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When Social Democracy Was Vibrant

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The German Social Democrats built a world of cultural institutions that improved workers' immediate lives – while organizing for a socialist future.

On May Day 1891, over 1,200 members of the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) assembled in Berlin's Ostend Theatre to perform an allegorical production entitled "Through Struggle to Freedom." Afterwards, the crowd swelled to eight thousand as workers and their families partook in a *waldfest* (forest celebration), featuring music and satirical puppet shows. The night concluded with fireworks and songs.

That year's May Day festivities were no aberration. Far from a staid, wooden affair, life in the SPD was a lively, vibrant expression of the party's values. Social Democrats formed gymnastics associations and cycling clubs, choir societies and chess clubs. They organized youth activities, opened grocery stores, and offered funeral arrangements. They set up libraries and newspapers, and organized lectures. This comprehensive lifeworld represented an attempt to construct solidarity and community in the here and now, enriching workers' lives as they collectively built a movement for a better world.

Wellness and culture, the Social Democrats insisted, were not bourgeois indulgences. Nor were they distractions from the class struggle. They were essential to shoring up the strength and capacities of workers dehumanized and dispossessed by capitalism.



A workers gymnastics club in Germany in 1912.

The party's innovations were also born out of emergency. For twelve long years, in the late 1800s, the SPD was officially banned. The socialists, scrambling to somehow keep the dream alive, were confronted with questions that still resonate today: how do you improve people's lives when shut out of power? How do you forge community when any dramatic overhaul of the existing order remains in the future?

Though today just a shadow of its former self — more eager to offer neoliberal reforms than inspirational internal life — the German Social Democrats' answer was to construct an “alternative society.” Along the way, they built the largest socialist party in the world.

The German SPD

Founded in 1875 out of the fusion of two workers' parties, the German Social Democratic Party was one of the world's earliest Marxist-inspired political organizations. When the Second International was formed in 1889 — led at first by Engels himself — the SPD was the natural leader of the collection of socialist parties, providing equal parts inspiration and theoretical acumen.

But if the SPD was the world's first genuine mass workers' party, it also quickly became one of the most persecuted. Prohibition came in 1878, courtesy of the fiercely anti-socialist prime minister, Otto Von Bismarck. Even after the ban was lifted in 1890, repression and censorship were unceasing, and the socialists were widely scorned as unpatriotic and dangerous. “Economically, politically, culturally, and socially,” historian Gary Steenson writes, “the SPD and the free trade unions were pariahs in their own state.”

Building an alternative public sphere was a means of self-preservation and a way to provide immediate benefits to members who enjoyed scant political power. Despite being Germany's largest party, the SPD was essentially shut out of lawmaking and had no say whatsoever in any cabinet or government ministry, which were formed at the pleasure of the kaiser. Their elected representatives used parliament mostly as a platform to circulate socialist views — agitating for an expanded franchise, for instance — and to lend the party a certain amount of legitimacy. Parliament was also seen as a barometer of mass support. Party members gleefully watched as their vote totals rose, seeing an inexorable march toward socialism.

But in the meantime, workers were ailing. So even as the party organized for the socialist future, they also built associational organizations that became a “cradle to the grave,” alternate socialist public sphere.

The desire was for universal emancipation in all senses of the term. Without education, health, and communion with

others, there could be no liberation. And without socialist organizations, the dominant society could further monopolize all spheres of life with its values of competition and chauvinism.

One important animating ideal for the Social Democrats was the notion of *Bildung*. A concept for which there is no simple English translation, *Bildung* encompassed education along with self-actualization: one can formulate a new image of oneself and, over time, attain it through conscious effort. For the Social Democrats, winning socialism meant winning *Bildung* for all — not just the privileged classes. Bringing the working class, excluded and beaten down, into the most elevated realms of society, and exposing them to the loftiest of human achievements, would prove to workers their worth and further prime them as democratic agents.

With time, these institutions and community-building efforts signaled a moral protest against a failing society, where elites weighed down upon even the most modest dreams of workers.

Three Clubs

In the kaleidoscope of improvement initiatives that Social Democrats launched, three stand out as the largest and most successful: gymnastics, choral singing, and theater.

In Germany, the *Turnverein* (gymnastics associations) had long been marked by nationalism. As the nineteenth century progressed and the state began to pursue increasingly aggressive imperialist aims, this posture grew especially rabid. Yet the socialists recognized that the *Turnverein* — the originator of the parallel bars as well as the vaulting horse — need not be the province of reactionaries.

Gymnastics clubs for workers sprung up as early as the 1860s, and in 1893, Social Democrats founded a worker gymnastic union. Three to four times a year, members would assemble for gymnastics and demonstrations, and every two weeks there would be local gymnastics excursions. Usually members would meet at a train station on the edge of the city, then set out together to a lake for exercises and a picnic.

Proletarian hiking clubs were also quite common; a particularly famous one called itself “Friends of Nature.” Its slogan “Free Mountains, Free World, Free Peoples” reflected the desire to awaken joy from nature but also to offer an alternative to the oppressive conditions of urban life under capitalism. The long hours and horrendous living and working conditions that the lower classes faced cried out for restorative physical fitness. To be a Social Democrat meant having access to a world away from soul-crushing work.

Worker choirs had a similar genesis. Choirs had long been the domain of the church, even the military. Their increasingly nationalistic ranks strictly excluded women. But the Social Democrats would not allow the Right to have a stranglehold on this form of community building and wellness. They inaugurated mixed-gender choirs, and formed singing societies.

