

## A critique of the German social democratic program - Mikhail Bakunin



Bakunin makes an early and powerful critique of the statist, reformist, class-collaborationist and counter-revolutionary tendencies of emerging social democracy.

**Bakunin's essay refutes the claims made by some Marxists, then and now, that early social democracy played a largely progressive role within the working class movement. In this particular case, Bakunin's comments are also far more radical than anything Marx and Engels were willing to say publicly at the time on the subject.**

*"...all historical experience shows that an alliance concluded between two different parties always benefits the more backward - the more advanced party is inevitably weakened because the alliance diminishes and distorts its programme and destroys its moral strength and self-confidence; whereas when a backward party lies, it always finds itself closer than ever to its own truth ... I have no hesitation in saying that all the Marxist flirtations with bourgeois radicalism - reformist or revolutionary - can have no other outcome than the demoralization and disorganization of the nascent power of the proletariat, and therefore the further consolidation of the power of the bourgeoisie." (Bakunin, 1870s.)*

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## A Critique of the German Social Democratic Program

(1870, *Michael Bakunin*)

Let us examine the situation in countries outside France where the socialist movement has become a real power... The German Social-Democratic Workers party (S.D.W.P.) and the General Association of German Workers (G.A.G.W.), founded by Ferdinand Lassalle, are both socialist in the sense that they want to alter the relations between capital and labor in a socialist manner [abolish capitalism]. The Lassalleans as well as the Eisenach party [named after the congress held in Eisenach, August 7-9, 1869] agree fully that in order to effect this change, it will be absolutely necessary *first to reform the State*, and if this cannot be done by widespread propaganda and a legal peaceful labor movement, then the State will have to be reformed by force, i.e., by a political revolution.

*All the German socialists believe that the political revolution must precede the Social Revolution.* This is a fatal error. For any revolution made *before* a social revolution will necessarily be a bourgeois revolution – which can lead only to bourgeois socialism – a new, more efficient, more cleverly concealed form of the exploitation of the proletariat by the bourgeoisie. [By “bourgeois socialism”, Bakunin as well as Marx meant a partnership between capital and labor, the “public” and the State. – It was introduced in Germany by Bismarck and advocated in our times by right-wing democratic socialists, “enlightened capitalists.” and liberals in general.]

This false principle – the idea that a political revolution must precede a social revolution – is, in effect, an open invitation to all the German bourgeois liberal politicians to infiltrate the S.D.W.P. And this party was on many occasions pressured by its leaders – not by the radical-minded rank and file members – to fraternize with the bourgeois democrats of the *Volkspartei* (People’s Party), an opportunist party concerned only with politics and virulently opposed to the principles of socialism. This hostility was amply demonstrated by the vicious attacks of its patriotic orators and official journals against the revolutionary socialists of Vienna.

These onslaughts against revolutionary socialism aroused the indignation and opposition of almost all the Germans and seriously embarrassed Liebknecht and the other leaders of the S.D.W.P. They wanted to calm the workers and thus stay in control of the German labor movement and, at the same time, remain on friendly terms with the leaders of the bourgeois democrats of the *Volkspartei*, who soon realized that they had made a serious tactical error by antagonizing the German labor movement without whose support they could not hope to attain political power.

In this respect the *Volkspartei* followed the tradition of the bourgeoisie never to make a revolution by themselves. Their tactics, however ingeniously applied, are always based on this principle: to enlist the powerful help of the people in making a political revolution but to reap the benefit for themselves. It was this sort of consideration which induced the *Volkspartei* to reverse its antisocialist stand and proclaim that it too, is now a socialist party... After a year of negotiations, the top leaders of the workers’ and the bourgeois parties adopted the famous Eisenach Program and formed a single party, retaining the name S.D.W.P. This program is really a strange hybrid of the revolutionary program of the International Workingmen’s Association (the International) and the well-known opportunistic program of the bourgeois democracy...

Article 1 of the program is in fact contradictory to the fundamental policy and spirit of the International. The S.D.W.P. wants to institute *a free People’s State*. But the words *free* and *People’s* are annulled and rendered meaningless by the word *State*; the name International implies the negation of the State. Are the framers of the program talking about an international or universal state, or do they

intend to set up only a state embracing all the countries of Western Europe – England, France, Germany, the Scandinavian countries, Holland, Switzerland, Spain, Portugal, and the Slavic nations subjected to Austria? No. Their political stomachs cannot digest so many countries at one time. With a passion they do not even attempt to conceal, the social democrats proclaim that they want to erect the great pan-Germanic fatherland. And this is why the only aim of the S.D.W.P., the construction of an all-German state, is the very first article of their program. They are above all *German patriots*.

