

The critical reception of “German Social Democracy”

Confusions about Bertrand Russell's chronological development and intellectual debts have frequently led students of his social philosophy to exaggerate Russell's shifts on some issues and to over-emphasize his consistency on others. This latter tendency, in turn, has led to the imposition of a spurious kind of unity on Russell's social thought. In fact, the unity of Bertrand Russell's social philosophy--with "social" defined broadly to include political, ethical, religious, and economic themes--derives not from a settled body of doctrine but from constant goals and a series of recurring problems. Within this framework Russell never ceased to modify both the doctrines and the emphases of his social thought. Indeed, in his first book, *German Social Democracy*, Russell addressed himself to many of the issues which would occupy his social philosophy for a full seventy years and introduced himself to the English reading public as an eloquent advocate of individual liberty and determined opponent of governmental and institutional tyranny.

I

Russell's interest in the German Social Democratic Party began in the first months of 1895. After travelling across Europe on their honeymoon, Russell and his wife, Alys, settled in Berlin for the first three months of 1895. At this time Russell was undecided as to his future plans: should he continue his studies in philosophy and mathematics, or should he follow the traditional occupation of his family and enter politics?¹ Postponing a final decision, Russell pursued both goals at the same time. He attended the University of Berlin, studied

¹Russell explained his indecision this way: "I had still made no decision as to my future work, whether it should be what attracted me intellectually or should be something of more obvious practical utility". "A Turning-Point in My Life", *Saturday Book*, 8 (1948), 144.

economics, and worked, in fits and starts, on what would become his Cambridge Fellowship thesis.

Russell began his study of economics out of a conviction "that politics could not be intelligently pursued without the help of economics, and that, *if* I chose politics, I must first become a competent economist".² This intensive study of economic thought, plus a healthy dose of intellectual curiosity and Alys's own investigation into the status of women in the Social Democratic Party, sparked Russell's interest in German social democracy. He and Alys attended several party meetings, met with a few party leaders, and began to flirt with the idea of preparing a detailed study of the German Social Democratic Party. Russell's intellectual ambitions at this time were extraordinarily lofty:

I remember a cold, bright day in early spring when I walked by myself in the Tiergarten, and made projects of future work. I thought that I would write one series of books on the philosophy of the sciences from pure mathematics to physiology, and another series of books on social questions. I hoped that the two series might ultimately meet in a synthesis at once scientific and practical.... The moment was an important and formative one as regards my purposes.³

German Social Democracy was to be the first book of this "second series".

In the short run, at least, the lure of philosophy proved too strong. The Russells returned to England, and Russell began the serious preparation of his Fellowship dissertation. After a summer of intense work, Russell submitted his manuscript, "An Essay on the Foundations of Geometry".⁴ This effort was successful, and he was awarded a "Prize Fellowship", which lasted six years and was tenable without any obligation of residence, teaching, or research.

Almost immediately after his election Russell and Alys returned to Berlin, resolved to "investigate the party in depth, interview its leaders and its members at all levels, [and] attempt to probe beneath the skin in order to understand the status and prospects of the party".⁵ For six weeks the Russells "associated almost exclusively with Socialists".⁶ Besides interviewing Party leaders, such as August Bebel and Wilhelm Liebknecht, and attending local Party meetings, the Russells made a determined effort to collect Social Democratic literature and to study

²*Ibid.*

³Bertrand Russell, *The Autobiography of Bertrand Russell 1872-1914* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1967), p. 125.

⁴This thesis would be revised and published as *An Essay on the Foundations of Geometry* (Cambridge: University Press, 1897).

⁵Ronald W. Clark, *The Life of Bertrand Russell* (London: Cape/Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1975), p. 63.

⁶Russell, *Autobiography*, p. 126.

closely the history and intellectual heritage of the movement.⁷ After about two months in Germany, the Russells returned to England and continued their reading of the theoretical works on which German social democracy rested.

