The Contemporary Lessons of Kautsky’s The Road to Power by Phil Sharpe

Kautsky’s ‘The Road to Power’ is his most radical expression of strategy in relation as to how the domination of capitalism can be replaced by the political actions of the revolutionary party and working class.(1) His approach is based on reconciling the role of the objective and the subjective in terms of the connection of the material conditions of the level of development of the productive forces of capitalism with the generation of the conscious aspiration for socialism: “Marx and Engels recognized that revolutions are not made at will. They come with inevitable necessity, when the conditions which render them necessary exist, and are impossible so long as those conditions, which develop gradually, do not exist. Only where the capitalist methods of production are highly developed is there the possibility of using the power of the state to transform capitalistic property in the means of production into socialistic property. On the other hand, the possibility of capturing and holding the state for the proletariat only exists where the working class has grown to great proportions, is in large part firmly organized, and conscious of its class interests and its relation to state and society.”(2)

The crucial point being made is that the very growth of capitalism also promotes the class struggle against the system and the generation of conscious working class awareness of the importance of the class struggle. It is the task of the Socialist Party to unify the struggles occurring against aspects of capitalism into one unified mass movement that will be able to be able to take part in the ‘great final battle for the conquest of political power’.(3) However it could be argued that it was the importance of empirical events that undermined the possibility for the success of this strategy. The majority of the Social Democratic Party preferred to accommodate to the imperialist state of Germany and support its militaristic aims.(4) Furthermore the organic or evolutionist approach of Kautsky did not explain the importance of sudden events or the prospect of revolutionary transformations that did not correspond to his conception of historical materialism. Hence his approach could not comprehend the events in Russia in 1917. Instead Rosa Luxemburg could understand these developments in a more explanatory manner because she was able to pose the importance of historical necessity in terms of the catastrophic outcomes of socialism or barbarism.(5)

However does the development of the First World War and its revolutionary aftermath imply that Kautsky’s approach had become invalid? Kautsky was aware of the problems created by capitalist expansion such as imperialism and war. This aspect was incorporated into his pamphlet. However the point he was making is that the most favourable conditions for the process of transition to socialism occur when the objective aspects (material) interact with the subjective (class struggle). In other words the economic development of capitalism intensifies the class antagonism located in the relations of production and therefore promotes the struggle for socialism. Hence Kautsky would consider that the following view of Althusser was a one-sided distortion of his approach: “We also find the finality that was the delight of the Second International’s evolutionism……the regulated, ‘progressive’ succession of the modes of production, tending towards the end of class society. Is it any wonder that there is no mention at all of class struggle, since everything is apparently regulated by the play of the ‘correspondence’ and subsequent contradiction between content (the productive forces) and form (relations of production)?”(6) This view would be a caricature of his standpoint because Kautsky is not trying to deny the importance of the class struggle in terms of the emphasis on the significance of the productive forces and is instead trying to understand its context. Indeed he is arguing that the actual generation of the productive forces is the cause of the intensification of the class antagonisms because it means the promotion of the importance of the numerical strength and collective development of the working class. Thus he argues the prospect of the victory of socialism is because of the connection between ‘the extension of capitalism and therewith of the proletarian class struggle’.(7) Consequently Kautsky’s actual intention is to explain why class struggle can be successful in terms of the realisation of socialism because of the favourable tendencies created by the expansion of the productive forces.

Hence the suggestion is that the greater the development of the productive forces the more intolerable becomes the relations of production between wage labour and capital. The enhanced strength of the working class promotes a consciousness that the socialist alternative is possible and necessary. At a political level the result of the progress of the productive forces is class polarisation between the supporters of capital or labour. Hence every governmental crisis poses the issue of whether the situation has become feasible to create a new proletarian government. The major alternative to this perspective is the reformist approach that considers that reform of the capitalist system is the alternative to revolution. Concessions in relation to length of the working day and in terms of welfare suggest that improvement of the existing system is preferable to its replacement by a revolutionary government. But the formation of coalition between revolutionary and capitalist parties would dilute the aims of the former and enhance the interests of the latter. This does not mean that reforms should not be welcomed but this development of reforms should not be at the expense of the strategic principles of the revolutionary party. Only opposition to the government of the bourgeoisie can be principled because any coalition that is formed is still based on the ability of the state to act in the interests of capital. Hence: “A proletarian party which shares power with a capitalist party in any government must share the blame for any acts of subjection of the working class.”(8)

This lesson would be timely in relation to any temptation for revolutionary forces to support any future Labour government given the effective relationship of this government to the interests of capital. It is true that Left Unity has rejected the prospect of involvement in a coalition with the Labour Party but an alliance could still be constructed that is without organisational form. The point being made by Kautsky is that the truly principled revolutionary party should not be accountable to the party of reform in any sense because that situation would express a dependent relationship to capital. Only a difference of policy and programme would effectively differentiate between the party of reform and the revolutionary party. The party of reform would be a party that is pro-capitalist and so inclined to support alliances and coalitions with the party of the bourgeoisie. In contrast the revolutionary party would reject any governmental or programmatic alliance with the party of reform in the name of the principles and strategy of the class struggle. This differentiation does not deny the necessity of specific agreement between reformists and the revolutionaries in the name of realising particular measures of reform. But governmental coalitions and adaptation to the programme of the reformists should be rejected in the name of the class struggle.