Instead of dedicating themselves to the creation of the all-German State, the German workers should join their exploited brothers of the entire world in defense of their mutual economic and social interests; the labor movement of each country must be based solely on the principle of international solidarity... If, in case of conflict between two states, the workers would act in accordance with Article 1 of the social-democratic program, they would, against their better inclinations, be *joining their own bourgeoisie* against their fellow workers in a foreign country. They would thereby sacrifice the international solidarity of the workers to the national patriotism of the State. This is exactly what the German workers are now doing in the Franco-Prussian War. As long as the German workers seek to set up a national state – even the freest People's State – they will inevitably and utterly sacrifice the freedom of the people to the glory of the State, socialism to politics, justice and international brotherhood to patriotism. It is impossible to go in two different directions at the same time. Socialism and social revolution involve the destruction of the State: – consequently, those who want a state must sacrifice the economic emancipation of the masses to the political monopoly of a privileged party.

The S.D.W.P. would sacrifice the economic, and with it, the political emancipation of the proletariat – or more correctly said, its *emancipation from politics and the State* – to the triumph of bourgeois democracy. This follows plainly from the second and third articles of the social-democratic program. The first three clauses of Article 2 conform in every respect to the socialist principles of the International: the abolition of capitalism; full political and social equality; every worker to receive the full product of his labor. But the fourth clause, by declaring that political emancipation is the *preliminary* condition for the economic emancipation of the working class, that the solution of the social question is possible only in a democratic state, nullifies these principles and makes it impossible to put them into practice. The fourth clause amounts to saying:

"Workers, you are slaves, victims of capitalist society. Do you want to free yourself from this economic straitjacket? Of course you do, and you are absolutely right. But to attain your just demands, *you must first help us make the political revolution. Afterwards, we will help you make the Social Revolution*. Let us first, with your strength, erect the democratic State, a good democratic State, as in Switzerland: and then we promise to give you the same benefits that the Swiss workers now enjoy... . (Witness the strikes in Basel and Geneva, ruthlessly suppressed by the bourgeoisie.)"

To convince yourself that this incredible delusion accurately reflects the tendencies and spirit of German social democracy, you have but to examine Article 3, which lists all the immediate and proximate goals to be advanced in the party's legal and peaceful propaganda and election campaigns. These demands merely duplicate the familiar program of the bourgeois democrats: universal suffrage with direct legislation by the people; abolition of all political privileges; replacement of the permanent standing army by the volunteers' and citizens' militias; separation of Church from State, and the schools from the Church; free and compulsory elementary education; freedom of the press, assembly, and association; and replacement of all indirect taxation by a single, direct, and progressively higher income tax based on earnings.

Does not this program prove that the social democrats are interested in the exclusively political reform of the institutions and laws of the State, and that for them socialism is but an empty dream, which may at best be realized in the distant future?

Were it not for the fact that the true aspirations and radical sentiments of its members, the German workers, go much further than this program, would we not be justified in saying that the S.D.W.P. was created for the sole purpose of using the working masses as the unconscious tool to promote the political ambitions of the German bourgeois democrats?

There are only two planks in this program which free-enterprise capitalists will dislike. The first appears in the latter half of clause 8, Article 3; it demands *establishment of a normal working day* (limitation of hours), *abolition of child labor, and limitation of women's work*; measures which make the free enterprisers shudder. As passionate lovers of all freedom which they can use to their advantage, they demand the unlimited right to exploit the proletariat and bitterly resent state interference. However, the poor capitalists have fallen upon evil days. They have been forced to accept state intervention even in England, which is by no stretch of the imagination a socialist society.

The other plank – clause 10, Article 3 – is even more important and socialistic. It demands state help, protection, and credit for workers' cooperatives, particularly producers' cooperatives, with all necessary guarantees, i.e., freedom to expand. Free enterprise is not afraid of successful competition from workers' cooperatives because the capitalists know that workers, with their meager incomes, will never by themselves be able to accumulate enough capital to match the immense resources of the employing class ... but the tables will be turned when the workers' cooperatives, backed by the power and well-nigh unlimited credit of the State, begin to fight and gradually absorb both private and corporate capital (industrial and commercial). For the capitalist will in fact be competing with the State, and the State is, of course, the most powerful of all capitalists. [It will be seen from the context of the next paragraph that Bakunin regards state subsidy of workers' cooperatives as part of the transition from capitalism to state socialism.]

Labor employed by the State – such is the fundamental, principle of authoritarian communism, of state socialism. The State, having become the sole proprietor – at the end of a period of transition necessary for allowing society to pass, without too great dislocation, from the present organization of bourgeois privilege to the future organization of official equality for all – the State will then become the only banker, capitalist, organizer, and director of all national labor, and the distributor of all its products. Such is the ideal, the fundamental principle of modern communism.

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