

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



x-post: H-German: Socialist Visions of the Public Sphere in Late 19th-Century Central Europe (CGCEH at AHA 2006). Philadelphia: American Historical Association, 05.01.2006-08.01.2006.

Reviewed by Elun Gabriel

Published on H-Soz-u-Kult (February, 2006)

x-post: H-German: Socialist Visions of the Public Sphere in Late 19th-Century Central Europe (CGCEH at AHA 2006)

x-post: H-German

Conference Report, American Historical Association Meeting 2006, Session 185: Socialist Visions of the Public Sphere in Late Nineteenth-Century Central Europe

Session Chair: Mary Jo Maynes, University of Minnesota

“Socialism and the Liberalization of the Public Sphere in Imperial Germany”

Elun Gabriel, St. Lawrence University

“Filled with Vivid Desires of Attaining Equality’: Working-Class Activism in Late Imperial Austria”
Jonathan Koehler, University of Rochester

“*Habsburgtreu* Social Democrats?: Karl Renner and Otto Bauer on the Habsburg Nationalities Question and a Civic Austrian Identity”

Ian Reifowitz, State University of New York, Empire State College

Commentator: Vernon L. Lidtke, Johns Hopkins University

This panel sought to address how socialists in Germany and Austria-Hungary contributed to the construction of their national political culture. In particular, the panelists considered how Social Democratic conceptions of the nation and the national polity offered alternatives to how these terms were understood in the dominant cul-

ture of these empires.

Elun Gabriel’s paper focused on the role of German Social Democrats in the process of forging a public sphere that allowed for open, democratic political contestation. Drawing on Reichstag debates, pamphlets, and newspaper articles during the era of the Socialist Law (1878-1890), he argued that Socialists sought to recast their public identity, allaying public fears of socialist revolution by emphasizing a commitment to legalism and open debate. Through repeated parliamentary debate about the nature and place of Socialism in Germany, not only Social Democrats, but also liberals, political Catholics, and national minorities began to articulate a discourse that rejected the concept of “exceptional laws”—those which denied certain categories of citizens equal rights—in favor of a view that all political perspectives should be allowed to contend equally in a free environment.

The Socialist rhetoric of the 1880s emphasized the values of legality, openness, and parliamentarism. To lend credibility to this perspective, Socialists distanced themselves from their former revolutionary rhetoric by contrasting their new emphasis on society’s gradual transformation through public debate with the allegedly conspiratorial and undisciplined revolutionism of anarchists. By rejecting the anarchists’ violent revolutionary statements, and committing the party to gradual social change through democratic institutions, Social Democratic leaders opened up the possibility that their movement might

appeal to a much wider audience than before.

Socialists thus reformed their own self-conception to fit within a political culture that accepted vigorous yet peaceful contestation, while simultaneously helping to create a national political culture that valued liberal democratic principles, despite the authoritarian structures Bismarck had imposed on the German Empire.

In his paper, Jonathan Koehler examined how the Austrian Social Democratic Party tried to resolve conflicts between liberals and workers, which resulted from differing conceptions of the role of the individual in public life. Following the Austrian legal reforms of 1867, workers had high hopes of gaining political equality. Yet their expectations were soon disappointed, as liberal politicians rejected measures that would have abolished the estate system and allowed greater political participation. Those liberals, such as Max Menger, who remained genuinely sympathetic to the workers' plight, sought to promote worker self-help associations, which they hoped would transform artisans into entrepreneurs. This vision clashed with the Lassallean workers' movement's emphasis on the need for state help for workers.

In December 1869, workers challenged their political exclusion with a massive protest. They rejected the liberal assertion that property, political "maturity," and public service were necessary before one could be allowed to participate fully in civic life, which would have required workers to wait until they had been properly schooled for public life. The liberal government responded to worker protests with a crackdown that ultimately led to the imposition of a harsh anti-socialist law and more than a decade of mutual acrimony that occasionally burst into violence. Only in the mid-1880s, when younger liberals such as Engelbert Pernerstorfer and Victor Adler, who had been involved in the liberal student culture of the 1860s and 70s, sought to bridge the gap with workers by showing them respect and challenging the exceptional laws, did the tensions ease. By rejecting the idea that property and civic responsibility were prerequisites for political participation, Adler was able to bring moderate and radical labor factions together, while directing their energies to non-destructive political engagement.

