

From Revolution to Reform: The Origins of Bernstein's Evolutionary Socialism

The 19th century was a political sandbox for various forms of government and political control, from French Revolutionary republicanism to Bonapartist dictatorship, imperial conquest to nationalistic unification. Similarly, many rationalizations and justifications for the current order were proffered, including divine right, ancestry, or even military strength. Yet by the close of the 19th century the European powers had nearly unanimously moved towards representative democracy and were all in the process of expanding the electorate.¹ Whereas previous attempts at democracy were decried as illegitimate by opposition factions, such as in the formation of the Paris Commune, or were used as tools of conservative politicians to undermine the support of liberal elites, as in the case of Otto von Bismarck's unification plans, democracy came to be the secret weapon of the left and was seen by many as a key route to social reform.² The German Socialist Eduard Bernstein was an instrumental proponent of these ideas, and in his 1899 tract *Evolutionary Socialism* argued that a socialist system could only be obtained through gradual reform efforts inside of a capitalist framework. In doing so, Bernstein radically broke with Marx by denying that the ideal socialist society was only attainable through violent revolution. Bernstein's clash with Marxist revolutionary theory was a product of historical factors and events that favored democratic reform between the publishing of *The Communist Manifesto* and the late 19th century writing of *Evolutionary Socialism*, yet Bernstein's acquiescence to the capitalist democratic system reveals a broader shift in recognizing democracy's legitimacy as a system of government and heralding its dominance in the century to come.

Marxism's focus upon the proletariat revolution made it incompatible with capitalist democracy, a fact that was freely acknowledged by its proponents. Marx and Engels claimed that socialism could only be attained "by the forcible overthrow of all existing social conditions" and

involved the “most radical rupture with traditional ideals.”³ They envisioned a society without classes or divisions in wealth, and believed that the privileged classes would not relinquish power peacefully. In 1848 when Marx and Engels published *The Communist Manifesto* such a vision was not unimaginable – misery in the lower classes due largely to crop failure, poor working conditions, and the decline in traditional manufactures caused to the rise of British industrial capitalism led to popular uprisings across Europe.⁴ These revolts were later violently suppressed by conservative forces, underlining Marx’s conviction that revolution could not be achieved by any means short of forceful suppression of the privileged classes.⁵

Bernstein vehemently disagreed with the necessity of revolution to advance the rights of the working class. By refuting many of the predictions of Marx and Engels, Bernstein discredited the theory of socialist revolution and instead proposed to increase worker rights through the “slow propaganda of parliamentary activity.”⁶ Instead of a sudden outpouring of violence when the working class became fed up, he foresaw the gradual expansion of proletariat power through universal suffrage, believing that mass enfranchisement would lead to the election of socialist politicians. Bernstein’s views were partially in reaction to the failures of the previous revolutions, such as the Paris Commune, which was extremely short lived and ended in the massacre of many of the Communards by French Republican forces.⁷ This likely served to discourage revolution as dangerous and prone to failures, which could in turn lead to political repression. Assassinations in the hope of sparking a revolutionary crisis, such as those on Kaiser Wilhelm in 1878, were also proven counterproductive, in this case leading to the temporary ban on the German Social Democratic Party.⁸ Events in Bernstein’s lifetime were extraordinarily dismal for those who wished to see a socialist revolution.

The late 19th century was kinder toward the proponents of democracy. The expansion of

the electorate to universal male suffrage in Germany and France and the increase in voting rights in nearly every other European country would have given Bernstein hope that the working class could obtain political power under a capitalist democratic system.⁹ Indeed, Bernstein claimed that “universal franchise is . . . the alternative to a violent revolution,” indicating his belief that the vote was enough to increase the political clout of the proletariat and how these successful transitions toward democracy reinforced his convictions.¹⁰ The proliferation of political parties revealed the ability for a multitude of political ideologies to gain traction and influence and allowed for the creation of Bernstein’s Social Worker’s Party.¹¹ When taken as a whole, Bernstein’s affinity for democratic reform and disdain for revolution was a logical consequence of the events during his lifetime.

Bernstein, as a socialist, was assuredly not a supporter of the capitalist economic system. Bernstein spoke frequently of eliminating class disparities and securing freedom for all, yet his writing lacked the disgust at industrialism and hatred of the bourgeoisie that colored the pages of Marx and Engel’s writings. The improvement in the conditions of the proletariat in the half century between the publication of *The Communist Manifesto* and *Evolutionary Socialism* likely tempered Bernstein’s revolutionary passions. The implementation of sickness insurance, pensions, and accident insurance in Germany and other countries certainly alleviated some of the acute suffering in the working classes and showed that progress was possible.¹² Trade unions saw an explosion in membership and power, especially in Britain, to the delight of Socialists all across the continent.¹³ Unions even increased in power to such an extent that Bernstein felt obliged to warn against union overreach and monopolization of production.¹⁴ Based upon these recent gains and the promise of future improvements, Bernstein was able to tolerate the continual existence of capitalism and slow transition to socialism.

Even though Bernstein may have started his career as a Marxist of impeccable reputation, he later abandoned the revolutionary ideals in favor of a gradual transition to the socialist ideal and working within the system. In Bernstein's eyes, democracy and socialism went hand in hand, as he viewed democracy as the "absence of class government."¹⁵ In doing so, he was able to conflate the transition from republicanism to democracy with the transformation from capitalism to socialism. This view was supported by recent history, as many of the shifts towards universal suffrage coincided with improvements in social conditions. However, by endeavoring to reform the system from the inside he acknowledged the ability for the systems to coexist without inevitable and existential conflict. Marx on the other hand insisted that communism could only rise from the ashes of capitalism, and so the two systems were antithetical.¹⁶ Crucially, by participating in the capitalist political system Bernstein acknowledged the legitimacy of the government and republican system, a point that Marx and Engels stubbornly refused to admit.

While the recognition of the authority of the system may seem trivial now, the turmoil and upheaval in the earlier 19th century highlight this period of stability as momentous shift in the construction of the modern state. The ability for even socialists and conservatives to agree on the foundational principles of government lends credence to the unification of the nation and the state. The shift from physical battlefields to parliamentary ones characterized these late 1800's governments as remarkably modern and familiar, and could not been possible without the involvement of the left. Bernstein may have been merely one embattled socialist, but his views are instrumental in defining the 19th century shift from governance by force to governance by consent.

¹ Richard J. Evans, *The Pursuit of Power: Europe 1815-1914*. (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2017), 567–70.

² Rougerie, Jacques, "1871: The Paris Commune," in *Political and Historical Encyclopedia of Women*, ed. Christine Fauré and Richard Dubois (New York: Routledge, 2003), 240; Evans, *Pursuit of Power*, 601.

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- ³ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (Ware: Wordsworth Editions, 2008), 22, 34.
- ⁴ Evans, *Pursuit of Power*, 187.
- ⁵ Evans, 199–209.
- ⁶ Eduard Bernstein, *Excerpts from Evolutionary Socialism*, 1899, 1–2.
- ⁷ Evans, *Pursuit of Power*, 271–72.
- ⁸ Evans, 603–4.
- ⁹ Evans, 568.
- ¹⁰ Bernstein, *Evolutionary Socialism*, 6.
- ¹¹ Evans, *Pursuit of Power*, 554.
- ¹² Evans, 551.
- ¹³ Evans, 548–50.
- ¹⁴ Bernstein, *Evolutionary Socialism*, 5.
- ¹⁵ Bernstein, 5.
- ¹⁶ Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, 15.

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