

## Book Review: Karl Kautsky. *Die Agrarfrage*

**Karl Kautsky. *Die Agrarfrage*.** Eine Uebersicht über die Tendenzen der modernen Landwirtschaft und die Agrarpolitik u.s.w.<sup>[1]</sup> Stuttgart, Dietz, 1899.

**- V.I.LENIN**

Kautsky's book is the most important event in present-day economic literature since the third volume of *Capital*. Until now Marxism has lacked a systematic study of capitalism in agriculture. Kautsky has filled this gap with "The Development of Agriculture in Capitalist Society," the first part (pp. 1-300) of his voluminous (450-page) book. He justly remarks in his preface that an "overwhelming" mass of statistical and descriptive economic material on the question of agricultural capitalism has been accumulated and that there is an urgent need to reveal the "basic tendencies of economic evolution in this branch of the economy in order to demonstrate the varied phenomena of agricultural capitalism as "partial manifestations of one common [integral] process" (*eines Gesamtprozesses*). It is true that agricultural forms and the relations among the agricultural population in contemporary society are marked by such tremendous variety that there is nothing easier than to seize upon a whole mass of facts and pointers taken from any inquiry that will "confirm" the views of the given writer. This is precisely the method used in a large number of arguments by our Narodnik press which tries to prove the viability of petty peasant economy or even its superiority over large-scale production in agriculture. A distinguishing feature of all these arguments is that they isolate individual phenomena, cite individual cases, and do not even make an attempt to connect them with the general picture of the whole agrarian structure of capitalist countries in general and with the basic tendencies of the entire present-day evolution of capitalist farming. Kautsky does not make this usual mistake. He has been studying the problem of capitalism in agriculture for over twenty years and is in possession of very extensive material; in particular, Kautsky bases his inquiry on the data of the latest agricultural censuses and questionnaires in England, America, France (1892), and Germany (1895). He never loses his way amidst piles of facts and never loses sight of the connection between the tiniest phenomenon and the general structure of capitalist farming and the general evolution of capitalism.

Kautsky does not confine himself to anyone particular question, e.g., the relations between large-scale and small-scale production in agriculture, but deals with the general question of whether or not capital is bringing agriculture under its domination, whether it is changing forms of production and forms of ownership in agriculture and how this process is taking place. Kautsky gives every recognition to the important role played by pre-capitalist and non-capitalist forms of agriculture in modern society and to the necessity of examining the relationship of these forms to the purely capitalist forms; he begins his investigation with an extremely brilliant and precise characterisation of the patriarchal peasant economy and of agriculture in the feudal epoch. Having thus established the starting-points for the development of capitalism in agriculture, he proceeds to characterise "modern agriculture." The description is given first of all from the technical standpoint (the crop rotation system, division of labour, machinery, fertilisers, bacteriology), and the reader is given a splendid picture of the great revolution capitalism has wrought in the course of a few decades by making agriculture a *science* instead of a routine craft. Further comes the investigation of "the capitalist character of modern agriculture"—a brief and popularly written, but extremely precise and talented, exposition of Marx's theory of profit and rent. Kautsky shows that the tenant farmer system and the mortgage system are merely two sides of one and the same process, noted by Marx, of separating the agricultural producers from the landowners. The relations between large-scale and small-scale production are then examined and it is shown that the technical superiority of the former over the latter is beyond doubt. Kautsky effectively demonstrates this thesis and explains in detail how the stability of petty production in agriculture does not depend in any way on its technical rationality but on the fact that the small peasants work far harder than hired labourers and reduce their vital necessities to a level lower than that of the latter. The supporting data which Kautsky cites are in the highest degree interesting and clear-cut. An analysis of the question of associations in agriculture leads Kautsky to the conclusion that associations are undoubtedly indicative of progress but that they are a transition to capitalism and not to communal production; associations do not decrease but increase the superiority of large-scale over small-scale agricultural production. It is absurd to think that the peasant in modern society can go over to communal production. Reference is usually made to statistical data which do not show that the small producer is ousted by the big producer, but which merely serve to show that the development of capitalism in agriculture is much more complicated than in industry. In industry, too, such manifestations as the spread of capitalist work in the home, etc., are not infrequently interconnected with the basic tendency development. But in agriculture the ousting of the small producer is hampered, primarily, by the limited size of the land area; the buying-up of small holdings to form a big holding is a very difficult matter; with intensified farming an increase in the quantity of products obtained is sometimes compatible with a reduction in the area of the land (for which reason statistics operating exclusively with data on the size of the farm have

little evidential significance). The concentration of production takes place through the buying-up of many holdings by one proprietor; the latifundia thus formed serve as a basis for one of the higher forms of large-scale capitalist farming. Lastly, it would not even be advantageous for the big land owners to force out the small proprietors completely: the latter provide them with hand! For this reason the landowners and capitalists frequently pass laws that artificially maintain the small peasantry. Petty farming becomes stable when it ceases to compete with large-scale farming, when it is turned into a supplier of labour-power for the latter. The relations between large and small landowners come still closer to those of capitalists and proletarians. Kautsky devotes a special chapter to the "proletarianisation of the peasantry," one that is rich in data, especially on the question of the "auxiliary employments" of the peasants, i.e., the various forms of hired labour.