The outcome of this research was a series of six lectures at the newly founded London School of Economics and Political Science and one talk before the Fabian Society. The L.S.E. lectures, delivered in February and March 1896, were published as *German Social Democracy*,⁸ each lecture forming one chapter. The first two lectures dealt with the intellectual foundations of the Social Democratic Party, focusing on the lives and thought of Karl Marx and Ferdinand Lassalle.⁹ Three middle chapters examined the history, programme, and personnel of the Party. And the final chapter presented a discussion of the present position and prospects of the Social Democratic Party.¹⁰ Russell's preparation is strikingly evident throughout *German Social Democracy*--his step is sure, his prose sharp, his learning prodigious. And, moreover, he produced a work of both immediate interest and lasting value, a rare combination which Russell was better able to achieve than most.

II

The appearance of *German Social Democracy* was timely. In the middle and later decades of the nineteenth century, British interest in European politics and intellectual life was keen. Newspapers contained daily accounts of the Prussian wars, of German and Italian unification, of Bismarck's diplomatic maneuverings, of Louis Napoleon's intrigues and political machinations, as well as of a myriad of other similar topics. In particular, there was widespread admiration in Britain for things German--whether the philosophy of Kant and Hegel or the efficiency of the Prussian military. The major reviews both reflected and molded this interest by establishing regular columns on German politics and literature and by publishing scores of articles on topics ranging from German

⁷For a discussion of the Russells' lives in Berlin see Clark, *Life of Russell*, pp. 64-5; Russell, *Autobiography*, pp. 126-7; and Alan Wood, *Bertrand Russell: The Passionate Sceptic* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1957), p. 36.

⁸London: Longmans, Green, 1896.

⁹Russell was sharply critical of Marx's doctrines. For a discussion of Russell's critique and its place in the English reception of Marxist thought generally, see my forthcoming article, "The Introduction and Critical Reception of Marxist Thought in Britain 1850-1900", *Historical Journal*, 20 (June 1977).

¹⁰Alys Russell also contributed an appendix, "Social Democracy and the Woman Question in Germany", for which she had drawn on her article, "The Woman Movement in Germany", *Nineteenth Century*, 40 (July 1896), 97-104.

family life to Schiller's aesthetics.¹¹

This profound curiosity about German politics and thought coincided with the foundation, by Ferdinand Lassalle in 1863, of the first German socialist organization--the General German Workers' Association. A great number of Englishmen, and not just specialists and serious students of German politics, watched closely the growth of the German socialist movement; and they saw a growth remarkable in both size and speed. After Lassalle's death in 1864, the Association was torn apart by internal strife, which was exacerbated by the emergence of the controversial Johann von Schweitzer to its leadership in 1867. Dissidents, led by Bebel and Liebknecht, formed the rival Social Democratic Workers' Party at Eisenach in 1869. Unlike the Association, this was a Marxist party which gained its ideological guidance from Liebknecht. Liebknecht, who was active in the 1848 revolution, had fled to London after its collapse and had come under the influence of Marx and Engels before returning to Germany in 1862. Through him Marx wielded great doctrinal and strategical influence, if not absolute control. Eventually, the two parties ended their rivalry and, at the 1875 Gotha Conference, united to form the German Social Democratic Party. The astonishing popularity of the Party led Bismarck to secure the passage in 1878 of anti-socialist legislation--the *Sozialistengesetz*. These laws, renewed periodically throughout the 1880s, failed to kill, or even to cripple, the rapidly expanding socialist movement. In 1877 its vote was 493,000, in 1884 550,000, and by 1890 it was well over one million. By 1896 it had become a well-disciplined and highly successful mass party.

