The proletarian revolution and the renegade Kautsky

The question of the Constituent Assembly and its dispersal by the Bolsheviks is the crux of Kautsky’s entire pamphlet. He constantly reverts to it, and the whole of this literary production of the ideological leader of the Second International is replete with innuendoes to the effect that the Bolsheviks have “destroyed democracy” (see one of the quotations from Kautsky above). The question is really an interesting and important one, because the relation between bourgeois democracy and proletarian democracy here confronted the revolution in a practical form. Let us see how our “Marxist theoretician” has dealt with the question.

He quotes the “Theses on the Constituent Assembly”, written by me and published in Pravda on December 26, 1917. One would think that no better evidence of Kautsky’s serious approach to the subject, quoting as he does the documents, could be desired. But look how he quotes. He does not say that there were nineteen of these theses; he does not say that they dealt with the relation between the ordinary bourgeois republic with a Constituent Assembly and a Soviet republic, as well as with the history of the divergence in our revolution between the Constituent Assembly and the dictatorship of the proletariat. Kautsky ignores all that, and simply tells the reader that “two of them” (of the theses) “are particularly important”: one stating that a split occurred among the Socialist-Revolutionaries after the elections to the Constituent Assembly, but before it was convened (Kautsky does not mention that this was the fifth thesis), and the other, that the republic of Soviets is in general a higher democratic form than the Constituent Assembly (Kautsky does not mention that this was the third thesis).

Only from this third thesis does Kautsky quote a part in full, namely, the following passage:

“The republic of Soviets is not only a higher type of democratic institution (as compared with the usual bourgeois republic crowned by a Constituent Assembly), but is the only form capable of securing the most painless transition to socialism” (Kautsky omits the word “usual” and the introductory words of the thesis: “For the transition from the bourgeois to the socialist system, for the dictatorship of the proletariat”).

After quoting these words, Kautsky, with magnificent irony, exclaims:

“It is a pity that this conclusion was arrived at only after the Bolsheviks found themselves in the minority in the Constituent Assembly. Before that no one had demanded it more vociferously than Lenin.”

This is literally what Kautsky says on page 31 of his book!

It is positively a gem! Only a sycophant of the bourgeoisie could present the question in such a false way as to give the reader the impression that all the Bolsheviks’ talk about a higher type of state was an invention which saw light of day after they found themselves in the minority in the Constituent Assembly! Such an infamous lie could only have been uttered by a scoundrel who has sold himself to the bourgeoisie, or, what is absolutely the same thing, who has placed his trust in Axelrod and is concealing the source of his information.

For everyone knows that on the very day of my arrival in Russia, on April 4, 1917, I publicly read my theses in which I proclaimed the superiority of the Paris Commune type of state over the bourgeois parliamentary republic. Afterwards I repeatedly stated this in print, as, for instance, in a pamphlet on political parties, which was translated into English and was published in January 1918 in the New York Evening Post. More than that, the Conference of the Bolshevik Party held at the end of April 1917 adopted a resolution to the effect that a proletarian and peasant republic was superior to a bourgeois parliamentary republic, that our Party would not be satisfied with the latter, and that the Party Programme should be modified accordingly.

In face of these facts, what name can be given to Kautsky’s trick of assuring his German readers that I had been vigorously demanding the convocation of the Constituent Assembly, and that I began to “belittle” the honour and dignity of the Constituent Assembly only after the Bolsheviks found themselves in the minority in it? How can one excuse such a trick? [Incidentally, there are many Menshevik lies of this kind in Kautsky’s pamphlet! It is a lampoon production of the ideological leader of the Second International—Lenin] By pleading that Kautsky did not know the facts? If that is the case, why did he undertake to write about them? Or why did he not honestly announce that he was writing on the strength of information supplied by the Mensheviks Stein and Axelrod and Co.? By pretending to be objective, Kautsky wants to conceal his role as the servant of the Mensheviks, who are disgruntled because they have been defeated.

This, however, is a mere trifle compared with what is to come.

Let us assume that Kautsky would not or could not (?) obtain from his informants a translation of the Bolshevik resolutions and declarations on the question of whether the Bolsheviks would be satisfied with a bourgeois parliamentary democratic republic or not. Let us assume this, although it is incredible. But Kautsky directly mentions my theses of December 26, 1917, on page 30 of his book.

Does he not know these theses in full, or does he know only what was translated for him by the Steins, the Axelrods and Co.? Kautsky quotes the third thesis on the fundamental question of whether the Bolsheviks, before the elections to the Constituent Assembly, realised that a Soviet republic is superior to a bourgeois republic, and whether they told the people that. But he keeps silent about the second thesis.

