

Council communism introductions

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REVOLUTIONARY TRADITIONS - COUNCIL COMMUNISM Steve Wright

Asked to characterise the significance of the October Revolution, John Maynard Keynes - always one of capital's most astute thinkers - once suggested that 1917 heralded the victory of 'the Party of Catastrophe'. For many of the revolutionaries who helped to establish the international communist movement, however, the simple, unambiguous demand for 'All Power to the Soviets' had seemed to encapsulate a new class politics finally able to surpass the disasters of war and betrayal. One of them, the poet Hermann Gorter, greeted Lenin at the time as 'the foremost vanguard fighter of the international proletariat', and the soviets themselves in the following terms:

'The working class of the world has found in these Workers' Councils its organisation and its centralisation, its form and its expression, for the revolution and for the Socialist society' (quoted in Shipway 1987: 105).

For most people on the far left, Gorter and his colleague Anton Pannekoek are remembered - if they are known at all - as two of the 'Lefts' castigated in Lenin's "Left-Wing" Communism, An Infantile Disorder. In 1917, however, both were prominent figures within the international revolutionary movement. To their mind, the participation of the social democratic parties and unions in the First World War demonstrated not only the moral turpitude of the Second International's leadership, but the very bankruptcy of forms of organisation which shifted 'the center of gravity... from the masses to the leaders' (Gorter). Against the craft unions of old, they counterposed factory committees and soviets; against the party-form of social democracy, they championed a 'new type' of political vanguard dedicated exclusively to the development of workers' self-organisation.

Within much of Western Europe - and Germany above all - such perspectives found a wide resonance between 1917 and 1923. Expelled in late 1919 from the Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands (Spartakusbund) for their rejection of parliamentarianism and the old trade unions, the German 'left' communists formed a new party, the KAPD, which briefly overshadowed its 'official' rival in militancy and influence. Through their network of affiliated workplace organisations, the AAUD, the 'Lefts' for a time acquired an important presence within the German working class, particularly in the strategic regions of the Ruhr and Bremen. During the attempted rightist Kapp Putsch of early 1920, their activists played a leading role in the Red Armies which briefly dominated the Ruhr.

Factional divisions, ongoing polemics with the majority of the Bolshevik leadership, and renewed competition at home from a communist party now fused with the left social democrats, all combined to weaken the 'Lefts' standing in the class after 1921. Perhaps the most serious of the KAPD's internal differences concerned the nature of the party. One wing, around Otto Rühle, held that since the 'Revolution is not a Party Matter' - the party-form being inherently bourgeois - the KAPD should dissolve itself into the new workplace organisations, which would instead be the proper vehicles of proletarian dictatorship. Against them, the majority expounded a 'theory of the offensive', wherein the cadre party ('hard as steel, clear as glass') sought to lead the proletariat by example - with less than happy results, as the disastrous 'March Action' of early 1921 made clear.

By the early twenties, when it became clear that the Soviets were such in name only, and the Comintern subordinate to Russian foreign policy, the left communists finally broke with the Bolsheviks. Within Europe, the relative stabilisation of class conflict after 1923 brought with it the loss of the tendency's remaining audience. Turned in upon themselves, the remaining left communists began slowly to reassess their political perspectives. Developing one of the first theories of state capitalism, they came to see the Bolshevik regime as the product of the last of 'the great bourgeois revolutions of Europe'. Like Rühle, many also began to question the appropriateness of the party-form for communist politics, arguing instead that, while groups of

revolutionaries should do all they could 'to foster self-initiative and self-action' in the class, spontaneous actions of dissatisfied masses will, in the process of their rebellion, create their own organisations, and that these organisations, arising out of the social conditions, alone can end the present social arrangement (Mattick 1978: 85, 84).

During the thirties, a number of small but lively journals provided a forum for debate and discussion amongst the 'council' communists, as such 'Lefts' now called themselves. Perhaps the best-known of these was Paul Mattick's International Council Correspondence (later Living Marxism), to which Rühle, Pannekoek and Karl Korsch all contributed. While the theoretical work and political analysis advanced in these journals was often of a high standard, the council communists' isolation continued into the following decade; if anything, the climate of the Cold War would be even more inhospitable for those who saw the rival blocs as simply different forms of capitalist imperialism.

Like many other tendencies of the old communist movement, council communism would be 'rediscovered' by the radical politics of the sixties and seventies. Whilst never attracting the sorts of numbers who flocked to the leninist groups, the current nonetheless exerted a significant influence upon the outlook of the post-1968 libertarian left. Even here, however, its reach was largely indirect, via other groupings and thinkers - the situationists, Socialisme ou Barbarie, the Johnson-Forest Tendency - whose earlier break with leninism had brought them into contact with the surviving council communists during the fifties. In some cases the accidents of family history also played their part: Noam Chomsky, for example, would have his first encounter with radical politics courtesy of a council communist uncle in New York.

In many cases, this libertarian reinterpretation of council communism has taken the form of 'councilism', an ideology which celebrates the direct democracy of the councils whilst reducing the struggle for a classless society to the project of workers' self-management of production (see, for example, many of the arguments propounded in the British journal *Solidarity* during the seventies). Against this, a new generation of ultra-left thinkers has argued that 'Socialism is not the management, however "democratic" it may be, of capital, but its complete destruction' (Barrot and Martin 1974: 105).

Of course, there is also much to criticise about the politics of the original council communists themselves, and considerable debate to be had as to the degree to which such views are of relevance today. Certainly one of the damaging (if unintended) consequences of their efforts to defend a vision of working class autonomy from both capital and all self-proclaimed saviours has been an understanding of class composition that remains frozen in time. This deficiency has left some of their modern day descendants poorly equipped to deal with new working class demands and behaviours, and the questions of race and gender with which these are often entwined - although on this score, at least, they are hardly alone on the left. At the same time, given the parlous state of the labour movement, the council communists' insistence upon workers' self-organisation as the heart of class politics has lost none of its pertinence. Meanwhile, revolutionary workers' councils have continued to appear in many moments of intense social conflict over the past seventy years: from Hungary to Chile, from Poland to Iran. The most recent instance was just four years ago, during the 1991 rebellion in Kurdistan; it will not be the last.

COUNCIL COMMUNISM Neil Fettes - 1999

The question is not what goal is envisaged for the time being by this or that member of the proletariat, or even the proletariat as a whole. The question is what is the proletariat and what course of action will it be forced historically to take in conformity with its own nature

---- Marx: The Holy Family

For much of the twentieth century the theories of a classless society, sometimes identified as "Communism" have been associated with either the various Police State regimes in under-developed parts of Europe, Asia and Africa or with the practice of "Leninist" organizations in the West. Under a state sanctioned ideology known as Marxism-Leninism these "Communist" governments with varying degrees of success developed capitalism on their soil using methods every bit as brutal as any openly capitalist power. On the other hand the Leninist parties, in whatever their guise, be it Stalinist, Trotskyist or Maoist, functioned either as social democratic organizations (for example in Italy and France) or as small irrelevant sects, often aspiring to be social democratic organizations. A detailed critique of Leninism from a Council Communist perspective would require a much longer article than this one, but it ought to be sufficient to note that the course of history has generally run the other way from the proponents of the Leninist model.

For more than half a century 'orthodox' Leninist groups, have been trying to build vanguard parties that would 'lead' the working class to power. For its part when the working class has moved to challenge capitalism, most notably in Hungary in 1956 and Paris in 1968, it has steadfastly ignored its would-be leaders. While Leninism figured as a communist orthodoxy since the 1920's there were currents which also identified with the communist project but which sought to place the creative powers of working people at the heart and centre of the revolutionary reconstruction of society. Rather than relying on a 'revolutionary' party they knew it was task of working people, through the organizations they would themselves create, to open the gateway to a new and better society.

The theory of council communism, which holds that socialism can only be achieved through the active participation of the broad mass of humanity, is scarcely known today yet in the early part of this century as a revolutionary wave rolled across Europe, it was a significant force. Many of those who would be prominent in the 'left' communist circles, as the Council Communists were first called, had long histories as dissident and 'ultra left' radicals. Among those who would figure in the prominently were such important pre-war radicals as Dutch revolutionaries Herman Gorter and Anton Pannekoek, and Germans Otto Ruhle and Karl Schroder. Pannekoek is known today largely through two mentions in Lenin's writings: A complimentary, although not uncritical reference in *State & Revolution* where Lenin admitted that Pannekoek had been right against Kautsky on the question of mass action and revolution, and a second scathing reference in *Left Wing Communism*, where Lenin attacked Pannekoek (identified under his pen name of Karl Horner, as an ultra leftist. Yet before the first World War Pannekoek's name was better known than any of the Russians and he was to develop a deeper and more insightful critique of the Second International than Rosa Luxemburg.

Those who would later develop council communist ideas and organizations greeted the Russian Revolution with enthusiasm, as did many anarchists who perceived albeit from a distance, in Lenin's writings and apparent Bolshevik practice, a similarity of views. By the time of the founding of the Communist International in 1919, it was quite clear that there was a serious divergence in theory and practice. By the early 1920's many of the left communists had begun to regard the Bolshevik regime as a state capitalist society, but initially after their separation from the Communist International retained formal views on organization. Many organizations, most notable the Communist Workers Party of Germany (KAPD) sought to build new revolutionary organizations which would be in the words of Herman Gorter "as hard as steel, as clear as glass." As the post war revolutionary wave receded the left communist organizations split and fragmented. The KAPD split into separate groupings which argued respectively for and against the organization of revolutionaries separate from the factory. By the

end of the decade the council communists existed only in tiny groups, although they continued to have an influence. When the Nazis occupied the Netherlands, Pannekoek's name featured prominently on their arrest lists.

Instead of disappearing or concentrating on turning out turgid manifestos, the Council Communists began to try and analyze the society in which they lived. Part of this analysis involved the question of how capitalism maintained control over society and what exactly were the tasks of revolutionaries. The Council Communists functioned through small organizations sharing a common perspective, but rather than attempting to develop an alternate leadership, they sought to clarify and publicize the issues of the class struggle.

In contrast to orthodox Leninist organizations which saw class consciousness as something external to the working class and which would have to be injected by a bourgeois intelligentsia (hence the doctrine's popularity among intellectuals) the Council Communists developed a theory of class consciousness which saw working people and their allies moving into struggle as a result of actual conditions, not because of the intervention of small groups of revolutionaries.

As Council Communist Paul Mattick put it in 1943:

"The consciousness to rebel against and to change society is not developed by the 'propaganda' of conscious minorities, but by the real and direct propaganda of events ... So long as minorities operate within the mass, the mass is not revolutionary, but neither is the minority. Its 'revolutionary conceptions' can still only serve capitalistic functions. If the masses become revolutionary, the distinction between conscious minority and unconscious majority disappears, and also the capitalistic function of the apparently 'revolutionary' minority."

--- Mattick : From the Bottom Up

At times when the masses were not in motion, the propaganda of small groups was ineffective and worthless. In this way the actual practice of Leninist and council communist groups was little different except that the Leninist groups saw themselves as something different and intervened into struggles to try to win the masses to their programme. In contrast to Trotsky, who when he wrote in 1938 that "the crisis of humanity is the crisis of leadership" was referring to his own organization the Fourth International, the Council Communist groups realized that the building of socialism did not depend upon the building of their organization. Pannekoek was to argue in the 1940's that there was an internal contradiction in the term "revolutionary party." While the "vanguard party" sought power, the duty of the revolutionary socialists was to try and aid the the political and economic development of the working class. The Council Communists expected this development to take place through an escalating series of class actions leading to the establishment of workers' councils. Nevertheless they realized that this expectation could not be a dogma imposed regardless of situation, but the key aspect of their analysis remained the theme of workers' self emancipation.

The Council Communists saw trade unions as a part of the capitalist methods of control. Trade unions are bargaining agents for the sale of labour power. As such they are a part of the capitalist system, but they are also responsible for getting a better price for labour power. If this were not true, no one would join them. The Council Communists simply recognized this fact and insisted that demands to make the unions "fight" or to leave the unions to set up 'red' unions was fruitless. Workers would remain in unions as long as saw them as necessary. When they were no longer necessary or did not serve the workers' needs they would be cast off. In the 1930's and beyond the wildcat strike was seen as a herald of this kind of development For the same reason appeals for and against parliament were also deemed worthless. In contrast to those who argue to vote for social democratic parties like the New Democratic Party, but to fight for a socialist alternative, or to build socialist caucuses in the party, workers vote and do not vote for the NDP to the extent that they perceive the party as corresponding to their interests. Those who abstained from voting in parliamentary elections did so because they saw no reason to participate; however those who maintained parliamentary illusions, could just as easily participate in wildcat strikes and militant actions when they saw it as necessary.

For much of the so-called revolutionary left there is indeed a crisis in the workers' movement. Their organizations are small and without roots in the class many of their militants genuinely wish to liberate. This situation appears unlikely to change in the near future. Yet class struggle continues to take place on both a global and a local scale. For those organization which

are influenced by council communist ideas the future is not so bleak. The fate of these organizations and journals rests upon the evolution of the class struggle, not on their ability to develop to "win the masses to their banner." It would be foolish to simply imagine that the ideas and theories developed by the Council Communists half a century ago can be mechanically applied to the world of today; perhaps even as foolish as trying to apply the ideas of a faction of the Russian Social-Democratic Labour Party. The Council Communists were aware that many of their ideas were situation-specific, and without a doubt much of their writings have been passed by through the course of capitalist development. Nevertheless the council form continues to appear in revolutionary situations and the belief that the key to human emancipation is not State or party, but working people themselves is surely still important to the world of today.

N. F. 3/99

COUNCIL COMMUNISM Mark Shipway - 1987

Council communism is a theory of working-class struggle and revolution which holds that the means that workers will use to fight capitalism, overthrow it, and establish and administer communist society, will be the workers' councils.

Historically, workers' councils (or 'soviets', from the Russian word for council) first arose in Russia in 1905. During that year, workers in many industrial areas engaged in mass strike. In the absence of any widespread trade-union organisation, these strikes were organised by committees of delegates elected from the factory floor. Where workers of several trades or industries were on strike at the same time, delegates from the separate strike committees often met in central bodies to unify and coordinate the struggle. The most famous example of this was the St Petersburg Soviet, formed in October 1905. As well as agitating over economic issues, such as limitation of the length of the working day, the soviets raised political demands, such as for the convocation of Constituent Assembly.

The events in Russia in 1905 made a considerable impact on revolutionaries in Western Europe, and particularly Germany. At this stage, however, the soviets were not yet regarded as the most important feature of the struggle; Anton Pannekoek, a leading theoretician of council communism whose writings will form the basis of this account, recalled later that the soviets were 'hardly noticed as a special phenomenon' at the time.^[1] Instead it was the mass strikes of 1905 which made the greatest impression, as typified by Rosa Luxemburg's famous account of 1905, which was titled *The Mass Strike*, and which contained only one fleeting reference to the soviets.^[2]

For revolutionaries such as Pannekoek and Luxemburg of the 'left wing' of the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) the mass strike was one of the first signs of the emergency of new forms of organisation and struggle corresponding to new developments within capitalism. After the First World War this recognition was developed into a theory which saw the working class's use of parliament and trade unions as belonging to a period when capitalism was still an expanding system and workers were able to win substantial reforms. From around the turn of the century onwards, however, as capitalism entered the crisis which led to the First World War, it became increasingly difficult for workers to wrest any concessions from the ruling class other than through action on a mass scale. Furthermore, the end of capitalist expansion also opened up the prospect of a revolutionary overthrow of system, and this was again a task to which new forms of mass action would be fitted better than the old parliamentary and trade-union methods.

When the workers' councils re-emerged in Russia following the February Revolution in 1917 they surpassed the point they reached in 1905, setting themselves up as a rival to the authority of the state and then (or so it seemed at the time) seizing power themselves in the October Revolution. 'Now their importance was grasped by the workers of Western Europe', wrote Pannekoek.^[3] In a pamphlet completed in July 1918, another prominent council communist, Herman Gorter, wrote of the soviets in Russia: 'The working class of the world has found in these Workers' Councils its organisation and its centralisation, its form and its expression, for the revolution and for the Socialist society.'^[4]

Under the impact of the Russian Revolution, and the German Revolution the following year, various small revolutionary groups which had split from the SPD over its support for the First World War formed themselves into the Communist Party of Germany (KPD), voting by a majority to adopt anti-parliamentary and anti-trade union positions at the founding congress in 1918. When referring to this period, this anti-parliamentary and anti-trade-union majority can for convenience's sake be called 'left communists', since at the time their political views appeared to be a 'more extreme' version of the 'orthodoxy' by which they were defined, i.e. the Bolshevism of Lenin and the Third International.

Before long, however, the apparently tactical differences between the left communists and the Bolsheviks came to a head. During 1919 the left communist majority was forced out of the KPD by means of bureaucratic manoeuvring, and in April 1920 formed itself into the

Communist Workers' Party of Germany (KAPD). The KAPD was one of the groups which Lenin attacked in his polemic against *'Left-Wing' Communism, an Infantile Disorder* (1920).^[5]

Lenin's criticisms were answered immediately by Herman Gorter in a lengthy 'Open Letter to Comrade Lenin', written in the summer of 1920. Gorter had already expressed the basic premise of the 'Open Letter' in his 1918 work on *The World Revolution*, when he had argued that 'The condition of the Western European Revolution, especially in England and Germany, are entirely unlike, and cannot be compared with, those of the Russian Revolution.'^[6] Gorter argued that in Russia the working class had been able to ally with the peasantry to overthrow a weak ruling class. In Western Europe, on the other hand, the working class had no natural allies, and faced a very powerful ruling class. Therefore all tactics for the class struggle in Western Europe had to aim at increasing the power, autonomy and class consciousness of the workers. The tactics advocated by Lenin and the Third International - such as participation in parliament and in the trade unions, and alliances with Social Democratic Parties came nowhere near to fulfilling such criteria. According in Gorter:

As the Third International does not believe in the fact that in Western Europe the proletariat will stand alone, it neglects the mental development of this proletariat; which in every respect is deeply entangled in the bourgeois ideology as yet; and chooses tactics which leave the slavery and subjection to bourgeois ideas unmolested, intact.

The Left Wing [by contrast] chooses its tactics in such a way that in the first place the mind of the worker is made free.^[7]

At first, the KAPD, along with like-minded groups from other countries, fought for its perspectives within the Third International, believing that 'Whoever wishes to conduct the West-European revolution according to the tactics and by the road of the Russian revolution, is not qualified to conduct it.'^[8] It met with no success in this struggle, however, and left the International in 1921 after the Third Congress.

Soon afterwards, a section of the KAPD (the so-called 'Essen tendency') tried to set up a new, Fourth (Communist Workers') International. Given the reflux of the post-war revolutionary wave, such a venture was doomed to failure, but the Fourth International (or KAI) is still interesting in that the attempt to establish it had to be justified by a critique of the Third International, the Russian state, and the Russian Revolution.

The 'Manifesto of the Fourth Communist International' (written by Gorter in 1921) argued that the Russian Revolution had been a 'dual revolution': in the towns, a working-class, communist revolution against capitalism, and, in the countryside, a peasant, capitalist revolution against feudalism. This contradictory and antagonistic duality had been resolved in favour of peasant-capitalist interests in 1921, with the introduction of the New Economic Policy. Thenceforth the 'Soviet Government' had ceased to serve working-class interests; it had become a capitalist state. Insofar as the Third International was tied to the interests of the Russian state, it too had become a capitalist institution. Hence the need for the formation of a new workers' International.^[9]

While Gorter was characterising the Russian Revolution as a 'dual revolution' - part communist, part capitalist - other left communists went further in their critique. In 1921, Pannekoek argued that 'the Russian revolution is a bourgeois revolution, like the French one of 1789'.^[10] In time this view became predominant among the left communists. By 1923 Gorter seemed to have abandoned his 'dual revolution' thesis when he argued that 'even in their First, revolutionary, so-called communist stage, the Bolsheviks showed their bourgeois character'.^[11] Another left communist, Otto Rühle, had come to the conclusion that the Russian Revolution had been a capitalist revolution even before Pannekoek or Gorter, and in 1924 he too wrote that the Russian Revolution had been 'the last in the line of the great bourgeois revolutions of Europe'.^[12]

Thereafter the term 'left communism' became increasingly redundant. What had initially appeared to be disagreements over the tactics of the working-class revolution in Russia and Western Europe were now understood as fundamental differences between the methods of the *capitalist* revolution in Russia and the *communist* revolution in Western Europe.

Revolutionaries such as Gorter, Rühle and Pannekoek analysed the Russian Revolution as a 'bourgeois' revolution leading to the establishment of state capitalism. For the working class

the lasting significance of the Russian Revolution did not lie in the type of society to which it had given rise, but in the forms of action used by the Russian workers during the revolution:

Russia showed to the European and American workers, confined within reformist ideas and practice, first how an industrial working class by gigantic mass actions of wild strikes is able to undermine and destroy an obsolete state power; and second, how in such actions the strike committees develop into workers' councils, organs of fight and of self-management, acquiring political tasks and functions. [\[13\]](#)

Thus, through their central emphasis on the council form, those formerly styled 'left communists' came to be known as 'council communists'.

At the beginning of the 1920s the KAPD had claimed a membership in excess of 40 000. In close alliance were a further 200 000 workers in the revolutionary anti-trade-union 'factory organisations' under the umbrella of the General Workers' Union of Germany (AAUD). However, as is the case with any active communist organisations outside periods of revolutionary turmoil, these numbers steadily decreased throughout the 1920s, so that by the 1930s the council communists existed only as small, scattered propagandist groups, mainly in Germany and Holland. The Dutch Group of International Communists (GIG), which was formed in 1927, published the journal *Rätekorrespondenz* ('Council Correspondence'). This served as the vehicle for numerous important theoretical debates, many of which were taken up by the German revolutionary emigrés in the USA who had started publication of *International Council Correspondence* (later known as *Living Marxism* and then as *New Essays*) in 1934. This was edited by the ex-KAPD member Paul Mattick, and its contributors included Rühle, Pannekoek and Karl Korsch. The group in America had some contact with the longest-surviving British council communist organisation, the Anti-Parliamentary Communist Federation. The APCF (formed in 1921) published a succession of newspapers, the best and last of which was *Solidarity* (1938-44). During the Second World War Anton Pannekoek wrote what is probably the best-known expression of council communist ideas, *Workers' Councils*, and he continued to contribute articles to the revolutionary press until his death in 1960. In the USA Paul Mattick published a number of books after the war, mainly concerned with a Marxist critique of bourgeois economics. His *Anti-Bolshevik Communism* (1978) collected together the fruits of a life-time's commitment to the revolutionary movement. [\[14\]](#)

THEORETICAL QUESTIONS

In examining the principal theoretical ideas of council communism, it is useful to bear in mind that council communism originally emerged *in opposition* to certain dominant trends within the existing workers' movement, in particular within Social Democracy and syndicalism. In fact, council communist ideas are perhaps most easily understood when approached from this angle.

In one sense, therefore, council communism can be seen as a critique of the use of parliament and trade unions as weapons in the class struggle. In his early writings, Anton Pannekoek did not reject these outright. His text on *Tactical Differences Within the Workers' Movement* (1909) argued that parliamentary debates and propaganda during election campaigns could be used to 'enlighten the workers about their class situation'. Trade-union organisation could impart a sense of discipline, solidarity, and collective class consciousness. Agitation for reforms could also conceivably increase workers' class consciousness and organisational strength. [\[15\]](#) However, this assessment of the worth of parliament, trade unionism and reformist agitation indicates the point of view from which the council communists evaluated all forms of struggle, a point of view which Pannekoek summed up in *Workers' Councils*:

Here is the criterion for every form of action, for tactics and methods of fight, for forms of organisation: do they enhance the power of the workers? For the present, but, still more essential, for the future, for the supreme goal of annihilating capitalism? [\[16\]](#)

As we have seen, in his polemic with Lenin, Herman Gorter had argued that all revolutionary tactics had to aim at increasing the power, autonomy and class consciousness of the workers. This was a point of view shared by Pannekoek, and it was on the basis of such

criteria that council communists rejected the old methods of Social Democracy. Thus, in 1920 Pannekoek summed up his opposition to the use of parliament as follows:

parliamentary activity is the paradigm of struggles in which only the leaders are actively involved and in which the masses themselves play a subordinate role. It consists in individual deputies carrying on the main battle; this is bound to arouse the illusion among the masses that others can do their fighting for them.

. . . the tactical problem is how we are to eradicate the traditional bourgeois mentality which paralyses the strength of the proletarian masses; everything which lends new power to the received conceptions is harmful. The most tenacious and intractable element in this mentality is dependence upon leaders, whom the masses leave to determine general questions and to manage their class affairs. *Parliamentarianism inevitably tends to inhibit the autonomous activity by the masses that is necessary for revolution.*

[17]

Before the First World War, Pannekoek had also criticised trade-union activity by putting exactly the same emphasis on class consciousness and autonomous activity. Within the unions, he argued:

Success or failure appears to depend on the personal qualities of the leaders, on their strategic skill, on their ability to read a situation correctly; while the enthusiasm and experience of the masses themselves are not regarded as active factors. [18]

Success of mass movements depends on their capacity for autonomous action, their unquenchable ardour for battle, and the boldness and initiative of the masses. But it is precisely these qualities, the primary condition of the struggle for freedom that are repressed and annihilated by trade union discipline. [19]

As well as being a critique of parliamentary and trade-unionist methods from the point of view of working-class self-emancipation, council communism also emerged as an opposition to dominant ideas about what the overthrow of capitalism would involve, and how this would come about. In 1938 Pannekoek wrote:

There are many who think of the proletarian revolution . . . as a series of consecutive phases: first, conquest of government and instalment of a new government, then expropriation of the capitalist class by law, and then a new organisation of the process of production. [20]

This had been the dominant conception within the Social Democratic Second International. Similarly schematic conceptions of revolution also prevailed within the syndicalist movement, which looked, for the most part, to the gradual building up of industrial unions within capitalism, the overthrow of the ruling class by the General Strike, and then the reorganisation of society by the unions.

Council communists rejected these ideas. In *Workers' Councils* Pannekoek wrote that 'victory will not be one event, finishing the fight and introducing a then following period of reconstruction', [21] nor would it involve a series of 'different consecutive occurrences'. [22] In Pannekoek's view:

The revolution by which the working class will win mastery and freedom, is not a single event of limited duration. It is a process of organisation, of self-education, in which the workers gradually, now in progressing rise, then in steps and leaps, develop the force to vanquish the bourgeoisie, to destroy capitalism, and to build up their new system of collective production. [23]

This idea of revolution as a *process* is central to council communism, and it leads us directly to a consideration of council communist ideas concerning class consciousness and organisation, which Pannekoek described in 1909 as 'those two pillars of working class power'. [24] In the council communists' view, revolution would involve the mass action of a vast majority of the working class. This was one of the principal points of divergence between the council communists and the Bolsheviks. The communist revolution wrote Pannekoek in 1938:

cannot be attained by an ignorant mass, confident followers of a party presenting itself as an expert leadership. It can be attained only if the workers themselves, the entire class, understand the conditions, ways and means of their fight; when every man knows, from his own judgement, what to do. They must, every man of them, act themselves, decide themselves, hence think out and know for themselves. [25]

As this passage illustrates very well, mass *action* is inseparable from mass *consciousness*, and the council communists continually emphasised that widespread class consciousness was one of the essential conditions of working-class self-emancipation. This is not to say, however, that the council communists thought that widespread class consciousness was an essential precondition of revolution, if this is taken to mean that the majority of the working class must be fully class conscious *before* any revolutionary action can be attempted. The emphasis in council communism tended towards the reverse of such a relationship between class consciousness and class action. As Pannekoek put it, the struggles of the workers ‘are not so much the result as the starting point of their spiritual development’.^[26] In keeping with their idea of revolution as a process, the council communists argued that *generalised, widespread* class consciousness could only be a product of workers’ active engagement in the class struggle itself. In her account of the 1905 Russian Revolution, Rosa Luxemburg had argued that the ‘high degree of political education, of class consciousness and organisation’ which the working class needed if its struggles were to be successful could not be brought about ‘by pamphlets and leaflets, but only by the living political school, by the fight and in the fight, in the continuous course of the revolution’.^[27] Luxemburg’s conception was shared by the council communists; in 1927 Pannekoek argued that class consciousness:

is not learned from books, or through courses on theory and political formation, but through real life practice of the class struggle. It is true that prior to action, as well as after action, theory can be expressed in concepts that present organized knowledge; but, in order to develop in a real sense, this knowledge itself must be acquired in the hard school of experience, a harsh lived experience that shapes the mind in the full heat of combat ... It is only through the practice of its struggles against capitalism ... that the proletariat is transformed into a revolutionary class capable of conquering the capitalist system.^[28]

In parallel with their view that widespread class consciousness would emerge from active mass involvement in the class struggle, rather than from ‘simply converting people through propaganda to new political opinions’,^[29] the council communists also anticipated that working-class organisation, the second essential condition of the communist revolution, would arise in a similar way. The revolution could not be prepared in advance through gradually organising the working class in readiness for the single, decisive revolutionary act. In 1912 Anton Pannekoek criticised the attitude which held that revolution was ‘an event in the future, a political apocalypse, and all we have to do meanwhile is prepare for the final show-down by gathering our strength and assembling and drilling our troops’.^[30] Against this attitude he had put forward the view that:

it is only by the struggle for power itself that the masses can be assembled, drilled and formed into an organisation capable of taking power.^[31]

He repeated this view in *Workers’ Councils*:

The workers’ forces are like an army that assembles during the battle! They must grow by the fight itself.^[32]

Here Pannekoek’s ideas echoed Rosa Luxemburg’s formulation of the relationship between class struggle and organisation in *The Mass Strike*: ‘the organisation does not supply the troops for the struggle, but the struggle, in an ever growing degree, supplies recruits for the organisation’.^[33] In 1920 Pannekoek argued that mass revolutionary organisations (such as the ‘One Big Union’ or ‘Industrial Unions’ that syndicalists sought to create) could not be:

set up within a still passive workforce in readiness for the revolutionary feeling of the workers to function within it in time to come: this new form of organisation can itself only be set up in the process of revolution, by workers making a revolutionary intervention.^[34]

One example which Pannekoek used in *Workers’ Councils* illustrates excellently the council communists’ ideas about organisation. In the USA in the 1930s the presence of large numbers of unemployed (and therefore potential blackleg) workers meant that ‘Any regular strike against wage cuttings was made impossible, because the shops after being left by the strikers, immediately would be flooded by the masses outside.’ To overcome this problem, workers adopted the *occupation* tactic, i.e. going on strike, but remaining in the workplace. Workers also found that by occupying the workplace collectively, the striking workforce was no

longer 'dispersed over the streets and homes ... separated into loose individuals', and that strikes no longer had to be 'accompanied by a continuous fight with the police over the use of streets and rooms for meeting'. As Pannekoek pointed out, the occupation tactic, which almost as a by-product increased the solidarity and active participation of those on strike, was not planned consciously in advance of the actual struggles: 'It was not invented by theory, it arose spontaneously out of practical needs; theory can do no more than afterwards explain its causes and consequences.'^[35] Again, there is a continuity here between the ideas of the council communists and of Rosa Luxemburg, for in 1904 Luxemburg had argued that 'fighting tactics' were not 'invented' by revolutionaries, but were:

the result of a progressive series of great creative acts in the course of the experimenting and often elemental class struggle ... the unconscious precedes the conscious, the logic of the objective historical process goes before the subjective logic of its spokesmen.^[36]

Thus organisation and class consciousness are linked through a dialectical relationship. New forms of struggle and organisation arise spontaneously, in the sense that they are not planned consciously in advance, and they arise as a practical response to the problems faced by workers in the course of their struggles. Once these new forms have arisen, however, they can be made more widely known, and other groups of workers can begin to act on their example.

To sum up these ideas, from the council communist point of view the revolutionary process can be seen as one in which the working class continually adopts new ideas and new forms of organisation in response to the practical problems which confront it in the course of the class struggle. Once workers have taken up the fight against the attacks of the ruling class, the necessity to overcome the practical problems which crop up in the course of the fight pushes workers towards the realisation that existing forms of organisation are no longer adequate to their tasks, and that new forms have to be developed. In the course of an escalating struggle each practical step forward taken by the working class in serious pursuit of its demands leads in the direction of the overthrow of the existing system and the simultaneous reorganisation of society in the working class's own interests. As Pannekoek put it in 1920: 'without being communist by conviction, the masses are more and more following the path which communism shows them, for practical necessity is driving them in that direction'.^[37]

This is not a unilinear process; advances and retreats follow one another. None the less, the underlying tendency is towards communism, if for no other reason than that reliance on outmoded ideas and forms of organisation invariably leads to defeats, whereas the adoption of new ideas and new forms brings successes. In his book, *Lenin as Philosopher* (1938), Pannekoek based this conception on a fundamental 'theory of knowledge':

On the basis of his experiences man derives generalisations and rules, natural laws, on which his expectations are based. They are generally correct, as is witnessed by his survival. Sometimes, however, false conclusions may be drawn, with failure and destruction in their wake. Life is a continuous process of learning, adaptation, development. Practice is the unsparring test of the correctness of thinking.^[38]

WORKERS' COUNCILS AND COMMUNISM

This basic account of council communism can be completed with a description of the role of the workers' councils within council communist theory. As was the case with the council communists' ideas on class consciousness and organisation, their emphasis on workers' councils is also understood best in the context of the central concept of revolution as a process. If revolution is a process, rather than a series of consecutive but separate events, then it follows that there must be a single organisational form which can be used by the working class throughout all phases of the struggle. In a slightly schematic way, it could be said that since communism is based on common ownership and democratic control of the means of production and distribution, the organisations which carry out the communist revolution must be ones which are suited to the realisation of this final goal. As Pannekoek wrote in 1938:

Since the revolutionary class fight against the bourgeoisie and its organs is inseparable from the seizure of the productive apparatus by the workers and its application to production, the same organisation that unites the class for its fight also acts as the organisation of the new productive process. [39]

The organisations which the working class uses to fight against capitalism are therefore in a sense *pre-figurative* of the organisations which are used for the construction and administration of the new, communist society.

Council communists have commonly expected the workers' councils to emerge from mass strike movements where workers would take the conduct of their struggle into their own hands rather than leaving it up to existing organisations such as the trade unions. All strikers would meet in regular mass assemblies to discuss and organise the struggle, and to elect strike committees whose members would be delegates mandated by and answerable to the general assemblies and who could be recalled and replaced at any time. Where the strike centres were geographically dispersed, or as other sections of the working class joined the strike movement, delegates from the separate strike committees would meet in central bodies to unite and coordinate the struggle.

