



Germany toward the End of 19th Century: Headways, Dilemmas and Recoiling of Reactions

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Abstract:

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, Germany derived its source of power from its footing on the Junkers, who played decisive role in the politics. Middle class was gaining political space whereas the lower middle class and workers suffered the dead weight of the ruthless power system based on capitalist business. Stifling of the peasants followed the Kulturkampf-a policy of Bismarck to draw a cleavage between the Protestants and Catholics. The political scenario brought into fray the disjunction of the rightists, right-centrists and the leftist. This age witnessed the emergence of a class-division in society in Germany. Historians have described this time as an era of the 'commanding heights' for change in the politics and society. At this time, in the face of the social and economic crises besetting the history, the socialist unequivocally resisted the authoritarianism of the state and its repressive rule. Later on the socialists gained strength and organized themselves in the political outfits. Ferdinand Lassalle, August Bebel, Karl Liebknecht attained mass support among the working class of the society and they formed first political parties upholding the interests of the workers. In this time in 1870s the racial discrimination took shape against the Jews in society. The continuation of this unaccountable discrimination resulted in the mass extermination of the Jews in the Third Reich (1933-1945) in Germany. Wilhelm II, who dismissed Bismarck, followed a policy of military build-up and targeted to amass the colonial power, and this led to the germination and growth of the imperial dimension of the Prussian state. Authoritarianism, repression, imperialism were singularly defied by the social-democrats who were set to become insurmountable force during the entire course of German history through world war I up to intolerances of the Third Reich.

Keywords: *Bismarck, Jews, Nationalism, Imperialism, Socialist movement*

An understanding of the predicament of culture in 19th century Germany has to begin with an insight into the emergence, development of thought-system on one hand and overcoming of the catastrophic tangle on the other. A cursory glance at the unfolding of the intellectual happenings assures us about a dialectic in which the 'passing into background' and 'coming into being' are interlocked in a cycle of cataclysm. Towards the end of the 18th century Kant was giving answer to the philosophical contempt of the objectivity hurled by David Hume. Hegel was seeking to put forward a somber reply to the outcry against the authority of Reason by constructing his philosophical system in which the positivity (rationality) and Negativity (irrationality) would be enlisted into the evolution of Unity or Harmony. Nonetheless, two towering figures of the 19th century Europe stood in the face of the inrush of a new era, unknown and seemingly not fully knowable to the previous minds. A long hiatus exists between Goethe, Hegel and Nietzsche. Nietzsche became capable of interpreting the emergent 'new age' of Europe and Germany. Nietzsche called his age as the era of Nihilism-the logic of decay. In Russia, both Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy were becoming increasingly aware of the depreciation of the cultural

ethos and the absence of a reviving faith in constructive hopes. Baudelaire in France accentuated his idea that the mankind is suffering in terms of increasingly lapsing into past and consequently being unable to look to a future filled with hope.

Analyzing the cultural crisis in terms of philosophical contours must be preceded by a look on the socio-political situations and their impact on the philosophical horizons. Politically, the years after 1815; i.e. the last attempt to restore the grand order of monarchy through a conference of the prime ministers of several European countries in Europe, were typified as the time of thwarts and threats to the social and political stability. The attempt to arrive at a constitution of Germany in 1848 crashed at the provisional parliament at Frankfurt. In sixties the vortex of crisis unfolded on the political bottlenecks of the definition of social and political identity in Germany, which led to the internecine conflict of arguments for big or small Germany. Through a war the matter was eventually resolved into the creation of two states representing the identities of being German-namely Prussia and Austria.

