

Christian Krell (ed.)

Thinkers of Social Democracy

49 Portraits

Translated by James Patterson



Introduction

Christian Krell

Concepts, ideas, visions and practical politics are products of their time. They are shaped by social and economic developments, political events and, not least, intellectual fashion. They are often, however, most closely connected with individual persons. The concept of a social state based on the rule of law is associated with Hermann Heller, the notion of economic democracy with Fritz Naphtali and the idea of a new Ostpolitik cannot be discussed without mention of Willy Brandt. Sometimes individual concepts are even named after their most prominent representatives, such as the Radbruch Formula.

In this volume 49 personalities are presented who with their ideas, concepts, styles of thought and deeds have shaped the theory and practice of social democracy. Social democracy is to be understood here not only as a political movement in the sense of social democratic parties. Social democracy is, on one hand, a conception of democracy at the heart of which stands equal freedom for all and which expresses the close connection between political and social emancipation. This theory has been variously characterised and in detail (see, among others, Meyer 2005 and 2006; Gombert 2014). On the other hand, social democracy is represented in practice by various parties, political tendencies and civil society organisations and thus qualifies as a political movement. This volume encompasses both.

Intellectual or “Vordenker”?

The concept of “*Vordenker*”¹ or pioneer (in the sense of intellectual trailblazer) is as broad as it is indeterminate. Often, people who-

¹ We have chosen to translate “*Vordenker*” in the title of the book as “thinkers” because there is no satisfactory English equivalent. In the text, however, different

se thinking is ahead of its time are referred to without further ado as “intellectuals” (for example, Charle 1996). The term “intellectual” is at least fairly specific. In use since the end of the nineteenth century there have been many attempts to define it, with a very wide variety of meanings. They range from Karl Mannheim’s idea of a “free-floating intelligentsia”, which particularly emphasises the intellectual’s independence, to Antonio Gramsci’s model of an “organic intellectual”, an essential feature of whom is his or her clear embedding in a social group.

There is also a wealth of literature on the question of the role of intellectuals in or with regard to politics. There is a lively discussion of the role of the intellectual in German politics in Hübinger and Hertfelder’s (2000) *Critique and Mandate*. Other works examine the meaning of intellectuals for a specific political tendency, such as von Alemann et al.’s (2000) volume *Intellectuals and Social Democracy* or – more specifically – Helga Grebing’s essay on Jewish intellectuals in the German labour movement (1997).

For two reasons the notion of intellectuals was deliberately eschewed here in favour of the notion of “thinker” or pioneer.

First, a controversial topic that is often discussed in connection with the role of the intellectual is the extent to which intellectuals should put themselves in the service of a cause or even become members of a party and thus be subsumed in political life more narrowly. The dynamic field between the views of Gramsci and Mannheim, mentioned above, refers to this (see also Hertfelder 2000: 13). This way of looking at the problem is a lot rarer in relation to *Vordenker*. And this is important because almost all the thinkers we shall look at here were of course part of the labour movement and unequivocally embedded in it.

Second, a whole series of ascriptions inhere in the notion of the intellectual, often associated with a formal, academic education.

aspects of the German word may be emphasised and reference made to thinkers who broke a path, prepared the way or laid the ground for what came after them: *Vordenker* literally “think ahead”. Thus they may also be referred to as “pioneers” or even “precursors”.

However, for many of the thinkers selected here such ascriptions are, in general, not appropriate and the academic criterion is not apt. Undoubtedly, there are also many academics among the thinkers presented in this book, but there are also manual workers and highly educated auto-didacts, who did not obtain academic qualifications. The notion of *Vordenker* undoubtedly encompasses them all; it is less specific and thus more appropriate for this project.

The example of August Bebel is illustrative: Bebel was not an intellectual or a systematic thinker, according to Helga Grebing (in this volume). With his book *Women and Socialism*, however – which has gone through many editions and has been translated into many languages – he was undoubtedly a pioneer of German and European social democracy. The book outlined a different, better society and analysed the present situation, while presenting the ideas of Marx and Engels in straightforward language for a wider public.

