

# CLASS UNITY

## Study Guide: The Class Struggle [[link](#)]

[Chapter I](#) through [Chapter III](#)

### Things to Keep in Mind

“How well Karl Kautsky wrote [when he was still a Marxist and not a renegade].”  
— VI Lenin, “Left-Wing” Communism: an Infantile Disorder ([1920](#))

Karl Kautsky was the close associate and ideological hitman of August Bebel in the German Social Democratic Party (SPD). In the 1890s and the 1900s his name became essentially synonymous with the ideological current known as “orthodox Marxism”, more or less the dominant set of ideas in the SPD, and thus in the Second International, an international socialist party that existed from 1864-1916.

The International broke apart under the stress of WWI, and Kautsky himself played an ambivalent but ultimately tragic role in this process. Initially he agreed to go along with the SPD’s choice to back the German Empire in the War, only splitting when it was too late. He earned more notoriety in the judgment of the subsequent left when he opposed the Bolshevik Revolution, notably exchanging polemics with Lenin and Trotsky. However, the problem as they saw it was not that Kautsky was simply not a Marxist, but rather that he had been a Marxist—perhaps *the* Marxist—and had *reneged*, that is gone back on, rejected, and failed to carry through the project of Marxism that he himself had fought for for so long.

When reading *The Class Struggle*, it is very tempting to parse through every sentence trying to locate the exact wayward idea containing the kernel of Kautsky’s future renegade status. This is not the way in which we want to read this text though. Rather than asking the question of how Kautsky and the Second International were Marxists, were botching Marxism, or could serve as a model of us in the present, we instead want to focus on questions surrounding *politics*. How did they think about politics, what assumptions did they make, and how are those assumptions similar or especially different from the assumptions that seem to be common sense today?

### Guiding Questions

*Read these questions beforehand and think about what you think the answers are as you go along. In your notes, indicate key quotes that might be related to each question.*

#### I. The Passing of Small Production

According to the Second International, was private property in the means of production once emancipatory? Was it, and what made it emancipatory or not emancipatory? How and why do they think that this has changed?

---

What did the Second International think that capitalism was? Was it just commodity production? If not, then why?

---

Is the class struggle eternal, or is it at the time of the Second International very new? There are two views on this question, one that holds that there have been classes for a long time, and another that holds that classes are very new and qualitatively different than hierarchies of the past.

---

What is the difference between the value and price of a commodity?

## II. The Proletariat

What does Kautsky think is dissolving the family? Is this what the socialists want to do?

---

How are the socialists' answers to thorny moral and social questions qualitatively different than the modern left's answers to these same questions? How are the background assumptions that they make different than those of the modern Left, and how does that change the character of their political analysis?

---

What is the chief new social effect of capitalist/industrial production?

## III. The Capitalist Class

According to Kautsky, there is a new type of capital that characterizes capitalism. What is it? How is this true or not true today? Has the composition of capital changed in the developed world since the period of the Second International?

---

Did Marxism seek to understand class struggle and capitalism at the level of individual firms or capitalists, or at the level of social totality? What does this mean for organizing practically, both for us and the Second International?

---

For Marxists in the 2nd international, what was the reason for the state's existence?

---

What causes industrial crises? how is this cause different than the causes of crisis in past societies?

---

There is a claim in this document that the end of capitalism is more or less inevitable, but also that it will not come along by itself without human intervention. What do we make of this claim 120 years later, with capitalism still very much in existence? How might this idea have represented both an advantage and a difficulty for the Second International?