

The Place of Marx's Manifesto in the Vernacular Socialism of fin-de-siècle Czech and German Workers

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Abstract: Between 1871 and 1914 the *Communist Manifesto* went through 55 editions in German, 11 in Polish, 9 in Hungarian, and 8 in Czech. Its formative influence on the history of European socialism can hardly be denied—but what lessons did the nascent mass labor movements of central and eastern Europe draw from it? To what extent were the rank and file of these movements exposed to it? This paper addresses such questions with particular emphasis on the dilemmas of state reform and nationalism vs. internationalism that preoccupied the socialist workers' movement in the Habsburg Monarchy.

I. Introduction

In mid-March 1903, socialist workers in Austria-Hungary commemorated the twentieth anniversary of Marx's death. The Austrian Social Democratic Workers' Party, by far the largest socialist political grouping in the Monarchy, and one of the largest in Europe, put on a festive event in Vienna's Sofiensaal on March 16th. After orchestral renditions of Beethoven and Wagner, and rousing performances by a workers' choir, party leader Victor Adler gave a characteristically eloquent speech on Marx's significance. "In Marx," he said, "the best that the working class has felt is represented, the highest that the working class has thought; in his name is united that what we believe and what we want."¹ According to Adler, Marx had, above all, illuminated the importance of class struggle and the meaning of history. But he also warned the thousands packed into the venue that reading *Capital* was no mean feat. Adler finished his

¹ *Arbeiter-Zeitung* March 17, 1903, p. 3. "In Marx stellt sich für uns dar das Beste, was die kämpfende Arbeiterklasse empfunden hat, das Höchste, was die Arbeiterklasse gedacht hat; in seinem Namen vereinigten sich für uns alle ihre Hoffnungen, alle ihre Entschlüsse, in seinem Namen vereinigt sich für uns, was wir erkennen und was wir wollen."

address by remarking that the vast expansion of the international workers' movement under the aegis of the Second Socialist International would surely give Marx, were he alive, confidence in the closing words of the *Communist Manifesto* – “workers of all lands unite!” Rapturous applause and more music rounded out the evening.

For politically interested workers who could not attend such events, there were other ways to join in celebrating Marx that year. The Czech socialist May Day brochure, perhaps the most widely circulating publication in the second national largest branch of Austrian Social Democracy, had Marx emblazoned on its cover. A lionizing article by party intellectual František Modráček told readers that, “particles of [Marx's] intellectual activity have scattered around the entire educated world like rays of light.”² The back cover of the brochure advertised the *Communist Manifesto* as one of the essential texts that every thinking worker should own.

But what did Marx and his most popular publication mean to the masses of workers who gravitated toward socialism at this time? What, if any, was the role of the *Communist Manifesto* in the European labor movement's rapid expansion around 1900? As we know, in spite of the efforts of party leaders, few workers had direct exposure to the *Manifesto* and it is exceedingly difficult to discern how those that did grasped it. Yet, I would like to propose in this paper that by examining the evolving culture of the workers' movement, we can reconstruct the *Manifesto*'s important, if diffuse, influence. The lessons of Marx and Engels's 1848 text were profound, even if they were not always understood in ways prescribed by the party elite. For this reason, I refer in this paper to the *vernacular socialism* that animated the rank and file of the Austrian workers' movement. This vernacular socialism exalted Marx, but in large part because some of his ideas and his language meshed with elements of workers' movement popular culture, some steeped in

² *První máj 1903* (Prague, 1903), p. 2. “Atomy jeho cinnosti dusevni rozletly se po celem vzdelanem svete jako svetelne paprsky.”

popular Christianity. The *Manifesto* also contained a conundrum that was especially vexing in Austria and which became insoluble in the last decade before the Great War: the question of nationalism vs. internationalism.

II. Workers' exposure to the *Manifesto*

In the first place we ought to consider the ways in which the rank and file of Austrian Social Democracy was exposed to the *Manifesto*. The expectations and aspirations of party leaders in the realm of workers' education were often much too high. While education was rightly seen as the *sine qua non* of class consciousness, socialist educators and intellectuals were unrealistic about what people working exhausting jobs could realistically achieve. When they started to collate statistics on borrowings from workers' libraries—which virtually every self-respecting local socialist organization in Austria possessed—they were invariably disappointed with the results. In 1913, socialist education reformer Robert Danneberg found that novels and poetry comprised around 83 per cent of borrowings from Viennese workers' libraries and that of the category “social science,” which made up 12 per cent of borrowings, only 2-3 per cent were truly socialist.³ The same went for freelance book sellers, or colporteurs, who were the primary means of bringing books to the working-class public. These peddlers had a strong incentive to sell whatever they knew workers would buy, and serious socialist works had to compete with lurid titles like *Hugo Schenck und seine Verbrechen oder der Frauenmord und seine Opfer*;

