

SPECIAL FEATURE

# Kautsky's Unexpected Comeback: Understanding the Re-emergence of the Second International in Contemporary Debates

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## Abstract

In the history of the left, the conjuncture 1914–1917 is the “bifurcation point” per definition. Leaving an enduring mark on the labor movement and creating a permanent division among socialists, it also shaped subsequent historiographies. For the pro-Bolshevik left, 1914 epitomized the betrayal of a group of leaders who rejected in practice the proletarian internationalism they had promoted in so many resolutions and demonstrations. Conversely, those opposing the Soviet government and resurrecting a reformist, anti-communist “Labour and Socialist International” regarded the years 1889–1914 as an uncomfortable political past. Despite irreconcilable political disputes, both factions exhibited a shared lack of interest in vindicating the Second International, let alone delving into its history. The real take-off of Second International historiography came later and coincided with the outset of the Cold War after 1945, in a context of growth of social democratic parties in Western Europe, strong disputes between the capitalist powers and the Soviet Union, and development of an array of labor history centers and institutions. But if the 1960s and 1970s were a “golden age” for studies of socialism in general and the Second International in particular, the picture became bleaker from the 1980s onward, and studies of socialism lost momentum. Over the past 15 years, there has been a noteworthy resurgence in the field of labor internationalism, encompassing a renewed interest in the Second International and a popular reappraisal of Kautsky and a conversation about “neo-Kautskyism.” Connecting historiography with broader social and political phenomena, this article aims to reflect on the resurgence of the interest on the Second International within both activist and academic circles. The first section summarizes the historical importance of this transnational network during the “Age of Empire” and then examines how the crisis of 1914 became a crucial “bifurcation point” with significant political and historiographical impact throughout the twentieth century. The second section explores recent trends in scholarly research on the topic. The third section provides an analysis of a different type of reappraisal of the history of the Second International, namely the vindication of Karl Kautsky among radicals and socialists in the United States in the last 10 years. The conclusion sums up the main arguments and reflects on the contribution this analysis can make to a discussion about the “long cycle” of socialism.

## Introduction

Some years ago, while conducting research on the congresses of the Second International at the International Institute of Social History, I stumbled upon a unique set of images depicting socialist leaders at what was likely a social event during one of the evenings of the Amsterdam congress of 1904. One of the photos captured Karl Kautsky (1854–1938), among others, dancing joyfully, providing a distinct and uncommon portrayal of socialist leaders in a relaxed and happy atmosphere. I posted the image on Twitter/X with a brief comment about its origin. The IISH account reposted the image, and after a while, the post began to receive many reactions. I noticed that it was being shared not only by academics and old left-wingers but also by younger people with a more light-hearted and upbeat tone.

As I investigated further, I discovered that Kautsky—as well as the Trotskyist leader J. Posadas, but that is a topic for a different article—is featured on a variety of political/humoristic accounts on different social outlets, most remarkably one called “Neo-Kautskyist Memes for Programmatically Non-Delineated Teens.” My curiosity was piqued: This was a niche, to be sure, but one that looked quite different from those I had encountered previously. In fact, it expressed a broader political trend: young activists who were enthusiastic and attracted to the biography of Kautsky, a Marxist theorist of Czech-Austrian origin, who played a crucial role in the Second International and was considered the “Pope of Marxism” but later ended up quite discredited among left-wing ranks due to his opposition to the Bolshevik revolution. How to make sense of this phenomenon?



Karl Kautsky and Henri van Kol dancing. Amsterdam, August 1904.  
Source: International Institute of Social History, visual materials, IISG BG B9/807.

This article aims to reflect more thoroughly on this renewed interest on Kautsky, connect it to the historiography of the Second International, and link these reflections to some of the main questions posed by Marcel and Linden about what he calls “bifurcation points”: crucial moments in the history of radical and revolutionary movements throughout the last 200 years. As any (former) activist or labor historian knows, it is even possible to reconstruct political traditions based on how they date those “bifurcation points.” Such a reconstruction exercise is certainly useful, both in political and historiographical terms, because by focusing on discussions and splits it improves our understanding of these traditions. The exercise can prove risky, however, if we limit

ourselves to intellectual and political discussions without connecting them to broader social trends and exploring links between political traditions and the working class at large.

