

## OLLI Lecture

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### “Socialism”

It's hard to miss this appellation today. You find it on bumper stickers all over the country as some accuse President Obama of being a socialist, especially in his proposals for health care reform. There are worse appellations: communist, for example. I recently heard that accusation of the President at a gas station in Dillsburg, Pennsylvania.

- Tell Dillsburg story

We have a profound confusion in this country about what communism and socialism are. I'd like to begin today's comments on both topics with the following lengthy quotation from Harry Laidler's History of Socialism, p 3. He wrote:

*For thousands of years those in control of political...power in the nations of the world used that power to oppress the weak. For thousands of years, under every kind of...society, the great mass of the world's burden bearers were doomed to lives of poverty and want, while the few lived in luxury. The few declared the wars; the many went forth to battle and to death. The few made the laws, told the many under what conditions they should labor, what rewards they should obtain for that labor, what they should think, what they should believe. Until comparatively recent times, except for occasional rebellions, the many suffered in silence and obeyed.*

*And for these thousands of years, prophets and dreamers of the world—some from the heart of the common people, some from the privileged classes of society—agonized over this tyranny, this oppression, this injustice. They saw its results in the warped and starved and slavish lives of the multitudes; in the corrupt, the profligate, the arrogant lives of the few. Their hearts went out to the people in their suffering, their wrath to the oppressor. They contrasted the bitter realities of the present with a possible future where justice and brotherhood in the*

*affairs of men would at last prevail. Some of the prophets appeared before the rulers of society, calling them to repentance and renunciation. Others made their appeal primarily to the common people, urging that they secure control of this sorry scheme of things, and transform it into a nobler social order.*

Today, I'm not going to talk about the Prophet Amos, Plato's Republic, or Thomas More's Utopia. These voices spoke to a pre-industrial societies whose economies were based on agriculture. Socialism, as a voice of protest against injustice, doesn't really appear until families flock to the cities and take up labor in factories.

There had been lots of communists, however, including the early Christian communities who believed in shared property. Shared community property was a characteristic of medieval Europe and elsewhere on the planet, where the "commons" provided life-saving resources for peasants. Then came the notion that land was not just a community resource but that agriculture could be a source of individual wealth. Fences were erected over the common lands; legal protections of private property enforced by the State; and thousands driven into miserable towns and cities and starved.

Protest against this development was soon to develop, at first among intellectuals. In England we recognize it amongst the "Levelers" in Cromwell's army and later in the Romantic Movement in literature, which idealized the nation's rural past. Similarly in Germany, writers like Heine, Goethe, and Herder eulogized the world that was passing. But passing it was, and in 1848 the protest attracted some of the finest pens in Europe. We've already mentioned Karl Marx's 1848 pamphlet, "The Communist Manifesto," which only a few read. More importantly was the work of Louis Blanc (1813-1882), the author of Organisation du Travail (1840) in which he urged the establishment of "social workshops" for the unemployed, paid for by the state. So influential was he that in 1848 he was elected to the provisional government and appointed Minister of Labor and Progress after the downfall of the Orleanist government. His ideas implemented as "national workshops," which eventually enrolled 200,000 unemployed workers. Administering this program, unfortunately, was one of his

political opponents and the workshopists were publicly assigned to digging holes and filling them in; all in the name Louis Blanc. He was forced into exile when Louis Napoleon was elected president of the Republic in 1849.

But even Louis Napoleon had been influenced by socialist thought. He was acquainted with the work of Count Henri de Saint-Simon (1760-1825), a veteran of both the American and French revolutions and the author of such volumes as The Industrial System, the Catechism of Industry, and The New Christianity. In these tomes, Saint-Simon recognized that a new form of society was emerging—an industrial one. He urged that industrial wealth be made state-owned and that the state should play an active role in the distribution and investment of that wealth. Saint-Simon proposed to assign that role to the captains of industry, who would hold the highest offices in the state. Louis Napoleon captured some of these ideas in his Napoleonic Ideas and his later Extinction of Poverty but he never surrendered the power of the state to the industrialists; instead, he implemented an activist role for government that far exceeded anything in French history. Some called him “the socialist Emperor” For example:

- In 1864 he endorsed the legalization of labor unions in France.
- He launched a major effort at public works, especially in Paris, by assigning the engineer Baron George Haussman (1809-1891) to reconfigure the city. The results of Haussman’s efforts were spectacular and endure to this day; *e. g.*, the great boulevards, the Bois de Boulogne, the Paris Opera, the Luxembourg Palace and Gardens, even the city’s vast sewer system.
- He created the *Credit Mobilier*, a publicly-supported bank that sold shares to individuals and, using that capital, financed long-term investments seen as advantageous to the state.
- He instituted the legal foundations of the welfare state, but on a far more modest level than what Bismarck would create on the other side of the Rhine.

