

SECTION V. NEW PUBLICATIONS – REPORTS, PRESENTATIONS AND REVIEWS

V.1: REVIEW ESSAYS

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Campaignism: An Essential Theme in the History of the Left

Kevin J. Callahan: Demonstration Culture. European Socialism and the Second International, Leicester, Troubador Publishing, 2010. XXXII, 324 pp. – ISBN 978-1848763838.

*“Die Aufgabe der Internationale ist also vor allem, sich selbst zu manifestieren”
– Friedrich Adler*

The agitation campaign, with its standard repertoire of techniques – the mass demonstration with banners flying, the door-to-door petition drive, the flyers, the newspaper editorials, the speeches from whatever tribune is available, all focused on one message and one goal – is such a familiar and inherent part of the life of the Left, yesterday, today, and presumably tomorrow, that we forget that it too has its history. The outstanding merit of Kevin J. Callahan’s new book is that it brings into focus precisely this aspect of the history of the Left, rather than the ideological and organizational issues that usually take front and center.

In order to bring out some of the larger historical implication of what Callahan calls “demonstration culture” and what I tend to call “the permanent campaign”, I will preface my review of Callahan’s findings with a necessarily speculative outline of its overall historical trajectory.

The Permanent Campaign

The agitation campaign and its various techniques were developed empirically in the first half of the nineteenth century by people with specific political goals in mind. A successfully and highly influential example was the campaign mounted in the early 1830s by middle-class reformers to repeal the Corn Laws in Great Britain. By the end of 1848, many of the component techniques such as petitions, demonstrations and so forth had become familiar to working-class activists.

The move from scattered campaigns to campaignism – that is, to the explicit justification of agitation campaigns as a central and continuing activity – was made by Ferdinand Lassalle.

In my view, the huge historical importance of Lassalle's innovation has been overlooked. His great idea was to transform the campaign from an ad hoc tool to a permanent ongoing institution and to envision a new type of party which would make this permanent campaign its central activity. In Lassalle's words:

"Found and publish newspapers, to make this demand [universal suffrage] daily and to prove the reasons for it from the state of society. With the same funds circulate pamphlets for the same purpose. Pay agents out of the Union's funds to carry this insight into every corner of the country, to thrill the heart of every worker, every house-servant, every farm-laborer, with this cry ... Propagate this cry in every workshop, every village, every hut. May the workers of the towns let their higher insight and education overflow on to the workers of the country. Debate, discuss, everywhere, every day without pausing, without ending."¹

Lassalle's vision was a stimulant to the empirical search for techniques of agitation by several generations of primarily social-democratic activists. The result of these discoveries and innovations is described in books such as Vernon Lidtke's *The Alternative Culture* and Callahan's *Demonstration Culture*.² The permanent campaign was an essential item in the institutional DNA transmitted from the Second International to the postwar Third International. Compare these words of Lenin (from *Left-Wing Communism*, his pamphlet written for the Second Comintern Congress in 1920) with the Lassalle passage just quoted:

"[T]he Communist Parties must issue their slogans; true proletarians, with the help of the unorganised and downtrodden poor, should distribute leaflets, canvass workers' houses and cottages of the rural proletarians and peasants in the remote villages ... they should go into ... chance gatherings of the common people, and speak to the people, not in learned (or very parliamentary) language; they should not at all strive to 'get seats' in parliament, but should everywhere try to get people to think, and draw the masses into the struggle, to take the bourgeoisie at its word and utilize the machinery it has set up, the elections it has appointed, and the appeals it has made to the people; they should try to explain to the people what Bolshevism is, in a way that has never been possible (under bourgeois rule) outside of election times[.]"³

Campaignism had enormous implications for revolutionary Social Democracy's attitude toward political freedom – although, depending on the context, these implications could be diametrically opposed. In context where the Marxist revolutionaries were not in power, campaignism meant that political freedoms were "light and air for the proletariat", as Kautsky put it in his canonical *Das Erfurter Programm*. None took this lesson more to heart than Russian Bolsheviks, motivating their drive to carry out the democratic revolution "to the end", that is, to the achievement of the maximum space for the campaigns seen as necessary for the ultimate socialist revolution.⁴ And yet the Bolsheviks were also the first to show that campaignism in power could be the worst enemy of political freedom. More on this in a later section.