In other words Kautsky’s approach is not based on concessions to the forces of class collaboration. His utilisation of historical materialism is not in order to justify an evolutionary alternative to the role of the class struggle. Instead he is trying to establish the connection between the objective development of capitalism and the intensification of the class struggle. Hence the development of the productive forces is an integral aspect as to why the relations of production promote the class struggle. This is because the growth of the productive forces promotes the collective ability of the working class to challenge the domination of capital within the relations of production. The result is the intensification of the class struggle and so the revolutionary party should resist the influence of reformism to dilute its aims and objective of socialism. Instead the strategy should be to bring the class struggle to a successful conclusion by the overthrow of the economic and political power of capital. This means the reformist adaptation to capital is unprincipled. In this context Kautsky does not deny that immediate and abrupt new developments could advance the prospect of revolution such as a war between France and Germany. The struggle for peace led by Social Democracy could result in revolution. But this development is not an inherent aspect of the tendencies of capitalism. In contrast, the prospect of revolution caused by the intensification of class antagonisms is inevitable.(9) What is not explained is whether the development of war is itself the outcome of the process of economic and social development and growing class contradictions.

It was the failure in 1914 by Kautsky to make this conclusion that war was the expression of capitalism which diluted his stance to one of peace without annexations. On the one hand the left radicals led by Luxemburg opposed the war as reactionary and imperialist because it was the outcome of capitalist development. On the other hand the left centrists like Kautsky had an ambiguous policy: “By contrast, the left centrists tried until mid 1915 to uphold the ambiguous pre-war position of the party. On the one hand, they recognized the right of the German nation to defend itself; up to that point they were prepared to support the war effort. On the other hand, they regarded the war effort as imperialist in origin, and fought against any expansion of Germany’s territory.”(10) However Kautsky in ‘The Road to Power’ did not make concessions to the standpoint of national defence and instead outlined how war between German imperialism and France would be the basis of a perspective of peace and the advance of the prospect of revolution. What was problematic was that he sometimes in this pamphlet considered war as an exception that did not correspond to the laws of historical development. It was not connected to the logic of class struggle and so the possibility was that a flexible policy – such as national defence – could be adopted without it being a betrayal of the perspective of the aim of socialism. Only the connection of war to capitalist development and the role of class struggle could avoid this tendency for national opportunist reasoning. But in 1909 Kautsky generally upheld a principled formulation about the relation between war, revolution, and the struggle for peace. Only in 1914 did he tend to uphold and promote the opportunist alternative located within his tendency towards empiricism.

What is important to reject in the approach of Kautsky is his tendency towards deterministic inevitability. He argues that the reformist conception that capitalism is gradually evolving into socialism is false because of the intensification of the polarisation between capital and labour but he concludes this viewpoint in terms of the perspective that the victory of labour over capital is inevitable: “So it is that this gradual growth into Socialism is really a gradual growth into great struggles that shatter the very base of the state, that is growing more violent, and that can end only with the overthrow and expropriation of the capitalist class. It must so end, because the working class is indispensable for society. It may be temporarily defeated, but it can never be destroyed. The capitalist class, on the contrary, has become superfluous. The first great defeat that it receives for control of the state must lead to its complete and utter collapse.”(11)

This comment is not false to the extent that it acknowledges the reality of great class struggles as an important aspect of the relations between capital and labour. But this is precisely why the demise of capitalism has not been inevitable because the forces of capital have tended to be the victors in the major class conflicts that have taken place in the 20th century. Hence the supporters of capital have not ideologically recognised their apparently increasingly superfluous role within the relations of production and have instead acted to uphold the system despite its increasing economic contradictions. Instead it has been the working class that has expressed the sense that it is increasingly less important to economic activity, and the ideology of defeatism has become influential concerning the prospect of victory over capital. This apparent weakness of the condition of the working class has been manifested by the generation of the triumphant bourgeois perspective about the end of history. However it can be said with confidence that the class struggle cannot be transcended as long as capital is dominant and instead class conflict will still be intense. Consequently the prospect that capitalism can be overcome and replaced by socialism is still possible, but it would be dogmatic to define this possibility in terms of inevitability. Instead it would be more accurate to consider that history is open-ended and so socialism is possible and not inevitable. This does not mean that conceptions of the increasing importance of labour to the production process are false rather that the connection between the growing influence of labour within the relations of production and the prospect of socialism has not been established by historical events. Hence we cannot argue convincingly that there is a historical law that generates the prospect of the inevitability of socialism. Instead we can agree with Kautsky that capitalism results in intense class struggle and this means that socialism becomes a possibility. In this context the conception of inevitability is a dogma that has been falsified by the very history of capitalism. But it is also a dogma to consider the present situation of the supremacy of capital over labour as inevitable and instead we would have to view history as the contingent outcome of the balance of class forces. Kautsky justifies his position of inevitable success by suggesting that the very intensification of class conflict will create a logic that results in the overthrow of capitalism. However actual historical events have indicated that whilst capitalism has generated mass struggles that have had a revolutionary dynamic the result has not been the successful realisation of socialism. It has been possible for the ruling class to virtually accept the demise of capitalism because of the strength of the mass movement of the working class, as in France 1968, and yet this successful development has not been realised. The influence of reformist parties has been crucial for understanding why in certain favourable circumstances the overthrow of capitalism has not occurred.

