Imagining Socialism: Karl Kautsky and Thomas More

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ABSTRACT

In this article, I address the confrontation in Kautsky’s study of Thomas More between historical materialism and the providential view of history of More himself. Kautsky has trouble addressing providence and history in the thought of More because of his own concern with comprehending More and Utopia in terms of historical materialism. Kautsky does take seriously More’s religiosity. However, he identifies it, not with the orthodox Catholic Church, but with the popular religious feeling of the Middle Ages. In the process, Kautsky betrays his own nostalgia for a lost age of primal innocence and simplicity.

In the century since Karl Kautsky published Thomas More and His Utopia, the battle for the soul of Thomas More has yet to abate. The controversies inspired by contentions that More’s sweeping moral and social vision must not and cannot simply be his own seem interminable. His views have been identified with those of Plato, Aristotle, and Augustine, with medieval scholastic philosophy and medieval corporatism, with Renaissance humanism and Enlightenment rationalism, with socialism and liberalism. Despite this apparent confusion, much of the terrain upon which commentators have engaged each other has actually been swept clean in recent years. There is some growing consensus among scholars about how we ought to understand More and his work, at least in relation to his own time. In this context, it may be useful to reevaluate the contribution of Kautsky to the literature on More, since his conclusions would seem to be substantially at odds with this new consensus, which has a decidedly non-Marxist bias.

Kautsky’s work on More now seems somewhat anachronistic, but it is still impressive, mostly because of the grand historical framework within which he integrates and according to which he interprets Utopia. Much of the debate about the value of his interpretation obviously rests upon the opinion one has of historical materialism. From the perspective of more recent scholarship in particular, the important issues involved in a retrospective evaluation of Kautsky’s work on More would seem especially to concern the confrontation in Kautsky’s writing between historical materialism and the providential view of history of More himself. How well, in other words, can a Marxist social scientist in the late nineteenth century make sense of a religious worldview—common enough among both Roman Catholics and Protestant Reformers in the early sixteenth century—that assigns all to the will of God?
I wish in this article to highlight the confrontation between materialist and providential views of history in Kautsky’s study of More and Utopia. In the first part of this essay, I discuss the study itself, specifically in terms of how it represents an expression of historical materialism as a philosophy of history. The second part presents recent interpretations of More and Utopia, particularly as they involve responses, either implicitly or explicitly, to Kautsky’s work on More. In the third part of the essay, I focus on providence and history in the thought of More himself. These themes are tremendously important for understanding More’s thought, especially with respect to his defence of the Roman Catholic Church. Kautsky has some trouble taking account of them because of his own concern to comprehend More and Utopia with reference to historical materialism.

I. Historical Materialism as a Philosophy of History

Thomas More and His Utopia represented a conscious effort by Kautsky to establish a “respectable historical pedigree” for socialism. (Steenson 1978: 80-81, 163). He identified Marxism not simply with the class struggle, but more generally with the materialist conception of history. The significance of Utopia for Kautsky therefore consisted not simply in the presence within it of socialist ideas, but in the pivotal historical role he assigned to it in the progressive movement toward a socialist world. According to Kautsky, More’s sensitivity to the material conditions of his time enabled him alone fully to master the essential features of capitalism even in its infancy and therefore to imagine an alternative mode of production that closely resembled modern socialism. By elucidating that which was new and premonitory of modern socialism in More’s thought, Kautsky hoped to undermine the arguments of those who associated More with the socialist thought of antiquity, particularly with the ideas of Plato, in order to demonstrate that there had always been socialist beliefs without the reality of a socialist society being any closer. (Kautsky 1979: 1, 97-98, 247).²

Like Marx, Kautsky believed that the significance of historical materialism as a philosophy of history consisted in its opposition to “spiritualist” and idealist understandings about the autonomy of thought (159-60). His study of More was therefore dependent upon levels of analysis that presupposed the need to understand Utopia as the product not simply of one man’s genius, but of a specific configuration of social forces and relationships. Utopia and More himself are, for Kautsky, products of a historical moment which corresponds to the advent of capitalism, the modern nation-state, and individualism. Caught in the struggle between feudalism and capitalism, papacy and monarchy, and the claims of the community against those of the self, More is a divided soul. Suspended between two modes of production, he seeks to reconcile their competing imperatives and to overcome the internal contradictions and tension between them.