Connecting historiography with broader social and political phenomena, this article focuses on a particular tradition with a classic “bifurcation point”: the Second International and its collapse in 1914. The first section summarizes the historical importance of this transnational network during the “Age of Empire” and then examines how the crisis of 1914 became a crucial “bifurcation point” with significant political and historiographical impact throughout the twentieth century. The second section explores recent trends in scholarly research on the topic. The third section, in turn, provides an analysis of a different type of reappraisal of the history of the Second International, namely the vindication of Karl Kautsky among radicals and socialists in the United States in the last 10 years. The conclusion sums up the main arguments and reflects on the contribution this analysis can make to a discussion about the “long cycle” of socialism.

### **The Second International and its political and historiographical impact through the twentieth century**

In July of 1889, amidst a flurry of events celebrating the anniversary of the French Revolution, two labor congresses were held in Paris. One was led by the so-called French “possibilists” and English trade unionists, while the other was dominated by German social democrats and French Marxists. Over the following years, the latter would gain momentum, holding a second meeting in Brussels in 1891, with the participation of many of those who had attended the “possibilist” congress. This “New International” met again in Zurich in 1893 and in London in 1896. Typically held over 4–5 days during the summer months, these congresses brought together a diverse range of delegates representing various political traditions, including anarchists and trade unionists.

A fifth congress took place in 1900, again in Paris: With the anarchists now formally excluded, the meeting decided to create a permanent International Socialist Bureau, headquartered in Brussels. While remaining a loose federation of national groups, the International gained in organizational capacity and the congresses held in the 1900s revealed the strength of the movement and its consolidation in numerous countries. By the early 1910s, the International represented parties that brought together millions of workers in almost all European countries and, to a much lesser extent, other regions of the world, such as the United States, Argentina, and British colonies in Australia and Southern Africa. As is well known, however, the story of its heyday overlaps with that of its major crisis. Against a background of growing international diplomatic tensions, the International devoted its main efforts to declaring its opposition to war: In 1912 a massive congress was organized in Basel and in the last days of July 1914 the ISB held an emergency meeting to discuss the peril of imminent conflict. A few days later, though, German and French socialists supported their national governments and backed the war effort. The next congress of the International, which was to be organized in Vienna that summer, never took place.

In the history of the left, the conjuncture 1914–1917 is the “bifurcation point” per definition. Leaving an enduring mark on the labor movement and creating a

permanent division among socialists, it also shaped later historiographies. For the pro-Bolshevik left, 1914 epitomized the betrayal of a group of leaders who rejected in practice the proletarian internationalism they had promoted in so many resolutions and demonstrations. Those who opposed the Soviet government and reconstituted a reformist, anti-communist "Labour and Socialist International," for their part, looked back at the period 1889–1914 as an uncomfortable political past. Despite their unbridgeable political controversies, both sides shared a common disinterest in vindicating the Second International, let alone studying its history. After a pioneering work by Jean Longuet in 1913, little was published on the subject in the following decades.<sup>1</sup>

The real take-off of Second International historiography coincided with the outset of the Cold War after 1945, in a context of growth of social democratic parties in Western Europe, strong disputes between the capitalist powers and the Soviet Union, and development of an array of labor history centers and institutions. To be sure, this interest was partially driven by political considerations: From the 1950s onward, scholars who sympathized with social democracy, such as the Fabian G.D.H. Cole and Julius Braunthal—a leader of the Socialist International himself—published classic works on the history of international socialism.<sup>2</sup> Like other books that appeared in those years, which were more focused on the Second International, such as those of James Joll and Patricia Van der Esch, they were mostly centered on institutions, congresses, and the ideas of the leadership.<sup>3</sup> In any case, "activist" interest overlapped with an increasing academic engagement, as shown by important syntheses and collective volumes about the history of socialism and Marxism edited by historians such as Annie Kriegel, Jacques Droz, and Eric Hobsbawm.<sup>4</sup> With remarkable erudition and sophistication, the Romanian-French historian Georges Haupt reoriented studies on the topic, criticizing purely institutional histories and stressing the need to connect the history of social democracy with the living history of the labor movement.<sup>5</sup> Haupt's work constitutes an essential reference for any study of the Second International, thanks to both his systematization of sources and the methodological questions he raised.