Kautsky has an inkling of what could happen if the employers organised in order to oppose the collective struggle of the working class. He implies that they could represent a powerful opposition to the prospect of socialism. But he does not think that this development could undermine the realisation of the historical process and its generation of the success of the class struggle in favour of the working class. Indeed he argues that only the irrational view that the ‘will’ can overcome the logic of the maturing of the historical conditions for socialism is able to represent an alternative to the Marxist conception of history. He argues the role of the will is not an expression of representing complete freedom of the will and is instead something that is connected to objective historical conditions. Hence the capitalist has the will to make profits at the expense of competitors and the worker has the will to strive for higher wages. These competing wills explain the class struggle. It is necessary to also acknowledge that the importance of these wills is defined by strength that is established by a role in the production process. Will that lacks strength cannot result in durable success and instead generates illusions that are not realised. However the existence of actual strength can only promote success if it is connected to the generation of a will that is determined to realise victory over an adversary. Hence the task of Marxists is to promote the strength of the working class so that it also creates the will that believes success in the class struggle can be realised. The role of Marxism is to advance a strategy that can unite the strength and will of the working class and so create a consciousness and confidence of the possibility to overcome the domination of capital: “As a SOCIAL process, therefore, the class struggle is for a long time an unconscious process. As such it is laden with all the waste of energy inherent in all unconscious processes. Only through a RECOGNITION of the social process, its tendencies or aims can this waste be ended, the strength of the proletariat concentrated, the workers brought together into great organizations united upon a common aim, with all personalities and momentary actions subordinated to the permanent class interests, and those interests, in turn, placed at the service of the collective social evolution.”(12)

The point is that the maximum realisation of the collective will of the working class is based on the relationship between theory and practice. In the period of the emergence of capitalism the strength of the working class is often weak and its will is only in its infancy because of this situation. The result is the capitalist class is often very powerful in relation to the working class but the struggle for improved conditions starts to change this situation. But what results in a significant development is when the forces of Marxism are able to influence the activity of the working class and so the sense of strength is complemented by the will that recognises that the class struggle can bring about the prospect of socialism. Kautsky is not suggesting that Marxist theory is sufficient in order to generate the will that represents the aspiration for socialism. On the contrary the will would be feeble and unsure of its capacity unless it interacts with the development of the collective strength of the working class via the role of struggle. In this context the role of Marxism is to develop a perspective that will promote the progress of the working class in struggle, and in this manner the will for socialism is also generated. However this does not mean that the economic struggle is the primary means of connecting the strength and will of the working class for socialism because this interaction is generated most dynamically by the parliamentary process and the continual political victories of the Socialist party in electoral terms. This situation ultimately means the realisation of the political power of the working class, and the powerful logic of this unity between the strength and will of the working class means that the attempts of the ruling class to undermine the realisation of the political power of the working class will be in vain.

This strategy is based on Kautsky’s interpretation of historical materialism. It is a perspective that expresses the unity between the objective process and the conscious will of the working class. However it does not maintain in a principled manner a conception of the self-emancipation of the working class because in the last analysis justification is provided for the view that the economic struggle of the workers is only secondary and transitional to the political and Parliamentary aspect of the realisation of socialism. It is this apparent neglect of the role of the class struggle in all its aspects that results in critics of Kautsky like John Holloway suggesting his approach neglects the role of the subject: “The basic feature of scientific socialism is its assumption that science can be identified with objectivity, with the exclusion of subjectivity. This scientific objectivity…….is understood to refer to the course of social development: there is a historical movement which is independent of people’s will. It is also taken to refer to the knowledge which we (Marxists) have of this historical movement: Marxism is the correct ‘discovery’ of the objective laws of motion that govern social development. In each of these two axes, the objectivity shapes the understanding of the subject and object.”(13)

As outlined above this view would represent an unfair comment about Kautsky’s conception of historical development but it is understandable given that Kautsky ultimately reduced the class struggle to an issue about the level of success of the socialist party in electoral terms. He does recognise the importance of the economic class struggle but he also reduces this to being an expression of the role of the electoral dynamic of the process of transition to socialism. Kautsky does not deny the importance of the subject and has a conception of the relationship between the objective and subjective in terms of the connection between the productive forces and the strength of the will. The will represents the role of the subject in terms of conscious class struggle. However the working class is ultimately only a secondary aspect of this subject because what is primary in strategic terms is the importance of the election victory of the Socialist party. This is what is crucial in relation to the prospect of the transition to socialism. Kautsky himself does not consider that the party has substituted itself for the activity of the working class because he maintains that the election of the Socialist party to political power is an expression of the dynamic character of labour in its conflict with capital. The party is identical to the class and articulates its aspirations in the objective of socialism which is realised by the means of a Parliamentary majority. However some would argue that this strategy effectively affirms that the role of the party is primary in the process of historical transformation. The working class acts as mass support or as cheerleaders for the party. This is one of the first conceptions of party revolution, and the role of the mass strike or economic struggle of the working class is to promote the prospect of the realisation of the electoral majority of the Socialist Party. Hence the party becomes the subject of history. However in his analysis of the class struggle Kautsky has also a rival understanding of the role of the working class as the subject of the class struggle in terms of the dynamism of the will of labour that is realised in the conflict with capital. It is ultimately the collective strength of the working class, as expressed by its will, which enables the prospect of the electoral majority of the Socialist Party to be realised. Consequently Kautsky outlines and defends two rival conceptions of the role of the subject in the class struggle.