After elucidating the basic features of the development of capitalism in agriculture, Kautsky proceeds to demonstrate the historically transitory character of this system of social economy. The more capitalism develops, the greater the difficulties that commercial (commodity) farming encounters. The monopoly in land ownership (ground rent), the right of inheritance, and entailed estates<sup>[4]</sup> hamper the rationalisation of farming. The towns exploit the countryside to an ever greater extent, taking the best labour forces away from the farmers and absorbing an ever greater portion of the wealth produced by the rural population, whereby the rural population is no longer able to return to the soil that which is taken from it. Kautsky deals in particularly great detail with the depopulating of the countryside and acknowledges to the full that it is the middle stratum of farmers which suffers least of all from a shortage of labour-power, and he adds that "good citizens" (we may also add: and the Russian Narodniks) are mistaken in rejoicing at this fact, in thinking that they can see in it the beginnings of a rebirth of the peasantry which refutes the applicability of Marx's theory to agriculture. The peasantry may suffer less than other agricultural classes from a shortage of hired labour, but it suffers much more from usury, tax oppression, the irrationality of its economy, soil exhaustion, excessive toil, and under consumption. The fact that not only agricultural labourers, but even the children of the peasants, flee to the towns is a clear refutation of the views of optimistically-minded petty-bourgeois economists! But the biggest changes in the condition of European agriculture have been brought about by the competition of cheap grain imported from America, the Argentine, India, Russia, and other countries. Kautsky made a detailed study of the significance of this fact that arose out of the development of industry in quest for markets. He describes the decline in European grain production under the impact of this competition, as well as the lowering of rent, and makes a particularly detailed study of the "industrialisation of agriculture" which is manifested, on the one hand, in the industrial wage-labour of the small peasants and, on the other, in the development of agricultural technical production (distilling, sugar refining, etc.), and even in the elimination of some

branches of agriculture by manufacturing industries. Optimistic economists, says Kautsky, are mistaken in believing that such changes in European agriculture can save it from crisis; the crisis is spreading and can only end in a general crisis of capitalism as a whole. This, of course, does not give one the least right to speak of the ruin of agriculture, but its conservative character is gone for ever; it has entered a state of uninterrupted transformation, a state that is typical of the capitalist mode of production in general. "A large area of land under large-scale agricultural production, the capitalist nature of which is becoming more and more pronounced; the growth of leasing and mortgaging, the industrialisation of agriculture—these are the elements that are preparing the ground for the socialisation of agricultural production...." It would be absurd to think, says Kautsky in conclusion, that one part of society develops in one direction and another in the opposite direction. In actual fact "social development in agriculture is taking the same direction as in industry."

Applying the results of his theoretical analysis to questions of agrarian policy, Kautsky naturally opposes all attempts to support or "save" peasant economy. There is no reason even to think that the village commune, says Kautsky, could go over to large-scale communal farming (p. 338, section, "*Der Dorfkommunismus*"<sup>[2]</sup>; cf. p. 339). "The protection of the peasantry (*der Bauernschutz*) does not mean protection of the *person* of the peasant (no one, of course, would object to such protection), but protection of the peasant's *property*. Incidentally, it is precisely the peasant's property that is the main cause of his impoverishment and his degradation. Hired agricultural labourers are now quite

frequently in a better position than the small peasants. The protection of the peasantry is not protection from poverty but the protection of the fetters that chain the peasant to his poverty" (p. 320). The radical transformation of agriculture by capitalism is a process that is only just beginning, but it is one that is advancing rapidly, bringing about the transformation of the peasant into a hired labourer and increasing the flight of the population from the countryside. Attempts to check this process would be reactionary and harmful: no matter how burdensome the consequences of this process may be in present-day society, the consequences of checking the process would be still worse and would place the working population in a still more helpless and hopeless position. Progressive action in present-day society can only strive to lessen the harmful effects which capitalist advance exerts on the population, to increase the consciousness of the people and their capacity for collective self-defence. Kautsky, therefore, insists on the guarantee of freedom of movement, etc., on the abolition of all the remnants of feudalism in agriculture (e.g., *die Gesindeordnungen*,<sup>[3]</sup> which place farm workers in a personally dependent, semi-serf position), on the prohibition of child labour under the age of fourteen, the establishment of an eight-hour working day, strict sanitary police to exercise supervision over workers' dwellings, etc., etc.

It is to be hoped that Kautsky's book will appear in a Russian translation.<sup>[5]</sup>

#### Notes

[1] Karl Kautsky. *The Agrarian Question*. A Review of the Tendencies in Modern Agriculture and Agrarian Policy, etc.—Ed.

[2] Village communism.—Ed.

[3] Legislation defining relations between landowners and serfs.—Ed. —*Lenin*

[4] *Entailed estates*—a system of inheritance that has been preserved in some capitalist countries from feudal times. Under this system estates are inherited undivided by the eldest in the family or by the eldest son of the holder.

[5] A translation of one of the chapters of Karl Kautsky's *The Agrarian Question* was published in *Nauchnoye Obozrentye*, No. 8, for 1899, under the title "Modern Agriculture."