Chapter 2 - Origins of the German workers' movement

The Impact of Social Democracy

Germany possessed the world's most important socialist party; no other could compare with it. The SPD (Sozial-demokratische Partei Deutschlands) counted a million members and four million voters in 1914. It was also the largest political party in Germany. This was primarily the result of the numerical importance of the German working class; Germany's workers comprised a large proportion of its population, although less than that comprised by Great Britain's workers. Germany was more working class than France (which was still largely rural) and the United States, where the tertiary sector underwent rapid development. The SPD's influence can also be explained by the fact that the proletariat was an interested party in the struggle for democracy, and perceived the socialist party as a suitable instrument for conducting this struggle. Finally, due to the bourgeoisie's weakness, Germany did not have a strong liberal party such as existed in England, or a radical party as in France. The SPD appeared to non-proletarian democrats as the only party which effectively fought for democracy: one of the best "proofs" of this was Bismarck's prohibition of the party between 1878 and 1890. The SPD represented this extensive constituency quite well, since its activity to improve the condition of the workers in the dominant society was limited to reformist and parliamentary action. Even before 1914, basically since its birth at the Gotha Congress of 1875, the SPD, considered in all of its aspects, was not a revolutionary organization. The talk of "treason" in 1914 shows that it was judged exclusively by what it said. Pannekoek's analyses, the only radical contributions on this terrain, prove that there was no discontinuity between the periods before and after August 4, 1914.

Pannekoek was Dutch, and his native country's small size helped him to view things from an international perspective. In Germany, on the other hand, the SPD totally dominated the entire political horizon of the various tendencies which claimed to be Marxist, including, among others, the most radical elements around Rosa Luxemburg. Overawed by the power of the "party", the left—which represented approximately 15% of the SPD—having originated in a critique of the reformist practice of the leadership of the party in all fields, and never abandoning the labor of Sisyphus of trying to unseat that leadership, did not take the decisive step toward schism. The left in its entirety would wait until it would be excluded from the party, after 1914, to forge its own organizations. In addition, there were also, prior to 1914, "revisionist" (Bernstein) and "orthodox" (Kautsky) tendencies: the latter was apparently the majority faction. But it soon became clear, after August 4, 1914, that the majority was more right-wing than the "revisionists". Bernstein, moreover, would be excluded as a "leftist" opponent of the leadership.

It is necessary to closely examine the positions and activities of Rosa Luxemburg during the revolutionary period as well as the previous years. Because she was heavily
criticized by the Leninists, and because she criticized Lenin and the Bolsheviks both long before as well as during the 1917 revolution, proletarian revolutionaries often tend to make her the spokesperson and to consider her as the theoretician (and as a model of practice while she was alive) of the authentically revolutionary current. This opinion was nourished by the left factions themselves, which soon overlooked the fact that they had opposed her at the KPD’s founding congress. The clarification of the history of the communist left in Germany leads to the destruction of the legend to which her death gave birth.

Luxemburg’s critique of Lenin’s organizational fetishism (see Organizational Questions of Russian Social Democracy) was one aspect of her critique of workers organizations. The basis of her critique was still more clearly expounded in The Mass Strike, Party and Trade Unions: the organizations, and particularly their leaderships, necessarily followed in the wake of the spontaneous movements of the proletariat, and usually even tried to restrain these movements. This was in absolute conformity with what can normally be verified with respect to the relation between the established organizations of the working class and the movements of the working class (whether or not they lead to revolutions). Luxemburg correctly saw this as inevitable, but did not for that reason cease to view the parties, trade unions, etc., which were formed in the non-revolutionary period and which embraced large sectors of the proletariat, as organizations which are perhaps bad, but ultimately are still class organizations, which the proletariat must rejuvenate during the revolution. This is why she opposed the Dutch Left, which split from the reformist Dutch party (see Chapter 3), as well as the German “left radicals”, instead calling upon the masses to “reconquer” their organization (the SPD). According to her, one must not separate oneself from the masses even when they follow the “worst” workers party.

Her position was based on two theses which had proven to be increasingly false: first, that the “workers” organizations only possess a relative autonomy in respect to the workers movement; and second, “the masses” are, at bottom, revolutionary (or at least never counterrevolutionary).

The German Revolution has clearly proven what various “lefts” had intuited: the workers parties had acquired so much autonomy (in respect to the revolutionary movement, but not to capital) that they were the most skilled architects of the counterrevolution; in this manner, the revolutionary proletariat was defeated by the counterrevolutionary proletariat.

Luxemburg wanted to establish a compromise between these two elements. The Bolsheviks branded her position as centrist at the Zimmerwald Conference on the war and social democracy (see Chapter 4); and her position was in fact basically centrist. It corresponded perfectly with that sector of the workers movement in Germany, organized by the “shop stewards” during the war, which attempted to achieve positive results in the reformist struggle, with “real” material benefits and policies (in opposition to the manifest sabotage of all actions by the trade unions and the social democrats). They wanted to return to social democracy’s origins without advancing towards communism. They did not want revolution.
The Luxemburgian critique of organizational fetishism was carried out in the name of the fetishism of the masses; her critique of “isolation” (in the case of the Dutch Left prior to 1914) was carried out in the name of the fetishism of action. This explains why she remained, until her death, on the side of the masses in the insurrection of January 1919, whose failure she had nonetheless predicted. Her attitude recalls the fetishism of the people among the great bourgeois revolutionaries, but in the era of the proletariat.

August 1914 was the consequence of a long evolution. The anarchist movement has never ceased to refer to it, and has all too hastily viewed it as the failure of “Marxism”, since there were many “government anarchists” (following Malatesta’s formulation) who defended the sacred union on this or that side. We shall cite only the cases of Kropotkin and J. Guillaume. Anarchism has in particular placed much more emphasis on the organizational roots of the failure of the Second International than on its real causes. Contrary to what Marx and Engels said, the revolutionary movement underwent a “real” split after the Commune. “Anarchism” and “Marxism” cannot explain either of the two, since the Marxist movement preserved and developed certain aspects which proved useful in 1914 (revolutionary defeatism). This did not prevent both of them, however, from retaining remnants of the communist perspective, but only in the form of parts removed from a totality, which they could not grasp intellectually because the proletariat no longer grasped it practically. The notion of community had become weakened and the “socialists” began to place all their hopes in the State: socialization was thus identified with nationalization or municipal ownership. Certain “anarchists” still persisted in upholding an old tradition involving the search for community, but did not clarify the problem of class, oscillating between reformism and savage revolts. In their activity, too, made the revolution a question of organization, of the proper formula which would allow emancipation. Some Marxists also preserved the perspective of community, although in a contradictory way. In his description of the future society, Bebel heralded the disappearance of value, but not of the social regulation of the production of goods through necessary labor time, which is the very origin of value. Kautsky clearly foresaw the end of the law of value . . . but preserved wages and prices. The transformation was presented as a series of governmental measures instituted by the “Socialist State”: it is organized capitalism. In 1916, Bukharin would assert that it was not a question of developing the forces of production, which were already quite sufficient for the passage to socialism, but of destroying capital, which places obstacles in the way of that transformation. Such ideas were rare during that era, even after 1914. Pannekoek was one of the few who were aware of the partial character of both the socialist and anarchist movements. In 1909 he wrote: “the one-sided revolutionary wing of the workers movement thus acquires an anti-political character. In France and Italy ministerialism and the formation of electoral blocs have expanded the audience of revolutionary syndicalism and have led the trade unions to declare themselves enemies of the party.”

It would be useless to denounce a “collapse”, as Lenin did, who confused the issue with his talk of “opportunism”. As Engels defined it, the notion of opportunism (rehabilitated by Lenin) turned reality on its head. Engels equated opportunism with an emphasis on day-to-day activity and bread-and-butter issues, and not with the real social fact of
social democracy organizing labor in opposition to and in partnership with capital. This fits in with his superficial analysis of the workers movement of his era, which would later be employed by Lenin and the CI in their analyses of the socialist movement.