But Kautsky elaborates this strategic approach in a controversial manner in that he also argues that the party does not attempt to realise revolution. Instead revolution is the outcome of a situation that cannot be anticipated: “The Socialist party is a revolutionary party, but not a revolution-making party. We know that our goal can be attained only through a revolution. We also know that it is just as little in our power to create this revolution as it is in the power of our opponents to prevent it. It is no part of our work to instigate a revolution or prepare the way for it. And since the revolution cannot be arbitrarily created by us, we cannot say anything whatever about when, under what conditions, or what forms it will come. We know that the class struggle between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat cannot end until the latter is in full possession of the political powers and has used them to introduce the Socialist society. We know that this class struggle must grow both extensively and intensively. We know that the proletariat must continue to grow in numbers and to gain its moral and economic strength, and that therefore its victory and the overthrow of capitalism is inevitable. But we have only the vaguest conjectures as to when and how the last decisive blow in the social war will be struck.”(14)

This comment would seem to be paradoxical given that Kautsky has already indicated that an electoral majority of the Socialist Party would enable it to introduce socialism because of the assumption of political power by the forces of revolutionary change. It would seem that the issue of when the revolution could be realised in a democratic country is established by the prospect of establishing an electoral majority. Kautsky is also quite explicit that the importance of elections can indicate the relative strength of the working class in relation to the supporters of capital and so it is possible to avoid any adventurist actions that could only end in defeat for the adherents of socialism. Only when an electoral majority is secured should the Socialist Party take action to introduce socialism. This process of change can be assisted by the role of strikes and demonstrations that also indicate the level of strength of the forces supporting the Socialist Party. However despite this definite conception of when the process of transition to socialism can be realised, Kautsky still insists that the Socialist party is not revolution-making. What he seems to imply with that view is that the Socialist party should not be provoked into making an insurrection that involves the utilisation of violence. It is possible that the hostile reaction of the ruling class to the success of the Socialist Party will be to provoke civil war and this could result in a premature attempt to seize power by the advocates of revolution. Kautsky is not actually concerned with this prospect of a mass uprising and is instead more critical of the isolated actions of anarchists. Hence he does not entirely rule out the possibility of mass struggle leading to an attempt at revolution via civil war but he suggests that in a democratic country this type of action is contrasted with the more effective method of the utilisation of elections.

Thus the historical materialist reasons that he provides for the fact that the party is not revolution-making contradicts the understanding that the balance of class forces is established by the level of electoral success. The greater the level of votes for the Socialist Party the closer is the prospect of the revolutionary transformation of society. Consequently the conception that the party is not revolution making is defined by the instruction that the party and class should exercise peaceful restraint and should allow the electoral success to continue until victory is obtained. This perspective does not explain what would happen if electoral success ceased, or what would happen if the ruling class launched civil war. But presumably the very mention of civil war would imply that the strategy and tactics of the revolutionary forces would have to change if capitulation was not to occur given the situation of ruling class opposition to the peaceful transition to socialism. It would be an abdication of responsibility if the Socialist Party was to allow the ruling class to gain a victory over the working class by the use of the threat of force. In this situation the Socialist Party would have no option than to become a revolution making party. But until that time occurred the party would have to emphasise moderation and restraint in order not to provide the ruling class with an excuse to use counterrevolutionary violence.

It could be argued that the Socialist Party may become so committed to the electoral system that it would become reluctant to consider any other tactical options in changing circumstances. (This is what actually happened in relation to the history of Social Democracy) Rosa Luxemburg has a different strategic approach. Her starting point is the consideration of how to connect the immediate objectives of the working class with the goal of socialism. This means a rejection of what she considered to be the passive approach of Kautsky, of waiting for a revolutionary situation to arise and instead the role of the party should be to promote the class consciousness and will of the workers to engage in struggle. This dynamic indicates the limitations of capitalism and establishes the importance of the socialist alternative. Hence she argues that: “Of course not even the current tactics of social democracy consists of waiting for the development of capitalist contradictions to reach their peak …..On the contrary having recognized the direction of a development, we base ourselves on it and but in our political struggle we then push its consequences to its extreme and therein lies the essence of revolutionary tactics.”(15) For example it was not effective and principled to passively accept the undemocratic character of the electoral system in Germany. Instead it was necessary to carry out militant mass action in order to realise a democratic republic. In this manner it would be the development of a mass movement that would be the criteria of success instead of accepting the limited character of the role of the trade unions combined with the Parliamentary struggle. Instead mass strikes would connect the political and economic aspects of the class struggle into one united action. The sectional character of trade union struggle would be overcome and so would the passivity of the electoral tactic. In this manner the mass strike would advance the prospects of both the democratic republic and the possibility of advance towards socialism: “As soon as a period of revolutionary struggles commences, that is, as soon as the masses appear upon the scene of conflict…….in a revolutionary mass action the political and economic struggles are one, and the artificial boundary between trade union and Social Democracy as two separate, wholly independent forms of the labour movement, is simply swept away…….There are not two different class struggles of the working class, an economic and political one, but only one class struggle, which aims at one and the same time at the limitation of capitalist exploitation within bourgeois society, and at the abolition of exploitation together with bourgeois society itself.”(16)

The point being made by Rosa Luxemburg is that only the actual self-activity of the working class can promote the prospect of change within society whether it is the realisation of the democratic republic or the socialist transformation of society. Hence the role of the party is to guide and provide perspectives for this type of struggle in terms of advocating tactics that enhance the prospect to realise the maximum potential of the mass movement. Consequently it is the rejection of these tasks to be satisfied with the view that the party is not revolution making. Instead of justification of this passivity it is the role of the party to promote the prospect of the mass strike and to provide arguments as to why this approach can change the balance of class forces within society. It will be the success of the mass strike that represents the strength of the supporters of socialism within society. In this context parliamentary struggle is not the primary expression of the prospect of socialism and is instead a complement to the role of the mass strike. In contrast, Kautsky would consider the mass strike as being complementary to the Parliamentary struggle.

