CHAPTER 2

On the Relation of Theory and Practice: Karl Kautsky and the First Post-Marxist

[T]he path of development is the path of struggle. The reconciliation of antagonisms implies the stoppage of development.

– KARL KAUTSKY

It was Karl Kautsky, more than anyone else, who defined the Marxism of the Second International. He was the editor of the most respected Marxist theoretical review of the period, Die Neue Zeit, the theoretical organ of the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) and, with Eduard Bernstein, the literary executor of Marx and Engels. As the quasi-official leading theoretician of what was by far the strongest party in the International, he was from the death of Engels in 1895 until the cataclysm of 1914–18 the authoritative voice of Marxist orthodoxy. First the war, however, and then the October Revolution in Russia pushed to the surface the fissures which lay beneath the official unity of German – and international – Social Democracy and which had seemed, until then, mere superficial cracks. Kautsky’s brand of Marxism showed itself incapable of coming to grips with the crisis of war; the polarisation of the SPD between those who supported the Imperial German war effort and those who, like Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg, declared their outright opposition, left him profoundly isolated. His call for a ‘peace without annexations’ could not but seem a pious wish, his ostrich-like refusal to recognise that the acquiescence of the majority of socialist parties in the war efforts of their respective governments was tantamount to the collapse of the International, an admission of political – and perhaps theoretical – bankruptcy.


2 Kautsky 1906b, p. 66.
Orthodoxy and Apostasy

Kautsky’s place as the great renegade in the history of Marxism and the workers’ movement has been fixed by Lenin’s repeated and virulent denunciations of him during the war and in the aftermath of the October Revolution. Without examining the substance of Lenin’s critique, which will be considered later, it is worth pausing a moment over its form. The paradoxical nature of Lenin’s approach is strikingly expressed in the following: ‘Kautskyism is not fortuitous; it is the social product of the contradictions within the Second International, a blend of loyalty to Marxism in word, and subordination to opportunism in deed’.3 Lenin is underlining, on the one hand, the importance of considering Kautsky not as an individual, not in terms of his subjective motivations, but as representative of a definite ideological trend, the product of the objective clash of social forces.4 Yet on the other hand, he characterises Kautskyism precisely in terms of bad faith, hypocrisy, of merely verbal adherence to Marxism, adherence in words and promises but not in practice.5 The latter claim is often conveyed, Etienne Balibar has noted, in the following fashion: Kautsky ‘ignored’ or ‘forgot’ certain aspects of Marxism, exemplified in a whole series of analyses by Marx and Engels of the state and the Paris Commune in particular; this ‘forgetfulness’, acknowledging the class struggle without the dictatorship of the proletariat, yielded distortions of the Marxist theory of class struggle and the state. Lenin backs up his claims with abundant evidence, extensively citing and explicating the analyses of Marx and Engels and comparing them with Kautsky’s works. This whole procedure is problematic, Balibar argues, inasmuch as it presumes the notion of a ‘primordial authentic Marxism’, existing prior to and standing above the struggle of different tendencies, capable of being recognised or discovered (instead of being ignored or forgotten) so as then to be put into practice.6 ‘[E]verything happens,’ Balibar comments, ‘as if Lenin had been able to criticize Kautsky only by turning his own ideological concept of Marxism against him: the concept of “orthodoxy”, which carries with it its opposite, that of error, heterodoxy and heresy’.7

3 Lenin 1915d, p. 312; see also Lenin 1918e, p. 230.
5 See Lenin 1914, 97; Lenin 1915b, pp. 231–2; Lenin 1916a, 448; Lenin 1918e, pp. 234, 282.
7 Balibar 1974b, 287. Balibar goes on to say that by presenting his critique in these terms, ‘Lenin himself prepared certain of the conditions which would later allow Leninism to be presented, in its turn, as an “orthodoxy”, that is, as a dogma’.