The Pope of Marxism

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Dave Stocking reviews Karl Kautsky by Dick Geary (Manchester University Press 1987, 146pp, £4.95)

A popularly priced paperback on Karl Kautsky is to be welcomed. It is approaching a decade since Gary P Steenson's Karl Kautsky: Marxism in the Classical Years appeared in an expensive North American university hardback and seven years since Massimo Salvadori's Karl Kautsky and the Socialist Revolution. The ?Lives of the Left? series is widely available.

Steenson?s book is written from an avowedly non-Marxist position seeing in Kautsky?s life?s work the pursuit of a series of noble but unrealistic dreams. Salvadori's book was much more theoretically penetrating and informative.

Given the lack of availability of Kautsky?s classical works in English, The Agrarian Question (untranslated), The Social Revolution, Ethics and the Materialist Conception of History and The Road to Power (long out of print), and the fact that most of Kautsky?s economic writings of the pre-war period remain untranslated, Salvadori's detailed description of his thought was valuable. But it was marred by his fundamentally ?Eurocommunist? standpoint which seeks to minimize the contradictions of Kautsky?s evolution and to stress his lifelong commitment to a peaceful parliamentary road to socialism.

Both Salvador and Steenson aim much of their fire against Lenin and Trotsky?s contention that Kautsky was a ?renegade?. In their view so total is the continuity between the pre-1914 and post 1914 Kautsky that the leaders of the Comintern were simply mistaken about Kautsky. Both were under illusions that were rudely shattered and this explains their bitterness. Trotsky, however, understood Kautsky?s contradictions better than many of his latter day critics. In 1938 writing an obituary for the erstwhile ?Pope of Marxism? he asserted:

?There was a time when Kautsky was in the true sense of the word the teacher who instructed the international proletarian vanguard?. He still held that ?Kautsky undoubtedly leaves behind numerous works of value in the field of Marxian theory which he applied successfully in the most variegated domains?.

Yet Trotsky also maintained that Kautsky showed a life long ?organic opportunism? and that he was ?at bottom a talented commentator?. He also re-asserts that from the opening of the war Kautsky ?behaved uncontestably like a renegade?.

Dick Geary?s book belongs, at bottom to the school of those who see no fundamental contradictions in Kautsky?s development. He accepts in essence the Karl Korsch, Georg Lukacs and Antonio Gramsci critiques of Kautsky whilst defending him against the more unbalanced and unfair attacks. In fact, starting from an admiration of the voluntarist, praxis based humanist approach to socialism Geary found much of these values in Kautsky, especially in his critique of Bolshevism. The Kautsky that Geary most dislikes is the Kautsky who defended, and Die Neue Zeit propagated, historical and dialectical materialism.

Here he takes an unsubstantiated swing at Engels, Lenin, Plekhanov and Trotsky as well as at Kautsky for ?scientism?, for ?mechanical views?, for ?inevitablism? which denigrates the role of human practice, for holding that ?objective laws? govern human society. This theses has gained ground in the 1970s and 1980s and would have us write off the contributions of Engels?especially the pernicous Anti-Duhring and the Dialectics of Nature (?risible? in Geary?s words). In trying to sever the links between Marx and Engels some bits of Marx?s own work have to be lopped off as
scientific or fatalist? most typically the Preface to the Contribution to a Critique of Political Economy. This attack on the objective, scientific and lawful basis of Marxism is not new. In the late sixties and early seventies it was used to justify an interventionist, spontaneist, syndicalist politics. The predecessor of the Cliffite SWP (International Socialists) hailed Lukacs and Korsch for these reasons.

As the children of ?68 aged and grew conservative the anti-scientific critique became a justification for Eurocommunism. Now it is little more than an excuse for academic scepticism, and a sad scepticism, about the working class and its capabilities that pervades Geary?s book. For him the ?Soviet model? has failed because it did not produce the liberated humanity envisaged by Marx and Engels. On the other hand, the ?democratic Marxism? of Kautsky and of his successors has also failed to overthrow capitalism. The decline of the industrial labour force seems to undermine the very subjective agent of socialism. In essence then Kautsky?s life is seen as another ultimately futile and utopian project.