Possibly in order to oppose Luxemburg’s conception of the mass strike as the criteria by which we can measure the level of strength of the possibility for socialism, Kautsky outlined alternative premises. Firstly, that the majority of the people are opposed to the regime. Secondly, there is a mass party opposed to the regime. Thirdly, this party must have the support of the majority of the people. Fourthly, confidence in the state apparatus by its traditional institutions must be declining. He utilises statistics in order to indicate the increasing economic development of the working class and the growing political popularity of the Socialist Party, but what is lacking is a crisis of state that would promote the prospect of transition to socialism: “When such a situation has arisen, when a stage has been reached where internal conflicts threaten a collapse, and if there is within such a nation a class that is interested in attaining, and has the power to take political power, then the only thing that is needed is a party that posses the confidence of this class, and which stands in irreconcilable antagonism to the tottering regime, and which clearly recognizes the existing situation in order to lead the aspiring class to victory.”(17)

The emphasis of Kautsky’s strategy is on the role of the party. It is the intransigent and principled Socialist Party that can take advantage of an economic and political crisis in order to lead the working class to victory and the realisation of political power. This conception of party revolution rejects Luxemburg’s understanding that only mass struggle can create a genuine situation of political crisis. She argues that if an economic crisis occurs it can only acquire political expression if the working class intervenes in order to try and overthrow the bourgeois regime. If this development does not occur then it is entirely possible that the situation can become stabilised without the hegemony of the ruling class being challenged. Furthermore, Kautsky’s approach is passive because it suggests that the situation can only be resolved by a new election and the possibility of a socialist party majority. However, by the time that an election took place, it is entirely possible that the crisis has been resolved and confidence has been restored in the old regime. He does not outline a strategy that would suggest how the working class and its party can intervene dynamically in order to resolve the crisis to their advantage. Instead only in a formal manner does he suggest that the crisis can be resolved in favour of socialism. Furthermore, his approach is not equipped to take advantage of the crisis because of his emphasis on the perspective that the party does not make revolutions. But the situation of a crisis implies that the party has to be revolution making, and has to take decisive initiative if the potential of the crisis is to be realised. In other words the actual perspective of Kautsky implies that the party would be more receptive to a period of stability and tranquil electoral success in order for the process of socialism to be realised in the most effective manner.

But Kautsky also offers a concrete analysis that would undermine any suggestion of complacency. He argues that the role of the powerful employer’s associations and the undermining of the progress of the trade unions combined with the tendency towards imperialist expansion and electoral measures to deny the prospect of the success of Social Democracy are creating the prospect of a crisis. In order to realise the goal of democracy and oppose the threat of militarism it will be necessary to secure the dominant political power of Social Democracy. He is adamant that this process of change cannot occur gradually and without important conflicts: “No one would be so naïve as to assert that we can pass imperceptibly and without a battle from the military state and absolutism into democracy, and out of the conquering imperialism into the union of free peoples by a gradual “growing into”.(18) In other words he anticipates the most intense and bitter conflicts if the prospect of opposing absolutism and imperialism is to be effective. He does not outline this process of struggle in the most precise terms and so he fails to suggest that this development could acquire the features of extra-Parliamentary struggle. However the logic of his comments does imply that the struggle for democracy and against imperialism would require a mass movement and strikes if success is to be achieved in relation to these objectives of democratisation and against militarism. He conceives of the struggle in strategic terms that are ambiguous: “The proletariat must grow mightily in these struggles. It cannot win these battles, cannot reach the above mentioned goals of democracy and abolition of militarism without, without itself attaining to a dominant position in the state.”(19) The reference to the proletarian actions could imply permission for all methods of class struggle including the revolutionary tactic of insurrection if that is what it takes to achieve state power. But it would be better to be more cautious and argue that Kautsky is actually calling for mass strikes and demonstrations in order to complement the electoral struggle for political domination. In any eventuality his approach is closer to Luxemburg’s tactic of mass strikes and support for the role of working class militancy. In contrast the leadership of Social Democracy had committed itself since 1907 to support for national defence, and so they were effectively opposed to Kautsky’s call for opposition to militarism.(20)

However Kautsky also seemed to undermine his position when he outlined how the working class lacked allies for its objectives. The farmers and middle class opposed the policies of the Socialist Party. These social forces have blamed the trade unions for rising prices because of improved wages and have tended to support the colonial and imperialist policies of the ruling class. Hence the supporters of the Socialist Party have become isolated and the prospect of continued success has been called into question. In contrast the ruling class has acquired allies in the class struggle. Kautsky is suggesting that the optimistic trends of the increasing collective strength of the working class have been undermined by what are unfavourable class alignments. In this situation the revisionists advocated the development of reformist policies that would appeal to the small farmers and the middle class. This would include the advocating of a socialist colonial policy. In contrast Kautsky does not suggest that the answer to these problems implies right-wing concessions at the level of policy. Instead he is still in favour of intransigent struggle in relation to anti-imperialism and gives support for the militancy of the trade unions. The problem is that he does not outline a policy that could result in the construction of alliances between the working class and other social forces. He is aware that the peasants want land but are also opposed to nationalisation.(21) Hence he could conceive of the peasantry as an ally of the working class in the revolution in Russia but was more pessimistic about the prospects in Germany where the question of economic modernisation seemed to conflict with the interests of the peasants. Furthermore he recognised that the question of opposing imperialism was central to the principles of Social Democracy and so no concessions to middle class opinion could be made, but this was not the position of the leadership who understood that the electoral setback of 1907 was because of the popularity of militarism. The logic of Kautsky’s position was that he should have tackled the issue of alliances more seriously instead he upheld a position of proletarian isolationism. He did not fully realise that the apparent isolation of the working class seriously undermined the prospect of further political advances in socialist terms. Instead the issue of alliances was only seriously tackled by the right-wing of the party. They utilised this issue in order to dilute the aims and objectives of the party.

