

A MARXIST LOOKS AT THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY:  
EDVARD KARDELJ'S VIEW OF  
THE SLOVENE REFORMATION

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For Kardelj, a Marxist writing about his nation's development, the most important historical events of the sixteenth century are the Slovene peasant wars. That peasants united — as many as 80,000 in 1515 — and warred against their lords indicates a basic “crisis in the feudal system.”<sup>1</sup> Looking for the necessary underlying economic explanation Kardelj found one of Marx's prescribed historical turning points, the juncture where feudalism broke and commercial capitalism began. That peasants were in revolt in the sixteenth century was therefore socially symptomatic, like a fever which comes with a critical illness. In this case the fever accompanied the initial death throes of feudalism and the birth pangs of a bourgeois capitalist economy.

Kardelj outlines the period's basic economic changes. In Slovene areas, a natural commercial crossroads between Central Europe and the Adriatic and Mediterranean seas, market activity and mining had increased in the latter fifteenth century. Imperial decrees encouraged such enterprises. Capital which had been dormant during the height of feudalism came alive and was put to effective use for commerce and manufacturing by an emergent bourgeoisie. The impact of this on the peasant varied. The lord, pressed by new economic developments, passed his expenses on to the peasant in the form of increased rents and dues, payable in coin, an innovation of the period. The peasant, enterprising in his own right, sensed the possibility for material advancement inherent in the free market. In his relationship with the lord he demanded reconfirmation of the “Old Law” (*stara pravda*) in order to assure that his economic obligation to the lord would not change. This in turn would allow the peasant's auxiliary participation in the commercial revolution to net absolute monetary gain. The peasant did not succeed. Commerce with the West was curtailed due to feudal wars and war with the Turks. The chance for commercial profit was lost. The lord meanwhile refused to abide by the “Old Law” where feudal obligations were concerned. When the peasant resorted to violence to assert his economic rights (intermittently from the late fifteenth to the early seventeenth century but most strikingly in 1515), neither emperor nor religious reformer aided his cause. To the contrary, the Emperor assisted the nobility in



putting down the peasant revolts, and church reformers evoked religious doctrine in support of a socially conservative position.

One more cynical than Kardelj might have described the peasants' motivation as essentially self-serving, perhaps even "kulak-like." Instead Kardelj idealizes the peasant and other popular elements who joined the rebellions. The sixteenth century witnessed no less than "the great Slovene peasant-plebeian democratic revolution,"<sup>2</sup> for the peasant war was one of the highest historic progressive efforts of the Slovene people.<sup>3</sup> Kardelj in venturing such an evaluation cites his mentor Friedrich Engels, who praised the Slovene peasant revolts in his own work *The Peasant War in Germany*.<sup>4</sup> That the peasant demanded reconfirmation of the "Old Law," however, is not to be viewed as reactionary, according to Kardelj. The peasant, experiencing economic and social injustice, was not at the time capable of envisioning a future society or a new social order which embodied a more perfect justice. So he fixed instead on the "Old Law" as it was administered in an age when feudalism was less harsh.<sup>5</sup>

Kardelj's approach to the sixteenth century is presented most fully in *Razvoj slovenskega narodnega vprašanja*, published first in 1939 under the pseudonym Sperans.<sup>6</sup> Later editions of the work, which until recently was the only comprehensive history of the Slovenes, vary only slightly from the original. (Sixteenth century developments which were enlarged upon in post-World War II editions will be discussed below). Here it is essential to stress the point that sources shape a writer's approach. So, too, does his basic outlook which further predisposes him to selective use of material, and ultimately both sources and outlook color interpretation of events.

