The Dispute over Revisionism

Some of the main ideas and problems in Kautsky’s theoretical thinking – his concepts of capitalism and of socialist revolution – can best be presented with an analysis of the first dramatic polemic against Kautsky and the Scientific Socialism represented by him, the revisionist controversy of 1899, which was the first polemic to seriously threaten Kautsky’s theoretical authority inside the party. In 1899, Eduard Bernstein published his critique of Marxism and the Erfurt Programme, the theoretical basis of the Social Democratic Party of Germany. Bernstein’s Evolutionary Socialism¹ was a wholesale attack on all the main propositions on which Kautsky’s position of socialism was based. (Kautsky was the recognised author of the theoretical parts of the programme). Bernstein criticised the ‘method’, the ‘programme’ and the ‘tactics’ of the Erfurt Programme. Kautsky hastened to answer Bernstein’s critique already during the same year by publishing his Anti-Bernstein.²

Evolutionary Socialism had as its main target – as explicated by Bernstein in the beginning of his preface to the first edition of 1899³ – the Marxist theory of the breakdown of capitalism. This theory of collapse referred to a concep-

¹ Bernstein 1909. Bernstein’s revision of Marxism was first criticised and vehemently condemned by ‘orthodox’ Marxists – Kautsky among them – after the publication of Evolutionary Socialism. Starting in 1896, Bernstein had, however, already presented his main arguments against Marxism in a series of articles published in Die Neue Zeit under the title ‘Problems of Socialism’ (Bernstein 1896–97a, b, c, d, e; 1897–98a, b, c). Kautsky expected from the publication of these articles a veritable development of Marxism and an attempt to understand the new phenomena of modern capitalism from a Marxist standpoint (see Hühnlich 1981, p. 40). (For an analysis of the exchange of letters between Kautsky and Bernstein during the dispute, see Steinberg 1978). The articles published in Die Neue Zeit were already criticised by Rosa Luxemburg in Die Leipziger Volkszeitung as representing social reformism even before the publication of Bernstein’s Evolutionary Socialism (see Luxemburg 1970 [1898–9]; see also Plechanow 1897–8). Bo Gustafsson has pointed out that Bernstein’s break with Marxism can be dated back to his postscript and comment written in 1895 or 1896 and published in the 1897 German edition of Luis Héritier’s history of the French Revolution of 1848. At this time, no one paid any attention to Bernstein’s critique of the Marxist idea of a revolutionary seizure of power by the proletariat. (See Gustafsson 1969, pp. 109 and 120).

² Kautsky 1899a.

³ Bernstein 1909. See also Colletti 1972, pp. 48–9.
tion according to which capitalist development will lead, out of necessity, to the destruction of capitalism, to a final crisis in capitalist society. Economic development was understood as leading toward a growing polarisation of society, that is, to a decreasing number of big capitalists and an increasing mass of proletarian wage workers. The middle classes, artisans, small-scale manufacturers and merchants, as well as peasants, are dying out. Economic development furthermore leads to the increasing misery of the working class; immiseration is the other side of the accumulation of capital. The inevitable result of the growing polarisation of society is socialist revolution, the overthrow of capitalism.

It was typical of the polemics between Bernstein and Kautsky that the latter did not approve of the former’s interpretation of Marxism. According to Kautsky, there was no question of either collapse or immiseration in Marxism. Neither the programme of the party nor Kautsky’s own conceptions were ever based on any such ideas. The very terms were invented by Bernstein and other opponents of Marxism. Bernstein was fighting against the windmills of a dogmatic Marxism that he had himself constructed.4

Despite the obvious disagreement over the right interpretation of Marxism, it is all the more astonishing that both Bernstein and Kautsky did, however, seem to share a common understanding of what constituted the theoretical core of Marxist theory of capitalism and socialist revolution. In order to prove that this was indeed the case, it is better to start the analysis of the dispute not with a discussion of the method of Marxism – where the disagreement seems to be the greatest (Bernstein explicitly rejected dialectics and the materialist conception of history) – but instead with a discussion of the disputants’ analyses of the economic development in Western Europe and Germany in particular, and the strategic conclusions drawn from them. It was the question of the accumulation and concentration of capital – and the dispersion of ownership of property – that was the main problem for both theoreticians.

The whole dispute seems to concentrate on the empirical validity of the economic laws of capitalist development and the Marxist prognosis about the increasing centralisation of capital and the growing proletarianisation of the great majority of the population in the developed capitalist countries. They both agreed that if Marx’s prognosis is valid, then the socialist revolution is a historical necessity. If not, then the revolutionary socialist perspective loses its scientific basis and the way is open to social reforms within bourgeois

4 Kautsky 1899a, pp. 42–3.