# THE DEFICIENCIES OF COUNCILISM

Long live the world revolution, 1920

*"You must not forget that when we use the term 'workers' council' we are not proposing solutions but rather raising problems."* Letter from Anton Pannekoek to Maximilien Rubel, 1952.

Council ideology stems from the ossification of one of the main segments of what has been called "the communist left." We must clarify from the outset that this is a concept that has become a catch-all, and the plural "the communist left" better fits its plurality and heterogeneity. Furthermore, this label immediately raises the question of claims to formal affiliations and the typical resumptions of political sects. We have already addressed this topic when attempting to define the "far left."[1]

The aim of this text is to present a contradictory view of a historical current within the revolutionary workers' movement that, from its origins rooted in the proletarian experiences of the 1920s, has evolved, especially in the years following 1968, toward a new, radical ideology that is particularly harmful to the necessary work of reappropriation and rearmament of the communist program.

This ideological regression has also resulted in the near organizational disappearance of this tendency as a living expression of communism[2], primarily due to its theoretical and organizational deficiencies. Paradoxically, we are left with an exceptional heritage of journals, texts, and books, the richness of which contrasts with the formal disappearance and group death of this movement. Some activists[3] from this background stood out notably for their reflections, their trajectories, and their theoretical insights, such as Karl Korsch, Anton Pannekoek, Paul Mattick, H. Canne-Meijer, Cajo Brendel, Jan Appel, and, in France, Maximilien Rubel. Finally, during its period of decline, part of this movement gave rise, in

[1]We have already analyzed, in our work of contradictory re-exposition, the Bordigist current in our text: "Strengths and weaknesses of Bordigism" in our magazine Matériaux Critiques No. 8, as well as that of "situationism" in: "Critical return to Guy Debord" in our magazine No. 10. You can read it on our website: https://materiauxcritiques.wix site.com/monsite/textes
[2]The last groups that explicitly refer to this current are, for example, the "GIK" and "Daad en Gedachte" in the Netherlands, Solidarity in Great Britain, or "Socialisme ou Barbarie", "Information et Correspondance Ouvrière", the "Groupe de Liaison et d'Action des Travailleurs" or the "Cahiers du communisme de conseils" in France, all of them disappeared in the 1990s. 1960/70 https://www.daadengedachte.nl/ One of the last expressions of this historical trend was the magazine "Echange," based on Henri Simon, which has now disappeared along with its main proponent. https://maitron.fr/simon-henri/
[3]We are thinking mainly of Paul Mattick, Marx et Keynes, Gallimard, Paris, 2010, and Karl Korsch, Marxisme et philosophie, Allia editions, Paris, 2012, which constitute two indispensable references for the reflection and transmission of revolutionary Marxism.

part, to a new nebula: the "communizers," who questioned the theory of the proletariat and oriented themselves toward the modernist search for other substitute social themes.

## Rosa Luxembourg and the spontaneity of the masses

The main weaknesses of this current must obviously be placed within the context of the long-term lack of understanding of the true nature of the Russian and global counterrevolution. This led to the failure of all voluntaristic and activist initiatives. The theoretical basis of this failure essentially corresponds to the weakest point of its shortcomings: the visceral incomprehension of the need for the proletarian class to organize itself into parties[4]. The consequence of this is a **spontaneous conception** of the emergence of struggles and their structures, characteristic of anarchist and "autonomous" circles of the frustrated petite bourgeoisie. The rejection of the party and its construction in revolutionary times became the privileged libertarian reference point in favor of the improvised emergence of committees, assemblies, and soviets (councils), which, thanks to "democratic control from below," were supposed to suffice to organize the revolutionary victory. This improvised, free, and spontaneous mirage became the perfect panacea for passively hoping and wishing for a self-active, independent, and self-managed organization, born from a vital impulse, without obstacles or leaders.

This visceral rejection of the Party by the "councilists," wrongly considered the **almost exclusive agent of counterrevolution** in Russia and around the world, however, frontally contradicts what the KAPD (the organizational and pro-party origin of so-called councilism) very aptly said at the Third Congress of the Communist International:

"*The Communist Party cannot unleash proletarian struggles; nor can it reject the struggle, since otherwise it would sabotage the preparations for victory. It will only be able to obtain long-term leadership of these struggles if it opposes all the illusions of the masses with complete clarity of the objective and methods of struggle. Only in this way can it become, through a dialectical process, the nucleus of crystallization of revolutionary fighters who, in the course of the struggle, win the confidence of the masses."* (June-July 1921).