Thus *German Social Democracy* was published at a very propitious time. As such, it was reviewed in several of the most popular and influential late-Victorian periodicals. It cannot be said to have been extensively reviewed, since many of the most prestigious quarterlies, monthlies, and reviews did not print critical notices. Neither the *Quarterly Review*, *Athenaeum*, *Saturday Review*, nor the *Economic Review* offered critiques. But, on the other hand, compared to similar books on German socialism, *German Social Democracy* was widely reviewed. Notices appeared in several of the leading periodicals, and, what is perhaps more important, two of the critiques were written by acknowledged experts on contemporary German politics and thought.

The first two reviews to appear were in major newspapers, one in the *Scotsman* and the other in the *Times*. Both short notices, running for scarcely one-third of a column, they were highly laudatory and set

a tone which would be shared by Russell's other critics. The *Scotsman* judged that *German Social Democracy* "forms a valuable historical commentary on present day German politics, which will give a better idea than any other book in English of the present position and prospects of the Socialist party in Germany". After briefly summarizing the content of each chapter, the reviewer concluded:

Mr Russell has studied his subject with great thoroughness, and his book gives a most interesting picture of the present political condition of Germany and causes which have led to it. It is a book which should prove of the utmost value to students of current foreign politics.¹²

The *Times* critic agreed with this judgement. Explaining that "It is by no means an easy matter to distinguish and trace to their sources the various elements in the building up of the Social Democratic aim and ideal which have gradually gained so large an influence in German politics", the reviewer praised the "knowledge and lucidity" which Russell had demonstrated in his analysis of "what events and what theories have had most to do with bringing about the present political situation". The *Times* complimented Russell's "fair-minded spirit" and "insight and judgment" and ended its review by mentioning Alys's "sensible chapter" on "Social Democracy and the Woman Question in Germany".¹³

The 30 January 1897 issue of the *Academy: A Weekly Review of Literature, Science and Art* presented a short but extremely favourable assessment of *German Social Democracy*. It began,

This is a [book] which should command the attention of readers who wish to know something of a movement which is unquestionably gaining strength in Germany, and is acting forcibly, though indirectly, upon English political thought.

The critic complimented Russell on his observation that Social Democracy, in Russell's words, "is not a mere political party, nor even a mere economic theory; it is a complete self-contained philosophy of the world and of human development; it is, in a word, a religion and an ethic". The *Academy* reviewer also praised Russell's decision to write "both a history and a criticism" of the Social Democratic Party and agreed wholeheartedly with Russell's criticism of Marx's thought, a criticism "as clear and also as sympathetic as his history". The critic concluded: "We may recommend this book as a clear presentation of the strength as well as the weakness of a system which no student of social economics

¹¹For a study of British attitudes toward Germany see P.M. Kennedy, "Idealists and Realists: British Views of Germany, 1864-1939", *Royal Historical Society, Transactions*, (5), 25 (1975), 137-56.

¹²The *Scotsman*, 17 Dec. 1896. *German Social Democracy* had been on the "New Books" list of the *Scotsman* for 10 Dec.

¹³The *Times*, 18 Dec. 1896.

can afford to neglect".¹⁴

Another review appeared in the prestigious *Westminster Review*, and its author concurred in the sentiments expressed by Russell's previous critics. "*German Social Democracy*, by Mr. Bertrand Russell", began the critique, "is an excellent and capable piece of work". The reviewer then proceeded to outline the history of the German labour movement, supplementing his narrative with quotations from Russell. But the heart of the critique was a discussion of the future prospects of the Social Democratic Party. Closely following Russell's treatment of this matter in his final chapter, the critic warned: "The Social Democratic party is not revolutionary, and it will be the fault of the classes who support the present system if it ever becomes so".¹⁵ What is required, he insisted--again quoting heavily from Russell--, is that

their [the German Socialists'] demand for "cessation of persecution, complete and entire democracy, absolute freedom of coalition, of speech, and of the press," must be granted, or "war and extinction of the national life are the almost inevitable doom of the German empire."¹⁶

