

The Red Vienna Reader

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Käthe Leichter. “The Best Defense”

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The conditions that facilitated Hitler’s rise to power were “an object lesson: in the antidemocratic unscrupulousness of the conservatives of those years, a lesson in the helplessness and fatigue of the Social Democrats..., in the erosion and breakup of the Republican center — months before the establishment of the Nazi regime,” according to a recent commentator. In 1933 few can have read this lesson as clearly or proposed as sharp a response as the Viennese sociologist and activist Käthe Leichter. A student of Max Weber, head of the women’s section of the Viennese Labor Department in Socialist Red Vienna, a researcher, writer and speaker for the rights of working women, Leichter joined the Revolutionary Socialists after the Fascist takeover of Austria in 1934. She was turned over to the Gestapo and murdered in 1942.

Käthe Leichter. „Die beste Abwehr.“ *Der Kampf*, November 1933 (XVVI, 11): 446-452.

“The experience of Germany has shown above all that the heaviest, most fearful sacrifices the working class is required to contribute in the struggle against Fascism are still easier to bear than the sacrifices imposed by unresisting submission.” Otto Bauer at the International Socialist Conference.¹

¹ Otto Bauer, de facto head of the Austrian Socialist Party (SDAP), speaking at the August 1933 meeting of the LSI [*Labor and Socialist International*] convened to discuss a united front against the Nazi takeover in Germany.

The German catastrophe has imposed upon all workers of the world an obligation to review their tactics. This is not merely a question of confirming that any particular turning-point was missed or any particular situation exploited correctly; that a particular decision was the wrong one; that the leaders or the masses failed to show initiative or energy. This approach to critical debate, so commonplace today, grasps the surface appearance of the fascist overthrow of the Workers' Movement but not its deeper causes. Only by conscientiously reviewing whether the causes of many a failure lie deeper, whether the perspective that guided the Workers' Movement from within Bourgeois Democracy in the post-war years is the one that will enable us to fight Fascism — only by acknowledging the inevitable consequences can we succeed in making the inner change required at this moment. Since the counterrevolution will not appear everywhere in one stroke as entirely fascist, the Workers' Movement now threatened by Fascism in other countries has been given a breathing space which, if correctly exploited, will determine if the decisive assault can be successfully repelled. Self-criticism, then, not to produce internal splintering to the point of irreparability but to avoid that dangerous paralysis which we now know can be the fate of even a large, powerful working class, and to gain that ability to act that alone can successfully fend off Fascism.

To do this, it seems necessary to wean the Socialist Movement from Automatism, the belief in the inevitability of economic and historical processes, which over the last decades has been all too dominant. In the progression from Utopianism to Science, recognition of the conditions of historical process in the Socialist Movement was a step forward.² Today, when the Movement should be passing from insight to execution, it's apparent that we were mesmerized by the determining processes and lost our faith in the creative power of the Workers' Movement itself, our confidence in their own ability to organize and act.³ Isn't it shocking when Wels, at the international conference of the Labor and Socialist International states: "We were merely the product of the process?"⁴ Is it fair to baldly let the errors of 1918 slip behind "objective historical factors," as Bauer does in the August issue of *Der Kampf*?⁵ And isn't it characteristic that the time of this first great shock of the world economic crisis, the time to unleash anti-capitalist enthusiasm, has been chiefly spent discussing whether this is only one crisis of capitalism or

² Friedrich Engels, in *Socialism, Utopian and Scientific* (1880), had drawn a distinction between sentimental social movements and movements like Marxism that based their activities on rational theories of historical development. Over-reliance on the descriptive aspects of Theory had blinded the leadership to conditions on the ground.

³ "Determining process" [*Entwicklungsbedingtheit*]: literally, "Condition for the process of development." From the *Communist Manifesto* on Marx and Engels consistently use the expressions *bedingen* and *Bedingtheit* to suggest that historical developments provide the conditions that make change possible, but not necessarily inevitable.

⁴ Otto Wels, Chairman of the German Socialist Party [SPD] since 1919. Committed to the survival of a constitutional republic in Germany, he continued to advocate for peaceful constitutional resistance in the face of the collapse of Parliamentary legalism.

⁵ Otto Bauer. „Der deutsche Faschismus und die Internationale“. *Der Kampf*, Jahrgang XXVI, Heft 8/9 (August 1933, pp. 309-322) [*Author's note*]. Like Wels, Bauer had passed on the opportunity to institute a socialist constitution for Austria after the collapse of the Hapsburg Monarchy in 1918.

the last one, without finding the courage to tell the masses that we, the Socialists, are going to make it the last by releasing all the enthusiasm of anti-Capitalism and reshaping it as enthusiasm for Socialism. For the masses shaken by the first shock of the crisis we had academic explanations on offer, so that they slipped into resignation, the more so as they'd been hurled out of the productive sector and into the anti-capitalist demagoguery of the Nazis, either directly or after persistent periods of unemployment, without a socialist perspective.