In reality, if one wants to speak of opportunism, one would have to accuse the whole proletariat (and it is evidently a matter for accusation, since opportunism is a moral notion) of being opportunist throughout the entire epoch. The workers fought for immediate advantages because the flourishing condition of capitalism allowed them to do so. This reformist foundation was transformed, in certain situations, into its opposite: revolutionary action, whether because the proletariat’s situation became unendurable, or because society’s rulers themselves descended into crisis, or, as in the 19th century, due to the impetus of bourgeois revolutions; there is no hard and fast line between revolution and reformism; there is an irremediable opposition between the petrified forms of reformism (which are often even unsuitable for an “honest reformism”) and revolutionary forms of organization; there is a bloody struggle between the proletariat which remains reformist and the proletariat which becomes revolutionary, but to oppose the proletariat (which “is revolutionary or does not exist”) on one side, to the working class, “mere variable capital”, on the other, pertains to the realm of metaphysics.

In their early days, social democracy and the German trade unions comprised the organization of this spontaneous reformist struggle of the German proletariat, which demonstrated its lack of subversive spirit by the very fact of separating its political and economic struggles in distinct organizations. Soon, however, a line was drawn between the workers organizations and the workers movement per se: this became clear when the workers movement developed various forms of action which opposed the traditional organizations during the wildcat strikes of the first years of the 20th century; this development would become yet more pronounced with the creation of the “shop stewards” networks during the war. Henceforth, the traditional workers organizations, the SPD and the trade unions, had their own logic and their own function in the existing society: this is what must be understood (as the Dutch did so well, splitting from the SDAP before 1910); the grave reproach of “opportunism” is nothing but an empty phrase: its employment reveals the bad conscience of the organization that feeds on the energy of the proletariat, which is what social democracy had become.

It is, then, impossible for revolutionaries to be in workers organizations (like Engels) or to try to deal with them (like Lenin), so as to guide their transformation (Engels) or to unmask them (Lenin). These organizations cannot be transformed because they have their own nature, nor can they be unmasked, because, while they may be susceptible to the reproach of being somewhat lax in the reformist struggle, they cannot be held accountable for their lack of revolutionary spirit, since the workers are reformist anyway. In which case, the only way to conquer what one may call the workers movement—organizations which have become autonomous of the workers—is, wherever possible, to decisively attack it, even if this attack is carried out by a minority.

All talk of “opportunism” assumed that the social democratic party was really founded upon principles which it betrayed in its political activities. In reality, these principles had
never been more than a smokescreen. Twenty years of denunciations of the always-renewed opportunism of a party which was not actually what it had initially proposed itself to be at its first congresses and which had revealed a nature which had nothing to do with the organization of revolutionary proletarians, were of no significance at all. The party had become an established body within the society which it had theoretically claimed had to be completely transformed. It preferred the status quo, its preservation, against the revolution (or even against the simple autonomous actions of the workers in their attempts to obtain reforms) which could, in case it failed, threaten the integrity of the organization and the extremely privileged social situation of its functionaries. It is in relation to this real function and these real principles behind its activity that the acts of social democracy must be judged in advance.

Finally, one cannot accuse a party of being opportunist unless one assumes that it is actually a revolutionary party which has ceased to be revolutionary as a result of its resort to certain easy measures to attain its goal, measures which in fact will by no means allow the goal to be reached. Such a reproach can only be valid for a short time. The party either rapidly moves towards a form of activity which is in conformity with its goal and its principles (thus showing that it had only undergone a momentary and non-essential deviation, connected, for example, to its temporary domination by leaders who are effectively strangers to the revolutionary movement)—this case is very rare; it has probably never happened and only presents the obverse of a false symmetry—or else its first deviations are confirmed by others, which verifies that the party was in no way revolutionary, that its nature and its goal are power for itself, for its leaders, and that in any event, what is most important for it is its own preservation and consequently that of the existing order. In this case the reproach of opportunism must be abandoned, since it still implies a certain community with those against whom it is directed. This is why Gorter’s resort to this term in applying it to the Dutch Communist Party in 1919 is fully justified. The party had been undergoing a critical period of development for several years, and Gorter thought that it still had a healthy nucleus; as he said: “We hope that these leaders might adopt a better tactic.” In regard to social democracy this judgment of a politics which was even more rightist was disseminated for decades. Social democracy had assumed the role of the long-term defense of the interests of capital. One of the merits of the German Left would be that of showing that the Second International had fulfilled its role, that it had not “failed”, and in this respect the German Left was more advanced than the Italian Left. Without going so far, numerous Anglo-Saxon historians emphasize the continuity of social democracy, whereas leftist historians highlight the “rupture” of 1914. In West Germany, the “democratic” tradition of the German workers movement is the favorite theme, while in East Germany, historians focus on the “revolutionary” tradition of the SPD prior to 1914.

The Era of 1848
The Brockhaus Encyclopedia of 1846 notes that the term proletariat “has recently been applied to the lowest social layers with the least property.” Hegel had already used it in 1821 to designate those who were not capable of supporting themselves and who had fallen into dependence upon others. The most active categories of the working class during this period were the master craftsmen, skilled workers and apprentices
(who together comprised 10% of the population), although the decline in craft-based trades brought with it a reduction in the number of master craftsmen. Skilled workers still comprised a minority in the factories. The formation of the working class is a process of social disintegration. Torn from an ancient mode of existence, the worker clung to that existence and found there part of the energy needed to rebel against his new conditions. The image of the golden, pre-
“bureaucratic” age of the workers movement, where the worker launched wildcat strikes free from any noxious constraints, is as unreal as that of a brutalized and inert proletariat. Modern proletarian movements were born during this transitional period, and modern theoretical communism is their most inclusive and universal expression. Social democracy, and particularly the German Social Democracy, would be born of the failure and demise of this early movement, from which it would derive its theory as an ideology without making it the theory of its effective practice. The proletariat is not and never was pure negativity. Otherwise, one could never understand how, even in that epoch, conservative forces could prevent its rebellion and integrate it, nor could one form a comprehensive vision of the whole era which could explain why there was no revolution in 1918-1921.

German workers, at that time a small minority of the population, found it very difficult to link their actions to those of the agricultural population, who were divided into two large distinct sectors in the middle of the 19th century: the farmers of the north and the southwest, where land ownership was relatively dispersed, and the farm laborers of the east (1.5 million, of whom one-third were Poles), where serfdom was abolished, but who were still dependents of the landowners. At the end of the 18th century, Silesia was shaken by peasant agitation against the landowners’ efforts to increase their statutory corvée.

The prohibition of workers associations between 1731 and 1840 only partially destroyed the old solidarity of the medieval guilds. For the workers, German backwardness was not just a negative factor; it also allowed for the survival of collective forms of action. Mutual aid funds for the unemployed and invalids among the skilled workers were becoming more tolerated: among, for example, the printers concentrated in Leipzig who were threatened by technological progress. Strikes and boycotts were generally used in reaction to deteriorating conditions, and more rarely to obtain improvements. Despite the arrests of many strikers as a result of the prompt joint action of the factory owners and the authorities, the last years of the 18th century witnessed a large number of strikes between 1791 and 1795 which were linked to the French Revolution. Twenty thousand workers carried out a one-week general strike in Hamburg in 1791, which ended only with the intervention of the army. In Breslau, in 1793, the firing of a Hungarian worker led to a strike and more than 200 arrests. The city, which at that time counted 50,000 inhabitants, was the scene of daily demonstrations in which thousands of workers participated. The disturbances spread to the countryside; troops killed 37 people. The strike was brought to a conclusion on the basis of a compromise: the worker was re-hired. These movements never attained the extent of the Luddite agitation in England, however.
At the beginning of the 19th century, a Rhinelander, L. Gall, attributed the source of wealth to labor: “everything which ennobles and perpetuates life exists as a result of labor, but it is nonetheless precisely the class of laborers which suffers from the scarcity of what it has itself created.”