With the final failure of the revolution and its transformation from within the workers' movement into a counterrevolution in Russia, various leaders of the German-Dutch left ended up identifying the counterrevolution with the Bolshevik Party in Russia, as if the latter were counterrevolutionary by nature, when in reality it itself suffered the negative effects and repercussions of the regression of the revolutionary situation in Russia and around the world. This spontaneous vision, however, found its main figure in Rosa Luxemburg:

*«He had a mystical faith in the revolutionary masses and their abilities. That faith was linked in her to faith in the creative force, never defeated, of life.»* Henriette Roland-Holst, Rosa Luxemburg, cited by Daniel Guérin in the books : Rosa Luxemburg et la spontanéité révolutionnaire, p.31, Flammarion, Paris, 1971.

Rosa thus became, partly against her own ideas, the standard-bearer of the general strike as a

[4]For more information on this important topic, we refer the interested reader to our article "Parti pris" (Prejudice), published in our magazine Matériaux Critiques No. 3, as well as on our website: https://materiauxcritiques.wixsite.com/monsite/textes

method opposed to reformism and its bureaucracy, but also as a "magic" strategic solution that allowed for the automatic emergence of class consciousness. The mediation of the political party and the communist vanguard was no longer necessary, but even detrimental, as it carried the seeds of opposition between "*the good revolutionary masses and the corrupt leaders*[5]*"*. Otto Rühle[6] found the propagandistic and polemical formula: "The revolution is not a party affair[7]". This rejection of the party form, which was in reality a rejection of the bourgeois form and politics of some of them, thus became the axis of superficial demarcation vis-à-vis the counterrevolution, which also, in reaction, organized itself into a party ("Freikorps," White Guards). Against the party form, what would become councilism, as a "*finally found*" solution, opposed the council form (or soviets in Russian), without considering the essential point: that it was not a difference in organizational forms, but above all in political content. The replacement of the council form with the party form in no way guarantees revolutionary content or program, as tragically demonstrated by the majority emergence of bourgeois councils led by the very same people who were to organize the counterrevolution and the massacre of the main revolutionary leaders.

*«As for the Spartacists, the majority (SPD members: Noske, Ebert, Scheidemann, Müller, etc., editor's note) have the advantage of powerful allies (the army and the bourgeoisie). Furthermore, they have a widespread and organized apparatus, an effective press, and experienced cadres. It was this latter that enabled them, in November, to seize control, especially in the provinces, of thousands of councils that had sprung up almost spontaneously in the wake of a revolution that the majority had opposed until the very end.»* Gilbert Badia, Spartacism (The Last Years of Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, 1914–1919), p. 198, L'Arche, Paris, 1967.

Thus, to return to the apt title of a work on this subject: "*The Revolution (was) Murdered by Its Own Celebrants*.[8]" The absolute apology for the councils as a form "*finally found*" does not respond to the true political question of the revolutionary content -the program- in an adequate form that should correspond to it. Form and content must maintain a dialectical relationship that expresses a concrete and organic totality that represents the proletarian movement oriented and organized toward its immanent objective.

Form and content, like essence and appearance, interact with each other and are in constant transformation. Thus, for Marx, the value of a commodity is above all a form: the value form. But beyond this elemental cell, it is a question of **revealing** the totality of the substance of value, that is, of abstract general labor that comes from a long historical process determined by the conditions of production of its time, that is, by the capitalist mode of production. Content (essence) is usually linked to material reality, whose form (appearance) constitutes the visible, concrete manifestation. Therefore, from the perspective of materialist dialectics, they are contradictory, in flux, mutually conditioned to each other, and are therefore

[5]However, it should be noted that Rosa Luxemburg never developed the caricature-like "anti-party" stance later adopted by some "Luxemburgists." As on other issues (trade unions, parliamentary issues, etc.), she maintained a centrist social democratic stance alongside Paul Levi, her friend and lawyer in the Spartacist League.