Kardelj in preparing *Razvoj* in the late 1930s did not use, nor did he have access to, archival sources. He could not, in other words, write an original work based on analysis of socio-economic data. Kardelj read secondary works written by Slovene historians who had gathered their information proceeding from other than Marxist perspectives. Many were nationalistic or idealistic writers. Kos' work, *Zgodovina Slovencev od naselitve do reformacije*, published in 1933, appears to have made a particularly indelible impression on the Marxist Kardelj.<sup>7</sup> Kos, above all, portrayed the Slovene peasant positively, nobly. It was the peasant in the medieval period, struggling with foreign intruders for control of Slovene territory, who had given life and substance to the nation. Kardelj in the 1930s also read non-Slovene works on social revolution, notably Albert Mathiez on the Revolution in France in 1789,<sup>8</sup> and Engels on the German peasant war of 1525. Many of the works, including Engels' are fundamentally idealistic; Engels himself attributes his approach towards the German peasant activities to Wilhelm Zimmermann whom he describes as an idealist who was happily also a "realistic" historian. Some of the works were probably reading recommended by



Dušan Kermauner, a Slovene Communist who acted as mentor to many Slovene student radicals in the 1920s and thirties. Kermauner, an admirer of Mathiez, also translated Engels' *The Peasant War in Germany*.<sup>9</sup> It may have been the version Kardelj read in preparing *Razvoj*.

Kardelj's use of sources presents problems for the historian. Bogo Grafenauer, a contemporary authority on Slovene History — and of the sixteenth century in particular — has publicly chided Kardelj for his selective use of pre-World War II bourgeois histories and also for not acknowledging the results of post-World War II scholarship in revised editions of *Razvoj*.<sup>10</sup> The latter scholarship, Grafenauer notes, is based — unlike Kardelj's — on thorough analyses of documentary evidence. However, for Kardelj, it seems, attachment to a comprehensive Marxist thesis outweighed incorporating contradictory data when he was preparing post-war edition. His use of Mathiez is also troublesome. Perhaps peasant rebellions do indeed have similarities, but equating the Slovene revolts of the sixteenth century with French developments in the late eighteenth century as presented by Mathiez is problematic. Even assuming the Marxist premise of continuity of class purpose, it is necessary to account for differences of time and place. Centuries and different socio-economic conditions separate the Slovene peasant of the Imperial alpine lands in 1515 from the peasant of France in 1789. Yet Kardelj seems predisposed to view Slovene social history simplistically. Sometimes, that is through the eyes of the early twentieth century French historian Mathiez.

Kardelj's major source on the sixteenth century is Engels. Perhaps it is because Engels had written several laudatory paragraphs on the Slovene peasants in his own work on the German peasant war.<sup>11</sup> Kardelj very likely hit on this reference, expanded coverage on the Slovene peasants and at the same time adopted the framework Engels had set for his own exposition. To use Engels as a guide in writing a "Marxist" history might strike one as eminently appropriate, and yet it is not necessarily. It could be said of Engels' publication, as Grafenauer has said of Kardelj's *Razvoj* that it is not a "mature" Marxist study. The materialism is lacking. There is virtually no socio-economic analysis. Engels modeled his work, as noted above, on Zimmermann, an idealist preacher-professor who ran afoul of the authorities during the revolution of 1848.<sup>12</sup> The fact that *The German Peasant War* is not based on detailed analysis of economic data gives the reader a break; the narrative makes for comparatively lively reading. Essentially, however, it is highly idealistic, deterministic, Hegelian, and also polemical. To reiterate, Kardelj's work on the sixteenth century bears Engels' strong imprint. Furthermore this early Kardelj work establishes a pattern. Kardelj's later writing is always more preoccupied with the dialectic than it is with the material.

Kardelj's writing on the Slovene peasant uprising is largely consist-



ent with current Marxist studies on the German peasant wars. Most of the latter are products of recent (post-1950s) scholarship in the German Democratic Republic — to a lesser extent in the USSR — which accepts Engels' work as seminal. These works, like Kardelj's, generally treat the Reformation period as one of "transition from feudalism to capitalism."<sup>13</sup> They focus on the traumatic effects of early commercial capitalism on the peasant and the agricultural economy. In these studies the peasants demand a return to the *Altes Recht* or *Gottliches Recht* (*stara pravda* in Slovene lands) and they lament their plight in the millenarian folklore of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. So, too, Kardelj notes Slovene peasant legends about Kralj Matjaž and Kraljević Marko.<sup>14</sup>