The Silesian riots of June 1844, which were discussed by the whole revolutionary movement of the epoch, occasioned the celebrated debate between A. Ruge and Marx. Silesian industry had benefited from the Continental blockade, but the weavers were being decimated by the development of productivity. After the mistreatment of a weaver, some of the houses of the merchants were destroyed and the riot was brought to an end by means of a compromise imposed upon the weavers by military intervention, which caused several fatalities. The region’s workers suffered from a rise in the price of necessities between 1846 and 1847, which led to the deaths of up to 20% of the population in certain localities. This riot was the high point of a number of still-unknown actions. Clubs and mutual aid and educational associations were created, often following the model of groups which already existed in other countries as a result of the efforts of emigrant artisans, who participated in the social and political life of their new homes. The most well-known such group was the German Peoples Society of Paris (1832), which became the League of the Exiles, then the League of the Just, from which the Communist League later split.

Marx and Engels frequently insisted on the fact that theory (the “German ideology”, but also revolutionary theory) had developed so easily in Germany because that country offered few avenues for action (liberal or proletarian). It could be suggested that the hunger for workers education, which characterized England and other European countries, was all the greater in Germany due to the limited possibilities for immediate action. The Communist League was as much an organization for education and recreation as it was an organization for politics and theory, and created public workers associations for elementary education, publishing, holding debates and cultural gatherings. If “militantism” is currently criticized for being an activity remote from life, the movement of the mid-19th century had a tendency to manifest an all-embracing social activity. Finally, the German revolutionary movement (like those of Russia and the Netherlands prior to 1914) had an open and international character due to its internal weakness and its need for inspiration from foreign experiences, both to imitate and to criticize. From its inception in 1840-1847, the communist current in Germany had a European dimension.

The liberal bourgeoisie often supported the workers associations, about which the Jewish typographer S. Born said: “We want a club so we can be men.” It was not rare for the municipality to pay the clubs’ lecturers. When these associations too plainly declared themselves against the established order, the bourgeoisie withdrew their assistance; sometimes they were prohibited. This development coincided, around 1844-1845, with growing interest in the “social question”, as is verified by numerous texts from that time. Engels recalled that interest in communism was as common among the bourgeoisie as it was among the proletarians, and related that numerous members of the liberal professions and even of the bourgeoisie attended lectures on communism. Understanding that the creation of wealth through labor engendered the creation of misery among the workers, the bourgeoisie tried to prevent the resolution of this
contradiction from assuming an explosive form, and studied the subversive movement and its theoretical expressions in order to take action in regard to social conditions. *The Essence of Money* by M. Hess criticized the existence of labor power as a *commodity*, which had been accepted by Kant and Hegel: "If men could not be sold, they would not be worth even one penny, since they have no value unless they sell themselves or put themselves out to hire."22 The critique of the world of commodities would be pursued by Marx. It is possible that no more than five or ten thousand people effectively participated in these “debates” and this “organization”, but their role would be important in the following years. In 1848-1849, *The New Rhineland Gazette* had a print run of 6,000, a considerable number for that era.

However, even though the barricades of March 1848 forced the Prussian army to evacuate Berlin, the April events demonstrated the impotence of the workers movement in taking the initiative in a revolution which would continue to be bourgeois, and timidly bourgeois. To different degrees, the European bourgeoisie preferred during the 19th century not to immediately secure total political power, which it did not assume until 1918 in Germany. In April 1848, the two active organizations were Born’s Central Workers Committee and the Committee for Popular Elections, a much broader grouping. In the light of later events the failure of 1848 would be interpreted as follows:

“This is how the only occasion offered by the history of the working class of the 19th century for an action in common between skilled artisans and a much greater number of more radical and more dispossessed men, with the goal of jointly confronting the authority of the state, was not taken advantage of.”23

This historian even went so far as to compare the arrest of Schlöffel (a radical student associated with unskilled workers) to the assassination of Luxemburg and Liebknecht in January 1919. Born’s group, representing the “highest layer of the working class”, was the precursor of the SPD: the defeat of the more proletarianized elements, in the sense in which Marx employed the term24, coincided with the beginnings of the organization of the more privileged and consequently more moderate elements, who appealed especially to the State, thus presaging Lassalle (see below). It is clear that the journals published later, in 1849, which were associated with Born, publicized the theme of production associations supported by public funds.

After the defeat of April 1848, this movement was incapable of promoting the “dual” revolution (bourgeois and proletarian) advocated by the communists.25 The armed confrontations in which the workers formed a large part of the democratic camp had little chance of victory after the bourgeoisie of western Germany yielded to the reaction. This same reaction, however, would reassume the reins of the economic program of the bourgeois revolution and would carry out capitalist development to the great benefit of the bourgeoisie of the Rhineland and Saxony.

In Dresden, in May 1849, the democrats raised barricades and tried to blow up the buildings on either side of them so as not to be caught in a pincers movement—Cavaignac’s tactic in Paris in June of 1848. But the demolition teams failed. Lacking
food and water, and not receiving the reinforcements which they had expected, the rebels also squandered their chance to seize the city’s artillery and armory. As had been shown to be the case in Breslau in 1793, and was further confirmed in Paris in June of 1848, urban insurrections were condemned to impotence if they left the use of artillery in the hands of the enemy. The Prussian cannons reduced the barricades and the rebels, after three or four days of resistance, abandoned the city. Despite the aid they received from the peasants during their retreat, they were unable to resume the struggle.\textsuperscript{26} The army of Baden, formed by 25,000 men (both regulars and guerrillas) from all over Germany, but primarily from the south and southwest, was organized in June under the command of a Polish officer. In its ranks were soldiers from Baden, workers from Württemburg and guerrillas. Against the Prussians, who had four or five times more soldiers, it was not unified enough, and was surrounded in the fortress of Rastatt and capitulated in July. The scope of this civil war has probably been exaggerated: throughout all the skirmishes of 1848-1849, the Prussian army suffered fewer than 500 casualties.\textsuperscript{27,28}

The effects of this defeat on the German and European communist movements have been underestimated. The “lessons” of the counterrevolution were taken into account by the moderates as well as by the revolutionaries. While the years 1840-1850 coincided with a critique of private property, the defeat of 1848-1849 accentuated the tendency to seek improvements within capitalism. The old traditions inherited from the guilds had transmitted the experience of collective struggle to modern proletarians: the succeeding phase would see the initiation of efforts to achieve a community of wage labor within existing society with its own defense mechanisms and values recognized by the State.

In 1848-1850, the Brotherhood (\textit{Verbrüderung}) led by Born counted almost 40,000 members and dedicated its efforts to promoting a collectivist system. As Born stated in a letter to Marx in 1848, it was necessary to avoid “futile insurrections”; the majority of workers must be won over and the class must be unified \textit{within} capital.\textsuperscript{29} This reformism was obviously condemned to failure. It was unrealistic to want to organize a reformism parallel to capitalism in rival units of production (cooperatives). This perspective was the craftsman’s dream of adapting to technological progress without destroying capital, thereby preventing artisans from becoming either proletarians or small capitalist businessmen. The SPD, with the assistance of the trade unions, would on the other hand construct a modern reformism, consonant with industrial development, not outside of but within large industry. Lassalle appeared to be the point of intersection between the two phases, combining labor organization and cooperation.

In effect, the reaction which followed 1848-1849 was political: on the economic plane, it could only survive by adopting the program of its adversary (the bourgeoisie). In order to consolidate its hegemony, the supposedly feudal Prussian State had to prepare the ground for a capitalist development which was the only way to firmly establish German power and to reinforce its own political preeminence. But the ambiguity of German unification would endure even after 1871, disappearing only in 1918. Economic expansion did not, properly speaking, make the artisans dissolve into the ranks of the proletariat: artisans were often absorbed into factories where they preserved their status
as foremen of the labor process which, in its organization and specialization, had not yet been totally transformed. The role of skilled workers, as well as that of their training (political and professional) was progressively marginalized due to migration within Germany or immigration overseas. The wages of workers in the rural areas rose. Certain kinds of poverty tended to disappear with the absorption of the unemployed and poor artisans by industry. The economic crisis of 1857, the first disturbance to simultaneously shake England, the United States, France and Germany, did not profoundly affect the workers’ standard of living. The Bismarckian approach, a synthesis of authority and conciliation to subordinate the workers to capitalism, was already in effect. Strikes—of short duration compared to those in England—were often broken by the old artisan class.