But if the 1960s and 1970s were a "golden age" for studies of socialism in general and the Second International in particular, the picture became bleaker from the 1980s onward, and studies of socialism lost momentum with the end of the Cold War. In an essay published just over a decade ago, Patrizia Dogliani painted a worrisome picture, arguing that studies on internationalism and socialism seemed to have "disappeared."<sup>6</sup> The situation has changed since then, and for the better. In the last 15 years we have witnessed a promising revitalization in the field of labor internationalism, in general, and of the Second International, in particular. As mentioned in the introduction, even a popular reappraisal of Kautsky and a conversation about "neo-Kautskyism" has taken place. This renewed interest draws on different sources: As it happened before, the interest in the history of social democracy combines academic and political considerations. The next sections attempt to understand and explain these developments.

### **"Revisionism" and beyond: Recent scholarship on the Second International**

In recent decades, drawing on the attraction of global and transnational history, scholars of different topics and fields have paid increasing attention to international

organizations and the role of internationalism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.<sup>7</sup> Usually associated with the perspectives of labor and revolutionary organizations, internationalism is now explored with a much broader scope, in connection to liberalism, Christian-democrats, and other political currents and social organizations.<sup>8</sup> More specifically in the field of the history of workers and labor movements, another driving force has been of course the calls for a global turn in labor history set forth by Marcel van der Linden and other scholars at the International Institute of Social History.<sup>9</sup>

These new perspectives are the backdrop against which we observe renewed interest in the study of socialist and working-class internationalism. In recent years, scholars shed light on the plethora of transnational labor organizations that emerged in the aftermath of World War I.<sup>10</sup> The Second International also profited from this new interest and the field has experienced a renovation and a shift in terms of approach. While most of the classical historiography assumed the internationalism of pre-war social democracy as a matter of fact, and therefore sought ways of interpreting the “betrayal” or “failure” of the “bifurcation point” of 1914, recent works have developed a different perspective. The idea is not entirely new: In 1985, Jolyon Howorth argued that there had been no betrayal in 1914 simply because social democracy had always been informed by nationalism, and Moira Donald developed a similar idea in 2001, arguing that internationalism was not a meaningful feature for the rank-and-file of socialist parties.<sup>11</sup> What happened in 1914, therefore, had just expressed the power and strength of the nationalist identity of the working classes.

Although departing from Howorth and Donald in important aspects, the work of American historian Kevin J. Callahan shared with them a perspective that the author calls “revisionist” and constitutes a significant reference for understanding recent historiography about the Second International.<sup>12</sup> Instead of stressing the limits, tensions, and ultimate “failure” of socialist internationalism, this revisionist historiography, according to Callahan, highlights its achievements and accomplishments—in other words, it focuses on everything that the International *was* able to do during its quarter century of existence.<sup>13</sup> In an influential book published in 2010, Callahan argued that the International “created a mass-based political culture of demonstration that effectively displayed a united image of socialist solidarity in the public sphere while promoting a sense of common purpose and fraternity amid great ideological, national and cultural diversity within its sections.”<sup>14</sup> His book examined these “demonstrations” at various levels, such as publications and manifestos, international congresses, and mass demonstrations. According to Callahan, this perspective not only allows for a better understanding of what the Second International managed to do, rather than focusing on its “failures,” but also provides a better understanding of what happened in 1914, as this “performative” capacity of the International had never been incompatible with the intention of the different parties to “defend their own conceptions of the nation.”

Important works have appeared in the last decade in Germany and France that connect with these “revisionist” arguments. In a large monograph which came out in 2012, Sebastian Schickl studied the interplay between internationalism and nationalism in the stances of the Second International. Situated within the historical framework of transnational organizations, and adopting a discourse analysis approach, the study covered the period 1889–1917 and paid attention to shifts in socialist discourses about a

variety of regions and case studies, from the Balkans to India, and Palestine to Egypt.<sup>15</sup> In a short book published in 2018, Pierre Alayrac explored the London congress of 1896 as a case study for understanding the political culture, networks of sociability, and biographies of its participants.<sup>16</sup> Following the insights of Callahan, Alayrac analyzed the ceremonial aspects of the congress, the use of language and interpreters, and the efforts to limit dissensions and divisions among delegates. The book argued that international meetings not only aimed to create a transnational identity but also fulfilled a latent function of strengthening each national movement and increasing the political authority of its leaders. Elisa Marcobelli, in turn, published an important monograph on the question of militarism and war.<sup>17</sup> Rejecting the notion of “failure” and talking instead about successive “crises,” she argued that the International developed a “learning curve” that allowed for quicker and more efficient reactions to diplomatic tensions. In so doing, she attempted to show that the struggle against militarism and war was a real and genuine element which in fact became the core of the International’s activity.