To the extent that it began to draw in wider and wider sections of the working class, the movement's demands would tend to outstrip their original starting-point, and tend towards the expression of the interests of the working class as a whole. At the same time, as a consequence of the interests of the entire working class being at stake, the general assemblies would be open to all those involved in the struggle- revolutionaries, families and relatives of strikers, inhabitants of the surrounding communities, the unemployed, and so on.

Within a fairly short space of time, the general assemblies and the local and central strike committees would be faced with tasks other than the pursuit of 'economic' demands. For example, they would perhaps have to publish bulletins or newspapers, in order to spread information, keep everyone fully informed about what was happening, and combat propaganda put out by the ruling class. They might also have to form militias in order to defend themselves against attacks from the armed forces of the ruling class, and to take the struggle onto the offensive. Thus through these and other necessary measures the strike committees would take on *political* functions, becoming in the process true workers' councils or soviets, organs of working-class power, rivalling the authority of the capitalist state.

Before long the workers would also be faced with the necessity of organising food and power supplies and other essential services, whose normal functioning would have been paralysed by the strike movement, in order to supply their own material needs. Where factories and workplaces were occupied by workers, to all intents and purposes the owning class would have been expropriated, and production and distribution would be restarted according to the needs of the workers. Here technical, social and political decisions would be on the agenda: methods of production, what to produce and in what quantities, the basis of distribution in the event of shortages and so on. The workers would express their interests in all these matters by exactly the same means they had been using throughout the struggle: through their mass assemblies and committees of recallable delegates. In other words, 'The workers' councils growing up as organs of fight will at the same time be organs of reconstruction.' [40]

It is not hard to see the connections between this brief scenario and the theme of 'non-market socialism', for in the situation described above all the essential features of a non-market society are present, albeit in the most rudimentary, embryonic form: the property of the capitalist minority has been expropriated and is now the common possession of the workers; the uses to which the means of production shall be put are no longer decided by the capitalist minority but are determined by democratic discussion and decision-making in which all workers have an equal chance of participation; the fruits of production are distributed according to needs expressed by the workers, rather than according to capitalist considerations of exchange, profit and the market. It would be the birth of a moneyless society based on common ownership and democratic control of the world's resources, i.e. non-market socialism or communism (both of which terms mean the same thing).

COUNCIL COMMUNISM AND COUNCILLISM

The above sketch of the role of the workers' councils in the communist revolution is a suitable starting-point for an assessment of this current's strengths and weaknesses. Although the preceding account has been couched in speculative, 'would be' terms, this gives a misleading impression of council communism; council communists have always rooted their ideas firmly in the real experiences and struggles of the working class, and the councils themselves have arisen repeatedly in different periods and various circumstances during highpoints of the class struggle. Although not always conforming in every exact detail to the rough outline sketched above - the councils of the German Revolution in 1918, for example, arose from the apparent collapse of state power following Germany's defeat in the war, rather than from a mass strike movement - on several occasions the actions of the working class have followed the pattern described.

Even outside of the pantheon of 'highpoints' - such as Russia 1905 and 1917, and Germany 1918 - there have been other times when workers' struggles have shown a tendency towards the emergence of the council form, even if they have often ultimately failed to realise their potential. The mass strikes of July-August 1980 in Poland are a case in point. This massive struggle was sparked off by the state's announcement of increases in food prices. The Polish workers responded with demands for large wage rises, and since they were well aware that the trade unions were a part of the state, they took control of their actions themselves, meeting in mass assemblies to elect mandated, recallable delegates. Rather than fighting separately, the workers extended and centralised their fight. In several regions inter-factory strike committees (MKS) were formed, constituted by delegates from scores of different workplaces. As well as negotiating with the state, the MKS also set up groups of workers to defend occupied shipyards and factories, and organised the supply of food, power, and other essential services to a limited extent; in other words, they took on some political and social functions beyond the scope of their 'economic' origins.

Council communism therefore has the definite merit of being based on something which actually exists and which cannot be eradicated, short of revolution: the continuing struggle within capitalism between the capitalist and working classes. It does not regard revolution as something which occurs on a totally different plane from, quite unconnected to, the everyday struggle of the workers. It sees communism as a potential lying within the everyday struggle, which will emerge from this very struggle. For the council communists, therefore, the 'communist movement' is not just the few organised groups of workers who are already class conscious; the 'communist movement' is also the 'movement towards communism', the real underlying tendency of workers' struggles within capitalism, which is indeed what gives rise to organised groups of revolutionaries in the first place.

According to council communist theory, the workers' councils are revolutionary organisations. They are not *permanent* mass organisations of the working class. They emerge at times of intense political, social or economic crisis when workers find themselves compelled to take matters into their own hands. Their sole purpose is to negate the authority of one class and install the power of another over every aspect of society. If they do not succeed in this task, the councils usually disappear with the defeat of the movement which produces them; in other words, when their source and lifeblood, the initiative, vitality and creativity of the working class, is drained away. Any attempt to maintain a permanent existence outside revolutionary periods changes the councils' nature: either they take on non-revolutionary functions (for example, negotiating with the ruling class 'on behalf of' the workers) or else they turn into small propagandist groups defending a political programme.

The potential for the emergence of workers' councils would thus seem to be tied closely to a contingent circumstance: the breakdown of the existing political, social or economic 'order'. In 1920 Pannekoek wrote that 'Economic collapse is the most powerful spur to revolution.'^[41] At that time, very few revolutionaries did not sincerely believe (for obvious reasons) that capitalism was going through its death throes and would shortly collapse virtually of its own accord. Pannekoek himself did not hold this view, but the relative importance which he attached to conditions of economic breakdown would seem to be accurate. In the concept of

revolution as a process, it is the workers' pursuit of their demands which almost inexorably leads them to take measures which are revolutionary. This may be credible during periods of capitalist crisis when it appears as if the working class can only satisfy its most basic demands by completely reorganising society. The Polish workers' struggle, for example, originated from the working class's protests about its inability to obtain one of its most basic material needs — food — but this original issue was soon outstripped as the struggle began to challenge wider and wider aspects of the existing society. However, such deep crises are not a permanent feature of capitalism. There are also periods of boom and relative prosperity for sections of the working class. During such periods there would not appear to be the same potential for the logic of events to lead in a revolutionary direction, for the capitalist system has a greater capacity to satisfy the material demands which workers place upon it. At such times, the conditions which would give rise to a revolutionary struggle and workers' councils would appear to be practically non-existent.

This leads on to the issue of how advocates of the workers' councils should organise themselves during periods when the emergence of workers' councils and revolution do not appear to be immediate prospects. This issue has been a subject of endless debate amongst groups of revolutionaries standing within the council communist tradition. Of the 'theorists' of council communism mentioned so far, Otto Rühle and Herman Gorter held diametrically opposed views on the role of the council communist 'party', while Pannekoek occupied an intermediate position.

Rühle's views on political parties seem to have been shaped decisively by the experience of the mass parliamentary parties of the Second International. His break with the SPD, which he had once represented in the Reichstag, led to an indiscriminate rejection of *all* political parties. In Rühle's view, all political parties were, by definition, 'bourgeois'. In 1924 he wrote that, 'The concept of a party with a revolutionary character in the proletarian sense is nonsense.' [42] At the end of 1920, Rühle's sympathisers dissolved the sections of the KAPD to which they belonged into the local factory organisations (part the AAUD). Rühle opposed the separation of economic and political organisation, and favoured a single, 'unitary' revolutionary workplace organisation. To this end he was influential in the formation of a breakaway from the AAUD, called the General Workers' Union of Germany — Unitary Organisation (AAUD-E) in 1921.

The tendency represented by Rühle was opposed vigorously by Gorter, who wrote that 'the factory organisation is not sufficient for the great majority of the proletariat to become conscious, for it to achieve freedom and victory'. [43] The class situation of workers in individual factories might prevent them from having a sufficiently broad over-view of the entire political situation. It was therefore vital for the most advanced and lucid revolutionary workers to form themselves into a separate communist political party, to act as 'the one clear and unflinching compass towards communism' and to 'show the masses the way in all situations, not only in words, but also in deeds'. [44] This party would not seek to seize power itself; Gorter believed strongly in the workers' capacity for self-emancipation, and, indeed, for the reasons he stated in his 'Open Letter' to Lenin, argued that there could be no revolution in Western Europe otherwise. As more and more workers took up communist ideas, the working class, the factory organisations and the party would merge into one entity, united on the same level of class consciousness, and capable of restructuring society.

Pannekoek seems to have vacillated between these two positions without ever settling on one or the other. This is perhaps not surprising given the great length of his period of involvement in revolutionary politics, and the changing objective circumstances in which he put forward his ideas. In 1920 Pannekoek supported a conception of the role of the party similar to Gorter's:

The function of a revolutionary party lies in propagating clear understanding in advance, so that throughout the masses there will be elements who know what must be done and who are capable of judging the situations for themselves. And in the course of the revolution the party has to raise the programme, slogans and directives which the spontaneously acting masses recognise as correct because they find that they express their own aims in their most adequate form and hence achieve greater clarity of purpose; it is thus that the party comes to lead the struggle. [45]

In the 1930s, however, Pannekoek swung in the opposite direction, echoing Rühle's equation of all political parties with parties like the SPD: 'The very expression "revolutionary party" is a contradiction in terms.' [46] At this stage Pannekoek defined parties as organisations which sought power for themselves; they were therefore incompatible with working-class self-emancipation. Revolutionaries with similar ideas might come together to discuss and propagandise, and to 'enlighten' the workers through open debate with other groups, but these could not be called 'parties' in the 'old' sense of power-seeking organisations. [47]

Later still, in 1947, Pannekoek seemed to return to his original position, assigning the same functions to organised groups as he did in the 1930s, but upgrading their importance in relation to the actions of the working class as a whole:

The workers' councils are the organs for practical action and fight of the working class; to the parties falls the task of the building up of its spiritual power. Their work forms an indispensable part in the self-liberation of the working class. [48]

Council communists have therefore put forward a number of different views on the party issue, ranging from Rühle's rejection of all parties as inherently 'bourgeois' to Gorter's emphasis on the party's vital role as 'the brain of the proletariat, its eye, its steersman'. [49] In general, however, the council communists' chief focus on the workers' own councils has assigned the political party to a less central role. The councils are neither created nor controlled by any party. They are the spontaneous and independent creation of the working class in which all workers participate on equal terms.

If this emphasis on working-class autonomy and spontaneity is taken to an absurd extreme, however, it can lead to two dangers: first, the denial of all necessity or reason for any political organisation distinct from the majority of the working class, and, second, the fetishisation of any organisational form created spontaneously and autonomously by the working class. In combination, these dangers amount to what has become known as 'councillism', i.e. an empty, *formalistic* emphasis on workers' councils which completely neglects the communist *content* of the council communist equation.

It is certainly safe to say that capitalism could not be overthrown, nor could a communist society be brought into being, *without* the self-organised activity of the vast majority of the working class. But this *in itself* is not a sufficient condition for the establishment of communism. If the class struggle escalated to a situation in which workers began to take the organisation of society into their own hands, it would seem reasonable to imagine that this would also be accompanied by a corresponding awareness, at the level of political consciousness, of the momentous implications of their actions. But while this may seem *likely*, there is sufficient evidence to suggest that it is far from *inevitable*. Although there is rarely any absolute separation between form and content in the struggles of the working class, neither are there any cast-iron guarantees of the unity of form and content.

It is conceivable that workers could spontaneously take over the means of production at a time of political, social or economic crisis, only to establish a form of self-managed capitalism. ('Councillists', in fact, see nothing wrong in this and have applauded the occasions when this actually appears to have happened.) The essential additional condition which must accompany widespread working-class self-organisation is, therefore, widespread communist consciousness. It is from this fact that the vital need arises for council communists to form political organisations of the type described by Gorter and the early Pannekoek, agitating and propagandising on the basis of a commitment to the goal of a non-market socialist society as the only working-class alternative to the existing worldwide capitalist system.

Council communist intervention in the struggles of the working class - participating in, supporting and publicising them, and endeavouring to deepen and extend them - should be informed by the perspective of a commitment to nothing less than the final goal of communism. This means, if needs be, defending the final goal even in opposition to the immediate actions and concerns of the working class, as the KAPD clearly understood:

in the course of the revolution the masses make inevitable vacillations. The communist, party, as the organisation of the most conscious elements, must itself strive not to succumb to these vacillations, but to put them right. Through the clarity and the principled nature of their slogans, the unity of words and deeds, their entry into the struggle, the correctness of their predictions, they must help the proletariat to quickly and

completely overcome each vacillation. Through its entire activity the communist party must develop the class consciousness of the proletariat, even at the cost of being momentarily in opposition to the masses. Only thus will the party, in the course of the revolutionary struggle, win the trust of the masses, and accomplish a revolutionary education of the widest numbers.^[50]

It was argued earlier that there is a dialectical relationship between organisation and class consciousness: that new forms of organisation do not arise as a result of shrewd forward planning, but once such new forms have arisen, their example can be spread and exert a conscious influence on the actions of workers in the struggles that take place afterwards. It is as a part of this dialectical process, as a link between the real struggles of the working class and its understanding of all the implications of these struggles, that organised groups of revolutionaries standing in the council communist tradition have their most positive and vital role to play.

Notes:

[1] Anton Pannekoek, *Workers' Councils* (1941-2) (Cambridge, Mass.: Root and Branch, 1970) p. 83.

[2] See Rosa Luxemburg, *The Mass Strike, the Political Party and the Trade Unions* (1906) (London: Merlin, no date)

[3] Pannekoek, *Workers' Councils*, p. 83.

[4] Herman Gorter, *The World Revolution* (1918) (Glasgow; Socialist Information and Research Bureau (Scotland), 1920) p. 61.

[5] V. I. Lenin. *Collected Works*, vol. XXXI (Moscow: Progress, 1996) pp. 17ff.

[6] Gorter. *The World Revolution*, p. 51,

[7] Herman Gorter, 'Open Letter to Comrade Lenin', *Workers' Dreadnought*, 11 June 1921. The 'Open letter' (more commonly known nowadays as 'Reply to Lenin') was published in the *Workers' Dreadnought*, the newspaper of the left communists in Britain who were grouped around Sylvia Pankhurst, between 12 March and 11 June 1921.

[8] *Ibid*, 4 June 1921.

[9] The 'Manifesto of the Fourth Communist International' was published in the *Workers' Dreadnought* between 8 October and 10 December 1921.

[10] Anton Pannekoek, 'Sovjet-Rusland en het West-Europeesche Kommunisme', in *De Nieuwe Tijd* (1921), translated in S. Bricianer, *Pannekoek and the Workers' Councils* (Saint Louis: Telos, 1978) p. 229.

[11] Herman Goner, *The Communist Workers' International* (1923) (London; 1977) p. 4.

[12] Otto Rühle, *From the Bourgeois to the Proletarian Revolution* (1924) (Glasgow/London: Revolutionary Perspectives/Socialist Reproduction, 1974) p. 8.

[13] Pannekoek, *Workers' Councils*, p. 86.

[14] For a more detailed account of the German council communists during the 1920s and 1930s, and of the groups they influenced in other countries, see Denis Authier and Jean Barrot, *La Gauche communiste en Allemagne (1918-1921)* (Paris: Payot, 1976), especially pp. 189-216 and 221-30.

[15] See Bricianer, 1978, pp. 73-117.

[16] Pannekoek, *Workers' Councils*, p. 104.

[17] Anton Pannekoek, *World Revolution and Communist Tactics* (1920), in D. A. Smart, *Pannekoek and Gorter's Marxism* (London: Pluto, 1978) pp. 110-11 (emphasis in the original).

[18] Anton Pannekoek, *Tactical Differences Within the Workers' Movement*, in Bricianer, 1978, p. 105.

[19] Anton Pannekoek, 'Gewerkschaftsdisziplin', *Bremer Burger-Zeitung* (18 October 1913), translated in Bricianer, 1978, p. 132.

- [20] Pannekoek, 'General Remarks on the Question of Organisation', in *Living Marxism*, IV: 5 (November 1938), reproduced in Bricianer, 1978, p. 273.
- [21] Pannekoek, *Workers' Councils*, p. 54.
- [22] Ibid, p. 108.
- [23] Ibid, p. 91.
- [24] Pannekoek, *Tactical Differences Within the Worker's Movement*, in Bricianer, 1978, p. 87.
- [25] Anton Pannekoek, *Lenin As Philosophy* (1938) (London: Merlin, 1975) p. 103.
- [26] Pannekoek, *Workers' Councils*, p. 98.
- [27] Luxemburg, *The Mass Strike*, p. 32.
- [28] Anton Pannekoek, 'Prinzip und Taktik', *Proletarier*, 7-8 (1927), translated in Bricianer, 1978, pp. 241-2.
- [29] Pannekoek, *Workers' Councils*, p. 35.
- [30] Pannekoek, 'Marxist Theory and Revolutionary Tactics', in *Die Neue Zeit*, XXXI (1912), translated in Smart, 1978, p. 52.
- [31] Ibid, p. 52.
- [32] Pannekoek, *Workers' Councils*, p. 91.
- [33] Luxemburg, *The Mass Strike*, p. 62.
- [34] Pannekoek, *World Revolution and Communist Tactics*, in Smart, 1978, p. 116.
- [35] Pannekoek, *Workers' Councils*, p. 72.
- [36] Rosa Luxemburg, 'Organisational Questions of the Proletarian Revolution' (originally titled 'Organisational Questions of the Russian Social Democracy'), in *Leninism or Marxism* (Glasgow: Anti-Parliamentary Communist Federation, 1935) p. 14.
- [37] Pannekoek, *World Revolution and Communist Tactics*, in Smart, 1978, p. 95.
- [38] Pannekoek, *Lenin As Philosopher*, p. 17.
- [39] Pannekoek, 'General Remarks on the Question of Organisation', in Bricianer. 1978, p. 273.
- [40] Pannekoek. *Workers' Councils*, p. 54.
- [41] Pannekoek, *World Revolution and Communist Tactics*, in Smart, 1978, p. 94.
- [42] Rühle, *From the Bourgeois to the Proletarian Revolution*, p. 26.
- [43] Herman Gorter, *The Organisation of the Proletariat's Class Struggle* (1921), in Smart, 1978, p. 159.
- [44] KAPD, 'Theses on the Party' (July 1921), in *Revolutionary Perspectives*, 2 (no date) p. 72.
- [45] Pannekoek, *World Revolution and Communist Tactics*, in Smart, 1978, pp. 100-1.
- [46] Anton Pannekoek, 'Partei und Arbeiterklasse', *Rätekorrespondenz*, 15 (March 1936), translated in Bricianer, 1978, p. 265.
- [47] See Pannekoek, *Workers' Councils*, p. 101.
- [48] Anton Pannekoek, 'Five Theses on the Fight of the Working Class Against Capitalism', in *Southern Advocate for Workers' Councils* (May 1947), quoted in Bricianer, 1978, p. 267.

[49] Gorter, *The Organisation of the Proletariat's Class Struggle*, in Smart, 1978, p. 163.

[50] KAPD, 'Theses on the Party', in *Revolutionary Perspectives*, 2, pp. 72-3.

COUNCIL COMMUNISM Richard Gombin - 1978

The theory of workers' councils originated in the new forms of industrial conflict which burgeoned during and immediately after the First World War. Among these new forms we can (already) mention wildcat strikes, factory occupations and the formation of committees of shop-floor delegates.

The whole question of the council phenomenon is shrouded in myths and mistaken interpretations, which induce caution. For example, while we generally tend to associate the soviet with the Russian Revolution, the original concept of the council -- based on a radical critique of the classical theory of party and unions -- was not formulated in Russia (either in 1905 or in 1917). Again, for a long time the councils were presented as an institution springing forth spontaneously from the revolutionary mass movement, incarnating the autonomy of the masses relative to the proletariat's own organisations. This is only completely true in the case of the 1905-7 Russian Revolution, and one should bear in mind that the unions were still only in their infancy at the time, while the Bolsheviks were unrepresented in the factories. In 1917, on the other hand, [1] the councils were of a very different nature, more closely resembling the type then prevalent in Central Europe. Here, reality was a far cry from legend. For councils of all kinds were formed on the initiative of one or another of the nuances of the socialist movement, or were at least controlled by them. [2]

One cannot, therefore, claim that the councils reflected an entirely autonomous reality or practice. In any case, this would have been inconceivable at a time -- to use a Leninist expression -- when even social-democratic consciousness was far from affecting all working-class milieux.

But as with all genuinely revolutionary epochs, the period 1914-21 brought with it both topian transformations of reality as well as a projection of more profound demands for emancipation which were to remain within the realm of utopia. [3] In the world of concrete phenomena one has only to think of the immense upheaval which occurred in manners, in the most deeply rooted beliefs, in habits and customs unchanged all through the nineteenth century. One should also bear in mind the development of new practices, such as active State intervention in social and economic life, the growing involvement of women of all classes in the world of work, their political as well as familial self-assertion; the end of the gold standard and of price stability, the assertion of national rights, the collapse of feudal systems (in Eastern and Central Europe). These are just some of the factors signalling a total break with the past.

Social relations had inevitably undergone a profound transformation. A whole generation had been mobilized, whether in the army, in munitions factories, agriculture or hospitals. Uprooted once and for all, it was to prove far less submissive, much more turbulent than its predecessors. Above all, it was thrust into a world of anxiety and economic uncertainty in which it was far more prone to contestation. Nor would the spirit of contestation, of revolt even, spare the workers' organizations themselves, for their attitude and behaviour in the course of this period was gravely to sap the capital of trust they had built up among militants in the pre-war era.

Paradoxically, the unions and workers' parties actually grew in numbers and discipline immediately after the war, at a time when their authority was becoming more readily questioned. The haste with which workers' and socialist leaders had rallied to their national flags, the collaboration between unions and civil and military authorities to break wildcat strikes during the war, provided working-class consciousness with a heavy dose of scepticism. So, through their new forms of action, workers in fact gave vent to a whole range of utopian aspirations made possible by secular subjection. Thus, at one and the same time, authoritarian-type apparatuses and ideologies gained in followers while losing in credibility. The first leaf of this diptych held sway for half a century, with the ascendancy of the workers' leadership becoming *topia*; but today we are witnessing the emergence of a quest for autonomy which was already to be found in embryo in the years 1917-21 .

The institutions which arose in this period, and which constitute a positive innovation by comparison with what had by now become a veritable working-class custom, partake of this antinomic duality. For the most part, the workers' council was under the control of syndicalist or socialist militants. But as a *project* (and the spontaneous and unpredictable conditions of its appearance bear witness to this), the workers' council is a concrete utopia, overriding and denying the circumstances of its institutionalization. It contains, in the form of (not immediately realizable) virtualities, the demand for autonomy currently thrusting itself into the forefront of attention.

The originality of the council movement lay in its perception of the drift of future evolution. Although its theoretical work was founded on indications only, it was certainly not based on illusion. True, it was difficult to avoid triumphalism entirely in the conditions of revolutionary ferment of those years. Some even went so far as to identify any workers' council with some form of opposition to the established workers' leaderships, thus stumbling into a dogmatism which has marked the major part of council ideology. Consequently, it is worth taking a look at the real context within which these strikes and councils, mutinies and revolts grew up before going on to deal with the theory of councils and the circumstances of its birth in detail.

The First World War and the emergence of new forms of workers' struggle

The situation in most of the belligerent countries was pre-revolutionary, if not revolutionary. But setting aside Russia, we find three types of situation. In Germany and Austria, councils covered the entire territory and assumed at least partial power; in Bavaria and Hungary they wielded formal political and social power at the summit: while in England and Italy, even if the councils had no political power, they nonetheless developed into a far from negligible council movement.

Workers' councils made their appearance in Austria in November 1918, at the same time as in Germany. They rapidly spread to cover much of the country; but very nearly all of these organizations were formed on the initiative of the socialist party, and socialist militants were well represented on the councils' highest bodies -- the executive committees. Furthermore, and here lies the main difference with Germany, the Austrian councils were never once in a position to seize power. The revolution, if revolution there was, occurred within the framework of State and parliamentarianism. [4]

In Germany, on the other hand, the councils were constitutional in character. The first occasion was on 10 November 1918, when the Greater Berlin Workers' and Soldiers' Council confirmed the composition of the new government, which was followed by the transfer of executive power to the government on 23 November. [5] Similarly, a month later the Pan-German Congress of Councils handed over its powers to a future Constituent Assembly, for which it then voted.

But reality was more complex than these juridical forms suggest. The situation arose out of the balance of political power and of the very nature of the workers' councils in Germany. The latter made their appearance in the wake of the strike movement and the army mutinies which hit the country as from 1917. These strikes were aimed at employers who refused to increase wages despite rising prices; and at the government, which was doing nothing to halt the war, but they were also directed against social democracy and the unions. As far back as August 1914 the SPD (the German Social Democratic Party) had adopted a policy of collaboration with the imperial government; it was not long before the party came to be seen as both a hostage and a guarantee for the government. True, the leaders favoured a 'war to the finish'. As for the unions, they had undertaken to avoid all industrial conflicts for the duration of the war. And it was not an uncommon sight to see the *General-kommission* (their supreme body) making common cause with employers and the military authorities in order to smash a work stoppage. As a result, the wave of strikes affecting Germany from April 1917 onwards took on a distinctly anti-union colouring; wildcat strikes broke out with growing frequency right up until the armistice, only to spread with even greater vigour from that moment on. [6]

These 'illegal' actions swept the old union structures clean out of the factories. In their place workers proceeded to elect delegates who would be answerable to the rank and file, and who were hostile to the existing hierarchy. The delegates met in works committees (*Betriebsräte*), prefiguring the workers' councils proper, elected on the same basis but for the purposes of political representation. [7] While one can point to the existence of councils as early as spring 1917, it was only in the autumn of 1918 that they began to spread so widely that, in the eyes of public opinion, they came to incarnate the mass revolutionary movement. [8] It was the naval mutinies which sparked off a movement that had been simmering for at least a year; civilians were quick on the uptake and, starting with the major ports (Kiel, Hamburg, Bremen), each town, each region began electing workers' and soldiers' -- or workers' and peasants' -- Councils.

In the beginning there can be no doubt that these councils arose spontaneously, but the situation soon settled down, and by December 1918--January 1919 it was already possible to take stock of things and to distinguish three categories of council, depending upon the size of the locality.

In most small and medium-sized towns the initiative was taken by the local SPD organization (generally in collaboration or in agreement with the local branch of the unions), either by arranging for the election of a council on a show of hands at a mass rally, or by designating the candidates itself. In rural areas councils were often formed without socialist participation, and bourgeois or agrarian delegates were not infrequent. [9]

In the big towns, notably the industrial ones, the SPD allied with the USPD (independent social democratic party, offspring of war-time pacifism) in order to control a council or to form it. Where the parties did not have the initiative, they arranged to have themselves coopted on to executive committees in sufficient numbers, even when the councils were elected by factory delegates -- the purest form of workers' democracy. In some large towns, however, it was the 'left-wing radicals', the revolutionary wing of social democracy, who wielded the predominating influence. But, in general, the SPD was in control of the council organizations. [10]

From the point of view of the country as a whole, two councils assumed particular importance: the Greater Berlin Council and the Pan-German Council, constituted on the basis of nationwide elections. Both were led by social-democrat majorities. Thus, of the 489 delegates to the Congress of Workers' and Soldiers' Councils (16-20 December 1918), 292 belonged to the SPD, eighty-four to the USPD, while only ten were Spartakists.

One may conclude, from this rapid survey, that the spread of councils did not in itself express any project going beyond the establishment of a democratic republic within the framework of the capitalist regime. [11] While it is true that, from mid-November on, councils began replacing regional and local authorities all over Germany, the administration nevertheless stayed at its posts and the social power of the landowners and industrialists remained intact. It was within the framework of this power system that the change in political regime took place; a change sanctioned by the councils, moreover, since their national executive handed over the job of drawing up a constitution for the German Republic to a parliamentary assembly.

The fact that the councils were almost entirely dominated by the SPD was due to the existing balance of power between the various parties and revolutionary groups. But if the councils had no reality *outside* the parties and unions whose representatives populated their executive committees, this was due less to the existence of the workers' organizations than to the inevitable limitations upon any attempt to transcend social-democratic consciousness at the time. Radicality was as yet able to express itself only in terms of the *project* of factory committees and workers' councils.

One is inclined to wonder whether this was equally true of those countries where the councils wielded both political and social power, as was the case for a brief period in Bavaria and in Hungary.

The Bavarian monarchy fell on 7 November, and Kurt Eisner proclaimed the republic, which he intended should be organized along democratic lines. Five months later he was replaced by a first republic of soviets presided over by Ernst Toller, who in turn gave way to a second republic of soviets with the communist Eugene Levine at its head. The role of the councils in this merry-go-round of regimes was reduced to that of sounding board for the avatars of this inter-party struggle. For, here again, real power was in the hands of the SPD and

the USPD, soon to be joined by the recently formed communist party. Thus, both Eisner's provisional government and Levine's council of people's commissars resulted from a coalition of parties which held together thanks to the lynchpin role played by the independent socialists. Despite the presence of anarchists, the councils themselves reflected these partisan cleavages. [12]

The situation was different in Hungary insofar as the socio-economic regime itself was shaken. Nationalization and land redistribution measures were planned, even if they did not lead to genuine socialization during the 133 days of the Hungarian Soviet Republic (22 March--2 August 1919).

The significance of the councils in Hungary should be analysed in the light of the external situation on the one hand, and of the political forces at work on the other. It differs before and after the establishment of the Soviet regime.

The emergence of councils during the war [13] corresponds to the growing radicalization in the belligerent countries. From November 1917 onwards, violent strikes and sabotage occurred in the principal factories, and a general strike in June 1918 brought the economy to a standstill. These were very bitter strikes, whose political character was more pronounced than in other countries. Continued pressure from the workers led to increasing radicalization. In January 1919 several factories were confiscated from their owners and run by the local workers' councils. [14] Despite the existence of an aggressive minority which directly attacked the unions, the latter had long been solidly established and constituted a vital cog in working-class life. Together with the socialist party they controlled the Workers' Soviet of Budapest, the only one to play an important political role. Thus it backed Count Karolyi's government, in which the socialists were represented. It approved all the measures presented by the social-democrat leaders, notably the alliance with the communist group, which was demanding the establishment of a council regime.

In this respect, the establishment of such a regime in Hungary looks rather like an operation artificially grafted by the propagandists grouped around Bela Kun, who had received some political training during their captivity in Russia. Faced with the threat of invasion by the Entente powers, the socialists formed a government together with the communist leaders, hauling the latter from the gaols into which they had allowed them to be thrown shortly before.

The supreme authority in the new republic was represented by the Budapest Council. Following the April 1919 elections, its executive committee contained fifty-six socialists and twenty-four communists out of eighty members. [15] So the new regime rested, right from the outset, upon a compromise between the communists and socialists, the latter deciding in all disputed cases. [16]

Paradoxically, the reason why the socialists accepted what might otherwise look like a very poor bargain, even though they were both stronger and better established than the communists, was that they were being attacked from the left for their lack of a foreign policy capable of satisfying the nationalism of the majority of citizens. The Bolshevik project of creating a soviet regime as in Russia was shelved; Bela Kun, the Commissar for Foreign Affairs, attempted to extricate Hungary from her tricky position vis-a-vis the Entente powers and the territorial claims of her neighbours. Having failed to untie this Gordian knot, Kun and his group were obliged to step down, having also shown themselves incapable of imposing a 'subjective' solution in a country where the 'objective' situation (the importance of rural areas, solid union implantation and a very moderate socialist party) was unfavourable to them.

On the local scene, the old administration continued to exercise its authority right through this period; nationally speaking, the councils had no existence outside the parties, whose instruments they were.

While in Hungary, despite its 'soviet' regime, there was no council ideology distinct from Bela Kun's bolshevik schema, England experienced a genuine movement in favour of free and autonomous workers' expression. This movement, known as the 'shop stewards' movement', combined two different phenomena.

On the one hand, before the war, the Socialist Labour Party and the Guild Socialists had been spreading propaganda in favour of workers' control. This was still only a timid plan to give workers some say in the running of their factory, and although both projects stipulated that the workers would be represented by their unions, the latter were resolutely opposed to any such

scheme (as was the majority socialist party, the Labour Party). [17] But the idea was so well received by the metalworkers and miners that the Trades Union Congress ended by adopting, in 1918, the principle of joint control in those industries whose nationalization it was demanding.

On the other hand, the wartime period was also a time of great agitation, particularly among munitions workers and miners. Most union leaders backed the National Government and its war-time policies right up to the hilt! [18] Since, on top of this, the unions had undertaken to abstain from all strike-backed wage claims, the workers felt obliged to turn to their shop stewards (originally little more than union recruiting agents, having no power to negotiate) in order to make themselves heard.

Discontent came to a head in 1915 following two initiatives by unions that had subscribed to an 'industrial truce' and had turned a blind eye to the practice of 'dilution' (employing semi- or unqualified workers to do qualified work) in munitions factories. The Clydeside metalworkers' strike (early 1915) confirmed the shop stewards in their new and 'illegal' role; now that they were organized into workers' committees they constituted the expression of rank-and-file opposition to all authority, whether employers' or unions'.

The Clydeside strike was followed by disputes in other sectors of the economy. An uninterrupted succession of work stoppages and violent confrontations took place between the outbreak of the great May 1917 strike (which had broken out in the munitions industry) and the miners' strike of 1920; the shop stewards played a leading role in all these disputes. [19] Each factory, each region set up its own workers' committee, delegates being elected on a non-union basis. In most cases, these movements originating in the rank-and-file clashed with the existing organizations. [20]

This phenomenon became very widespread in the first three or four years of its existence. Particularly vigorous among the metal-workers, the movement expanded after 1918. Regional committee leaders began to set up a national structure as early as November 1916, and by August 1917 a conference was attended by twenty-three committees. A national council was elected, but the committees preserved a good deal of autonomy.

As for the themes most frequently discussed by the shop stewards' movement, we should distinguish between those which are consubstantial so to speak, with the movement itself, demanding direct rank-and-file representation, the control of industry by the workers themselves and even the negation of the capitalist State, and those which were soon to be propagated by the national leadership. The latter were more politically marked in character and were to popularize slogans originating from the Russian Bolsheviks. As time went on, the distance separating the initial impetus and the movement's national council widened. While the rank-and-file movement declined following the end of the war, most of the delegates and committees being absorbed into the unions, the leaders, who now constituted a distinct group, agitated in favour of joining the communist party. We have come a long way from the ideological premises of 1916-19 (worker's control, setting up of factory organizations, negation of the State). The slogans had now become: conquest of the State, construction of State socialism, construction of a communist party. This evolution was complete by 1921, when the National Conference of the Shop Stewards' Movement declared that the proletariat alone was incapable of managing production without the socialist State; the unions were rehabilitated, and political action in the narrow sense of the term came to the fore. [21]

As can be seen, the shop stewards' and rank-and-file movement only represented something really radical and innovative in its first years, before it came to incarnate a precise political project. Its limitations arose out of the circumstances which gave birth to it: the complex problem of dilution, which was resolved when the unions returned to their restrictive, corporatist attitudes following the end of hostilities. At all events, the limits to the radical consciousness of the movement were those of a highly stratified working class. It would be another half-century before the re-emergence of wildcat strikes and rebellious shop stewards expressing the demands for autonomy of a levelled and homogeneous class.

