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“Austro-Marxism” and the Present-Day Left

Once upon a time, in a far away country, Austria, a long time ago, socialists called themselves “socialists”, because they wanted to bring about a new society which was called “socialism”.

In Austria these socialists belong nowadays to a very rare species, however they have developed in their prime between the two world wars a very special kind of Marxist thought, which differed from both social-democratic reformism and the dogmatism of the Communist International. This school called itself “Austro-Marxism”, Austrian Marxism, because it was deeply rooted in both the history of the Austrian Marxist working class movement and the Austrian culture. From both its achievements and its defeat the present-day Left can learn its lessons.

Austro-Marxism is closely linked with the name of the political leader of the Austrian Social-Democracy after World War I, Otto Bauer. In contrast to the Social-Democratic Right and also to Karl Kautsky, Otto Bauer was not opposed to the October Revolution but regarded it as a socialist revolution of historical momentum which had been carried through under very specific historical circumstances. However, in contrast to the Communist International he did not recognize the Russian Revolution as a generally authoritative and binding model. Therefore and in opposition to Communists, he rejected the orientation towards a violent overthrow of the social conditions in the small state of Austria which had emerged from the former Austro-Hungarian Empire and attempted to open up a democratic way of transformation based on parliamentary decisions. This project failed, as we know, due to a reactionary and fascist coup d’etat which took place on February 12, 1934.

After the revolutionary excitations of 1918 and 1919 – in the wake of which councils of workers and soldiers and a Communist Party had been founded – had abated, Social Democracy was also ousted from the government in 1920. Therefore it had the possibility to realize its ideas of social-reform only in the municipalities, in particular in the capital, in the famous model of Red Vienna.

With regard to social, educational and cultural politics, the Vienna governed by the Social Democrats represented a unique experiment which, as long as it existed – from 1920 to 1934 – nurtured the belief that a parliamentary transformation to socialism would only be a matter of time. In particular the communal Viennese housing projects achieved exemplary importance. Between 1925 and 1934 the City of Vienna Council had more than 60.000 apartments built. These housing estates did not only provide affordable housing space for the working class, the rent was not allowed to amount to more than 4 per cent of people’s income and in case of unemployment it was possible to pay it in rates. The housing estates which were usually laid out as courts, integrated large green spaces, kindergartens, socio-medical centres, branches of consumer societies, cinemas and theatres. In the beginning, they were conceived as “palaces of the working class”, which emphasised their role as the ruling class of the future, yet their architecture underwent a change with the swing to the right of the ruling class. They became fortresses which nurtured the illusion that they could save the working-class from the fascist reaction.

The social housing projects were financed by special local authority revenues, which were levied in addition to the general taxes; among others a so-called “tax on luxury goods” was levied on horses meant for riding, big private cars, furs and champagne and there was a progressive tax on housing.

Austro-Marxism did not only consist of a social-reformist practice, but also of a theory on social transformation which I take to be the highest developed one ever – if the Civil War is not taken into account. Not only was the Austrian Social Democratic Party before World War II (and probably also after) the largest in the whole world in terms of members in relation to the number of inhabitants. More often than once it was during those years of its prime also confronted with the question of seizing power.

The first time such a situation arrived was in the years of the Austrian revolution, that is, 1918/19, when the Habsburg Empire which had declared and lost the war had collapsed. The power was lying in the streets while in the neighbouring countries of Bavaria and Hungary republics of councils had been proclaimed. Yet due to the fear that the Entente powers would interrupt the food and fuel supply and start a military intervention, the Social Democrats contented themselves with a bourgeois-democratic revolution.

On the other hand, there has never before or after in Austrian history been a comparable incentive towards structural social reforms as between 1918 and 1919:

- women's suffrage was introduced;
- a law provided paid leave for workers;
- a law provided for shop stewards and workers' councils and regulated the rights of elected representatives of the workers and employees;
- the Habsburgs were exiled and their estates and other assets confiscated;
- a law regulated the socialisation of basic and heavy industries;
- factory owners were forced to employ unemployed persons;
- a compensation for those injured and maimed in the war was decreed;
- a democratic people's militia was introduced to replace the standing army.

This far-reaching character of the reforms introduced by the Social Democrats, which changed the lives of millions or at least gave rise to hope, explains why the working class did not follow the Communists on the road to the dictatorship of the proletariat.

At least as interesting are the aims towards which Otto Bauer was heading and which were doomed to failure in the face of the unyielding resistance they met at the hands of the conservative forces. They help to understand why within only a few years the reaction could gather momentum again and began with removing what they called the "revolutionary debris".

In his brochure "The Road to Socialism", published in 1919, Bauer – who at that time was responsible for the elaboration of a bill on socialisation – had presented the detailed concept of a democratic socialisation of the economy.