Russell, in this his first foray into social philosophy, had urged both the Social Democrats and the German government to adopt a moderate, constitutional course. Both groups should learn from the example of British history, Russell recommended, and follow "the opportunist tradition of British politics".¹⁷ Specifically, the Social Democrats should compromise, conciliate, and negotiate with the liberal German parties and with the Kaiser's government itself. An uncompromising adherence to principle may be noble, but it is sure to doom any movement's chance of success. Russell, and the *Westminster Review* critic, were both hopeful that the German socialists and governing classes would heed this advice so that "Germany may develop peacefully, like England, into a free and civilised Democracy".¹⁸ After offering this suggestion, the

¹⁴*The Academy: A Weekly Review of Literature, Science and Art*, 51 (30 Jan. 1897), 148. As with the *Times* reviewer, the *Academy* critic also called attention to the appendix: "Nor should we omit mention of an interesting appendix, by Alys Russell, B.A., on the 'Woman Question in Germany.'"

¹⁵Anon., "Contemporary Literature: Sociology, Politics, and Jurisprudence", *Westminster Review*, 147 (March 1897), 345.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, p. 346.

¹⁷*German Social Democracy*, p. 152.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, p. 162. The *Times* critic shared this hope: "A wise moderation on the part of rulers and the abandonment by the Socialists of their hampering class warfare principles may certainly do much to lessen the existing tension, and all friends of order and good government will join in Mr. Russell's hope, however little ground there may seem for it at present, that each side may come to see the need for some concession".

reviewer concluded: "We can confidently recommend this to all who desire to obtain clear ideas upon this subject".¹⁹

Three reviews of *German Social Democracy* were published in June 1897. Charles Zueblin, the American sociologist, prepared a long review for the *Journal of Political Economy*.²⁰ In fact, Zueblin offered more a summation of *German Social Democracy* than an appraisal of its worth. He quoted long passages of Russell's analysis of the central tenets of Marxist thought, namely, the doctrines of historical materialism, the labour theory of value, and the concentration of capital. Only in the very last sentence did Zueblin offer an evaluation: "This book is at the same time the fairest and most judicially critical treatment of German social democracy which has appeared".²¹ The June 1897 *Fabian News* also presented a critique of *German Social Democracy*. Written by Henry W. Macrosty, a member of the Fabian executive, this review was much shorter than Zueblin's but also much more critical. Russell's first chapter "is generally acute, though occasionally trivial and sometimes unjust". The two middle chapters, which dealt with the life and thought of Lassalle and the history of the Social Democratic Party to 1878, were "slight, but fairly satisfactory". Unfortunately, remarked Macrosty, this discussion contained too many "irritating errors". But, despite these reservations, the last three chapters were "indispensable to an English student of German affairs". Indeed, concluded Macrosty, even with its light deficiencies this was "by far the best and fairest account of German Socialism we have seen in English".²²

The third review of *German Social Democracy* to appear in June 1897 was written by the leading late nineteenth-century English expert on Germany, William Harbutt Dawson. "Of all the prewar writers", concludes Henry Cord Meyer, "William H. Dawson had the broadest knowledge of German affairs. More than any other social scientist this English historian portrayed the social and economic processes growing and changing in the rapidly developing German nation".²³ Dawson wrote many books

¹⁹p. 346. The *Westminster Review* also commented that the appendix was "admirable".

²⁰*Journal of Political Economy*, 5 (June 1897), 386-9. Zueblin was professor of sociology at the University of Chicago from 1892 to 1908. For more information on his career see *National Cyclopaedia of American Biography* (New York: White, 1917), 4, 454-5 and *Who Was Who in America* (Chicago: Marquis, 1943), 1, 1396.

²¹p. 389. Zueblin also praised Alys's "admirable" appendix.

²²H.W.M[acrosty], *Fabian News*, 7 (June 1897), 15-6.