Of course we have always contrasted our economic programs with our opponents'; but didn't ours always conscientiously strive to remain within the realm of the possible — from a genuine sense of our responsibilities, of course? But then was any part of what was objectively possible achievable once we'd proposed it? Dared we deceive ourselves, since in this world of heightened political antagonisms it was enough for an economic program to come from us for it to be ruled out by our enemies? Based on this realization, wouldn't it have been a hundred times more clever to lay out socialist demands that weren't going to be met of course, but that would leave no doubt among the disillusioned, especially the downward-mobile masses, that we're fundamentally different from all the others because we realize that nothing can be gained on the basis of this sick economic order except by overcoming it? With our deep-seated socialist awareness and convictions, did we have to abandon the anti-capitalist masses to pseudo-Socialist demagoguery? Yes, they say, but unlike Hitler we didn't want to make promises we

couldn't keep afterwards; consistent with our responsibilities we had to keep asking ourselves what we could accomplish if we were in office.⁶ But isn't just that the fundamental mistake, that we never thought of the power we were to exercise as Socialist power, but from the outset only as that of a coalition government within the framework of the capitalist order? Oh, sure, we strive for Socialism. That was never lacking in our programs, articles or speeches; but it became a petrified phrase, worthless for agitation as long as we never dared to rise beyond the premises of Capitalism in our demands, our programs and our concrete proposals. Less faith in the automatic nature of Capitalism and the inevitability of its cycles from crisis to recovery; more boldness to stress our uncompromising will to exploit the crisis for the collapse of Capitalism; more bold concepts for those economic programs that will shift socialist economics from a fantasy of the future to the task of the present generation: much has been neglected, but not all, and that is our task today.

The overvaluation of the role of Automatism in economic life, at a time when the automatic functions of the Capitalist economy have been disrupted, corresponds to faith in democratic Automatism in a time when Democracy itself is broken up by the class enemy.⁷ The Austrian Social Democrats certainly can't be reproached for failing to anticipate the situation. No

⁶ On March 23, 1933 Hitler had demanded and obtained extraordinary powers from the German Parliament claiming they were needed to resolve the economic crisis.

⁷ On March 4, 1933 Austrian Chancellor Engelbert Dollfuß had dissolved the Austrian Parliament, invoking a technicality.

other socialist program anticipated the breakup of Democracy with as much clarity as the Linz Program of the Austrian Social Democrats, which established, not as a possibility but a certainty, that “The bourgeoisie will not voluntarily relinquish its position of power.”⁸ And yet today we know there is a yawning gap in their conceptualization of the seizure of power. The takeover of the State by violence was to be in self-defense only, conceded only if all efforts to permeate the Military and to take over the State by democratic means should fail. But don’t we now know from our experience of these past years that if we have our strategy for revolution, the bourgeoisie has its own well-founded strategy for counter-revolution? Only at those times when the working class is weakened, either by self-directed political dismemberment as in Italy; weakened before all else by the Crisis, by the depleted potential of the unions as instruments of struggle, weakened by politically unfavorable international configurations, will the bourgeoisie smash Democracy.⁹ The enemy knows full well when the political situation favors them: only then will they go for the establishment of a bourgeois dictatorship, unconstrained by ideological scruples. Indeed, they are all the more certain to do so if they have not only illegal combat troops at their disposal but segments of the state apparatus as well — in short, if the prospect of

⁸ *Linz Program*: published in November of 1926, it threatened a military response to aggression. However, in the “Julitage,” the July Days of 1927, the Party failed to respond militarily to a State-sponsored massacre in Vienna.

⁹ “Self-directed political dismemberment:” a reference to the *biennio rosso*, the “Two Red Years” of 1920-1922, when a widespread movement of workers and peasants in Italy turned against itself.

victory beckons.¹⁰ By postponing our decisive struggle to the time when our opponents smash Democracy, we postpone it ourselves to that point in time in which we are the weaker ones economically, internationally and domestically: when the risk of drawing the short straw is greatest.