The conclusion that revolutionaries need to draw from Kautsky?s work and career are quite different from Geary?s. Kautsky played and invaluable role in the propagation and explanation of the views of Marx and Engels to a whole generation of revolutionary Social Democrats, not only in Germany but throughout Europe and beyond.

Die Neue Zeit? first as a monthly and then as a weekly? was avidly read by all the serious Marxists of the Second International. Many of these later wrote for it including Plekhanov, Trotsky, and Luxemburg. In this role Kautsky acted as systematizer and popularizer of the theoretical legacy of Marx and Engels.

This popularization was not of course unproblematic Kautsky did indeed have a powerful tendency to stress the objective process whose material basis was the uninterrupted growth and expansion of capitalism, especially German capitalism in the 1880s and 1890s, and the equally relentless growth of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the trade unions. This objective processism was imported undialectically into the sphere of political struggle. It was the basis for Kautsky?s famous optimism? an optimism he maintained to the end of his life but which left him completely at a loss in all decisive moments of struggle when resolute action was needed.

For Kautsky, unlike Marx and Engels and unlike Lenin and Trotsky, was and remained exclusively, a theoretician. He was never a member of the SPD?s central committee or a member of the Reichstag ?fraktion? (i.e. an SPD MP). In ?practical politics? he relied heavily on Engels until 1895 and there after on August Bebel. When the latter died in 1913 he wrote sadly:

?I have lost more than a friend, I lost my strongest support in practical politics. The feeling depresses me not a little that I must now engage in practical politics without being able to follow a leader.?

This attitude of Kautsky?s underlay what Lenin was to stigmatise as the ?servility of the theoretician. ? Whenever Kautsky?s theory touched ?practical politics?. That is the strategy and tactics of the workers? party, Kautsky?s inclination was to provide a theory that defended, and did not disturb, the SPD?s existing ?tried and trusted? tactic namely parliamentary vote gathering.

Kautsky?s role in the creation of the Erfurt Programme reflected this. He wrote the maximum programme and Eduard Bernstein wrote the minimum programme. Both sidestepped Engels? advice to tackle the question of the semi-absolutist Prussian state. Engels had, in 1891, expressed alarm at ?opportunism which is gaining ground? and those who ?now want the party to find the present legal order in Germany adequate for putting through all Party demands by peaceful means?.

Engels wanted the programme to include the demand for a ?one and indivisible? democratic republic. But if legal restrictions in Germany made this impossible then at the very least the programme should call for ?the concentration of all political power in the hands of the peoples representatives? and the breaking up of Prussia. Prussia was 60% of the Reich, with a most authoritarian political system which included a four class voting system that condemned the proletariat to permanent minority status. Engels? the old revolutionary of 1848 and the military adviser to countless
revolutionaries knew well that the moment comes when the weapon of criticism must give way to the criticism of weapons. Kautsky, however, took Marxism's correct emphasis on the objective tendencies of capitalist development and crisis as an alibi for immobilism and non-activity by the workers? party in the class struggle.

This theoretical immobilism was resented in the years to 1899 by the opportunist wing of the party led by Bernstein. After 1910 it earned him the opposition of Rosa Luxemburg and the ?left radicals?. But between these periods Kautsky did exercise a turn to the left. Roughly from 1899 to 1910 he came under pressure from the forces of Russian and Polish Social Democracy. Tardy and unwilling at first to take up the cudgels against Bernstein?s revisionism (indeed there is some reason to believe that he was himself evolving slowly in this direction) he was pulled up short by the vigorous intervention of first Parvs and Plekhanov and then by Rosa Luxemburg with whom he formed a nearly ten year long intellectual partnership.