¹ As cited in: Lars T. Lih: Lenin Rediscovered. *What is to be done?* in Context, Leiden e.a., Brill, 2006, p. 59.

² Vernon L. Lidtke: *The Alternative Culture. Socialist Labor in Imperial Germany*, New York e.a., Oxford University Press, 1985.

³ V. I. Lenin: *Collected Works*, vol. 31, Moscow, Progress Publishers, 1966, pp. 98-99.

⁴ See: Lars T. Lih: *The Ironic Triumph of Old Bolshevism. The Debates of April 1917 in Context*. In: *Russian History* 38 (2011), pp. 199-242.

Lassalle was inspired by a rather eclectic version of Marxism, and indeed Marxism and campaignism have an elective affinity. If the central theme of Marxism is the world-historical mission of the proletariat, then campaignism seems a necessary tool to spread the word and prepare the proletariat to carry out its great task. To quote Kautsky again, “the task of Social Democracy is to make the proletariat aware of its task.”

Thus campaignism is useful, indeed indispensable, for Marxism. But we can, and perhaps should, look at the relationship from the other direction. In order to justify itself, campaignism needs a narrative of world-historical mission of whatever kind. The aim of campaignism is to make people feel and act as part of a greater whole. It might be that this feeling is really an end in itself, rather than a means to actually carry out the mission. With this thought in mind, we turn to Callahan’s description of campaignism at work.

Demonstration Culture

Demonstration Culture is a case study of campaignism as applied to one theme, namely, the sense of international solidarity fostered by European Social Democratic parties, and in particular, the lived experience of international congresses from 1889 to the Basle Congress of 1912.

“Campaignism” is my own coinage and not a concept directly employed by Callahan (or by anybody else!). Callahan’s material encouraged me to widen my definition of campaignism to include much more than the paradigmatic case of the door-to-door agitation invoked by Lassalle and Lenin. “Campaignism” can be defined provisionally as, first, the entire range of techniques used to encourage people to feel and act as part of a greater whole, and, second, the systematic drive on the part of leaders and organizers to use these devices in precisely this way. This second element is what puts the “ism” in “campaignism.”

So defined, I believe that campaignism fits naturally into Callahan’s argument and in no way distorts his argument, while allowing us to put it into a larger historical framework. His book not only shows us an array of relevant techniques in places where we might not think to look for them, but also documents the conscious awareness of many of the leaders about what they were doing. We will discuss these two aspects in turn.

Callahan puts his discussion of particular techniques into a comparative framework taken from sociology, anthropology, and political science. Some may find the result a bit too social-science in approach and tone, and Callahan doesn’t always do a good job of elucidating some of these concepts (I still haven’t grasped what an “insurrection-demonstration” is supposed to be). Still, on the whole, I find Callahan’s argument to be accessible and non-jargon-ridden, with the comparative element adding an essential resonance.

Among techniques of solidarity uncovered by Callahan through his study of international socialist congresses are the following:

- efforts to present a united front at international congresses, particularly after some scandalous failures in the early congresses
- press coverage of congresses
- choosing the location of congresses, at both the national and international level

- maximizing opportunities for sociability among congress delegates (including the very intriguing image of Karl Kautsky “dazzling the audience with a ballet performance”!) (93)
- speaking tours associated with the congress
- the “ritual of reception” of the delegates arriving from various countries
- portraits of past and present heroes, banners with slogans, and other visible paraphernalia
- the inaugural address, usually emphasizing the inspiring growth of the movement
- mass demonstrations and rallies with the participant of the local worker population, with the aim of creating “a proletarian public, a counter-public to the state-bourgeois public” (128)
- music in various forms, from the singing of songs and socialist hymns to elaborate concerts
- official solidarity expressed for strikes and protests in various countries
- telegrams and address in which others express solidarity with the congress
- celebration of leaders such as August Bebel
- homage to the dead
- coordinated protest campaigns as organized by the International Socialist Bureau (ISB) outside of congresses

Each of these topics is described by Callahan in vivid detail backed up by imaginative research – see, for example, the table on pp. 89-91 of expenditures for social activities at the 1912 Basle congress.