[6]See on the website: https://maitron.fr/ruhle-otto/

[7]This 1920 text earned its author expulsion from the KAPD. It is well worth reading. On the website: https://bataillesocialiste.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2007/04/ruhle_revolution-parti1920.pdf For an introduction to the history of this party, we refer readers to our text: «The KAPD: Historical Example of a Combative Party» in our magazine Matériaux Critiques No. 12 and on our website: https://materiauxcritiques.wixsite.com/monsite/textes

[8]Book by Jean-Paul Musigny: «The revolution murdered by its own celebrants, even» Le mouvement des conseils en Allemagne, 1918-1920, Nautilus, Paris, 2001.

inseparable. Every form of organization depends on the political content of that for which it was constituted. The content of the action is the determining, conscious, and voluntary criterion, since revolution is not a matter of "majority" or democracy.

This is the essential point of our conception of the party, which is not reduced to a simple form of organization, but must correspond to the unified form of class consciousness, to "*the power that leads from the immediate to the total, the unifier of theory and praxis, is the Party, with its organization and its discipline, with its total conscious will*." Georg Lukacs, History and Class Consciousness, p. 7, Les éditions de minuit, Paris, 1960. The historical party is not a simple contingency, but the essence of communism. It is, moreover, the reason why, like A. Bordiga, among others, is forcefully expressed in his polemic against "Bolshevization": "**The revolution is not a question of the form of organization**."[9]

Councilism was then forced to conceive the notion of "anti-substitution" in order to strictly differentiate and separate, like social democratic deviations, the party from the class. This idea made it possible to introduce philosophical "prohibitions" into the thought and action of revolutionaries, who were deprived of the duty to assume certain tasks and necessities of the struggle, reserved exclusively for other proletarians, such as, for example, the seizure of power and, even more so, the dictatorship of the proletariat. This separation/prohibition is in absolute contradiction with the Communist Manifesto, which specifies that communists "*do not form a distinct party opposed to other workers' parties. They have no interests distinct from those of the proletariat as a whole. They do not proclaim sectarian principles on which they wish to model the proletarian movement*." K. Marx - F. Engels, Manifesto of the Communist Party, p. 41, Marxist Science Publishing, Paris, 1999.

On the contrary, the theory of "anti-substitutionism" defines communists as proletarians who, because they are communists, would be limited to tasks of analysis and propaganda (and often only in writing!) and, above all, not to those of action and organization. They are thus reduced to mere "observers," "informants," "correspondents," and, at most, "advisors." Because of their designation as "communists," they are forced to be "theorists" confined to their rooms. By rejecting the notion of "vanguard" to define communists, the councilists theorized its opposite, "**tailorism**": communists as the "rearguard" of the movements of their class. The argument generally used to justify this self-castration is the critique of the "Leninist" conception of the party popularized in Lenin's 1902 pamphlet, "What Is to Be Done?" We have already answered this question in our text: "Leninism and anti-Leninism, a sterile polemic", where we pointed out:

«*Leninism and anti-Leninism are by no means reducible to a confrontation between revolution and counterrevolution. Whether it is Leninism ("Marxism-Leninism") or the antithetical reaction of anti-Leninism ("councilism"), we are rather faced with a sclerotic, symmetrical, and complementary prolongation of all the constitutive and proactive positions, tactics, and strategies that led to the workers' defeat. Their crystallization in rigid doctrines and a liturgy of repetitive recipes (state or Soviet, "dictatorial or democratic") aims to perpetuate, while camouflaging, the victory of the counterrevolution, whether in its Stalinist or "libertarian" form, by denouncing or glorifying the*

[9]A. Bordiga, Discours à l'Exécutif de l'Internationale Communiste, 02/23/1926, https://www.marxists.org/francais/bordiga/works/1926/02/bordiga_ic261.htm

*irremediably bourgeois nature of the struggle of Lenin and the Bolsheviks*.» Matériaux Critiques No. 9, October 2024.

Anti-Leninism thus serves, in most cases, as a repellent to the necessary reworking of an adequate theory of the activity and tasks of communists in favorable and unfavorable periods, and in relation to working-class reality. The accusation of replacing the party with the class or its fighting organizations, called "Blanquism [10]," has been used many times in working-class history (from Blanqui to Lenin, to Bakunin). But it was Trotsky who, in 1920, responded to it most perfectly.