Louis Napoleon’s legalization of labor unions was a pioneering effort in what was to become a major international development—the organization of industrial workers into associations designed to negotiate with the owners of capital to

improve their lot and to influence government to act on their behalf. As early as 1825 in England their existence was legalized (although strikes remained illegal for another half century). They won the right to vote in parliamentary elections in 1867 from Disraeli's Tory government. As industrialization spread, so too did the power of organized labor. The English industrialist/socialist Robert Owen (1771-1858) had urged workers to form one big union to facilitate their negotiations. Instead most preferred organizing on the basis of their various trades: ironworkers, railway workers, even cigarmakers, etc. In these instances, the idea was not to overthrow the state but to use that instrument to improve working conditions and the quality of their lives. It proved to be particularly successful in the leading industrial nation, Great Britain.

Not everyone agreed with this approach to labor, however. Charles Fourier (1772-1837) so believed in the inevitability of progress that in his The New Industrial and Social World (1829) he insisted that capitalists and laborers would soon completely reorganize society where men and women would come together in commonly-owned *phalansteries* where food would be prepared in a common kitchen, children reared by the community, and productivity would vastly increase. Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (1809-1865) also cared little for the incremental approach of the trade unions. In his 1840 work, Qu'est-ce que la Propriété?, he answered his own question by denouncing it as theft. In its place he proposed a vast state-operated bank that would extend credit to everyone on the basis of their good ideas for improving productivity and creating yet more common wealth. You may find these conclusions a little odd, but Proudhon's work moved Leon Tolstoy to write War and Peace. The Frenchman had little patience for the detailed prognostications of Saint-Simon and Fourier, whom he termed "Utopians."

Karl Marx agreed with him on that point, if nothing else. Originally he was a devoted opponent of the authoritarian Prussian state whose police chased him into exile. It was early in this period that he met Friedrich Engels (1820-1895), another young Prussian revolutionary and they formed a lifelong collaboration. They were an odd couple: Marx, the impoverished academic; Engels, the son of a wealthy German manufacturer, who supported Marx financially for much of his

adult life. Without that support, Marx might not ever have finished his three-volume masterpiece, Das Kapital, the first of which appeared in 1867.

For socialists, it was a *tour de force* linking previous socialist thought to vast historical forces, British economic thought, and German philosophy. The author sought assiduously to avoid “utopian” thinking and spent most of his time describing how socialism had evolved out of history and would inevitably replace industrial capitalism with collectively owned industrial wealth as a result of a revolution of the proletariat. At the risk of being glib, I would summarize his analysis that industrialization was creating a vast and well-organized labor force that would eventually capture the bourgeois state and replace it altogether. With what? He was rather vague on that point since he did not wish to be accused of being a “utopian.” In his 1875 *Critique of the Gotha Program*, he wrote: “Between the capitalist and the communist systems of society lies the period of revolutionary transformation of the one into the other. This corresponds to a political transition period, whose state can be nothing else but the revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat.” At the end of this socialist phase, the “state would wither away” as the ultimate era of communism would dawn. Meanwhile, labor unions and trade unions (with their petty compromises with capitalism) merely delayed the onset of the inevitable revolution.

Even before the first volume of Kapital appeared, Marx had become the predominant voice of the first meeting of the International Working Men’s Association, convened in London in 1864. A broad spectrum of labor opinion was represented there, but in its subsequent annual meetings Marx’s revolutionary views steadily eclipsed those who represented the labor movement. When in 1871 socialists in Paris overthrew the city government and instituted the Paris Commune, Marx and his followers thought that they were witnessing the onset of the universal revolution they had been predicting. Instead, the Commune was crushed by the French government and “Communards” and “Communism” became associated with senseless class warfare and bloodshed. The meetings of the First Internationale ended after the Commune failed.