The German Reformation in recent Marxist literature is often termed an early bourgeois revolution.<sup>15</sup> The reference for this assertion is again Engels who used Hegel as his source. Yet Hegel was thinking less about class conflict and economic factors than about spiritual matters; for him what Luthranism begat culminated in the French Revolution. Not exactly so for Kardelj, although he notes Engels' point about Luther being a "bourgeois revolutionary." Kardelj has little use for Luther or Slovenes who may have supported him or other Protestant leaders. For Kardelj among the religious reformers only Müntzer and the Anabaptists are historically progressive.<sup>16</sup> Kardelj separates sixteenth century religious and cultural developments from the socio-economic ones, treating them in tandem rather than as part of a whole. He seems, however, to have missed making one rather crucial point. He does not note how the sequence of events in the German and Slovene lands differed. Specifically, the German peasant war, because it came in 1525, several years after Luther's attack on the Church, has traditionally been linked with the religious Reformation. Given the year-long public tribute in the GDR in 1983 to Luther on the five-hundredth anniversary of the reformer's birth suggests that German Marxists still consider the religious reform movement and the social upheaval of the time as part of one larger revolution.<sup>17</sup> Their tendency therefore is to over-estimate the ideological motivation of the peasants.<sup>18</sup> Kardelj, as noted above, tends to keep the two developments separate; indeed it is difficult in dealing with the Slovene lands to link the two since the major Slovene peasant revolt in 1515 preceded Luther's break with the Church by half a decade. Kardelj rather ignores this important point, no doubt now wishing to stray too far from Engels' model on the German peasant war. yet it should have been stressed. The two developments perhaps really have little to do with each other. Emphasizing that point would have strengthened Kardelj's own argument about the progressive character of the peasant activities as contrasted with what he deems the socially reactionary nature of most religious and cultural leaders of the time.



Turning briefly to the religious issues of the sixteenth century, it hears noting that Kardelj hardly mentions them in the various editions of *Razvoj*. Grafenauer considers this a serious omission.<sup>19</sup> The quarrel with the Church was after all not only political. Passionate debate over religious doctrine and practices occupied scholars, clergy, and also laymen for many decades. The religious issues were important, perhaps fundamental, to Europeans living in the sixteenth century. Kardelj treats them as incidental; in dismissing them he may have by-passed the essence of the sixteenth century *Zeitgeist*.

Kardelj has very little praise for Slovene religious reformers. Primož Trubar is treated almost condescendingly by him, particularly in the 1939 edition of *Razvoj*. Trubar is depicted as an opportunist,<sup>20</sup> an agent of the Protestant nobility, who like Luther — although less brutally — turned against the peasant-plebeian democratic revolution of the sixteenth century. In post-war editions of *Razvoj* Kardelj's portrayal of Trubar is less harsh, but he can never quite forgive Trubar his social conservatism. In his 1957 publication Kardelj grudgingly concedes that Trubar's cultural work related positively to the development of a Slovene national consciousness. Kardelj, quoting Rupel, Trubar's biographer, cites a moving passage where in 1582 Trubar writes with pride about rendering Slovene (*slovenski jezik*) into a written language. Trubar then goes on affectionately about the "dear homeland" (*draga domovina*), which in its suffering — inflicted by the Pope and the Turks — has by God been given an alphabet, something the people can have pride in.<sup>21</sup>

How to explain Kardelj's stern treatment of Trubar and other Slovene Protestant writers? He writes, for example, that "our Protestant writers do not express the true identity of the people."<sup>22</sup> Kardelj's reliance on Engels' work on the German peasant war of 1525 may be the answer. Engels' book, essentially a polemic, was written in 1850, shortly after the disappointing, to him, revolutions of 1848-49. Engels attributes their failure to the cowardice and conservatism of the bourgeoisie. In his Introduction and text he makes frequent analogies between events of the mid-nineteenth century and the sixteenth, projecting back into the Reformation era his negative views of the Forty-Eighters. He blames them for the failures of the democratic revolutionary efforts of the sixteenth century as well as those of the mid-1800s.