“Marxism” and Lassallism
For anyone who invokes “Marxism”, especially in Germany, Lassalle has been a model of detestable “reformism” for more than a century. It would hardly be an exaggeration to say that the history of the Marxist tradition has always presented the Lassallian movement as the evil opposed to the good incarnated by Marx’s supporters in Germany. Undoubtedly imperfect, but ultimately revolutionaries, it was men like Liebknecht and A. Bebel who would constitute the real socialist movement, as opposed to the traitor Lassalle who secretly negotiated with Bismarck. There is, in fact, a great deal of continuity between Lassallism and the SPD, although the most foreign aspects of the Lassallian movement would be abandoned. Lassalle himself is a complex personality. When he died in 1864 as a result of a duel, Heine wrote that he was a mixture of great personal qualities and the genius of self-destruction. Transcending the archaic reformism of the artisanal sector, Lassalle simultaneously rejected class struggle and Manchester liberalism. His *System of Acquired Rights* develops the theme of the passage from private property to public property. He announces the advent of the workers as a (non-subversive) social-professional grouping within capitalism, who pressure capitalism (with the help of the State) to obtain a stable and recognized status. In an 1862 speech—the year Bismarck was appointed Chancellor—Lassalle posed the question: who should run society? Constitutions, he explains, are not so much immutable documents as the provisional crystallizations of power relations between rival social groups. Aware of the *political* reality of the capitalist world, where the atomization of individuals leads to their regrouping into blocs which demand shares of power, he seeks to directly organize this claimed share of power in collaboration with Bismarck. Although his secret correspondence was not revealed until after his death, the other socialists never ceased to denounce Lassalle’s collusion with the State. Lassalle describes his organization to Bismarck as “my empire”: “The working classes are instinctively predisposed in favor of dictatorship, if one knows how to fully convince them that this dictatorship is to be exercised in their interest.” Lassalle’s adversaries in the workers movement fought in the name of workers autonomy against submission to the State. But can one speak of workers autonomy under capitalism, which, more than any other social system tends to produce the conditions of life in their entirety? Paradoxically, the demand for workers independence in opposition to the factory owners drove the ADAV (General Association of German Workers) towards the State. The demand for independence in opposition to capital would push the SPD towards
what appeared to be the means to limit capital’s field of action, that is, to exercise influence over it: once again, the State is at hand. Everything which intends to live on the margins of capital is finally condemned to seek the protection of that which appears to be above capital, but which is nothing but its concentrated power.  

Lassalle made an incomplete attempt, sealed by an explicit pact (see his letters), to accomplish what social democracy would later realize by concluding an implicit agreement with capital. Lassalle was a precursor; for the workers, against the bourgeoisie, and with the assistance of the State. In this sense, he was also a prefiguration of 1918-1919 and national socialism. Lassallism could not succeed because it remained tied to the utopia of the cooperatives which were to have constituted a counterweight—but always with the help of the State—to the industrial power of capital, which was impossible. The SPD would strip Lassallism of these absurdities in order to preserve its essential nucleus: Lassalle had helped German society to frame the question of what place the workers should assume within it.

Although it was reformist, the ADAV, founded in 1863, faced the hostility of the factory owners and the police in (local) social conflicts, despite the pact sealed by the Lassalle-Bismarck summit. Since he believed in the possibility of establishing production cooperatives, Lassalle could all the more easily “discover” the theory of the iron law of wages, which holds that wages must always decline to a minimum due to the play of economic mechanisms, no matter what the organized workers do. This theory allowed him to justify his indifference, not to say hostility, to the trade unions. That such a doctrine suited his politics is the least that one could say. His successor as leader of the ADAV, Schweitzer, followed the same path, but was compelled to recant after 1868 under pressure from ADAV members and the reform movements. He then organized a conference said to represent 140,000 workers, but this number rapidly declined and was reduced to 10,000 in 1870.  

Alongside the party linked to Marx and Engels, the Social Democratic Workers Party (SDAP), which was founded in 1869, there was the offshoot of an organization created in 1863, the League of German Workers Clubs (VDA), which from its inception had opposed Lassallism in regard to the question of German unification. The ADAV supported unification under Prussian leadership, and could be said to have sold its support to the most powerful German state in exchange for a special law concerning labor and some advantages within the unified Germany of the future. The SDAP, however, proclaimed its support for a democratic unification without Prussian hegemony. The social composition of the ADAV was, at least initially, more working class than that of the SDAP, which happily directed its message towards the anti-Prussian democrats as well as militant workers. The declarations of Bebel and Liebknecht seem to grant a place of honor to the resistance against Prussian dominance, even more than to the problems of socialism. It cannot be said that the SDAP represented the class struggle and Marxism against the class collaboration of the ADAV. The SDAP was quite ambiguous, so much so that, until about 1880, support for the socialist and workers movement was provided above all by artisans threatened by industrialization. The VDA was “a rather weak federation of local clubs”, while the ADAV
was, from its very inception, highly centralized. Two political organizations were linked to the VDA: the German Party (1865), a very weak democratic group, and the Saxon Peoples Party (1866), primarily composed of workers. This dualism would persist in the SPD. Marx was much more aware of the Lassallian danger than of the distance separating the SDAP from communism. He was convinced that the SDAP would evolve in a revolutionary direction; as for the ADAV, its large membership led him to provisionally take it into consideration before attacking it in earnest. On December 22, 1864, he wrote that the ADAV’s membership in the IWA “was only necessary as a beginning, in order to fight against our enemies here. Later, it will be necessary to completely destroy this organization, since the foundations upon which it is based are false”. After the failure of the new newspaper, the Sozial-Demokrat, in 1864-1865, the rupture between the IWA and the ADAV was consummated: the IWA would thenceforth accept individual memberships only. Marx’s influence in Germany declined to one of its lowest points ever. Liebknecht, who lived for twelve years in London, and had been a member of the ADAV since 1863, would later break with the Lassallians. In 1900, he would justify his activity within the ADAV in the following manner: “there was a movement and an organization within it, albeit embryonic ones.” After 1866 and Prussia’s victory over Austria, it was clear that unification would be achieved under Prussian leadership; especially since Germany’s southern states feared France. Bismarck and the liberals reached an understanding and he granted fewer concessions to the ADAV, which then moved towards the left. The SDAP was slowly gaining prestige and benefiting from its association with Marx and the IWA. Published in 1867, Volume I of Capital was much less influential than is generally believed. Its rare readers (Bebel waited two years to read it and Liebknecht had read fewer than 15 pages after having received it) accepted it as an exaltation of the working class against capital, reading into it the “certainty of victory”, according to Liebknecht’s 1868 formula. The socialist newspapers which took note of its publication generally only quoted its Introduction, without understanding its analyses. What were discovered in Capital were not capital’s laws of motion, its flexibility, or the characteristics of communism, but the “scientific” proofs of capital’s exploitation of the workers. Only half of its message was absorbed, as if the project of theoretical communism was limited to denunciation, and was not the unveiling of the communist program. The visionary aspect of revolutionary theory was beginning to be forgotten, and was relegated to the supposedly inferior and infantile level of “utopian socialism”. Similarly, when the SDAP convened its 1869 Congress in Eisenach, claiming to embrace 14,000 workers, its program, when subjected to careful examination, was by no means “Marxist”. The Lassallian vestiges with which it was still impregnated (“Free Peoples State”, “the entire product of labor”, “public credit for production cooperatives”) were the same ones which Marx would criticize six years later when the Party would fuse with the Lassallians at Gotha. It is impossible to oppose “Lassallism” to “Marxism”, even while recognizing that the latter had provisionally capitulated to the former in 1875. Its alleged affiliation later betrayed by the SPD never existed. The Eisenach Program is, furthermore, fully within the democratic tradition: demands for “political freedom” and a “democratic state”. The influence of the Peoples Party was such that one of its leaders, Sonnemann, a left liberal, persuaded Bebel to adopt the name “Socialist Democratic
Party”, thus leaving the word “worker” out of the party’s title. When Bebel proposed that the word “worker” be included in the name of the party he was defeated by the former followers of Lassalle.