What followed after the creation of two German lands was a time of continued troubles and social and political, cultural and intellectual turmoil. Kaiser William I, coming to the throne appointed Bismarck as the chancellor of the newly created Prussian state. It was Bismarck who designed and executed the state policies of Prussia in such a fashion that from 1871 till 1914 Prussia stood on the trajectories of swings in all realms of socio-political and cultural fabric of the state. Once Bismarck is said to have said that the future of the Empire would be too early to predict and it shall abdicate any comparison either. Truly so. Bismarck's Germany was controlled by the vast power-structure of the Junkers. The Junkers possessed vast measures of agricultural land and they let this land worked upon by the poor farmers. This system was a kind of 'feudalization' that obviously undercut the urges of any progress. And the Empire drew its strength from them only. Nonetheless, the Junkers stood under diverse sort of immediate pressures emanating from the structure of society and politics. They enjoyed seemingly great political leverage; they however were economically becoming impotent and emaciated. In the face of an age of free trade they were afraid of losing their capitalist mode of existence and their might based on such an existence. At this point of time German state was a spectacle of stratified society. In short this stratification appears as follows:

Junkers: politically dominant,-economically threatened

Middle Class: Politically gaining space, economically weak

Lower Middle Class: 'squeezed' by the upswing of business

Peasants: Threatened by 'Kulturkampf' (War of Cultures)

The political tensions increasingly determined the fate of the state. On the one hand, there were rightists and centre-rightists rallied behind Bismarck. On the other, the leftists and socialists posed a counterweight to the state. The strength of the socialists derived its legitimacy by the increase of the workers in the industries. The additional factor related to the beginning of the emergence of two distinct classes in society. Bourgeoisie retained the capital and the control over the means of production and production-relations whereas the masses of workers in the industries subsisted by their investment of their working force into the production of goods and received marginal wage. Large levels of inequalities in wealth, education, housing and health demonstrated the truncated and troubled state of affairs in such a situation in Prussia. Daniel Ziblatt has referred to the age of 'commanding heights' for change at this time in Prussia. Matters were worsening even due to the state activities carried out on behest of Kaiser Wilhelm himself. Daniel Ziblatt has noted: "The unusual hybrid political regime that Bismarck is chiefly credited with designing governed by a powerful monarch and his appointed chancellor, a weak national parliament, universal male suffrage, a federated executive in the form of a second chamber (Bundesrat), and powerful states with their own suffrage systems,

systems of public finance, and bureaucracies-was not a static set of political institutions but one that did indeed face serious pressure for change.”¹

Arguing about the crisis lying ahead the state, Zibblatt writes: “His (Kaiser Wilhelm’s) brash interventions into political affairs signaled a determination to preserve or extend his autocratic powers at the expense of the democratic national parliament, even as social groups-farmers, employees, Catholics, workers, and ethnic minorities-mobilized in defense of their own sectoral interests. The most potent symbolization, which represented what some historians have called the birth of German mass politics, was the stunning success of the socialist labor movement, whose political arm, the Social Democratic Party, emerged in 1912 as the largest party in the Reichstag.”²

One happening among these things and amid these tensions contributed to the weakening of the state machinery of Prussia in long terms. One Dr. Nobiling attempted an assassination of Kaiser but failed and committed suicide. This event was played by Bismarck to crush the rising popularity of the liberals and socialists in the middle and working classes. Bismarck succeeded masterfully in framing and implementing the Anti-Socialist Laws. “Anti-Socialist Laws* declared Social Democracy, and any other “revolutionary” movements, to be enemies of the state, of society, and the constitution. All public activities by the party were forbidden. Its press was banned, party activists could be denied a means of earning a living, and could even be exiled. It was a draconian measure.”³ But these laws failed to capture feet in a state where democratic and parliamentary aspirations had a long unbroken history ever since anti-Napoleonic wars. Most recent event in this direction was the revolution of 1848 aiming to establish a democratic and constitutional parliament. Hence “The laws were bound to fail, just as the Kulturkampf had failed. Catholics stood together against a common threat and the socialist working class showed admirable solidarity with their party. The Kulturkampf** strengthened the Center Party, and support for the SPD increased significantly between 1878 and 1890.”⁴