There had been some attending the Internationale's meetings who applauded bloodshed and even terror as a way to bring down the bourgeois state. Foremost among them was Michael Bakunin (1814-1876), the son of a Russian noble family who devoted most of his life to bringing down the Czarist regime and eventually all forms of state government. He is the modern founder of anarchism and the author of such volumes as Man, Society, and Freedom (1871) and God and the State (1875). Like Marx, Bakunin had no patience with labor unions; unlike Marx, he had no patience with long-term political organizing that would eventually bring down the state. He wanted it to happen NOW and he happily advocated violence to make it happen. Marx hated the idea and called it "juvenile" and an invitation for the forces of repression to crush to forces of reform. After heated debate, Bakunin and the anarchists were excluded from the Internationale, although their movement continued to have followers in France, Italy, Spain, and Russia.

Russia is, of course, a particularly interesting case because there socialism marched to a different drummer. Writing in exile from London, Alexander Herzen (1812-1870) predicted in his underground newspaper, "The Polar Star," that Russia, in spite of its industrial backwardness, might lead the anti-capitalist revolution because of its historical tradition of communalism, where the local commune (the *mir*) might become the basis of a socialist revolution. Bakunin collaborated briefly with Herzen and back home university students organized themselves into revolutionary cohorts under the name "Peoples' Will." They carried out at least four efforts to assassinate Czar Alexander II and in March 1881 finally succeeded. As he drove through the streets of St. Petersburg, a bomb went off under his carriage (a gift from Napoleon III). The Czar stepped out to assist his wounded escort and then a second bomb exploded, causing him to bleed to death. He was succeeded to the throne by his son, Alexander III (1881-1894) who cracked down hard on everything that even smacked of the French Revolution. Yet, in time Peoples' Will morphed into the Russian Socialist Revolutionary Party that was on the eve of World War I by far the most popular political party in the Russian Empire. Its ideology was not Marxist but a home-grown concoction that combined Herzen and a bit of Bakunin. Try as hard as he

might, Alexander III's dreaded secret police were unable to halt the growth of the Socialist Revolutionaries.

Back in Western Europe, however, things were moving in a different direction. The reforms instituted by Napoleon III, Disraeli, and Bismarck had convinced many labor union members and socialists that Marx had it wrong; that with the triumph of democratic government the workers could gain control of the state by the ballot and not the bullet. It helped, of course, that real wages for workers in western Europe had risen by 50 percent between 1870 and 1900. Foremost among these so-called "revisionists" was the German socialist, Eduard Bernstein (1850-1932). He was one of the authors of the Gotha Program, an 1875 resolution [adopted at the Gotha Conference] calling upon German labor to rally behind the newly-formed Social Democratic Party. Marx criticized it vehemently because of program's emphasis (reminiscent of the late Ferdinand Lassalle) on worker participation in elections sponsored by the German state. Bernstein, nevertheless, was obliged by Bismarck's anti-socialist legislation to go into exile in 1878, but from abroad he had a profound impact on shaping the new party. It was his view that the emerging industrial society was not developing as Marx had predicted and, in fact, working class conditions were improving. Thus, rather than despairing of hope in the future and planning revolution, the workers' party should focus its efforts on the further expansion of democracy in Germany leading to the transformation of the autocratic state. When he finally returned from exile in 1901, he was immediately elected to the Reichstag where he joined an ever-growing number of Social Democratic delegates.

What were these socialists seeking that attracted such a broad following? At a conference at Erfurt in Germany in 1891 the party adopted the following demands:

- Universal, equal, and direct suffrage for all adults, including women.
- Separation of church and state.
- Compulsory secular education.
- Free medical treatment.
- Progressive income and inheritance taxes.

- An eight-hour work day.
- The replacement of the standing army with a “peoples’ army” (militia).

Much of that doesn’t sound very revolutionary to us (more like the New Deal), but in Bismarck’s Germany the program threatened the very foundation of the Kaizer’s state. Even though there was no principle of ministerial responsibility, what if these Social Democrats gained control of the Reichstag by election and demanded that the Kaizer’s ministers enact such legislation? Bismarck did his best to avoid the issue by trying to hamper the growth of the Social Democrats. Ultimately, he failed in that endeavor. Adopting an American idea, Labor Day (proposed by Samuel Gompers), their annual May 1 demonstrations grew larger and larger each year and involved: kids and grannies; umpapa bands; lots of beer; fervent speeches and parades.

In France a similar trend was manifest. There were several socialist parties there but during the Dreyfus Affair at the end of the century (more later about that) they rallied together and help topple a conservative government in elections held in 1899. As a gesture of recognition of their contribution to that victory, the new liberal government called upon socialist delegate Alexander Millerand (1859-1943) to accept a cabinet post. Although the Marxists howled, Millerand accepted and thus became the first socialist after Louis Blanc to serve a “bourgeois regime.” After World War I they would form several governments of their own in France.