"By means of an entire system of democratic organisations the people should control economic life along the principles of self-administration": He had the following organisations in mind:

- workers' committees in workplaces;
- tenants' committees in apartment houses;
- trade unions;
- consumer associations
- agricultural cooperatives;
- municipal councils;
- branches of administration to be established for the individual industries;
- supervisory councils for the large agrarian properties;
- agrarian councils for the regional districts;
- an administrative board for the central bank;
- the national assembly.

Although the bill of socialisation based on Bauer's ideas passed the National Assembly, it could be undermined by the capitalists and the reactionary state administration.

With this failure in the political sphere and in the sphere of the state, i.e. in the sphere of power, also the fate of Austro-Marxism as a project of social transformation was sealed.

Nonetheless it was to take one and a half decades more until the social and political predominance of the working-class in the years 1918 and 1919 and a balance of class powers which existed until the middle of the 1920s, were overcome and until the predominance of the reactionary forces had developed to such a degree, that they could venture an armed attack on the working class movement in 1934. Of crucial importance for the state of demoralisation in which the working class movement found itself were the catastrophic consequences of the capitalist economic crisis, in the face of which Social Democracy had to capitulate with only limited practical possibilities open to them in the fields of local policy and trade union struggle.

Nevertheless there was a signal of resistance. It was an Austrian particularity in the years between the wars that not only the state commanded armed formations – army and police forces – but that also the political parties had lightly armed military units at their command.

In contrast to Germany, where Fascism seized power by making use of the means of parliamentary democracy, the development in Austria went via the suspension of parliament, the ban of the Communist Party and met with the armed resistance of the working class on February 12, 1934. With their military superiority the workers who were demoralised by the defensive strategy the party had followed for many years, met the fascist state power with acts of armed resistance for several days from their “fortresses”, the communal housing estates. When the arms fell silent there were several hundreds of deaths to be deplored on both sides. The Social Democratic Party with hundred thousands of members and 1,500 affiliated organisations was banned, its leadership had to flee into exile to Czechoslovakia.

There Otto Bauer, trying to analyse the defeat the Social Democrats had suffered under his political leadership, wrote an exceptional book bearing the title “Between Two World Wars?”, in which he suggested a concept for the reorientation of the working class movement, called “Integral Socialism”, meant to reunite the Socialdemocratic movement and the Communist movement, in Austria and on the international scale..

The strategic peculiarity of this concept of “Integral Socialism” results from its neither aiming at a simple addition of the separate streams within the working class movement – what would have been in tune with the wishes of the politically most progressive sectors of the supporters who were highly disillusioned by the advance of Fascisms all over Europe – nor at the more or less friendly absorption of one part by the other – what most of the leaders of the Communist International had in mind – but amounts to a radical renewal of both streams. “Working-class parties, Social Democratic as well as Communist ones, can undergo change”,¹ that is how Josef Hindels, a widely esteemed left socialist –one of the few Austromarxists who remained in the Socialdemocratic party after WW II, sums up this aspect of Bauer’s line of argument in his introduction to the book.

It is not sufficient, Bauer writes at the end of his book, “to align opposing political ideologies. Also it is not enough to merely on a surface level mediate and make a compromise between both the opposed ideologies. The task which time itself sets for Socialism is to overcome and unite the Social Democratic thesis and the Communist anti-thesis in a new and higher synthesis ... to establish an integral Socialism by stepping over the rigid positions taken by both democratic Socialism and of Communism are taking.”²

Otto Bauer’s “Integral Socialism” became possible because he reflected the change the Communist International had undertaken at its 7th World Congress in 1935 by calling for the defence of the democracies threatened in their existence by Fascism.

Therefore Otto Bauer could write, “The new tactics of the Communist International ... does not restrict the task of the Communists to mere agitation but sets them immediate day-to-day tasks – they, too, want to take an influence on the course of political events within the capitalist state”. And he understood the chance contained in this change of orientation, “If Social Democrats and Communists are fighting side by side for the same aims on the political agenda, no matter if a formal action group was agreed upon or not, a factual alliance of both parties can develop.”³

Bauer did not live to witness how ten years later the exact opposite came about: As he had foreseen, Fascism had been defeated by a military alliance of the anti-Fascist powers and by enormous sacrifices on the part of the Soviet peoples. Yet the development of Communism towards a libertarian and democratic socialism turned out to be as unrealisable under Stalin’s leadership as a development to the Left of the Social Democracies in the West, where under the aegis of the USA the stage was set for capitalist restoration and the re-armament of Germany.

It is legitimate to ask what the concept of “Integral Socialism” can mean for us today, after the irrevocable downfall of Soviet Communism and the “fading away” of the Fordist working class movement.

¹ Bauer, Otto: Zwischen zwei Weltkriegen, S. 4.

² Bauer: Zwischen zwei Weltkriegen, p. 312.