### Kautsky’s unexpected comeback

A different trend of revitalization in the field has come from contributions that focused on the history of ideas and had more overtly political motivations. One of the driving forces of this trend is the important body of scholarship in English that, in the last 20 years, has paid attention to the political and intellectual history of Marxism. While one can recognize a diverse array of origins, a key factor in this process has been the journal *Historical Materialism*, its book series published by Brill and its periodic conferences in different countries. However important in terms of its contributions to the historiography of Marxism, these efforts to explore the history of the left was for the most part an intellectual phenomenon limited to scholars and activists (or both) related to left-wing groups. Something different, in terms of political impact, is what has been happening in the United States and partially in Britain over the last decade, when a new generation of young activists has become interested in socialist ideals while campaigning for candidates of mainstream parties, namely Bernie Sanders and Jeremy Corbyn. This has been most prominently demonstrated through the explosive growth of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA).

The DSA was founded in 1982 as a result of a merger of two organizations. A majority came from the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee, established in 1973 under the leadership of Michael Harrington as a split from the old Socialist Party of America, while a minority came from the New American Movement, a coalition of intellectuals with roots in the New Left movements of the 1960s. Between its foundation and the 2010s, the DSA remained a small organization, but in the last decade it grew exponentially, in particular after the popular yet ultimately unsuccessful campaign to promote the presidential candidacy of Bernie Sanders in 2016. The DSA attracted a wave of young activists, and in 2017 the median age of its membership was 33, down from 68 in 2013.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, DSA members have since been elected to Parliament as candidates of the Democratic Party: Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Rashida Tlaib won seats in the House of Representatives in November 2018. They were later re-elected in November 2020 and were accompanied by two more members of the DSA, Cori Bush and Jamaal Bowman. Greg Casar became the fifth DSA



member elected to the House in November 2022. By that year, there were also fifty state lawmakers affiliated with the party.

It is against this broader background that we must assess a peculiar discussion about Kautsky and the Second International which unfolded in the first half of 2019, mostly in the pages of *Jacobin*, a very popular magazine and website founded by Bhaskar Sunkara and closely connected to the DSA. The debate started in January 2019, when James Muldoon argued that Kautsky “offered a vision of a socialist republic worthy of renewed attention today,” in the context of ongoing discussions on the left in the UK about and among democratic socialists in the US.<sup>19</sup> A peculiar feature of Muldoon’s piece is that he paid considerable attention to (and vindicated) the stances of Kautsky *after* 1917. He recalled, for instance, that Kautsky stood up against the Bolsheviks and praised Kautsky’s proposed plan for the German USPD, claiming that it offered a pragmatic and democratic option opposed to both social-democratic attempts to regulate capitalism and revolutionary strategies that entailed the dismantling of the capitalist state. In Muldoon’s view, Kautsky fought for “a deepening of democracy within existing political institutions and an extension of democratic principles throughout society.” Muldoon also claimed that Kautsky believed that socialists “must first build support among the majority of the population” and linked this to the idea of connecting “two aspects of the democratic road to socialism: contesting elections *and* building a strong workers’ movement.”

Muldoon’s arguments were criticized by Charlie Post in an article published in *Jacobin* in early March 2019.<sup>20</sup> Most of his reaction drew on well-known Leninist arguments, stressing for instance that “Kautsky and his comrades in the USPD, who would return to the SPD in the early 1920s, bear responsibility for the defeat of the German Revolution, which created the conditions for the rise of fascism.” Post also connected the arguments of Kautsky in 1918 with his stances before the war, when he criticized the strategy of the mass strike to obtain electoral reform. The core of Kautsky’s shortcomings, in Post’s perspective, was that his attempt to combine “mass organization and activity with winning power in the capitalist state through elections” meant a belief in a “*non-insurrectionary* road to socialism.” This idea, in his opinion, was doomed from the start because it drew on an “unrealistic understanding of the capitalist state,” pointing to the blockade that would come to any social change from both the unelected state bureaucracy and the military apparatus. Even more clearly than Muldoon, Post connected these discussions with the contemporary political challenges of the US left, arguing that those who prioritized the ballot box (i.e. trying to elect Democrat representatives) were driving the emerging mass movements to a defeat.