However Kautsky attempts to overcome his apparent strategic limitations in relation to the question of internal class alignments with discussion of the potential revolutionary dimensions of the increasingly imperialist character of economic activity. He outlines how the process of economic development in Europe and America is being expressed in terms of the prospect of conflict and war because of the increased expenditure on armaments and the struggle for colonies. Furthermore, he argues that imperialist domination will result in the revolt of nationally oppressed peoples which could also create an additional cause of war. He contends that it has only been the international influence of the working class that has been able to oppose the prospect of these economic tendencies for imperialism being expressed in terms of global war. In these economic conditions the working class should develop a strategy that would oppose war and connect this prospect to the alternative of socialism, but if despite these efforts war should occur the working class should not be demoralised and instead act to transform war into the prospect of revolution. Engels view that war could result in a premature revolution has become outdated because of the growing strength of the working class: “Since then the situation has changed much. The proletariat has now grown so strong that it can contemplate a war with much more confidence. We can no longer speak of a premature revolution, for it has already drawn so great strength from the present legal basis as to expect that a transformation of this basis would create the conditions for its further upward progress.”(22) And: “The proletariat hates war with all its strength. It would sacrifice everything rather than raise a cry for war. But if war should break out in spite of it, the proletariat is the only class that could confidently await its outcome.”(23) Furthermore: “On the other hand, the more the idea of imperialism becomes bankrupt, the more the Socialists become the only party that is fighting for a great ideal and a great object, that is capable of arousing all the energy and devotion that flows to such an object.”(24)

Kautsky is actually arguing that far from the outbreak of war representing the undermining of the potential for the realisation of socialism the opposite is the truth of the situation. The onset of war would express the moral decline of the ruling class and in contrast indicate the moral superiority of the internationalist aims of socialism. The chauvinist justification of war by the ruling class would represent the decline of standards of government and the fact that the ruling class no longer represented historical progress and instead justified a system in decline. The influence of corruption and greed, combined with short-term calculation, would replace intelligent and perceptive statesmanship. In these conditions the increasing burden of taxation because of growing armaments would create the possibility for the small capitalists to become the allies of the working class. In this situation only the working class would adhere to a policy that promised a better future. The terrible conditions of war could generate the prospect that the working class could acquire more allies in favour of the struggle for the alternative of socialism. The immediate tasks of the Socialist Party in this situation are to intensify the struggle for democracy and against militarism in order to undermine the threat of war. In order to enhance the capacity for struggle of the working class it should utilise the role of the mass strike: “Just as clear as these tasks are the means which are at our disposal for their solution. In addition to those that have already been utilized we have now added the MASS STRIKE, which we have already theoretically accepted at the beginning of the 90’s, and whose application under favourable conditions has been repeatedly tested since then.”(25)

With this advocacy of the importance of the mass strike, Kautsky has adopted a strategy that is very similar to that of the revolutionary left led by Luxemburg. He is suggesting that the struggle either against the outbreak of imperialist war, or after war has started, should justify the application of revolutionary tactics. The threat of war should not result in accommodation by Social Democracy to the system because what is being expressed is an acute crisis of the system that actually indicates an opportunity to intensify the struggle to achieve socialism. This standpoint is not very different from Lenin’s call to transform the imperialist war into a class war. Kautsky’s position also implies that adherence to the electoral tactic may not be sufficient in order to oppose militarism and imperialist war in an effective manner. This is because the ruling class will postpone elections during the war, and the effective struggle to end imperialist war will require extra-Parliamentary methods. He does not explicitly support the replacement of the Parliamentary standpoint with an extra-Parliamentary approach but his radical analysis would seem to have the logic that militant struggle outside of Parliament is necessary if the threat of war, or the end of war, is to be resolved in a progressive manner. This point is vindicated by the favourable reference to the utilisation of the mass strike as an important tactic to be used against the prospect of imperialist war. Hence it is not surprising that Kautsky calls for support of an irreconcilable policy by the Socialists as an alternative to the fluctuations of the ruling class and the emotions of the middle strata, and they will have to be true to their beliefs in a situation of uncertainty: “In the midst of this constant wavering policy they will increase the conscious strength of the labouring masses just in proportion as their theory makes possible a logical, definite practice. The more the Socialist Party maintains an indestructible power in the midst of the destruction of all authority, the more the Socialists will increase their authority. And the more they persevere in their irreconcilable opposition to the corruption of the ruling class the more complete the trust that will be vested in them by the great masses of the population in the midst of the universal rottenness which has today seized the bourgeois democracy, which has completely surrendered its principles for the purpose of gaining governmental favours.”(26)