Today no doubt, when Democracy's destroyed in large swaths of Central Europe, it feels worth striving for to many. And yet today, while restoring this Democracy is repeatedly presented as our main task, there are many in the Party who feel that was not the intent of the Linz Program; that we are mourning the loss of Democracy while our enemies have already broken up its foundations, instead of confronting them on the ground onto which they have forced us by breaking up Democracy. Of course, back then we were thinking about a different economic and international situation, but that was an illusion, even then. So long as we structure our tactics as defensive tactics against our enemy's aggression we will necessarily fall into a vicious circle that prevents us from fighting, one moment because our enemies haven't sufficiently provoked us, the next because their attacks are too successful. De Man seems to me quite correct when he traces this attitude to an "economic determinism exacerbated by fatalism" with which a "spiritless and passive opportunism is only too happy to justify its flight from the risks of offensive action by relying on political and economic processes, with their

¹⁰ Like the SA in Germany the Austrian Heimwehr were non-governmental militias, technically illegal but in fact closely allied with the State.

natural succession of historical phases that justifies inaction in times of prosperity because the workers lack the motivation to struggle, and in times of crisis because they lack the opportunity.”¹¹

The feeling that for every situation we have our reasons grounded in “objective criteria” to justify passivity makes the working class suspicious of our will to Socialism — and of course such objective criteria are never lacking, either in normal times or in times of crisis. But the danger above all else is, that the masses, too, will lack energy at the decisive moment so long as democratic automatism is shown to be the norm while powerful actions against the enemy are the exception, mere tactical threats in fact. They, too, are getting used to relying on the power of threats alone, and to no longer believe in the use of revolutionary means as a reality. As the Belgian Spaak very aptly told the International Conference:

“It’s a mistake to believe that a party that for years held fast to the rules and methods of a purely democratic struggle, can switch at one stroke to armed defense through extra-legal struggle when Fascism comes.”¹²

Over the past months we have experienced the difficulties in this transition process.

¹¹ Hendrick de Man: „Die sozialistische Idee.“ Diederichs. Jena 1933. [*Author’s note*]. Hendrik [Henri] de Man: Belgian Socialist economist. His commitment to aggressive social planning from above would lead him to collaborate with the Nazis. His nephew was the literary critic Paul de Man.

¹² Paul-Henri Spaak: Socialist lawyer and politician, Prime Minister of Belgium; an architect of the European Union after the War.

Thus an optimistic fatalism emerges, potentially as dangerous as the pessimistic. He who fatalistically believes that Fascism is unpreventable will certainly not summon the strength to oppose it. But he who thinks Fascism is only one form of reaction like many others; that all of this has happened before, that it's not so bad, we need only wait until "our time" has come; he who hopes as well for the internal disintegration and self-destruction of Fascism without the need for the working class to go into action; or who's indifferent to other forms of counter-revolutionary activity because they don't show themselves to be one-hundred-percent fascist — he commits himself to a fatalistic optimism, expecting everything from historical events and nothing from the strength of the working class. But in doing so he practically removes the working class as an active agent in the evolutionary process, an error just as serious as the one that considers Fascism to be unpreventable. Here economic determinism, which only asks what this crisis means and not how to exploit it, has its ideology in the superstructure: in a political fatalism that awaits, fascinated, the coming and disappearance of Fascism without raising the question: "What should the working class do, first to forestall Fascism from growing at all or, should it still 'break out,' to take it down again?"¹³

¹³ In the meantime, at the Vienna Party meeting Friedrich Adler sounded a warning. The turn away from a purely defensive policy was proposed at this Party meeting as well. [*Author's note*]. Friedrich Adler: son of Victor Adler, founder of the Austrian Social-Democratic Party; headed the Workers Council Movement in 1918-19. Secretary-General of the SLI. At the emergency meeting of April 15 1933 he intervened on behalf of the "Left" Socialists, including Leichter.

Is it out of contempt for Democracy that its mere recapture, with its civil liberties and parliamentary system, arouses little enthusiasm? Of course, today thousands are learning for the first time to appreciate the value of Democracy, a condition a hundred times more desirable than a fascist dictatorship. It's the dynamics of the democratic process that's disappointing. According to our Marxist convictions Bourgeois Democracy was sure to work for us too, as a result of the increase in wage labor, the proletarianization of ever greater strata of society who must come to us on the open ground of democratic struggle. Here, too, however, the process did not run so mechanically, automatically. Proletarianization has developed on an enormous scale, but not in the form of a rise in wage work, on the contrary: by ejecting ever greater masses out of the production process; by downgrading the middle strata to the level of paupers, not wage-workers. The outcome of the postwar period, of rationalization and the world economic crisis was not the consolidation of the proletariat but its economic splintering. Social strata emerged that by no means increased the ranks of our movement automatically, quite the opposite in fact: they handed Fascism an opportunity to infiltrate the working class at its upper and lower margins with pseudo-socialist rhetoric. Surely this would not have been so easy without negligence on our side. At a time when the crisis was already well under way we were still basically pursuing policies for the benefit of salaried workers whose wages, workplace rights and social policy we championed before all else. This, certainly, is why you can't reproach the Austrian Movement for not recognizing