³ Jakub Beneš, *Workers and Nationalism: Czech and German Social Democracy in Habsburg Austria, 1890-1918* (Oxford, 2017), pp. 31-2.

buyers of the first edition received pictures of saints as a bonus.⁴ In the last year before the outbreak of war, colporteurs in all of German Austria ordered only 196 copies of the *Communist Manifesto* from the Vienna party bookstore.⁵

The picture was not all so bleak, however. First of all, the ideas of the *Manifesto* and of Marxism in general were successfully transmitted in more digestible media, like Social Democracy's published party programs, the proceedings of party congresses, and, above all, May Day brochures and annual worker calendars, which actually sold quite well. Print runs of German and Czech workers' calendars reached into the hundreds of thousands and sales of annual May Day brochures were reliably over 50,000 after 1907.⁶ Orations by socialist activists also brought the teachings of Marx and Engels to working-class crowds. Rousing speeches were often more instrumental in making listeners into committed socialists than print media. Hearing powerful people's tribunes for the first time was a revelatory experience for many and featured prominently in the "conversion" narratives of socialist workers who bothered to record them. Second, borrowing and purchasing fiction was not always ideologically neutral. For instance, workers in central Europe showed a strong preference for the social fiction of Emile Zola, which reinforced a working-class ethos. Third, under the right circumstances, Marx did quite well. The *Communist Manifesto* was far and away the bestselling publication after two lecture circuits held in Austrian Silesia in 1910; 85 copies were sold among over 700 attendees.⁷ A multiplier effect of buyers or borrowers sharing books among themselves or reading them aloud should also be taken into account.

⁴ Dieter Langewiesche, *Zur Freizeit des Arbeiters. Bildungsbestrebungen und Freizeitgestaltung österreichischer Arbeiter im Kaiserreich und der Ersten Republik* (Stuttgart, 1979), 108.

⁵ Beneš, *Workers and Nationalism*, p. 31.

⁶ Beneš, *Workers and Nationalism*, p. 29.

⁷ Langewiesche, *Zur Freizeit des Arbeiters*, 113.

III. Lessons of the Manifesto

Yet the question remains *how* people read the *Manifesto*, or absorbed its lessons through various media, and in filtered form. In examining the “cultural origins of the French Revolution,” Roger Chartier famously asked “Do books make revolutions?” before concluding, essentially, that they do not—at least not on their own: some prior cultural shift is required to make the content of radical books acceptable to readers and make their revolutionary implications *thinkable*.⁸ No revolution comparable to the French Revolution happened in central Europe around the turn of the twentieth century. But workers believed they were living through dramatic times. Even before the cataclysmic world war and the so-called “national revolutions” that it spawned (many with social revolutionary dynamics), socialist workers in Habsburg Austria regarded 1905 as a revolutionary year. In the autumn of that year, inspired by events in Russia, millions took to the streets across the country to demand universal, equal, direct male suffrage—the centerpiece of Social Democratic political demands since the early 1890s. The government caved in the face of radical demonstrations followed by a general strike. The first elections based on universal manhood suffrage took place in spring 1907, delivering an epochal socialist victory throughout the Czech- and German-speaking lands.

The *Manifesto* surely augmented socialist workers’ sense that they were the protagonists in a gripping story of suffering, struggle, and ultimate redemption. The basic socialist narrative told countless times over through diverse media was rooted at least partly in the basic redemptive scenario of Christianity, which most converts to socialism in central Europe imbibed in their

⁸ Roger Chartier, *The Cultural Origins of the French Revolution*. Trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Durham NC, 1991), chapter 4.

youth. Indeed the word “convert,” widely used at the time, is telling, as is the format of catechisms that many primers in socialist thought took. Comrades spoke of the socialist “martyrs” of the 1880s executed, imprisoned, or driven into exile by the Taaffe regime; in the 1890s they referred to “baptism” by imprisonment almost as a kind of sacrament. And revered movement leaders were often labeled “apostles” of socialism. The anticlerical Czech author and socialist sympathizer J.S. Machar complimented his friend, the socialist “apostle” and proletarian bard Josef Krapka Náchodský in an 1898 letter: “if your destiny had blown you in a different direction, you would certainly be a great writer today. But do not regret that it didn’t happen: the path you tread is better, brighter—Christ walked it, as did and will ever the entire glory of great people.”⁹

