

Reclaiming the Best of Karl Kautsky

Denounced and then lost to history, the radical Karl Kautsky's thought still offers a compelling vision of how to democratize all aspects of our lives.



Karl Kautsky, among the delegates to the Amsterdam Conference of the Second International, 1904. Wikimedia

After the death of [Friedrich Engels](#) in 1895, Karl Kautsky — sometimes called the “pope of Marxism” — was widely considered the most authoritative interpreter of Marx’s thought. Author of influential texts such as *The Economic Doctrines of Karl Marx* and *The Road to Power*, Kautsky was also founder and editor of the review *Die Neue Zeit* and co-author of the German [Social Democratic Party’s](#) (SPD’s) Erfurt Program.

Today, however, Kautsky is mainly read today as a negative example of a mechanical and deterministic thinker. Given Lenin’s scathing work “[The Proletarian Revolution and the Renegade Kautsky](#),” Kautsky’s grandson even recalls meeting scholars at conferences who thought his grandfather’s first name was “Renegade.”

After reading Kautsky’s criticisms of the progress of the [Russian Revolution](#), Lenin was reported to be “literally burning with anger,” producing a text in which he depicted Kautsky as a liberal political thinker who had distorted Marx’s writings. Yet while there were clear differences between the two men, Kautsky’s thought cannot justifiably be viewed as any kind of liberalism.

In fact, during the German Revolution of 1918–19, Kautsky offered a vision of a socialist republic worthy of renewed attention today. His “[Guidelines for a Socialist Action Program](#),” resonates with contemporary discussions on the UK left of a strategy “[In and Against the State](#)” and also speaks to US democratic socialists’ discussions of how to democratize institutions.

Cutting across prominent debates at a time when the creation of a national assembly appeared to stand in tension with the formation of a “council republic,” Kautsky argued for the coexistence of parliamentary institutions alongside workers’ councils.

He called for the transformation of the state with devolved powers to municipal institutions, the rule of law, worker-controlled workplaces, community-directed investment, and a political culture of solidarity and public-spiritedness. It’s a program with much to draw on for socialists in liberal democracies today.

The Original Democratic Socialist

Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels inherited a radical, democratic, republican legacy, expressed in the *Communist Manifesto*’s claim that the working class must “win the battle for democracy.” Such discussion was further developed in the Second International (rallying socialist and social-democratic parties around Europe and beyond) among theorists who debated the meaning of a democratic path to socialism.

As one of the leading social-democratic thinkers and a chief SPD theorist, Kautsky criticized those who sought to separate socialism from democracy. Against reformists within the SPD, Kautsky argued that socialism could not be reduced to progressive social reforms and must include workers obtaining political power and transforming the economy. Yet against the Bolsheviks, he contended that socialists should not reject democracy in the name of some “higher” form of social organization based on the revolutionary [Paris Commune](#) of 1871 or a “state of a new type.”

Kautsky instead strove for a deepening of democracy within existing political institutions and an extension of democratic principles throughout society, including to workplaces and other economic institutions. He held an expansive vision of a participatory, self-determining society in which citizens would play a permanent and active role in all areas of political and economic life.

In an observation with [particular relevance for the present](#), [Kautsky argued](#) that the working class was the most consistent and trustworthy defenders of democracy and the only class for whom democracy was not a contingent luxury:

There are two things that the working class urgently needs: democracy and socialism.

Democracy means the widest possible freedoms and political rights for the popular masses and transforming the institutions of the state and local administration into mere tools of the popular masses. And then socialism, which means transforming private production for the market into social — i.e., state, municipal or cooperative — production for the needs of society. The working class requires both in equal measure.

The important lesson for democratic socialists is that socialism consists of [the widest application of democracy](#) and is inseparable from the end goal of the democratic or cooperative organization of the economy.

A Third Way in the German Revolution

Following a sailor mutiny at Kiel in early November 1918, soldiers and workers organized into councils across Germany, leading to the abdication of the Kaiser and [the German Revolution](#). However, there was disagreement about the future form the German state should take following the fall of the Empire.

In November 1918, the main political cleavage was between the SPD, who advocated for liberal parliamentary institutions and the maintenance of the status quo in the economic and social spheres, and the Spartakus Group and Revolutionary Shop Stewards, who called for workers’ councils to become the country’s central political and economic institutions.

Kautsky diverged from both the SPD and the Spartacists. He believed that universal suffrage and parliamentary institutions should form the basis of the new republic. But he did not see

any compelling justification for restricting suffrage to paid factory workers, which would disenfranchise large elements of the lower classes including many women, peasants, and the unemployed.