Another socio-cultural malaise confronting the Prussian state related to the handling of the Jew question. The state was not neutral in the disparagement of the Jews at that time. The history of Germany witnessed changes in the people’s attitude and treatment of the Jews in all walks of life. In the fallout of the French Revolution, the Jews in France were declared to be equal to any French citizen. In western part of the Rhine River which came under influence of France in 1805-06, the cleavage between the German citizens and the Jews minimized. Jews could access all professional positions; they enjoyed equal chances in education. The number of the Jew girls and boys entering the university education was impressive in the nineteenth century Germany. This situation took turn towards worsening only after the unification of Germany in 1871. Martin Kitchen informs “Though the first half of the nineteenth century the lot of Jews in Germany had improved greatly-Anti-Semitism* was still widely spread, but it was relatively muted and was far from intellectually respectable.”⁵ This situation changed after 1871. Kitchen writes of that: “In the 1870s a new and even more pernicious form of pseudo-scientific and racial anti-Semitism developed. Earlier anti-Semitism

¹ Zibblatt, Daniel: *The Dangers of Weak Conservatism for Democracy in Germany: Long Run Legacies Into The Twentieth Century*

² Ibid.

³ Kitchen, Martin (2006): *A History of Modern Germany 1800-2000* (MA, USA/ Oxford, UK/ Victoria, Australia: Blackwell) pp. 147-148

⁴ Kitchen, Martin (2006): Op.Cit. p.148

*Anti-Socialist Law 1878 outlawed all Social-Democratic organizations, all working class or socialist presses, and ordered the confiscation of all Socialist literature by the Prussian state

**Kulturkampf, ; i.e. the bitter struggle (c.1871-87) on the part of the German chancellor Otto von Bismarck to subject the Roman Catholic church to state controls. The term came into use in 1871, when the scientist and Prussian liberal statesman Rudolf Virchow declared that the battle with the Roman Catholics was assuming “the character of a great struggle in the interest of humanity.”

⁵ Kitchen, Martin (2006): Op.Cit. p.133

was rooted in the traditional animosities between Christians and Jews,...or in the discomfort and even hatred resulting from a confrontation with otherness”⁶ became the hallmark of German attitude towards the Jews. The germination of racial anti-Semitism surged on the historical horizon which led eventually to Nazism. In this sense, the second Reich led by Bismarck paved the way for the third Reich led by Hitler, when mass elimination was historically perpetrated in the name of racial purity. In support of this argument, one may consider seriously the fact underlined by Kitchen. He writes: “The new anti—Semitism was based on the belief that the Jewish people posed a biological threat to other races.”⁷

Another crisis that was plaguing the Prussian state assumed increased proportion of debate—the question of nationalism**. Germany, since few decades of the 19th century, evolved into a political set-up, in which liberal thoughts acquired as much stake as the conservatives. Germany was witness to the students-movement in Wartburg and German democrats had genuine democratic aspirations when they attempted to install a constitutional system in Germany. Bismarck gave a new turn to the understanding of nationalism. Like absolute Enlightenment, he clamored for the identity of nationalism with the state and exceptions were not allowed. Martin Kitchen reflects on this issue and writes: “The nation was now identified with the state, any criticism of which was denounced as unpatriotic. Political parties which demanded reform were thus condemned as enemies of the Reich. The social democrats were now denounced as “fellows without fatherland” and parliamentary democracy was seen as un-German.”⁸ On the one hand the state and Bismarck attained autarchic heights and on the other hand the plight of people’s dreams worsened. It seemed that liberalism and democratic ideas must fall on feet in the face of the power of the state to distrust liberalism and democracy among political parties and intellectuals. Martin Kitchen drives home the point very poignantly, when he writes about the state: “It stood like a sore thumb, a provocation to the new breed of nationalists. Its supporters—Social Democrats, the Catholic-Center Party and some of the Independents were marginalized and condemned as undemocratic.”⁹ It was a situation of no way-out. Nationalists belonged to a community of being not-definable, for those who stood with Bismarck’s state were nationalist and those who nurtured the liberal ideas of nationalism were equally nationalists. There remained no choice to accept the status quo. Be that as it may: “Nevertheless, for most Germans the Reichstag, and not the Kaiser, was the focus of national attention, the only truly representative body of the nation with all its shortcomings, deficiencies, and divisions.”¹⁰ There were songs that were written in praise of the land and the Kaiser. Two of them “Wacht am Rhein” and “Heil dir im Siegerkranz” were full with the overtones of anti-French and ant-Catholic vehemence. These songs preceded the grandiose imperialist* designs of Germany in the coming years. Germany at this time however could not succeed in specifying its national anthem and the design of its national flag. Martin Kitchen informs: “Germany