This was the period of Kautsky?s best works?The Agrarian Question, The Neutralizing of the Trade Unions, Bernstein and the Social Democratic Programme, The Social Revolution, his articles on the Russian Revolution of 1905 and Road to Power. In these works Kautsky defended the revolution against the revisionists and sided with the Bolsheviks on several critical questions. He repeatedly prophecised intensified class struggle and a coming period of wars and revolution. Yet despite all this, Kautsky never concentrated on how to make ?revolutionary use of every revolutionary situation?. (Lenin?s words).

Compare Kautsky?s best writings with those of Lenin, Luxemburg and Trotsky and one comes to the inevitable conclusion that Kautsky was organically a centrist?not fully revolutionary Marxist. Under the advice and pressure of more revolutionary temperaments than his own?those of Rosa Luxemburg, Klara Zetkin and indeed of his wife Luise Ronsperger Kautsky?he responded positively to the revolution in Russia in 1905.

But the last four years before the First World War saw him turn sharply on the revolutionary wing of the party occupying a ?centre? position between the right wing party and union bureaucracy and the left radicals. Here he elaborated his famous ?strategy of attrition?, a servile description of the SPD?s waiting, watching and vote catching practice.

This he counterposed to Luxemburg?s advocacy of mass strike tactics tied to a campaign to win universal suffrage in Prussia.

Kautsky?s behaviour in 1914 was a logical consequence of his ?organic opportunism? but it was nonetheless an act of renegacy. The ?Basle resolution? of the Second International had clearly predicated a fight against war that included voting against war credits and continuing opposition to a war after its outbreak in order to hasten the downfall of capitalism.

Kautsky?s actions over the war credits was deeply symptomatic. On Saturday 1 August 1914 Kautsky and his closest political ally in the SPD Reichstag fraktion, Hugo Haase, drafted a statement for the parliamentary group which refused war credits. When the fraktion made it clear that it was going to vote for credits Kautsky joined a commission to draft the statement of approval.

Kautsky pressed for a statement of principle attacking the ruling classes for causing the war and calling for no annexations or violations of neutrality. This passage was deleted after the direct intervention of the Imperial Foreign Office. The SPD leaders did not take a step in those days without government approval.

Kautsky?s active political life effectively ended on 4 August 1914. After that his extreme right centrism was not really required by the parties of the workers? movement. His theory was not right wing enough for the new SPD leaders since his pacifism was out of tune with the Kaiser?s war needs. Nor could he rejoin the forces opposed to the war. The
October Revolution turned him into a pamphleteer for the counter-revolutionary Mensheviks. But after 1924 he was redundant even on this front and retuned to Vienna where he obviously felt more at home with the Austro-Marxists who combined verbal radicalism with the immobility and bland optimism so dear to Kautsky.

He still wrote and wrote though few people read his works. The ignominious collapse of first German and then Austrian Social democracy involved the Kautsky family in a train of events which led to personal tragedy. Two days after Hitler?s Anschluss in 1938 Karl and Luise fled to Amsterdam. On 17 October, twelve days after his eighty-fourth birthday, Kautsky died. Luise - Rosa Luxemburg?s friend - had a harder fate. Arrested by the Nazis in 1944, at the age of eighty, she was sent to Auschwitz where her son Benedict was also imprisoned. Three months later she perished.

Trotsky?s obituary is perhaps the most balanced assessment of Kautsky?s life?s work, short as it is. Certainly it provides a better revolutionary key to estimating Katusky than the books of Salvadori, Steenson and Geary.

What is still required is a political biography that situates Kautsky firmly in the inner party political struggles and the international class struggle of the years 1890 to 1917. This, together with re-issues or translations of some of his key works, will make a fuller appreciation of Kautsky possible. It will surely not contradict of Trotsky?s measured words of 1938:

?We remember Kautsky as our fomer leader to whom we once owned a good deal, but who separated himself from the proletarian revolution and from whom, consequently, we had to separate ourselves.? 

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