In this sense, the Lassallians were the purest representatives of a specifically, yet limited (see below) working class reformism, in contrast to the “Marxists” who obtained all their inspiration and their power from the democratic movement and from the fear of the liberal bourgeoisie in the non-Prussian states of being dominated by Prussia. The SPD would later combine Statism and democracy, but this dualism would again be manifested in the conflict between an extreme right in favor of State power and a liberal right (Bernstein).

Parliamentary activity soon occupied a preponderant place within the new party. Liebknecht, of course, vehemently declared in 1870: “The Reichstag does not make history and is content with performing a comedy; its members say and do what the director tells them. Should we, therefore, make the Reichstag the center of our activities. . . ? If revolutionaries were not so inept and if the government did not control the elections, it would be possible.” But he did not reject the principle of parliamentarism and only regretted that it played its democratic role so poorly.

The SDAP was a section of the IWA, but, as Engels wrote to Cuno on May 7-8, 1872, “the attitude of the German workers movement in relation to the International has never been very clear. Their relationship has always been purely Platonic. . . .” Between July of 1870 and May of 1871, a minority within the Party (Bebel, Liebknecht) maintained relatively internationalist positions. But one must take the role played by the national question into consideration as a factor of confusion, even in the reflections of Marx and Engels. It is possible that the national question often served as a surrogate for deeper reflection (and sometimes for action). Exaggerating the role played by Russia in the failure of the movements of 1848-1849 allowed them to avoid posing serious questions concerning the effective capabilities of the proletarians and revolutionaries of their time. Similarly, they counted on German unification to help develop the socialist movement. Conversely, they expected French action to undermine political structures: this was true of Liebknecht in regard to the Saxon monarchy.

On July 21, 1870, Liebknecht and Bebel refused to vote for the war budget, which had been accepted by the Lassallians and Fritzche, an ex-Lassallian who became a member and then a parliamentary deputy of the SDAP. But their internationalism was unstable. Liebknecht, at the head of the “Brunswick Committee”, which was composed primarily of ex-Lassallians, declared on July 26: “I must not blame you too much for your patriotic fervor. But you, too, for your part, should make some concessions. Even if you do not agree with the position Bebel and I took in the Reichstag, our disagreement must be overcome at all costs or, in any event, we must prevent it from coming to the attention of the public.” Their internationalist position obviously implied that they should be clear and stand firm against those who upheld the opposing position. The Party’s unity would not be restored again until after the defeat of the French: a French victory could then no longer be feared, and the entire “Marxist” workers movement could once again join in a demand for a peace without annexations (which would also be one
of the centrist positions of 1914-1918, garnering the support of the majority at Zimmerwald in 1915, and would be attacked by the Zimmerwald Left: see Chapter 4).

Bebel and Liebknecht did not have an international point of view, and in this respect they were like everyone else. Their attitude, even when it coincided with Marx’s viewpoint, derived not from international but from national considerations. For them, it was a matter of making alliances with certain parties and social groups in Germany, but different ones from which the Lassallians expected concessions since the latter relied above all on the State. Their dissident attitude towards the war was an extension of their policy of supporting the liberal bourgeoisie and their hostility towards Prussia. Evoking the Commune before the Reichstag in April of 1871, Bebel invited the supporters of the Commune to “act with the greatest moderation”.45

The SPD would speak of a victory over Lassallism: but which elements of Marxism emerged victorious? Above all, the idea of the ultimate victory of socialism, and of the need for an independent political workers organization. But Lassalle was not opposed to these things. Believing in a final victory is not in itself revolutionary: if the tasks of the communist revolution are not clarified, the “transition” to socialism could appear to be a gradual evolution. Lassallism was integrated into the workers movement. In their pure form, the specific contributions of Bebel, Liebknecht and Lassalle each represented a stereotyped tendency from the beginnings of the movement, and fuse when capital distracts the working class. Many signs testify to the persistence of Lassallism until the beginning of the 20th century. One can even speak of an official Lassalle cult.

Liebknecht, in publishing an article by Engels in 1868, deleted the passages critical of Lassalle. In his famous pamphlet Our Goals (1870), Bebel makes few allusions to the IWA, but often quotes Lassalle and employs his arguments. Marx often complained that the Lassallians simultaneously plagiarized and distorted his theories. Marx’s thought was never understood for what it really was. It was always disseminated through a filter, that of Lassalle, in an epoch when Marx’s writings were not widely circulated, and later through the official Social Democratic screen. Militants’ correspondence testifies, at least until the end of the century, to a lack of awareness of the Communist Manifesto. In 1872, the cover of a Party publication reproduced two photographs, of Marx and Lassalle, flanking that of Liebknecht. The History of Social Democracy, a semi-official work written by Mehring, a theoretician of the left, is nonetheless as favorable to Lassalle as to Marx.46 The attack against Lassalle during the 1870s derived primarily from the (self-avowed) anti-Marxist Dühring. Lassalle’s real popularity would persist (even outside the Party) until the War: other idols would then replace him. It is pure illusion to believe that the polemics of the epoch revolved around Marx and were settled in his favor. The progressive penetration of theoretical communism is a legend. Upon Liebknecht’s death (1900), it was Bebel who would lead the Party until 1913. His polemics were of little importance: above all, he wanted to preserve the organization, that is, the one which would prepare the future (ultimately a capitalist future) of Social Democracy.47 Theory became simply an allusive reference, useful or annoying, depending on the circumstances. The Marx-Engels correspondence, published in 1913, was carefully abridged by V. Adler, Bernstein and Bebel, with particular attention to those passages dealing with Lassalle and Liebknecht, whom Marx abused on several
occasions. The movement needed heroes. Mehring denounced this maneuver, and published some of the expurgated passages before the book’s release, although he claimed in 1915 that the book had presented the essentials of Marx and Engels’ correspondence. Riazanov would later guarantee this falsification, but would then regret having done so.

The SDAP combined with the ADAV in 1875 at the Gotha Congress to form the Socialist Workers Party, making many concessions to Lassallism, which were severely criticized by Marx. The legend would have it that this deviation was to be corrected by the creation, in 1890, of the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD), whose Marxist Erfurt Program, written by Kautsky, would be the proof of revolutionary victory. Of course, Marx expressed vigorous reservations concerning the name itself: “What a name: Sozialdemokrat. Why not frankly call it the Proletarian?”, Engels wrote to Marx on November 16, 1864. Marx responded on November 18: “Sozialdemokrat. A bad name. But it is important not to quickly use up all the best names in possible failures.”

