

✚ KARL KAUTSKY'S *FORERUNNERS OF MODERN SOCIALISM*

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The four-volume *Forerunners of Modern Socialism*, by Karl Kautsky, is one of the most neglected yet important works concerning Christian communism. Only part of this work has been translated, comprising the last section of volume one and all of volume two, as *Communism in Central Europe in the Time of the Reformation*.¹ The German text is far more extensive. Indeed, so grand was the task that Kautsky was unable to complete it,² with the final one and a half volumes written by others.³ In what follows, I begin by outlining the topics covered, before focusing on the way Kautsky deals with both the Peasant Revolution under Thomas Müntzer (1525) and then the Anabaptist Revolution in Münster (1534–35). Throughout, we need to remember that by heretical or Christian communism Kautsky means a combination of rupture and communalism, of revolution and new ways of living collectively. Both elements, with differing emphases, appear throughout his detailed study.

1 Karl Kautsky, *Communism in Central Europe in the Time of the Reformation*, trans. J. L. Mulliken and E. G. Mulliken (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1897).

2 *Vorläufer des neueren Sozialismus I: Kommunistische Bewegungen im Mittelalter* (Berlin: Dietz, 1976 [1895–97]); *Vorläufer des neueren Sozialismus II: Der Kommunismus in der deutschen Reformation* (Berlin: Dietz, 1976 [1895–97]); Karl Kautsky and Paul Lafargue, *Vorläufer des neueren Sozialismus III: Die beiden ersten grossen Utopisten* (Stuttgart: Dietz, 1977 [1922]).

3 Hugo Lindemann and Morris Hillquit, *Vorläufer des neueren Sozialismus IV* (Stuttgart: Dietz, 1977 [1922]).

The Manifold Types of Heretical Communism

The first lengthy volume begins by discussing early Christian communism and then the socio-economic context of the Middle Ages and the Reformation. The discussion of early Christian communism may be seen as a preliminary sketch of what was to become his more well-known *Foundations of Christianity*,⁴ the first full-length Marxist study on the topic. The agenda there he states as follows:

Whatever one's position may be with respect to Christianity, it certainly must be recognized as one of the most titanic phenomena in all human history. [...] Anything that helps us to understand this colossal phenomenon, including the study of its origin, is of great and immediate practical significance, even though it takes us back thousands of years.⁵

The book begins with the person of Jesus in both pagan and Christian sources. Carefully assessing the information in light of New Testament scholarship of his time, Kautsky argues that around this everyday rebel a whole cluster of superhuman stories grew, stories that became the New Testament. He wants to cut through the mythical and legendary accretions and offer a historical materialist analysis. This analysis focuses initially on reconstructing the economic, social, and political context of Jesus within the slave-based mode of production of the Roman Empire, and invokes some key Marxist points concerning the technological limits of such a mode of production and the reasons for its breakdown. From there he tracks backward to offer a history that runs from the origins of Israel through to the early Christian movement. Here again he proposes a model of the underlying social formation, arguing that it was another form of the slave-based mode of production. The final section comes back to Christianity, where he expands on the famous argument concerning early Christian communism, how the movement around Jesus was revolutionary, how that early communism was only a communism of consumption and not production, and how it was subverted in the later

4 Karl Kautsky, *Foundations of Christianity*, trans. H. F. Mins (London: Socialist Resistance, 2007 [1908]); *Der Ursprung des Christentums: Eine historische Untersuchung* (Stuttgart: Dietz, 1977 [1908]).

5 Kautsky, *Foundations of Christianity*, 3.

history of the Church, only to carry on a half-life within monasticism.

To return to *Forerunners*: the second half of volume one traces various “heretical communist” groups in the Middle Ages, inspired as they were by the example of early Christian communism:

- Monastic communism, mysticism, and asceticism.
- Waldensians, in the twelfth century and still existing today in Piedmont, where they hold to the model of Christian communism in the book of Acts.
- Apostolic Brethren, founded by Gerardo Segarelli, from Parma in Italy, who in 1260 renounced his possessions and dressed as the apostles, begging and preaching repentance and gathering a movement around him.
- Their successors, the Dulcinians, under Fra Dolcino of Novara (1250-1307), who was forced to lead the community into a fortress and undertake military excursions, until they were crushed.
- Beguines and Beghards, who lived simple lives in communities across the Netherlands in the twelfth century.
- Lollards, followers of John Wycliffe who stressed personal faith, divine election, the Bible, and were involved in a series of uprisings in England.
- Taborites, a fifteenth century movement that championed asceticism, communal living, and the establishment of the kingdom of God by force of arms.
- Bohemian Brethren, who believed that the kingdom of God was among them in communal life and worship and who had a profound influence on Czech literature through the translation of the Bible.