Choral singing proved an ideal vehicle to provide *Bildung* for those long denied the chance to explore the history of music. The various choirs borrowed as much from the works of elite composers as they did from classics of folk music. Their aim wasn’t to crudely reject all that the privileged classes had produced, but to make sure everyone had access to humanity’s cultural riches.

One of the more interesting socialist-inspired choirs was the Doctors Chorus of Dr Kurt Singer, the official music correspondent of the Social Democratic newspaper *Vorwärts* (*Forward*). Made up of Berlin medical professionals, a majority of whom were women, the group visited jails and hospitals and raised money for the maimed and orphans, bringing social-democratic ideals into intimate settings. Reviews spoke of “glowing faces” and “spontaneous applause” during their performances.

Yet perhaps the crown jewel of the Social Democrats’ public sphere was the *Volksbühne*, or “People’s Stage.”

The birth cell for this theater movement was a subscription-based discussion club of mostly sculptors and bookbinders that met in the back of a Berlin club and called itself the “Old Aunt,” to mislead the police. Out of this gradually developed a revolutionary new concept in the delivery of culture.



A poster advertising the worker's bicycle federation.



The *Volksbühne* in Berlin.

The “People’s Stage” abolished class stratification within the theater: all seats were the same price, assigned at random by lottery, and performances were timed to meet the schedules of the working class. Workers with hearing or seeing disabilities received better spots. Funds would often be collected at the beginning of performances, historian Andrew Bonnell writes, in support of “comrades engaged in the struggle for the honor of all workers.”

In many cities, starting with Berlin, Social Democrats constructed theaters run according to the principles of the people’s stage. The idea was to provide a working-class alternative to the bourgeois theater — where luxury and thespian amusement were limited to the elite — and to complement cultural offerings with extensive educational resources. Lectures as well as free reading materials were always included with a theater subscription. And programming quickly expanded beyond theater to include music, film, dance, and even radio.

Though debates in the interwar period would later stratify and polarize the meaning, goal, and purpose of revolutionary art — splitting socialists both politically and culturally — Social Democrats maintained an admirable balance. One night the people’s stage would host protests against the police and the biased courts; the next it would feature the new avant-garde naturalism of Ibsen and Hauptman.

The lack of antipathy toward this new modernism was also telling. Despite its bourgeois origins, naturalism, observers argued, dared to expose “the intolerable contradictions, to which the present social order subjects us,” portraying the realities of poverty. At one performance of Ibsen’s *Pillars of Society*, the Berlin modernist director Otto Brahm recorded that *Volksbühne* audiences displayed an attitude closer to the “reverence of church” than “Berlin ‘premiere mood.’”

Similarly, the Social Democrats were not against the inclusion of classics like Goethe or Beethoven. Though they sought to distance the party from “approved” cultural goods, the Social Democrats also knew that to reject the past would be to cede the classics entirely to the aristocracy and bourgeoisie.

Piano recitals at lunchtime featured some of the greatest virtuosi of the day, including Artur Schnabel and Leo Kestenberg. It was at the *Volksbühne* where Schnabel performed all thirty-two piano sonatas of Beethoven, a historical first and a personal highlight in his storied career. With such performances, the *Volksbühne* hoped to produce the next generation of great artists from the ranks of the working class.

Even the embrace of the word “*Volk*” in “*Volksbühne*” was significant. “*Volk*,” or people, carried overtones of exclusionary national and even racial belonging. The Social Democrats tried to appropriate the word for themselves, stripping it of its

reactionary meaning and casting themselves as the true defenders of the people.

In many ways, the Social Democrats were the last to hold onto the humanistic promise of the Enlightenment. Though workers at times brought their suffering and oppression with them into the theater, they often came out as flames burning bright with the highest aspirations of all humanity, ready to forge further into the future.

The SPD Example

By 1912, the SPD was the largest party faction in the German Reichstag and the largest socialist party in Europe. Its sprawling public sphere was the envy of socialists around the world. Its electoral support, despite occasional setbacks, climbed ever higher.

World War I ended all of that. Succumbing to the militarism sweeping the continent, SPD parliamentarians voted for war credits to fund the barbaric conflict. Though they initially tried to justify the war as an act of humanitarian intervention on behalf of the oppressed peoples of the tsarist regime — and an antiwar faction soon declared independence from the party — the decision signaled the death knell of the Second International. The leading light of socialism had turned its back on the bedrock principle of proletarian internationalism.

But the tragic demise of the Second International-era SPD shouldn't obscure what the party was able to accomplish. In the midst of an intensely hostile society, they formed, as party theoretician Karl Kautsky memorably put it, an island onto which they could flee together — a “spiritually socialist community spirit,” in the parlance of others.

The Social Democrats' choirs and gymnastics clubs and theaters weren't diversions from the socialist movement. They provided the tools of self-determination, filling in the many gaps where bourgeois society had failed workers and the poor. Kautsky and others in the party knew that greater suffering wouldn't bolster support for socialism. They saw the need, both practically and ethically, to make immediate interventions to ameliorate the evils of an unjust society.

In the US today, athletic leagues in working-class communities are underfunded. Funding for art and culture tends to stream to projects that appeal to a cloistered, Ivy League-educated elite. Radical education is often ensconced in academia. Food deserts prevent the poor from accessing healthy food. Mind-numbing jobs and long hours are the lot of millions. Communities are atomized. And socialist transformation is nowhere on the horizon.

The German SPD, while operating in an environment very different from twenty-first century America, showed that coupling political and economic organizing with cultural élan can yield socialist rewards — and improve the immediate lives of workers in the process.