In Italy, the rising revolutionary wave gave birth to some original thinking on the role of councils in the workers' struggle. The post-war period especially was marked by disputes between workers and bosses. Strikes intensified towards the middle of 1919 (metalworkers in the north, agricultural labourers, typesetters, textile workers, sailors). [22] The economic crisis, unemployment, the problems of demobilization, all worked to create an explosive situation:

anything seemed possible, especially given that the majority of the Socialist Party (PSI) was 'maximalist', i.e. revolutionary, refusing to participate in any bourgeois government. The first factory occupations occurred in March 1919, at Bergamo, where a factory committee took control of production. [23] By the end of 1919 a network of councils in the Piedmontese metal industry involved 150,000 workers. A general strike broke out in Turin in April 1920 concerning legal time (introduced during the war, and which the employers were anxious to suppress). In fact, the strike rapidly turned political, the employers proving exceptionally intransigent and refusing to recognize a non-union workers' delegation. The movement also met with the resistance of the metalworkers' federation, the FIOM, which was hostile to the factory committees. With the PSI refusing to call for an extension of the strike to Italy as a whole, the dispute ended in a compromise that was far from satisfactory for the Turin metalworkers.

The September 1920 strike, on the other hand, broke out in Milan and affected the whole of Italy. Virtually everywhere it was accompanied by factory occupations and even workers' control. But this time the strike had been called by the FIOM as a tactical weapon aimed at breaking the employers' lock-out; it was certainly not a spontaneous and autonomous movement. [24] This strike too ended in capitulation: the promised legislation on 'workers' control' never saw the light of day.

Nevertheless, the phenomenon of rank-and-file organization had been stronger and more widespread in Italy than anywhere else. True, the climate reigning in the country was explosive, the particularly precocious development of fascism being a good indication of the closeness of social revolution. It was in the climate of revolutionary fever reigning in Turin early in 1919 that some young 'intransigent' socialists, active on the extreme left of the PSI, founded a review called *Ordine Nuovo*. The editorial committee included the future leaders of the Italian Communist Party: Togliatti, Tasca, Terracini, Gramsci. It is to the last of these that we owe an overall view of the problem of the workers' councils. Gramsci draws his inspiration from the modes of workers' representation which arose during the war, when it became quite common for workers' delegates to be elected for the purpose of maintaining discipline on the shop floor. This practice continued after the war, but was not officially recognized until February 1919, when 'internal commissions' were set up in order to supervise the fair application of the agreement which had just been signed by the FIOM and the employers regarding the Piedmontese metalworkers. [25]

Antonio Gramsci perceived the possibility of turning these commissions into workers' councils, i.e. into organizations elected by the entire rank-and-file (even non-unionized) and whose competence would not be limited solely to questions of wages, working hours and conditions. [26] He dealt with the problem of proletarian institutions since 1918, drawing lessons from the Russian Revolution, the English shop stewards' movement as well as from the ideas of the American socialist, Daniel De Leon. But his concern for the renewal of forms of class struggle is founded upon a preliminary critique of the unions which, he wrote, had developed into an unwieldy apparatus living by laws of its own, alien to the worker and external to the masses. The unions typified a period in which capital was dominant, they had become charged with a function inherent in a regime based on private property since they sold the labour force under commercial conditions in a competitive market. They were incapable of serving as an instrument in the radical renewal of society. [27]

Gramsci thought that the party too was unsuited to the new forms of proletarian struggle: existing in the political arena, it played the same role as the unions in the economic sphere, namely that of a competitive institution owing its existence to the bourgeois State. Parties and unions were no more than the agents (*agenti*) of the proletariat, to serve as instruments of impulsion (*propulsione*) of the revolutionary process. [28]

The modern form of struggle, Gramsci continued, was incarnated in the workers' councils. Their superiority over other structures stemmed from the fact that they assembled workers at their place of work, and in their capacity as producers, and not, as was the case with the unions, in their role as wage-earners. The councils stood for the negation of industrial legality: their 'revolutionary spontaneity' implied they were ready to declare class war at any moment. [29]

But the councils were not merely instruments of struggle. In the new society they were to take the place of the capitalists and assume all the functions of management and administration.

Furthermore, their task would also be to improve the conditions of production as well as to increase output. [30]

Although close to the thinking of the German councillists on certain points, Gramsci's conception was not without a certain ambiguity. Unlike the Germans, Gramsci did not break completely with classical socialism, which held that party and unions were invested with the revolutionary task. Thus, following the failures of the strikes in April and September 1920, he declared, disappointed, that it was the party's task (a regenerated and re-organized party, it is true) to give the signal for the revolution, and not that for a strikers' rally. One should not exaggerate his criticisms of the party: the target for his fury was the historical PSI, but he never questioned the superiority of *separate* political action. [31] He constantly assigned the socialists the task of conquering the majority inside the councils, and this majority was to play an active role in the revolution. [32] Finally, far from denying the role of the unions, he recognized that they played a useful function of education and preparation for the class struggle. [33]

Did Gramsci's 'spontaneist' period, in which he even went so far as to talk of the proletariat's 'self-liberation', result from his idealization of the Russian soviets (about which he was ill-informed)? [34] Did it come from some ephemeral libertarian influence, since militant anarchists had been active in the Turin movement? [35] At all events, from 1921 Gramsci fell in step with the Third International's doctrine concerning councils. By April of that year he was writing: "The party is the highest form of organization; the unions and shop-floor councils are intermediary forms of organization". [36] Henceforth, he proclaimed, the task of "directing the spontaneity of the masses" ought no longer to fall upon the councils but upon the party, a powerfully organized and centralized, Bolshevik-type party. [37] Gramsci subsequently became leader of the young Italian Communist Party (PCI) and held high office in the Comintern; his council period was to be relegated to the bottom drawer of official communist history. In any case, his thinking on this subject was too marked with ambiguity, the audacity of his critique of the party was too illusory for him to be able to tread some marginal path, outside the orthodox communism with which he was to finish by identifying completely.

Despite similar situations of revolutionary ferment in a number of belligerent countries, it was only in Germany that a definite break with the past was made, and that we find the development of a theory of councils opposed to party communism.

From left-wing radicalism to left-wing communism

Council communism was not born along with councils themselves, although the appearance of the latter did precipitate its formulation. As a political theory it constitutes the culmination of a long tradition of radical opposition within the German social-democratic movement and the unions. The conflict with reformist tendencies is as old as socialist workers' organizations themselves. If we stick to the period following the 'laws on socialists', [38] we can see that a vigorous left-wing opposition began making itself heard within the ranks of the socialist party as early as 1890. Its spokesmen, known as the 'Young People' (*Die Junge*), protested against the bureaucratic and dictatorial atmosphere almost reigning in the party. The cult of the leader (*Führerprinzip*), they claimed, enabled an all-powerful leadership, paid by the party, to stifle any sign of revolutionary spirit and to continue to play the parliamentary game for all it was worth. Revolution had now become a slogan regularly repeated inside the Reichstag. But then, this purely parliamentary game was well-suited to the essentially reformist tastes of the leadership. The 'Young People' were excluded from the party at the Erfurt Congress (1891) and went on to found independent socialist groups. Such well-known publicists, anarchist militants and anarcho-syndicalists as Gustav Landauer and Fritz Kater were to emerge from the ranks of these independent socialists.

A similar battle was then raging within the trade union organization. An anti-authoritarian and revolutionary fraction had, since the Congress of Halberstadt (1892), been criticizing bitterly the narrow centralism and the purely reformist tactics of the leadership. The leadership's opponents demanded autonomy for local organizations (hence their nickname: 'the localists'), access to strike funds and greater initiative in the launching of industrial action for the rank-and-

file sections. In 1897 they managed to set up an independent fraction where, under the influence of French revolutionary syndicalism after 1907, libertarian ideas came to predominate.

The other oppositional current began to develop in the early years of this century. Although it was Marxist, its reading of Marx and Engels was far more radical than that of social democratic orthodoxy. *Left-Wing radicalism*, while violently opposed to anarchism, had a number of points in common with it, notably its mistrust of party apparatus and its faith in the autonomous practices of the masses. Following the elimination of libertarian elements from the socialist and union organizations it was this current which took up the standard, in anticipation of post-war council communism.

There were three main currents of thought within the German social democratic party at the turn of the century. The revisionist right, without always acknowledging its debt to Edward Bernstein, called for a policy akin to that of the left-wing bourgeois parties, similar to the French radical party or the English Liberals. Then there was the 'Marxist Centre', in control of the party, and whose authorized theoretician was Karl Kautsky. Under cover of strict doctrinal orthodoxy (contrary to the revisionists, he believed in the inevitability of revolution), Kautsky lent his authority to a markedly prudent tactic that was scarcely any different from the one Bernstein was calling for. A third family of thought emerged during the Russian Revolution of 1905--7. The left-wing radicals (*Linksradi kalen*), as they were called, gathered around Rosa Luxemburg, whose book *The Mass Strike, the Political Party and the Trade Union* first appeared in 1906. [39]

Drawing inspiration from her experience of the Russian Revolution, Rosa Luxemburg put forward in this book a number of ideas which had already been in circulation for some years, notably among the Dutch Tribunists. [40] She shows that, in European Russia, revolutionary actions -- strikes, revolts, street demonstrations -- appeared *spontaneously*, unprovoked by any party. Russian social democracy was insufficiently established among the proletariat, with the result that the workers themselves created the revolutionary organizations the situation demanded: strike committees factory committees, workers' councils. The Radicality of their actions was unfettered by the existence of a heavily structured party or of a powerful, but soporific union. In Germany, the spontaneity of the workers was stifled by bureaucratization of the apparatus, by organization fetishism, the cult of the leader. Hundreds of permanent party and union officials went on applying their own policy, cut off from the rank-and-file, reluctant to undertake any bold initiatives for fear of jeopardizing their magnificent organizational edifice, which no longer served any useful purpose. Preservation of the means (the organization) now came to take priority over the objective (the revolution). [41]

In her dispute with Kautsky, Luxemburg held that organization was not a static phenomenon but a process: workers provide themselves with the organizational forms most appropriate to their struggle. The artificial separation of economic and political action is absent from these organizations. The party's parliamentary policies, and the strictly wage-demand-oriented policies of the unions, are to be submerged beneath the development of spontaneous actions such as mass strikes. Tactically speaking this quarrel took on a more concrete character in the years 1908-10, when the party leadership ruled out a general strike as a means of fighting for the suppression of the plural electoral college in Prussia.

But although Rosa Luxemburg developed a theory of mass spontaneity which permitted her to stigmatize the party's immobilism and its congenital reformism, she failed to draw all the organizational and theoretical conclusions which flowed from this theory. To the end of her life she remained a militant profoundly attached to the party of the masses, to the hierarchy, to the congresses and their motions -- in short, to everything which had made up the essence of pre-1914 social-democracy. [42]

The Dutch, and Anton Pannekoek in particular, did draw all the conclusions, and notably the organizational ones, from their radical critique of Kautskyite socialism. Their discussion of the general strike took place rather earlier, in 1903, and their attacks on the reformism of the SDAPH (Social Democratic Workers' Party of Holland) led them to break away and found a new party (the SDP, Social Democratic Party) in 1909. This party never attracted more than a few hundred activists and it stayed outside the Second International (which didn't want it anyway), but this break did illustrate the extent of the divergences between Gorter, Pannekoek

and Roland-Holst on the one hand, and Troelstra, who was a faithful follower of Kautsky, on the other. [43]

The Tribunists' major criticism of Troelstra and his Dutch followers concerned their entirely mechanistic conception of Marxism. While it is true that the proletariat's importance derives from its place and its function in the productive process, said Pannekoek, one should not imagine that the outbreak of revolution is inevitable. Similarly, organization is important for the simple reason that it renders the masses strong, disciplined, fusing the will of each and everyone into a single will. True, parliamentarianism is a powerful means of increasing the cohesion of the working class. And alongside this, syndicalism is necessary in order to arouse workers to fight and induce them to accept class discipline. But, Pannekoek points out, "socialism will not come about merely because all men finally admit its superiority over capitalism and its aberrations". [44] The working class must, in addition, be conscious of the necessity of the struggle and of socialism. Pannekoek thought this subjective factor was extremely important, while Kautsky ignored it. Class consciousness, the former held, is acquired through engagement in mass action, led by the workers themselves. Parliamentarianism on the other hand, which was the leadership's essential activity, is not the class struggle. Certainly in the past it made it possible to unify the proletariat, but it could never lead to socialism. As for the unions, they are an institution by now perfectly integrated into the capitalist system, since their function is to sell the labour force.

This critique led Pannekoek to relativize the role of the party and the unions, without, however, going so far as to examine them from the viewpoint of historically situated and dated organizational forms. In his quarrel with Kautsky between 1911 and 1913, on the other hand, he denies the possibility of transforming the existing State into a socialist State by means of an electoral majority, and he declares that the bourgeois State will have to be destroyed utterly (*vernichtet*), its power annihilated (*aufgelöst*). [45]

But this revolution cannot be accomplished peacefully; it will not be brought about by the present leaders' prudent policies. It will require all the might and the will of the proletariat in action. Parliamentarianism and union demands are no longer enough. New forms of capitalism (monopolies, cartels, the internationalization of production and markets) have given rise to new forms of struggle: mass actions. The passive attitude of the 'marxist centre' stems from its fear that, by 'ill-considered' initiatives, the masses will destroy their patiently constructed organizations. The chiefs, with Kautsky at their head, saw their role as that of brake, a check on 'wildcat' initiatives. For Pannekoek, this was a singularly restricted conception of organization, lingering over its external forms, its visible structures. And this at a time when the emergence of an economy based on large units had aroused in the proletariat a feeling of common belonging (*Zusammengehörigkeit*): it is this spiritual factor which leads men to organize, to develop structures. One may throw over external forms, the subjective element is indestructible. [46]

On the eve of the war, the Dutch Marxists had thus gone a long way towards an organizational and theoretical break with the Second International. They had demonstrated the limited character of parliamentary struggle (without, however, entirely rejecting it as yet), the capitalist essence of unions (whose usefulness they nevertheless continued to underline), and had made the destruction of political power the number-one task of the revolutionary movement. Finally (together with the Bulgarians and the Russians it is true), they had shown it was possible to break with the social-democratic movement. But above all, they drew lasting lessons as to the relativity of the forms the class struggle was capable of assuming, from the mass movements of recent years (1893, 1903, 1905--7, 1903, 1910). It was quite natural, then, that they should adopt the new organizational structures which were to emerge during and immediately after the First World War.

The war precipitated the latent tendencies in left-wing radicalism. What had started out as a simple critique of orthodox socialism was to develop into both a social movement and a revolutionary theory in its own right.

Two kinds of factor worked in favour of this. On the one hand, the war had brought to a head German social democracy's desire (but the same phenomenon had occurred at the same moment in the other belligerent countries) for integration into bourgeois society and even (after November 1918) to perpetuate it. This was, in fact, the underlying significance of the 'Sacred Union' (*Burgfriede*, or 'civil peace') wherein the SPD, by its votes in favour of war credits, its

abstention from any meaningful opposition, implicitly approved the German government's war policy. Parallel to this, the unions, by deliberately avoiding involvement in industrial disputes, and by even going so far as to cooperate with the military authorities in preventing or breaking strikes which began to simmer spontaneously in factories throughout the Reich from 1916 on, had set themselves up as enemies of the workers. It very soon became clear that it would only be possible to carry on the struggle in spite of, and against the union leaderships. A whole section of the German proletariat thus fell vulnerable to the ideas of the left opposition. [47] In less than three years, this had been transformed from a handful of intellectuals into an imposing mass movement. By June 1917 the left opposition accounted for more than half the membership of the union organization, and the spring 1917 breakaway showed just how far the party itself had been affected.

Theory too leaped forward, emboldened by the example of the Russian Revolution and the appearance of councils inside the Reich itself. The constitution of autonomous bodies, both in the factories and in provinces and towns, was due to the causes mentioned above. The moment the workers' leaders began fulfilling the repressive functions of the employers and the police, each movement, each strike became a revolt. Especially since the slightest action inside a factory almost automatically resulted in the sacking of union officials, cessation of the payment of union dues and the improvisation of temporary structures. Thus, even if to begin with a strike was purely concerned with, say, a wage claim, it nevertheless developed rapidly into an action in which political and economic questions fused to undermine the social *status quo*.

Left-wing radical theory fed voraciously off these examples of mass spontaneity. The organization of councils as the expression of autonomous struggle became the fundamental concept of the new radicality.

Right from the beginning of the war, left-wing militants had sought to distinguish themselves from patriotic social democracy. Towards the end of 1914 Rosa Luxemburg, Franz Mehring, Otto Rühle and Karl Liebknecht established a small oppositional circle, the 'Internationale' group, later to be known as the 'Spartakus Group'. Liebknecht broke with party discipline in December 1914 by voting against military credits, and he was followed by Rühle in the spring of 1915. Their resolute opposition to the war united all left-wing radicals, with their hatred of all leaderships (*Instanzen*), parliamentary leaders, paid officials, party propagandists. But divergences soon appeared within the ranks of the extreme left. The origins of this split can be traced back to the preceding period and to the attitude adopted towards social democracy.

A right wing, for whom the Spartakist leaders acted as spokesmen, [48] had no wish to break with the party, fearing that by so doing they would 'cut themselves off from the masses'. Underlying this argument was their reluctance to break with the old organizational forms and with the old Second International habits, object of so much obloquy in the past.

This wing linked up with the centrist fraction of the party, the 'Sozialdemokratische Arbeitsgemeinschaft', in April 1917 in order to found the independent social-democratic party (USPD), which took a very moderate line, and whose organization scarcely differed from that of the SPD. The other wing was more extremist, and followed their ideological premises right through to their conclusion. The extreme left-wing radicals were made up of local groups, independent of each other, although some of them had already been bastions of the opposition before the outbreak of war. This was the case, for example, of the Berlin group, gathered around the review *Lichtstrahlen* (edited by Julian Borchardt); the Bremen group, around the *Bremer-Bürger-Zeitung* and, subsequently, the *Arbeiterpolitik* (with Karl Radek, Paul Fröhlich, Johann Knief), which was heavily influenced by Pannekoek's thinking; the Hamburg group, which edited *Kampf*, under the direction of Heinrich Laufenberg and Fritz Wolfheim. Other extreme left-wing groups were active in Dresden, Frankfurt and Brunswick. Unlike the Spartakists, who had not entirely broken with social democracy, the extremists were hoping to individualize themselves, organizationally speaking. In their view, the task of the future for the proletariat was to construct its own organization and conduct its own policy. [49]

Although they managed to cut all their bridges (and especially the financial ones) with the party, the extremists only came together in a distinct structure in 1920. But as early as autumn 1915 they had labelled themselves 'Internationals', after the Bremen and Hamburg delegates had

approved Lenin's proposal to construct the Third International at the Zimmerwald Conference (September 1915), while the Spartakists had preferred to maintain their links with the Second International.

Thus, on the eve of the Russian Revolution, the Internationals [50] were very clearly moving away from the Spartakists on two points. For one thing they were demanding an organization built along different lines from the old forms found in their entirety in the USPD. They wanted an organization arising out of the struggle itself and action-orientated (*Aktionsfähig*). [51] Secondly, in order to mark their complete estrangement from pre-war organized socialism, they planned to construct a new International. It was these ideas that Pannekoek advocated in the organ of the Zimmerwald Left, which he edited with his compatriot, Henrietta Roland-Holst. [52]

With the October Revolution in Russia, the November 1918 revolution in Germany and the growth of factory committees and workers' councils, the Internationals had at last found a concrete form for the organization of their struggle. Soviet Russia illustrated their own notion of dictatorship of the proletariat, with power emanating from the base and rising towards the town and rural councils. [53] As a result of their enthusiasm for the Russian Revolution they altered their label, and in November the ISD (International Socialists of Germany) became the IKD (International Communists of Germany), publishing a paper called *Der Kommunist*, propagating the slogan: 'All power to the soviets'.

Paradoxically, the Russian Revolution brought the Internationals and the Spartakists together again; in view of the extent of revolutionary turbulence they decided to merge and found the German Communist Party (KPD). [54]

The constitutive congress took place in Berlin, 30--31 December 1918, in the midst of great exaltation. But this was not enough to wipe out divergences, and the antagonistic currents were to crystallize around three questions. What form of organization should dominate in the new party (centralization, or decentralization with autonomy for the local sections)? Should the new party vote for the Constituent Assembly (and thus participate in the parliamentary institutions)? Finally, what should be the party's attitude towards the unions (entry into the existing unions in order to stimulate opposition from within, or construction of new, even original organizations?).

The delegates divided into two blocs more or less along the lines separating the left and right wings of the old left-wing radicals. A right-wing minority (Rosa Luxemburg, Karl Liebknecht, Karl Radek, Paul Levi) favoured electoral participation, entry into the existing unions and a centralized, hierarchized organization. Although (through the intermediary of Radek) this group had the blessing of the Bolsheviks, it was nevertheless very attached to the *spirit* of social democracy, which it intended to perpetuate in the new party. The majority, on the other hand, emerged as the heirs to the boldest themes of left-wing radicalism. It contained most of the extremist groups (the Bremen, Hamburg, Dresden, etc., Internationals) and the left wing of the Spartakists which, for the first time, came out into the open to express its disagreement with the respected leaders. [55]

The confusion between Spartakists (starting with its leaders) and the revolutionary wing of the left-wing radicals was deliberately encouraged by communist historiography in subsequent years. In reality, however, the Spartakists were always rather more cautious than the Internationals, especially where tactics were concerned. It was clear right from the inaugural congress that the former intended to construct a mass party capable of playing a role in the institutional political life of the future Weimar Republic, while the latter, the Internationals, were more interested in crystallizing their thirst for revolutionary action in some completely new form of organization.

This unhappy *menage à deux* was to last until the expulsion of the group (the majority group at that!) coming to be known as the left-wing communists (*Linkskommunisten*) at the Heidelberg Congress (October 1919).

In April 1920 the expelled group founded the KAPD (German Workers' Communist Party). Right from the start this new formation boasted 38,000 members, or rather more than half the KPD, which was left drained of life until its merger with the majority of the USPD (in December 1920), the latter bringing with it a dowry of some 300,000 militants. The party within which the left-wing communists now found themselves was supposed to incarnate the principles

conceived and propagated since 1915. Its programme (inspired by Pannekoek) utterly rejected parliamentarianism and the unions. It sought to remain a party of confirmed communists working to develop the revolutionary consciousness of the masses and the struggle on the shop floor through organizations within the enterprise (*Betriebsorganisationen*). The new party was not organized along federal lines, as some might have hoped, but along the lines of 'proletarian centralism', the decisions of the highest bodies being binding. [56] Its refusal to work with the reformist unions led the KAPD to assume the programmatic leadership and long-term direction of the new factory organizations as well.

These organizations emerged during the war and their numbers increased rapidly after November 1918. They began to unite in the summer of 1919, notably in the mines and in the metalworking industries. But it was in February 1920 (*before* the creation of the KAPD) that factory committees (*Betriebsorganisationen*) came together to form the General Workers' Union of Germany (AAUD). This organization was articulated around the enterprise, the basic cell being formed by the factory or workshop; these were then organized at local, provincial (*Wirtschaftsbezirk*) and Reich levels. Its aim was to generate revolutionary agitation within the factories with a view to the destruction of capitalism and the establishment of a council republic. In 1920 the AAUD had about 100,000 members, but the following year membership declined irremediably.

The decline of council organizations (principally the AAUD, but also the anarcho-syndicalist union, the FAU) flowed from the centrifugal tendencies, apparent right from their birth, as well as from the political and social situation in the country. Factory organizations mushroomed during 1919, to the detriment of the unions, which fell back considerably, especially in the heavy industries of the Ruhr and central Germany. At first factory committees were formed spontaneously, without any precise ideological attachments. It was only towards the end of 1919 that ideological divergencies began to surface. Firstly because the communist party, under Paul Levi's leadership, was warning its militants of the dangers of 'anarchist' tendencies, inviting them to vote for the legal factory councils and not to take part in extra-union organizations. Secondly because, from December 1919 onwards, the anarcho-syndicalists, who had until then shared the views of the left-wing communists, now adopted Rudolf Rocker's anarchist-inspired programme, denying the necessity of a dictatorship of the proletariat and of the use of violence. The new programme returned to the traditional (revolutionary) syndicalist view, namely that the trade union, the instrument of economic struggle, was destined to become the fundamental organizational unit in the society of the future.

As opposed to the leaders of the KPD and the FAUD (German Free Workers' Union), the council theoreticians were thinking in terms of structures suited to both political and economic struggle, constituted at the place of work and not at the level of the locality (as in the case of the unions) or the old trade unions (the organizational base of the FAUD).

The emergence of a theory of councils coincides with that of factory organizations, though it is impossible to say which came first. At most we may presume that the example of the IWW (the American revolutionary organization based on industrial unions) was not without influence on the thinking of the Hamburg propagandists. [57] In other words, when the AAUD was formed, only some of the factory committees actually joined it; on top of that, two tendencies began pulling the organization in opposing directions right from the first months of its existence. The Brunswick tendency, close to the left wing of the USPD, followed the IWW example, advocating the industry-wide union as the basic form of organization. It left the AAUD shortly afterwards and slid into obscurity. The other tendency, left-wing, was more deeply prejudicial to the cohesion of the *Union*. This was the so-called 'unitarist' (*Einheitsorganisationstendenz*) tendency which rejected the KAPD's control over the *Union* and demanded instead a unitary organization that would be both politically and economically oriented, bypassing political parties. This tendency was especially strong in Dresden, the fief of its chief theoretician and spokesman, Otto Rühle, who very early (in December 1920) made his section independent of the KAPD. In October 1921 his organization, the East Saxony section, led a number of other local groups out of the KAPD and founded the AAUD-E (German General Workers' League Unitary Organization).

Aside from these centrifugal tendencies, the mass council organizations, the Leagues, were further handicapped by the overall situation in the country: inflation, growing

unemployment, fiercer repression, especially since the failure of the March 1921 'action' in the course of which an embryonic insurrection was harshly stamped out by the army and the police. After 1921 the AAUD began to lose its mass character, evolving into a marginal group. It shifted away from the KAPD in 1927 and in 1931, it formed the KAU (Communist Workers' Union) together with the remnants of the AAUD-E. As its name suggests, the KAU had no pretensions to being a mass workers' movement but consisted of a group of propagandists fighting "to make the councils the instrument of class will". [58]

The KAPD suffered a similarly rapid decline after 1921, torn by personal and ideological quarrels. The principal disagreements concerned the binding nature of the decisions of the highest bodies, relations with the AAUD and the question of membership of the Third International. Local groups were becoming less and less autonomous, while centralism was gradually gaining the upper hand over federalist principles, and the AAUD rapidly became a union appendix to a party congratulating itself on having brought together the 'avant-garde elements'. One final question of practical importance exacerbated the party's already considerable difficulties: should militants take part in purely economic struggles (*Lohnkampf*)? The Berlin leadership, dominated by Karl Schröder (backed up on doctrinal terrain by the Dutchman Herman Gorter), was exhibiting some singularly dictatorial and dogmatic tendencies. In March 1922 Schröder was outvoted and expelled from the party. So he formed his own 'Essen Tendency' (*Essener Richtung*), with its own paper, its own congress and its 'own' AAUD. Consequently from 1922 onwards two KAPDs coexisted alongside each other, but their numbers were derisory, with 12,000 militants in the Berlin tendency at the end of 1922, and only 600 in the Essen wing. [59]

To begin with, most of the Essen tendency's activities were taken up with the establishment of a Fourth International. This attempt in itself would only be of passing interest had it not followed immediately upon the heels of the KAPD's imbroglio with the Third International, which had caused something of a stir within the International and which marked the emergence of a communist theory of councils as opposed to the Comintern's party communism.

Council communism and party communism

We have seen that left-wing communism as it emerged in 1918 follows in the footsteps of the left-wing radicalism of the preceding period. The Bolsheviks belonged to this radical opposition in the Second International. They even (like the Dutch in 1909) went as far as breaking organizationally with Russian social democracy in 1903. Throughout the war, and more especially after the October Revolution, the Bolshevik leaders remained very close to the German extreme left, especially the Bremen Group. Both Bolsheviks and German 'Internationals' found themselves in the Zimmerwaldian Left (though not the Spartakists, who were opposed to the construction of a new international) entrusting Pannekoek and Roland-Holst with editing its official organ, *Vorbote*. [60]

The Russian Revolution was enthusiastically welcomed by all radical socialists, and especially by the Internationals, who saw in it the establishment of the dictatorship of the proletariat through the councils. [61] Their enthusiasm was all the greater in that Lenin's recent pamphlet, *State and Revolution* (published in Russia in 1918), explicitly adopted the ideas Pannekoek had expressed in his dispute with Kautsky over the destruction of the bourgeois State and of political power as such. The future left-wing communists saw in it a charter for their own revolutionary aspirations; Lenin had formulated the classic themes of the *Linksradikalen*: destruction of the State, rejection of elections (and hence of parliamentarianism), the advent of a free and equal association of producers. [62] True, closer reading of the pamphlet reveals some rather different propositions. For Lenin stated also that there would still be a (transitory) State in the post-revolutionary period, exercising an *extremely rigorous* control and, like all States, repressive. [63]

Divergences only became public in the course of 1919, when the left-wing communists (now in the KPD) realized that Moscow, and shortly afterwards the Third International, were backing the right wing of the party, in other words those elements which favoured the worst

deviations of social democracy: the cult of organization for organization's sake, parliamentarianism, unionism, leader-worship. Following the assassination of its historic leaders (Luxemburg, Liebknecht, Jogiches), the 'rightist' Levi took over the party leadership (at the end of April 1919) and imposed a policy of 'entryism' into the unions, of electoral participation, by way of a stream of decisions without appeal and congresses meeting under irregular conditions. [64] Opponents were qualified pell-mell as anarchists and anarcho-syndicalists and, at the Heidelberg congress in October 1919, Levi announced that all those who disagreed with his views should leave the party, and he actually gained a majority in favour of expelling . . . the majority! And that at a time when the unions had been utterly discredited, when workers' leagues were springing up all over the country, when more and more workers were boycotting elections in favour of direct action.

In autumn 1919 the left-wing communists came round to the view that Levi was becoming increasingly tempted by social-democratic opportunism and that they, the expelled group, were the true representatives of revolutionary communism. They consequently formed their own, new communist party, whose place they thought was in the Third International. Their desire to join the new organization which Moscow had just created resulted from something of a misunderstanding. They were convinced Lenin would recognize them as communists as soon as he had a moment to talk it out with them and let himself be persuaded of the KPD's opportunism.

Unfortunately for them, the KPD's opportunism only existed because it corresponded to the policy of the new international, hence to Moscow's policy. Right from the KPD's inaugural congress Radek had come out wholeheartedly in favour of the right wing, and it was through his auspices that Levi took over the party leadership. Lenin himself, in a letter to the left-wing communists dated September 1919, had warned against non-participation in elections, and against the boycotting of unions and legal factory committees, and had described their attitude as 'an infantile disorder'. [65] He was even more incisive in his famous pamphlet on 'left-wing communism' written in spring 1920 and handed to delegates at the Second Congress of the Communist International, abandoning his earlier equivocal stance and explicitly condemning the 'Dutch leftists'. He advocated a disciplined, centralized party, taking very little notice of the federalist line favoured by the majority of German communists. Within the unions, he distinguished between leaders and masses, only the former being corrupt; from this he concluded that entry into the unions was necessary in order to win over the masses and dislodge the leadership. Similarly, he insisted upon the absolute necessity of participation in bourgeois parliaments insofar as the masses were still attached to them, and in all other bourgeois institutions capable of being entered. The parliamentary game must be exploited in all its forms: electoral alliances, compromises, collaboration. This policy being justified, in Lenin's view, by the overriding need to raise the consciousness of the masses at all costs, and to prepare the way for the soviets. The revolution needs a mass party and, in Western countries, quantity must take precedence over quality. [66]

Despite the ideological gap existing between Moscow and the left-wing communists from the outset, the latter waited two whole years before giving up hope and leaving the Third International. The KAPD sent three successive delegations to Moscow, two in the course of the summer of 1920, and one in the autumn. Otto Rühle, who travelled there in May, came back disenchanted, talking about the centralized system and the dictatorship of the party. [67] He broke with the KAPD on his return, taking with him the East Saxony region. The Party leadership was unconvinced by his report and three of the leaders, among them Gorter and Schröder, went to Moscow to see for themselves in November 1920.

Meanwhile, the Second Congress of the Communist International had just condemned 'left-wing communism' by refusing to accept the KAPD. The party's line on parliament and the unions was judged 'inadequate'. Its programme was described as "capitulating to [revolutionary] syndicalist opinion". [68] Furthermore, points 9 and 11 (relating to work inside the unions and in parliament) of the twenty-one conditions of admission approved at the same congress clearly contradicted the KAPD programme.

Gorter, who was determined to organize a revolutionary opposition inside the Communist International, nevertheless managed to obtain temporary admission as a 'sympathizing party', with consultative status. [69] But Gorter's plans came to nothing, and after the Third Communist

International Congress (summer 1921) the KAPD was ordered to merge with the KPD. It was the end of an illusion, and henceforth Gorter and the Essen tendency devoted themselves to setting up a Fourth International. This, the KAI (the Communist Workers' International), was founded in 1922 and only existed on paper, attracting a few hundred militants, mostly German and Dutch. [70]

Despite these organizational avatars, from the middle of 1920 onwards, council theory was no longer merely the most extreme expression of left-wing radicalism, but had emerged as being diametrically opposed to Bolshevik ideology as shared by those communist parties which had subscribed to the conditions imposed by the Comintern. From this moment on we can begin to speak of a *council communism*, carrying on the radical tradition of Marxism and opposed to *party communism*, heir to the opportunism of the Second International.

Consequently, council theory originally posed as a virulent critique of the very party which was to be known later on as the 'orthodox' or 'official' communist party, and which eventually became the 'Marxist-Leninist' party. In place of unions and parties, council communism proposes natural, i.e. historical, groupings of the masses: the councils. Finally, it replaced the Russian Revolution in the context of the historical evolution of capitalism by looking upon it as a bourgeois revolution.