²³Meyer, *Five Images of Germany* (Washington: American Historical Association, 1960), p. 6. Meyer continued, "Dawson's work was descriptive rather than analytical; he failed to convey the larger significance of the technological and sociological facts he compiled. But taken together his books are still the most thorough and reliable description of

on German history and scores of articles on contemporary German politics for major English periodicals.²⁴ And, as might have been expected given his background, Dawson produced the longest and most thorough review of *German Social Democracy* and, moreover, the only review which was sharply critical of Russell's interpretation.

Dawson began his critique, which appeared in the *Economic Journal*,²⁵ by complimenting Russell for his treatment of Marx and Lassalle. "On its merits", Dawson stated, "the expository portion of this monograph deserves ungrudging praise". Dawson praised Russell for his "lucid exposition" of the main tenets of Marxist doctrine and agreed with Russell's "acute and judicious examination of their defects and incompletenesses". But of Russell's treatment of the history of the Social Democratic Party, Dawson had a very different opinion:

On changing abstract for personal ground he seems unfortunately to have put altogether on one side the judicial fairness which he had preserved throughout the earlier chapters, and this is the more to be regretted because this work claims to be "history,"--a solemn word to invoke. Here and there he plainly shows the spirit of the partisan. (*Ibid.*, p. 249)

What irritated Dawson was that Russell had "suffered himself to blaze off in jibes and diatribes--which was wrong and indiscreet". Specifically, Russell's unrelenting hostility to the German Emperor and government upset Dawson. Russell had labelled Wilhelm II "the puppet of the police" and had argued that constitutional reform could not be achieved "unless, by a miracle, there should arise an Emperor with some common sense and common humanity". "Such *dieta*", Dawson insisted sharply, "are not in good taste in these pages". "It is a pity that the whole polemic against Prussia and German government was not omitted", he remarked. "It is not pertinent to the subject in hand, it must unfavourably impress those readers who know better, and it will disseminate errors". Dawson was equally critical of Russell's recommendations as to the course the Social Democrats and German government should pursue, a course, as has been seen, in which Russell's *Westminster Review* critic agreed. "Mr. Russell's specific for the 'saving' of Germany", Dawson complained, "which includes 'complete and entire democracy' and 'absolute freedom of coalition, of speech, and of the Press,' we are inclined to think

Imperial Germany available in English". This emphasis on description rather than analysis would be important in determining Dawson's reaction to *German Social Democracy*.

²⁴See, for example, *German Socialism and Ferdinand Lassalle* (London: Swann Sonnenschein, 1880) and *Bismarck and State Socialism* (London: Swann Sonnenschein, 1890). For additional information on Dawson see *Who Was Who, 1941-1950* (London: Black, 1951), p. 299.

²⁵*Economic Journal*, 7 (June 1897), 248-50.

far too pragmatic. Such a wholesale letting loose of energy would make the last state worse than the first" (*Ibid.*, p. 250).

Dawson concluded his review by expressing "genuine regret that we have taken to fault finding". Since "the theoretical and expository portions of the book are so honest and good, and will be of so much service", it was "nothing less than a misfortune that the author was tempted into flagrant partisanship".²⁶ Obviously the contentiousness and pugnacity which were so characteristic of Russell's personality and writing were present in this his first book, and just as obviously their presence outraged Dawson. But Russell's other critics, who shared his beliefs, did not object.

The two final reviews of *German Social Democracy* to be published both appeared in October 1897. The *Edinburgh Review* of that month offered a very brief critique, perhaps more properly described as a "mention", in a long essay review entitled "The Internal Crisis in Germany".²⁷ Written by Sir Ignatius Valentine Chirol, the article contained only one direct reference to Russell. Describing the programme of the Erfurt Congress, Chirol observed: "This is the programme 'of perfectly orthodox Marxianism and boundless democracy,' as Mr. Bertrand Russell aptly describes it in his very interesting and generally impartial lectures on social democracy".²⁸ Although disappointingly slight, this notice was still important. Even a mere mention in the *Edinburgh Review* was an indication of the book's relevance and gave a definite boost to its popularity and to Russell's reputation. Chirol's approval was especially valuable because he was one of the most informed English students of German politics. For four years, from 1892 to 1896, he was chief correspondent in Berlin for the *Times*, returning to London in late 1896 to take charge of that newspaper's foreign department.²⁹ Thus that such an authority appreciated Russell's work was an important confirmation of its worth.