Yet now redemption could be sought in the here and now. In the 1904 Austrian German May Day brochure, Max Adler explained, “the May Day of the proletariat is for millions of the wearied and the burdened a new Christmas Day; on this day a new message, a new gospel fills the innumerable hosts of the poor and downcast with raised consciousness: that the time to flourish has finally come. The equality and fraternity that the old gospel could only guarantee to its ardent followers in God is now to be realized in might beauty on earth as well.”¹⁰ The solemnity of the May Day processions with their prescribed liturgies sometimes consciously strove to replace Catholic religious rituals that were still familiar to most workers. What was different, and what Max Adler’s article alluded to, was the ability for the laboring classes to

⁹ Beneš, *Workers and Nationalism*, 48. “Kdyby Vas byl osud zaval jinam, byl byste dnes jiste znamym spisovatelem. Ale nelitujte, ze se tak nestalo: Cesta, kterou jdete, je lepsi, svetlejsi - po ni sel Kristus, po ni sla a jde cela slava lidi velikych.”

¹⁰ Beneš, *Workers and Nationalism*, 46. “Der Maientag des Proletariats ist für Millionen von Mühseligen und Beladenen ein neuer Christtag; eine neue frohe Botschaft, ein neues Evangelium erfüllt an ihm die ungezählten Heerscharen der Armen und Bedrückten mit erhöhtem Bewußtsein: daß die Dinge endlich so weit gediehen seien. Die Gleichheit und Brüderlichkeit, welche jenes ältere Evangelium seinen inbrünstig Empfangenden nur in Gott zusichern konnte, nun auch in machtvoller Schönheit auf Erden zu verwirklichen.”

improve their own lot through action. The proletarian Vienna labor leader and feminist Adelheid Popp recalled that when she first began reading socialist newspapers, she didn't understand the theoretical treatises right away, but immediately grasped the importance of the reportage on working-class suffering: "I learned to see that everything what I had endured was not the work of divine providence but conditioned by unjust societal institutions."¹¹ While she lost her faith in the Christian God, she, "learned to set her hopes in the savior that resides in the heads and hearts of millions, who [...] will conquer the world in order to transform it so that it serves the happiness of all."¹²

Combining rationalist social critique with eschatological visions, Popp's 1915 memoir recreates a tension that is at the heart of the *Manifesto*. Marx and Engels juxtaposed passages of incisive and ironical societal critique with quasi-millenarian descriptions of human history progressing through stages to perfection; historian Gareth Stedman Jones regards the latter as Engels' influence, though it is doubtful whether Marx was completely immune to such thinking.¹³ The "materialist conception of history," of which the *Manifesto* is the first clear expression, is thus also sacred history. Though somewhat contradictory in intellectual terms, this fusion was congenial to the expanding workers' movement of fin-de-siècle Austria.

Perhaps it helped structure the ways in which workers grasped the upheavals of 1905. A reformist political goal—universal suffrage in elections to a bourgeois-dominated parliament—which had, at best, tactical value in socialist theory, took on utopian overtones as workers' mobilizations reached a crescendo in autumn of that year. The Habsburg governor of Bohemia

¹¹ Adelheid Popp, *Jugend einer Arbeiterin* (Bonn, 1991) [orig. 1915], 73. "Ich lernte einsehen, daß alles, was ich erduldet hatte, keine göttliche Fügung, sondern von den ungerechten Gesellschaftseinrichtungen bedingt war."

¹² Popp, *Jugend*, 134. "...lernte auf den Erlöser hoffen, der in den Köpfen und Herzen von Millionen wohnt, der [...] die Welt erobert, um sie so umzugestalten, daß sie dem Glücke aller dient."

¹³ Gareth Stedman Jones, "Introduction," to Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (New York, 2002), 57-63.

reported disapprovingly that, “in countless gatherings the most exaggerated notions about universal suffrage are being spread, situating universal suffrage as a real panacea that will bring to each and all an improvement of his situation and fulfillment of his wishes.”¹⁴ When, on November 5, a glass-working apprentice named Jan Hubač was killed in clashes with police in Prague, he immediately became a saintly martyr in what participants regarded as an epic redemptive struggle. Workers were convinced that their sacrifices in November would usher in a new era in world history. A poem commemorating Hubač in the Czech socialist literary monthly *Rudé květy* read, “from that bloodstained flood/ A beautiful morning arises!/ Let spill the blessed blood/ In the fight for the people’s rights!”¹⁵ Hubač’s blood, like Christ’s, redeemed the working people’s suffering.

