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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’s Bolsheviks



Karl Kautsky: Marxist pope

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What follows is an edited 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.¹ Though the work as a whole is yet to be translated into English, its broad-ranging historical overview of democracy - from the Iroquois through to the German *Kaiserreich* - will be familiar to many readers.

The pamphlet explains why the German working class must pioneer 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 its - savagely abridged - translation, *The class struggle*):

Direct legislation by the people cannot, at least in a large modern state ... render parliament superfluous: at best it can operate 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 it is just as impossible for it to oversee the state administration or, if necessary, to guide it. For as long as the modern large state exists, the focus of political activity will always lie in its parliament.

At first glance, reprinting this piece may seem like a somewhat strange exercise: what, 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’s project - as *The communist manifesto* puts it - to “win the battle of democracy”. Not only does Kautsky discuss referenda, especially through reference to Switzerland: he underlines the central point that the strength of Marxist political parties lies not in this or that particular demand, tactic or action in isolation, but rather “the totality of its practical demands” and the final aims contained in its programme.

For this reason alone, Kautsky argues, from the standpoint of working class politics referenda are to be seen as highly problematic - as is taking at face value the two ‘options’ on offer in any given vote, without thinking about the broader socio-political context.

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