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Kitchen, Martin (2006): Op.Cit., p.128

*According to the United States Holocaust Museum the word anti-Semitism means prejudice or hatred of Jews. In 1879, German journalist Wilhelm Marr originated the term anti-Semitism, denoting the hatred of Jews, and also hatred of various liberal, cosmopolitan, and international political trends of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries often associated with Jews.

**Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy says “The term “nationalism” is generally used to describe two phenomena: (1) the attitude that the members of a nation have when they care about their national identity, and (2) the actions that the members of a nation take when seeking to achieve (or sustain) self-determination. (1) raises questions about the concept of nation (or national identity), which is often defined in terms of common origin, ethnicity, or cultural ties, and specifically about whether an individual’s membership in a nation should be regarded as non-voluntary or voluntary. (2) raises questions about whether self-determination must be understood with complete authority over domestic and international affairs, or whether something less is required.”

⁹ Kitchen, Martin (2006): Op.Cit., p.129

¹⁰ Ibid.

did not have either an officially recognized national anthem or flag until the Weimar Republic, by which time neither was treated with much respect or affection.”¹¹

There might have been confusion or shortcoming of insights in defining the nationalism as the substratum of Germany at this moment. However, the height of unchecked reverence extended to Kaiser was going to exemplify its consequences after one decade and half when Wilhelm Kaiser II came on the throne. He staunchly believed in the superiority of Germany and embarked on the colonialist ventures of his country. Wilhelm Kaiser II unequivocally stressed the need of a strong naval power and with this he started a design of standing at par with the imperial powers of his time. Navy meant exploration and control of distant territories and this was what Germany started pursuing. Germany explored and established colonies as far as in Africa at this stage of history. H.A.L. Fisher argues: “William II of Germany bade goodbye to the conciliatory policy of Bismarck and adopted the policy of world politics.”¹²

In his monograph *Imperial Germany and The Industrial Revolution*, Thorstein Veblen seeks to interpret the colonial or imperial identity from a different angle and prefers to put emphasis on the commercial and economic factors rather than on the diplomatic juggling. For him, the age in German history that proceeds after the settlement of Napoleonic adventures provides a basis to analyze the beginning of the commercial and economic need and subsequently their fulfillment and extension that the seeds of imperialism in German history lay. He also attributes imperialism to the notion of Fatherland as a peoples’ belief in Germany that swept the cultural consciousness of the German community throughout 19th till the end of World War II. To argue with Thorstein Veblen: “As is true of the Elizabethan era in England, so the Imperial era in Germany can not be said to have begun abruptly at any specific date. It may defensibly dated from the formation of the Zollverein¹³, or from the North-German confederation, or from the accession of William I (and Bismarck), or from the coronation at Versailles; at any rate a later date would not be acceptable. Its beginnings are to be sought earlier than the earliest of these dates, especially in so far as these beginnings are looked for in the material situation of the German people rather than in their diplomatic history.”¹⁴ Continuing his stance, Veblen emphasizes: “The modern industrial and commercial situation begins seriously to affect the state or the German peoples only after that date, and even then it is only gradually that the Fatherland is drawn into this modern system of trade and industry to such an extent as to feel the exigencies of the new economic situation. It is toward the west that the new economic conditions first take visible effect, and it is apparently in commerce and the improvement in transport that contact with the more advanced countries or the west first provoked movements or adjustment to the new state of things.”¹⁵ Veblen’s contention puts the case of Germany as an imperial power which emerged at a later date but due ultimately to the market interests the expansion of the tentacles took place. In this way, the emergence and further consolidation of Germany as an imperial power followed suit a logic quite European in nature. Most of the European imperial powers shared the same concerns first of economic

