Kautsky on referenda

As a contribution to the debate regarding the tactics to adopt in relation to the European Union referendum, Ben Lewis has translated this piece by Karl Kautsky on ‘Direct Legislation’. Kautsky (1854–1938), known as the ‘pope of Marxism’, was a thinker who, as recent scholarship has underlined, had a profound influence on the theory and practice of Lenin and Bolshevism.

What follows is an abridged version of a chapter from Kautsky’s seminal discussion of Marxism’s attitude towards the state and democracy entitled Parliamentarism, Direct Legislation by the People and Social Democracy, first published in 1893. The pamphlet was reissued in 1911 under the shortened title of Parliamentarism and Democracy.

On both occasions, it visibly impacted on the thinking of European social democracy, though the work was a whole is yet to be translated into English. Its broad ranging historical overview of democracy—from the kingdom through to the German Kaiserreich—will be familiar to many readers, especially through reference to Switzerland.

The pamphlet explains why the German working-class movement pioneered the struggle for representative democracy, as outlined in the political demands of the Social Democratic Party of Germany’s Erfurt programme, which was adopted in 1891. Kautsky’s fundamental point of departure is to defend the assertion he made in his enormously influential commentary on the Erfurt programme (known in English under the title of savagely abridged—translation, The class struggle),

direct democracy by the people cannot, alone in all ambiguous cases—reader parliament may here or there, at best, function alongside parliament: in order to correct it in individual cases. It is absolutely impossible for direct legislation to take care of the whole of the state’s legislation and its just as impossible for it to oversee the state administration, if necessary to guide it. For as long as the modern large state exists, the focus of political activity will always lie in parliament.

At first glance, reprinting this piece may seem like a somewhat strange exercise when, for example, does a text originally written in 1893 have to offer to the debate around the nature of the June 23 vote? What follows is obviously not a discussion of the question of European unity internationalism versus nationalism or anything of the sort. Nonetheless, some of Kautsky’s arguments can perhaps help modern-day Marxists to take a step back from the reactionary political circus that is the referendum campaign and to think more thoroughly about the role of referenda and direct democracy, the nature of political parties and parliament and how all of these fit into the working-class project as the communist movement puts it—in the battle of democracy.

Not only does Kautsky discuss referenda, especially through reference to Switzerland, he underlines the central point that the strength of Marxism political parties is not in this or that particular demand, be it action in isolation, but rather the totality of practical demands and the final aims contained in its programme.

As a standup: quote Karl Marx: “Enlightenment is a necessary condition for any given vote, without thinking about the broader socio-political context.

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