The Functions of *Vordenker*

Thinkers of the kind we have in mind here are distinguished by the fact that they offer a game-changing perspective that points beyond the status quo. Whether this is taken up by a particular group or by society in general does not lie in their hands, however. US sociologist Amitai Etzioni made this point succinctly: it involves “[prying] open the walls in which society tends to box itself and suggest various directions which the freed prisoner may take; which ones are preferred is to be decided by the community as a whole” (Etzioni 1975: 211).

Precursors, to put it differently, are always sailing close to the wind of the *Zeitgeist* “in order, at the same time, to escape its embrace” (Krink 2010: 52). One example of this is the critical engagement with nuclear energy in the SPD. This debate was launched by a number of individuals as early as the mid-1970s, when nuclear energy was generally still considered progressive. Slipping one’s mooring in the mainstream and calling the familiar into question,

or at least giving it a new twist, is not always popular but characterises the *Vordenker*, as Karsten D. Voigt describes:

Anyone who wants to be a pioneer must first be capable of contemplation. Thinking ahead is thus nothing other than a form of contemplation directed towards the future. Thinking ahead causes dissonances with thinking in terms of conventional categories. Whether these dissonances are used cognitively depends on how ready one is for a rethink. Experience shows that such willingness is weak in political parties when what would be criticised as an inability to learn in a changing political context is prized as fidelity to principles. (Voigt 2010: 122)

The writer Max Frisch spoke in this connection, at a Hamburg SPD party conference, of a necessary, but also “onerous assistance” (quoted in Michal 1980: 143) with regard to politics. Despite the sometimes difficult relationship between majority opinions and thinking ahead of one’s time, pioneers thus play an indispensable role for political forces. They pave the way for (collective) learning if the circumstances of the time or values have changed or interests have shifted and political realignment is required.

Social progress is thus not possible without people able to think ahead. For a political movement this thinking ahead is crucial when it is progressive. When what matters is thus not to preserve the present or the “good old days”, but rather to change and to bring about something new and better, ideas about this future are necessary. Thus pioneers not only give rise to a political programme, but come up with images to put it across.

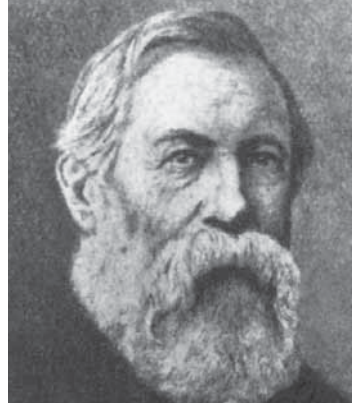
Selection

For the present volume 49 thinkers were chosen who, in some special way, have shaped the history and ideas of social democracy. The aim was to identify those who sought to make things happen and made a particularly important contribution. The selection is

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Throughout my life I have done what I was made for, namely to play second fiddle, and I also believe that I've been able to make my situation quite tolerable. And I was delighted to have such a marvellous first violin as Marx.

”



Friedrich Engels – (More than the) Friend, Catalyst and Voice of Marx

Christian Krell

The desire to overthrow the existing economic order was hardly instilled in factory owner's son Friedrich Engels (* 28.11.1820 – † 5.8.1895) in the cradle. Nevertheless, he was the driving force in the emergence of what later became known as Marxism. Without him the works of Marx (☞ pp. 219-224) would never have been so extensive, would have been less known and would scarcely have inspired the labour movement. At the same time, notwithstanding his own description, Engels was much more than “second fiddle”, but a thinker of stature in his own right.

Friedrich Engels – Reluctant Industrialist

As the son of a merchant and manufacturer Friedrich Engels grew up in a well situated bourgeois environment, although it was not unscathed by the dramatic upheavals of the time, industrialisation, urbanisation and immiseration.

Engels emancipated himself from the religious-Pietist ideas of his parents and discovered Hegel during his stays in Bremen and Berlin. With the key idea of freedom, which supposedly will increasingly be realised over time by reason and rationality, Hegel's philosophy exerted a decisive influence over Engels's thought and ultimately also over the idea developed in materialism that history is directed towards a goal. Later, however, his attention shifted to the driving forces of history. It was less ideas in Hegel's sense and rather material relations that shaped the course of things.

Meeting Marx was fateful. With their encounter in Paris in August 1844 began not only a friendship, but also a productive communion of ideas that lasted a lifetime.

After this meeting the lives of the two men can no longer be described separately. Common locations included Brussels, Paris, Cologne and, finally, England, always characterised by the endeavour to relate scientific insights and political philosophy to the emerging labour movement.

