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On Council Communism

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 élite, 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

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.

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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.

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.

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 on 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 (June-July 1921) to form an international left opposition failed, the decision was immediately taken to build a new Communist Workers' International

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 on 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.

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(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

¹⁰ Rühle 1920a.

¹¹ Rühle 1920b.

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 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

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 on '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.

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

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 Salzungen, 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.

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

²¹ Grossman 1929.

²² Bonacchi 1977, pp. 57–64.

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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

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.

waste of human labor power and natural resources'.²⁷ 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

²⁷ Mattick 1976, pp. 232–3.

²⁸ Mattick 1976, p. 237.

²⁹ Mattick 1969, p. 131.

³⁰ Gorter 1978, p. 170.

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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 on 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

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).

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

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).

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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 Empiriocriticism*.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

³⁵ Pannekoek 1948, p. 77.

³⁶ Lenin's 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.

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:

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 [Bourrinet] 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.

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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

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).

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

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.

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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

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

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

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.

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.

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.

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

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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 on 'autonomous class struggles in England, 1945–1972' (Brendel 1974a, 1977).

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On Council Communism. 2004. Translated by Peter Drucker. 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. Council communism is a current of communist thought that emerged in the 1920s. Inspired by the November Revolution, council communism was opposed to state socialism and advocated workers' councils and council democracy. Strong in Germany and the Netherlands during the 1920s, council communism continues to exist as a small minority in the left. Template:Left communism Council communism is a Radical Left movement originating in Germany and the Netherlands in the 1920s. Its primary organization was the Communist Workers Party of Germany (KAPD). Council communism continues today as a theoretical and activist position within both left-wing Marxism and Libertarian Socialism, and shares a number of traits with Anarchism.