It would be more correct to translate this term by social democrat. It effectively designated a movement which accepted and reinforced the democratic scenario (that is, a political form, one State form opposed to others, such as, for example, dictatorship), in order to imbue it with a social content by introducing improvements in working class living conditions. As for the terminology expressing essential questions, the choice of the term Sozialdemokrat made no difference at all, for either the SPD or the most advanced fraction of the bourgeoisie, who also proposed solving “the social question” within the “democratic framework”. Following the SPD’s trajectory from 1890 to 1933, one notes that the SPD always reproached the liberal bourgeoisie for not respecting its own principles, for not going far enough in support of democracy, in a word, for not involving the workers in existing society. Words are not autonomous, and bear the meaning given them by whoever uses them. Those who formed the Communist League wanted to use this term to insist upon the nature of the movement of which they were a part: a movement for the collective use and enjoyment of wealth. Babeuf spoke of “the common happiness”. Social democracy designates no more than a reorganization, a realignment of private property within society, a socialization of the wealth hitherto distributed between the State and Business by means of an equitable distribution of power in favor of all social groups: adding equality to freedom, real rights to formal liberties, a social content to political democracy, a step forward in the destiny of the workers towards universal suffrage: this is the real program of the SPD. The general political goals defined at Erfurt differed little from those at Gotha. The evolution of the German workers movement up to 1918 consists of the difficult rupture of an unnatural (from the revolutionary point of view) but historically inevitable alliance between reformism and the communist movement. But the road taken in common is more than just a simple journey. It profoundly affected the revolutionaries and created an anti-revolutionary organization anchored in reality and supported by the majority of the workers. The opposition movements which arose were ambiguous and did not question, unlike what took place in other countries and even in Germany before the war, the function of Social Democracy itself. The German Left was relatively late in forming, considering the importance of this country (see Chapter 1): once constituted, it would not, as elsewhere, go very far.
After Erfurt, the “Jungen” (Youth) group hit the nail on the head with their critiques of the Party’s reformist character and its acceptance of official institutions (parliament). Their critiques were too much like those of the anarchists for Engels to refrain from being one of their most vehement opponents. He nonetheless took little notice of the kernel of truth which they contained. In reality, “anarchism”, just like “Marxism”, did not exist as an organized and unified current. A prisoner of its time, it embraced a series of reactions to the capitalist stagnation of the Second International. Anarchism is one of the great architects of the construction of the modern trade union movement after the end of the 1800s: the trade unionism which anarchism inspired would prove to be as non-revolutionary as that of the “Marxists” (see Chapter 9). Only a minority with a Marxist background (including the German Left) would prove to be capable of trying to derive a perspective for the future after 1914.

Engels harbored vast illusions when he wrote to Lafargue on June 11, 1869: “Now that we have won, we have proved to the world that almost all European socialists are Marxists.”51 The following year, the English, Belgian and German socialists were tempted to attend the congress of the Possibilists (with P. Brousse, supporters of achieving what is possible within capitalism). Engels went so far as to recommend unity at any price, convinced that such a development would by itself eliminate opportunism (see his letter of August 9, 1890).52 This is why he scorned the “Jungen”.53 For Marx and Engels, parties like the SPD, despite their deficiencies, represented the “real” workers movement, as opposed to the anarchist groups whom they compared to religious sects. This is why they both accepted parliamentary action without exposing its effects.

Engels mistakenly assimilated universal suffrage with the “index which allows one to measure the maturity of the working class. It can only be that, and will never be anything but that in today’s State”.54 The representative system is much more than that and as capital blocks any other kind of community not derived from the capital relation it becomes correspondingly more important. Elections and political life become one of the privileged sites in which one rediscovers a sense of community. Parliamentarism is not merely a “barometer of class struggle”: it does not limit itself to measuring, it deforms what it measures, and itself intervenes with all of its weight in the “class struggle” in order to bring the latter to an end. It is not enough to say that parliamentarism was not revolutionary after 191455: one must also see its nefarious role even before 1914, and admit that Marx, Engels and after them almost the entire left wing of the Second International did not take this into account.

Engels’ tactic also rests upon the idea that universal suffrage would not be easily granted in Prussia, where the workers movement was barely tolerated.56 Thus, one could do revolutionary work even on the parliamentary terrain, since Prussia was opposed to democracy. This view underestimated the ability of capitalist society to become democratic, and to keep the workers on this terrain to the detriment of the proletarian social movement. The policy of the Prussian State in regards to the workers movement was not distinguished by a confused rejection of toleration, but by integration, which had begun with Lassalle.
Reformism and the Radical Response prior to 1914

It would be an excessive distortion of the facts to consider the SPD’s evolution until the end of the 19th century from the perspective of the “revisionist” dispute which began around 1890 involving Bernstein, the only honest reformist, or Vollmar, the Bavarian socialist. The latter, a militant in a largely agricultural, only slightly industrialized region, advocated doctrinal softening and flexibility in electoral tactics in order not to alienate the peasants and middle classes. This was not the more important sort of revisionism from the capitalist point of view. In reality, the most dangerous reformism (for the revolution) came from the workers (trade union) leaders in the large industrial regions. These leaders applied the second (reformist) part of the Erfurt Program, abandoning the measures enumerated in the first part which can be summarized as follows: capitalist socialization of wealth and production. This Program did not say that the privileged agent of this evolution would be the State, but neither was anything clearly stated on this topic, so the road was still open. Lassallian Statism again comes to the fore, not to develop cooperatives, but to assure society’s democratization. Since the years when Bismarck prohibited the socialist party, from 1880-1890, a system of social services was established which would link the workers to the State. Weimar would later systematically develop a mixed economy (associating State and private capital) advocated by the ADGB and the SPD, the logical outcome of the socialization defined—or, which is the same thing, badly defined—at Erfurt.

At first, from about 1869 to 1890, the trade unions were a means of recruitment for the Party, which was illegal from 1872 to 1890. After 1890, the political and trade union organizations enjoyed a situation of independent coexistence. In 1906, the trade unions imposed their right to veto any important decision of the SPD. But their mutual evolution did not proceed without problems. Radical elements often dominated local trade union coordinating bodies and local sections. The latter, comparable to the departmental unions of the French CGT, frequently opposed the emergence of a layer of permanent salaried officials, which took place wherever trade unions existed. The radicals denounced tendencies towards conciliation, and opposed collective bargaining. In 1896, a local section of the Leipzig printers union was excluded from its chapter for having signed a collective labor contract. The dispute was brought before the trade union congress, which pronounced in favor of collective bargaining agreements, and excluded the Leipzig central from the national trade union. At the same time, centralization—an indispensable means of struggle in negotiations over labor power—deprived the local centrals of their means of action and pressure, especially financial ones. Trade union structure lagged behind industrial development. In Hamburg, while industrial trade unions embraced more than 40% of the ADGB’s members, only 9 out of 52 local union leaders came from these unions, which had almost no managerial positions. The ADGB hesitated to form industrial federations, preferring instead to group trade unions together locally or regionally by trade.

The growth of the trade unions, which combined, in 1892, in the General Trade Union Commission, and later in the ADGB in 1900, was accompanied by a growing rivalry with the SPD. Like the Bavarians, the trade unions found the revolutionary ideology of the Party to be an obstacle to their growth. The Party, on the other hand, needed this
ideology to win over those elements which more or less aspired to social change, as well as to preserve its left wing. The trade unions supported the “revisionists” (who loudly proclaimed what the Party was actually doing), and the “orthodox” leaders forged a revolutionary image at little expense, appearing to be defenders of the revolutionary tradition. There was a struggle between these two organizations, whose interests were not convergent: this disagreement would reappear in the Weimar republic and last until just after the Nazi seizure of power. The interest of the trade unions was to accept any political regime which would guarantee their role as mediators. The Party’s interest was to modify the political system by promoting a type of State in which it could have a place. These two perspectives and the respective interests of the two bureaucratic layers which defended them frequently converged, but not always. The theory of the “two pillars” (trade union and Party) which constituted the workers movement only served to conceal a struggle for influence.

The bureaucratization of the Party was also accompanied by a certain amount of resistance and only really got underway after 1900. The most numerous permanent officials were not in the Party, but in its satellite organizations: in 1914, there were 4,100 permanent officials in the SPD and the ADGB, but in 1912 there were 7,100 in workers cooperatives. The organization had to be organized: to sustain workers activities, certain commercial enterprises were necessary. Auer had said, in 1890: “the Party cannot live on dues; we need to make profits from our Press.” A Saxon delegate to the 1894 Congress denounced the capitalist nature of the Party: “There are enterprises which employ between 50 and 100 workers. When these workers wanted to take the First of May off from work, the social democratic management, among whom were various orators who spoke at the rallies on the First of May, docked their pay.” The Party had to be profitable.