IV. The riddle of the Manifesto: workers of the world unite?

If the *Manifesto*’s redemptive theory of history had a diffuse and affirmative influence on the Austrian workers’ movement, its remarks about the national and international organization of the workers’ movement had a more direct, but disputed impact. The most oft-quoted line of the *Manifesto*—“workers of all lands unite!”—was in some ways the most contentious during Marxism’s zenith in central Europe. Questions lingered on whether workers should first organize themselves nationally, or immediately pursue international associations. What was to be the role

¹⁴ Beneš, *Workers and Nationalism*, 109. “In unzähligen Versammlungen werden die übertriebensten Vorstellungen über die Wirkungen des allgemeinen Wahlrechtes verbreitet, das allgemeine Wahlrecht als wahre Panacée hingestellt, die Jedem eine Besserung seiner Lage u. die Erfüllung seiner Wünsche bringen wird.”

¹⁵ Beneš, *Workers and Nationalism*, 136. “Z krvave one zaplavy/ jitro vsak nadherne vstava!/ Zehnana krev bud prolita/ v boji za lidu prava!”

of nationalism? Marx and Engels were ambiguous on such matters in the *Manifesto*. They wrote, “the struggle of the proletariat is at first a national struggle. The proletariat of each country must, of course, first of all settle matters with its own bourgeoisie.”¹⁶ Some pages later, they stated, “The working men have no country. We cannot take from them what they have not got. Since the proletariat must first of all acquire political supremacy, must rise to be the leading class of the nation, must itself constitute *the* nation, it is, so far, itself national, though not in the bourgeois sense of the word. National differences and antagonisms between people are daily more and more vanishing, owing to the development of the bourgeoisie, to freedom of commerce, to the world market, to uniformity in the mode of production and in the conditions of life corresponding thereto.”¹⁷ Taking these pronouncements together, it seems, on the one hand, that nations were irrelevant to the proletariat’s struggle, or at best an ephemeral concern to be in time transcended. But how long would the score-settling with the bourgeoisie take? How earnestly would the proletariat become “the leading class of the nation” and itself “constitute the nation”? How would it then relinquish this role in the interests of international cooperation? Such questions are left unanswered by the *Manifesto*, and perhaps for this reason they constituted the biggest dilemma faced by Austrian, and indeed European, Social Democracy around 1900.

Although internationalism was a cardinal principle socialism in this era, leading socialists in Austria set great store by workers becoming the leading class of their respective nations. This was evident in the myriad efforts to claim national high culture as the birthright of the working classes; not by accident did the 1903 Marx celebration in the Sofiensaal begin with compositions by Beethoven and Wagner, the latter widely seen by those in attendance as a revolutionary prophet. Moreover, for hundreds of thousands of workers who occupied public squares and

¹⁶ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, with introduction by Gareth Stedman Jones (New York, 2002), 232.

¹⁷ Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, 241.

thoroughfares of Habsburg Austria in 1905, national leadership was at stake. Having been shunned and excluded by bourgeois society, Czech and German workers could now, in populist fashion, seize the reins of their respective national communities. The socialist metalworker Václav Kindl fondly recalled filing into Prague's Old Town Square on 28 November with tens of thousands of others; it was a day when "the whole nation stood behind us" and no longer behind the middle-class "nationalist dunces."¹⁸ The day after the 1907 parliamentary elections in which Czech Social Democracy won an overwhelming majority of votes, the Czech socialist daily *Právo lidu* stated baldly, "the nation—that's us!"¹⁹

It was for this very reason that the moment of Austrian Social Democracy's greatest triumph was the beginning of its disintegration. At the beginning of 1906, the Bohemian governor reported to Vienna, "I cannot fail to mention the remarkable [and] conspicuous convergence of international Social Democracy with the Czech national position."²⁰ Five years later, Czechoslovak Social Democracy severed itself officially from the All-Austrian party and 96% of Czech socialist voters sanctioned the move in the parliamentary elections of that year. The so-called Little International was a dead letter three years before the calamity of 1914.

Both the supporters and detractors of the Czechoslovak move could claim legitimacy based on the *Manifesto*. In the vernacular socialism of central European workers, the redemptive revolution that beckoned was above all social, but also inextricably and profoundly national. If the proletariat was to be the gravediggers of capitalism and bourgeois civilization, socialist workers also saw themselves as banishing forever a narrowly elitist notion of what the nation

¹⁸ Beneš, *Workers and Nationalism*, 99. "národní kubíci"

¹⁹ Beneš, *Workers and Nationalism*, 141.

²⁰ Beneš, *Workers and Nationalism*, 136. "Auch kann ich nicht unterlassen, auf die bemerkenswerte Erscheinung hinzuweisen, dass sich eine auffallende Annäherung der czechischen internationalen Sozialdemokratie an den czechisch-nationalen Standpunkt bemerkbar macht."

meant. This too was a legacy of Marx and Engels's most famous work, arguably one with echoes down to the present.