Kardelj felt similarly about the middle class of inter-war Yugoslavia. He also subscribed to the view that in history's cyclical re-enactments the performance of a social class is consistent with its own innately progressive or non-progressive character. One is reminded of Marx, writing in 1852 in his "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte," where he cites Hegel about all great historic facts and personages recurring twice. Marx added: "Once as tragedy, once again as farce."<sup>23</sup> So, too, the bourgeoisie of 1848, and surely, for Kardelj the bourgeoisie of



the 1930s, repeating over and again the blunders of the emergent middle classes of the sixteenth century. But for Kardelj, Engels, and those of a dialectical bent, interpretations of history might be projected *forward* as well as backward — a dubious practice for a would-be historian. In Kardelj's mind, it is therefore only to the peasant-plebeian element that society might look for hope of better world. Kardelj's major sources — Kos, Mathiez, and Engels — had all stressed this. Regrettably, the peasants, due to poor organization and lack of vision, failed to seize the opportunity to transform society in 1848. But they would, when the promise of a better future regenerated their consciousness of duty to their revolutionary mission. For Kardelj "the great peasant-plebeian democratic revolution" of the sixteenth century was fulfilled by the National Liberation War (*Narodna osvobodilna vojna*) of the 1940s. The masses then, spiritually propelled by a vision of a more perfect justice, would no longer need to yearn for a return to the "Old Law" or *stara pravda*.

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2. Ibid., 111.
3. Ibid., 112.
4. Frederick (sic) Engels, *The Peasant War in Germany* (New York: International Publishers, 1926).
5. Sperans (Edvard Kardelj), *Razvoj slovenskega narodnega vprašanja* (Ljubljana: Naša založba, 1939), 60. Also see Kardelj, op. 121-2.
6. Sperans, loc. cit.
7. Milko Kos, *Zgodovina Slovencev od naselitve do reformacije* (Ljubljana, 1933). For a discussion of Kos' influence on Kardelj see Janko Pleterski, "Zgodovinska misel slovenskih marksistov v času Speransove knjige," *Edvard Kardelj-Sperans in slovensko zgodovinopisje* (Ljubljana: Zgodovinsko društvo za Slovenijo, 1980), 6.
8. Kardelj cites Mathiez' *The French Revolution*, Vol. I, p. 23, in the Slovene translation. Sperans, op. cit., 59. That Slovene translation was certainly Dušan Kermauner's. See below, footnote 9.
9. Taras Kermauner, "Evropski socializem in jugoslovanski



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10. Bogo Grafenauer, Review of the third edition of *Razvoj slovenskega narodnega vprašanja* by Edvard Kardelj, *Zgodovinski časopis*, 24, 313.
  11. Engels, op. cit., 91.
  12. Ibid., 11-12; 167. Wilhelm Zimmermann's *The History of the Great Peasant War* was published in 1841. Second and third editions were issued in 1856 and 1891 respectively.
  13. Robert W. Scribner, "The German Peasants War," *Reformation Europe: A Guide to Research*, ed. Steven Ozment (St. Louis: Center for Reformation Research, 1982), 107-33.
  14. Sperans, op. cit., 59-60.
  15. Thomas A. Brady, "Social History," *Reformation Europe: A Guide to Research*, op. cit., 161-81.
  16. Kardelj, loc. cit., 88-89.
  17. In the German Democratic Republic celebrating the anniversary of Luther's birth displaced for the most part other important anniversary — the hundredth of Marx's death.
  18. Scribner, op. cit., 114-5.
  19. Grafenauer, op. cit., 326-7.
  20. Sperans, op. cit., 53-4.
  21. Kardelj, op. cit., 98-99.
  22. Sperans, op. cit., 56.
  23. Karl Marx, "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte," *The Communist Manifesto with selections from the "Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte" and Capital*, ed. Samuel H. Bear (Northbrook, Illinois: Crofts Classics, 1955), p. 47.