The second thesis reads as follows:

“While demanding the convocation of a Constituent Assembly, revolutionary Social-Democracy has ever since the beginning of the revolution of 1917 repeatedly emphasised that a republic of Soviets is a higher form of democracy than the usual bourgeois republic with a Constituent Assembly. (my italics).

In order to represent the Bolsheviks as unprincipled people, as “revolutionary opportunists” (this is a term which Kautsky employs somewhere in his book, I forget in which connection), Mr. Kautsky has concealed from his German readers the fact that the theses contain a direct reference to ‘repeated’ declarations!

These are the petty, miserable and contemptible methods Mr. Kautsky employs! That is the way he has evaded the theoretical
Is it true or not that the bourgeois-democratic parliamentary republic is inferior to the republic of the Paris Commune or Soviet type? This is the whole point, and Kautsky has evaded it. Kautsky has “forgotten” all that Marx said in his analysis of the Paris Commune. He has also “forgotten” Engels’s letter to Bebel of March 28, 1875, in which this same idea of Marx is formulated in a particularly lucid and comprehensible fashion: “The Commune was no longer a state in the proper sense of the word.”

Here is the most prominent theoretician of the Second International, in a special pamphlet on The Dictatorship of the Proletariat, specially dealing with Russia, where the question of a form of state that is higher than a democratic bourgeois republic has been raised directly and repeatedly, ignoring this very question. In what way does this differ in fact from desertion to the bourgeois camp?

It goes without saying that to discuss the dispersal of the Constituent Assembly with people who call themselves socialists and Marxists, but who in fact desert to the bourgeoisie on the main question, the question of the Paris Commune type of state, would be casting pearls before swine. It will be sufficient to give the complete text of my theses on the Constituent Assembly as an appendix to the present book. The reader will then see that the question was presented on December 26, 1917, in the light of theory, history and practical politics.

If Kautsky has completely renounced Marxism as a theoretician he might at least have examined the question of the struggle of the Soviets with the Constituent Assembly as a historian. We know from many of Kautsky’s works that he knew how to be a Marxist historian, and that such works of his will remain a permanent possession of the proletariat in spite of his subsequent apostasy. But on this question Kausky, even as a historian, turns his back on the truth, ignores well-known facts and behaves like a sycophant. He wants to represent the Bolsheviks as being unprincipled and he tells his readers that they tried to mitigate the conflict with the Constituent Assembly before dispersing it. There is absolutely nothing wrong about it, we have nothing to recant; I give the theses in full and there it is said as clear as clear can be: Gentlemen of the vacillating petty bourgeoisie entrenched in the Constituent Assembly, either reconcile yourselves to the proletarian dictatorship, or else we shall defeat you by “revolutionary means” (theses 18 and 19).

That is how a really revolutionary proletariat has always behaved and always will behave towards the vacillating petty bourgeoisie.

Kautsky adopts a formal standpoint on the question of the Constituent Assembly. My theses say clearly and repeatedly that the interests of the revolution are higher than the formal rights of the Constituent Assembly (see theses 16 and 17). The formal democratic point of view is precisely the point of view of the bourgeois democrat who refuses to admit that the interests of the proletariat and of the proletarian class struggle are supreme. As a historian, Kautsky would not have been able to deny that bourgeois parliaments are the organs of this or that class. But now (for the sordid purpose of renouncing revolution) Kautsky finds it necessary to forget his Marxism, and he refrains from putting the question: the organ of what class was the Constituent Assembly of Russia? Kautsky does not examine the concrete conditions; he does not want to face facts; he does not say a single word to his German readers about the fact that the theses contained not only a theoretical elucidation of the question of the limited character of bourgeois democracy (theses 1-3), not only a description of the concrete conditions which determined the discrepancy between the party lists of candidates in the middle of October 1917 and the real state of affairs in December 1917 (theses 4-6), but also a history of the class struggle and the Civil War in October–December 1917 (theses 7–15). From this concrete history we drew the conclusion (thesis 14) that the slogan “All Power to the Constituent Assembly!” had, in reality, become the slogan of the Cadets and the Kaledin men and their abettors.

Kautsky the historian fails to see this. Kautsky the historian has never heard that universal suffrage sometimes produces petty-bourgeois, sometimes reactionary and counter-revolutionary parliaments. Kautsky the Marxist historian has never heard that the form of elections, the form of democracy, is one thing, and the class content of the given institution is another. This question of the class content of the Constituent Assembly is directly put and answered in my theses. Perhaps my answer is wrong. Nothing would have been more welcome to me than a Marxist criticism of our analysis by an outsider. Instead of writing utterly silly phrases (of which there are plenty in Kautsky’s book) about somebody preventing criticism of Bolshevism, he ought to have set out to make such a criticism. But the point is that he offers no criticism. He does not even raise the question of a class analysis of the Soviets on the one hand, and of the Constituent Assembly on the other. It is therefore impossible to argue, to debate with Kautsky. All we can do is demonstrate to the reader why Kautsky cannot be called anything else but a renegade.