Parliamentarianism, party and unions, the councillists claimed, are forms of struggle adapted to another, pre-revolutionary, age. During this historical phase, which ended more or less with the First World War, the proletariat was not very numerous and was utterly atomized. It needed an organization to defend its immediate interests, leaders to represent it in the institutions of the bourgeois State. In that period the unions undeniably played a positive role, extracting from the capitalists concessions indispensable to the improvement of workers' well-being. Similarly the socialist parties unified the class, which thus found itself individualized and represented *en bloc*. [71] But, rapidly, as the workers grew in numbers, these organizations external to the working class began generating their own bureaucracy, which made itself increasingly independent of the masses and tended to defend its own interests. As a result, the organizations started to identify with the capitalist system and hence to obstruct the revolutionary struggle. [72]

While the proletariat was naturally reformist in the pre-First World War period, in the following phase it aspired to revolution. It was no longer concerned with obtaining concessions from employers or the State, but with the suppression of both. Given this objective, which is inherent in the proletariat, the old organizations and the old tactics (those of the old social-democratic movement) had become a brake upon the development of new forms of action which are essentially *mass actions*. [73]

No doubt, the left-wing radicals had demonstrated the short-comings of parliamentarianism at any price before the war, pointing to the way it was practised by the socialist chiefs. But they did admit that it had a certain utility in the education of the masses and as a propaganda instrument. The International Socialists (ISD) themselves continued to express this view right up to the eve of the Russian Revolution. [74] As for the Dutch Marxists, they had very early on refused to assimilate the notion of parliamentary struggle to that of revolutionary struggle. [75] But no-one could possibly harbour the illusion after social democracy had behaved as capitalism's saviour in November 1918 and after. Otto Rühle even went so far as to consider that a party was incapable, by definition, of being anything other than a bourgeois institution; the term 'revolutionary party' seemed to him to be a nonsense. [76]

The unions fulfilled the same function of compromise in the economic domain as the parties on the political scene. They are merely an institution functioning within the framework of bourgeois society and, as the war had so strikingly shown, they act as a powerful shield for it. So it would be utterly absurd to think of turning the unions into revolutionary instruments. As 'organs of capital', the unions aspired to nothing more than recognition by the ruling apparatus. [77] The very development of trade unionism necessarily leads it into conflict with the working class, and the revolutionary struggle begins the moment workers decide to organize themselves outside union structures. The union leaders cling to their positions and to their new social status (for their union role has turned these former workers into petit bourgeois), summoning up all their strength in order to oppose the revolution and communism. [78]

The Third International leadership had imposed the conception of a mass communist party on communists in the West. As a result of this they everywhere encouraged the unification of revolutionary minorities with the left wing of social democracy. Thus, the KPD was transformed overnight from a group of a few thousand members into a powerful party with more than 300,000 members. The council communists attacked this tactic which, in their view, could only bring about a situation where the leaders dominated. For the great majority of these newcomers were far from having attained a communist consciousness, and this could only mean that they would hand over responsibility to their leaders. Under these conditions, the revolution could lead only to a party, but not to a class dictatorship. When a class is not yet ready for revolution, no-one can carry it through in its place. And when a minority seizes power and holds on to it in the name of the proletariat, it is merely following a neo-Blanquist line, not communism. It is important to deliver the workers not only from their physical and material subjection to the bourgeoisie, but also from their spiritual enslavement. But this immense and difficult task cannot be undertaken by some resolute avant-garde. [79] The proletarian revolution will be the work of the masses as a whole, and if they allow a party to take power in their place then all that will have been achieved is a bourgeois revolution. For the revolt against capital is also a revolt against all the old organizational forms. [80]

This brings us to the heart of council theory. The councils were not simply new forms of organization arisen to replace the old. They were also the expression of the class locked in struggle. [81] In this new phase of the struggle the proletariat was seeking to destroy the State and wage labour. It had come to realize that a revolution does not consist of a change of majority in parliament or in the fact of a political party coming to power. New forms of production, large economic units, the internationalization of markets and the development of monopolies had brought about a transformation of the worker's mentality. He now wanted to be master of his own fate and, first and foremost, of the basis of all societies: the means of production. But, although the working class already possessed the necessary material strength (numbers, but also its productive function) to overthrow its masters, it was still too impregnated with bourgeois ideology to have a clear conscience about it. [82] In consequence, the proletarian revolution was to take an entire epoch, resulting from a slow process of ripening among the masses, from an ever-growing consciousness of the tasks awaiting it.

Obviously, in this new phase of the struggle the proletariat cannot hope to rely on its old organizations now allied with capitalism. They were suited to a form of struggle in which leaders held sway over passive masses; in which revolution was conceived as an operation that had been foreseen and planned for in advance -- by the leadership. The proletarian revolution, conversely, was to be the fruit of a *spontaneous* struggle waged by the class as a whole. New, more appropriate forms of organization would spring forth. But there was no need to invent them, for they already possessed a concrete historical existence: the workers' councils. [83]

Admittedly, the emergence of these councils was not followed by the advent of a communist society. The backward economic conditions of Russia in 1917 had prevented the working class from coming to power. It could have happened in Germany in November 1918, if the workers had not been halted in their tracks by the conceptions which social democracy had been inculcating in them for years. These historical examples at least proved that the time for mass action had arrived, that communism would be established by the councils. [84]

The fact that the councils only had a very limited historical existence (in Russia they rapidly became State organs, the docile instruments of party domination) leads one to wonder whether the council communists restricted their role to the pre-revolutionary period or not. The answers to this question are not really very uniform. Most theoreticians, however, attribute a double function to them, seeing in them both a revolutionary organization and the basis of future communist society. That is, they are supposed to act both as a unit for struggle and destruction in the revolutionary period. and as wielders of economic (above all, the management of production) and political (dictatorship of the proletariat) powers in the subsequent phase. [85] But while all are agreed on this, some go on to assign the proletariat the task of forming councils right away, while others see councils merely as the organs of a future council State. [86]

As long as we stick to the critique of party communism and to the role of councils in the revolutionary process and in communism's transitional phase, most members of the council

movement are more or less in agreement. Differences arise when one tries to answer the age-old question of the *present* organization of revolutionaries. The advent of a network of councils would signal a very advanced stage of class consciousness: by assuming responsibility for the abolition of profit-based society themselves, the workers would thereby demonstrate that they had acquired a genuinely communist mentality. Until then, those with a clear awareness of the tasks, the communists, constituted a minority. Should they organize themselves, should they intervene in the workers' struggles to show them the way ahead? Then, if they were to come together in a joint organization, what sort of structure should this have?

All these questions gave rise to heated debate in councillist circles and continue to divide them to this day. Schematically, we can say that the great majority of council communists are opposed to the idea of any external group *directing* the struggle inside factories. Similarly, in principle, the council movement is hostile to the party communists' views on centralism, discipline and hierarchy. That said, in fact one finds nuances covering all colours of the spectrum bounded by two poles, the one tending towards organization, the other towards spontaneity.

At the time when council communism was incarnated in a genuine movement, roughly during the 1920s, there was a great temptation to construct a councillist *party*. This tendency was represented by the KAPD leaders, and especially their theoretician, Herman Gorter. Gorter (1864--1927) was one of the great Dutch poets of the impressionist school. He began to play an active role in the SDAP (Dutch Social Democratic Party) from 1896, opposing the revisionist tendency. After 1907 he joined the oppositional group which was to found the tiny Socialist Party (SDP) in 1909 (with Pannekoek, Van Ravesteyn and Wynkoop). In 1918 he took part in the foundation of the Dutch communist party, before travelling to Germany, where he joined the left wing of the KPD. From 1920 on he became the theoretician of both the German KAP (Essen tendency) and its Dutch counterpart, which he managed to bring together to form a Communist Workers' International (KAI) in 1922. [87]

In Gorter's view the proletariat needed two kinds of organization: those based on the place of work, the factory, and those bringing 'enlightened' militants together. The former would constitute workers' leagues while the others would form the party. The workers' league is a mass organization concerned with every-day struggle in the factory. But the drawback of the league is its tendency to reformism, confining itself to wage claims. Or, conversely, as a result of an erroneous evaluation of the situation, it is liable to utopianism. The party, on the other hand, is there to steady the helm: it is capable of pointing the way ahead since it is composed of that fraction (however minimal) of the working class which possesses the knowledge and a clear consciousness of the revolutionary objectives. The Western proletariat needed these 'pure' parties, reminders of the one formed by the Bolsheviks in 1902--3. But the party must not seek to gain power for its own ends, for the revolutionary dictatorship is to be that of the entire class. In any case, Gorter prophesied, the proletariat of the industrialized countries of Western Europe and North America is far too numerous for a dictatorship of the party to be possible. The party of pure communists prefigures the political councils, while the unions anticipate the advent of economic councils. [88]

Gorter's organizational conceptions were not all that different from Lenin's own; a party-union duality, with the former taking precedence over the latter had after all been set forth in *What is to be Done?* as early as 1902.

Nor did Otto Rühle (1874--1943) entirely abandon this line, except insofar as he advocated a 'unitary' organization. Rühle had been a teacher with a deep interest in pedagogic and psychological problems as well as a social-democrat deputy in the Reichstag when the war broke out. He followed Liebknecht in voting against the war credits in March 1915. Right from the foundation of the KPD he found himself in the left-wing opposition, which he subsequently followed into the KAPD, taking with him his own organization in East Saxony (he had been elected President of the Dresden workers' council in November 1918). On his return, disappointed, from a trip to Soviet Russia he separated his regional group from the KAPD and, in 1921, realized his project of creating a unitary organization with the foundation of the AAU-E. [89] This incarnated Rühle's underlying belief that the organization of the revolutionary vanguard (which he considered indispensable) should not take the form of a political party. It was in the enterprise that the primary battlefield in the struggle against the power of capital was

to be found, and it was on this basis that conscious revolutionaries would seek to unite. The BO (workers' organizations) federated and gradually formed the Unitary Workers' League (AAU-E). This League took on the characteristics of revolutionary struggle -- economic and political -- and concerned itself with both. It was governed by the federalist principle: no centralism, no leadership 'from outside', no interference by intellectuals not belonging to the plant. Delegates could be revoked at any time, while the leaders were no more than spokesmen for the rank and file, its executive organs. The task of unitary organization consisted of developing class consciousness and a feeling of solidarity among workers. Neither a party nor a union, the AAU-E was the revolutionary organization of the proletariat. It dissolved itself with the appearance of the councils which, in some ways, it had prefigured. [90]

The intermediate conception, halfway between the 'organizationalists' and the 'spontaneists', was developed by Pannekoek, arising logically from his views on the nature of the revolutionary struggle, which he tied directly to class consciousness. Anton Pannekoek (1873--1960) was an astronomer of world-renown and an historian of science; throughout his life he pursued a dual career as militant and scientist. He was active in the socialist movement for over half a century. He joined the Dutch SDAP in 1912 and, in the following year, began developing his theory of mass spontaneity. He was invited to Berlin in 1905 in order to teach at the party school, and henceforth he became active in both organizations. He became involved in the Bremen left-wing radical circles from 1906 onwards, contributing a large number of articles to the party journals. He was expelled from Germany in 1914 on account of his Dutch nationality, but he carried on his activities in Switzerland and Holland within the Zimmerwaldian left while keeping up his contacts with the German international socialists. He withdrew from active militant work after 1921 to devote himself to astronomy, which he taught at the University of Amsterdam from 1925 onwards. He nevertheless contributed to the theoretical work of the Dutch council communists, the GIC (International Communists Group), and published numerous articles in various council-communist reviews in the 1930s and 40s.

Pannekoek insisted with greater force than his companions upon the spiritual aspect of the class struggle. Certainly, he remained a convinced Marxist and materialist. But in his view material factors (relations of production) had no immediate influence upon the revolutionary process. The timelag between the emergence of new material structures or new modes of production and the moment the worker's consciousness becomes aware of them and adapts to them may be very long. Meanwhile, the worker's consciousness remains the prisoner of the beliefs, prejudices and false values of the surrounding culture. The power of the bourgeoisie is spiritual before all else: the bourgeoisie controls religion, education, propaganda activities and, more generally, the entire range of cultural production, to which the worker is more or less subjected. There is thus a gap between the material situation as it is today, and collective consciousness. Hence the need to raise the proletariat's consciousness of its emancipatory tasks, while it is growing in numbers and while its role in the productive process makes it the true master of this process. [91]

If it is to be carried through to its conclusion, the revolution must first exist in the consciousness of the proletariat. The latter will find its own road to freedom through its struggles. But at the same time it is vital to develop and broaden its consciousness. And this is where the communists, those who have reflected and who have mastered the science of historical evolution, find their role. These enlightened elements are to meet in small groups which Pannekoek saw as being external to the scene of the practical struggle, namely the enterprise. Theirs is a function of clarification, explanation and discussion. It is their duty constantly to render the task to be accomplished ever more clearcut and evident; their task is tirelessly to propagate, in their writings and in their speeches, ideas and knowledge, formulating objectives, enlightening the masses. Just as the workers' councils constitute the units of practical action in the class struggle, these discussion groups represent its spiritual force. [92]

The precise outlines of these groups, which Pannekoek sometimes called parties, remain vague. They are without status, nor do they have membership cards or regular subscriptions. Most important, it is not their job to direct conflicts. It does not really matter to him what they are called so long as they are different from what we normally know as parties. These groups bring together all those who share the same underlying conceptions in order to discuss and to discover the tasks to be accomplished. Their activities are purely intellectual, and their

importance stems from the fact that victory will ultimately depend upon the spiritual force of the proletariat as well. [93]

Alongside Pannekoek's rather moderate positions (his ideas concerning the party consisted of nuances), some council communists' views were rather more blunt, rejecting all forms of 'external' organization, no matter what its profile might be.

During the period 1917--23 one encounters conceptions which more closely resemble certain anarchist tendencies than the prevailing Marxism. As early as 1917, Julian Borchardt, for example, stated that all parties were alike and proclaimed the right to autonomy in the face of all authority, even that derived from the revolutionary party. Borchardt even rejected the form of the party itself, retaining only its 'executive organs' (*Ausführende Organe*). [94] A little later a fraction developed inside the 'unitarist' branch of the council communists (AAU-E) demanding the dissolution of all general organizational structures (i.e. ones bringing together rank-and-file groups). [95] But these two tendencies stood at the outer edges of council theory. On the other hand, a certain number of councillists put forward ideas in the 1930s derived by strict interpretation from the very heart of this theory. For these people, it was impossible to distinguish between the class struggle and the acts of the workers; the workers' movement coincided with the movement of the workers. It is governed by its own laws tending toward the appropriation of the means of production. Not only does it create its own organs of material struggle (factory or action committees) but also its own organs of intellectual knowledge: working groups. These groups are no longer gatherings of individuals external to the class but constitute an instrument forged by the class itself and within its own ranks. This will lead to the autonomous organization of the masses into councils, and the autonomous organization of *revolutionary workers* into working groups. [96] In other words, all intervention from outside is eliminated; all efforts in the direction of the final objective must come from within the class and any exception to this can only be inspired by the 'ex-workers' movement.

We have seen how council theory broke away from left-wing radicalism, establishing its own individuality *against* the conceptions Moscow was propagating through the Third International. With the passing years, the question of the Russian Revolution, its nature and characteristics, was to take an increasingly important place in the discussions of these 'working groups'. The councillists developed not one but two successive conceptions of the Russian Revolution, the content of these conceptions being inseparable from their theory as a whole.

To begin with, from 1919 on, radical theoreticians accepted that Russia had undergone a true revolution, abolishing the old regime and carrying the proletariat to power. But the specific conditions predominating in this backward country meant that the revolution could not be expected to assume the same forms as those it would surely take on in the industrialized countries of western Europe and North America. For these countries possessed large, educated proletariats, with long histories behind them; they could not rely upon other social categories for the completion of their historical task. In Germany, for example, the mass of peasants was composed of tenant farmers and smallholders whose sole ambition was to enlarge and protect their property: they were the natural allies of the industrial bourgeoisie. The proletariat could only count on its own forces, material and spiritual. The day it arose, it would take upon itself the destruction of the old structures and, above all, it would exercise its own dictatorship -- class dictatorship. In Russia, on the other hand, six million workers had been backed by a vast mass of peasants also aspiring to the expropriation of the capitalists. Once it had achieved power, however, this numerically weak working class (in a country of 180 million inhabitants), devoid of any tradition of freedom or class consciousness, was obliged to yield power to a party made up of conscious and devoted communists whose policy could not ignore the social base of its regime: the peasantry. Which explains why the dictatorship which was in fact exercised was not one of a class but that of a party, a bureaucracy, or more likely that of a few leaders only. [97]

In spite of this analysis, or perhaps because of it, the council communists identified themselves with the Russian Revolution and did not question the rightness of Bolshevik theory and practice. Bolshevik tactics were considered perfectly appropriate to the situation of an economically backward country; all they asked of the CPSU was that it desist from calling for the mechanical application of similar tactics to Western Europe, where the situation was utterly different. [98]

Opinions began to evolve from about 1921--2, when the Russian Revolution started to emerge as a bourgeois revolution. This change coincided with Lenin's introduction of the NEP and his encouragement of private property, especially in the countryside. Rühle was one of the first to demythologize the 'communist' character of the Russian Revolution. On his return from Russia he stated that the councils merely masked the dictatorship of the party, and that he found no trace of genuine communism; conversely, he went on, there was a flourishing new soviet bourgeoisie! [99] Shortly afterwards all the councillists came round to the view that what had occurred in Russia had been a democratic-bourgeois or peasant-bourgeois revolution: so far were internal policy (the restoration of private property) and external policy (commercial and diplomatic relations with the capitalist powers) both supposed to bear witness to a process in which power was gradually passing into the hands of a minority and which was leading straight towards 'State capitalism'. The tasks facing the Russian revolutionaries were those of a defaulting bourgeoisie: the Revolution had been made by a handful of representatives of the petit bourgeoisie -- the Bolsheviks -- who had then gone on to set themselves up as an obstacle to the world proletarian revolution. As usual, it was Rühle who stated this idea most incisively: for him, the more or less proletarian character of the Russian Revolution did nothing to alter its bourgeois essence in a country where the first task was to progress from feudalism to the industrial capitalism of the modern era. Right from the outset, he claimed, the regime had shown itself to be bourgeois: one had only to look to the Brest-Litovsk Treaty, the acceptance of the principle of the right to self-determination of peoples, the persistence of private property among the peasantry or the policy of nationalization, which had nothing whatever to do with *socialization*. [100]

The essence of this analysis was to remain the same, even after the forced collectivization of 1928--30, although refinements were added later. Pannekoek later explained that the occupation of power by the party was due to a 'shortage of cadres' and that the State had substituted itself for the class. For him, State capitalism was equally a form of *State socialism* since the State, in Russia, was the sole master. With the bureaucracy carrying out tasks which, in Western Europe, would have been those of the bourgeoisie, it was clearly the job of the bureaucrats to impose industrialization and the collectivization of land. This is why, despite its bourgeois character, or rather because of it, the Russian Revolution represented an enormous step forward, the masses having advanced from a stage of unevolving barbarianism to a situation in which they might aspire to dignity. But the price of this progress was a heavy one: an oppressive dictatorship, and an even more crushing slavery than that weighing upon the working class in Western capitalist societies. [101]

The Second World War led to no notable changes in the council theory; a certain number of theses were accentuated, while others were played down. The main target of struggles was now the State-unions coalition, as a result of which new forms of conflict were to be envisaged, such as wildcat strikes and factory occupations. These new methods (not entirely new, since the councillists had already observed their appearance before the war) seemed to them characteristic of the independence of thought and the autonomy of which the proletariat was now capable. The central problem in the post-war revolutionary process emerges as the extension of strikes. Since each wildcat strike brought the legality of the system itself and property rights into question, the repressive function of the union now acted as a spark liable to set the whole of society alight. The councillists therefore placed all their hopes in the powers of workers' solidarity and in the contagiousness of action which, by degrees, would lead the workers to seize the instruments of production. For nationalization alone will not do away with exploitation: a new bureaucracy will inevitably arise, as in the USSR, to take the place of the old exploiting class. The radical solution is the one which leads the workers to control the means of production for themselves. [102]

A few tiny groups propagating council theory or else theories close to it survived in the following years in Holland, Australia, Britain and France. Since the end of the 1960s, however, the ideas and traditions of council communism have suddenly enjoyed a fresh vogue. It has become one of the stars in the theoretical firmament of the New Left. [103] This is why it is necessary to situate, or at least to try to do so, the theses of the council movement in relation to the aspirations of the new radicality.

There can be no doubt whatsoever that the council theorists remain within the path traced by Marxism: their aim is to supply the one true, undeformed interpretation of Marxian thought. Furthermore, their Marxism is very narrowly determinist, and in spite of the importance Pannekoek accords to the spiritual factor and to consciousness, council communism's interpretation of historical materialism remains rather restrictive. The relations of production are seen as modifying, with or without timelag, social life and its evolution. As Gorter stated, men may make their own history, but only within rather narrow limits. Historical evolution is contained within the transformation of the modes of production.

This determinism, rather distant from the spirit of the new radicality, all too often gives rise to a certain dogmatism. Councillists believe firmly in the crisis of capitalism inevitably resulting in the emergence of revolutionary consciousness. Even if they are a good deal less dogmatic than a Kautsky or a Lenin, the council communists are nevertheless marked by a strict economism. [\[104\]](#)

The other element equally foreign to contemporary revolutionary thought concerns the central place assigned to the enterprise in the process of liberation. Pannekoek tells us that production is the very essence of society and that enterprises are its constitutive cells. [\[105\]](#) This statement flows from his very imperative historical materialism and his excessive valorization of economic factors. This valorization accounts for the councillors' conception of work: for them, work was considered desirable, indispensable, the source of all spiritual and social life. In other words, their conception of work differed barely from the quasi-religious image presented by Marx and Engels. The worker-controlled society advocated by the councillors turns out to be an immense factory; neither the unpleasantness nor the tedium of work will have disappeared. Far from liberating man from productive work, this vision binds him to it permanently and irremediably.

Otto Rühle even went as far as to hold that the worker is only really a proletarian when inside his factory. Outside, he is a petit bourgeois, philistine in his life-style, dominated by the ideology of the dominant class. Only in his place of work does he become a revolutionary. [\[106\]](#) One ends up wondering just how the worker manages to sustain this split personality; can a single individual really have twin mentalities, or two faces, like Janus? This question leads us to a more fundamental critique expressing the hard core of radical theory, namely the very partial character of council communism. For the concepts of council communism only really grasp one facet of human alienation, ignoring the other aspects, including the everyday life of the individual which lies at the heart of the radical critique. It is not certain that the proletarian is better armed in the professional struggle than he is in the fight against cultural, family and sexual repression.

Even where the role (ambiguous, to say the least) of 'conscious minorities' -- working groups or new-style parties -- is concerned, council communism borrows rather too many elements from classical Marxism for it not to be a little suspect in the eyes of the new radicals. The councillors were of bourgeois origin for the most part, intellectuals who were well-established in careers in the surrounding society. There is something paradoxical about their enthusiasm for the messianic role of the workers -- the others, to employ the existentialist's vocabulary -- when one considers that the autonomy or the self-movement of the proletariat lies at the centre of their preoccupations.

For all this, the councillors did contribute an historical contradiction of Leninist ideology. In those dark years when the Third International stood out as the incarnation of revolutionary hopes, the councillors demystified this claim while starting from the same theoretical premises as the official communists.

Finally, by referring first and foremost to the historical experience of the councils they gave content and illustration to one of the fundamental demands of radicality, namely that the struggle for liberation from all constraints should be autonomous. And if they were not alone in placing all their hopes and faith in the experience of the councils, they nonetheless situated it within the historical evolution of radicality.

Footnotes

- [1] See Richard Gombin *The Radical Tradition* (London 1978) chapter 1.
- [2] Generally, we find three tendencies: the moderate, chauvinist branch; the reformist, pacifist branch, less inclined to seek integration into bourgeois democracy; the revolutionary left wing, the majority of which ended by siding with the Third International.
- [3] Here I am employing Gustav Landauer's distinction (in *Die Revolution*, Frankfurt, 1907) between topia, which is experienced and expressed reality, and utopia, incorporating both topia -- that which exists -- and that which is not expressed, but to which we aspire. The moment utopia becomes a fact it becomes topia.
- [4] F. L. Carsten, *Revolution in Central Europe (1918-1919)* (London, 1972), p. 125ff.
- [5] For a chronological and institutional description see A. Schwarz, *Die Weimarer Republik* (Corstanz, 1958), p. 28-9.
- [6] P. Broué, *Révolution en Allemagne* (Paris, 1971), ch. 6.
- [7] P. von Oertzen, *Betriebsräte in Novemberrevolution* (Dusseldorf, 1963), p. 71ff.
- [8] Broué, op. cit., and E. Kolb, *Die Arbeiterräte in der deutschen Innenpolitik* (Dusseldorf, 1962), p. 60.
- [9] Kolb, op. cit., pp. 88-90.
- [10] *ibid.*, pp. 91, 92.
- [11] This is the view of most historians of the period, starting with O. K. Flechtheim, even though the latter is favourable to the revolutionary movement. Cf. his *Die K.P.D. in der Weimarer Republik* (Frankfurt, 1969), ch. 2.
- [12] See R. Grunberger, *Red Rising in Bavaria* (London, 1973), for a chronology and account of these events. Documents of the period are to be found in G. Schmolze (ed.), *Revolution und Räterepublik in München 1918-1919 in Augenzeugenberichten* (Dusseldorf, 1969).
- [13] The first council dates back to December 1917; cf. R. L. Tokés, *Béla Kun and the Hungarian Soviet Republic* (New York, 1967), p. 38. The vast literature on this subject is dealt with in F. Völgyes, *The Hungarian Soviet Republic* (Stanford, 1970).
- [14] Tokés, op. cit., p. 120.
- [15] *ibid.*, p. 161.
- [16] Of the 33 People's Commissars, 17 were socialists, 14 communists and two belonged to no party (*ibid.*, p. 137).
- [17] It is noteworthy that the Guilds, which were active after 1910, did not call for the ownership of industry, nor were they prepared to leave the management of industry in the hands of the workers alone. Finally, their theoreticians were careful to point out that there was no question of breaking with the unions and that they sought merely to transform the doctrines of trade-unionism, notably insofar as joint control was concerned. See G. D. H. Cole, *Guild Socialism* (London, 1920) p. 24.
- [18] G. D. H. Cole and R. Postgate, *The Common People* (London, 1968), p. 518.
- [19] *ibid.*, p. 546-57.
- [20] Cf. B. Pribicevic, *The Shop Stewards' Movement and Workers' Control, 1910-1922* (Oxford, 1959), p. 99ff.
- [21] *ibid.*, p. 144.
- [22] A. Tasca, *Naissance du fascisme* (Paris, 1967), p. 45.
- [23] *ibid.*, p. 54.
- [24] *ibid.*, p. 103-4.
- [25] H. Prouteau, *Les occupations d'usines en France et en Italie (1920-1936)* (Paris, 1967), p. 40.
- [26] J. M. Cammett, *Antonio Gramsci and the Origins of Italian Communism* (Stanford, 1967), p. 74.
- [27] 'Sindacati e consigli', *Ordine Nuovo* (11 October 1919), in A. Gramsci, *L'Ordine Nuovo 1919-1920* (n.p., 1955), pp. 34-9 (henceforth referred to as *Opere*).
- [Johngray note : English translation in Antonio Gramsci *Selections from Political Writings 1910--1920* (London, 1977), pp. 98-102]

[28] 'Il partito e la rivoluzione', *Ordine Nuovo* (27 December 1919), in *Opere*, pp. 67-71.

[Johngray note : English translation in Antonio Gramsci *Selections from Political Writings 1910--1920* (London, 1977), pp. 142-146]

[29] 'Sindicalismo e consigli' *Ordine Nuovo* (8 November 1919), and second article, 'Sindacati e consigli' (2 June 1920), in *Opere*, pp.44-8,131-5.

[Johngray note : English translation in Antonio Gramsci *Selections from Political Writings 1910--1920* (London, 1977), pp. 109-113, 265-268]

[30] 'Democrazia operaia', *Ordine Nuovo* (21 July 1919), written in collaboration with Palmiro Togliatti, in *Opere*, pp. 10-13.

[Johngray note : English translation in Antonio Gramsci *Selections from Political Writings 1910--1920* (London, 1977), pp. 65-68]

See also J. M. Piotte, *La pensée politique de Gramsci* (Paris, 1970), p. 260.

[31] Cammett, op. cit., p. 88.

[32] Cf. 'Il problema del pottere', *Ordine Nuovo* (29 November 1919), and 'Partito di governo e classe di governo' (6 March 1920) in *Opere*, pp. 56-60, 91-6.

[Johngray note : English translation in Antonio Gramsci *Selections from Political Writings 1910--1920* (London, 1977), pp. 130-134, 167-172]

[33] 'Sindacati e consigli', op. cit. (20 June 1920).

[34] Along similar lines, see Piotte, op. cit., p. 263.

[35] Even though he openly held libertarian doctrines to be 'pernicious' (Cammett, op. cit., p. 125). Concerning his relations with the anarchists, cf. P. C. Masini, *Antonio Gramsci e l'Ordine Nuovo. Visti da un libertario* (n.p., 1956).

[36] Cited by Piotte, op. cit., p. 271.

[37] *ibid.*, p. 373.

[38] *Sozialistengesetze* (1878-90), which outlawed socialist organizations during this period. On the development of German social democracy see C. E. Schorske's classic work, *German Social Democracy (1905-1917)* (Cambridge, Mass 1955).

[39] R. Luxemburg, *The Mass Strike, the Political Party and the Trade Union* (Detroit, n. d. [1919]).

[Johngray note : Online at the www.marxists.org site]

[40] From the name of the journal opposing the leadership of the Dutch party, published from 1907 onwards: *Die Tribune*.

[41] At the time she wrote, the problem of bureaucratization was being discussed widely. It was in 1906 (while still a member of the SPD) that Robert Michels drew attention to this phenomenon, before devoting a more detailed sociological study to it in 1911.

[Johngray note : English translation as Robert Michels *Political Parties* (London, 1962)]

[42] J. P. Netti's book bears abundant witness to this: *Rosa Luxemburg* (London, 1966).

[43] H. M. Bock, 'Zur Geschichte und Theorie der holländischen marxistischen Schule', in A. Pannekoek and H. Gorter, *Organisation und Taktik der proletarischen Revolution* (Frankfurt, 1969), p. 12, speaks of 500 members; F. Kool (ed.), in his introduction to *Die Linke gegen die Parteiherrschaft* (Olten, 1970), p. 89, puts the figure at 700.

[44] A. Pannekoek, *Die taktischen Differenzen in der Arbeiterbewegung* (Hamburg, 1909).

[Johngray note : English translation of excerpts in Serge Bricianer *Pannekoek and the Workers Councils* (St Louis, 1978), ch. 2]

[45] A. Pannekoek, 'Massenaktion und Revolution', *Die Neue Zeit*, vol. 1 (1912), p. 543, and 'Die Eroberung der Herrschaft', *Leipziger Volkszeitung*, no. 210 (1912).

[Johngray note : English translation of excerpts in Serge Bricianer *Pannekoek and the Workers Councils* (St Louis, 1978) ch. 3]

[46] A. Pannekoek, 'Marxistische Theorie und revolutionäre Taktik', *Die Neue Zeit*, vol. 1 (1912), pp. 272-81, 365-73.

[Johngray note : English translation in D.A. Smart (ed.) *Pannekoek and Gorter's Marxism* (London, 1978)]

On the history of 'left-wing radicalism', cf. H. M. Bock, *Syndikalismus und Linkskommunismus von 1918-1923* (Meisenheim am Glan, 1969).

[47] The more so in that extreme-left journals circulated with amazing ease, even at the front. Cf. J. Miller, 'Zur Geschichte der linken Sozial-demokraten in Bremen (1906-1918)', in *Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft* (Sonderheft, 1958), pp. 202-17.

[48] In reality, a good many Spartakists did not share the views of their leaders but, in the circumstances, only the latter managed to make their views heard. Liebknecht's views, moreover, were more innovative than those of Luxemburg, as is shown by his prison writings in the years 1917-18: Karl Liebknecht, *Politische Aufzeichnungen aus seinem Nachlass* (Berlin, 1921). See also Bock, op. cit., pp. 65, 66.

[49] *Arbeiterpolitik* (Bremen), no. 1 (24 January 1916), and no. 7 (17 February 1917), see the editorials.

[50] To begin with, the ISD label, strictly speaking, referred only to the Hamburg and Bremen groups. But within a short space of time all the extremist groups came to be known by this name.

[51] *Arbeiterpolitik* (Bremen), no. 15 (14 April 1917), and no. 10 (26 August 1916).

[52] 'Zur Einführung', *Vorbote* (1 January 1916), unsigned.

[53] A. Pannekoek, 'Bolschewismus und Demokratie', *Arbeiterpolitik* (Bremen), no. 5 (14 December 1918).

[Johngray note : English translation of excerpts in Serge Bricianer *Pannekoek and the Workers Councils* (St Louis, 1978), pp. 150-152]

[54] Radek played a vital role in this unexpected rapprochement. Having been active in the Hamburg organization, he joined Lenin in 1917 and argued in favour of reunification. It should be added that the Bolshevik leaders were highly popular among the Internationals, the latter reprinting articles by Lenin, Zinoviev and, of course, Radek in their press, even though the latter had not exactly left fond memories behind him among his former comrades in either the German or Polish parties.

[55] More exactly, the divergencies were masked by a facade of ideological unity. Thus, even at the constitutive conference of the USPD (in April 1917), the Spartakist representative Fritz Ruck, had expressed views very close to those of the Internationals. H. M. Bock, *Syndikalismus und Linkskommunismus*, op. cit., p. 62.

[56] *Programm der kommunistischen Arbeiter-Partei Deutschlands*, place of publication not indicated, undated [1920].

[Johngray note : [online link](#)]

[57] It was the left-wing communists of Hamburg and Bremen who drew up the statutes of the AAUD in August 1919. Cf. Bock, op. cit., pp. 130 2. See also F. Wolffheim *Betriebsorganisationen oder Gewerkschaften* (Hamburg, 1919; the text dates from August).

[Johngray note: English translation of AAUD statutes published in *Workers Dreadnought* November 1921]

[58] *Massenaktion*, pamphlet put out by the KAU (Berlin, 1933). For a long time already, the AAUD-E had been torn between those wanting to maintain a solid organization, with decisions taken at the top and binding on the rank-and-file (the Rätekommunisten), and those calling for the abolition of all constricting organizational structures. As for propaganda, chiefly directed against the political parties, it called for the extension of the councils' watchword. Cf. *Die Allgemeine Arbeiter-Union (Einheitsorganisation). Was sie ist und was sie will !* (Frankfurt am Main, 1927).

[59] H. M. Bock, op. cit., p. 209. In 1923, council communist groups and sects as a whole numbered fewer than 20,000 persons (F. Kool, op. cit., p. 145).