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² H.A.L. Fisher quoted by K.L. Khurana (1998): *Modern Europe [1789-1956 A.D.]* (Meerut: Lakshmi Narain Agarwal)

*Imperialism is an action that involves a country (usually an empire or a kingdom) extending its power by the acquisition of territories. It may also include the exploitation of these territories, an action that is linked to colonialism. Colonialism is generally regarded as an expression of imperialism.

¹³ Zollverein or German Customs Union was a coalition of German states formed to manage tariffs and economic policies within their territories. Organized by the 1833 Zollverein treaties, Zollverein by 1866 included most of the German states. The foundation of the Zollverein was the first instance in history in which independent states had consummated a full economic union without the simultaneous creation of a political federation or union. Prussia was the prime motivating force behind the creation of the customs union.

See, *Wikipedia* accessed 10.07.2017

¹⁴ Veblen, Thorstein (1915): *Imperial Germany and The Industrial Revolution*. (Kitchener: Batoche Books 2003) (online)

¹⁵ Veblen, Thorstein (1915): Op.Cit.

and subsequently the colonial for expansion and colonization during the entire course of the 19th century.

Veblen deals with the cultural roots of German Imperialism seriously too. He picks up the word Fatherland, which evolved as a notion which in the long run contributed to the pursuit of power-ambitions of the German people. In a way, it subsisted under the political program of colonial expansion as a cultural undercurrent of the expansionist policy of Germany in 19th century and more vehemently after 1871. The very term Fatherland implicitly connoted a vastness of cultural reaches of Prussia and the Prussian state mobilized on this facet. Concerning this aspect of the cultural history, conjoined with the imperial ambition, Veblen writes: "Taking the term¹⁶ to apply in its larger sense, Prussia as a cultural area will comprise the German-speaking lands of the Baltic littoral from the Russian frontier to the general neighborhood or Luebeck, or perhaps to Kiel, and extending irregularly inland to include whatever has felt the effects of occupation by the Teutonic order. This stretch of the country, especially eastward from the region of Oder, is the youngest of the German lands; that is to say it is the portion of Fatherland that comes last in the sequence of reduction to Christianity and German rule. It was made over into the pattern of feudalistic Christendom at a later date than the rest, later by some six or eight centuries than the more cultured lands of the South. The conquest of the Wendisch, Lithuanian and Esthonian peoples by the Teutonic Order in the thirteenth century, and their reduction to Christianity, is the last great episode in the predatory settlement of the Fatherland by German-speaking invaders, and the immediate consequences of the invasion and settlement were much of the same character here as elsewhere. There followed a protracted period of ruthless exploitation, terror, disturbances, reprisals, servitude, and gradual habitu-ation to settled allegiance, irresponsible personal rule and peacable repression."¹⁷