Since I focus in more detail later on volume two, with its treatment of Thomas Müntzer and the Anabaptists in Münster, I deal with the remaining two volumes first. In the third, Kautsky writes of his beloved Thomas More, who was also the topic of a separate study.⁶ More’s *Utopia* he regards as one of the major socialist texts before Marx and Engels. More too was inspired by Christian communism, which he found in old popular Roman Catholicism and the monastic tradition. Indeed, More was the last representative of this tradition, dying as a martyr. But More also criticised economic exploitation in the England of Henry VIII, offering *Utopia* as an economic, political, and so-

6 Kautsky, *Thomas More and His Utopia*, trans. Henry James Stenning (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1979 [1888]); *Thomas More und seine Utopie: mit einer historischen Einleitung*, 3rd ed. (Berlin: J.W.H. Dietz, 1947 [1888]).

cial alternative to what he experienced. At this level, he was also a materialist critic, thereby becoming the crucial link between older Christian communism and modern communism, between medieval religiosity and historical materialism. In Kautsky's words:

We believe that we have disclosed the most essential roots of More's Socialism: his amiable character in harmony with primitive communism; the economic situation of England, which brought into sharp relief the disadvantageous consequences of capitalism for the working class; the fortunate union of classical philosophy with activity in practical affairs—all these circumstances combined must have induced in a mind so acute, so fearless, so truth-loving as More's an ideal which may be regarded as a foregleam of Modern Socialism.⁷

In this volume too we find chapters on Thomas Campanella (1568–1639), who sought to establish a movement based on the community of goods and wives and anticipated the Age of the Spirit in 1600 (based on Joachim of Fiore's prophecies), and on the autonomous indigenous communities established by the Jesuits in Paraguay in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. However, they were not written by Kautsky, but by Paul Lafargue, Marx's son-in-law. So too was the final volume written by others, by Lindemann and Hillquit. It covers later movements in France and North America, where we find the influence of Robert Owen, Charles Fourier, and Étienne Cabet in the countless communist experiments of the nineteenth century.

Müntzer and Münster

If Thomas More was Kautsky's personal favourite, then “in the eyes of the German working class Müntzer was and is the most brilliant embodiment of heretical communism.”⁸ Volume two of *Forerunners* is devoted to this theologian of the revolution, as well as the Anabaptist Revolution in Münster. For Kautsky, the core of Thomas Müntzer's theological and political position is as follows:

7 Kautsky, *Thomas More and His Utopia*, 128; *Thomas More und seine Utopie: mit einer Historischen Einleitung*, 228–29.

8 Kautsky, *Communism in Central Europe in the Time of the Reformation*, 154.

In regard to what was to be understood by “the Gospel,” he asserts: “It is an article of our creed, and one which we wish to realise, that all things are in common [*omnia sunt communia*], and should be distributed as occasion requires, according to the several necessities of all. Any prince, count, or baron who, after being earnestly reminded of this truth, shall be unwilling to accept it, is to be beheaded or hanged.”⁹

Omnia sunt communia is of course the Latin translation of the slogan “all things in common” in Acts 2:44 and 4:32, the core inspiration for Christian communism itself. Kautsky credits Müntzer with significant revolutionary and indeed communist credentials. The revolutionary currents breaking over Europe were due, in no small degree, “to his extravagant communistic enthusiasm, combined with an iron determination, passionate impetuosity, and statesmanlike sagacity.”¹⁰ Yet this is inseparable from Müntzer’s breathtaking theological engagements, with a view to overthrowing oppressors and freeing those burdened in the name of a thoroughly democratic and communist project.