A month after Post’s article, a new piece appeared in *Jacobin*, this time signed by Eric Blanc, with the title “Why Kautsky Was Right (and Why You Should Care).”<sup>21</sup> Unlike Muldoon, Blanc focused on the trajectory of Kautsky *before* the Russian and German revolutions, as he claimed to “distinguish between Kautsky’s long-standing radicalism and his late-in-life turn toward the political center.” This is indeed important, as Blanc contended that both Muldoon and Post viewed Kautsky as a reformist who did not desire a rupture with the capitalist state. In contrast, Blanc developed a more innovative intellectual approach by presenting Kautsky as a forgotten (or misunderstood) figure who holds the key to addressing the challenges of revolutionary strategy.

In order to do so, Blanc claimed, in the first place, that German social democracy's slide to the right in the 1910s was not a consequence of Kautsky's writings but rather the outcome of the unexpected rise of a caste of party and union bureaucrats who were dismissive of Marxist principles. He admitted that, confronted with this challenge, "Kautsky caved" and changed his position on strategic issues after 1910, including his stance on blocs with liberals, participation in capitalist coalition governments, and the possibility of socialist revolution. However, and this is a crucial component of his interpretation, Blanc claimed that Kautsky's strategy must be judged not by what he did in the revolutionary years of 1918–1921 but "by the political practices of the parties that actually sought to implement it." According to him, we should look for true Kautskyism not in what Kautsky did but elsewhere. This implies, in Blanc's view, looking outside Germany, for although Kautsky himself made a turn to the right after 1909, his earlier radical theories continued to influence leftists across Europe, particularly in Russia and Finland.

The second crucial element is that, according to Blanc, Kautsky proposed different revolutionary strategies in democratic and nondemocratic regimes. In his view, the relevance of Kautsky for contemporary activists is that he rejected the idea of an insurrectionary strategy *within capitalist democracies*, arguing that democratic channels and legal mass movements were the best means for workers to advance their interests in such a context. Blanc claimed that history has confirmed the validity of this approach, since "not only has there never been a victorious insurrectionary socialist movement under a capitalist democracy, but only a tiny minority of workers have ever even nominally supported the idea of an insurrection." Reinforcing the significance of this debate for present-day socialists, Blanc claimed that for more than a century the left has been "politically disoriented and marginalized by attempts to generalize the Bolshevik experience to non-autocratic political contexts," and stressed that "without first winning a democratic election, socialists won't have the popular legitimacy and power necessary to effectively lead an anti-capitalist rupture."

As expected, Blanc's intervention sparked a number of reactions. Mike Taber's is an example of a reply which drew on many of the classic Leninist and Trotskyist arguments, stating that the "good" Kautsky can be found not in 1918 but rather in his earlier record, mostly in his efforts to popularize Marxism, resist Eduard Bernstein's revisionism, and support the Russian Revolution of 1905.<sup>22</sup> Like Post, Taber proposed that Kautsky's opposition to Bolshevism after 1917 was a reflection of his inclination toward reformist and opportunist trends from his early years. He also accused Blanc of creating a "caricature" of Leninism by overlooking its emphasis on struggles for democracy and the complexity of its discussions about revolutionary strategies. Also in April 2019, during a conference organized by Historical Materialism in New York City, Eric Blanc and Charlie Post engaged in a public debate in which they both expanded their arguments.<sup>23</sup> Blanc expressed his interest in criticizing "the traditional Leninist view of revolution" in order to find alternatives for "a revolution [which] could realistically happen in a capitalist democracy like the United States." He summed up his arguments as follows:

The core idea of this strategy is that in conditions of parliamentary democracy, the path to socialism is very likely going to have to pass through the universal



suffrage election of a workers' party to government. Such a government, in alliance with struggles from below, would seek to democratize the existing state and implement anti-capitalist changes in the economy, leading the ruling-class minority to resort to antidemocratic sabotage of the elected government and the revolutionary process. Defeating this reaction—through the power of mass action as well as the actions of our elected representatives—would culminate in a complete break with capitalist control over the economy and the state.