The divergence between the Soviets and the Constituent Assembly has its history, which even a historian who does not share the point of view of the class struggle could not have ignored. Kautsky would not touch upon this actual history. Kautsky has concealed from his German readers the universally known fact (which only malignant Mensheviks now conceal) that the divergence between the Soviets and the “general state” (that is, bourgeois) institutions existed even under the rule of the Mensheviks, i.e., from the end of February to October 1917. Actually, Kautsky adopts the position of conciliation, compromise and collaboration between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. However much Kautsky may repudiate this, it is a fact which is borne out by his whole pamphlet. To say that the Constituent Assembly should not have been dispersed is tantamount to saying that the fight against the bourgeoisie should not have been fought to a finish, that the bourgeoisie should not have been overthrown and that the proletariat should have made peace with them.

Why has Kautsky kept quiet about the fact that the Mensheviks were engaged in this inglorious work between February and October 1917 and did not achieve anything? If it was possible to reconcile the bourgeoisie with the proletariat, why didn’t the Mensheviks succeed in doing so? Why did the bourgeoisie stand aloof from the Soviets? Why did the Mensheviks call the Soviets “revolutionary democracy”, and thereby admitting their superiority over all other institutions. It is only by concealing this fact that Kautsky the historian made it appear that the divergence between the Soviets and the bourgeoisie had no history, that it arose instantaneously, without cause, suddenly, because of the bad behaviour of the Bolsheviks. Yet, in actual fact, it
was the more than six months’ (an enormous period in time of revolution) experience of Menshevik compromise, of their attempts to reconcile the proletariat with the bourgeoisie, that convinced the people of the fruitlessness of these attempts and drove the proletariat away from the Mensheviks.

Kautsky admits that the Soviets are an excellent combat organisation of the proletariat, and that they have a great future before them. But, that being the case, Kautsky’s position collapses like a house of cards, or like the dreams of a petty bourgeoisie that the acute struggle between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie can be avoided. For revolution is one continuous and moreover desperate struggle, and the proletariat is the vanguard class of all the oppressed, the focus and centre of all the aspirations of all the oppressed for their emancipation! Naturally, therefore, the Soviets, as the organ of the struggle of the oppressed people, reflected and expressed the moods and changes of opinions of these people ever so much more quickly, fully, and faithfully than any other institution (that, incidentally, is one of the reasons why Soviet democracy is the highest type of democracy).

In the period between February 28 (old style) and October 25, 1917, the Soviets managed to convene two all-Russia congresses of representatives of the overwhelming majority of the population of Russia, of all the workers and soldiers, and of 70 or 80 per cent of the peasants, not to mention the vast number of local, uyezd, town, gubernia, and regional congresses. During this period the bourgeoisie did not succeed in convening a single institution representing the majority (except that obvious sham and mockery called the “Democratic Conference” [22] which enraged the proletariat). The Constituent Assembly reflected the same popular mood and the same political grouping as the First (June) All-Russia Congress of Soviets. By the time the Constituent Assembly was convened (January 1918), the Second (October 1917) and Third (January 1918) Congresses of Soviets had met, both of which had demonstrated as clear as clear could be that the people had swung to the left, had become revolutionised, had turned away from the Mensheviks and the Socialist-Revolutionaries, and had passed over to the side of the Bolsheviks; that is, had turned away from petty-bourgeois leadership, from the illusion that it was possible to reach a compromise with the bourgeoisie, and had joined the proletarian revolutionary struggle for the overthrow of the bourgeoisie.

So, even the external history of the Soviets shows that the Constituent Assembly was a reactionary body and that its dispersal was inevitable. But Kautsky sticks firmly to his “slogan”: let “pure democracy” prevail though the revolution perish and the bourgeoisie triumph over the proletariat! Fiat justitia, pereat mundus [Latin for “Let justice be done, even though the world may perish”.—Editor.]

Here are the brief figures relating to the all-Russia congresses of Soviets in the course of the history of the Russian revolution:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>All-Russia Congress of Soviets</th>
<th>Number of Delegates</th>
<th>Number of Bolsheviks</th>
<th>% of Bolsheviks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First (June 3, 1917)</td>
<td>790</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second (October 25, 1917)</td>
<td>675</td>
<td>343</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third (January 10, 1918)</td>
<td>710</td>
<td>434</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fourth (March 14, 1918)</td>
<td>1,232</td>
<td>795</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fifth (July 4, 1918)</td>
<td>1,164</td>
<td>773</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

One glance at these figures is enough to understand why the defence of the Constituent Assembly and talk (like Kautsky’s) about the Bolsheviks not having a majority of the population behind them are just ridiculed in Russia.