[60] Rosa Luxemburg had expressed reservations concerning three points: the principle of nationalities, the non-collectivization of land, the dictatorship of the party. These reservations came on top of her reluctance to break with social democracy, at least up to December 1918. Cf. her *The Russian Revolution* (London, 1959; written in 1918).

[Johngray note: Online at the www.marxists.org site]

[61] A. Pannekoek, 'Bolschewismus und Demokratie', op. cit. See also his article, 'Der Anfang', *Arbeiterpolitik*, no. 48 (30 November 1918).

[62] V. Lenin, *State and Revolution* (Moscow, 1970).

[Johngray note : Online at the www.marxists.org site]

[63] V. Lenin, *State and Revolution* (Moscow, 1970). (italics in the original text).

[Johngray note : Online at the www.marxists.org site]

[64] O. C. Flechtheim, *Le parti communiste allemand sous la République de Weimar* (Paris, 1972), pp. 85ff. According to Broué, Paul Levi's effective authority over the party dates back to March 1919: op. cit., p. 295.

[65] Letter in *Kommunistische Arbeiter-Zeitung* (Hamburg), no. 191 (1919).

[66] V. Lenin, 'Left-Wing' Communism, an Infantile Disorder (Peking).

[Johngray note: [Online at the www.marxists.org](http://www.marxists.org) site]

[67] 'Bericht über Moskau', *Die Aktion*, no. 39/40 (1920).

[Johngray note : Online translation at Subversion website [Report from Moscow - Otto Rühle \(1920\).](#)]

[68] In *Manifestes, thèses et résolutions des quatre premiers congrès mondiaux de l'Internationale communiste* (Paris, 1934; facsimile repr. Paris, 1970), pp. 47, 49.

[Johngray Note: English Translations in *Theses Resolutions and Manifestos of the First Four Congresses of the Third International* (London, 1980), *The Second Congress of the Communist International* (New York, 1977), *Workers of the World and Oppressed Peoples, Unite! : Proceedings and Documents of the Second Congress, 1920 (Communist International in Lenin's Time)* (New York, 1992)]

[69] Bock, op. cit., p. 257.

[70] Trotsky had no hesitation in criticizing in advance (at the Third Congress of the Communist International) this Fourth International 'in no danger of ever becoming very numerous'. He evidently thought otherwise when he set up his own Fourth International a few years later.

[71] H. Gorter, *Offener Brief an den Genossen Lenin, eine Antwort auf Lenins Broschüre: Der Radikalismus, eine Kinderkrankheit des Kommunismus* (Berlin, n.d. [1921]).

[Johngray note: English translations in *Workers Dreadnought* Vol. VII no. 51 to Vol. VIII no. 13, March-June 1921. Corrected translation in Wildcat pamphlet *Open Letter To Comrade Lenin* (London, 1989) [Online at the Communist Left site](#) (also available in German and French)]

[72] F. Wolffheim, *Betriebsorganisationen oder Gewerkschaften* (Hamburg, 1919), and A. Pannekoek, *Weltrevolution und kommunistische Taktik* (Vienna, 1920).

[Johngray Note: English translation in D.A.Smart (ed.) *Pannekoek and Gorter's Marxism* (London, 1978), pp. 93-141 online [World Revolution and Communist Tactics](#)]

[73] 'Der Parlamentarismus in der proletarischen Revolution', *Proletarier* (Berlin), no. 2 (November 1920).

[74] 'Zur Frage der Einheitschule', *Arbeiterpolitik* (Bremen), no. 7 (17 February 1917). Cf. also Bock, 'Zur Geschichte und Theorie der holländischen marxistischen Schule', op. cit., p. 17.

[75] They were undoubtedly influenced by the founder of Dutch social democracy, who subsequently became a libertarian socialist, Ferdinand Domela Nieuwenhuis. From the 1890s on, Nieuwenhuis opposed parliamentarianism in favour of class struggle, and issued warnings to the Marxist parties, whom he suspected of veering towards State socialism and dictatorship. See his *Socialisme en danger*, 3rd edn (Paris, 1897), pp. 48, 72, 216.

[76] O. Rühle, *Von der bürgerlichen zur proletarischen Revolution* (Berlin, 1970), p. 32 (the text dates from 1924).

[Johngray note : Online translation [From the Bourgeois to the Proletarian Revolution - Otto Rühle \(1924\).](#)]

[77] *ibid.*, pp. 38-43, and A. Pannekoek, *Workers' Councils* (Melbourne, 1950: English version of *De arbeidersraaden*, published in Amsterdam, 1946, under the pseudonym of P. Aartsz), p. 65. See also his 'Five Theses on the Class Struggle', *Southern Advocate for Workers' Councils* (Melbourne, May 1947).

[Johngray note : [Workers Councils](#) online link]

[78] J. H. [A. Pannekoek], 'Trade Unionism', *International Council Correspondence* (Chicago), no. 2 January 1936).

[Johngray Note : Online Translation [Trade Unions - Anton Pannekoek \(1936\)](#)]

[79] H. Gorter, 'Partei, Klasse und Masse', *Proletarier*, no 4 (February-March 1921), and A. Pannekoek, 'Der neue Blanquismus', *Der Kommunist* (Bremen), no. 27 (1920).

[80] [A. Pannekoek], 'Partei und Arbeiterklasse', *Rätekorrespondenz* (published by the GIC, the Dutch International Communist Group), no. 15 (March 1936), and J. Harper [A. Pannekoek], 'General Remarks on the Question of Organization', *Living Marxism* (Chicago), no. 5 (November 1938).

[Johngray Note: Online translations at [Party and Working Class - Anton Pannekoek \(1936\) General Remarks on the Question of Organization - Anton Pannekoek \(1938\)](#)]

[81] 'Arbeiterräte und kommunistische Wirtschaftsgestaltung', *Rätekorrespondenz*, no 5 (October 1934).

[82] A. Pannekoek, *Workers' Councils*, op. cit., section 1: 'The Task'.

[johngray note : [online link](#)]

[83] J. H. [A. Pannekoek], 'The Workers' Councils', *International Council Correspondence*, no. 5 (1936).

[johngray note : [online link](#)]

[84] K. Horner [A. Pannekoek], *Sozialdemokratie und Kommunismus* (Hamburg, 1919).

[Johngray Note: English translation of excerpts in Serge Bricianer *Pannekoek and the Workers' Councils* (St Louis, 1978) ch. 6]

[85] K. Schroder, *Vom Werden der neuen Gesellschaft* (Berlin, n.d. [1920]); O.

Ruhle, *Von der bürgerlichen zur proletarischen Revolution*, (op. cit. in footnote 76 with [online link](#)); J. Harper [A. Pannekoek], 'General Remarks on the Question of Organization', (op. cit. in footnote 80 with [online link](#)) See also the first programme of the KAPD (1920), (op. cit. in footnote 56 with [online link](#))

[86] In general, it was the fervent KAPists who saw, in the existing factory organizations, the core of the councils. For a 'Council State', cf. the second programme of the KAPD (repr. in Bock, op. cit) and Pannekoek, who compares them to parliament (*Workers' Councils*, p. 47).

[johngray note : Workers Councils [online link](#)]

[87] A detailed bio-bibliography of Gorter will be found in S. Bricianer, op. cit., and in Kool (ed.), *Die Linke gegen die Parteiherrschaft*, op. cit.

[88] H. Gorter, 'Partei, Klasse und Masse', op. cit., and *Die Klassenkampf-Organisation des Proletariats* (Berlin, 1921). See also his *Offener Brief an den Genossen Lenin*. . . , (op. cit. in footnote 71 with [online link](#))

[89] Which he was to leave in order to return to the SPD in 1926. Concerning his life and work, cf. Kool's introduction to Kool, op. cit., and *Otto Rühle Schriften* (Hamburg, 1971).

[90] O. Rühle, *Die Revolution ist keine Parteisache!* (Berlin, 1920),

[Johngray Note: English Translation in *London Workers Group Bulletin* Issue 14, October 1983. [Online link](#)]

and *Von der bürgerlichen zur proletarischen Revolution*, (op. cit. in footnote 76 with [link](#))

[91] A. Pannekoek: 'Historical Materialism', article published in Dutch in *Nieuwe Tijd*, 1919 (French translation in *Cahiers du communisme de conseils*, no. 1, 1968), and 'Marxismus und Idealismus', *Proletarier*, no. 4 (February-March 1921). A good biography of Pannekoek is to be found in *Die linke gegen die Parteiherrschaft*. Bock gives a list of his books, articles and pamphlets in *Organisation und Taktik der proletarischen Revolution*, op. cit.

[Johngray Note : See also John Gerber *Anton Pannekoek and the Socialism of Workers' Self-Emancipation 1873-1960* (Amsterdam, 1989). An article by the same author is online at the Collective Action Notes website [Anton Pannekoek and the Quest For an Emancipatory Socialism - John Gerber](#)]

[92] 'Prinzip und Taktik', *Proletarier*, no. 8 (August 1927);

[Johngray Note : English translation of excerpts in Serge Bricianer *Pannekoek and the Workers' Councils* (St Louis, 1978) pp. 231-244]

'Partei und Arbeiterklasse', *Rätekorrespondenz*, no. 15 (March 1936).

[Johngray Note: Online translations at [Party and Working Class - Anton Pannekoek\(1936\)](#)]

[93] *Workers' Councils*, op. cit., p. 101,

[johngray note : [Online link](#)]

and 'The Party and the Working Class', *International Council Correspondence*, nos. 9 and 10 (September 1936).

[Johngray Note: Online at Collective Action Notes website [Party and Class \(1936\)](#)]

Cf. also Pannekoek's letter to Pierre Chaulieu, in which he further detailed his conception of the party-group, reprinted in *Cahiers du communisme de conseils*, no. 8 (May 1971).

[94] See his *Revolutionshoffnungen* (Berlin, 1917), and Bock, op. cit., pp. 73ff. The Bremen ISD broke with him, accusing him of having 'liquidated' the party-form.

[95] *ibid.*, p. 220.

[96] H. Canne Meijer, 'Das Werden einer neuen Arbeiterbewegung', *Rätekorrespondenz*, nos 8-9 (April 1935), partial English translation in *International Council Correspondence* no. 10 (August 1935). See also *Die Linke gegen die Parteiherrschaft*, op. cit., p. 613, n. 261.

[Johngray note : ['The Rise of a New Labour Movement'](#) on line at this site.]

[97] 'Östlicher und westlicher Kommunismus', *Proletarier*, no. (October 1920); Gorter, *Offener Brief an den Genossen Lenin*. . . , passim ([online link](#)); and Gorter, 'Partei, Klasse und Masse' (1921), op. cit.

[98] 'Lehren der Marz-Aktion', *Proletarier*, no. 5 (April-May 1921); [A. Pannekoek], 'Sowjetrussland und der westeuropäische Kommunismus', op. cit. (June 1921). Cf. also Pannekoek's letter to Erich Muhsam (at the end of 1920), in which he declared his wholehearted solidarity with the Bolsheviks (cited by Bricianer, op. cit., pp. 215-17).

[Johngray Note : English translation in Serge Bricianer *Pannekoek and the Workers' Councils* (St Louis, 1978), pp. 222-225]

[99] 'Bericht über Moskau', *Die Aktion*, nos 39-40 (September 1920). (op.cit. in footnote 67 with [online link](#))

[100] 'Die russische Staatspolitik und ihre Konsequenzen für die Kommunistische Internationale', *Proletarier* no. 6 (June 1922); 'Thesen über Moskau', *Rätekorrespondenz*, no. 3 (August 1934): *Von bürgerlichen zur proletarischen Revolution*, (op. cit. in footnote 76 with [online link](#)), ch. 2, 'Das russische Problem'.

[101] Workers' Councils, section ii, ch. 5, 'The Russian Revolution'.

[Johngray note : [Online link](#)]

[102] Cf. *The New World*, pamphlet published by the 'Groups of Council Communists Holland' (Amsterdam 1947), and A. Pannekoek, *Workers' Councils*, final section, 'The Peace',

[Johngray note : [Online link](#)]

as well as his article 'The Failure of the Working Class', *Politics*, vol. 3 no. 8 (September 1946), cited by Bricianer, op. cit., pp. 283ff.

[Johngray Note : Online at [The Failure of the Working Class \(1946\)](#)]

[103] Symptomatic is the chapter on the workers' councils (written by an ex-KAPist, Paul Mattick) published in an anthology claiming to be representative of the New Left: P. Long (ed.), *The New Left* (Boston, 1969). On the councillist tradition in France since the Second World War, cf. my *Les origines du gauchisme* (Paris, 1971), ch. 4 (English translation: *The Origins of Modern Leftism*, Penguin Books, 1975). [Johngray note : [Online link at Collective Action Notes Site](#)]

[104] The thesis of the 'fatal crisis of capitalism' was current in councillist circles in the 1930s. This theme was taken up again in the 1940s, and Pannekoek still speaks of a gradual worsening of capitalism's positions in his *Workers' Councils*, pp. 225-7.

[Johngray note : the page reference is actually 229-30. [Online link - see paragraph 12 onwards](#)]

See also Mattick's essay on workers' councils (op. cit. in note. 103).

[Johngray Note: Gombin is correct about the prevalence of crisis theory in councillist circles - however Pannekoek consistently rejected breakdown theories. See [The Theory of the Collapse of Capitalism](#) (1934)]

[105] 'The Workers' Councils', *International Council Correspondence*, op. cit. [footnote 83 with [online link](#)]

[106] Ruhle, *Von bürgerlichen zur proletarischen Revolution*, op. cit. [see footnote 76 with [online link](#)], p. 51.

ON COUNCIL COMMUNISM Marcel van der Linden - 2004

Rise and fall

As the society of revolutionary Russia gradually hardened into its new shape in the years after 1918 and political power was increasingly concentrated - due in part to the violence of war and economic crisis - in the hands of a bureaucratic elite, oppositional movements continually emerged, both inside Russia and abroad, that sought to turn the tide.(1) Karl Korsch in Germany, Amadeo Bordiga in Italy and Timofei Sapronov in Russia tried and failed to form a new international in 1926, for example.(2) From 1930 on, the 'Bukharinite' opposition (Heinrich Brandler, Jay Lovestone, M.N. Roy and others) made a similar attempt. Trotsky's International Left Opposition, whose formation in 1930, eventually led to the foundation of the Fourth International in 1938, became the best known of such projects.

One very early protest against the trends in Russia was expressed in the Netherlands and Germany by former Bolshevik sympathisers who would later become known as 'council communists' - a term that was probably used from 1921 on. (3) The most prominent spokespeople of this protest were the German educator Otto Rühle (1874-1943) and two Dutchmen; the poet and classicist Herman Gorter (1864-1927) and the astronomer Anton(ie) Pannekoek (1873-1960). These intellectuals had initially been enthusiastic admirers of developments in Russia. Gorter, for example, dedicated his 1918 pamphlet *The World Revolution 'To Lenin'*, the revolutionary who 'stands out above all other leaders of the Proletariat' and for whom 'Marx is his only peer'. A year later, Pannekoek still asserted, 'In Russia communism has been put into practice for two years now' (4)

But their mood changed quickly. The most important reason for their turnabout was the efforts of the Communist International established in 1919 to promote the Bolshevik example as an international model. In 1920, Pannekoek published his pamphlet *World Revolution and Communist Tactics*, in which he defended the proposition that revolutionaries in Western Europe should use very different tactics from their comrades in Russia. In Western Europe, the influence of an old, experienced bourgeoisie made itself felt at every level of society. In Russia and Eastern Europe, by contrast, the bourgeoisie was still young and relatively weak. For this reason, East-European workers had fewer ideological prejudices and were more receptive to Marxist ideas. Accordingly, the struggle against bourgeois institutions such as parliaments and trade unions had to be central in the West.

In his pamphlet *'Left-Wing' Communism - An Infantile Disorder*, Lenin refuted the Dutch and German left-wingers' standpoints.(5) He considered that Pannekoek (K. Horner) and his fellow thinkers were spreading confusion. While he acknowledged that there was an 'enormous difference' between 'backward Russia' and 'the advanced countries of Western Europe', he considered the universal significance of the Russian experience far more important: 'it is the Russian model that reveals to all countries something - and something highly significant - of their near and inevitable future'.(6) By focusing centrally on 'the international validity' of 'certain fundamental features of our revolution' in this way, Lenin accentuated the sharpening contradictions within the international Communist movement. Intense debates arose inside West-European Communist Parties.

Within the German Party (KPD), this conflict was exacerbated by another development. The organisation's leadership, headed by Paul Levi, a long-time associate of the recently murdered Rosa Luxemburg, pushed a decision through its October 1919 congress that all members had to take part in parliamentary elections and fight the union bureaucracy from inside the trade unions. This new line was, in practice, tantamount to declaring a split, since the left wing could never be expected to accept it. The result, in any case, was that the KPD lost about half of its hundred thousand members within a few months. In some districts, such as Greater Berlin, the Northwest (Hamburg and Bremen), Lower Saxony (Hanover) and East Saxony (Dresden), the organisation was virtually wiped out.

At first, the expelled opposition did not want to found a new party of its own. But, when the KPD leadership acted hesitantly in the early stages of the right-wing Kapp Putsch in March 1920 and seemed isolated from the militant sections of the working class, the decision was taken to establish a rival organisation. On 4-5 April 1920, the Communist Workers' Party of Germany (KAPD) was accordingly founded. At its inception, it had 38,000 members. As early as February 1920, the General Workers' Union (AAUD) was founded, an organisation modelled to some extent as the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) of the US, which many saw as a trade-union federation linked to the KAPD. The KAPD flourished briefly. Its high point was probably in August 1920, when it had about 40,000 members.⁽⁷⁾ From then on, the Party was decimated by a series of splits and splinter groups. The coup de grâce came in March 1922, with the division between a 'Berlin current' and an 'Essen current'.⁽⁸⁾ By the end of 1924, the two groups together had only 2,700 members left.⁽⁹⁾

The KAPD operated initially on the assumption that the international Communist movement could still be reformed from within. But, when the KAPD delegation's attempts during the Third Comintern Congress in Moscow (Dune-July 1921) to form an international left opposition failed, the decision was immediately taken to build a new Communist Workers' International (KAI, sometimes referred to as the Fourth International), even though a large tendency within the Party (which would later become the 'Berlin current') considered this initiative premature. On a programmatic level, the KAI took Herman Gorter's propositions in his recent Open Letter to Comrade Lenin, which were, in fact, mainly a repetition of the arguments made by Pannekoek, as its starting point. Outside Germany, the KAI was chiefly supported by very small political groups, such as the Dutch sister organisation KAPN, a British group around Sylvia Pankhurst, and the Bulgarian Communist Workers' Party around the journal *Rabotchnik Iskra*.

Within the council-communist movement - which gradually became more diverse as a result of the disintegration of the KAPD - criticism of Russia rapidly grew more intense. East-Saxon spokesperson Otto Rühle was perhaps the first to conclude that the Bolsheviks were not building socialism. Rühle had been a KAPD delegate to the Second Comintern Congress in mid-1920, but had left in protest even before the Congress began. Once back in Germany, he gave vent to his dismay. The Bolsheviks had tried to skip over an entire epoch by leaping directly from feudalism to socialism. The delayed world revolution had made this attempt a failure. The outcome was 'a frightful disappointment'.⁽¹⁰⁾ The Bolsheviks had instituted an ultra-centralism that corresponded completely to the bourgeois character of their revolution.

Centralism is the organizational principle of the bourgeois-capitalist epoch. By this means a bourgeois state and capitalist economy can be constructed. A proletarian state and socialist economy cannot, however. They require the system of councils.⁽¹¹⁾

Within a fairly short time, this opinion of Rühle's was generally accepted in KAPD circles.

In the course of 1921, the council-communist movement thus began to demarcate itself clearly from official Communism. The movement's starting points can be summarised simply. Firstly, capitalism is in decline and should be abolished immediately. Secondly, the only alternative to capitalism is a democracy of workers' councils, based on an economy controlled by the working class. Thirdly, the bourgeoisie and its social-democratic allies are trying to save capitalism from its fate by means of 'democratic' manipulation of the working class. Fourthly, in order to hasten the establishment of a democracy of councils, this manipulation must be consistently resisted. This means, on the one hand, boycotting all parliamentary elections and, on the other hand, systematically fighting against the old trade unions (which are organs for joint management of capitalism). Finally, Soviet-type societies are not an alternative to capitalism but, rather, a new form of capitalism.

These five starting points are the parameters within which debates have taken place among council communists over the past eighty years. There has been considerable room for fundamental differences of opinion within these parameters, however. The differences have also been sharpened by the movement's ongoing decline, which reduced the remaining council communists to small groups. In these groups, internal theoretical debate has often been more important than practical political work.

Organised council communism disappeared from the scene in Germany after Hitler seized power in 1933, although groups remained active in the resistance.(12) In the Netherlands, several small groups developed, one of which, the Groups of International Communists (GIC), continued to serve as a co-ordinating centre for international discussions until the late 1930s and, among other things, published a journal (*Rätekorrespondenz*, 1934-7) towards this end. Several texts appeared in the early issues of this periodical that subsequently functioned more or less as the substantive platform of the international movement. The first such text was 'The Rise of a New Labour Movement' by Dutch educator Henk Canne Meijer (1890-1962), who can justly be seen as the GIC's 'soul'.(13) Canne Meijer explained that the historical role of the whole of the old labour movement (made up of parties, trade unions and co-operatives) was exhausted and that a new labour movement was now rising up, based entirely on an autonomous proletarian activity.(14)

A second influential text was the German journalist and teacher Helmut Wagner's (1904-89) 'Theses on Bolshevism'. Wagner characterised the Soviet Union as state capitalism without a bourgeoisie, constantly zigzagging between the interests of workers and peasants. The Five Year Plans and forced collectivisation were nothing but attempts to keep the contradiction between these two classes under control by force.(15) Wagner still assumed that the Bolsheviks had followed incorrect policies in an effort to build socialism. Anton Pannekoek came a few years later to a different conclusion, that the Bolsheviks had carried out a bourgeois revolution, so that, rather than following incorrect policies, they had followed the only possible policies. Their only 'mistake' had been to imagine that they were building socialism rather than capitalism.

A former KAPD member who emigrated to the United States in 1926, metalworker Paul Mattick (1904-81), began to build up an operation of his own in Chicago in the early 1930s.(16) He was, among other things, the driving force behind the journal *International Council Correspondence*. (17) In Australia, J.A. Dawson (1889-1958) published the *Southern Advocate of Workers' Councils* for several years just after the Second World War,(18) while Lain Diez published council-communist texts in Chile. From time to time, an independent Marxist thinker seemed to develop in a council-communist direction, as with the ex-Communist lawyer and philosopher Karl Korsch (1886-1961) from the early 1930s on.

Council communism enjoyed several years back a bit of the limelight while the student movement was flourishing in the 1960s, particularly in Germany, Italy and France. Classic texts were republished and 'veterans' such as Mattick and the Dutch journalist Cajo Brendel (born in 1915 and perhaps the last true disciple of Pannekoek) were popular speakers and writers. The 'old' council communism was often integrated in a more or less eclectic way into a 'new' theory or worldview. That was apparent early on in the case of Daniel and Gabriel Cohn-Bendit's book, *Le gauchisme: remède à la maladie sénile du communisme*.(19) With the decline of the '1968 movements', council communism also largely disappeared from sight once more, although groups are still active in various places in Western Europe and North America. (20)

Debates

There have been numerous internal debates among council communists since the 1920s. Here, I confine myself to a brief outline of the most important controversies.

i. Characterisation of the historical period

What exactly does the proposition that capitalism is in decline signify? In the 1920s and 1930s, many Marxists (council communists and others) thought that capitalism was very close to the end of its tether. This opinion was often backed up with references to Rosa Luxemburg's theory that, in having conquered the whole planet, capitalism had reached its historical limit. In the late 1920s, a second theory was added to the argument, based on Henryk Grossmann's book on the collapse of capitalism. (21) Grossmann had used Marx's reproduction schemes to show that the rising organic composition of capital automatically leads to the accumulation process's grinding to a halt, and that capitalism has therefore an objective internal limit. Grossmann's opinion was the subject of fierce debates among council communists in the early 1930s. Korsch and Pannekoek, among others, rejected Grossmann's approach, while Mattick defended its key points. (22) Pannekoek argued that socialism would come into existence, not because capitalism would collapse and thus force workers to form new organisations, but, rather, because

capitalism would become more and more unbearable for the workers and thus spur them on to form new organisations that would make capitalism collapse. Mattick, by contrast, considered Pannekoek's line of argument sophistry, because capitalist collapse and revolutionary class struggle are two sides of the same coin: ongoing concentration of capital would lead to prolonged immiseration for the workers, transforming their economic struggle into a revolutionary struggle. Saying that the collapse of capitalism was inevitable was thus exactly the same as saying that the revolution was inevitable.

Such debates naturally seemed much less urgent during the long post-Second-World-War boom. Now, the central question became how to interpret the boom. No single council communist believed that capitalism had found a way after all to keep its fundamental contradictions under control. They were all convinced, rather, that the 'golden years' only meant a postponement of the day of reckoning. The theoretical and political challenge was above all to analyse the boom as a temporary phenomenon. Paul Mattick, in particular, took this task upon himself. As early as the late 1930s, he began to develop a critique of John Maynard Keynes, culminating in his magnum opus *Marx and Keynes* in 1969. According to Mattick, Marx had not foreseen that a Keynesian period of extensive state economic intervention would occur (though Marx's theory in no way ruled out such a possibility). Keynesianism 'silently accepted' Marx's opinion about capitalism's immanent crises, and, at the same time, offered a remedy in the form of conscious interference with the mechanism of the market. (23) This remedy could not possibly solve the structural problem of capital accumulation, however, because increased state intervention led to more wasteful production (of weapons and so forth) and public works. Even if additional markets were created for capital in this way,

... the final product of government-induced production, resulting from a long chain of intermediary production processes, does not have the form of a commodity which could profitably be sold on the market. (24)

Government deficit spending is therefore 'not part of the actual aggregate demand, but a deliberate policy of producing beyond it'. (25) This policy, based on a continual increase in the national debt (and, consequently, a steady depreciation of incomes and debts), was bound to reach a dead end at a certain point.

Notwithstanding the long duration of rather 'prosperous' conditions in the industrially-advanced countries, there is no ground for the assumption that capitalist production has overcome its inherent contradictions through state interventions in the economy. (26)

Mattick was also alert to some possible non-economic consequences of post-war capitalism, as shown by the attention he devoted, much earlier than many other Marxists, to ecological issues. In 1976, he devoted an essay to 'the ongoing destruction of the environment'. He argued that threats to the human habitat were not the result of the development of the productive forces, but, rather, of capitalist relations of production and their 'monstrous waste of human labor power and natural resources?' At the same time Mattick did not exclude the possibility of capitalism finding a solution to the threat on its own:

Since the way the world moves is determined by profit, capitalists concern themselves with ecological problems only inasmuch as they have an impact on profits. The capitalists have no particular interest in destroying the world; if it turns out that preserving the world can be profitable too, then protecting the world will also become a business. (28)

ii. Revolutionary intervention in workers' struggles

Probably the most important difference among council communists concerned revolutionary intervention in workers' struggles. The political parties of the 'old' workers' movement had failed.

When it proved possible to better workers' conditions within the confines of capitalism, the once radical labor movement [had] turned into an institution providing additional support for the social status quo. (29)

But did this co-optation of the 'old' movement also mean that the very concept of a revolutionary workers' party had become obsolete? Was a revolutionary party useful in educating the proletariat for autonomous activity, or were all political parties bourgeois organisations that had to be combated?

In the course of the 1920s, three different positions gradually crystallised. First, there were council communists who believed that the 'old' workers' movement had only discredited a certain kind of party, but not the idea of a party as such. The new revolutionary party should not be something separate from the working class, but should dialectically fuse with it. This position was defended by, among others, Herman Gorter, who summarised the line of argument pithily in three points:

Firstly, regroupment of all workers, of the great majority of the proletariat in the [revolutionary] union; secondly, regroupment of the most conscious workers in the party; thirdly, unity of union and party. (30)

The advocates of 'unity organisations' had a second position. The most important theorist of this intermediate position was Otto Rühle, who had already declared in 1920 that 'the revolution is not a party affair [Die Revolution ist keine Parteisache]'. In Rühle's eyes, the division of labour between party and trade union was a legacy of capitalism. The unity organisation, which workers could use to defend their interests on all fronts and promote council democracy, should replace them both. The starting point of the workers' revolutionary learning processes was where they produced surplus-value, that is, in the workplace. There they would have to organise their struggle themselves. Through economic struggle, they would educate themselves and arrive at a higher, political consciousness. These learning processes would find organisational expression in federations of workplace organisations, which would carry an economic and political struggle simultaneously. This standpoint was virtually identical to revolutionary syndicalism. (31)

The most radical council communists were those who flatly refused to intervene in the workers' movement. Anton Pannekoek, while not the originator, was the most prominent representative of this standpoint. He lays out its logic in his memoirs:

[Under the influence of Henk Canne Meijer and others] new principles gradually became clearer. This one especially: the working masses must themselves make the decisions about their struggle, and themselves carry out and lead it. This seems either a commonplace or evident nonsense; but it means that there is no room for Leaders as such. I remember that I once debated with myself during a great strike what the workers should do, and could not figure out which of two different attitudes should be taken up; and what if one later had to give one's opinion or advice in an article or newspaper? In the end, thanks to an article of Henk's, I saw the simple solution all at once: I don't have to figure it out; the workers have to figure it out themselves and themselves take full responsibility for it. (32)

The council communists' task, according to this approach, was exclusively to study and analyse capitalism and workers' struggles. This standpoint, which is still propagated today by Cajo Brendel and a few associates, earned its supporters the sobriquet 'cloistered friars of Marxism'. (33)

iii. Subjective factors

The controversies over party building were linked to another debate. If, in fact, the 'objective conditions' in the advanced capitalist countries are ripe for revolution, what are the 'subjective factors' that keep the working class from establishing a new society? Rühle came to the conclusion, in roughly 1920 or so, that the deepest cause of the failure of the German Revolution of 1918-19 lay, not in the errors of one revolutionary organisation or the other, but, rather, in the mentality of the working class. Revolution would only be possible in industrialised countries when the working class had enough self-confidence and the will to take control of the real loci of power, the workplaces, and put them in the hands of unity organisations in which political and economic power were united. The fact that the working class had not done so in 1918-19 was the result of its subaltern mentality. Rühle wrote in 1925:

What is needed most today is the gradual dismantling of authority within people themselves, in their mode of psychic activity, in the general, daily practice of life in society. Dismantling authority in the organizational apparatus is important. Dismantling it in the theory and tactics of class struggle is more important. But most important of all is dismantling authority in the human soul, because without that it is impossible to abolish authority in either organization or tactics and theory. (34)

While Rühle thus advocated a broad, revolutionary-pedagogical approach, most council communists considered that it was not necessary to alter the working class's whole psychology, but only to fight against mistaken political ideas. Their underlying assumption was that the workers' bourgeois ideology kept them from establishing a democracy of councils. As Pannekoek put it:

What hampers [the workers] is chiefly the power of the inherited and infused ideas, the formidable spiritual power of the middle-class world, enveloping their minds into a thick cloud of beliefs and ideologies, dividing them, and making them uncertain and confused. The process of enlightenment, of clearing up and vanquishing this world of old ideas and ideologies is the essential process of building the working-class power, is the progress of revolution. (35)

Marxist philosophy had a central role in explaining and combating the 'thick cloud of beliefs and ideologies'. This is why Pannekoek, in particular, spent considerable time criticising what he regarded as bourgeois thinking inside the workers' movement. In 1938, he published a critique of Lenin, especially of Lenin's 1909 book *Materialism and Empirio-criticism*. (36) Pannekoek tried to prove that Lenin failed in his critique of Ernst Mach and Mach's Russian followers Bogdanov and Lunacharsky to go beyond the eighteenth-century materialism of the Enlightenment. Lenin reduced 'matter' to physical matter, while historical materialism has a much broader concept of matter, namely the concept of 'objective reality', or 'the entire observed reality', including 'mind and fancies' (Eugen Dietzgen). (37) Lenin shared his tendency towards 'middle-class materialism', in Pannekoek's view, with his philosophical mentor Gregorii Plekhanov. Their thinking was in both cases the product of 'Russian social conditions':

In Russia ... the fight against Czarism was analogous to the former fight against absolutism in Europe. In Russia too church and religion were the strongest supports of the system of government. . . . The struggle against religion was here a prime social necessity . . . Thus the proletarian class struggle in Russia was at the same time a struggle against Czarist absolutism, under the Banner of socialism. So Marxism in Russia ... necessarily assumed another character than in Western Europe. It was still the theory of a fighting working class; but this class had to fight first and foremost for what in Western Europe had been the function of the bourgeoisie, with the intellectuals as its associates. So the Russian intellectuals, in adapting this theory to this local task, had to find a form of Marxism in which criticism of religion stood in the forefront. They found it in an approach to earlier forms of materialism, and in the first writings of Marx . . . (38)

According to Pannekoek, Lenin was waging a battle that had already been won in Western Europe. Lenin's ideas were of no use to people living under developed capitalism, and would only make the working class's self-emancipation more difficult. (39)

iv. The role of individual actions

Another controversy, over the role of individual actions, was also linked to the debate on the party. Should conscious council communists carry out 'exemplary actions' in order to rouse the proletariat from its slumber? Or was that absolutely the wrong thing to do, because it distracted the masses from their self-emancipation? This was by no means a purely academic question. Council communists with 'activist' leanings tried to act in an 'exemplary' way several times during the 1920s and 1930s. In the tempestuous years of the German Revolution, first the surveyor Max Hölz (1899-1933) and, a bit later, the disabled moulder Karl Plättner (1893-1945) formed armed groups, which, among other things, robbed banks and plundered country houses in order to divide the loot among the poor. They hoped in this way to show the vulnerability of existing institutions and inspire other workers to similar deeds. (40) Another council-communist advocate of exemplary action, the disabled Dutch construction worker Marinus van der Lubbe (1909-34), became world famous after he set fire to the Reichstag in Berlin on 27 February 1933, because, as he later told the police, 'I saw that the workers on their own weren't going to do anything [against National Socialism]'. Van der Lubbe had been a member in the Netherlands of Eduard Sirach's (1895-1937) Left Workers' Opposition, a Rotterdam-based council-communist group. (41)

Council communists' different reactions to Van der Lubbe's act demonstrated what the debate on exemplary action was about. Anton Pannekoek (who was close to the 'anti-activist'

GIC) forcefully criticised Van der Lubbe's action and called it 'completely worthless'. Eduard Sirach, by contrast, published a pamphlet that ended as follows:

Setting fire to the Reichstag building was the act of a proletarian revolutionary. . . . As the smoke rose from this home of democratic deception, in which the German masses were sold out to capitalism for fifteen years, the illusions in parliamentary democracy that had kept the German workers chained to capitalism also went up in smoke. The thirst for action and spirit of self-sacrifice that inspired Van der Lubbe must also inspire the working masses if they are to put an end to criminal capitalism!! This is why we are in solidarity with him! (42)

v The postcapitalist economy

Under the Impact of the events in Russia/the Soviet Union, various, mainly pro-free-market authors (Ludwig von Mises and others) had argued in the years after 1917 that a centrally planned economy was impossible in principle. Only a few radical socialists took up the challenge at the time and tried to prove the contrary. The most important positive exceptions were probably the Austro-Marxist Otto Leichter and Karl Polányi, who was inspired by the ideas of 'Guild Socialism'. (43)

German metalworker Jan Appel (1890-1985), who had represented the KAPD at the Second and Third Comintern Congresses and emigrated illegally to the Netherlands in 1926, tried to develop a council-communist alternative to capitalism. His starting point was that a developed communist society would have no market, no competition, no money and no prices. There would thus be only a natural economy, in which production and distribution would be regulated democratically. Appel countered the criticism of Von Mises and his co-thinkers that a rational economy would be unthinkable in such circumstances given the lack of an accounting unit (such as value), by proposing socially necessary labour time as the basis for such an accounting unit. Appel worked this idea out in a manuscript that was discussed and developed further in the Groups of International Communists. The result was published in 1930 as a 'collective work' under the title *Fundamental Principles of Communist Production and Distribution*. (44) The text would remain a subject of debate and undergo a series of revisions in the following years. (45)

The *Fundamental Principles* contain a wealth of analyses, tackling a wide range of problems of communist economic organisation: the role of small and middle peasants, for example, and priorities for deployment of resources in different phases of development. But the focus of its analysis is the issue of distribution mechanisms. The Principles divide a communist economy into two sectors: on the one hand 'productive establishments' that provide goods and services for which they receive compensation, and on the other hand 'establishments for general social use' (GSU establishments), which are not compensated for their output. A shoe factory, for example, is a productive establishment, a hospital a GSU establishment. Both sectors are made up of autonomous units in which the employees have complete freedom of decision. 'Horizontal co-ordination' among the different units results from the stream of products between them (in the form of means of production and consumer goods) (46)

The principle 'supply according to need' is realised in the GSU sector, but not in the other sector. In other words, total consumption by the population can be divided into an individual portion (products of the productive sector) and a collective portion (products of the GSU sector). In both sectors, fixed and circulating means of production (P) are processed with labour (L) in order to produce products. All components of the production process contain specific quantities of average social production time. Producers are rewarded for their efforts with labour certificates, worth for example 'one hour of average social production time'. (47) But not all hours worked are converted into labour certificates. An example can make this clearer. Let us suppose that all productive establishments as a whole in a given country consume 700 million work hours of P and 600 million work hours of L, and produce products worth 1,300 million work hours. Then, the productive sector needs 700 million work hours (P) in order to reproduce itself, leaving 600 million work hours for the rest of society. Let us further suppose that the GSU sector consumes 58 million hours of P and 50 million work hours of L (with an output of 108 million work hours), so that this sector needs 58 million work hours (P) to reproduce itself. This means that total input in the form of labour (L) in the society is 650 million, while $600 - 58 = 542$ million work hours is left for individual consumption. The so-

called 'Remuneration Factor' or 'Factor of Individual Consumption' (FIC) is then $542 / 650 = 0.83$. If a worker works 40 hours a week, she thus receives only labour certificates equivalent to $0.83 \times 40 = 33.2$ work hours. (48)

As the communist society becomes more highly developed, the relative size of the GSU sector increases, so that, eventually, sectors such as food supply, transport, housing, etc. are also incorporated into it. (49) Despite this tendency towards growth, however, the GSU sector will never be able to include the whole society, and the FIC will thus never be reduced to zero:

Only those productive establishments which supply goods satisfying general needs will be amenable for transformation into the GSU type of establishment. A little thought will reveal that it will hardly ever be possible to include in the System of fully socialised distribution those many and varied articles and goods which reflect the special tastes dictated by various individual human interests of a specialised kind. (50)

The Principles' core idea seemed to receive powerful support when Marx's Grundrisse was published in 1939, including the passage:

Economy of time, to this all economy ultimately reduces itself. . . Thus, economy of time, along with the planned distribution of labour time among the various branches of production, remains the first economic law on the basis of communal production. It becomes law, there, to an even higher degree. However, this is essentially different from a measurement of exchange values (labour or products) by labour time. (51)

The Fundamental Principles played a role in council-communist discussions up until the 1970s, but mostly as a background text, since authors used ideas from it without mentioning their source. (52)

Scholarly research

Study of the history, theory and practice of council communism has developed in a very uneven way. (53) Researchers have shown interest above all in the writings and biographies of the theorists who played a role in council communism. We have at least three monographs on Anton Pannekoek, plus an unpublished doctoral thesis (54) Herman Gorter was the subject of first a partial and then a complete biography. (55) No one has yet written a life of Otto Rühle, but there are a few good analyses of his political and theoretical development. (56) Works have also been published on some less prominent council communists (such as Sylvia Pankhurst and Jim Dawson). There has still been no thorough monograph on Paul Mattick, however. (57) Several anthologies of writings by council-communist theoreticians, particularly by Pannekoek and Gorter, but also by Rühle, Mattick and Willi Huhn, have been published since the late 1960s. (58) Pannekoek's extensive memoirs are also available in book form, (59) while later council communists put their memories down on paper as well or were interviewed at length. (60) Works by Appel, Gorter, Pannekoek and others have been republished. A complete edition of Karl Korsch's writings and correspondence, necessarily giving considerable attention to his council-communist tendencies, has reached an advanced stage. (61) Good bibliographical overviews have been compiled for a number of important council communists. (62)

By now, we are also well provided with works on the narrative history of council communism as a movement. The history of the German organisations has been studied by Hans Manfred Bock, who not only wrote a standard work on the tumultuous events of 1918-23, (63) but also reconstructed the later development of the movement up until the early 1970s. (64) Philippe Bourrinet has described in detail the development of the Dutch movement (and its interaction with the German movement). (65) Mark Shipway has studied council-communist influence in Britain (Sylvia Pankhurst, Guy Aldred and others). (66)

While a good deal is thus known by now about council communism, there is still a dearth of thorough analyses. Some attention has been paid to the council communists' views on capitalist breakdown and the council system, but their theoretical contributions merit more serious study. (67) The Fundamental Principles, for example, have so far barely been subject to any discussion. Second, historical-materialist analysis of the current is still in its infancy. The application of Marxist analysis to Marxism itself, once advocated by Karl Korsch, is very much underdeveloped in this respect. Even the basic building blocks for an analysis are still lacking. There is, for instance, still no good overview of the KAPD's history from its founding to its disappearance. On this point, we must be content with fragments. (68) Virtually nothing is

known about the practical and organisational functioning of the KAPD, its sister organisations and successors. We also know little about its social implantation and the sociology of its supporters. (69) My impression is, for example, that the unemployed were very much over-represented among council communists of the 1920s and 1930s, but there is still no way to test this hypothesis empirically. A comparative historical study explaining why council communism became influential chiefly in Germany, while Dutch intellectuals who were marginal in their own country acquired such a disproportionate political weight in the movement, is equally to be hoped for.

Results

Strict followers of council-communist doctrines are few in number today. It is difficult to draw up a balance sheet. Council communism was briefly a mass phenomenon in the early 1920s, and really took on its own distinctive identity only when the KAPD was already in decline - one could consider it a product of the German Revolution's defeat. The rise of National Socialism was the coup de grâce for an already much weakened movement. After the Second World War, council communism remained a very marginal current among left-wing intellectuals for many years, although it acquired some influence in the international protest movements of the late 1960s and 1970s.

Council communism's enduring influence seems to me to be mainly indirect. On the one hand, the movement has made a real contribution from a non-anarchist perspective to systematic suspicion of all 'bureaucrats' in the workers' movement. On the other hand, it has shown just as systematically how forms of autonomously organised workers' resistance continually manifest themselves anew. Its influence was visible, for example, in the *Socialisme ou Barbarie* group of Cornelius Castoriadis, Claude Lefort and others, and even in currents that did not have a positive evaluation of council-oriented thinking, such as the workerism [operaismo] of Sergio Bologna, Antonio Negri, Karl Heinz Roth and others.

What remain of council communism concretely are mainly texts - texts that often seem quite dogmatic and one-sided, with a definite male bias and Eurocentric focus. Yet these texts nonetheless contain insights and warnings that we should not forget. (70)

Translated by Peter Drucker

Footnotes:

1. Thanks to Cajo Brendel, Götz Langkau and the editors of this journal for their comments on earlier versions of this paper.
2. See Riechers 1973, Montaldi 1975, Prat 1984.
3. Kool 1970, p. 575.
4. Horner 1919, p. 495.
5. Herman Gorter responded to Lenin in his Open Letter to Comrade Lenin (Gorter 1989 [1920]). See also De Liagre Böhl 1978.
6. Lenin 1920, pp. 21-2.
7. Bock 1993, p. 239.
8. The issue of wage demands played a central role in the Split. The Essen current argued that it was counterrevolutionary to continue demanding higher wages. Since capitalism was an its deathbed, economic demands could only delay the old society's end. It was time to fight for a complete conquest of power, for control over society as a whole. The Berlin current continued, by contrast, to stress the importance of wage demands, because workers badly needed higher wages in a time of high inflation.
9. Bock 1993, pp. 319-20.
10. Rühle 1920a.
11. Rühle 1920b.
12. See Ihlau 1969.
13. Brendel 1974, p. 259.
14. Canne Meijer 1934.
15. Wagner 1934. In 1936-7, in exile in Switzerland, Wagner expanded his 'Theses' into an extensive unpublished manuscript an 'The Foundations of Bolshevik Power Politics: A Contribution to a Sociology of Bolshevism'. He published parts of his manuscript under the pseudonym Rudolf Sprenger. See, for example, Sprenger 1940.
16. Bonacchi 1977, Dingel 1981.
17. This publication began publication in 1934, originally as chiefly an English-language version of the GIC periodical *Rätekorrespondenz*. It was renamed *Living Marxism* in 1938 and *New Essays* in 1942. It ceased publication in 1943. In 1970, Greenwood Press published a facsimile reprint.
18. Wright 1980.
19. Published in Paris by Seuil in 1968.
20. The Dutch council-communist veteran Cajo Brendel wrote to me (12 December 2001): 'In the last five years I've witnessed the emergence of council-communist groups with journals of their own in Berlin, Lübeck, Hamburg, Freiburg,

Bad Salzung, Cologne, Duisburg and Oberhausen.... In addition there are also council-communist groups in France, the US and Canada. Not to mention Spain, Italy and Greece'. Moreover, I should mention the International Communist Current, a very small international tendency of French origin, which is not strictly speaking council-communist, but which has a broad affiliation.

21. Grossman 1929.

22. Bonacchi 1977, pp. 57-64.

23. Mattick 1969, p. 130.

24. Mattick 1969, p. 154; see also p. 118.

25. Mattick 1969, p. 160.

26. Mattick 1976, pp. 232-3.

27. Mattick 1976, pp. 232-3

28. Mattick 1976, p. 237.

29. Mattick 1969, p. 131.

30. Gorter 1978, p. 170.

31. Bock 1990.

32. Pannekoek 1982, p. 215.

33. Kool 1978. The expression originated with the Dutch revolutionary trade-union leader and parliamentarian Henk Sneevliet (1883-1942).

34. Rühle 1975, p. 141. Partly due to the influence of his wife Alice Gerstel, Rühle saw a logical connection between the pedagogical Marxism he propagated and Alfred Adler's Individualpsychologie, in which the quest for integral consciousness of the self was also central. Rühle devoted much of the rest of his life to developing this idea further. See Kutz 1991 and Schoch 1995. Many council communists had little use for Rühle's pedagogical turn. Mattick's judgement was: 'This part of Rühle's activity, whether one evaluates it positively or negatively, has little, if anything, to do with the problems that beset the German proletariat' (Mattick 1978, pp. 110-11).

35. Pannekoek 1948, p. 77.

36. Lenins book had been published in 1909 in Russian. The first translation (in German) was published in 1927.

37. Pannekoek 1948, p. 61. Gorter and Pannekoek saw the book *Das Wesen der menschlichen Kopfarbeit* (1869) by the German working-class philosopher Eugen Dietzgen (1818-88) as a crucial contribution to the development of Marxist theory. Brendel 1970, pp. 140-2; Bock 1992; De Liagre Böhl 1996, pp. 252-4.

38. Pannekoek 1948, pp. 68-9.

39. Korsch (1938) sided more or less with Pannekoek. A critical reaction (pointing among other things to the 'mechanical link' that Pannekoek makes between materialist philosophy and revolutionary practice) can be found in [Bourrinetl 2001, pp. 256-65.

40. Hölz was arrested in 1921, Plättner early in 1922. Hölz soon afterwards became an 'orthodox' Communist; he died in 1933 in suspicious circumstances in the Soviet Union. Plättner died in a German concentration camp shortly before the Allies liberated it. Bock 1993, pp. 308-18 and pp. 328-33, Gebhardt 1983, Giersich and Kramer 2000, Ullrich 2000, Berghauer 2001.

41. Karasek 1980, Jassies 2000.

42. Sirach 1933, p. 16.

43. Leichter 1923, Polányi 1922.

44. Appel 1990. On Appel's biography, see Van den Berg 2001.

45. Not all council communists were enthusiastic about the Fundamental Principles. Anton Pannekoek found it at first 'rather utopian, unreal' (Pannekoek, 1982, p. 215).

46. Appel 1990, p. 147.

47. The Principles allow for the possibility that 'in the early stages of a Communist society, it may at first be necessary that various intellectual occupations be remunerated at a higher level; that, for instance, 40 hours of labour gives the right to 80 or 120 hours of product... At the beginning of the Communist form of society this could indeed be a just measure, if for instance the means of higher education were not available to everyone free of charge, because society is not yet sufficiently thoroughly organised on the new basis. As soon, however, as these matters have been ordered, then there can no longer be any question of giving the intellectual professions a larger share in the social product', Appel 1990, pp. 56-7.

48. Appel 1990, pp. 94-5.

49. Appel 1990, pp. 97-8.

50. Appel 1990, p. 100.

51. Marx 1973, p. 173.

52. See, for example, Mattick 1968, in the chapter on 'value and socialism', or Castoriadis 1984, p. 330: '[Economic calculation in an autonomous society] ought to be carried out on the basis of the time spent working'. Castoriadis

defended this position as early as 1957, after he had been in contact with Dutch council communists for a number of years. See also Seifert 1983.

53. Archives of most of the important council communists are to be found at the International Institute of Social History in Amsterdam, including, among others, the papers of Canne Meijer, Huhn, Korsch, Mattick, Pannekoek, Pankhurst and Rühle. Extensive information is available at <www.iisg.nl/archives>.

54. Brendel 1970, Malandrino 1987, Gerber 1989, Boekelman 1980.

55. De Liagre Böhl 1973, 1996.

56. Franck 1951, Herrmann 1972-3, Mergner 1973, Jacoby and Herbst 1985.

57. On Dawson, see Wright 1980. Much has been written about the twists and turns in Pankhurst's life. The most useful works for our purposes seem to be Franchini 1980, Winslow 1996.

58. Bock 1969, Bricianer 1969/1978, Huhn 1973, Kool 1970, Mattick 1978, Mergner 1971, Rademakers 1970, Pannekoek 1972, Rühle 1971a, 1971b, Smart 1978. Many texts are now also available on the internet. See, for example, <www.kurasje.tripod.com>, or <www.left-dis.nl>.

59. Pannekoek 1976

60. Brendel 1974b, Jacoby 1982, Buckmiller 1976

61. Korsch 1980ff.

62. Buckmiller 1973, 1981; Provedi 1978; Boekelman 1980, pp. 368-484; Herbst and Klemm 1986.

63. Bock 1993.

64. Bock 1976.

65. [Bourrinet] 2001. Incidentally, this 'pirate edition of the book contains a great many minor mistakes and inaccuracies. A new corrected and updated 'authorised' edition will be published in 2005/6 in the Historical Materialism book series with Brill Academic Press.

66. Shipway 1988.

67. Marramao 1975-6, 1976, Pelino 1976, Villari 1977. See also Glaser 1997.

68. Reichenbach 1928, 1994, Rutigliano 1974, Bock 1977.

69. But see Bock 1976, pp. 93-8.

70. In addition to the literature already mentioned, I would like to refer to, for example, Willi Huhn's publications about the German workers' movement (Huhn 1952) and Cajo Brendel's publications on Spain from the 1930s to the 1970s and an 'autonomous class struggles in England, 1945-1972' (Brendel 1974a, 1977).

COUNCIL COMMUNIST THEORY [1] Peter J. Rachleff - 1976

Council communism emerged theoretically and politically in Germany and Holland in the 1920's as a distinct alternative to the Leninist theory of revolution and its political practice, both in Russia and internationally, through the Third International. Their theories were derived initially from their experiences in the movement for workers' councils in the abortive German Revolution of 1918 and in the early years of the Weimar Republic as well as their study of the council (or "soviet") movement in Russia during the revolutionary periods of 1905 and 1917. [1] Councilist theory did not emerge full blown, but developed over the next several decades, based on an increasingly refined critique of the Leninist experience in Russia and internationally, as well as a fuller understanding of the process of proletarian revolution and a clearer conception of the nature of a communist society. A clear thread throughout these notions is an adherence to the methods and spirit of Marx's analysis of capitalism and the nature of proletarian revolution, maintaining above all else that "the emancipation of the working class is the task of the workers themselves." [2] A fundamental notion of council communism is that the means and ends of the revolutionary process are inextricably intertwined, that the course of the revolution inevitably determines the nature of the new society itself. Thus, the organizational forms that they discuss as appropriate for the process of the revolution are also considered to provide the organizational bases of the new society.

It should be emphasized that the councilists did not seek to *impose* in theory or in practice an organizational form on the workers' movement. They initially stressed the "council" form because they saw it as the spontaneous creation of the working class in its struggle against capitalism. [3] Their primary loyalty remained with the self emancipation of the working class in whatever form it might take. Pannekoek made this quite clear in an article he wrote towards the end of his life.

"Workers' councils" does not designate a fixed form of organization, elaborated once and for all and for which all that remains is to perfect its details; it concerns a principle, that of workers' self management of the enterprise and of production. The realization of this principle can never occur through a theoretical discussion concerning the best means of execution. It is a question of the practical struggle against the apparatus of capitalist domination. From our time, one does not understand at all by "workers' councils" a fraternal association having an end in itself; "workers' councils," this means to say the class struggle, (where fraternity has a part), revolutionary action against the power of the State. Revolutions are not made on command, this is evident; they surge spontaneously, when the situation becomes intolerable, in moments of crisis. They are born only if the sentiment of intolerability affirms itself constantly in the heart of the masses, at the same time that a certain homogeneous consciousness of what it is necessary to do appears . . .

Thus, the idea of "workers' councils" has nothing in common with a program of practical realizations to put to work tomorrow or next year it only concerns a connecting thread for the long and hard struggle of emancipation that the working class has still before it. [4]

It was never the intention of the council communist movement to create a new ideology concerning the organizational forms of the class struggle. Rather, in the finest Marxist tradition, they sought to comprehend the self emancipatory movement of the working class, to elucidate it theoretically, and to further it practically. It is through their adherence to the notion of self emancipation that they sought to criticize all organizational forms which hindered this process and to demonstrate theoretically the potentiality of self emancipation and the creation of a new society based on "the free and equal association of the producers."

Initially, councilist theory grew out of the opposition to Bolshevism on the part of some German and Dutch communists in the early 1920's. The critique of the Russian Revolution was undertaken to demonstrate the inapplicability of the Bolshevik model of revolution to advanced capitalist countries. In 1920, Herman Gorter, the Dutch poet and communist, responded in the form of an open letter to Lenin's pamphlet, *Left Wing Communism, An Infantile Disorder*, which was, in effect, an attempt on the part of the Russian leader to impose the Bolshevik models of

organization and revolutionary activity on the communist parties of western Europe, to tighten his control over both his own party in Russia (in the face of increasing internal dissension) and over the international revolutionary movement. Gorter argued that the concrete differences between Russia and western Europe the social situation and revolutionary potentials of various classes, particularly the proletariat and the peasantry due to the differences in historical development and level of development of mode of production, was such as to militate against the generalization of tactics from one society to another.^[5] In particular, Gorter objected to the notions advanced by Lenin concerning: 1) the relationship of leaders to the masses; 2) trade union activity; 3) parliamentary activity. Gorter did not reject leadership per se, but rather took exception to Lenin's position on the relationship that he proposed should exist between leaders and masses.^[6] Gorter argued that the development of western Europe necessitated greater emphasis on the role of the masses themselves.

To the degree that the importance of the class increases, the importance of leaders decreases in proportion. This is not to say that we should not have the best leaders possible: the best among the best are not yet good enough and we are trying to find them. This means only that in comparison with the importance of the masses, that of the leaders decreases Have you not remarked, Comrade Lenin, that there aren't any "great" leaders in Germany? They are all ordinary men. This already shows that this revolution ought to be in the first place the work of the masses and not the leaders^[7]

Gorter saw the role of the vanguard being primarily one of "propaganda by the deed" as opposed to strict leadership and control of the masses by the party. He refers to "the formation . . . of a group who shows in their struggles what the masses ought to do."^[8] He sums up his rejection of Lenin's notion "in one word because you present a leadership politics."^[9]

Gorter also objects to Lenin's demand that the western European left should engage in trade union and parliamentary activity. Lenin's belief in the value of such activity was attacked by Gorter who responded that "you want to stifle the organizations in which the workers, each worker, and by consequence the mass, can attain strength and power, and you want to preserve those in which the mass is a dead instrument in the hands of the leaders."^[10] Both trade unionism and parliamentary activity encourage passivity on the part of the working class, thus hindering the development of mass initiative and revolutionary class consciousness. Gorter cites Pannekoek on this matter:

The tactical problem consists in finding the means of extirpating the traditional bourgeois mentality which dominates the masses and weakens their forces. Everything which further reinforces the traditional conception is negative. The most solid aspect, the most tenacious part of this mentality is, precisely, their dependence vis a vis leaders, to whom they abandon the solution of all general questions, the direction of their class interests.^[11]

Gorter summarizes his position thusly:

1. The tactic of the Western revolution must be entirely other than that of the Russian Revolution;
2. Because the proletariat is here all alone;
3. The proletariat must thus here make the revolution alone against all the classes ,
4. The importance of the proletarian masses is thus relatively greater, that of the leaders less than in Russia;
5. And the proletariat must have better arms for the revolution;
6. As the unions are defective arms, it is necessary to suppress them or radically change them, and put in their place factory organizations, united in a general organization;
7. As the proletariat must make the revolution alone, and not rely on any help, it must raise its consciousness and courage to great heights. And it is referable to ignore parliamentarism in the revolution.^[12]

Despite his rejection of Lenin's notions or, rather, orders Gorter avoids attacking Lenin directly or questioning the class nature of the Russian Revolution and the developments in Russia since 1917. He appeals to Lenin to reconsider his position. Gorter differentiates himself from those who have already become bitter opponents of Lenin and the Third International, having seen the latter organization as a tool for strengthening the Bolshevik state apparatus. Rather, Gorter believes that Lenin is merely wrong in his assessment of the situation and can be made to see the error of his ways, writing: "As for me, I think, as I have said all along, that you

misunderstood the European situation."[\[13\]](#) This somewhat naive position was soon abandoned by the councilist group as a whole. The slaughter at Kronstadt, the suppression of the Workers' Opposition, and other events soon made apparent the repressive nature of the Russian state.[\[14\]](#) The councilists turned their attention toward an understanding of the class nature of the Russian Revolution, the nature of Leninist politics, and the philosophical foundations of Leninism, in an effort to criticize and fight against everything that stood in the way of the self emancipation of the working class.

The critique of Bolshevism in Russia

In December 1934, *International Council Correspondence* translated and printed the councilist "Theses on Bolshevism," an in depth analysis of the Russian Revolution, written by the Dutch group. This was not primarily a vindictive essay against Lenin and the Bolshevik Party. Rather, it was argued that the party had merely carried out the tasks necessitated by the historical development of Russia.[\[15\]](#)

The economic task of the Russian Revolution was, first, the setting aside of the concealed agrarian feudalism and its continued exploitation of the peasants as serfs, together with the industrialization of agriculture, placing it on the plane of modern commodity production; secondly, to make possible the unrestrained creation of a class of really "free laborers," liberating the industrial development from all its feudal fetters. Essentially, the tasks of the bourgeois revolution.[\[16\]](#)

These socio economic conditions necessitated certain political behavior, i.e., an attack on specific socio political institutions. Here, too, however, the bourgeois nature of the revolution asserted itself.

Politically, the tasks confronting the Russian Revolution were. the destruction of absolutism, the abolition of the feudal nobility as the first estate, and the creation of a political constitution and an administrative apparatus which would secure politically the fulfillment of the economic tasks of the Revolution. The political tasks of the Russian Revolution were, therefore, quite in accord with its economic presuppositions, the tasks of the bourgeois revolution.[\[17\]](#)

However, the peculiar historical development of Russia "peculiar" in relation to western Europe, that is necessitated that someone other than the bourgeoisie carry through the revolution.

The first class characteristic of the Russian Revolution is, therefore, the fact that as a bourgeois revolution it had to be carried through not only without but directly against the bourgeoisie. Thus arose a fundamental alteration of its whole political character. [\[18\]](#)

So, despite their characterization of the Russian Revolution as a "bourgeois" revolution, in no way did the councilists mean to imply that it was of the same nature as the bourgeois revolutions which had occurred in western Europe some 100 300 years earlier, although it served the same function. For them, the crucial feature of the Russian pre revolutionary social structure was the vast size of the peasantry.[\[19\]](#) Because of their sheer numbers alone, the peasants exerted a tremendous influence on the course of the revolution. "In conformity with their over whelming majority, the peasants became the social group which at least passively determined the Russian Revolution."[\[20\]](#) The semi feudal nature of their exploitation forced the revolution into an anti feudal, rather than anti capitalist, direction.

This is not, however, to deny or minimize the role played by the Russian proletariat.

In spite of its backwardness, the Russian proletariat possessed great fighting strength, due to the merciless schooling of the combined Czarist and capitalist oppression. It threw itself with enormous tenacity into the actions of the Russian bourgeois revolution and became its sharpest and most reliable instrument.[\[21\]](#)

Indeed, the activity of the Russian proletariat was the most striking feature of the February Revolution and the period between February and October.[\[22\]](#)

The social circumstances which determined the consciousness of the proletariat and the peasantry were so different that it is hard to imagine their developing on their own a common basis for struggle and social reorganization. One would expect to see, rather, bitter conflict between these classes. However, a group emerged which was able to unite these classes under a common banner, a revolution based on "land, bread, and peace." This group which came to

exert leadership and exercise power developed out of neither class, but was the product of the unique historical development of Russian society. "The best forces of the Russian intelligentsia stood in the forefront of the revolutionary movement, and by their leadership imprinted upon it a petty bourgeois, jacobinal stamp."[\[23\]](#) However, although this group the Bolsheviks united the revolutionary forces and led them, they themselves were led by the necessity of the historical tasks confronting them. That is, in order to succeed, to have wide enough support to seize power and wield it, they had to articulate the needs and desires of the bulk of the population i.e., above all, the peasants.[\[24\]](#) Regardless of any subjective desires to the contrary, the Bolsheviks became the instrument of the bourgeois revolution in Russia.

But the seizure of state power by the Bolsheviks did not give to the Revolution the spirit of Lenin; on the contrary, Lenin had so completely adapted himself to the necessities of the revolution that, practically, he fulfilled the tasks of that class he ostensibly combatted.[\[25\]](#)

Thus, the Russian Revolution was analyzed by the councilists as a bourgeois revolution, circumscribed by the peasantry, sparked by the proletariat, and led by the Bolsheviks. It was primarily anti feudal in character, and immediately set about the process of industrializing and developing capitalism in Russia, although of a unique variety, i.e., "state capitalism."[\[26\]](#) The councilists observed this development with great interest, and sought to analyze it in depth in order to learn from it.[\[27\]](#) The Russian state never "withered away," growing in fact more powerful both domestically and internationally. From the vantage point of the proletariat, this was but another form of capitalism. Russian workers still lived by selling their labor power and still had no control over the means of production. Moreover, the Bolshevik state apparatus took on totalitarian features, suppressing all forms of opposition and all potential threats to their power. Such behavior began under Lenin [\[28\]](#) and was carried to its logical conclusion by Stalin. The councilists analyzed these developments, criticized them, and argued in favor of the struggle against them as part of the international struggle for socialism. In September 1939, in "The Struggle Against Fascism Begins with the Struggle Against Bolshevism," it was argued that:

Russia must be placed first among the totalitarian states. It was the first to adopt the new state principle. It went furthest in its application. It was the first to establish a constitutional dictatorship, together with the political and administrative terror system which goes with it. Adopting all the features of the total state, it thus becomes the model for those other countries which were forced to do away with the democratic state system and to change to dictatorial rule. Russia was the example for fascism.[\[29\]](#)

In sum,

nationalism, authoritarianism, centralism, leader dictatorship, power politics, terror rule, mechanistic dynamics, inability to socialize all these essential characteristics of fascism were and are existing in Bolshevism. Fascism is merely a copy of Bolshevism. For this reason the struggle against the one must begin with the struggle against the other.[\[30\]](#)

Not only did the domestic policy of the Bolshevik state have nothing to do with socialism,[\[31\]](#) but it was apparent that the Third International was but a tool in the hands of the Russian Communist Party in their efforts to consolidate and maintain their power, rather than a means for facilitating world revolution through the self emancipation of the working class. "In light of the immediate needs of the bolshevik regime and the political ideas of its leaders, the Communist International was not the beginning of a new workers' movement, but simply an effort to gain control of the old movement and use it to defend the Bolshevik regime in Russia."[\[32\]](#) Thus, "Bolshevism is not only unserviceable as a directive for the revolutionary policy of the international proletariat, but is one of its heaviest and most dangerous impediments."[\[33\]](#)

However, the councilist analysis and critique of Bolshevism did not stop here. Pannekoek undertook a detailed study of Lenin's philosophy, in an effort to understand the bases of Bolshevik ideology, and to demonstrate further its inapplicability for the developed capitalist countries of western Europe.[\[34\]](#) This critique took the form of an analysis of Lenin's *Materialism and Empiriocriticism*, which had been written in opposition to a group of Russian "Marxists" who had become interested in the philosophical theories of Mach and Avenarius. Pannekoek stresses that the point of Lenin's book was not to present and analyze the ideas of

Mach and Avenerius, but to attack them in such a way as to remove the threat to his ideological hegemony within the party.

Mach and Avenerius formed a danger for the Party; hence what mattered was not to find out what was true and valuable in their teachings in order to widen our own views. What mattered was to discredit them, to destroy their reputation . . . [35]

Pannekoek first analyzes the ideas of these other philosophers himself, and then shows how Lenin has misrepresented and misinterpreted them. This systematic misrepresentation is attacked by Pannekoek, who firmly believes that the proletariat must be allowed to consider all questions practical and theoretical on its own. He therefore favors the making available of all points of view, so that workers are enabled to decide for themselves what ideas and theories have value and which do not. Here we clearly see the contra position of councilist libertarianism to Leninist authoritarianism. [36]

Pannekoek proceeds to consider the very nature of Lenin's philosophy itself. He discovers and demonstrates that Lenin's philosophical notions are akin to those of bourgeois materialism.

To Lenin nature and physical matter are identical, the name matter has the same meaning as objective world. In this way he agrees with middle class materialism that in the same way considers matter as the real substance of the world.

. . . for Lenin, "nature" consists not only in matter but also in natural laws directing its behavior, floating somehow in the world as commanders who must be obeyed by the things. Hence to deny the objective existence of these laws means to him the denial of nature itself; to make man the creator of natural laws means to him to make human mind the creator of the world. [37]

The distance between Lenin and Marx is thus clear. Pannekoek points out that the meaning of matter for revolutionary Marxism was that:

man's ideas quite as certainly belong to objective reality as the tangible objects; things spiritual constitute the real world just as things called material in physics. If in our science, needed to direct our activity, we wish to render the entire world of experience, the concept of physical matter does not suffice; we need more and other concepts: energy, mind, consciousness. [38]

Lenin failed to understand both Marx and the reality of the world, being "entirely captivated by the fetishism of forces as causes, as a kind of working imps." [39]

Pannekoek finds not only the similarity with bourgeois materialism in Lenin's conception of matter and nature, [40] but also in the objectives of Lenin's polemic. Rather than attacking idealism as Marx's revolutionary materialism did (e.g. *The German Ideology*), Lenin attacked religion and fideism. "This oppositeness of religion to reason is a reminiscence from pre Marxian times, from the emancipation of the middle class appealing to 'reason' in order to attack religious faith as the chief enemy in the social struggle." [41] It thus becomes clear that Lenin's philosophy, rather than being the representation of the working class in its anti capitalist struggle, is closely connected to the historical situation in Russia, that of the battle against feudalism and for the bourgeois revolution. [42]

Thus the proletarian class struggle in Russia was at the same time a struggle against Czarist absolutism, under the banner of socialism. So Marxism in Russia, developing as the theory of those engaged in the social conflict, necessarily assumed another character than in Western Europe. It was the theory of a fighting working class; but this class had to first fight, and foremost, for what in Western Europe had been the function and work of the bourgeoisie, with the intellectuals as its associates. [43]

However, Pannekoek, once again in the best Marxist fashion, stresses that Lenin and Bolshevism must not be attacked on a personal level (for elitism, betrayal of the working class, etc.) but have to be understood on the basis of the social situation in which they struggled.

Lenin never knew real Marxism. Whence should he have taken it? Capitalism he knew only as colonial capitalism; social revolution he knew only as the annihilation of big land ownership and Czarist despotism. Russian Bolshevism cannot be reproached for having abandoned the way of Marxism; for it was never on that way. Every page of Lenin's philosophical work is there to prove it; and Marxism itself, by its thesis that theoretical opinions are determined by social relations and necessities, makes clear that it could not be otherwise. Marxism, however, at the same time shows the necessity of the legend; every middle class

revolution, requiring working class and peasant support, needs the illusion that it is something different, larger, and more universal. [44]

Through this many faceted analysis, the councilists demonstrated that the Russian Revolution was a form of bourgeois revolution rather than a socialist revolution. [45] They recognized and argued that Bolshevism could not play a progressive role in proletarian struggles in the developed countries. The policies of the Third International could, therefore, only be a hindrance to the developing socialist struggle in the advanced capitalist countries.