Post reacted by focusing on a more concrete question, namely whether socialists should assign *equal* importance to engaging in electoral politics and to building mass movements. His primary argument was that the latter holds much greater significance. After arguing that such a mass movement would be necessary to overcome the capitalist resistance in case of a revolutionary situation, he came back to the core of the discussion, stating that “attempts to use – in any manner, shape, or form – the Democratic Party to prepare for socialist politics is a utopian illusion,” since such a party “is completely and utterly dominated by capital and is a thoroughly electoral machine.” In his reaction, Blanc added a new element to the discussion by claiming that “Leninists, at least those who firmly uphold Lenin’s *The State and Revolution*, believe that all existing state institutions are inherently pro-capitalist by their very structural nature.” According to him, this overlooks that democratic parliaments and universal suffrage “were and remain conquests won by the labor movement against the capitalists.”<sup>24</sup>

## Conclusion

The historiography of the left has always been intertwined with political debates, particularly those concerning pivotal moments of division or “bifurcation points.” This is particularly true of the historiography of the Second International, which has undergone several distinct phases over the last hundred years. While between 1914 and 1945 the topic remained mostly unexplored, a combination of political, institutional, and academic interests combined to produce, in the context of Cold-War Western Europe, some of the most relevant and classic historiography, particularly between 1950 and 1980. In the 1990s, the history of the Second International, and of socialism in general, entered a period of crisis and decline. Over the past two decades, there has been a resurgence of interest in the Second International, driven by two distinct and largely unconnected trends. One is rooted in academia and aligns with broader historiographical developments, such as the study of international organizations and internationalism. The other is more explicitly political and found its main expression in a renovated historiography of Marxist ideas, and more specifically in discussions among the left in the United States, prompting a reassessment of Kautsky’s ideas.

What can we learn from this unexpected twenty-first-century comeback of the founder of *Die Neue Zeit*? In many ways, the discussion that emerged in the pages of *Jacobin* is not very original, as it draws on classic *loci* of political debates in the left such as the tension between insurrection and reform, between revolutionary dictatorship and democracy, or between participation in elections and organization in mass movements. But several aspects are indeed quite new, such as the attempt to give a “revolutionary” Marxist undertone to “democratic socialism,” or the reappraisal of Kautsky

as revolutionary leader, opposed to Lenin. It is also remarkable that the discussion took place in the context of a growing and popular movement, which has attracted thousands of young people across the United States, and that it is already resulting in new historical research on the subject.

The goal of this article was to summarize the main lines of the discussion rather than to add my own contribution to the debate, but I would still like to point out what I see as two major shortcomings of the “Neo-Kautskyist” polemic. First, the debate has been subject to a certain degree of narrowness and tunnel vision, with a disproportionate amount of attention given to the United States and the notion of “democracy” as the natural political system for which a political strategy should be devised. In direct connection to this, a second and serious shortcoming of the debate is the lack of attention given to imperialism and its role in shaping the political and economic structures of the time. Both the Second International and present-day socialist activists in the United States operate in a world shaped by imperialism, and by not paying attention to this the current discussion is repeating some of the worst strategic mistakes of pre-1914 socialism. Any serious assessment of the Second International’s legacy must consider its stances on these crucial issues, as well as its relationship with racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression that continue to shape our world today.

Are we currently witnessing the end of a long cycle that began with the utopian socialists in the 1840s, split into two main traditions of anarchists and socialists, and has since had numerous other bifurcation points? While I agree that we are not in a favorable situation for the left worldwide, I am not entirely convinced by the idea that we are at “the end of a cycle.” To be sure, we are experiencing a growth of the right, and a decline of traditional labor movements. But working people continue to resist exploitation and to devise ways to protest and struggle against the powers that be. The question is to what extent these movements and actions are still connected to the ideas and strategies of the “old cycle.” However “broken” the thread of continuity might seem, whenever the new generations start to organize and fight back, they never start from scratch, and they always connect in different ways with the main ideas and movements of protest of the last 200 years. They are still fighting against capitalism, and as long as the adversary remains the same, there will be continuity rather than rupture.