The jointly written *Communist Manifesto* (1848) is the best known expression of this endeavour "to win the European and first the German proletariat over to our side" (MEW 21: 12).

While Engels was active in Manchester as an economically successful and socially accepted merchant, Marx pursued his studies in London. Engels financed Marx's family to a considerable extent. Later on, Engels moved to London to be nearer to Marx.

Engels collaborated closely with the leading figures in the European – especially the German – labour movement. He was substantially involved in the emergence and diffusion of ideas developed by and with Marx and was a hub of the rapidly growing European labour movement. It was not surprising that August Bebel (► pp. 54-59) gave a funeral oration when Engels died in London in 1895.

The Situation of the Working Class – Not Only in England

Engels's scholarly works were based on concrete empirical observation, but were also intended to change the conditions he witnessed.

His empirical social research was pioneering, as his "Letters from Wuppertal" already illustrate.

An even more striking example of Engels's ability to depict social reality eloquently and vividly was *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (1845). In his dedication of the book to the workers he outlined his approach: "I forsook the company and the dinner-parties, the port-wine and champagne of the middle-classes, and devoted my leisure-hours almost exclusively to intercourse with plain *Working-Men*" (MEW 2: 229). He describes the wretched living and working conditions of the workers in striking terms:

these workers have no property whatsoever of their own, and live wholly upon wages, which usually go from hand to mouth. Society, composed wholly of atoms, does not trouble itself about them; leaves them to care for themselves and their families, yet supplies them no means of doing this in an efficient and permanent manner. (MEW 2: 304)

Engels drew his material not only from his own observation, but also from various sources. Sometimes he is accused of methodological deficiencies, but such criticisms are beside the point, given his intentions. What he wanted was to publically accuse those responsible for these conditions, the English bourgeoisie and thus also to reach the German bourgeoisie. He also wanted to show that from a class *in* itself – in other words, from a common social situation – a class *for* itself can emerge, that is, a formation of people who merge their interests and assert them in political action. "The workers begin to feel as a class, as a whole; they begin to perceive that, though feeble as individuals, they form a power united" (MEW 2: 349).

He applies a pattern of interpretation here that was to point the way for his and Marx's further work (cf. Euchner 1991: 162). He shows that social conditions are always the product of the dominant economic conditions, especially private property in the means of production. In this turn towards political economy he was a catalyst for Marx and furnished one of the main building blocks of the socialist theory later known as Marxism.

Voice of Marx and International Socialist

On 17 March 1883 Engels delivered the funeral oration for his comrade. For some years Marx had been increasingly beset by illness and less and less able to work. Engels's importance as the voice of his friend grew proportionately. After leaving the firm Ermen and Engels in 1869/70 he had more time and also a more stable constitution.

He encouraged Marx to continue work on the second and third volumes of *Capital* and represented him more and more in public activities. During this time the so-called *Anti-Dühring* was published. The book *Herr Eugen Dühring's Revolution in Science* (MEW 20: 16-303) provides a concise, compact and above all readable presentation of socialism and the crucial ideas of materialism. The dialectical principle, Marx's political economy and the historical development of socialism are all presented here. *Anti-Dühring* was extremely popular in the labour movement, equally as a "handbook of scientific socialism" (Euchner 1991: 168) and did a lot to disseminate materialism.

After Marx's death Engels's importance as proselytiser of Marxian ideas grew. He put aside his own studies in natural science and devoted himself to the publication of Marx's surviving writings, especially the second and third books of *Capital*.

At the same time, he became an important adviser to the growing social democratic parties in Europe. From among German Social Democrats Bebel and Liebknecht (⇒ pp. 199-205), but also Bernstein (⇒ pp. 60-66) and Kautsky (⇒ pp. 165-171) sought Engels's

advice and sometimes became close associates. He exerted a considerable influence over the programmes of social democratic parties, perhaps most evidently in the SPD's Erfurt programme of 1891.

Engels – From Revolutionary to Revisionist?

“Since ... a flood of telegrams with news of the victory arrived here we find ourselves in a constant euphoria ... 20 February 1890 is the date of the beginning of the German revolution” (MEW 37: 359). Engels was euphoric because of the SPD's good showing at the Reichstag elections in 1890. It seemed that social democracy would grow relentlessly and that it would thus prove possible to achieve by democratic parliamentary means what all the twists and crises of capitalism could not, namely a social, economic and political revolution.