This policy seems to be identical to Rosa Luxemburg’s conception of socialism or barbarism in which the question of the decline and regression of the civilisation of capitalism because of the prospect and reality of war also created the importance of revolutionary tactics for the struggle of power. Kautsky is outlining his own reasons for support of the following perspective of Luxemburg: “For Luxemburg, therefore, what the inevitability of capitalist collapse proves is not the redundancy, but the urgent indispensability of conscious revolutionary struggle on the part of the working class. It is because of that inevitability, and not despite it, that such a struggle is required. It is also because of that inevitability that Luxemburg can meaningfully speak of there being an alternative to socialism…..The whole breakdown theory gives sense to the slogan ‘socialism or barbarism’…..”(27) To Kautsky the major manifestation of the breakdown of capitalism would be war, and Luxemburg generally agreed with him, and the strategic answer to this situation would be the rejection of any compromise with the forces of capitalism. Thus he was against any prospect of alliances with governmental parties because of the war, and so rejected the claims of national defence, and instead he called for intransigent opposition to the forces of capitalism and imperialism with the possible result in revolution. The advent of revolution caused by war would not be premature and instead would be the outcome of the intensification of the class struggle. In contrast the agreement to share governmental power with other bourgeois parties would be to betray the prospect of the complete obtaining of political power by the Socialist party. Hence the Socialist party should develop a strategy based on the unrest caused by the war and which implies the possibility to develop militant methods of class struggle that will result in the success of socialism: “The only certain thing is universal uncertainty. It is certain that we are entering upon a period of universal unrest, of shifting of power, and that whatever form this may take, or how long it may continue, a condition of permanent stability will not be reached until the proletariat shall have gained the power to expropriate politically and economically the capitalist class and thereby to inaugurate a new era in the world’s history.”(28)

Kautsky is still reluctant to predict the tempo of changes but he has radically modified his standpoint which argued that the Socialist party is not revolution-making. Instead he argues that we have entered a revolutionary period of possible world revolution and the role of the Socialist Party is to promote tactics that will advance the prospect of success in this favourable period for change. The Socialist Party should take advantage of the demoralisation of the ruling class and the onset of political uncertainty caused by the threat of war, or the advent of war, in order to rally the working class to strive for revolutionary change. The prospect of success is facilitated by the possibility that the small farmers and middle class may support this struggle because of the corruption of the ruling class and these forces will be encouraged to take this stance because the working class is a reliable bulwark of opposition to war. Kautsky is suggesting that the Socialist Party should remain intransigent and principled because this is the most likely basis of political success in a situation of acute crisis for capitalism. It will be the possible of compromise with bourgeois opponents that will undermine the prospect of victory in the struggle for socialism. The prospect of success is based on the intervention of party and class in the struggle against war with the advocacy of a revolutionary policy. Hence the view of Schorske seems to have underestimated the extent to which Kautsky critique of war involved movement towards the active standpoint of Luxemburg: “In his prognosis of the future Kautsky affirmed more clearly than before the revolutionary implications of imperialism. Yet his analysis of the future revolutionary process was remarkable for the passive role which he assigned to the working class and its party. While pointing to an intensification of class struggle as characteristic of the era, he assigned only two clear functions to the proletarian party: agitation and organization. Even if the revolution should be violent, which Kautsky left uncertain, the dynamic element in it would be the ruling class which, through its inner contradictions, corruption and loss of self-assurance, would hurtle the existing order to destruction. The proletariat would be the passive beneficiary of the process thanks to having maintained an oppositional integrity. Where Luxemburg viewed the proletariat as an irresistible force, Kautsky seemed to see it as an immovable object.”(30)

It seems undeniable that Kautsky places emphasis on the condition of the ruling class when developing his perspectives about imperialist war. But this approach is not utilised in order to justify a passive conception of the class struggle. On the contrary he is arguing that the moral decline of the ruling class is symbolising the development of a revolutionary period that has been caused by the intensification of the contradictions of capitalism that has led to imperialism and the prospect of global war. In this situation it is actually the duty of the working class and the party to intervene actively in order to transform the crisis and the revolutionary period into a struggle for socialism. In order that success is realised it will be necessary to utilise the most militant tactics such as the mass strike so that the conditions can be prepared for the ascent of the working class to political power. This perspective is effectively a modification of the view that the party is not revolutionary making. Indeed it could be argued that the central preoccupation of the party and class in this period of crisis and possible war is about how to make a revolution on the basis of exploiting the malaise of the ruling class.

Thus the pamphlet ‘Road to Power’ has a tension between two opposing strategies. On the one hand there is the strategy based on the application of historical materialism which argues that it is not possible to anticipate revolutions and so it is advisable not to utilise adventurist methods that would imply a premature attempt at a seizure of power. Instead it is necessary to wait for the maturing of the conditions for the successful transition to socialism which is based on the importance of electoral victory. On the other hand Kautsky develops a different strategy based on the urgency generated by the changing circumstances that have led to the threat of catastrophe because of the prospect of global war. This means the party and class should actively intervene in order to link what has become a revolutionary period into becoming the pretext for the development of more militant and ambitious tactics. The aim of these tactics would be to hasten the possibility of the Socialist Party acquiring political power. Kautsky emphasises the importance of the mass strike in this context. Hence the party has become revolution making and seeks to utilise the crisis of capitalism in order to hasten the overthrow of the existing system. Kautsky has not adopted every dot and coma of the approach of Luxemburg, but his new strategy is based on acceptance of many of her principles and strategic premises.