The Third International aims at a world revolution after the model of the Russian Revolution and with the same goal. The Russian economic system is State capitalism, there called state socialism or even communism, with production directed by a state bureaucracy under the leadership of the Communist Party. The state officials, forming the new ruling class, have the disposal over the product, hence over the surplus value, whereas the workers receive wages only, thus forming an exploited class

According to CP ideas, a similar revolution is needed in the capitalist countries, with the working class again as the active power, leading to the overthrow of the bourgeoisie and the organization of production by a state bureaucracy. The Russian Revolution could be victorious only because a well disciplined united bolshevist party led the masses, and because in the party the clear insight and unyielding assurance of Lenin and his friends showed the right way. Thus, in the same way, in world revolution, the workers have to follow the CP, leave to it the lead and afterwards the government; and the party members have to obey their leaders in rigid discipline. Essential are the qualified capable party leaders, the proficient, experienced revolutionaries; what is necessary for the masses is the belief that the party and its leaders are right. [46]

The councilist objection to this policy is not based on moral or ethical criteria (i.e., anti elitism), but is firmly grounded in the historical reality of western Europe and America. [47] There, the task of the working class is quite different from the task in Russia.

In reality, for the working class of developed capitalism, in Western Europe and America, matters are entirely different, Its task is not the overthrow of a backward absolutist monarchy. Its task is to vanquish a ruling class commanding the mightiest material and spiritual forces the world has ever known. Its object cannot be to replace the domination of stockjobbers and monopolists over a disorderly production by the domination of state officials over a production regulated from above, Its object is to be itself master of production and itself to regulate labor, the basis of life, Only then is capitalism really destroyed. Such an aim cannot be attained by an ignorant mass, confident followers of a party presenting itself as expert leadership. It can be attained only if the workers themselves, the entire class, understand the conditions, ways, and means of their fights when every man knows from his own judgment what to do. They must, every man of them, act themselves, decide de themselves, hence think out and know for themselves. [48]

For the council communists, therefore, Leninism is antithetical to the self emancipation of the working class and thus must be opposed theoretically and practically by all genuine radicals in the developed countries. The total critique of Leninism is well grounded in Marx, in terms of theory and practice. In 1879, Marx and Engels wrote to Babel, Liebknecht, and others:

When the International was formed we expressly formulated the battle cry: the emancipation of the working class must be the work of the working class itself. We cannot, therefore, cooperate with people who openly state that the workers are too uneducated to emancipate themselves. [49]

It is this principle which was foremost in the minds of the councilists at all times and guided their theory and practice. Thus, they opposed all forms of political activity and all organizations which hindered the development of mass self reliance and self confidence. They developed extensive critiques of the modes of political activity engaged in by most "letists." [50]

Trade unionism and parliamentary activity.

Although most "radicals" recognized that trade unions in themselves were not revolutionary, they felt that they could be used to further the development of "revolutionary consciousness," particularly through the diffusion of radical propaganda by their leaders. If this was not the case and if often was not the blame was placed on the union leaders, who were

"betraying" their class and need only be replaced by more radical leaders. The councilists, however, developed a far more fundamental critique of trade unions, demonstrating that the important question was not that of the behavior of the union leaders but of the very structure of the unions and the relationship between the unions and the development of capitalism.

The councilists emphasized that trade union activity in itself, although it did represent a form of class struggle, had no intentions or possibilities of becoming revolutionary, i.e., of aiding in the selfemancipation of the working class.

Trade unionism is an action of the workers which does not go beyond the limits of capitalism. Its aim is not to replace capitalism by another form of production, but to secure good living conditions within capitalism.

Certainly trade union activity is class struggle. There is a class antagonism in capitalism capitalists and workers have opposing interests. Not only in the question of the conservation of capitalism, but also within capitalism itself, with regard to the division of the total product. The capitalists attempt to increase their profits, the surplus value, as much as possible, by cutting down wages and increasing the hours or the intensity of labor. On the other hand, the workers attempt to increase their wages and to shorten their hours of work Thus the antagonism becomes the object of a contest, the real class struggle. It is the task, the function of the trade unions to carry on this fight. [51]

However, the ability of trade unions to function for the benefit of the workers in the long run, in terms of the proletarian revolution, is negligible. In fact, they become a hindrance to the working class struggle (even on a daily basis) and lose all efficacy for the development of revolutionary consciousness. As the unions develop along with capitalism they lose any value they might have had in earlier periods and become just another obstacle in the path to self emancipation.

With the growth of capitalism and big industry, the unions too must grow. They become big corporations with thousands of members, extending over the whole country Officials must be appointed: presidents, secretaries, treasurers, to conduct the affairs, to manage the finances, locally and centrally. They are the leaders, who negotiate with the capitalists and who, by this practice, have acquired a special skill. The president of a union is a big shot, as big as the capitalist employer himself, and he discusses with him on equal terms, the interests of the members. The officials are specialists in trade union work, which the members themselves, entirely occupied by their factory work, cannot judge or direct themselves. [52]

Thus, a division of labor within the union structure itself develops, recreating and reinforcing the capitalist divisions between mental and manual labor. The workers lose control over their organization, delegating their own powers to the union officials. Many "radicals" have argued that this situation in itself need not be bad, especially if the union leaders are "radical." The councilists, however, recognized that this recapitulation of the division between mental and manual labor was already a large step in the wrong direction. Moreover, the ideology of union leaders makes no difference. Pannekoek, relying on Marx's notion that consciousness is determined by social existence, demonstrates that the behavior of union leaders must not be off handedly condemned as "betrayal" but must be understood as a concomitant of the social functions they perform.

The union officials, the labor leaders, are the bearers of the special union interests. Originally workmen from the shop, they acquire, by long practice at the head of the organization, a new social character. In each social group, once it is big enough to form a special group, the nature of its work molds its social character, its mode of thinking and acting. Their function is entirely different from that of the workers. They do not work in the shop, they are not exploited by capitalists, their existence is not threatened continually by unemployment. They sit in offices, in fairly secure positions. They have to manage corporation affairs and to speak at workers' meetings and discuss with employers. [53]

The union officials identify with the interests and functions of the unions. Rather than becoming the leaders of proletarian revolutionary class struggle, therefore, they become agents of capitalist social control, which has become the primary function of trade unions in developed capitalism.

The labor leaders in advanced capitalism are numerous enough to form a special group or class with a special class character and interests. As representatives and leaders of the unions

they embody the character and interests of the unions. The unions are necessary elements of capitalism, so the leaders feel as necessary items, as most useful citizens in capitalist society. This capitalist function of unions is to regulate class conflicts and to secure industrial peace. So labor leaders see it as their duty as citizens to work for industrial peace and mediate conflicts. The test of the union lies entirely within capitalism; so labor leaders do not look beyond it. [54]

Pannekoek emphasizes, as the councilists did in every matter that they analyzed, that "the conflicts arising here are not anyone's fault, they are inevitable consequences of capitalistic development." [55] Thus, the point is not to polemicize against the "betrayal" of the working class by union bureaucrats, or to seek their replacement by "radicals," [56] but to fight against the unions themselves and seek the creation of new structures and organizations which will allow for, if not encourage, mass self activity.

The councilists had no illusions here, however. They did not expect the workers to overthrow the unions because they failed to function as revolutionary organizations. Rather they recognized that as long as capitalism was expanding successfully the workers would remain within the union structures. [57] It is only when the workers find the unions incapable of protecting their immediate material interests that they will rebel against them. It is through new forms of struggle, spontaneously arising from the necessities of the struggle itself, that the workers will seek to act outside the union structure and will, of necessity, develop new forms of organization and activity. The sit down strikes of the 1930's were such a new form. "It was not Invented by theory; it arose spontaneously out of practical needs; theory can do no more than afterwards explain its causes and consequences." [58] Wildcat strikes, as well, directed against both capital and trade unions, are spontaneous forms of activity stemming from the practical necessities of the struggle. Although such strikes are usually limited In scope and are usually defeated,

their importance is that they demonstrate a fresh fighting spirit that cannot be suppressed . . . They are the harbingers of future greater fights, when great social emergencies, with heavier pressure and deeper distress, drive the masses to stronger action. [59]

The experience of solidarity and self management gained in such struggles is a crucial step in the direction of revolutionary consciousness, the understanding that the working class can on its own direct production and manage society collectively. Further, it is the experience that no one but fellow workers can be relied upon in times of struggle, that all activity must be autonomous and controlled from below by the workers as a collective unit. Thus, trade unionism will be defeated, not in theory by intellectuals, but in practice, by the workers in the course of struggling to attain their goals in the only possible way. This is a necessity of the proletarian struggle for self emancipation.

Bound to an expanding capitalism, totally integrated into the whole of the social fabric, the old labor movement can only stagnate with stagnating capitalism and decline with declining capitalism. It cannot divorce itself from capitalist society, unless it breaks completely with its own past, which is possible only by breaking up the old organizations, as far as they still exist . . . A rebirth of the labor movement is conceivable on as a rebellion of the masses against "their" organizations. [60]

Another form of political activity which many "radicals" have considered fruitful is parliamentary politics. Some have argued in favor of the "parliamentary path to socialism," i.e., electing socialists to the government who will then begin to institute socialism; others have argued that parliamentary election campaigns offer a good forum for socialist propaganda. [61] Some, too, have suggested seeking election to parliamentary offices and then, once in, trying to expose the sham of bourgeois democracy.

The council communists, on the other hand, have always maintained an anti parliamentary position. Again, this position grows out of their understanding of the obstacles and possibilities for proletarian self-emancipation in specific historical circumstances (advanced capitalism), rather than any abstract moral imperative. A major obstacle to the development of the revolutionary consciousness necessary for the selfemancipation of the working class is the strength of bourgeois Ideology, which is reinforced by parliamentary elections.

Capitalism is strengthened when its roots, by universal suffrage, securing at least political equality, are driven deeper into the working class. Workers' suffrage belongs to developed

capitalism, because the workers need the ballot, as well as trade unions, to maintain themselves in their function in capitalism. [62]

The notion that "socialism" can be introduced through the parliamentary process is obviously antithetical to the concept of socialism being the process and result of proletarian self emancipation. It is clear that "parliamentarism cannot bring freedom and mastery to the working class, but only new masters instead of the old ones." [63] Moreover, the nature of the activity involved in parliamentary politics can in no way help develop the strength necessary to overthrow the capitalist system.

The conquest of mastery and freedom by the working class will be a hard and difficult fight. It is by means of the exigencies of this fight, through its sacrifices, its hardships, its dangers, in defeat and victory, that the working class must acquire those qualities that make it strong and capable for self rule, for ruling society. Can simply putting secretly a name into a ballot box be called a fight at all? [64]

In parliamentary activity, the only strength which the working class is called upon to use is its numerical strength, "the least essential only of the power factors of the working class." [65] In no way is the sense of solidarity and ability to run society and production at all developed through such activity. Indeed, passivity as far as collective activity is concerned is encouraged by participation in such activity. [66] As for the parliamentary process or the parliament itself providing a forum for socialist propaganda by candidates or legislators, Pannekoek writes:

The insight needed [for revolution] cannot be obtained as instruction of an ignorant mass by learned teachers, possessors of science, as the pouring of knowledge into passive pupils. It can only be acquired by self education, by the strenuous self activity that strains the brain in felt desire to understand the world. It would be very easy for the working class if it had only to accept the established truth from those who know it. But the truth they need does not exist anywhere in the world outside them; they must build it up within themselves. [67]

In sum, then, any notion, any rationale, for engaging in parliamentary activity can only hinder the development of the strengths necessary for the destruction of the ideological hegemony of the bourgeoisie. As Gorter wrote to Lenin, who had advised taking part in such activity, "the worker must struggle alone with his class against the formidable enemy, must bring about the most terrible struggle which the world has ever seen. No leadership tactic can help this. [68]

The role of the Party

As for their own principles of organization and activity, the council communists presented a theoretical and practical alternative to Leninism. They totally rejected the Leninist party form of organization with its rigid centralism, hierarchy, strict obedience to leadership, and separation from the body of the working class.

The belief in parties is the main reason for the impotence of the working class; therefore, we avoid forming a new party not because we are too few, but because a party is an organization that aims to lead and control the working class. In opposition to this, we maintain that the working class can rise to victory only when it independently attacks its problems and decides its own fate. The workers should not blindly accept the slogans of others, nor of our own groups, but must think, act, and decide for themselves. This conception is in sharp contradiction to the tradition of the party as the most important means of educating the proletariat. [69]

The councilists further rejected the party structure because it recapitulated the capitalist division between mental and manual labor, between order givers and order takers. [70] With their emphasis on the importance of the connection between the means and ends of the class struggle, they recognized that socialism workers' self management of production and society cannot be achieved through a form of organization that hindered self emancipation. Rather than stimulating the capabilities of the workers, parties function to stifle them.

Such parties . . . must be rigid structures with clear lines of demarcation through membership cards, statutes, party discipline, and admission and expulsion procedures. For they are instruments of power they fight for power, bridle their members by force and constantly seek to extend the scope of their power. It is not their task to develop the initiative of the workers; rather do they aim at training loyal and unquestioning members of their faith. While

the working class in their struggle for power and victory needs unlimited intellectual freedom, the party rule must suppress all opinions except its own. [71]

The council communists recognized that building their own organization had little relevance to the goal of proletarian self emancipation. [72] Rather, they functioned as a group which shared a general common perspective and sought to clarify and publicize the issues of the class struggle. [73] However, they were uncertain of the efficacy of their propaganda, due to their conception of the nature of consciousness, i.e., determined by social existence in the sense that it arose spontaneously from the necessities of practical experience. Pannekoek himself often wavered on this very point, holding to different opinions at different times. [74] In the discussion of the role of the "party," he stated that:

The struggle is so great, the enemy so powerful, that only the masses as a whole can achieve a victory the result of the material and moral power of action, unity, and enthusiasm, but also the result of the mental force of thought, of clarity. In this lies the great importance of such parties or groups based on opinions: that they bring clarity In their conflicts, discussions, and propaganda. They are the organs of the self enlightenment of the working class by means of which the workers find their way to freedom. [75]

Whereas in *Workers' Councils* he holds to a rather different conception:

The great decisive step in the progress of mankind, the transformation of society now impending, is essentially a transformation of the working masses. It can be accomplished only by the action, by the revolt, by the effort of the masses themselves; its essential nature is selfliberation of mankind. From this viewpoint it is clear that here no able leadership of an Intellectual elite can be helpful. [76]

Nevertheless, Pannekoek never dismisses propaganda as useless, believing that at least keeping certain ideas in the air is worthwhile. Mattick maintains more closely the practical implications of the council communist and what appears to be Marx's conception of consciousness, recognizing the limitations of the effect of any propagandistic activity.

The "consciousness" to rebel against and to change society is not developed by the "propaganda" of conscious minorities, but by the real and direct propaganda of events; . . . So long as minorities operate within the mass, the mass is not revolutionary, but neither is the minority. Its "revolutionary conceptions" can still serve only capitalistic functions. If the masses become revolutionary, the distinction between conscious minority and unconscious majority disappears, and also the capitalistic function of the apparently "revolutionary" minority. [77]

All groups which have shared the councilist perspective have been caught on the horns of this dilemma. Although most have probably shared Mattick's theoretical analysis, they have refused to content themselves with either inactivity or internal discussion. Indeed, he has not himself carried out the implications of his position, but has engaged in considerable political activity and has written voluminously. Different councilist groups have sought to resolve this dilemma in different ways. Few have ever been satisfied with their tentative solutions. [78] Nevertheless, all have been united in their struggle for the self emancipation of the working class and their unwillingness to act as any kind of leadership in the Leninist sense, i.e., formulating policy and organizing to seize power.

The councilist alternative

The discussion so far in this chapter should have given some indication of how the councilists do see the revolution occurring, if only through the process of eliminating unsatisfactory theories. I would now like to turn to an explicit description of the councilist conception of the socialist revolution and the future free society.

One of the key notions of council communist theory is that of the necessity of severe crisis in order for there to be the possibility of a revolutionary situation. Drawing both from Marx's *Capital* and from their study of historical instances of mass upheaval, they concluded that only a crisis could force the working class into revolutionary activity.

Left wing radicalism had been based on what was designated by their reformist adversaries as the "politics of catas trophe." The revolutionists expected not only deteriorating living standards for the laboring population but also economic crises so devastating as to call forth social conditions which would, in the end, lead to revolution. They could not conceive of revolution short of its objective necessity. And in fact, no social revolution occurred except in

times of social and economic catastrophe. The revolutions released by World War I were the result of catastrophic conditions in the weaker imperialist powers and they raised, for the first time, the question of workers' control and the actualization of socialism as a real possibility. [79]

The councilists recognized that as Marx pointed out in times of growth and stability the control, both material and ideological, of the bourgeoisie over the workers is so great as to make a mass based revolution impossible. As long as there is no dire necessity to overthrow the system, as long as consciousness and reality are in accord, no revolution will occur. This notion makes sense theoretically based on an understanding of the essentially practical nature of consciousness and historically revolutions have only grown out of periods of severe crisis.

Mattick summarizes this conception of the importance of the crisis in a recently written essay:

. . . the history of the workers' movement shows that revolutionary class consciousness only manifests itself in times of especially deep crisis. Class struggles, which do not tend yet to fix themselves on class objectives and do not leave the realm of wage labor, constitute themselves as spontaneous reactions to a slow or brutal deterioration of the proletarian condition

. . .

It is only in times of crisis that revolutionary class consciousness can develop. By itself, the consciousness of belonging to the working class has hardly any importance; in any case, it exists everywhere The workers know well that they belong to a class antagonistic to that of the capitalists

When one considers for a moment the enormous strength which confronts the proletariat and its class aspirations, one will understand why the workers prefer to adapt to the present conditions rather than attack them

As long as the ruling class is capable of asserting its political power over the economy thanks to a prosperity either true or false it is useless to hope that the consciousness of the workers will take a revolutionary character. But it is precisely a distinctive trait of capitalism that it finds itself incapable of controlling the course of its economic development. [80]

The councilists rely theoretically on Marx's major work, *Capital*, in which he scientifically demonstrated the necessity of capitalist crises. [81] Neither they nor Marx argued that capitalism would break down permanently on its own. Rather, the very nature of capitalist production itself, based on the contradiction between use value and exchangevalue, generates crises of varying severity. It is only in such a period of severe crisis that the workers will act to make it the final crisis of capitalism. Until then, capitalism will go on, from crisis to expansion to crisis again. Only when the working class asserts itself with the totality of its strengths will the true breakdown occur.

The councilists viewed revolutionary consciousness as the *result* rather than the precondition for activity in a crisis period. [82] The working class, due to its position in society, and particularly its activity in the labor process, recognizes that it is a class opposed to the capitalist class. They realize that they are exploited and they struggle daily, through union activity, i.e., wage struggles, over their share of their product that they are to receive, through sabotage, in which they strike out against their domination by capital, by absenteeism, goofing off, etc. However, these struggles, although a necessary part of the class struggle, usually do not result in an attack on the capitalist system itself. They represent responses to daily capitalist domination and exploitation, but they do not transcend capitalism as a whole. Rather, they are efforts either to gain a larger share of the product for the workers, i.e., raise the price of their labor power, create less value for the wages they are paid, or are merely a response to the unpleasant nature of work. Revolutionary consciousness subsumes all of this and goes a step farther. It is the recognition that the working class as a whole *forms the future communist society in itself* within capitalism, i.e., that they can run society on their own and restructure it to meet their desires. Such a consciousness cannot arise from the daily experience of the labor process alone, where workers are under the constant control of others and can only exchange their products and cooperate in production through the mediation of capitalists, foremen, and the market. [83] In a crisis, the foundations of this system, the regularities of everyday life, begin to crumble, its irrational basis becomes apparent for all to see, [84] and the workers must begin to act on their own if they are not to submit to a much more severe exploitation than they have ever known. In fact, the existence of an explicit socialist consciousness need not, and most likely, cannot, precede the revolutionary class struggle itself.

Even though the workers in great masses may never attain a revolutionary consciousness. In order to live they are forced to take up the fight against capital. And when they fight for their existence under the conditions of the permanent crisis, this fight, regardless of its ideological quality, is a fight which can only turn in the direction of overcoming the capitalist system.

[85]

Revolution is more a matter of necessity than choice. In response to growing stagnation and crisis, the capitalists must seek to increase their surplus value at all costs, i.e., raise the rate of exploitation a great deal in a short time. This in itself begins to elicit responses from the workers. Moreover, as they find "their" organizations the trade unions obstacles in the way of their protecting their own immediate interests, they *must* begin to act autonomously.

The depressing tendencies grow stronger under big capitalism and so the resistance of the workers must grow stronger too. Economic crises grow more and more destructive and undermine apparently secured progress. The exploitation is intensified to retard the lowering of the profit rate for rapidly increasing capital. So again and again the workers are provoked to resistance. But against this strongly increased power of capital the old methods of fight no longer can serve. New methods are needed, and before long their beginnings present themselves. They spring up spontaneously in the wildcat strike, in the direct action. [86]

It is only through forms of mass direct action that the spiritual qualities self reliance, solidarity, confidence, creativity can develop which are necessary for the overthrow of capitalism and the building of a new society. "In the course of strike actions, the ordinary life of workers, in which they act under the constant direction of their boss, ceases, and they have to think, act, and coordinate their actions for themselves," [87] It is through this acting for themselves and coordinating their actions with workers in other shops and regions (all necessities of the struggle) that the consciousness of the workers can undergo a crucial change, attaining the very heart of revolutionary consciousness, their "understanding that they have the ability to initiate and control action, to make themselves the basic decisions about their lives."

[88]

Thus, by forcing the workers to act for themselves due to the failure of "their" organizations which had acted for them in the past to fight off increasing exploitation and to respond to the threat of actual starvation, along with the existence of great amounts of unused means of production, masses of unemployed workers, a severe crisis can spell the end of capitalism. [89] The crisis itself does not imply the end of capitalism; nor does it necessarily cause the appearance of revolutionary consciousness. It forces the workers into actions through which revolutionary consciousness may develop. The councilists see this as the result of a long process of ever heightening struggle.

In the course of a long period of conflict, workers form the goal of taking over production themselves. This goal develops as a response to two conditions that an escalating workers' movement eventually produces. First, the workers reach the limit of what they can gain without taking power. This limit is generally experienced in the intransigence or counter attack of the old rulers, expressed through lockouts, coup d'etats, and the like. The obvious solution that presents itself, therefore, is removing the old rulers from power. Second, the workers discover through their own actions their real power and ability, and therefore realize that taking over management is possible for them. [90]

However, the council communists *never* argued that a crisis had to result in a revolution. For them, it was a necessary but insufficient condition. They recognized that considerable activity undermining bourgeois ideological hegemony and laying the basis for new social relationships had to reach a high level, not only during the crisis but before it, growing from the daily struggle between capitalists and workers, if a successful revolution were to make any crisis the final one of capitalism. Gorter saw this, although on a very abstract level, in 1920:

Misery in Germany was terrible in the last years of the war. The revolution did not come. It was worse yet in 1918 and 1919. The revolution did not succeed . . . Crisis and misery are not sufficient. The most severe economic crisis is here and nevertheless the revolution does not come. There must be another factor which brings about the revolution, and which, if it is defeated, allows it to fail. This factor is the spirit of the masses. [91]

Almost all councilists have, however, remained far too abstract when confronted with this problem. [92] Some have merely stated what is necessary in a very general way, and then have

sought to study society concretely to see if any of the necessary activity is going on. For instance *Lutte de Classe* states that "for a revolution to be possible new social relations ought to be pre existing, at least in an embryonic state, to overthrow existing relations." [93] They have then devoted much of their efforts to describing and analyzing ongoing international working class activity. Pannekoek seems to vacillate between stating the problem in general terms and implying that the activity of the working class in the struggle itself can overcome all pre existing problems. Thus, in *Workers' Councils* he states in one place that:

once, however, they take up the fight, they are changed into new personalities; selfish fear recedes to the background and forth spring the forces of community, solidarity, and devotion, rousing courage and perseverance. These are contagious; the example of fighting activity rouses in others, who feel in themselves the same forces awakening, the spirit of mutual aid and of self confidence. [94]

But elsewhere in the book he seems to recognize the difficulties involved:

. . . the time will come that the evil of depression, the calamities of unemployment, the terrors of war grow ever stronger. Then the working class, if not yet revolting, must rise and fight. Then the workers must choose between inertly succumbing and actively fighting to win freedom. Then they will have to take up their task of creating a better world out of the chaos of declining capitalism.

Will they fight? Human history is an endless series of fights, and Clausewitz, the well known German theorist on war, concluded from history that man is in his inner nature a warlike being. But others, sceptics as well as fiery revolutionists, seeing the timidity, the submissiveness, the indifference of the masses, often despair of the future. So we will have to look somewhat more thoroughly into psychological forces and effects. [95]

But Pannekoek's investigation in this area is not very thorough. Basically, again growing from his understanding of the essentially practical nature of consciousness, [96] he argues that "the dominant and deepest impulse in man as in every living being is his instinct of selfpreservation Fear and submissiveness also are the effect of this instinct, when against powerful masters they afford the best chances for preservation. [97] Indeed, in capitalist daily life, this "fear and submissiveness" is far more practical than if the worker were to "nurture his feelings of independence and pride; the more he suppresses them and tacitly obeys, the less difficulty he will encounter in finding and keeping his job." [98] Here, then, is Pannekoek's tentative solution:

When, however, in times of social crisis and danger all this submissivity, this virtuousness, is of no avail to secure life, when only fighting can help, then it gives way to its contrary, to rebelliousness and courage. Then the bold set the example and the timid discover with surprise of what deeds of heroism they are capable. Then selfreliance and high spiritedness awake in them and grow. because of their growth depend their chances of life and happiness. And at once, by instinct and by experience, they know that only collaboration and union can give strength to their masses. When then they perceive what forces are present in themselves and in their comrades, when they feel the happiness of this awakening of proud self respect and devoted brotherhood, when they anticipate a future of victory, when they see rising before them the image of the new society they help to build, then enthusiasm and ardor grow to irresistible power. Then the working class begins to be ripe for revolution. Then capitalism begins to be ripe for collapse. [99]

Pannekoek seems to be arguing that everything can be solved in the revolutionary struggle itself. However, as we have seen. the councilists, despite their belief that such a struggle would have to happen regardless of the desires of any group or groups, often attacked those organizations and institutions which reinforced passivity in the masses. They recognized that the stronger such institutions are, the weaker the masses must be. What we have here is an immense problem, to my mind the most serious potential inadequacy in councilist theory, which merits far more consideration than I can devote to it here. I hope to deal with it more thoroughly elsewhere in this thesis. Here I must limit myself with having pointed out the nature of the problem, i.e., the extent to which conditioning towards passivity can be overcome in the revolutionary struggle. Let us move on, perhaps a bit uncomfortably, but with determination.

The functioning of councils in the revolutionary struggle

Much of the writing of the council communists concerned the form which they thought the struggle of the working class, in the process of its selfemancipation, would take. Here, once again, they relied on the analysis of historical instances of spontaneous upheavals (particularly Russia in 1905 and 1917 and Germany in 1918 1923), from which they generalized their theory of organizational forms in a revolutionary situation and the importance of those forms in the building and the controlling of a new society. As a contemporary French group puts it, "the councils are not a dried up scheme, the product of some 'brilliant mind' that they have tried to apply by force everywhere, but the spontaneous response to the problems which present themselves to the proletariat in its struggle against capitalism."[\[100\]](#)

In the councilist discussion of organizational forms, we find again the strong emphasis on the relationship of means to ends in the revolutionary struggle. All aspects of the revolutionary struggle are inextricably connected to the nature of the new society which will be built out of this struggle. Organizational forms must, therefore, serve the dual purpose of being fighting organs and means of reconstruction. Pannekoek points this out in his discussion of forms of organization:

As the proletariat rises to dominance it develops simultaneously its own organization and the forms of the new economic order. These two developments are inseparable and form the process of social revolution Since the revolutionary class fight against the bourgeoisie and its organs is inseparable from the seizure of the productive apparatus by the workers and its application to production, the same organization that unites the class for its fight also acts as the organization of the new productive process.[\[101\]](#)

Once again, it is stressed that these organizational forms must be applicable to the task of the self emancipation of the working class. Thus, any form of organization, if it is to be useful in the struggle for socialism, must be based on

the principle of *the masses* (not party or vanguard) retaining power Communism cannot be introduced or realized by a party. Only the proletariat as a whole can do that All the problems of the workers must therefore be viewed in relation to the developing self-action of the masses.[\[102\]](#)

Thus, the two primary requirements of an organizational form are: 1) that it be equally applicable to the revolutionary struggle and the construction of a new society, and 2) that it be a means of direct expression of the developing revolutionary consciousness of the working class rather than an instrument for controlling them and therefore stifling their initiative.[\[103\]](#) Such an organizational form has appeared every time the working class has taken up the direct fight against capital.

It is not necessary to try to construct or to imagine these new forms; they can originate only in the practical fight of the workers themselves. They have already originated there; we have only to look into practice to find its beginnings everywhere the workers are rebelling against the old order.[\[104\]](#)

Factory committees and workers' councils are just such forms. These organizations arise spontaneously in the course of the struggle. They are non hierarchical, concentrating all power in the hands of the workers themselves. "Direction in their own hands, also called their own leadership, means that all initiative and all decisions proceed from the workers themselves Decision and action, both collective, are one."[\[105\]](#) Such organs are not formed on command, but are the spontaneous modes of expression of the self reliance, self determination, and solidarity of the workers in the battle against capital. Such spiritual qualities do not arise out of moral exhortation, or from reading. Rather, they are the results of the developing struggle it self, as they are called forth within each worker and between the workers if the struggle is to succeed. Councils are an extremely flexible form of organization, capable of meeting the pressing needs of the revolutionary struggle.

The councils thus appeared as the basic organs of the revolutionary movement and they allowed the workers to seize and control the forces of production. It is on this basis that they organized their self defense. This base could go beyond the narrow confines of the firm and reach out to an industrial sector or to the totality of the workers of a city or region.[\[106\]](#)

Already within such councils are embodied new social relations cooperation, fundamental equality, solidarity, creativity, self reliance, and self confidence. Indeed, they are in part also the means of individual self transformation, from the passive, dependent worker of capitalism to the active, independent member of a future socialist society. The location of new social relations, they are also the location of the self creation of new men and women. This is the very nature of organizations such as workers' councils. [\[107\]](#)

The expression of workers' power, the location of all their power in the struggle, the councils represent power of an entirely different nature than now exists in capitalist or bureaucratic society. They express the exercising of power at the point of production, the factory, in the community, at the very heart of the society. This basis of economic power in the factory becomes itself the means and expression of political power in the society as a whole. Thus, seizing "state power" does not become the aim of the struggle; rather, the destruction of the state, of all forms of power which do not emanate from below, i.e., are apart from the daily lives of the masses of the population. [\[108\]](#) Indeed, the councils represent the means of moving from a society with a powerful state in the traditional sense to a society based on proletarian self management of production and of society, with no need for any such state apparatus. [\[109\]](#)

The functioning of the councils in the new society

How would such a society function? All forms of social activity the production of goods, the performance of services will be controlled by those who engage in them. Thus, there is common ownership of the means of production rather than private ownership or "public ownership," as in Russia or other state capitalist countries. This difference is rightly stressed by the councilists.

Common ownership must not be confounded with public ownership. In public ownership, often advocated by notable social reformers, the State or another political body is master of the production. The workers are not masters of their work, they are commanded by the State officials, who are leading and directing production. Whatever may be the condition of labor, however human and considerate the treatment, the fundamental fact is that not the workers themselves, but the officials, dispose of the product, manage the entire process In short, the workers still receive wages, a share of the product determined by masters. Under public ownership of the means of production, the workers are still subjected to and exploited by a ruling class Common ownership by the producers can be the only goal of the working class. [\[110\]](#)

Production in each workplace (be it production of goods or services) must be controlled by those who work there.

The ruling body in each shop organization is the entirety of the collaborating workers. They assemble to discuss matters and in assembly take their decisions. So everybody who takes part in the work takes part in the regulation of the common work. [\[111\]](#)

In plants too large to assemble all the workers, it will be necessary to elect delegates, but these delegates will have no governing power. They will be elected from among the work groups, will continue to work there i.e., there will be no full time delegates and will be instantly revocable. They will not be experts, nor will they be responsible for the running of the factory. Rather, their task will be to facilitate discussion and to carry out the decisions not the abstract "will" of their fellow workers and to serve also as liaisons between work groups within factories and between factories. [\[112\]](#) Delegates will often change, depending on the issues involved. Thus, within the factory, the division between order givers and order takers will disappear.

Of course,

the organization of the work inside the shop is only one half of the task of the workers. Over it, a still more important task, stands the joining of the separate enterprises, their combination into a social organization. [\[113\]](#)

Central bodies will be formed on the same basis as councils within the factories instantly revocable delegates who continue to work in the shops, no decision making powers, i.e., they will be the executors of the workers' decisions rather than making decisions for the workers. Such bodies will perform the functions of coordination, collection of vital data and information, and will see to its dissemination in a simple and comprehensible form. They will not be planning bodies. This crucial function of planning will be performed by the workers as a whole,

who, because of the dissemination of the necessary information in understandable form, [114] will make all the vital decisions which their delegates will then make known to the central councils, who will then have them publicized.

The councils are no politicians, no government. They are the messengers, carrying and interchanging the opinions, the will of the groups of workers Thus they are the organs of social intercourse and discussion . [115]

Such councils will serve to facilitate horizontal cooperation between factories in the same branch of industry and vertical cooperation between factories engaged in different stages of the productive process of a given good. Moreover, they will facilitate coordination between consumers' and community groups and the factory committees and councils.

Such a fundamental reorganization of production and society implies wide reaching changes in the nature of work and of social life in general. The priorities of production on such a basis are the opposite of those under capitalism, where the use value of goods is subordinated to their exchange value, and production for profit, rather than use and social benefit reigns.

From the viewpoint of the workers' councils, the statement of the problem in matters of economic organization is not as to how production must be governed, and in this sense best organized, but as to how the mutual relations of human beings to each other and among each other are to be regulated in connection with production. For, to the councils, production is no longer an objective process in which the labor of man and the product thereof becomes separated from him, a process which one directs end computes like lifeless material, but to them production is the vital function of the workers themselves. [116]

The division between mental and manual labor, through "the reuniting of the functions of decision and execution" [117] the division between the workers and the means of production, between the producers and their products, will all disappear. Through the development of the struggle and the expansion of new social relations,

the working class itself in its deepest character is transformed. From obedient subjects they are changed into free and self reliant masters of their fate, capable to build and manage their new world. [118]

For them, concomitantly due to their own self transformation and the alteration in the structure and nature of the work process, work itself comes to be seen less and less as the means to an end it was under capitalism. It becomes a form of pleasurable social activity, a means of engaging in useful social work and as a part of an interdependent whole which is conscious and appreciative of its interdependence. Indeed, "work" will become a fundamental though not the only means of self expression.