Prussian authoritarian state had minutely foreseen the troubles of resistance that its policies might invite at home. It passed measures that would have crippled the wings of the socialists at the domestic frontiers. The anti-socialist laws of 1876 bore evidence to this tendency of the Prussian state. The imperial, colonial and expansionist designs were meant to divert the attention of the masses from the crises befalling home affairs. Most of the historians agree on this thesis. The turbulences inside the country occurred with the consolidation of the socialist party which resisted authoritarian and repressive rule of the state. The strength of the socialists inside the country gained propensity and dynamism in this political and economic climate in Prussia. On 22 May 1875 Sozialistische Arbeiterpartei (Socialist Workers' Party) was born in Gotha. A program of political and organization structure was chalked out for further consolidation of the interests of the working class. "The Gotha Programme underlined the increasing formation and consolidation of the workers' class consciousness. This is made particularly clear by Lassalle's adherence to the >>iron law of wages<< as a keystone of social analysis and the fact that all other political forces were castigated as reactionary."¹⁸ Simultaneously another branch of the socialist labor organization driven by the urge of rebuffing the repression and coercion through laws and institutions of the Prussian state came into existence under the leadership of Karl Liebknecht and August Bebel. This branch of the socialist workers' organization came to be known as Eisenacher. ">>Eisenacher-was organized with the founding of the Social Democratic Workers' Party (sozialdemokratische Arbeiterpartei, SDAP). The founders, dual leadership and shaping figures were Wilhelm Liebknecht and August Bebel, who later, as >>Kaiser of the workers<<, rose to become an icon and for many years the chairman of the SPD."¹⁹ This organization resisted the perpetuation of the exploitative political and economic structure of the state

¹⁶ Fatherland

¹⁷ Veblen, Thorsten (1915): Op.Cit.

¹⁸ Reschke, Michael/Krell, Christian/Dahm, Jochen et al. (2013): *Social Democracy Reader* (Bonn: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung) p.35 "Iron Law of Wages" is a proposed law of economics that asserts that real wages always tend, in the long run, toward the minimum wage necessary to sustain the life of the worker.

¹⁹ Reschke, Michael/Krell, Christian/Dahm, Jochen et al. (2013): Op.cit., p.33

and put forward the program of alternatives in terms of its emphasis on voting rights, education and fairness in the taxation as not to burden the working class. So “the SDAP demanded general, direct and equal voting rights, legally regulated maximum working hours, progressive taxation...and general compulsory education. It recognized state institutions as arenas of political debate.”²⁰ The Socialist organizations which emerged at this time as the ideological antidote to the Prussian state were slated to play a historical role in the socio-cultural and politico-economic fate of Germany after the turn of the 19th century Germany. The Third Reich met with the severest and toughest repulsion by none other than the Socialist Workers’ Party. All the attempts of the Nazi rule to break the stead of this socialist movement perilously failed. The continuity of the indomitability, assigned to this socialist answer to any sort of coercion has gone into the inerasable annals of German history. The continuity of the German history from the 19th century’s end and 20th century’s onward march finds its subtle expression in this form of the human organization for a better future, a future of the hope for the betterment and emancipation of the repressed and marginalized social strata in any corner of Europe in the entire course of 20th century.

Conclusion

Upswings followed by plunges and vice-versa characterized the 19th century Germany from the very beginning. The aspiration for the restoration of monarchical system in 1815 gave way to the liberal thoughts and progressive democratic assertions in Germany. The failed attempt to visualize and bring into being the democratic parliamentary system in 1848 signaled though a decisive departure from the reactionary program of restoration of monarchy. After the failure of 1848 the agenda of nationalism and national identity occupied the forefront of the progressive intellectual imaginations and the political unfolding. Under the veil of a national leadership Kaiser Wilhelm , the would be emperor, ascended the throne. Thus, from 1815 onwards, the dilemma of the liberal thoughts and nationalist culminated into an imperial headway. What ensued from this headway of imperial expansionism was a distain for Jews and the curbing of the organizations and press of the working class through the Anti-Socialist Law of 1878. Thus, apparent solution of the tangled question of national identity brought into its wake the repressive system. Not very late, the reactions to this prototype of national progress emerged. The inception and strengthening of the Socialist workers’ organizations led by Ferdinand Lassalle, August Bebel and other ideologues questioned not only the class-division gaining ground, rather they constructively argued for the democratic political system. It was the strength of this reaction on the part of Socialist workers’ organizations that the SPD was able to withstand the dilemma of the so-called nationalist-socialist model of Nazi rule in 1930s and 1940s.

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