Callahan also provides us with a variety of comments by socialist participants that reveal the conscious awareness of these techniques and their intended impact. Perhaps the key insight is given by Friedrich Adler: “Die Aufgabe der Internationale ist also vor allem, sich selbst zu manifestieren.” This statement might be glossed: the essential task of the International is to use demonstrations (or, in French, *manifestation*) to demonstrate its own existence. Adler goes on to elaborate that the task of the International was “zum Ausdruck zu bringen, dass die Arbeiter aller Länder sich verstehen, dass sie eins sind in Erkenntnis und Willen.”⁵ (188) Here the individual worker is made to feel part of larger whole in spatial terms, that is, the workers of all lands at any one time.

A time-honored device for making people feel part of a greater whole with the people physically surrounding them is music, especially song. Viktor Adler made the point in exalted language: “The highest expression of our solidarity, the inspiration for the holy cause around which the masses assemble as brothers ... one cannot *speak* of that, one must sing it.”⁶ Or, in the more humble language of an American socialist group,

⁵ In this case, the author provides the German text, which is fortunate, since his translation is somewhat inaccurate. The one disturbing feature of this book is the level of the direct translation of passages in French and German. Callahan’s usually serviceable prose suddenly becomes clunkily over-literal, with highly suspect accuracy.

⁶ William J. McGrath: *Dionysian Art and Populist Politics in Austria*, New Haven e.a., Yale University Press, 1974, p. 214. When read next to Callahan’s study, McGrath’s chapter on Viktor Adler clearly makes highly exaggerated claims for Adler’s originality. With this proviso, McGrath provides another

“You and your friends will enjoy singing these fine songs.
Sing them in your branch meetings, sing them in your homes, sing them in the great outdoors.
The singing of these songs together joins us in bonds of unity as nothing else can.”
(152)

The individual was also encouraged to feel part of a greater whole in time, that is, part of a moment with a glorious past and an even more glorious future. These aims were brought out by Pieter Jelles Troelstra, Dutch member of the ISB, while urging that the upcoming international congress should be held in 1914 as an anniversary year (fiftieth anniversary of the International, twenty-fifth anniversary of the one of the first congresses of the Second International in Paris):

“... one should take advantage of every good opportunity in order to give each congress a more up-to-date and propagandistic face. A congress held in 1914 offers such a chance. The congress could then in part be given the function to express, though printed reports and spirited speeches from the delegates of the different countries, the enormous progress of the proletarian class struggle in the past 25 years ... A commemorative celebration could be connected with the 1914 congress in such a way so that the next international congress would make an incredible impression on those countries, where the proletariat movement is only in an infantile stage.” (83)

Behind all this was an overarching aim of instilling confidence. Sometimes the International seems as vast exercise in boosting self-esteem – or, to use the more flowery language of Viktor Adler, urging the working class “to throw off the debilitating dream of its impotence.”⁷ This self-confidence was visible in the body-language and even clothing of participants in socialist demonstrations. As an observer noted in the case of a huge demonstration through the streets of London in 1896,

“It was curious to notice how a vivid sense of their own importance in taking part in such a demonstration and of marching along to the strains of the ‘Marseillaise’ had given even the most wretched of the Jewish tailors an air of proud distinction. They stepped along with their heads and chests well thrown back, as if compelling the attention of the sightseers on either side.” (134)

The Austrian party made similar remarks about the great suffrage demonstration in 1905: “Through the great demonstration of the workers, this opening day of Parliament receives a special consecration [*Weihe*] and will be raised to the dignity [*Würde*] of a great people’s holiday [*Volksfeiertag*] by the mighty will of the proletariat. Even outwardly it will wear Sunday dress.”⁸

The cult of leaders that always marked the Social Democratic movement was yet another device, not for crushing the rank-and-file into insignificance, but rather to make the leader a

good case study of campaignism, particularly with his description of the mass demonstration for universal suffrage in 1905.

⁷ McGrath, *Dionysian Art*, p. 222.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 230. Callahan notes that over the years, “a clear trend is discernible that demonstrators and especially spectators resorted to more expensive and formal clothing modeled after bourgeois norms” (134).

symbol for “the noblest virtues of the International,” as Callahan well puts it (159). He quotes a speech about August Bebel given by Emile Vandervelde at the Copenhagen congress in 1910 (Bebel was ill and could not attend). After describing Bebel as “the purest embodiment of our socialist ideals ... the most beautiful realization of socialist intellectualism”, Vandervelde sums up by calling Bebel “the most typical expression for the fighting and victorious proletariat ... By the fact that you applaud the name Bebel, you are celebrating the international workers movement of the socialist proletariat.” (159)

Callahan’s case-study also brings out some important points about the Second International’s internationalism, a topic I cannot discuss here, except to make a couple of points.⁹ The domination of the International by large countries with prestigious socialist organizations and relatively abundant resources is already apparent in the prewar years. The only difference from later years is that there were two contenders for hegemony in the movement, Germany and France, and their clash allowed more autonomy for all the others. Callahan has a very good account of the mutual stereotypes of these two would-be hegemons.

