism was to blame because it did not respect the original right of the worker to his own products.<sup>4</sup>

Kautsky has been the main representative of this type of Marxism, which transformed criticism of capitalism into criticism of the bourgeois conception of natural rights: not private property but rather its abolition answers man's natural rights. So socialism became a new theory of natural rights.

The second point characterizing Gronow's work is the interpretation according to which

Kautsky's most original contribution to the development of the theory of capitalism was, however, his interpretation of the law of the accumulation of capital formulated by Marx at the end of the first volume of *Capital*. Kautsky interpreted it to be a historical and empirical law explaining and predicting the future development of capitalism.<sup>5</sup>

It is obvious that the two aspects are closely connected, since the interpretation of socialism as the foundation of a "human" system, made even more irresistible by the historical development of capitalism, was the essence of socialist ideology in the age of the Second International, of which Kautsky was the leading spokesman. The author, in accordance with the entire approach of his work, while he does succeed in describing this issue in conceptual terms shows no interest in indicating the reasons for the rising of this type of ideology and its practical function.

<sup>4</sup> Gronow, pp. 234-235.

<sup>5</sup> Gronow, p. 13.

Ingrid Gilcher-Holtey instead starts from the issue of Kautsky's function especially as an intellectual. Kautsky, she observes, as an intellectual succeeded more than anyone else in "Einfluss auf die Entwicklung der deutschen Sozialdemokratie zu nehmen".<sup>6</sup> In this context it is all the more remarkable that he had this unique influence without ever having held any official position within the SPD; in other words, no one ever elected him to the role that was nonetheless his. "Er hatte Einfluss ohne Mandat."<sup>7</sup> The point is thus to examine the causes which first enabled Kautsky to exert his influence, and later caused him to lose such influence.

The main conclusion of Ms Gilcher-Holtey is that Kautsky succeeded in exerting his greatest influence during the time of Bebel's political leadership, when the Social Democratic Party had not yet consolidated an internal structurization and bureaucratization process which, when achieved, deprived the intellectual of his "mandate". The peak of Kautsky's influence was reached during the revision of the party programme, culminating in the formulation of a new programme, adopted at Erfurt, in the debate on the agrarian issue and in the battle around revisionism. The fact that the Parteivorstand refused to give an official character to *Der Weg zur Macht* indicates that Kautsky's role was changing and that his "mandate" was running out. The author writes:

Analysiert man die Rolle Kautskys in den Jahren 1909/10, so kommt man zu dem Ergebnis, dass Kautskys Verhalten keinen Bruch mit seiner theoretischen Konzeption erkennen lässt, dass aber die Voraussetzungen und Bedingungen, die bislang seinen Einfluss als Theoretiker in der Partei ermöglichten, sich verändert hatten.<sup>8</sup>

Kautsky's former role finally ended in 1917, when he was dismissed from the post of managing editor of the *Neue Zeit*.

Kautsky's activities are thus analysed by the author in two phases: 1) the period when he exerted his "Mandat" as an intellectual; and the period 2) when the Marxist theorist was reduced to the role of "Intellektueller ohne Mandat". But in fact the study more or less stops in 1909/10; the analysis of the following period is very brief and can be seen as nothing more than an illustration of the work of an intellectual who has lost a certain kind of role.

In my opinion the way Ms Gilcher-Holtey deals with the interpretative issue is very interesting. Nevertheless I would argue that the author devotes too large a part of the book to the reconstruction of Kautsky's ideas in the framework of the political and ideological development of the SPD, following a much beaten track – although doing so in an interesting and relevant

<sup>6</sup> Gilcher-Holtey, p. 13.

<sup>7</sup> Gilcher-Holtey, p. 13.

<sup>8</sup> Gilcher-Holtey, p. 249.

way. The actual research into the specific historical circumstances that first caused Kautsky to acquire so much influence, and later caused him to lose it, is not stressed enough in its due specificity. It would have been necessary to make more use of the typical instruments of sociological organization and of analysis of ideological functions. While correctly posing the issue, the author instead shapes her work around a reconstruction of the debate on ideas within social democracy. I for my part would stress that there is one crucial point in Kautsky's biography that must at all times be taken into account: that is, after he lost his "official" role of party ideologist in the period of the Party's consolidation, he acquired another role, no doubt different from the former, but no less influential. The change was that his influence had a different foundation.

With regard to what I stressed above I find Panaccione's approach in his work *Kautsky e l'ideologia socialista* well focused, especially where he writes:

"Karl Kautsky was the driving force behind the process of asserting and giving firm roots to a heritage of ideas in the ranks of Social Democracy during a whole period of its history. One must keep in mind that his activity did not cease with World War I or with the Russian Revolution, but that he went on living (and writing) up to the eve of World War II."

During this second phase of his activity – and here I think that the peak of the second stage of Kautsky's political biography is effectively expressed – Kautsky

witnessed the gradual and rapid deterioration of that structure he so forcefully contributed to build; he was forced to reflect and to give his opinion about this process of dissolution, he was forced to look for some reason which would explain what was happening. In either role his life certainly deserves careful consideration.<sup>9</sup>

As I see it, in this second phase, the "red pope" Kautsky managed, within the boundaries of his cultural values, to be genuine and earnest in his enquiry into the problems engendered by the crisis of the myth of "happy Marxism" of which he had after all been the most significant ideologist at the end of the 19th century. Certainly he was more genuine than many other "red cardinals". I find Panaccione's work at its most interesting where he takes up where Ms Gilcher-Holtey left off, namely in the analysis of Kautsky's activity after 1909/10. After staying on the beaten track for about a hundred pages, Panaccione effectively analyzes some crucial moments and aspects of the history of the labour movement and Kautsky's role. I will schematically mention the most remarkable of these moments: 1) Kautsky's realism in his quarrel with Rosa Luxemburg and Pannekoek about

<sup>9</sup> Panaccione, p. 14.

the true nature of “mass-action”; 2) his fruitful intuition as to the relation between violence and economy, later further investigated and modified by Hilferding; 3) Kautsky’s refusal to identify capitalism with fascism on the one hand, and on the other to consider the nature of Soviet society as “objectively socialist” (here showing more clarity of vision and less schematism than Bauer); 4) finally his refusal, after the collapse of 1933 in Germany and of 1934 in Austria, to give in to the “illusion about the miraculous role of a new revolutionary subjectivity”,<sup>10</sup> in other words, to a neo-Jacobinic conception. This last aspect proves Kautsky’s unflinching trust in the universal values of political liberties and democracy. He had matured this trust during the second half of the 19th century, and he affirmed it again at the end of his life in the face not only of fascism, but also of communism and of those socialists who had been converted to the idea of authoritarianism as having a liberating function.

<sup>10</sup> Panaccione, p. 198.