One of the reasons adduced by the German Left in favor of a purely working class organization was the enormous weight acquired within the SPD by certain rural groups or small cities which played a role in the Party which was totally disproportionate to their real importance. The middle classes of medium-sized and even some small cities were over-represented within the Party’s organizational apparatus and its leadership. In 1912, at the Party’s Congress in the State of Württemberg, 17,000 socialist residents of the city were represented by 90 delegates; 5,000 socialists who lived outside the city sent 224 delegates. The German Left would also incorporate a reaction—a healthy one but one which often missed the point—against the sociological weight of non-proletarian social layers. The fear of the peasants, expressed theoretically by Gorter in numerous works, also expressed the desire of the revolutionary movement in the large urban centers to not be drowned out by concessions made by the socialists to those who lived in an environment which was less polarized around opposed interests. Nonetheless, numbers do not constitute a criterion for radical expression and autonomy: in the large organizations, in which the many degrees of officialdom between the rank and file and the leadership are most varied, the influence of the militants on the leaders was more limited.
“National Socialism” was progressively confirmed as the dominant characteristic of the SPD. Concerning Russia, Marx’s legacy was distorted, having been reduced to a mixture of pacifist internationalism and Russophobia, together with the concept of popular militias. This characteristic would come to be found in the weakness of Karl Liebknecht’s (W. Liebknecht’s son) anti-militarist activity before and during the war. Father and son were both victims of militarism, the former sometimes yielding to it, the latter believing that one could be victorious by concentrating on it. It was incorrect to maintain that militarism was “the principle support of capitalism”. Radical anti-militarism is revolutionary but it does not positively frame the question. It understood that the army was among the principle enemies of the revolution, without seeing the social tasks of the revolution which are also indispensable means of struggle against the army. These overlooked connections would be put to the test in January 1919 (see Chapter 7).

The socialist leaders severely condemned the anti-militarism of some SPD members, thereby revealing their patriotism. W. Liebknecht, in a debate with D. Nieuwenhuis in Zurich in 1893 (see Chapter 3), denied that one could “fight against the Moloch of militarism by convincing isolated individuals, provoking puerile uprisings in the barracks . . . which is false, but tirelessly advocated. We must establish our doctrine in the army. When the masses become socialists, then the time of militarism will have come to an end (prolonged applause)”. To the false “anarchist” radicalism then advocated by G. Hervé, he opposed a gradualism which retained nothing of “Marxism” but what he found useful, along with, among other things, a partial critique of anarchism. An in-depth critique would have presupposed the self-critique of “Marxism” and the recognition of its crisis. At the 1906 Mannheim Congress, Bebel addressed the issue of Belgian anti-militarism: “An insignificant country, whose army cannot compare with Prussian military organization. The same thing is happening in France. Anti-militarism is spreading there, after only two years (Karl Liebknecht interrupts him: they have done quite well!) . . . No! That is overly-biased and exaggerated! (Vigorous applause).” Bebel went on to describe the anticipated “fever which would seize control of the masses” in case of war, excluding any possibility of revolutionary action in such circumstances. In 1907, he defended the popular militia as the best means to defend the country, citing, in defense of his position, the opinions of certain generals. Militias are excellent for the youth; they evoke the Japanese schools for martial arts, in which “young people contend with so much ardor and courage . . . that all of Europe should adopt this athletic training regime for the defenders of empire”. The SPD thus proposed total mobilization and enlistment of youth: “fascism” would realize these goals. Noske declared that the social democrats would defend Germany “with as much determination as any of the gentlemen occupying benches on the right of the Assembly,” as long as reforms are conceded to them. The pact is clear.

The socialist youth movement was one of the focal points of opposition. It was not a creation of the Party. Groups of young people formed around 1904-1906, sometimes with the assistance of Party members. Berlin apprentices organized against their masters and thus constituted the nucleus, and the movement later spread to other northern cities. Persecuted by the police, they had 4,000 members in 1907. The social
democratic youth in Northern Germany, organized in the Union of Free Youth Organizations, were undoubtedly the first groups to experience clandestinity in the 20th century, at a time when the whole socialist movement was tolerated and even admired by capital. The social democratic youth experienced something of the spirit of the socialist movement which had been persecuted until approximately 1890, and this experience would prove useful. In the south the opposition groups were more working class, more democratic, and less radical, but still anti-militarist, having been influenced by, among other groups, the Young Belgian Guards, which arose after 1905. C. Zetkin, a teacher, elaborated a concept of education which was a synthesis of Marxism and the new educational methods. Responding to pressure from the trade unions, the SPD began to take control of the youth groups between 1906 and 1908.

From their inception, it was perceived that the great mass movements of 1905 in Poland and Russia presented a new means of action, a new method of agitation, and a new form for an old content. It was still a question, even for the left, of exerting pressure on the State but not of destroying it (see Chapter 3). The majority supported the parliamentary weapon; the minority preferred the extra-parliamentary weapon. “Mass action” and “mass strike” do not correspond to the revolutionary syndicalist thesis of the expropriatory “general strike” which was conceived in the first place as a rehearsal for the revolution and later as the form of the revolution itself, with the trade unions taking over production. Mass action is not essentially revolutionary. It could be a means of reformist pressure in a country where parliamentary pressure is not possible because parliamentary democracy does not yet exist. The “general strike” is a kind of economically organized mass action without a political party. For Luxemburg, the “mass strike” is mass action outside of traditional (economic and political) organizations, which compels the latter to take action. For the center (Kautsky), mass action is a self-generated adaptation of the movement at the peak of its struggles, and not a means of radical action. The mass strike had already been utilized in Belgium and Austria to obtain universal suffrage, just as mass demonstrations would later be used, in Germany in 1918, to obtain parliamentary democracy. The Luxemburgist left would privilege the dynamic relation of masses-party (the one influencing the other) and the working class-State relation (in which the working class is the sum of the relation, mass + party), above the destruction of the State, without providing a clear definition of the Party.

After the Hamburg Congress (1908), the Left supported the youth movement and in turn received important assistance from the youth movement. The position of the youth in the Party became a touchstone of the conflict between revisionists and radicals. In almost every place where a youth group existed, the Party section took its side against the central Party apparatus. As in the question of war, everything ended in compromise. The authority over the youth groups conceded to the local sections allowed the youth groups to pursue their radicalism wherever the sections favored them, even when the Party machine led by Ebert undertook to control them. After 1911 the movement ebbed due to the actions of the State, only to be reborn later during the war.

Behind the surface appearance of adhering to principles, the right—rather than the leadership of the Party—controlled the Party. The SPD added some pseudo-radical
declarations of principle to the programs of action proposed or imposed by the trade unions. The “Party” structure was not the sole cause of the SPD’s degeneration, which was promoted by the trade unions. The center backed the right and made use of the left for doctrinal support (without any impact on the policies it pursued), even referring to the left in its anti-revisionist struggle. The existence of revolutionary tendencies within an utterly reformist organization is not in itself a positive sign. These tendencies served to provide the organization with a dynamic and credibility for radical working class groups and in those situations where revolutionary ideology was necessary. As long as they did not break with the organization, and as long as they did not understand that they did not have to conquer or submit to the organization, but to destroy it, these revolutionary tendencies strengthened the organization. Korsch would later write that Luxemburg (and, elsewhere in the Second International, Lenin) only attacked the theory but not the practice of social democracy, thus strengthening it contrary to her own intentions.69

In 1908 the Party’s school, created in 1905 to train functionaries for the SPD and the ADGB, became the target of revisionist attacks (by Eisner, among others), but continued to be dominated by the Left (Luxemburg, Mehring). Its function was ambiguous. On the one hand, it preserved a tradition of revolutionary theory and thus prepared for the future. On the other hand, it preserved the idea of a party which was still concerned with revolutionary theory. As for the trade unions, they settled the matter by sending no more students to the Party’s school.

