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Genius, martyr, prophet : the myth of Karl Marx in social democratic milieu in Cisleithania : summary

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SUMMARY

Genius, Martyr, Prophet:

The Myth of Karl Marx in Social Democratic Milieu in Cisleithania

Karl Marx is undoubtedly one of the most significant thinkers of modern history. His work found countless followers and admirers during and before the last century and became one of the cornerstones of Social Democratic movements throughout Europe in the second half of the 19th century. Supporters of Social Democracy understood Marx as someone who was at the roots of their political movement, and their respect for him on this account often took on semi-religious characteristics. The presented work examines the political myth of Karl Marx cultivated within the Social Democratic milieu of the Austrian part of the Habsburg monarchy. The notion of political myth is understood within the text as a narrative that serves to legitimize political goals, integrate within the party milieu, and at the same time manifest a distinctive socialist culture. For the purposes of the text, the subject of interest has been reduced to the three strongest national organizations of the Social Democratic Workers' Party in Austria – German, Czech, and Polish. The chronological boundaries are formed by the Hainfeld Congress of 1888/1889 and the outbreak of the First World War in 1914. The research is based primarily on the literature of the individual party organizations and on a source base primarily on party provenance, i.e., programs, documents from Social Democratic congresses, promotional and educational brochures, and official party periodicals.

The book is divided into five main chapters which are supposed to analyze and reconstruct the myth in its complexity and comprehensiveness. The first one traces the birth of the myth after Marx's death and its spread among Austrian socialists. It shows the crucial role of Friedrich Engels as the "mythmaker", who defined the basic outline of the myth and also used his influence among the

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Social Democratic officials and activists to spread it within the party milieu. The chapter also analyses another source of inspiration for the forming of the main parts of the myth like the articles from Wilhelm Liebknecht or memories of Marx's daughter Eleanor Marx-Aveling.

The second chapter analyses the functions that the myth fulfilled within the social democratic milieu in relation to the most important values and political and economic goals espoused within the movement. It uses the praxeological model to show up the role of the myth for forming a Social Democratic identity and strategy through the identification of the main threads and sources of economic exploitation and also promises of future redemption connected with the expected socialist revolution. It proves, that in the beliefs and projections of 19th and early 20th century socialists, Marx played a crucial role in these processes and was understood as the main theoretic of the party, who laid the foundations of the basic pillars of Social Democratic understanding of the economic system and word in general. In their interpretations "Marx placed socialism on a scientific base", it was he, who precisely identified the main problems and felonies of the capitalist system, explained the true relationship between bourgeoisie and proletariat, and promised future change, which is going to come with the awaited revolution. As Marx was understood as the inventor of "scientific socialism", he played also a very important role in inner discussions within the party, he was used for the legitimization of particular goals or ideas.

The work then focuses on the specific forms of narratives associated with the figure of Karl Marx and the most common images he took on within the Social Democratic milieu. The main narrative structure, which helped to legitimize the party strategy described Marx as a brilliant scientist and infallible thinker, who knew "dozens of languages", and was an expert in math, economics, or sociology – only such an extraordinary man could stand at the roots of movement. The other lines introduced him as a founder and "father" of the movement, whose busts and images became a regular part of party meetings and worker homes, a martyr suffering for his socialist ideas, the compassionate gentleman with empathy with the poor and excluded, and finally semi-religious stories showing Marx as an alternative to the traditional Christian religion. These narratives should be interpreted as a blend of real stories connected to Marx's life and the demand from members and supporters of the Social Democratic party, who needed the genius to legitimize their programs, or martyr to inspire and encourage them in times of persecution or suffering.

The fourth chapter provides a chronological analysis of the development of the myth and traces its connection to significant social democratic anniversaries like 1st May, or so-called "Marxfeier" – special jubilee celebrations reminding Karl Marx's death. The chapter also proves, that the myth had a demagogical core, which did not change from the 1890s till the beginning of the First world war.

Nevertheless, some new elements appeared as the new political needs became actual, e.g. in connection with the general election in Austria in 1907.

The last part of the book is then devoted to a comparison of the myth within the various national organizations of social democracy in the Habsburg Monarchy. It shows up the dominance of the central party board in Vienna, which defined the main narrative strategies of the Austrian Social Democracy. The smaller national organizations like the Czech and Polish ones mostly just adopted the main ideological and strategic outputs. But the chapter also points to some other inspirations, which came for example from a big Polish diaspora or directly from Germany.

In total, the work is supposed to reconstruct the Myth of Karl Marx in its entirety, to show its functions, its particular narratives, its development in time, and its differences among the national Social Democratic organizations in Austria. It may also open up the door to further research of the political environment in Central and Eastern Europe in the late 19th century.

