

It was the calendar which spurred the writing of this study. Published first in 1889 as a series of articles in *Die Neue Zeit*, it was republished as a pamphlet for the hundredth anniversary of the beginning of the Great Revolution with the title, *Les antagonismes de classes en 1789*. The occasion suggested the title, but once that had passed, it was no longer well-adapted to the object of this essay, which is not limited to the year 1789, but covers the whole duration of the Revolution. I have thus modified it for this new edition without changing the contents.

The goal which I pursued twenty years ago writing these pages is, sadly, still relevant today: it meant to counter a trivial interpretation of historical materialism, a vulgar Marxism which held sway almost everywhere at that time.

When *Die Neue Zeit* was founded in 1883, the materialist conception of history, and more generally Marxist theory, despite the Communist Manifesto and Engels' *Anti-Duhring*, was again very marginal and poorly understood, even in socialist circles. This was very clear in the scientific analysis of German social-democracy of 1877, where nothing suggested these ideas even existed. In 1889, on the other hand, this idea was not only imposed in German social-democracy but in all of international social-democracy. Engels and his German friends had contributed greatly in *Sozialdemokrat* and in *Neue Zeit*, and with the same efficacy, Guesde and Lafargue had done the same in the Latin countries, and Axelrod and Plekhanov in the Slavic countries.

Nonetheless, the conversion to Marxism of the young generations of intellectual circles of the party had been too abrupt, too hasty, and among the very numerous new adepts, it lacked a real understanding of this theory. If we want to absorb Marxism in all its dimensions, if, beyond commitment to class struggle on the field of struggle, it is also a matter of achieving a fully independent theory in the field of knowledge, then we must rupture definitively with the modes of thinking of traditional science and have enough familiarity with different disciplines to rid ourselves of the crutches of bourgeois science. Wanting to work on the basis of Marxism without satisfying

these conditions means exposing oneself to the risk of falling into a vulgar Marxism which can, indeed, be enough for those who want to popularize what Marx and Engels have already discovered, but which is condemned to fail if we leave the paths already trod.

For this vulgar Marxism, widespread by 1889, knowing that the evolution of societies is the product of class struggle and that socialist society emerges from the struggle between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat is enough to give the keys to wisdom. Countering this vulgar Marxism, guarding against the danger that Marxism is reduced to a ready-made formula and a simple cliché, such was the assigned task of this study between other works. We wanted to show how enriched the knowledge of the facts becomes when we apply the principle of class struggle to history, but also cast a light on the number of problems which ensue. In this we wanted to curb a tendency to sugar-coat, not only the theory, but also the practise of class struggle, by showing that socialist politics should not be content to merely point out the contradiction between capital and labor, but must also go through the social organism with a fine comb, given that, subject to this fundamental contradiction, there are of course other less important ones in society which cannot be ignored, because understanding and using them can be important to proletarian politics and can render them more effective.

The introduction gives some indication of the goals which I pursued in the face of vulgar Marxism. At this moment there is no reason to proceed in a more radical way.

Still, we find that at the time this study was published, the revolt had already ripened of a part of vulgar Marxists against Marxism, the revolt of the "youngs" in Germany, of Domela Nieuwenhuis and Cornelissen in Holland, which thought to defend the theory of class struggle even against Engels himself, whom they accused of not having well understood Marx.

After the death of Engels, these elements went even further, and this evolution received the reinforcement of other vulgar Marxists. In a time of prosperity where the authorities had a tolerant attitude, they found fault with Marxism itself as they understood it, and attacked even the vulgar Marxism they once preached as real Marxism, but also Marxism in general, with anarchist and liberal arguments. This was with the approval of those who had rejected Marxism from the start.

In this situation, the priority of Marxists, to the degree that they had not been outflanked by the day-to-day politics, was from then on to clarify and defend that which represented the achievements of Marxism. Since, at the same time, our party was becoming stronger in such proportions as the practical tasks of political and labor organization, journalistic tasks, absorbing the energy of the young generation of intellectuals, we understood that that in this period there remained few available resources to pursue a scientific elaboration of Marxism.

The draft I wrote twenty years ago on the class antagonisms during the Great Revolution sadly has not yet been rendered obsolete by other works.

Such a task should fortunately soon be completed by a work on the French Revolution which H. Cunow is preparing and to which I would like to draw the attention of all readers of my work who want to delve deeper into the subject.

Four generations will soon have been counted since the beginning of the Great Revolution, but this grand event continues to affect our times, and it is impossible to fully understand the class antagonisms without having understood the drama in which they, for the first time without a religious pretense, collided with the greatest violence, and where it was revealed without disguise what are the real classes of bourgeois society. It also revealed that the essence of this social structure is defined by contradictions in class interests, contradictions which inevitably lead to repeated catastrophe. The form and weight of

social tragedies vary as a function of the techniques at work in economy, trade and politics, but they inevitably reproduce as long as the structure of society is made of antagonistic classes.

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Karl Kautsky