

“Without revolutionary theory there can be no revolutionary movement.” Lenin, *What Is To Be Done*

WHY PHILOSOPHY MATTERS: REVOLUTION NOT REFORM

Philosophy is always connected with politics, but the connection of dialectics with revolution is particularly close. This is easy to see in the development of revisionism, that is, the reformism and the rejection of revolution that began in the communist movement in the late 1800s. At that time the communist movement called itself “social democracy.” Social democrats organized for socialism as a stepping-stone to communism, a strategy we now know to be fatally wrong.

As the contradiction between revolutionaries and reformers developed into a definite split in the socialist movement, the term “social democrat” came to be used for the anti-revolutionary side, while the revolutionaries called themselves “communists.” By the time of World War I, the reformists got the upper hand in the large Socialist Party of Germany (SPD), and turned the party into an arm of the German state. The SPD voted for the imperialist war in 1914, helped the government to suppress protest, and helped kill leading communists during the failed revolutions in Germany in 1919.

The best-known statement of the revisionist line came from Eduard Bernstein’s book *The Preconditions of Socialism*, published in 1899. Bernstein was an SPD intellectual, editor of a socialist

newspaper and associate of Frederick Engels until Engels’ death in 1895. His book denied most of what Marx had shown to be the laws of motion of capitalism. He rejected the labor theory of value, and claimed that big economic crises and the concentration of capital in the hands of a few billionaires did not have to happen under capitalism. Instead of revolution, Bernstein said that socialism would be gradually achieved by winning elections, trade union organizing, and the influence of the SPD in the government. These ideas are still typical of social democrats today.

Dialectics and Revolution

Bernstein claimed that dialectics was responsible for the central role of revolution in Marxist politics. He complained that Marxism falsely maintained “the immeasurable creative power of revolutionary political force.” Bernstein said workers’ lives would gradually improve under capitalism so that revolution is unnecessary, but that “Hegelian principles,” that is, dialectics, deny this.

Actually, scientific dialectical analysis of capitalism shows us that its crises never end and its contradictions must become more intense, leading eventually to communist revolution. So revisionists must oppose dialectics, since they oppose

revolution.

Reformism and Idealist Morality

Bernstein and other revisionists wanted a replacement for dialectics, and they picked the idealist morality derived from the 18th-century German philosopher Immanuel Kant. This is the opposite of the materialist morality developed by Marx and Engels. They emphasized that the working class has a “task” or a “calling” that we ought to carry out, overthrowing the capitalist system and reorganizing society as communism. This is an “ideal of the revolutionary tasks laid down for an oppressed class by the material conditions” we live under. Communist moral ideals derive from the needs of the working class oppressed by capitalism, and what we can accomplish by mass mobilization for communism.

The revisionists decided to go “back to Kant” to avoid justifying revolution. According to Kant, morality does not aim at the welfare or happiness of humanity, but only at the rational action of individuals. Kant hoped that God exists and has created the world so that good actions would be rewarded with happiness, but denied that anyone could prove this. He derived morality from the

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abstract principle that a person's will should never contradict itself by willing one kind of action for him- or herself and another kind for other people.

Kant hoped that "reason" would have a non-material influence that would make people follow his principle. His morality tried to appeal to the conscience of the rulers, but he opposed revolution or even public protest. Kant condemned exploitation, but capitalists are certainly not going to get that Kantian message, since exploiting labor is the heart of their system. It would be hard to find a philosophy less helpful to workers' struggles, which explains why Kantianism became popular with revisionists all over Europe, who tried to substitute idealist "moral socialism" for "dialectical socialism," that is, communist revolution.

In the next column we will discuss the communist fight for dialectics.