The case study presented in this article can help demonstrate this point. Even in a left-wing political landscape so arid as the United States, when a younger generation started to develop a political experience without any serious organizational and political tradition, it managed to find its ways to connect to the “old cycle” and revisit classic “bifurcation points.” It did so in quite peculiar and original ways, such as going back to discussions about Kautsky and the Second International. One does not need to agree with the arguments or strategies of these “Neo-Kautskyists” to notice that the very existence of this debate provides proof that the traditions of the “old cycle” are still a point of departure for the discussions of the next generations, even after so many defeats and generational gaps.

## Notes

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13. Kevin J. Callahan, “A Decade of Research on the Second International: New Insights and Methods,” *Moving the Social* 63 (2020): 185–99.
14. Callahan, *Demonstration Culture*, xii.
15. Sebastian Schickl, *Universalismus und Partikularismus: Erfahrungsraum, Erwartungshorizont und Territorialdebatten in der diskursiven Praxis der II. Internationale 1889–1917* (St. Ingbert: Röhrig Universitätsverlag, 2012). More recently, Horst Lademacher published a volume on the efforts of the Second International to oppose war, covering the period 1889–1919. Whereas the chronology of the book connected to other recent works that want to move away from the fixation in 1914, Lademacher mostly shared the arguments of classic historiographies and considers these initiatives as mostly a failure. Horst Lademacher, *Die Illusion vom Frieden: Die Zweite Internationale wider den Krieg, 1889–1919* (Münster/New York: Waxmann, 2018).
16. Pierre Alayrac, *L'Internationale au milieu du gué: de l'internationalisme socialiste au congrès de Londres* (1896) (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2018).
17. Elisa Marcobelli, *L'internationalisme à l'épreuve des crises. La IIe internationale et les socialistes français, allemands et italiens (1889–1915)* (Nancy: Arbre Bleu Editions, 2019).
18. Amy Heyward, “Since Trump’s Victory, Democratic Socialists of America Has Become a Budding Political Force: Why an army of young people is joining DSA,” *The Nation*, 1 December 2017.
19. James Muldoon, “Reclaiming the Best of Karl Kautsky,” *Jacobin*, 5 January 2019.
20. Charlie Post, “The ‘Best’ of Karl Kautsky Isn’t Good Enough,” *Jacobin*, 9 March 2019.

21. Eric Blanc, "Why Kautsky Was Right (and Why You Should Care)," *Jacobin*, 2 April 2019.
22. Mike Taber, "Kautsky, Lenin, and the Transition to Socialism: A Reply to Eric Blanc," *John Riddell* (blog), 7 April 2019.
23. Eric Blanc and Charlie Post, "Which Way to Socialism?," *Jacobin*, 21 July 2019.
24. Blanc published another piece in *Jacobin* soon thereafter, although his main arguments remained the same. There were also different reactions published in other socialist publications: for a good summary see Nathaniel Flakin, "An Introduction to the Kautsky Debate," *Left Voice*, 23 July 2019. It is worth mentioning a piece by Matías Maiello from Argentina, who rightly pointed to a conspicuous absence in the debate: the question of imperialism. Drawing on the concept of "labor aristocracy," he argued that a fundamental reason for the growth of a bureaucracy within the SPD were the profits from colonialism (Matías Maiello, "Social Democracy and Imperialism: The Problem with Kautsky," *Left Voice*, 25 May 2019). A different vindication of Kautsky came from Lars Lih, also in the pages of *Jacobin*, in June 2019. Drawing on the arguments deployed in his 2006 book, Lih argued that there is no fundamental difference between Lenin and Kautsky, not even in 1917, to the point that the latter "deserves to be called the architect of the Bolshevik victory in October." For Lih, *State and Revolution* was "irrelevant to the events" of 1917: In that year "the Bolsheviks championed a message based directly on Kautsky's advice about hegemony and anti-agreementism, advice of long standing that was familiar to the whole party" (Lars Lih, "Karl Kautsky as Architect of the October Revolution," *Jacobin*, 29 June 2019). Beyond these political debates, the discussion about Kautsky has started to have an impact on historiography. Blanc recently published a monograph that explores the interconnected history of socialist parties within the Russian Empire between the early 1880s through the revolutionary wave of 1917–1919: Eric Blanc, *Revolutionary Social Democracy: Working-Class Politics across the Russian Empire (1882–1917)* (Leiden: Brill, 2021).