

**COMMUNISM IN
CENTRAL EUROPE
IN THE TIME OF
THE REFORMATION**

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Communism in Central Europe in the Time of the Reformation by Karl Kautsky & J. L. & E. G. Mulliken

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KARL KAUTSKY & J. L. & E. G. MULLIKEN

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By

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CHAPTER I

HERETICAL COMMUNISM. ITS GENERAL CHARACTER

I. The Papacy the Centre of the Attacks of Heretical Communism.

NOTHING can be more erroneous than the widespread idea that communism is antagonistic to the existence of man—antagonistic indeed to human nature itself. This is not the case. Communism dates from the childhood of the race, and has been the social foundation of almost all nations, even to the present day.

The history of communism bristles with far greater difficulties than those encountered by the historian of other phases of national growth. But, obscure as the subject is, owing to the lack of trustworthy sources of enlightenment, we believe that such knowledge as we possess will be sufficient to enable us to give some insight into its character and tendencies. As some assistance to our scanty information, we propose to glance over all the better-known evidences we can gather of the progress of communism during the period of the Reformation, and to consider its political effects, even though so little is known of the course of its inner development that all statements with regard to it must rest on conjecture alone.

The great difficulties which confront us in our efforts to gain a more intimate knowledge of the growth of communism lie in the purely oral character of the teaching, and the secrecy with which heretical sects were forced to carry out their propaganda and organisation. Our information is derived, not from the literature of the communists themselves but solely from that of their opponents. Their mysticism

constitutes another difficulty, and there is yet a greater arising from the want of distinct outward differences between the various heretical sects. Their persecutors took no pains to form an unprejudiced estimate of them, or to give an unbiassed statement of their doctrines, or even to make any distinction between them. The designations by which single sects were known were chiefly nicknames invented by their opponents and indicating the most opposite tendencies. In the present day, it would be an exaggeration to assert that all "Nihilists" must necessarily be socialists, and even more untrue to declare that no socialists exist among the Nihilists. Similarly, it cannot be said that the Waldenses, Beghards, Lollards, &c., were wholly and entirely communists. Nevertheless, we must not jump to the conclusion that these sects had never shown any communistic tendencies, for that would be to "empty the bath of water *and* child." Such tendencies are clearly enough evidenced, exhibiting no accidental, but rather a perfectly normal character—a character which repeatedly shows itself during the Middle Ages in all places where traces of communism became noticeable.

The most salient feature of the communism of the twelfth century is that antagonism to the Papal power, which lent to the movement an ever-increasing heretical character. It was almost imperative for those who had the interest of the poor at heart to rebel against the Papal Church, standing as it did in the front rank of the propertied classes of the Middle Ages. It was the wealthiest and the greatest among the exploiters, and held sway over the whole social life of the times, intellectually as well as economically.

Its dominance might be compared to that of *La Haute Finance*, or the Stock Exchange in the present century. In these days great banking institutions control social and political life, and in the Middle Ages the Papal hierarchy was, in a similar way, the mightiest of all the ruling powers, and, like the Stock Exchanges, decided the fate of Ministries—nay, even of Kings—founding and overturning kingdoms. The jurisdiction of the Papal power was quite as much disputed, however, as is that of *La Haute Finance* at the

present time. Both have, in common, the faculty of exciting the enmity of all other ranks of society—not only of the exploited classes, but also of the exploiters. Both are compelled to relinquish much of their spoils to the greatest of all exploiters, and both view the treasures of the latter with eager, covetous eye. Nothing is more erroneous than the opinion that the obedience shown to the Papal power during the second half of the Middle Ages was either hearty or stupid. It was neither. It might rather be designated as a sullen submission, always resentful, and rebellious whenever chance offered. But so long as the foundations of a new order of society and government were non-existent, the Papacy was quite as impregnable as *La Haute Finance* has hitherto proved itself to be. Every conflict—nay, every far-reaching social catastrophe, every war, every pestilence, every famine, every rebellion, served then, as in the present day, only to increase the opulence of the spoiler of spoilers.

This condition of affairs was, on the whole, favourable to the propagation of communistic ideas, but highly unfavourable to the development of the special class-conflict carried on by the poor. To illustrate the comparison with *La Haute Finance* still further, we might say that the circumstances were similar to those existing during the ascendancy of the French bourgeoisie (1830 to 1848). At that time, owing to its monetary power, and to a miserable electoral law, in conjunction with the political insignificance of the working classes, *La Haute Finance* held an almost unlimited sway by means of Parliament and King. It roused the opposition not only of farmers and wage-earners, but also that of the industrial capitalists and shopkeepers. The struggle against the common enemy united these classes, and to a great extent effaced the antagonism between them. It was, therefore, difficult for the proletariat to acquire a special class-feeling, and, in consequence, it usually remained under the leadership of the petty townsmen, or, rather, of the bourgeoisie. Another result was the lulling of the distrust felt by the bourgeoisie for the proletariat. They were formerly disposed to forget that their riches depended on the poverty

of the latter, and, their pity being roused for the poor and outcast, they felt encouraged to make efforts for the abolition of poverty. Many of them even coquetted with socialism, the most widely-read authors of that time being socialists, among whom we need mention only Eugène Sue and Georges Sand.

Then followed the revolution of 1848. The kingdom of *La Haute Finance* was overthrown and deprived of its political privileges. Political power fell into the hands of industrial capitalists, petty bourgeois, small farmers, and labourers. The common enemy had scarcely been overcome, however, before the special interests and antagonisms of these classes became more or less prominent, or, at any rate, were brought vividly to their own consciousness. The most manifest and bitter opposition was that between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. The revolution had shown the latter its power, and had, moreover, proved that socialism, far from being the dream of visionary literati which some imagined it to be, had, in fact, taken a strong hold of the most revolutionary class, and, ceasing to be a plaything, threatened to become a deadly weapon.

Thenceforward the bourgeoisie resisted with all its energy not only each independent movement of the working class, but also everything that seemed to savour of socialism. In fact, their excited imagination pictured as a proof of socialism many a deed which was simply the expression of the most harmless philanthropy. Socialism was, in consequence, boycotted in bourgeois society, and its partisans were forced to decide between two alternatives. If they chose to remain loyal to their opinions, they were excluded from association with their compeers, and their names never more mentioned; if they wished to avoid such a fate, they were obliged, once for all, to renounce any ideas that so much as savoured of socialism. From that moment socialism in a political and literary sense was dead; dead, *i.e.*, until the aspiring class had grown sufficiently strong to compel respect by its own might.

Similar, but naturally much more protracted, was the development of socialism in the Middle Ages, in which the Reformation played the rôle taken by the representatives