Endnotes

[19] Incidentally, Kautsky, obviously trying to be ironical, repeatedly quotes the expression “most painless” transition; but as the shaft misses its mark, a few pages farther on he commits a slight forgery and falsely quotes it as a “painless” transition! Of course, by such means it is easy to put any absurdity into the mouth of an opponent. The forgery also helps him to evade the substance of the argument, namely, that the most painless transition to socialism is possible only when all the poor are organised to a man (Soviets) and when the core of state power (the proletariat) helps them to organise.

[20] Lenin’s pamphlet Political Parties in Russia and the Tasks of the Proletariat was published by The Evening Post on January 15, 1918, and by The Class Struggle, the organ of the Left wing of the American Socialist Party, in issue No. 4 for November–December 1917. It also appeared as a separate edition.

The Evening Post—a bourgeois newspaper published in New York from 1801 (from 1801 to 1832 it was called The New York Evening Post). For a number of years it followed a liberal policy. After the October Socialist Revolution it published the secret treaties concluded between the Allies and the tsarist government. Subsequently it became the mouthpiece of the most reactionary imperialist circles. It now appears as The New York Post.

[21] On June 14 (27), 1917, the Provisional Government decided to hold elections to the Constituent Assembly on September 17 (30), 1917. In August it postponed the elections until November 12 (25).

Elections to the Constituent Assembly took place on the appointed date, November 12 (25), after the October Socialist Revolution. Deputies were elected according to the lists that had been drawn up before the Revolution and in keeping with the regulations endorsed by the Provisional Government. Elections took place at a time when the mass of the people had not yet appreciated the import of the October Revolution. This put the Right Socialist-Revolutionaries at an advantage and as a result they secured a majority of votes in areas outside the capital and industrial centres. The Constituent Assembly met in Petrograd on January 5 (18), 1918. By decree of the All-Russia Central Executive Committee on January 6 (19), 1918, the Constituent Assembly was dissolved because, through the reactionary majority, it had rejected the Declaration of Rights of the Working and Exploited People submitted by the All-Russia Central Executive Committee and had refused to approve the decrees of the Second Congress of Soviets on peace, land and the transfer of power to the Soviets.

[22] The All-Russia Democratic Conference was called by the Menshevik/Socialist-Revolutionary Central Executive Committee of Soviets to
decide the question of power and met in Petrograd in September 1917. Actually, however, it was called in order to divert people’s attention from the mounting revolution. More than 1,500 delegates attended. The Menshevik and Socialist-Revolutionary leaders took all steps to reduce representation of the Soviets of Workers’ and Peasants’ Deputies and increase the number of delegates from various petty-bourgeois and bourgeois organisations, thereby securing a majority for themselves. Thus, increased representation was granted to municipalities, which sent 300 delegates; Zemstvos sent 200 delegates and the co-operatives, which were under the control of the Mensheviks and Socialist-Revolutionaries, sent 120 delegates. But the Soviets of Workers’ and Soldiers’ Deputies, which represented the overwhelming majority of the population, had only 230 delegates. The Bolsheviks took part in the Conference for the purpose of utilising it as a platform for exposing the Mensheviks and Socialist-Revolutionaries.

The Conference adopted a decision to establish a Pre-Parliament (Provisional Council of the Republic). This was an attempt to create a semblance of a parliamentary system in Russia. According to the regulations worked out by the Provisional Government, the Pre-Parliament was to be an advisory government body. Lenin emphatically insisted on boycotting the Pre-Parliament, as to stay in it would have created the impression it could solve the tasks of the revolution. The Central Committee of the Party discussed Lenin’s proposal and decided that Bolsheviks should resign their seats in the Pre-Parliament. Only Kamenev and other capitulators insisted on participating. At the opening session of the Pre-Parliament on October 7 (20) the Bolsheviks road their declaration and walked out.

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Kautsky declared that the ideas of the uprising and the proletarian dictatorship were the product of an era when the working-class movement was in a primitive condition. He claimed that the proletariat could free itself only when it had become the majority of the nation and had attained, under the conditions of bourgeois society, “sufficient maturity and civilization.” By January 1973, The Proletarian Revolution and the Renegade Kautsky had been published 116 times in the USSR (a total of 3,360,000 copies in 38 languages). By 1970, it had been published 106 times abroad. REFERENCES.