

The Relevance of Otto Bauer and Austromarxism Today

Lecture by Walter Baier at the *Brückenbauer* International Conference

More than a century ago, socialists in Austria were calling themselves 'socialists' because they wanted to create a new social model known as 'socialism'. At their intellectual peak, they set up a school of Marxist theory, which they described as being separate from both social-democratic reformism as well as the dogmatism of the Communist International. It was called 'Austromarxism'. 'Austromarxism' is synonymous with the name Otto Bauer, who was Austria's social democratic leader in the period after WW1. This year marks the eightieth anniversary of his death. In an editorial written in 1926 in the *Arbeiterzeitung* (the central organ of the Social Democratic Party of Austria), Otto Bauer gave the following brief outline of Austromarxism:

"In the second half of the 19th century, a group of young Austrian comrades working in academia started to go by the name 'Austromarxists': Max Adler, Karl Renner, Rudolf Hilferding, Gustav Eckstein, Otto Bauer, Friedrich Adler and a few others. What united them was not a specific political trend but the unique qualities of their academic work ... While Marx and Engels were mainly inspired by Hegel and the later generation of Marxists adopted a materialist approach, this younger group of Austromarxists were partly inspired by both Kant and Mach. Meanwhile, they were at Austrian Universities, which meant they had to contend with the 'Austrian school of economics'. ... And, finally, they were all within Austria's original borders, appalled by struggles surrounding nationality, politically socialised, and they had to learn to apply a Marxist interpretation of history to complicated phenomena where a superficial application of Marxist methods was not permissible. As a consequence, a tight-knit intellectual circle was formed."

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Of the many influences that shaped Austromarxism, one certainly worth mentioning is Hans Kelsen's Pure Theory of Law. From a modern-day perspective, recapping the debate on Marxist theory of the state and democracy that took place between Otto Bauer, Max Adler and Hans Kelsen in 1924 would be worthy of a symposium in itself. But let us turn to 1918, the year of revolution: from the ashes of the multinational Austro-Hungarian empire rose the small Republic called then German-Austria, where, after hopes of annexation with Germany had been dashed, the social democrats were the only group able to consolidate power, as Bauer observed.

Today there is little point in revisiting the argument about whether it was right or wrong to establish a parliamentary and not a soviet republic. Otto Bauer's book *The Austrian Revolution* neatly sets out the arguments for and against. A complete English translation of this seminal work of Austromarxism, which has been acquired by transform! Europe, will be published next year for the very first time by Haymarket to mark the 100th anniversary of the publication's first edition.

Around roughly the same time, Bauer published a brochure titled *The Path to Socialism*, in which he proposed a democratic socialisation of the economy: "We want democratic socialism [...] This system of economic self-governance by the people requires the active participation and keen involvement of the masses."

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The party program authored by Otto Bauer which was passed at the party's 1926 conference in Linz ('Program of Linz'), is seen as the 'ultima ratio' for Austromarxism. It links the commitment to realise socialism through democratic means with a premonition of the danger hanging over the party and democracy itself. It contains the fateful line: "If the bourgeoisie decides to oppose radical social change, which the state authority of the working classes would have a duty to uphold, by deliberately suppressing the economy, engaging in violent rebellion or conspiring with foreign counterrevolutionary forces, the working class would be forced to oppose the bourgeoisie by taking up the tools of dictatorship."

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We know that this threat turned out to be nothing more than illusory: just empty words. But unlike Germany, where fascism was able to seize power through the parliamentary process, in Austria this rise was brought about by the suspension of parliament, the banning of the communist party and the armed uprising of the working class. Bauer himself laid out a self-critical analysis of the situation in an extraordinary book titled *Between Two World Wars. The Crisis of the Global Economy, Democracy and Socialism*, in which he champions a rebirth of the socialist movement using a concept he dubbed "integral socialism". The aim of this is to bring together the two competing arms of the workers' movement: socialism and communism.

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As was the case during the inter-war period, today assessments of the financial crisis that are critical of the capitalist system have to vie against interpretations that are driven by nationalism. On the socialist Left, this led to a controversial debate between Rosa Luxemburg, on the one side, who saw a trend developing in the rise of the nation state within a globalised civilisation that was dictated by the productive forces and should ideally be in step with the workers' movement. On the other side, there was Lenin, who believed that every nation had the right to form its own state, especially as a means to dismantling the Czarist autocracy – with no drawbacks (at least, in theory). With their concept of "national-cultural autonomy", with which they wanted to realise equal standing for all nations within a democratic, multinational state, the Austromarxists, Otto Bauer and Karl Renner, occupied the central ground.

However, the plausibility of each of these arguments should not belie the fact that, in historical terms, none of the three were to last. This can be generally explained with the contingency of national problems that almost always resulted in the failure of previously developed solutions.

However, the tragic political failings of Austromarxism when it was applied at two turning points in Austria's history (in 1918 and 1938), is also attributable to its main proponents: to Renner and to his obsession with the state, which is difficult to comprehend for anyone who is not a legal professional; and to Bauer, because of his tendency towards German nationalism, which was a common thread throughout his writings.

After 1945, the Austromarxist argument vanished from the discourse in Austria. This was partly due to the trauma of February 1934. The Social Democratic Party, which re-emerged as the Socialist Party, has shifted to the right. Otto Bauer, Max Adler and Rudolf Hilferding died in exile; Friedrich Adler, who continued to lean towards German nationalism even after the Moscow Declarations, was unable to play any further role in Austrian politics. And Karl Renner became a staunch defender of the West and its arguments during the Cold War. In spite of his tragic but key role in the interwar period, Otto Bauer was soon forgotten, even by his own party.

We should keep his memory alive as we do for Rosa Luxemburg and Antonio Gramsci, not because it is a way to generate ideas for how to solve the problems of today and tomorrow but because their theories reflect social and political struggles that were created by our current living conditions.