the problem: a great part of our energy in recent years has been committed to winning over the middle strata and fighting for insurance for the unemployed. But in doing so we failed to assess either group, psychologically. We were convinced that the middle strata are so tightly linked to the Capitalist Order that we approached them with demands that in their substance assured them of the preservation of the capitalist economy, meanwhile overlooking their gut-level anti-capitalism, typical of the downward-mobile. From the start we held the unemployed to be so revolutionary that we were practically afraid to release their revolutionary enthusiasm and fell back on our belief that our parliamentary struggles in their support would bind them to us regardless. But these parliamentary struggles became more and more unproductive, they brought worsening conditions for which we ourselves were held responsible. Besides, long-term unemployment, as we now know, does not always revolutionize, all too easily it brings resignation.¹⁴ There, too, there was socialist enthusiasm to waken. Wherever we neglected to do so indifference kicked in, the best breeding ground for Fascism. In this way Democracy, if not properly exploited, even with increasing proletarianization can very well produce in place of an automatic enlargement of the socialist ranks the “enemy from within,” “fascism” on the contrary, sustained in the marginal layers of the Workers’ Movement. It’s not Democracy that’s poorly viewed among the workers, it’s the experience of the process of

¹⁴ An argument made that same year by Leichter’s colleagues Marie Jahoda, Paul Felix Lazarsfeld und Hans Zeisel in *Marienthal*, a groundbreaking study of the psychological effects of unemployment.

Bourgeois Democracy in most countries, where as soon as we grow stronger the capitalists bestir themselves to summon their financial resources, seeding a fascist mass movement to overpower Marxism, so that Democracy works against us in the end, all the more so today as our enemies obviously have far greater instruments of power and far fewer inhibitions about distorting Democracy as they please. Once these instruments of power have been deployed and extended to the level of Fascism, is it likely they will be wrested away without the strongest pushback? Most of all, should the working class break free from the terrifying embrace of the fascist danger, is it likely above all, after their previous experience, that they will give their oppressors the freedom and leeway to regroup and start the game all over again?

Thus enthusiastic hope arises in the working class as the end-goal of our struggle against Fascism: not Bourgeois Democracy again but the socialist conquest of power. Thus a strong desire rises as well: not just to seize this power but to guarantee a safe path to Socialist Democracy by means of an “educational dictatorship” [Aufhäuser].¹⁵ When Otto Bauer in *Der Kampf* and at the International Conference took the view that the democracy to be fought for must be socialist, grounded in economic rights, that was a step forward. But that alone is not enough. The altered economic foundation, the

¹⁵ Siegfried Aufhäuser: German Socialist deputy and union leader, opposed the Party’s insistence on purely legal and peaceful resistance to Hitler. “Educational dictatorship” [*Erziehungsdiktatur*]: tutelary rule by the Party in order to prepare for Socialism; not to be confused with *Herrschaft der Proletariat* [Dictatorship of the Proletariat], the cultural and political domination by the working class in the period of transition to Communism.

new form of government, must be secured against the inevitable counter-actions of the bourgeoisie. Power must be asserted by dictatorial means to safeguard against backlash and to avoid the appearance that the seizure of power by the proletariat is a mere continuation of the “see-saw politics” of Bourgeois Democracy in which even a socialist government is infallibly replaced by a bourgeois one; meanwhile counter-agitation against the socialist administration is allowed free play, and only late is the question first raised: why did the working class so “magnanimously and graciously deal with that same opponent at the hour of victory?” (Bauer at the International Conference).