Across the Channel in Britain, workers were at first inclined to focus their attention on their trade unions. On this subject, I quote from Barbara Tuchman’s brilliant, The Proud Tower (p. 360):

*Giving its political allegiance to the Liberals, English labour could not be drawn into support of a socialist party and disapproved of class war. ‘The English working class,’ said Clemenceau [a leading French socialist], ‘is a bourgeois class.’ Continental comrades found the English Trade Union Congress dull and uninspired because the members were not interested in debating ideas but only immediate gains. To the French, said one visitor, such gains were the gathering strength of*

*the social revolution; to the British worker they were ends in themselves while 'fundamental principles and eternal verities irritate him.'* He was not interested in a new social system, as Sir John Morley said, *'but of having a fairer treatment in this one.'* There were, of course, the intellectuals. They created the Fabian Society in 1883 and attracted such lights as George Bernard Shaw, H. G. Wells, and Sidney and Beatrice Webb. Theirs was a drawing room form of socialism that downplayed class conflict and put its faith in democracy, especially on the local level to improve the lot of working people.

Three developments changed all that: 1) the 1892 appearance in Parliament of Keir Hardie (1856-1915) as a duly elected socialist; 2) the formation in 1893 of the Independent Labour Party with Kier Hardie as Chairman; and 3) the 1901 decision by the House of Lords that labor unions should be held liable for the losses they caused businesses when they staged strikes. This Taff Vale decision convinced increasing numbers of British workers that the Liberals were incapable of defending their interests and only a workers' party could achieve that end.

Thus by the end of the century socialism was a well-established force in Europe and in most places the movement had taken a turn toward reform and not revolution. There were exceptions, of course: most particularly the anarchists. Their violence took a lengthy toll of victims:

- President Carnot of France in 1894.
- Prime Minister Cánovas of Spain in 1897.
- Empress Elizabeth of Austria-Hungary in 1898.
- King Humberto of Italy in 1900.
- President William McKinley of the United States in 1901.

Although Bakunin had died but the shadowy movement's leadership had fallen into the hands of yet another Russian aristocrat, Prince Peter Kropotkin (1842-1921). A former officer of the Czar's Cossacks, he had become involved with the Russian revolutionaries, was discovered by the police, and imprisoned. He escaped and spent much of the rest of his life in exile, mostly in London. He was editor of the anarchist newspaper, *La Révolte*, in which he wrote: *A single deed is*

*better propaganda than a thousand pamphlets. Words are lost in the air like the sound of church bells. Acts are needed to excite hate for the exploiters, to ridicule the Rulers, to show up their weakness and above all and always to awaken the spirit of revolt.*

This is not Marxist doctrine; it's anarchism, the belief that government itself is criminal and violence should be used to bring it down. As I noted earlier, Bakunin and Kropotkin had their followers mostly in France, Spain, Italy, and Russia. But the revolutionaries in Russia tended to rally to their native-grown variety of agitation against the established order, the Social Revolutionaries. A few, however, adopted Karl Marx's view of the future. Foremost among them was Georgy Plekhanov (1857-1918) who was one of the founders of the Social Democratic Party in Russia, although he spent much of his life in exile in Western Europe. In spite of Russia's industrial backwardness, Plekhanov insisted, the Russian proletariat would be the catalyst for revolution against the Czarist regime. He was joined in this opinion by a young lawyer from Simbirsk whose brother, Alexander, had been executed for attempting to assassinate Alexander III in 1887. His name was Vladimir Ulyanov (1870-1924). We know him by his pen name, Lenin.

So socialism had, along with the Industrial Revolution, grown to be international. Acting on the belief that nationalism was a bourgeois myth designed to keep the workers of the world divided, the Second International was convened in Paris in 1889 on the hundredth anniversary of the French Revolution. It would meet annually thereafter until the onset of the First World War. Quoting Tuchman again:

*Its anthem, 'the International,' ...promised that 'tomorrow the International will be the human race'...Its membership at its height represented socialist parties for 33 nations...Its flag was a solid red representing the blood of Everyman...Its slogan was 'Workers of the World Unite.'* (p. 407).

Cheering from the sidelines in its later conventions would be an ardent Italian socialist, Benito Mussolini (1883-1945).