³ Bauer: Zwischen zwei Weltkriegen, p. 312.

In the following I would like to focus on one single aspect:

In his later years, Otto Bauer – just like W. I. Lenin – does not in the first place hold the wrong subjective positions of and betrayal by the right-wing Social Democratic leaderships responsible for the organisational split of the working class movement but social factors. Both resulted from an indissoluble tension between the theoretical Socialist aims of the working class movement and the demands of the day-to-day struggle for a better life. Therefore the cycles of capitalist economy define the scope of reformism and / or revolutionary tendencies of the masses respectively.

An objective source of differences within the working class movement comes from the difference of experiences in Eastern and Western Europe. With regard to this question, the Socialist Otto Bauer arrived at the same conclusions as the Communist Antonio Gramsci. To both, the development in the revolutionary post-World War I years showed that in Western Europe the victory of Socialism was not to be won in a revolutionary coup de main but that this could only be achieved in long-term “static warfare” and a struggle for hegemony in civil society.

Bauer concluded, if “reformist Socialism is nothing else but the unavoidable ideology of the working class movement at a certain stage of its development”⁴ – something that also holds true for revolutionary Socialism – a new unity cannot be brought about on the basis of a victorious peace imposed on one side by the other.

As far as the political chances of a synthesis are concerned, Bauer remains realistic. “Integral Socialism cannot neutralise the opposition between reformist working class movement and revolutionary Socialism, a contrast which is rooted in the very existence of the working class itself. It only can and it must bring about a relationship which is different from one of contrast and polar opposition, between revolutionary Socialism and reformist working class movement on the one, and the reformist working class movement and revolutionary Socialism on the other hand. The change of both is the achievement we must strive for today, which constitutes the original theoretical achievement of Marxism and also its constant practical task.”⁵

German philosopher W. F. Haug conceptualised the same problem in the term of “Plural Marxism“, i.e. a Marxist thought which at the end of the 20th century could no longer be related to merely two political mainstreams. Its function, he says, consists in the development of a “structural hegemony”, a “hegemony without a hegemon”, this is, the generation of a predominant Socialist culture – which is a joint effort and one in which there is no leading role determined in advance of one particular political force or party.⁶

With regard to Otto Bauer’s “Integral Socialism” all this requires a debate, although there might be some good arguments to doubt that his project of a theoretical reintegration of the opposing Socialist tendencies in a new synthesis– to say it in Gramsci’s words that would be called an “organic translation” – of their respective experiences has really been successful.

His in many respects abstract call for “dialectically overcoming both Communist doctrinarism ... (and) democratic doctrinarism”⁷ went unheard in the noise of the engines of the Fordist post-war-cycles and the years of Cold War.

In a polemic on the old and new Hegelian fetishism with the terminology of their own days, Marx and Engels had written that “Communism is for us not a *state of affairs* which is to be established, an *ideal* to which reality [will] have to adjust itself. We call communism the *real* movement which abolishes the present state of things.”⁸

At the end of the 1960s the students’ movements on both sides of the demarcation lines had shaken the rigidities of the social practice and the forms of thought it had triggered. Later feminism and the ecological movements did the same.

⁴ Ibid., p. 311.

⁵ Bauer: Zwischen zwei Weltkriegen, p. 319.

⁶ Cf. W. F. Haug: Pluraler Marxismus 1, Westberlin 1985, pp 158 ff in particular.

⁷ Bauer: Zwischen zwei Weltkriegen, p. 206

⁸ Marx, Karl/Engels, Friedrich: Die deutsche Ideologie, MEW, vol. 3, Berlin 1969, p. 35.

The impulses coming from them were by the most important formations of the working class movement, trade unions and political parties not taken up for their own renewal and for bringing about a new unity.

Therefore the traditional working class movements of the 20th century not only failed due to a powerful enemy but first and foremost because of themselves, a failure which was not only one in the field of politics, but also in the field of culture, that is, in their ideas of organisation, leadership and discipline which were inspired more by the organisational chart of a large Fordist firm than by Marx's categorical imperative of human emancipation.

Against this background, "Integral Socialism" could become a formula describing one crucial property of a Socialism of the 21st century. In the face of global threats its renewal and future will depend on its ability not to put the movements bred by the crisis, of trade unions, women, precarious people, migrants etc. in opposition to one another but to unite them in a new vision of the social on a global scale. Also a new "proletarian class unity" can only be brought about if the floor is opened to a diversity of forms and claims. Or, to say it in other words, we have to accept that today the realisation of universal claims of a secure, humane and beautiful life cannot succeed in another way than by acknowledging the differences.

Bauer's "Integral Socialism", conceived in the face of bitter defeat, might – although limited by the premises of its time – have come close to this method of re-thinking unity. That is what lends it a lasting value.

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