The narrative of the volume flows from the Peasant Revolution of 1525, through the revolutionary currents and underground work of the Anabaptists, to the watershed of Münster itself in 1534–35. In doing so, Kautsky is careful to read against the anti-revolutionary bias of the sources. Even Luther, whom Müntzer outshines theologically, becomes a suspicious figure. Throughout, the energy and organizational brilliance of the peasants and their leader becomes clear. The real test, however, appears with Kautsky’s account of the Revolution at Münster when Anabaptists from the Netherlands and Western parts of Germany descended on the city and took power. Nearly every other history of the revolution falls into line with the anti-revolutionary bias of the original accounts, which describe a descent into madness under Jan van Leyden. By contrast, Kautsky attempts to construe favourably the situation of what he interprets as a city of radical communists under siege. Seeking the correct path into the unknown, surrounded by forces of the ruling classes desperate to crush them, the Anabaptists did far better than anyone would have expected. So Kautsky reinterprets the austerity and puritan nature of the defenders, the economic need for what has been called “polyga-

9 Kautsky, *Communism in Central Europe in the Time of the Reformation*, 130.

10 Ibid., 110.

my” (of approximately 10,000 defenders, 8,000 were women),¹¹ the desire for peace, and the enthusiasm of those who knew they were doomed. Even adult baptism, a defining feature of the Anabaptists, is interpreted as a trenchant form of resistance against the political, cultural, and theological hegemony of the ruling class.¹²

I cannot resist asking a question here: were the Anabaptists really revolutionaries? Thomas Müntzer certainly was, as Engels and Kautsky agree. The Anabaptists themselves were clearly regarded as revolutionaries by both sides of the Reformation. Calvin, for instance, worked hard to distance himself from the Anabaptists—with whom the Romish church was keen to connect him—and present his own approach as a middle way between the Anabaptist excesses and the stultifying corruption of Rome.¹³ For Kautsky, they exhibited not only the robust debate and struggle of a radical movement in its early days, but also the two crucial elements of revolutionary overthrow and communal life (from Acts 2 and 4).

Theology and Revolution

This grand project on the history of heretical Christian communism, which is really six volumes if we include those on early Christianity and Thomas More, is ultimately indebted to the urging of Engels. It was he who first wrote on Thomas Müntzer and early Christianity from a Marxist perspective,¹⁴ and it was he who discussed at length with Kautsky the need to take up the mantle of a task yet incomplete. However, Kautsky goes much further than Engels might have imagined, especially in terms of his theologi-

11 Astutely, Kautsky points out that they “never got beyond the *search* for a suitable form of marriage” that met the extraordinary circumstances in which they found themselves (*Communism in Central Europe in the Time of the Reformation*, 269–70). In this way he reads the various reflections, announcements, backtracking, and reformulations. This is really an observation concerning all forms of communist construction.

12 Kautsky, *Communism in Central Europe in the Time of the Reformation*, 170–72.

13 Roland Boer, *Political Grace: The Revolutionary Theology of John Calvin* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 9–13.

14 Friedrich Engels, “The Peasant War in Germany,” in *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, vol. 10, 397–482 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1850 [1978]); “Der deutsche Bauernkrieg,” in *Marx Engels Werke*, vol. 7, 327–413 (Berlin: Dietz, 1850 [1973]); “On the History of Early Christianity,” in *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, vol. 27, 445–69 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1894–95 [1990]); “Zur Geschichte des Urchristentums,” in *Marx Engels Werke*, vol. 22, 447–73 (Berlin: Dietz, 1894–95 [1972]).

cal appreciation of what was at stake in these movements.

I would like to close on this issue, concerning which Kautsky makes a telling observation: “At the time of the Reformation, the general tone of thought was not legal, but theological, and, in consequence, the more radical a social movement, the more theological were its party words.”¹⁵ Immediate concerns, notes Kautsky, are more obviously economic: a grievance over corn prices, hoarding by the rich, service demanded by a lord, restrictions to traditional rites of access to common lands, an increase in taxes that were already beyond the means of peasants and workers. But when local protests gain more widespread and organised support, they typically take on modes of expression that go deeper, seeking underlying causes and expressing common grievances. At the time of the Reformation the voicing of such grievances was primarily in terms of theology, but in our own day it may be expressed in terms of particular political ideologies. In formulating his argument in this way, he draws closer to Engels’ suggestion, that theology was a code or language for expressing political aspirations. Yet Kautsky does not quite say that either (and thereby goes beyond Engels): no one language provides the authentic core, for which others are cloaks. Instead, his point is that theology and political thought are both modes through which radicalisation takes place.

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Kautsky, *Communism in Central Europe in the Time of the Reformation*, 220.

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