To a surprising extent, the strictly international activity of the Second International, as expressed in statements, manifestoes and appeals, was dominated by two themes: preventing war and praising revolutionary Russia’s fight against the oppressive tsar. Russia’s international reputation as a bastion of proletarian revolutionary prowess thus predates the October revolution by a decade or so. The coexistence of these two basic themes reveals a tension that became a contradiction in 1914, when traditional condemnation of the Russian tsar provided legitimacy for support of the war effort by German socialists.

Russia: From Erfurtian Underground to State Monopoly Campaignism

Like most other writers who have studied Western European Social Democracy, Callahan does not have a very solid sense of Russia and Russian Social Democracy, and this accounts for the presence of individuals otherwise unknown to history such as Sergei Plekhanov (138) or Nicholas Riasanoff (179). Of course, the compliment is returned by most historians of Russia who operate with only the vaguest of stereotypes about European Social Democracy, usually pictured as something as un-Bolshevik-like as possible. This is a pity, because the histories of the two are deeply intertwined. I will try to show this in the case of campaignism.

The campaignism of the Second International was impossible in tsarist Russia because the necessary political conditions were absent. But the fact certainly did not mean that campaignism was not a potent ideal for Russian Social Democracy. The Russian Social Democrats were eager observers of all the activities described by Callahan – and of course, as noted by Callahan, émigrés such as Georgii Plekhanov were active participants in international congresses. The attitude of Russian Social Democratic *praktiki* toward the massive rallies, parades, newspapers, and congresses was something like that of boys with their noses pressed against the glass of an inaccessible candy store. Memoirs written by these *praktiki*, both Menshevik and Bolshevik, often contain an episode where the author goes abroad, sees a massive parade or protest rally, and wonders if he or she will ever live to see such things in Russia.

⁹ For more on this aspect of the book, see the review by Ben Lewis: Second International. Imagination, Inspiration and Betrayal. In: *Weekly Worker*, 9 May 2013. URL: <http://www.cpgb.org.uk/home/weekly-worker/961/second-international-imagination-inspiration-and-betrayal> [Last consulted: 28 August 2013]

The new type of underground built up by the underground activists and idealized by Lenin in *What Is To Be Done?* was aimed at applying campaignism to the extent possible in absolutist Russia. The old type of underground tried to wall itself off from society in order to carry out assassination plots and the like. The aim of the new type was to connect to the workers by as many threads as possible (to use the image of the Bolshevik *praktik* Martyn Liadov), while still preserving security. The techniques developed to pull off this daunting task were collectively called *konspiratsiia*. For this reason, I have elsewhere called this new type of underground “the *konspiratsiia* underground”,¹⁰ but perhaps a better name would be “Erfurtian underground”. “Erfurtian” refers to the European Social Democracy parties inspired by the *Musterpartei* SPD, especially as presented in idealized form by Karl Kautsky in *Das Erfurter Programm*.

Campaignism was a central feature or perhaps *the* central feature of the Erfurtian model, and accordingly the dream of the Russian underground activists was to duplicate in some small way the impact of the campaignism of European Social Democracy. Lenin dreamed of an underground newspaper that would change the balance of power within Russian society simply by letting all protestors against the tsar learn of the existence of all the other protestors – thus making impossible resistance to autocracy suddenly seem possible (can we call this twitter logic?).

Campaignism also inspired the overriding political strategy of the Russian underground, namely, to carry out the democratic revolution “to the end” in order to obtain the political and institutional framework to carry out full-blooded campaignism. The paradox – or, as the Bolsheviks would insist, seeming paradox – of Bolshevik strategic thinking was that the *socialist* proletariat was the only class in Russia fully motivated to bringing the *democratic* revolution to the end, thus giving it the right and duty to be in some sense the leader (or “hegemon”) of this revolution. The imperative of campaignism was the main thing that made this paradox plausible.