How do we apply Kautsky’s strategy in the present conditions? In general terms Kautsky seems to have a valid point when he suggests that the party and class cannot anticipate the prospect of revolution. Hence the party is not revolution making in the sense that it cannot create the objective conditions for the overthrow of capitalism. Instead it can only respond to the intensification of class antagonisms and suggest a strategy that would facilitate the realisation of the most creative and dynamic aspects of the various mass struggles. However this acknowledgement that we cannot ‘force’ a revolution to occur does not mean that we should support Kautsky’s contention that the process of change is inevitable. Instead the history of the class struggle has indicated that the conception of evolutionary change resulting in revolutionary transformation is questionable. Instead the history of capitalism has established that class struggle is constant but that its outcome is dependent on many complex factors. This does not mean that the collective strength of the working class is sufficient in order to bring about revolutionary transformation. Instead we have to recognise that the role of strategy is crucial if success is to be possible. Unfortunately the beginning section of the ‘Road to Power’ could be said to justify the neglect of strategy because that emphasis represents ‘revolution making’ and instead Kautsky relies on the ontological validity of the premises of historical materialism in order to uphold his confidence that the victory of socialism is inevitable.

It is also necessary to argue that his main perspective of the beginning part of ‘The Road to Power’, which is based on the introduction of socialism via the role of Parliament because of an electoral majority has not been realised. The apparent nationalist degeneration of Social Democracy in 1914 discredited this perspective and instead Social Democracy has utilised Parliament in order to introduce reforms and to modify capitalism rather than introduce socialism. Thus it could be suggested that both Kautsky’s interpretation of historical materialism has had strategic limitations and socialism has not been the culmination of capitalist development and has not been introduced by Parliamentary measures. But this is not the end of the story. Kautsky also has a strategy based on the role of mass struggle and the utilisation of the crisis of capitalism in order to advance the aim of socialism. He suggests that the threat or onset of imperialist war could radicalise the working class and create a revolutionary period in which the struggle for socialism could be advanced. This is what happened in the period 1917-1920 and in the aftermath of the Second World War. The Vietnam War led to mass political discontent in the USA, and the Iraq War of 2003 also led to popular mobilisation in Europe. It could have been possible in these situations for a revolutionary party with an imaginative strategy to have promoted the cause of socialism.

The latter part of Kautsky’s book also has less emphasis on the Parliamentary basis of socialist transition and instead emphasises the importance of mass struggle such as the role of the mass strike. Instead of the party being the basis of the prospect of socialism he outlines how the actions of the working class can both intensify class antagonisms and bring about the possibility of socialism. He also elaborates about how the war can create allies for the working class in the other social strata of the population and so create a popular national alliance in favour of change. This development did not actually happen in the post first World War period but his prediction was based on sound reasoning that this situation could result because of the radicalisation caused by imperialist war. Kautsky was one of the first Marxist theoreticians to understand that imperialist war could be a cause of proletarian revolution. This understanding was to become the basis of the strategy of the Communist International. But Kautsky himself did not consistently uphold this standpoint because his position became increasingly opportunist by 1914.

So what can we retain from Kautsky’s strategy of ‘The Road to Power’? Firstly, recognition of the importance of mass action and the intensification of class antagonism, if socialism is to become possible. Secondly, understanding the relation between war and radicalisation and the importance of the development of a mass movement of opposition that could become the basis of struggle for socialism. Thirdly, the rejection of alliances with bourgeois parties in the name of reform because this can only result in compromise that undermines the prospect of socialism. Fourth, the importance of strategy does not mean that revolution can be a forced process based on violence or premature attempts to seize power. Instead we have to accept that the prospect of revolution is based on the advance of the strength and will of the working class to struggle for socialism. Progress in this sense may be long-term. The prospect of socialism is not possible if class consciousness is low and the working class has generally suffered defeats rather than victories. Hence the revolutionary process is the combination of a gradual maturing of socio-economic conditions and the increasing audacity of the working class to struggle for socialism.

FOOTNOTES:

(1)Karl Kautsky: The Road to Power Prism Key Press, New York, 2013

(2)ibid p8

(3)ibid p9

(4)Carl E. Schorske German Social Democracy 1905-1917, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass, p285-294

(5)Norman Geras : The Legacy of Rosa Luxemburg, Verso 1983 p13-42

(6)Louis Althusser: On the Reproduction of Capitalism, Verso, London 2014 p213

(7)Kautsky, op cit p9

(8)ibid p13

(9)ibid p23-24

(10)Schorske, op cit p303

(11)Kautsky op cit p29

(12)ibid p42

(13)John Holloway: Change the World Without Taking Power, Pluto Press, London, 2002 p132

(14)Kautsky op cit p47-48

(15)Rosa Luxemburg quoted in Lelio Basso: Rosa Luxemburg Andre Deutsch, London, 1975 p59-60

(16)Rosa Luxemburg: The Mass Strike, Merlin Press, London, ND p74

(17)Kautsky op cit p70

(18)ibid p101

(19)ibid p101

(20)Schorske op cit p73-79

(21)Moira Donald: Marxism and Revolution, Yale University Press, London 1993 p150-157

(22)Kautsky op cit p117-118

(23)ibid p118

(24)ibid p118

(25)ibid p123-124

(26)ibid p124-125

(27)Geras op cit p31-32

(28)Kautsky op cit p126

(29)Schorske op cit p114-115