The last review of *German Social Democracy* to be published was in the *International Journal of Ethics* and was written by Helen Bosan-

²⁶*Ibid.* Dawson also offered a short critique of Alys's work: "As an appendix there appears a very thoughtful consideration of the woman question in Germany. In the main it is an examination of Bebel's *Die Frau und der Sozialismus*. It must be remembered, however, that the Socialist position only represents one phase, and that the least popular, of German thought on this question".

²⁷*Edinburgh Review*, 186 (Oct. 1897), 505-42.

²⁸*Ibid.*, p. 526. Although this is the only specific reference in the article, Chirol relied heavily on Russell's history of the Party throughout his review.

²⁹See the *Dictionary of National Biography, 1922-1930* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1937), pp. 182-3.

quet, the wife of philosopher Bernard Bosanquet and a prolific "writer on social subjects".³⁰ Bosanquet used the opportunity to contrast the natures of the German and British socialist parties rather than to offer a critique of Russell's work. The subject of that book, she remarked, was an interesting one to be sure, "but perhaps what chiefly attracts the reader is to compare the very different products of the Marxian seed as sown in English and German soils".³¹ Only at the very end of her review did Bosanquet offer an opinion of *German Social Democracy*. After quoting with approval Russell's advice to the Social Democrats and the German government to compromise with each other, Bosanquet concluded: "That Mr. Russell advocates this compromising policy as a friend, and not as an insidious enemy, is clear; but, on the whole, he preserves the attitude of the impartial historian throughout, and his intimate knowledge of the subject has enabled him to produce a book which will be very useful to the student".

III

German Social Democracy is Bertrand Russell's least remembered book. Commentators on his social philosophy have contented themselves with a brief acknowledgement of its existence--if they have mentioned it at all--and then launched their discussions with his work written during the First World War. Likewise, *German Social Democracy* remains virtually unknown to specialists in German labour history.³² But *German Social Democracy* should not be ignored. It provides the first example of Russell's literary style; it gives valuable insight into his early political beliefs; and it raises for the first time several issues with which Russell would grapple for decades. Besides carefully explicating and confidently evaluating the main doctrines of Marxian socialism, Russell struggles with the problem of how a social-reform movement should adjust its means in order to achieve its ends. Of equal importance is the prosaic fact that

German Social Democracy introduced Russell to the English reading public. And the favourable nature of his reviews surely heartened him to continue his intellectual work. Thus both the publication and warm reception of *German Social Democracy* were a major milestone in Russell's intellectual development.

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³⁰Helen Bosanquet was a member of the 1905 Royal Commission on the Poor Laws and the author of many books including *Rich and Poor* (London: Macmillan, 1896), *Social Work in London, 1896-1912* (London: John Murray, 1914), and *The Poor Law Report of 1909* (London: Macmillan, 1909). See *Who Was Who, 1916-1928* (London: Black, 1929), pp. 108-9.

³¹*International Journal of Ethics* 8 (Oct. 1897), 130.

³²Despite the repeated praise of *German Social Democracy* by its critics as "indispensable" and "the best book in English" on its subject, it has been virtually forgotten by subsequent historians of German socialism. Continental historians do not seem to know of the book's existence; it is not included in the bibliography of any French, German, or Italian book on the subject that I have been able to locate. And it is only barely known to English and American scholars. Indeed, I have found only two references to *German Social Democracy*: Roger Morgan, *The German Social Democrats and the First International 1864-1872* (Cambridge: University Press, 1965), p. 7, and James W. Hulse, *Revolutionists in London* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), p. 141.