Nor did he agree with Lenin that the state could be completely abolished, which he thought would produce a new form of bureaucracy as it did in Russia. Instead, Kautsky called for the state to be radically transformed so that its institutions would be submitted to the will of a democratic citizenry and oriented towards the common interest.

The first steps would lie in the transformation of the standing army into a people's militia, the subordination of the executive to a legislature elected through universal suffrage, and the granting of extensive rights of self-government to local bodies, covering such areas as policing, taxation, housing, and basic social services.

Workers' councils should also remain as permanent centers for the mobilization of workers, to represent their interests and ensure parliament was vigorously patrolled by an organized citizenry. At the same time, democracy must extend beyond the state level itself.

Socialization and Workers' Control

But if Kautsky spoke of a democratic organization of the economy, what did this involve? In Germany, during the Revolution of 1918–19, this was known as the “socialization question.” At the time socialists were defined by their desire to transform capitalist relations of production into new forms of production by establishing workers' control over workplaces and producing goods for community need rather than profit.

In 1918, Kautsky was appointed Chair of the new government's Socialization Commission and drafted several reports on its implementation. He argued that the essence of socialization was the democratic intervention of workers into the economy.

Although workers had equal rights in the political sphere, in their workplaces they were subject to the arbitrary powers of their bosses and had little to no control over the institutions in which they spent the majority of their lives. For Kautsky, workplaces had to be transformed to ensure equal power for workers and democratic control over decision-making. However, turning factories and other enterprises over to their workers would grant a disproportionate influence to those at certain workplaces, over others. Socialization would thus require a balancing of the interests of workers with those of the community as a whole. Some large industries could be nationalized and effectively managed by the government, as is the case with many public utilities in parts of Europe today. Yet Kautsky insisted that socialization need not be synonymous with nationalization and state ownership. Indeed, the other side of the socialization problem was that in a system of complete nationalization, state officials would become a new privileged class with near total control over political and economic life.

To answer this problem, Kautsky proposed the creation of a new form of economic organization. This democratic administration would consist of one-third workers' representatives, one-third organized consumers, and one-third representatives of the state administration, in order to adequately balance the interests of different sections of the community.

Kautsky insisted that such an organization “would be quite different from State bureaucracy as we have hitherto understood it.” Its participatory structures would allow local communities to manage relevant services while providing for coordination across municipalities, where required.

He emphasized that no single blueprint could cover every complexity of how socialization would function. It would need to be worked out through careful examination of the particularities of each case and molded to each country's unique circumstances.

Kautsky's plans were not, ultimately, realized: they were deliberately ignored by the Social

Democrats, who had no intention of enacting them. But while the problems he addressed differ from those facing liberal democracies today, Kautsky shows the importance of workers' democratic intervention into the economy and reveals that socialization need not entail the growth of unaccountable state bureaucracies.

Building a Mass Movement

Kautsky was adamant that [socialism](#) should consist of a bottom-up mass movement which relied on the political initiative and revolutionary consciousness of its members. Without genuine power and control at the base of the movement, it would produce only a deformed revolution susceptible to corruption.

For socialism to be successful it must first build support among the majority of the population. The conquest of political power would thus need to be preceded by dedicated organizing and consciousness-raising.

For Kautsky, these efforts centered upon developing the power of independent workers' organizations such as a workers' party, unions, and an independent media. He considered that workers could gradually grow their movement through building powerful organizations and participating in parliamentary elections. Once a majority of the population supported a workers' party, socialism could be introduced through legislation; force would be necessary only if capitalists resisted these measures.

Kautsky highlighted the importance of two aspects of the democratic road to socialism: contesting elections *and* building a strong workers' movement. He provides guidance to building democratically organized and bottom-up movements capable of transforming political and economic life.

Control From Below

While he may have proposed an overly cautious and gradualist approach to political strategy and been too naive concerning the SPD's true intentions in office, Kautsky's vision of a socialist republic was more revolutionary than is commonly assumed.

One hundred years ago, socialists strived to democratize politics, the economy, and society. The democratic socialists of today have nothing to fear from embracing this history and proposing a transformative program of overcoming capitalism. Acknowledging this history not only continues to create a positive perception of socialism as compatible with democracy, it also evokes a meaningful alternative to [neoliberal](#) capitalism.

The growing popularity of democratic socialists such as [Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez](#), [Bernie Sanders](#), and [Jeremy Corbyn](#) has improved the image of socialism for a new generation. But there is a risk that as democratic socialism receives more attention in the mainstream media, its socialist content will get lost in translation.

The [meaning](#) of socialism has always been contested, but with the looming danger of co-optation socialists today must insist on a bottom line of workers' control over workplaces and a democratic organization of the economy. Without this strong alternative framework, socialism loses its critical power as a force for positive social change.