In the August issue of *Der Kampf*, Bauer opposes this commitment to dictatorship, in substance because it might hinder us from bringing over the middle strata. But a few pages later, Dan impressively demonstrates that we have falsely judged this group in psychological terms, and that they’ve been far more likely to be won over with open socialist agitation than with cautious words.¹⁶ And hasn’t Hitler’s ascension actually taught us that the uncompromising will to power, the relentless emphasis on dictatorship, can have the greatest effect among those cast out strata seeking attachment to a

¹⁶ Theodor Dan. Die kleinbürgerliche Rebellion und das Proletariat. „Der Kampf.“ Jahrgang XXVI. Heft 8/9. [Author’s note]. Theodor [Fyodor] Dan: Russian Menshevik leader in exile. The Menshevik leadership held considerable sway in the international Socialist Movement.

strong power?¹⁷ If we are resolved among ourselves to resort to this dictatorship only as far as absolutely necessary and only as a lead-up to Socialist Democracy; to safeguard self-determination in the Workers' Movement, even under a dictatorship; if above all we ourselves do not confuse Dictatorship with a reign of terror and like Karl Kautsky reach for the juxtaposition of Humanity with Bestiality, then we can confidently claim this path as our own.¹⁸ This will undoubtedly strengthen the feeling among the masses of our party members and supporters presently shaken by fears that “the Revolution could go under” again as easily; that a new uprising in Central Europe doesn't mean a new 1918.

And let us not delude ourselves that our enemies hate us for our radicalism in words! “Austrobolsheviks:” that's what we are in the eyes of the Austrian bourgeoisie, not because of the Linz Program or any of our strong words in speeches and writings, but because of tenant protections, Breitner luxury taxes, shop committees and social charges.¹⁹ Our revolutionary words wouldn't have much troubled them, it was our reforms which shrank the entrepreneurs' profits and their sphere of influence in the business that roused

¹⁷ The psychoanalytic theory that followers of Nazism were motivated by their need for attachment [*Anlehnung*] was at odds with Wilhelm Reich's argument, published the same year in *Mass Psychology of Fascism*, that they were motivated by sexual repression.

¹⁸ Karl Kautsky. *Die blutige Revolution*. „Der Kampf.“ Jahrgang XXVI. Heft 8/9. [Author's note]. Karl Kautsky: considered the most important Social-Democratic theoretician in the Second International. His virulent rejection of the Russian Revolution made a united front against Nazism difficult.

¹⁹ Breitner luxury taxes: direct taxes on luxury services and goods in support of Vienna's communal housing program, after Hugo Breitner, Financial Advisor of the City of Vienna and the subject of vicious attacks from the Right.

their anxiety. Even the most careful framing and phrasing of the Party program wouldn't have shielded the German Social Democrats from the enemy's hatred, which in fact was roused by their routine political reforms: the drafting of a new labor law and the administration of the Prussian State.²⁰ If we had to take their counter-agitation into account we wouldn't renounce our socialist objectives, just our routine activities. In fact, we see that everywhere the first onslaught of Fascism eliminates those social gains before all else. So the reformists have run into a cul-de-sac. When they advise us, as is the case in every country, to stand still and not to take a big risk with social institutions, meaningful values, and all the workers stand to lose in a confrontation with the enemy, that certainly, according to past experience, is the surest way to sacrifice these gains. Gradually but purposefully, the counter-revolution dismantles social policy and social insurance, the right to self-determination in the workplace and the right to decision-sharing in the unions, local autonomy and housing policy. The institutions and values that in many ways today limit the fighting ability of the workers for fear of losing them, are most surely lost as soon as the enemy no longer fears a counter-offensive. "The goals of defensive action can only be won by offensive ac-

²⁰ A reference to the *Preußenschlag* [Prussian Coup] of July, 1932, when the German Chancellor von Papen dismissed the Socialist administration of Prussia by decree, paving the way for the Nazi takeover. Germany's Constitutional Court ruled that the decree was illegal but should not be rescinded.

tion,” says de Man. “The principles of Democracy preclude remaining an absolute democrat.” (Irlen).²¹ One might as well say that reforms can only be maintained by revolutionary means and their very preservation prohibits Reformism.²² The enemy’s assault on our social positions will only fail to materialize because he fears us, not because we rely on good-faith cooperation.

When confronting the enemy face-to face one needs to ask uncompromisingly where the gaps are in one’s own ranks. For Socialists today that means many an internal adjustment, painful for those who see a difficult path away from the peaceful evolution of the immediate post-war years, full of hope for those who have always viewed socialist self-satisfaction and rigidity as the greatest danger, and the constant struggle for the right path as the safest guarantee for Socialism. In Germany today this regeneration of Socialism must be carried through under the terrifying repression of Fascism. Let’s ensure it’s not imposed on us by Fascism beforehand, but instead empowers us to repel it.

Translated and annotated by Paul Werner.

Comments

²¹ Irlen, „Marx gegen Hitler.“ E.-Prager-Verlag, Wien-Leipzig. [Author’s note]. Irlen: Pen-name of Boris Sapir, Menshevik leader in exile.

²² Reformism: tendency within Marxism that argued that the historical movement toward Socialism was bound to be inevitable, incremental, and peaceful.