In a letter to Kautsky dated November 8, 1884, Engels linked the radical German workers movement to the youth and to the backwardness of German capitalism: “It is curious, that what is of most help to our cause is Germany’s industrial backwardness. In England and France, the transition to industrialization is almost over. The living conditions of the proletariat have already been stabilized.”

This situation was reversed by the rise of German capitalism: “the golden chain to which the capitalist has bound wage labor and which it never ceases to forge, has now grown long enough to allow for a relaxation of some of its tension.”70

The theme of the integration of the workers movement into established society was debated for the first time during this epoch: after 1918, people would speak of “bourgeoisification” and “ossification”. Max Weber attributed this trend to “the growing number of people who have an interest in this kind of social promotion and its material advantages.” “One could ask who has more to lose by it: bourgeois society or social democracy? In my opinion, I believe that social democracy has more to lose, and more particularly those among its adherents who are the bearers of revolutionary ideology.” He viewed social democracy as “a State within a State”.71 In 1918, M. Weber would render homage to the qualities of order and discipline which the German people, drilled by social democracy, could exhibit, as his own experience with a local workers and soldiers council demonstrated. R. Michels, who abandoned social democracy for revolutionary syndicalism, denounced the SPD’s bureaucratization: 72 for some workers the labor bureaucracy constituted the social promotion which the church at one time offered certain peasants. Weber lamented that the bourgeoisie preserved the
revolutionary forces within the workers movement due to its refusal to concede full freedom of activity (particularly by way of universal suffrage) to social democracy: one would then see, he said, how it is not social democracy which will conquer the State, but that it will be the State which will conquer social democracy.

The bureaucratic centralization of the SPD gave rise at times to a vigorous reaction, above all in the urban centers where tendencies developed in opposition to the leadership. In opposition to reformism it was anti-Statist; in opposition to the suffocation of internal democracy it wanted a completely democratic party structure. Kautsky condemned “the rebel’s impatience” which, according to him, inspired the excessive radicalism of 1907. The left gradually exposed the center, attacking its opportunism, for example, at the Chemnitz Congress of 1912. But the Party’s evolution was quite coherent. It was the Left which could be accused of opportunism for struggling each day against reformism without attacking it in its continuity and its profound logic. One of the reasons why the Left failed to clarify this point was an insufficient understanding of the crisis-revolution relation. Convinced that a war was imminent, it expected the war would bring about a mass uprising. At the end of the war, the Left would expect, this time as a result of the political and social crisis engendered by the war, a revolution which it would still improvidently conceive of as an automatic development. Luxemburg had often set out her concept of organization as an irresistible flood: in a letter dated February 17, 1904 to H. Roland-Holst she stated that opportunism thrives in “stagnant waters” and dies “all by itself” in a current. The idea of the crisis of capitalism facilitated the avoidance of a serious investigation of questions concerning the critical situation of the working class in modern capitalism, particularly in relation to the function of the organized workers movement. Instead of relying on the shock of a serious disturbance (war, crisis), it was necessary to begin by breaking with their own organization. Levi was right, in 1930, when he said that after 1903 there was no radical presence, outside of “a tiny sect”, which could maintain theoretical coherence and assist in the reconstruction of a communist organization. Judging that the imperialist phase ruled out the satisfaction of reforms which had previously been possible, the Left also tended to ignore the considerable role played by reforms conceded to one part of the working class.

In 1913, a strike of shipyard workers in Hamburg, which was not supported by the trade unions, was met by a lockout and ended in defeat; more than 1,000 workers were dismissed. The rank and file was very much opposed to its leaders. The metal workers trade union petitioned for decision-making autonomy and control of the union funds by the regional offices. Once again, the same demand for democratic organizations crops up, which would facilitate the rapid growth of revolutionary syndicalism as well as the USPD after 1918 (see Chapters IV and IX). The theoretical and organizational weakness of the Left favored the focusing of discontent on partial goals capable of being integrated by the renovated classical workers movement. On the eve of 1914, Party and trade union leaders were aware of the malaise which threatened their organizations. They knew that there was a rejection of the traditional structures and a tendency towards spontaneous and local actions. The rank and file distrusted both the central apparatus as well as large movements coordinated from above, whose meaning
they did not understand. Their retreat to localism was a half-answer to the problem, and this tendency, which was further stimulated by the war and the post-1918 struggles, was to have the gravest consequences.

The trade unions occasionally had to yield in order to maintain their rule over their organizations. This was an era of trade union splits and a kind of nostalgic longing for the epoch when the movement had not yet been centralized. In the textile, metal working and painting trades, local trade unions arose which deliberately emphasized workers autonomy.77 The “shop stewards” who made their appearance during the war, were a new form of this workers autonomy (see Chapter 4). The SPD excluded those of its members who participated in these trade unions. The “Junger”, whom the Party had striven to keep apolitical by means of recreational activities, also clashed with their Party guardians. A kind of nostalgia was born among the leading circles of the Party. The Party found itself between two phases, after the construction and before the management of the State. The Jena Congress (1913) prefigured the “Community of Labor” created in 1916 by the centrist opposition in the Party’s leadership (see Chapter 4).

The image of the workers movement on the eve of the war was a study in contrasts. In Hamburg, Bebel’s home city, the model of socialist organization in Germany, the trade unions of skilled workers were predominant, although the local organizations exercised considerable influence, and a minority launched “unofficial” strikes. The trade union opposition was especially active among longshoremen and in the transport industry. Everyone who could not find work elsewhere came to the port for jobs.78 Even before 1914 a minority knew quite well that they could expect nothing from the trade union offices. Their reaction would prove to be one of the hallmarks of the post-1918 movement, prolonging the already long-standing antagonism between the socialist left and the trade unions. In Saxony (an industrial region as important as the Ruhr or Upper Silesia), the army intervened in a 1910 strike in the Mansfield mining region. The Halle district was dominated by the SPD left since 1913: it was to be excluded in 1916.79 If the SPD and the ADGB represented powerful conservative forces, it is nonetheless possible that they underestimated the fissures which appeared in their organizations prior to 1914 and which issued, unfortunately, not in a revolutionary movement fully capable of overthrowing the classical organs of the workers movement, but in some very small and disorganized intermediate groups.

4. Théorie marxiste et tactique révolutionnaire (1913), quoted in Pannekoek et les conseils ouvriers, as well as his 1915 text, summarized in Chapter 4 below. For an English translation of the entire text of Pannekoek’s Marxist Theory and


15. Reichard, pp. 220-221.

16. Ibid., p. 22.


25. For the lack of another term we use this formulation, but without granting it all the implications which it possesses in Bordiga (Cf., for example, Les révolutions multiples).


27. Ibid., pp. 95-97.

28. Ibid., p. 98.

29. Ibid., p. 100.

30. Ibid., pp. 171-172.
31. Ibid., p. 143.
34. Reichard, pp. 218-19.
36. Ibid., p. 49.
37. Ibid., p. 103.
38. Ibid., p. 132-33.
39. Ibid., pp. 172-173.
40. Ibid., p. 173.
43. Morgan: p. 208.
44. Ibid., p. 211.
45. Ibid., p. 216.
46. Ibid., pp. 234, et seq.
53. Ibid., p. 260.
55. As the Italian Left does, for example, in its 1945 Theses, published in Invariance, No. 9.
56. Écrits militaires, p. 483.
57. Hunt: p. 150.
58. Comfort: Chapter V.
60. Marks.
61. Ibid., p. 349.
62. Ibid., pp. 351-352.
64. Schorske: p. 144.
66. W. Walling: The Socialists and the War, New York, Holt, 1915, p. 46. Engels committed the same error in regard to the “fragmentation of militarism from within” by virtue of the presence of a large number of socialists in the army.
67. Ibid., p. 76.
68. Ibid., p. 77.
72. In his book, Political Parties. See his earlier article quoted by Schorske, Chapter V.
73. Schorske: p. 185.
74. Ibid., pp. 32-33.
77. Ibid., p. 261.
78. Comfort: Chapter V.