Did the late Engels thus become a revisionist? Someone who did not pin his hopes on revolutionary upheaval, but rather on gradual reforms to improve the situation of the workers? Engels himself firmly rejected this impression (cf. Steger 2003). A revolution would undoubtedly occur. However, as far as he was concerned all means were justified that led to this end. Thus, for example, it would certainly be possible to support other – even non-proletarian – parties in measures that “were either directly beneficial to the proletariat or that represent progress in terms of economic development or political freedom” (MEW 37: 326). In Engels's view, various paths could lead to socialism. With such pragmatism Engels displayed more flexibility than many of those who later invoked him and his partner.

The Spark that Catalyses the Naive Masses

The general presence of Marxian thought in the European labour movement as the nineteenth century drew to a close would not have been possible without Engels. He was, according to Austro-

Marxist Max Adler, “the spark that caused the high-voltage intellectual energy of Marxism to take hold in the naïve soil of the people” (Adler 1925: 13). As a productive and capable publicist, a generous supporter and an important catalyst and disseminator he made a decisive contribution to boosting the influence of ideas, often developed jointly with Marx, not only in philosophy, but also in political practice. Engels himself gave the decisive clue as to how the immense work of Marx and Engels could be productively brought to bear on current challenges. It is not a question of cherry-picking choice phrases from their writings, but rather of asking how Marx would have thought in this situation.

In contrast to Marx, who ever and anon comes back into focus, Engels and his works have today almost faded from view in the German labour movement. This is a mistake because the condition of the working class in many places in the world warrants renewing our acquaintance.

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“
... neither an embittered nor a presumptuous pursuit of women’s rights.
”

Herta Gotthelf – Equal Rights and Socialism

Karin Gille-Linne

Herta Gotthelf (* 6.6.1902 – † 13.5.1963) was born in Breslau. Little is known about her family of origin. Gotthelf was active in the socialist youth movement and joined the SPD at 18 years of age. After a banking apprenticeship in Breslau she moved to Cologne. In 1925 she became an auditing student at the Academy of Labour in Frankfurt am Main. She then went to Berlin and got involved in the work of the SPD national executive. After training as an editor she rose to become a colleague of Marie Juchacz (Reichstag MP, member of the party executive, women’s secretary) and became editor of the social democratic women’s periodical *Genossin* ([Female] comrade).

The “transfer of power” to the NSDAP took place while Gotthelf was in Berlin. As a socialist, political editor and Jew she soon came within the crosshairs of the state. In early 1934 she fled with her companion to England. In London Gotthelf continued her

anti-fascist work under completely different circumstances. Her activities were directed towards Germany: she maintained communications with socialists in the German Reich, was contact person for couriers and refugees, transferred money to Germany and organised help for the persecuted. She regarded herself as part of the so-called “truth offensive”, publicised the Nazi atrocities and tried to get the British to take action against Nazi Germany. Her companion left London for the United States in 1938. In the same year Gotthelf had her citizenship revoked and thus became stateless. She remained in London. When the SPD national executive resettled in London at the end of 1940/beginning of 1941 she was a key contact person and belonged to the tight-knit circle of SPD exile organisations. She was a member of the party executive, the National Group of German Trade Unions in Great Britain and the “Union of German Socialist Organisations in Great Britain”. During the war – and also afterwards – she was able to fall back on her international contacts from her socialist women’s activities before 1933 and the early years in London. In mid-1946, with the help of her political friends Erich Ollenhauer and Fritz Heine, she returned to Germany. At the first SPD party conference in 1946 Gotthelf was appointed SPD Women’s Secretary; a year later she was elected to the national executive (a paid position), to which she belonged from 1947 to 1958. As Marie Juchacz’s successor she led the SPD’s women’s activities with the authority of an elected member of the executive. When she was not re-elected to the executive in 1958 the SPD’s women’s activities experienced something of a substantive and structural break. Gotthelf remained editor of *Gleichheit* (Equality). With her companion, who had returned from the United States, she lived in Bonn until her death in 1963. In 1965 the last issue of *Gleichheit* paid tribute to Herta Gotthelf in a series with Emma Ihrer, Clara Zetkin and Marie Juchacz (cf. [unknown author], 1965: 230).