Two developments thus become possible in a self managed society. One needs to work less and work itself becomes more pleasurable. Significant changes in the structure of work, the abolition of the contradictions inherent in capitalist production, the development of technology (which has hitherto been held back by capitalist motivations and relations of production) to new levels, increase the productivity of labor and change the nature of work. Moreover, such increases in productivity can now be translated into increased leisure time, since the aim of production is measured in use values rather than the quantity of surplus value produced. [119] Once the necessary output has been met, why produce more?

By the rapid increase of the productivity of labor this part, the time needed to reproduce all the life necessities, will continually decrease, and an increasing part of life will be available for other purposes and activities. [120]

Pannekoek stresses that we must keep in mind the importance of the changes in the nature of work itself which will go hand in hand with self management. "Whereas the abundance of life necessities, the universal prosperity represents the passive side of the new life, the innovation of labor itself as its active side makes life a delight of glorious creative experience." [121] Society has been changed from bottom to top, production and social relations have been revolutionized, as well as the nature of work. The social causes of alienation have been removed.

One further area of social activity needs to be considered that of the distribution of the goods produced. The original councilists' discussion of the problem of distribution seems curiously far from Marx's famous dictum: "From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs." Rather than basing their presentation on this formula, these councilists

sought to devise a theoretical system in which both production and distribution were based on the same measure average social labor time. [122] The elaboration of this hypothetical system was contained in their publication of the *Grundprinzipien Kommunistischer Production und Verteilung* (Holland, 1930). [123] As Paul Mattick rightly points out in a preface he wrote to the 1970 reprinting of this document in French:

One cannot, however, foresee the real state of the economy after the revolution, and consequently it is impossible to construct in advance programs and tasks to fulfill in reality. The necessities of tomorrow will certainly be the determining factor. What we discuss in advance are the measures to take, the instruments to utilize to construct the desired social relations, that is to say in this case that interests us, the communist relations between people. [124]

In fact, this publication is probably the most speculative of all the councilist writings, the least based on historical instances and tendencies. Nevertheless, as Mattick writes, "despite the weakness of the Fundamental Principles they remain, yesterday as today, the point of departure for all serious discussion and all research on the realization of the communist society." [125] I am highly critical of their notion that in a communist society the distribution of goods will be based primarily on the amount of time that a person works. Although they also allowed for the creation of a special fund of goods for those who can't work, i.e., because they are too old, too young, or physically incapable, there seems to be a disregard on their part of the possibility of distribution according to need. This document seems to contradict the above cited statement that in a communist society, the approach to economics and related problems would be seen primarily in terms of human needs and desires, [126] because there is an over emphasis on calculation without a concern for distribution according to need.

If the capitalist methods of calculation rest on the universal domination of money, the disappearance of money and of the market in the communist society does not however suppress the necessity for calculation. To socially regulate production and distribution, it is indispensable to have a universal standard, a unity of calculation. [127]

The bulk of their presentation is thus an elaborate scheme of production and distribution based on calculations according to social average labor time, working out relations between the sectors of goods production and service production, accumulation and reproduction, and so on. Their fundamental notion of self management remains and is basic to their conception of production under socialism, but most of the rest of their discussion in this publication is unacceptable to me. Other councilists have recognized the weaknesses and inadequacies of these ideas concerning distribution and have not hesitated to criticize them.

The authors of the 'Fundamental Principles' are right to insist on the fact that the producers have the right to dispose of their production, but it is something else again to affirm that this right of disposition should be exercised by the intermediary of a distribution based on the equality of labor time. [128]

Despite the weaknesses in this particular document, we must grasp the value of council communist theory. Their fundamental notions have great relevance to "radicals" today, such as the relationship of means to ends in political activity, the importance of the notion of the class struggle as the self emancipation of the working class, the necessity of crisis for there to be revolutionary activity, their theory of revolutionary consciousness, and finally their notions of the new society, based not on a utopian vision but on generalizations from the historical experience of working class struggles in the 20th century. Throughout, save for their discussion of the bases for distribution, they represent a continuation of the essence of Marx's thought: analyses of tendencies existing within contemporary society, the self emancipation of the working class as a fundamental guiding principle, the new society as the "association of free and equal producers," the theory of crisis, the theory of consciousness, etc. Nevertheless, we should keep in mind that their primary concern was to analyze society in order to help change it, rather than be true to Marx. Perhaps the similarity of their theoretical conclusions to Marx's results from the remarkable insight with which he had analyzed society some fifty years before.

Notes:

[*] This text is Chapter 8 of "*Marxism and Council Communism, The foundation for revolutionary theory for modern society*", by Peter J. Rachleff, Revisionist press, NY. 1976.

[1] A discussion of the formation and functioning of workers' councils and factory committees in Russia and Germany is presented in Chapters VI and VII of this thesis. Pannekoek writes about the formation of their ideas: "This new organization of labor, we have to investigate and to clarify to ourselves and to one another, devoting to it the best powers of our minds. We cannot devise it as a fantasy; we derive it from the real conditions and needs of present work and present workers." *Workers' Councils*, p. 18. A contemporary French councilist group points out that the experience of Russia and Germany has been repeated elsewhere since then. "Since that time, each time that the proletariat has itself attacked capitalism, it has organized itself in workers' councils; they reappeared in 1920 in Italy, in 1927 in China, in 1936 in Spain, in 1953 in East Germany, in 1956 in Poland and Hungary . . . ,". *Revolution Internationale*, No. 1, "Le Pouvoir des Conseils Ouvriers," December, 1978, P 15.

[2] Their adherence to Marx, certainly in a non dogmatic way, distinguishes them from most groups which have, in posing alternatives to Marxism Leninism and state capitalism, rejected a large body of Marx's thought. See, for example, Paul Cardan, *History and Revolution: A Revolutionary Critique of Historical Materialism* or Murray Bookchin, *PostScarcity Anarchism*. Stanley Aronowitz writes of the councilists that "taking their cue from the works of Marx himself, they argued that the distinguishing feature of 'he proletariat is its capacity for selforganization and self management." "Left Wing Communism: The Reply to Lenin," in Howard and Klare, eds., *The Unknown Dimension*, P. 178.

[3] In this notion they are far closer to Marx than the dogmatic Marxist Leninists who strive to apply fixed social and economic categories and a predetermined model of revolutionary organization on all societies. Lenin himself set such a precedent for his followers in his attempts to impose particular political activities on the international left. See the discussion below concerning Lenin's *Left Wing Communism: An Infantile Disorder* and Gorter's *Response to Lenin*.

[4] "Ueber Arbeiterate," *Funken*, III, January 6, 1952, pp. 14-15, quoted in "A Propos des Conseils Ouvriers et du Conseillisme," *Informations Correspondence Ouvriere* #95-96, July August, 1970, p. 2.

[5] "In my opinion, the material base of the differences of opinion that separate you from what is called the Left in Western Europe, concerning trade union and parliamentary tactics, is precisely the difference between Russia and Western Europe in these areas." *Reponse a Lenine*, P. 11.

[6] The K.A.P.D., for whom Gorter theorized the activity in his *Reponse a Lenine* still conceived its role as that of a vanguard organized outside of the masses (to enlighten them and not to lead them in the Leninist sense). But this conception was itself surpassed by some ultra Leftists opposed to the duality of party/factory organizations; revolutionaries should not seek to come together in special organizations distinct from the masses." *Informations Correspondence Ouvriere*, #84, special issue on their national conference, "Sur l'ideologie ultragauche," p. 29.

[7] Gorter, *op. cit.*, P. 15. we are still seeking true leaders *who do not seek to dominate the masses* and do not betray them, and, so long as we do not have them, everything must be done from the bottom up according to the dictates of the masses." P. 9.

[8] *Ibid.*, P. 37.

[9] *Ibid.*, p. 47.

[10] *Ibid.*, P. 47. Rather than presenting in detail now the critique of trade unions and parliamentarism, I will wait to deal with them more fully later In this chapter.

[11] *Ibid.*, P. 54.

[12] *Ibid.*, P. 112.

[13] *Ibid.*, P. 103.

[14] Cf. Ida Mett, *The Kronstadt Commune* and Alexandra Kollontai, *The Workers' Opposition*.

[15] It is through notions such as this that it becomes apparent how similar the councilists were to Marx in the way they analyzed social situations. Marx, in the Preface to the first German edition of *Capital*, wrote: "My standpoint, from which the evolution of the economic formation of society is viewed as a process of natural history, can less than any other make the individual responsible for relations whose creature he socially remains . . ." *Capital*, Vol. I, p. 10. Councilist analyses of political behavior have always reflected this conception.

[16] Theses on Bolshevism," *International Council Correspondence*, No. 3, December 1934, thesis #7, P. 3. Probably the most succinct and valuable analysis of the socio economic condition of Russia prior to 1917 can be found in Trotsky, *The History of the Russian Revolution*, Vol. I, Chapter I, "Peculiarities of Russia's Social Development."

[17] "Theses on Bolshevism," *op. cit.*, thesis #9, P. 3.

[18] *Ibid.*, thesis #13, p. 4.

[19] Gorter emphasized this point in 1920. "The revolution in Russia won through the aid of the poor peasants. This should be kept in mind in Western Europe and throughout the world." *Op. cit.*, P. 17. Gorter pointed out that there were but 7 8 million proletarians in a population of 160,000,000 (p. 20). In comparison to other analyses of the Russian social and economic conditions, Gorter's numerical estimate seems rather generous. Cf. Trotsky, *op. cit.*, Chapter II, "The Proletariat and the Peasantry."

[20] Theses on Bolshevism," *op. cit.*, thesis #14, p. 4.

[21] *Ibid.*, thesis #15, p. 4. In fact, large segments of the proletariat rose spontaneously both in 1905 and 1917. However, the councilists never argued as, for example, Maurice Brinton does in *The Bolsheviks and Workers' Control* that the Russian masses could have actually built a socialist system out of the existing economic situation.

[22] In 1954, Pannekoek wrote in a letter to Cardan: "The Russian Revolution . . . seemed to be a proletarian revolution, the workers being the authors by their strikes and their mass actions. Afterwards, however, the bolshevik party succeeded little by little in appropriating the power (the working class was a small minority of the population); thus the bourgeois character of the Russian Revolution became dominant and took the form of state capitalism." *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, Vol. IV, No. 14, April June, 1954, p. 41.

[23] "Theses on Bolshevism," *op. cit.*, thesis #16, p. 4.

[24] ". . . the Russian Revolution was not dependent on Lenin or on the Bolsheviks, but . . . the decisive element in it was the revolt of the peasants. It was not Lenin who conducted the revolution, but the revolution conducted him." "The Lenin Legend," *International Council Correspondence*, Vol. II, No. 1, December 1934, p. 14.

[25] *Ibid.*, p. 10.

[26] "It [the Russian Revolution] was, in a few words, the last bourgeois revolution, but which was the work of the working class. Bourgeois revolution signifies a revolution which destroys feudalism and opens the path to industrialization with all the social consequences that this implies. The Russian Revolution is thus in the line of the English Revolution of 1647 and the French Revolution of 1799, with those following in 1830, 1848, and 1871." Pannekoek, letter, *op. cit.*, p. 40.

[27] "The experience of bolshevism can serve us as a lesson in order to know how socialism cannot be realized. Control of the means of production, private property transferred to the State, central and antagonistic direction of production and distribution leave intact the capital labor relationship as well as the relationship between exploiters and exploited, masters and subjects. This development leads only to a more modern form of capitalism, where capital is not indirectly but directly the collective property of a dominant class with a political base." Paul Mattick, "Anton Pannekoek," *La Revolution Proletarienne*, #472, 1962, P, 119.

[28] See, for example, Brinton, *op. cit.*, Mett, *op. cit.*, Kollontai, *op. cit.*, Serge, *Kronstadt 1921*, Daniels, *The Conscience of the Revolution*, Schapiro, *The Communist Autocracy*, and Berkman, *The Bolshevik Myth*.

[29] *Living Marxism*, Vol. IV, No. 8, September 1939, p. 245. See also "State Capitalism and Dictatorship," *International Council Correspondence*, Vol. III, No. 2, February 1937.

[30] *Ibid.*, p. 255. Pannekoek makes basically the same point in *Workers' Councils*, while also pointing out the fundamental difference between Bolshevism and Fascism. "The similarity of political forms and methods in Russia and Germany strikes the eye at first sight. In both the same dictatorship of a small group of leaders, assisted by a powerful, well organized and disciplined party, the same omnipotence of the ruling bureaucracy, the same absence of personal rights and of free speech, the same levelling of spiritual life into one doctrine, upheld by terrorism, the same cruelty towards opposition or even criticism. The economic basis, however, is different. In Russia it is state capitalism, in Germany state directed private capitalism." P. 201.

[31] "What is named state socialism discloses itself as state capitalism, the rule of a new exploiting class, bureaucracy, master of the production apparatus, as in other countries the bourgeoisie. It, too, lives on surplus value." *Ibid.*, p, 202.

[32] Mattick, "Anton Pannekoek," *op. cit.*, p. 118. See also "The Development of Soviet Russia's Foreign Policy," *International Council Correspondence*, Vol. II, Nos. 3 4, March, 1936.

[33] "Theses on Bolshevism," *op. cit.*, thesis #67, P. 17.

[34] "The doctrine of Party Communism of the Third International cannot be judged adequately unless their

philosophical basis is thoroughly examined." Pannekoek, *Lenin as Philosopher*, p. 4.

[35] *Ibid.*, p. 52.

[36] Self liberation of the working masses implies self thinking, self knowing, recognizing truth and error by their own mental exertions." *Workers' Councils*, p. 99. Korsch argues that the basic fallacy of Lenin's position is his notion "that the militant character of a revolutionary materialist theory can and must be maintained against the weakening influences of other apparently hostile theoretical tendencies by any means to the exclusion of modifications made imperative by future scientific criticism and research. This fallacious conception caused Lenin to evade discussion on their merits of such new scientific concepts and theories that in his judgment jeopardized the proved fighting value of that revolutionary (though not necessarily proletarian revolutionary) materialist philosophy that his Marxist party had adopted, less from Marx and Engels than from their philosophical teachers, the bourgeois materialists from Holbach to Feuerbach and their idealist antagonist, the dialectical philosopher Hegel. Rather he stuck to his guns, preferring the immediate utility of a given ideology to its theoretical truth in a changing world." "Lenin's Philosophy," *Living Marxism*, Vol. IV, No. 5, November, 1938, pp. 142-143.

[37] *Lenin as Philosopher*, PP. 54-55.

[38] *Ibid.*, p. 61.

[39] *Ibid.*, P. 56.

[40] "Middle class materialism, identifying objective reality with physical matter, had to make every other reality, such as all things spiritual, an attribute or property of this matter. We cannot wonder, therefore, that we find with Lenin similar ideas." *Ibid.*, p. 62.

[41] *Ibid.*, p. 63.

[42] Lenin's Marxism did not express the practical necessities of the modern international anti capitalist class struggle, but was determined by conditions specific to Russia. Russia required not so much the emancipation as the creation of an industrial proletariat, and not so much the end of capital accumulation as its acceleration . . . Lenin's Marxian 'orthodoxy' existed only in ideological form, as the false consciousness of a non socialist practice." Paul Mattick, *Marx and Keynes*, P. 307

[43] Pannekoek, *Lenin as Philosopher*, p. 68.

[44] *Ibid.*, P. 71. "Unlike Western Europe - where the Marxist theory arose in a period when the bourgeois revolution was already approaching its close and Marxism expressed a real and actualized tendency to pass beyond the goals of the bourgeois revolutionary movement, the tendency of the *proletarian* class - Marxism in Russia was from the start nothing more than an ideological form assumed by the material struggle for putting across the capitalist development in a pre-capitalist country . . . Yet on this new soil the bourgeois principle could not make use, once again, of those historically outworn illusions and self deceptions with which it had concealed from itself the restricted bourgeois content of its developmental struggles in its first heroic phase in the West . . . For penetration into the East, it needed a new ideological costume. And it was just the Marxist doctrine taken over from the West which seemed to be most able to render the growing bourgeois development in Russia that important historical service." "The Marxist Ideology in Russia," *Living Marxism*, Vol. IV, No. 2, March, 1938, p. 45.

[45] "The subsequent development of bolshevism showed that the boureois elements present in Leninism were not due to some 'false theory' (Gorter), but had their source in the character of the Russian Revolution itself." Mattick, "Anton Pannekoek," *op. cit.*, p. 119.

[46] Pannekoek, *Lenin as Philosopher*, P. 75,

[47] Here we see a fundamental difference between council communism and anarchism. A forthcoming essay by Paul Mattick on council communism, anarchism, and anarcho syndicalism will discuss in detail the differences between these theoretical systems. It will be included in a book on Karl Korsch to be published in Germany this summer.

[48] *Ibid.*, PP. 75-76.

[49] Circular letter of September 17, 1879, *Selected Correspondence*, P. 377.

[50] "If the essential content of the revolution consists in that the masses themselves take control of their own affairs, the direction of society and of production, it then follows that any form of organization which does not permit the masses to control and lead themselves Is counter revolutionary and harmful; for this reason It ought to be replaced by another organizational form which is revolutionary, that permits in fact the workers themselves to actively decide everything." Pannekoek, cited in Gorter, *op. cit.*, p. 29.

[51] Pannekoek, "Trade Unionism," *International Council Correspondence*, Vol. II, No. 2, January 1936, p. 11.

[52] *Ibid.*, p. 11.

[53] *Ibid.*, p. 12.

[54] *Ibid.*, P. 13. Paul Mattick describes how labor unions, the organization of workers within the structure of capitalism, once seen as a means for the liberation of the working class, have turned into their opposite, a means for accelerated capital accumulation and hence greater control over the workers. "The possibility, under conditions of a progressive capital formation, of improving labor conditions and of raising the price of labor, transformed the workers' struggle into a force for capitalist expansion. Like capitalist competition, the workers' struggle served as an incentive for further capital accumulation; it accentuated capitalist 'progress.' All gains of the workers were compensated for by an increasing exploitation, which in turn permitted a still more rapid capital expansion." Mattick, "Karl Kautsky: From Marx to Hitler," *Living Marxism*, Vol. IV, No. 7. June 1937, P. 195.

[55] Pannekoek, "Trade Unionism," *op. cit.*, P. 15.

[56] "Their counter revolutionary strength can neither be destroyed nor attenuated by a change in personnel, by the replacement of reactionary leaders by leftists or revolutionaries." Pannekoek, cited in Gorter, *op. cit.*, p. 29.

[57] "As long as capitalism is able to expand farther over the world and to increase its volume, it can give employment to the mass of the population. As long as thus it meets the first demand of a system of production, to procure a living to its members, it will be able to maintain itself, because no dire necessity compels workers to make an end of it." Pannekoek, *Workers' Councils*, p. 92.

[58] *Ibid.*, P. 72. "The self-determination by the workers over their fighting action is not a demand put up by theory, by arguments of practicability, but the statement of a fact evolving from practice." *Ibid.*, p. 69. For an excellent discussion of sit downs, see "Sur les Occupations d'Usines," *Information Correspondence Ouvriere*, No. 114, February, 1972.

[59] Pannekoek, *ibid.*, p. 69. "But these strikes prove that the class fight between capital and labor cannot cease, and that when the old forms are not practicable any more, the workers spontaneously try out and develop new forms of action. In these actions, revolt against capital is also revolt against the old organizational forms." Pannekoek, "General Remarks on the Question of Organization," *Living Marxism*, Vol. IV, No. 5, November 1938, p. 147. Pannekoek later wrote: "Wildcat strikes are spontaneous outbursts, the genuine practical expression of class struggle against capitalism, though without wider aims as yet; but they embody a new character already in the rebellious masses: selfdetermination instead of determination by leaders, self reliance instead of obedience, fighting spirit instead of accepting the dictates from above, unbreakable solidarity and units with the comrades instead of duty imposed by membership." "The Failure of the Working Class," *Politics*, September 1946, p. 271.

[60] Mattick, "Groups of Council Communists," *The Social Frontier*, Vol. V, No. 45, 1939, p. 249. "The workers are not anti unionists, but they find that today, in their important struggles, in order to triumph, they must pass over the body of the unions. Because the first repressive apparatus is that which is closest to the workers, the union apparatus." "Les Greves Sauvages, une Realite vers la Construction d'un Monde Nouveau," *Information Correspondence Ouvriere*, #90, February 1970, p. 4.

[61] Such beliefs are still held by wide sections of the American "left," both "old" and "new." Cf. for example, the position of the New American Movement on participation in the McGovern campaign or the attitudes expressed in *Socialist Revolution*, #11, on the same subject.

[62] Pannekoek, *Workers' Councils*, P. 77.

[63] Pannekoek, "Some Remarks on Parliamentarism," *Left*, #149, May, 1949, P. 52.

[64] *Ibid.*, P. 50. Note the similarity between these views and those of Marx, as expressed in *The German Ideology*: "... the alteration of men on a mass scale is necessary, an alteration which can only take place in a practical movement, a revolution; this revolution is necessary, therefore, not only because the ruling class cannot be overthrown in any other way, but also because the class overthrowing it can only in a revolution succeed in ridding itself of all the muck of ages and become fitted to found society anew." (p. 69)

[65] Pannekoek, *ibid.*, P. 51

[66] Consider the attitude of sections of the anti war movement concerning the danger that demonstrations might harm McGovern's campaign and that, therefore, demonstrations should be held off until after the election.

[67] Pannekoek, *Workers' Councils*, P. 99.

[68] Gorter, *op. cit.*, P. 53.

[69] Pannekoek, "The Party and the Class," in "The Role of the Party: A Discussion," *Modern Socialism*, n.d., p. 7. In the same discussion. Mattick argues that "the party is a foreign element in social production just as the capitalist class was an unnecessary third factor to the two needed for the carrying on of social life: means of production and labor. The fact that parties participate in class struggles indicates that these class struggles do not tend towards a socialistic goal. Socialism finally means nothing more than the elimination of that third factor that stands between the means of production and labor." In *ibid.*, p. 16.

[70] The general coordination of workers' organizations to capitalism saw the adoption of the same specialization in union and party activities that characterized the hierarchy of industries." "The Masses and the Vanguard," *Living Marxism*, Vol. IV, No. 4, August 1938, P. 106.

[71] Pannekoek, "The Role of the Party," *op. cit.*, p. 9.

[72] It is not possible to slowly assemble revolutionary forces into powerful organizations ready to act at favorable moments." Attempts to build such organizations have always failed with the organizations either becoming reformist or disappearing. "Apparently there is no way to replace these organizations with new ones of a revolutionary character a hopeless situation for those who want to *organize* the new society within the shell of the old." Mattick, "Spontaneity and Organization," *Left*, n.d., pp. 123-126.

[73] "If, in this situation, persons with the same fundamental conceptions units for the discussion of practical steps and seek clarification through discussions and propagandize their conclusions, such groups might be called parties, but they would be parties in an entirely different sense from those of today." Pannekoek, "The Role of the Party," *op. cit.*, p. 8.

[74] See, for example, Richard Gombin's good discussion of this problem in *Les Origines de Gauchisme*, pp. 103-120

[75] Pannekoek, "The Role of the Party," *op. cit.*, p. 8. In "Five Theses on the Class Struggle" (reprinted as an appendix to a Root and Branch pamphlet, "Mass Strike in France"), he reiterates this position: "Freedom can be won by the working class only through their own organized action, by taking their lot in their own hands, in devoted exertion of all their faculties, by directing and organizing their fight and their work themselves by means of their councils. For the parties there remains the second function, to spread insight and knowledge, to study, discuss, and formulate social ideas, and by their propaganda to enlighten the minds of the masses. The workers' councils are the organs for practical action and the fight of the working class; to the parties falls the task of the building up of its spiritual power. Their work forms an indispensable part in the self liberation of the working class."

[76] *Workers' Councils*, p. 40.

[77] Mattick, "From the Bottom Up," in the discussion in *Modern Socialism*, *op. cit.*, P. 17.

[78] Gombin's discussion (*op. cit.*) on how different French groups Informations Correspondence Ouvriere, Socialisme ou Barbarie, and the International Situationists have tried to deal with it, both theoreticly, and practically. One could also look at documents from such groups expressing their efforts to come to some sort of understanding, if not an actual conclusion (e.g., "Organisations et Mouvement Ouvrier," *Informations Correspondence Ouvriere*, #80, April, 1969; "Pour un Regroupement Révolutionnaire," *Contre le Courant*, published as a collection of material from *Lutte de Classe*, 1971; "As We Don't See It," pamphlet from London *Solidarity*, 1972).

[79] Paul Mattick, "Workers' Control," in Priscilla Long (ed.), *The New Left*, P. 385.

[80] Mattick, "Division du Travail et Conscience de Classe," in *Integration Capitaliste et Rupture Ouvriere*, p. 256.

[81] Henryk Grossmann and Paul Mattick have done the most work with Marx's "crisis theory." None of Grossmann's work is available in English. Mattick's major ideas can be found in his *Marx and Keynes; The Limits of the Mixed Economy*,

[82] "In fact, revolutionary movements rarely begin with a revolutionary intention; this only develops in the course of the struggle itself." Brecher, *Strike!*, p. 240.

[83] "What are the foundations of the new society? They are the social forces of fellowship and solidarity, of discipline and enthusiasm the moral forces of self sacrifice and devotion to the community, the spiritual forces of knowledge, of courage and perseverance, the firm organization that binds all these forces into a unity of purpose, all of them are the outcome of the class struggle. They cannot purposely be prepared in advance. Their first traces arise spontaneously in the workers out of their common exploitation; and then they grow incessantly through the necessities of the fight, under the influence of experience and of mutual inducement and instruction." *Workers' Councils*, pp. 18-19.

[84] Pannekoek writes of the Depression: "In this crisis the true character of capitalism and the impossibility to maintain it, was shown to mankind as in a searchlight. There were millions of people lacking the means to provide for their life necessities. There were the millions of workers with strong arms, eager to work; there were the machines in

thousands of shops ready to whirl and to produce an abundance of goods. But it was not allowed." *Ibid.*, p. 10.

[85] "Revolutionary Marxism," *International Council Correspondence*, #8, May 1935, P. 5. As Pannekoek puts it, "the working class is confronted today with the necessity of itself taking production in hand." *Workers' Councils*, p. 11.

[86] Pannekoek, *Ibid.*, p. 66. See also the discussion of the sitdown strikes mentioned above (see page 202).

[87] Jeremy Brecher, *Strike!*, p. 237. This book is the best study I have yet seen of how people have changed themselves through the course of struggle.

[88] Paul Mattick, Jr., "Introduction," to the Root and Branch edition of Pannekoek, *Workers' Councils*, p. ii

[89] Of course, we can only know afterwards if any given crisis was the "final" one, i.e., by seeing if it did indeed result in revolution.

[90] Brecher, *op. cit.*, P. 305. This same process is described in *Informations Correspondence Ouvriere* on the basis of the French experience. "The unification of the struggle and its extension do not come so much from the desire for unity and the willingness to extend it, but rather:

that following the concentration of firms, many workers have common interests and they discover this when a limited sector is fighting;

- that the sectors are so interdependent that stopping a few blocks them all;

that the resistance of the leaders to whatever touches their decisionmaking power rapidly pushes the struggle into an impasse and forces the striking workers to seek other support. The autonomy of the struggle does not come so much from the initial refusal of the union leaders or delegates to support a strike, but rather from the fact that their position in the modern enterprise renders them absolutely unable to regulate the problems of the base and that they intervene in the struggle to exercise a function, the union function, totally opposed to the workers' interests . . .". "La Lutte de Classe en France," *Informations Correspondence Ouvriere*, #85, September 1969, P. 3.

[91] Gorter, *op. cit.*, p. 106.

[92] Of course, there is a rather clear connection between uncertainty on this problem and the uncertainty concerning the group's activity which was discussed earlier in this chapter.

[93] In *Contre le Courant*, "Pour un Regroupement Revolutionnaire," p. 25.

[94] *Workers' Councils*, p. 67.

[95] *Ibid.*, p. 93.

[96] "Among the various dispositions in man those which are the most adapted to secure life in the existing circumstances will prevail." *Ibid.*, p. 93.

[97] *Ibid.*, P. 93.

[98] *Ibid.*, p. 94.

[99] *Ibid.*, p. 94. A contemporary French group, sharing the same general perspective, analyzes the French situation in the same basic terms: "This feeling of powerlessness is normal. It will disappear to the degree that the incapacity . . . of the capitalist class in the face of the economic crisis in which all the industrialized countries are entering will reveal itself." *Noir et Rouge*, "L'Autogestion, L'Etat, et la Revolution," special supplement to *Noir et Rouge*, #41, May 1968, P. 3. Perhaps the failure of this prophecy to come to fruition is an indication of the complex nature of this problem.

[100] *Revolution Internationale*, "Le Pouvoir des Conseils Ouvriers," No. 1, December 1968, P. 15.

[101] Pannekoek, "General Remarks on the Question of Organization," *Living Marxism*, Vol. !V, No. 5, November 1938, p. 148. This is, of course, antithetical to such notions as those expressed by Sweezy and Bettelheim, i.e., that there are two separate periods calling for quite different organization and behavior. (Cf. *On the Transition to Socialism*, New York, Monthly Review Press, 1971.)

[102] *The Masses and the Vanguard*, " *op. cit.*, p. 108.

[103] "The fighting workers are not an army conducted after a neatly conceived plan of action by a staff of able leaders. They are a people gradually rising out of submissiveness and ignorance, gradually coming to consciousness of their exploitation, again and again driven to the fight for better living conditions, by degrees developing their powers. New feelings spring up in their hearts, new thoughts arise in their heads. New wishes, new ideals, new aims fill their minds and direct their will and action. Their aims gradually begin to take a more concise shape. From the simple strife for better working conditions, in the beginning, they grow to the idea of a fundamental reorganization of

society." *Workers' Councils*, pp. 17-18.

[104] "General Remarks on the Question of Organization," *op. cit.*, P. 148.

[105] *Workers' Councils*, p. 67.

[106] "A Propos des Conseils Ouvriers, de la Fin du Travail et du Mouvement Revolutionnaire," *Informations Correspondence Ouvriere*, supplement to #97-98, September/ October 1970, P. 1

[107] "One of the essential conditions of the revolution is thus the organization of the masses in the form which can immediately and directly translate their consciousness in actions Only the councils, because they bring together all the workers and because they exercise their power over all the life of society in each factory, quarter, region, can respond to this fundamental need. They alone can assure the effective and immediate participation of all the workers; they alone can guarantee the rapidity of the realization of the initiatives of the revolutionary class." *Revolution Internationale*, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

[108] " The expropriation of the capitalists implies the destruction of the State apparatus which has as its principal function the protection of their individual or collective property. This apparatus, by its nature, is not capable of anything other than repressive use, and may neither be conquered nor transformed into an instrument of a mythic 'popular power,'" *Contre le Courant*, p. 25.

[109] "With a system of factory committees and workers' councils extending over wide areas the proletariat creates the organs which regulate production, distribution, and all the other functions of social life. In other words, the civil administrative apparatus is deprived of all power, and the proletarian dictatorship establishes itself. Thus, class organization in the very struggle for power is at the same time organization, control, and management of the productive forces and of the entire society. It is the basis of the association of free and equal producers and consumers." "The Masses and the Vanguard," *op. cit.*, p.109.

[110] *Workers' Councils*, pp. 15-16.

[111] *Ibid.*, p. 19.

[112] " The councils being assemblies of workers elected and instantly revocable, having simply a power of execution of the directive taken in informed assemblies, are thus the very form which permits all men to manage their activity, their production. They constitute not an organ destined to impose on a majority the directives of a minority, but the organization of the great majority to coordinate and effectively run its actions and its desires." *Revolution Internationale*, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

[113] Pannekoek, *Workers' Councils*, p. 23. Cardan writes: "Direct democracy gives an idea of the *decentralization* which socialist society will be able to achieve. But an industrially advanced free society will also have to find a means of democratically integrating these basic units into the social fabric as a whole. It will have to solve the difficult problem of the necessary *centralization*, without which the life of a modern community would collapse." *Workers' Councils and the Economics of a Self Managed Society*, p. 14.

[114] "For the first time in history, the economic life, in general and in detail, lies as an open book before the eyes of mankind." Pannekoek, *Workers' Councils*, p. 28.

[115] "The councils are no government; not even the most central councils bear a governmental character. For they have to means to impose their will upon the masses; they have no organs of power. All social power is vested in the hands of the workers themselves." *Ibid.*, p. 52.

[116] "Workers' Councils and Communist Organization of Society," *International Council Correspondence*, #7 , April 1935. Cardan writes: "But workers' management is not just a new administrative technique. It cannot remain external to the structure of work itself. It doesn't mean keeping work as it is and just replacing the bureaucratic apparatus which currently manages production by a workers' council however democratic or revocable such a council might be. It means that for the mass of people new relations will have to develop with their work and about their work. The very *content* of work will immediately have to change." *Op. cit.*, P. 17.

[117] Cardan, *Ibid.*, p. 18.

[118] Pannekoek, *Workers' Councils*, p. 34.

[119] "In communism, production is no longer a process of capital expansion, but only a labor process in which society draws from nature the means of consumption it needs. The only economic criterion is the labor time employed in the production of useful work." "Communist Production and Distribution," *Living Marxism*, Vol. IV, No. 4, August 1938, P. 110.

[120] *Workers' Councils*, p. 26.

[121] *Ibid.*, P. 56.

[122] They had no feeling that they were going against the grain of Marx's thought when they dealt with distribution. Indeed, they considered their ideas to be based on *Capital* and *The Critique of the Gotha Programme*. Pannekoek wrote later that "the G.I.K. [the Dutch council communist group] in studying the problem, the main problem of Socialism, of how to combine freedom with organization, perceived that they had only to continue along the line of thought laid down by Marx in occasional small notes in *Capital* and in his remarks on the Gotha Programme of the German Social Democrats." "The Crisis in Socialist Theory," *Left*, #132, October 1947, p. 226.

[123] This has been recently translated into French ("Temps du Travail Social Moyen: Base d'une Production et d'une Repartition Communiste," supplement to *Informations Correspondence Ouvriere*, #101, February 1971) and English (*The Movement for Workers' Councils in Germany*, Coptic Press, London, 1970). The latter is extremely hard to obtain.

[124] Mattick, "Preface," to the French edition of this document, p. 42. Of course, his point applies to much of our discussion in this last section, concerning the nature of work, organization of production, and of distribution, etc. in a future society.

[125] *Ibid.*, p. 47.

[126] See pages 228 229.

[127] "Temps du Travail Social Moyen," *op. cit.*, P. 32.

[128] Mattick, "Preface," *op. cit.*, p. 43.