When a party that arose out of the Russian Erfurtian underground took over exclusive state power, campaignism entered a new mode that can be called state monopoly campaignism. One could write a long treatise on the role of campaigns and campaignism in the history of the Soviet Union, providing the rhythm both of its long-term history and its day-to-day activities.¹¹ Here I will look at just one striking example that ties in closely to Callahan’s case study.

The records of the Second Comintern Congress in summer 1920, supplemented by John Riddell’s description of the proceedings based in large on interviews with long-lived participants, show the direct continuity between the Second and Third Internationals in their approach to putting on an international congress.¹² After reading Callahan’s account, the following features of the Comintern Congress stand out:

¹⁰ Lars T. Lih: *Lenin*, London, Reaktion Books, 2011.

¹¹ See, for example, the recent study by Olga Velikanova: *Popular Perceptions of Soviet Politics in the 1920s: Disenchantment of the Dreamers*, Basingstoke e.a., Palgrave MacMillan, 2013. Velikanova writes “I organize my research around the major mobilization campaigns of the 1920s: patriotic campaigns known as war scares, October Revolution celebrations, and the alliance (*smychka*) campaign to promote unity among workers and peasants” (4).

¹² John Riddell (ed.): *Workers of the World and Oppressed Peoples, Unite! Proceedings and Documents of the Second Congress, 1920*, New York, Pathfinder Press, 1991; see especially pp. 10-16, 97-140.

- the location of the congress in civil-war Moscow was part of its message to delegates
- the delegates were all housed in one hotel, thus allowing a great deal of sociability
- the delegates addressed worker meetings, participated in volunteer activities, mass demonstrations, dramatic performances and even a sculpture contest
- the “ritual of reception” was especially elaborate: delegates travelled to Petrograd (now St. Petersburg), took a streetcar to the Smolny Institute with Mikhail Kalinin at the wheel, and were greeted by a children’s choir
- Kalinin’s inaugural speech impressed upon delegates the sacred status of the Smolny Institute as a birthplace of the revolution
- a mass demonstration took place with thousands of worker participants, culminating in a piece of mass theater, the *Spectacle of Two Worlds*. One delegate remembered that “it was like a dream. As the sailors’ armored car drove up, we delegates stood, shouting, waving our arms, so enthusiastic we were quite overcome.”¹³
- in the first session of the congress – in a formerly tsarist palace now named for the Bolshevik martyr Moisei Uritsky – delegates sang the Internationale and rose to honor fallen comrades while an orchestra played a funeral march
- Zinoviev’s opening speech stressed how the present congress showed the vast growth and global reach of the communist movement
- Lenin’s opening speech as greeted as befitted a socialist hero (“all present rise and applaud. The speaker tries to speak, but the applause and cheers in every language continue. The ovation continues at length”)¹⁴
- many greetings to the congress were read aloud during the proceedings
- many appeals for international solidarity were issued
- the delegates laid a wreath on a grave of fighters for the revolution and went to a “large international rally” to lay the cornerstone for a monument to Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht
- the congress climaxed its activities by issuing a long and impressive Manifesto, penned by Trotsky

I have consulted these records many times in order to understand this or that ideological position, but only under the impetus of Callahan’s description of earlier international socialist congresses did I look at the proceedings as a lived event. And when I did look, the continuities with the past leapt out at me.

But there was certainly one striking difference between the practices of the prewar and postwar Internationals. The demonstrations engineered by prewar socialist leaders were

¹³ Riddell, *Workers of the World*, pp. 14-15.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 107.

meant to establish a legitimate claim to participate in a public space controlled by others. In Russia in 1920, the organizers of the congress themselves controlled the public space. On the one hand, this control allowed ever more grandiose efforts at campaignism such as the *Spectacle of Two Worlds*. On the other hand, the genuine drama of actual contestation with independent forces was absent.

The Second Comintern Congress was an early example of state monopoly campaignism, a hallmark feature of twentieth-century politics. By eliminating all competition and by mobilizing resources by fiat, the state discovers that it can put on campaigns on an inconceivably grander scale than previously. The result is recognizably akin to the prewar campaignism described by Callahan, but it has metastasized to fill up all the available space. Prewar campaignism motivated socialists to fight for political freedom. State monopoly campaignism motivated socialists to stamp it out completely.