Constitutional Issues

Gotthelf was already involved in the programme consultations of the “Union of German Socialist Organisations in Great Britain”. Due to her efforts the Union committed itself to combat the restrictions on the guarantee of equal rights for men and women from the “Weimar constitution”. At the Wuppertal SPD women’s conference in 1948 and during the constitutional consultations of the Parliamentary Council Gotthelf was a major source of impetus. She helped the Social Democrat jurist Elisabeth Selbert (■ pp. 306-311) to obtain a mandate in the Parliamentary Council and organised the campaign to implement Art. 3 II Basic Law “Men and women have equal rights”. In this way Gotthelf and Selbert created one of the most important bases of society in the Federal Republic.

Equal Rights and Socialism

Gotthelf worked side by side with male party comrades. She rejected cooperation with bourgeois and communist women in the so-called cross-party women’s committees. She denied that these self-authorised women’s associations had political legitimacy and reproached them with downplaying National Socialism and its anti-Semitic ideology. She also sharply criticised their analysis of fascism, which absolved women of blame (cf. Gille/Meyer-Schoppa 1999: 30 ff.). Gotthelf’s goal of equal rights for women and men both inside and outside the party could not be achieved by cross-party means. In her view, equal rights without socialism were inconceivable (Meyer-Schoppa 2004: 267 ff.).

Education, Organisation and Interest Representation

Herta Gotthelf led women's work in the SPD for 12 years. She organised national and international women's conferences, represented women's policy positions in the party national executive, supported women Social Democrat officials and mandate holders and conducted election campaigns. In 1947–1963 Gotthelf edited *Genossin* (The [Female] comrade) on behalf of the national executive. From 1950 it was known as *Gleichheit* (Equality). The social democratic women's periodical was an educational organ, discussion forum and mirror of activities. Gotthelf produced many leading articles and contributions to debates. She often recalled socialist "pioneers" in the journal. In 1958 appeared the biographical volume *Women Make Politics*, which she had prepared.

As a paid member of the party executive she was an important voice at party meetings and a key influence for many years. Often Gotthelf harried the CDU-led governments, with the help of Social Democratic members of the Bundestag, when they delayed implementation of the principle of equal rights in the 1950s. She thus paved the way for the far-reaching legal amendments of the Social-Liberal coalition at the end of the 1960s and into the 1970s, which replaced the model of the "housewife" with the partnership model (joint decision-making rights instead of sole decision-making rights for the husband, no more legally prescribed distribution of tasks, free choice of family name on marriage, the breakdown instead of the fault principle in the case of divorce, fair legal consequences of divorce and so on).

Position Statements

Gotthelf urged the SPD to take positions on the key issues of gender equality. She regarded it as very important that SPD women's policy was implemented by both women and men. Men were thus represented on the specialist committee for women's issues of the

SPD party executive, which Gotthelf headed, from the outset. However, in the party overall, active support from male Social Democrats often left a lot to be desired, from Gotthelf's standpoint. Interest in changing inherited gender hierarchies was much lower among men than among women in the SPD. In that respect things have not changed much since the 1950s. A serious debate – which has yet to be held – on Herta Gotthelf's positions could highlight gender policy traditions and fractures that would boost both the SPD's understanding of its own party history and gender policy work today.

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“

Socialism is not the abolition, but the refinement of the state. The worker comes closer to socialism, the closer he comes to the state.

”

Hermann Heller and the Social Constitutional State

Thilo Scholle

Hermann Heller (* 17.7.1891 – † 5.11.1933) is among the most important legal scholars of the Weimar Republic. For him, the democratic constitutional state formed the political basis on which a society's development towards socialism could be pursued. Heller understood socialism not as a definite model of society, but as a “timeless ideal of justice” (Schluchter 1983: 120). In the debates on the significance of the Weimar imperial constitution among Social Democrats and legal scholars Heller was one of the most decisive defenders of the Republic.

At the same time, he always pointed to the negative consequences of the capitalist economic system for citizens' democratic equality. The state of affairs that socialism was striving for was not only a “legally-equal socialised” people, but also at an “economically socialised population” (Heller 1971, GS I: 375). The terms socialism and social democracy thus ultimately had the same meaning.