

**ETHICS AND THE
MATERIALIST
CONCEPTION OF HISTORY**

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KARL KAUTSKY

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BY KARL KAUTSKY

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PREFACE

Like so many other Marxist publications the present one owes its origin to a special occasion, it arose out of a controversy. The polemic in which I was involved last Autumn with the editors of Vorwärts brought me to touch on the question of their "ethical tendencies." What I said, however, on this point was so often misunderstood by one side, and on the other brought me so many requests to give a more thorough and systematic exposition of my ideas on Ethics, that I felt constrained to attempt at least to give a short sketch of the development of Ethics on the basis of the materialist conception of history. I take as my starting point, consequently, that materialist philosophy which was founded on one side by Marx and Engels, on the other, though in the same spirit, by Joseph Dietzgen. For the results at which I have arrived I alone am responsible.

My original intention only got so far as to write an article for the "Neue Zeit" on the subject. But never had I so miscalculated over the plan of a work as this time; and not only in re-

spect of its scope. I had begun the work in October, because I thought there were now going to be a few months of quiet for the party, which might be devoted to theoretical work. The Jena Congress had run so harmoniously that I did not expect to see a conflict in our own party so soon. On the other hand it looked at the beginning of October as if there had come in the Russian revolution a pause for gathering together and organizing the revolutionary forces.

As is well known, however, everything turned out quite differently. An unimportant personal question was the occasion of a sharp discussion, which indeed did not for a moment disturb the party, but all the same cost the party officials and especially those in Berlin, a considerable amount of time, worry and energy. What, however, certainly demanded even more time and energy was the Russian revolution, which unexpectedly in the course of that very October received a powerful impetus and regained its previous height. That glorious movement naturally absorbed even out of Russia all the interest of revolutionary thinking people. It was a magnificent time, but it was not the most suitable moment to write a book on ethics. However, the subject had captivated me and I could not free myself, and so I concluded my work despite the many distractions and interruptions, which

the Berlin storm in a teacup, and the hurricane in the Russian ocean brought with them. It is to be hoped that the little work does not bear too obviously on its face the marks of its stormy birth. When, however, I had brought it to a conclusion another question arose. Far beyond the limits of an article had it grown, and yet was hardly fitted for a book. It contents itself with giving a general idea of my thought, and gives very few references to facts and arguments to prove or illustrate what has been brought forward.

I asked myself whether I ought not to reconstruct and enlarge my work by the addition of such arguments and facts. If, however, that had to be done it would mean delaying the publication of the book for an indefinite period; because to carry out this work would require two years' quiet undisturbed labor. We are, however, coming to a time when for every Social Democrat quiet and undisturbed work will be impossible, where our work will be continual fighting. Neither did I desire that the publication should be put off for too long a time in face of the influence which has been won in our ranks by the ethics of Kant, and I consequently hold it necessary to show the relations which exist between the materialist conception of history and Ethics.

Consequently I have resolved to allow the little book to appear. However, to show that with this not all is said which I might have said on Ethics, and that I hold myself in reserve to deal with the subject more fully in a period of greater calm, I call the present work simply an attempt — an Essay. Certainly when these quieter times will come is not to be seen at present, as I have already remarked. At this very time the myrmidons of the Czar are zealously at work to rival the deeds of the Alvas and Tillys during the religious struggles of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries — not in military achievements, but in brutal destruction. The west European champions of culture and order greet that with enthusiasm as the restoration of legal conditions. But just as little as the hirelings of the Hapsburgs succeeded, despite temporary successes, in conquering North Germany and Holland for Catholicism will the Cossacks of the Romanoffs succeed in restoring the rule of absolutism. This has sufficient strength remaining to lay its country waste, not to rule it. In any case the Russian Revolution is not by a long way at an end — it cannot close so long as the peasants are not appeased. The longer it lasts, so much the greater will be the disturbances in the rank of the west European proletariat, so much the nearer financial catastrophes, so much the more

probable that even in west Europe there should set in a period of sharp class struggles.

That is no time which calls for the theoretical labors of revolutionary writers. But this drawback for our theoretical labors, which will probably be felt in the next few years, we need not lament. The materialist conception of history is not only important because it allows us to explain history better than has been done up to now, but also because it enables us to make history better than has been hitherto done. And the latter is more important than the former. From the progress of the practice our theoretical knowledge grows and in the progress of the practice our theoretical progress is proved. No world-conception has been in so high a degree a philosophy of deeds as the dialectical materialism. Not only upon research but upon deeds do we rely to show the superiority of our philosophy.

Even the book before us has not to serve for contemplative knowledge, but for the fight, a fight in which we have to develop the highest ethical strength as well as the greatest clearness of knowledge if we are to win.

KARL KAUTSKY.

Berlin-Friedenan, January, 1906.

