The Question of Democracy and Dictatorship: Lenin’s Critique of Kautsky the Renegade

Lenin first accused Kautsky of being a renegade of Marxism after the Russian Revolution. Until then, Lenin, like many others, had regarded Kautsky as a real and genuine Marxist. The best-known and most vehement criticism of Kautsky was first introduced by Lenin after Kautsky’s direct and unconditional critique of the Russian Revolution and Lenin’s conception of the dictatorship of the proletariat. Lenin’s critique reached its utmost forcefulness after the publication of Kautsky’s *The Dictatorship of the Proletariat* in 1918. Kautsky had become a ‘renegade of Marxism’. In *The Proletarian Revolution and the Renegade Kautsky*, Lenin criticised Kautsky’s conception of democracy and the dictatorship of the proletariat.

The socialist character of the Russian Revolution and the dictatorship of the proletariat were the main targets in Kautsky’s *The Dictatorship of the Proletariat*. The relation between dictatorship and democracy was understood both by Lenin and by Kautsky to be the leading question. The analysis of these two methods of government was the main idea in Kautsky’s pamphlet. Kautsky’s interpretation of Marx’s concept of the dictatorship of the proletariat was, in Lenin’s opinion, totally false, even though Kautsky tried to defend his own position as a genuine Marxist interpreter by claiming that Marx understood the dictatorship of the proletariat not as a form of government, but rather as a specific state of affairs or condition, a mediating state between a bourgeois and real proletarian government. Lenin thought that Kautsky’s attempt was ridiculous. His main mistake was that he did not make any distinction between democracy in general and bourgeois democracy in particular; he did not even pose the question about the class character of bourgeois democracy. According to Lenin, democracy always functions in favour of one particular class.

In Lenin’s view, Kautsky understood only one question correctly: dictatorship means that one class in society is deprived of its political rights, and during proletarian dictatorship this class is the bourgeoisie. Kautsky was, however, at

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1. Lenin 1967g; cf. also Trotsky 1921.
2. Lenin 1967g, p. 45.
3. Lenin 1967g, pp. 47–8, 50.
4. Lenin 1967g, p. 46.
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the same time mistaken in claiming that proletarian dictatorship is equivalent to a dictatorship exercised by a small group of persons depriving the rest of society of its democratic rights. The dictatorship of the proletariat is, on the contrary, equal to the most perfect democracy of the working class and other poor elements in society. Revolutionary proletarian dictatorship is equal to power which has been won in class struggle and which is maintained and exercised even violently against the bourgeoisie. It is a power not bound by any laws.⁵

According to Lenin, the whole idea of Kautsky’s discussion of democracy and dictatorship seemed to rest on an attempt to conceal the essential difference between a violent and a peaceful transition to socialism. Kautsky opposed any use of violence in revolution:

Kautsky has in a most unparalleled manner distorted the concept of dictatorship of the proletariat, and has turned Marx into a common liberal; that is, he himself has sunk to the level of a liberal who utters banal phrases about ‘pure democracy’, embellishing and glossing over the class content of bourgeois democracy, and shrinking, above all, from the use of revolutionary violence by the oppressed class. By so ‘interpreting’ the concept ‘revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat’ as to expunge the revolutionary violence of the oppressed class against its oppressors, Kautsky has beaten the world record in the liberal distortion of Marx. The renegade Bernstein has proved to be a mere puppy compared with the renegade Kautsky.⁶

Lenin never tired of repeating the claim that proletarian democracy is a million times more democratic than any form of bourgeois democracy. This essential fact was misunderstood by Kautsky because he never faced the question of the class character of democracy, a question separating a real Marxist from a liberal trying to pose as a Marxist. Soviet Russia is the most democratic country in the world, its workers and proletarian peasants have the right to make use of the freedom of assembly, the freedom of press and the right to elect their own representatives in state institutions, and these rights are not only formal rights – as in a bourgeois democracy. The material conditions for their realisation are present in Soviet Russia.⁷ This simple fact should prove that

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⁵ Lenin 1967g, p. 52.
⁶ Lenin 1967g, p. 54.
⁷ Lenin 1967g, pp. 58–9.