Ian Reifowitz's paper considered how two major Socialist thinkers writing in the early twentieth century, Karl Renner and Otto Bauer, approached the nationalities question in creative and unconventional ways. Renner eschewed the ideal of "cosmopolitan de-ethnicization," instead envisioning nationality as based on the "personality principle," which enabled individuals to determine the

specific *Volk* to which they belonged. He also rejected the idea of territorial ethnic identity, in an attempt to avoid the attendant problem of what to do with ethnically heterogeneous areas. Instead, Renner imagined that an individual's cultural and linguistic rights would be portable and that there would be no specific territories established for each ethnic group. Renner saw an appropriate parliamentary structure for a multinational empire as consisting of two legislative chambers, one with representation based on geographical districts and one organized along nationality lines. His model was intended to balance the individual's identity as a citizen equal with all others and the preservation of each nationality's cultural and linguistic heritage.

Otto Bauer, while supporting Renner's plans for administrative reforms, was more concerned with eliminating inter-ethnic strife as a means to promote effective cooperation in the socialist cause. Like Renner, Bauer rejected the anti-nationalism many socialists embraced, arguing that each nationality had a distinctive character linked to language and culture that deserved its own expression. He was concerned that nationalistic and class-based antagonisms were interconnected. For instance, he believed the predominance of Germans in the capitalist class confused working-class Germans, alienating them from their Germanness. Like Renner, Bauer had a very flexible view of national identity, in which one could join a nationality by voluntarily assimilating into its culture and adopting its language.=20

Both of these influential socialist thinkers confronted the problem of the multinational Habsburg Empire by trying to re-imagine nationality in ways that allowed for both pluralistic civic identity as well as class-based proletarian identity.

Vernon Lidtke began his comments by noting that all three papers painted a portrait of socialism in imperial Germany and Austria as rather more integrated into society, and the cultures as more open and democratic, than once thought. He wondered if the presenters were not pushing the rosy picture too far. Lidtke recommended that Gabriel think carefully about the complexities of the public sphere, such as the restriction of women from it, and the possibility that there may have been a number of competing public spheres. He also questioned whether Social Democrats applied the same value of openness to their own sphere as they demanded in the national political arena. Lidtke noted that Koehler rightly stressed the many connections between the socialist and liberal traditions in imperial Austria, and their complicated inter-

relations. He was interested in hearing Koehler develop his ideas about how Adler and other leaders sought to shape the “working-class soul” rather than simply cultivating their minds. Lidtke praised Reifowitz for his concise statement of Renner’s rather complicated political vision, which he thought deserved more scholarly attention. He wondered, if the people in Austrian villages were in fact so indifferent to rigid constructions of national identity as Renner thought, could Renner’s ideas have actually worked if put into practice? Lastly, Lidtke noted that the panel as a whole underscored the profitability of looking at the German and Austrian socialist movements together, instead of within the confines of national history alone. Socialists in both nations kept in close contact, and individuals such as Karl Kautsky in fact moved between the two socialist spheres, while the

political and ideological problems the movements faced were in many ways strikingly similar.

After each of the presenters responded to Lidtke’s thought-provoking questions, the audience asked questions of individual presenters. Gabriel suggested the appeal of anarchism to some German workers related to their desires for autonomy and self-assertion. Koehler discussed how Austrian socialists learned to balance rationalism and discipline with an appreciation for individual subjectivity and creativity in the development of working-class identity. Reifowitz elaborated on the tensions between Renner’s and Bauer’s visions, as the former emphasized the creation of a civic Austrian identity across national lines, while the latter ultimately focused on the establishment of trans-national proletarian solidarity.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/>

Citation: Elun Gabriel. Review of , *x-post: H-German: Socialist Visions of the Public Sphere in Late 19th-Century Central Europe (CGCEH at AHA 2006)*. H-Soz-u-Kult, H-Net Reviews. February, 2006.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=28975>

Copyright © 2006 by H-Net, Clio-online, and the author, all rights reserved. This work may be copied and redistributed for non-commercial, educational purposes, if permission is granted by the author and usage right holders. For permission please contact H-SOZ-U-KULT@H-NET.MSU.EDU.