*«We have been accused more than once of having substituted the dictatorship of the Soviets for that of the Party. However, it can be safely stated that the dictatorship of the Soviets was only possible thanks to the dictatorship of the Party: thanks to the clarity of its theoretical vision and its solid revolutionary organization, the Party guaranteed the Soviets the possibility of transforming themselves from the formless workers' parliaments that they were into an apparatus for the domination of labor. There is nothing fortuitous in this «substitution» of the power of the Party for the power of the working class, and, fundamentally, there is no substitution. The Communists express the fundamental interests of the working class. It is perfectly natural that, in an epoch in which history places the totality of these interests on the table, the Communists should become the recognized representatives of the working class as a whole*.» L. Trotsky, Terrorism and Communism, p. 119, Editions Prométhée, Paris, 1980.

## Transmission fragments

However, the councilist tradition allowed for the transmission of principled positions and proletarian experiences from the German communist left and its rich practice during the revolutionary movements of 1918-21. The fundamental understanding of the counterrevolutionary role and function of the unions, increasingly integrated into the state apparatus, and the maintenance of a principled anti-parliamentary and anti-electoralist position based not on a moralistic analysis but on the proven impossibility of using these bourgeois structures for purposes other than those for which they were conceived -the strengthening of democracy- are two of its main programmatic pillars. To these [11]must be added a distrust of national liberation struggles, always instrumentalized by one or another of the nationalisms inherent in all bourgeois states, even those in their infancy, and the rejection of inter-bourgeois campist or anti-fascist fronts.

These positions and their elaborations were part of a more general quest by some groups around the world to critically revisit the achievements of past revolutionaries and clarify the fundamental positions around which revolutionaries of the late twentieth century should unite.

[10]Engels defines Blanquism as follows: In his political activity he was above all a “man of action” who believed that a small, well-organized minority could, by attempting at the opportune moment to carry out a revolutionary coup, draw the popular masses behind it, thanks to some initial successes, and thus achieve a victorious revolution (...) From the Blanquist idea that every revolution is the work of a small minority, there automatically follows the necessity of a dictatorship after the success of the insurrection, a dictatorship which, naturally, is not exercised by the entire revolutionary class, the proletariat, but by the small number of those who have carried out the coup and who, in turn, are subject in advance to the dictatorship of one or several people. F. Engels, The Program of the Blanquist Emigrants of the Commune, 1873. On the website: https://www.marxists.org/francais/engels/works/1873/06/18730600.htm

[11]In politics, "campism" is used to describe the tendency to necessarily choose a side in the confrontation between imperialist powers, and to align oneself, even critically, with one of them under the pretext that it is "less evil" or more "progressive."

Unfortunately, this approach also included confusions and visions that, although inherited from the past, corresponded to a "new" and alternative management of capital rather than to its critique and transformation in theory and practice. This deficiency was labeled "managerialism" because it fails to overcome "workers'" management (in the sociological sense) with an "equitable" distribution of goods produced under unchanging capitalist relations. It is the democratic vision of workers' control that in no way represents a break with exploitation, the production of surplus value, and the perpetuation of the CMP. Marx had already attacked Proudhon for the illusion of reforms that would not correspond to the satisfaction of real human needs.

*«In a future society, in which class antagonism has disappeared, in which classes no longer exist, use would no longer be determined by the minimum production time, but the social production time devoted to different objects would be determined by their degree of social utility.»* Karl Marx, The Poverty of Philosophy, p.73, Éditions Sociales, Paris, 1972.

On the contrary, the managerialist concept, which is basically social democratic, maintains the working-class myth of a self-managed society without bosses, but not without factories or wage labor.[12]

*«With regard to the organizational framework of the new society, they (the council communist groups) advocate the idea of a council organization based on industry and the production process, and the adoption of average working time as an instrument for measuring production, reproduction, and distribution, insofar as such an instrument is indispensable for ensuring economic equality within the framework of the current division of labor. (...) a new society can only function on the basis of direct worker participation in all decisions.»* Paul Mattick, Communist Council Groups, (1939) in: Capitalist Integration and Workers' Breakaway, p.81, EDI, Paris, 1972.

This management approach corresponds, in fact, to the Proudhonian vision of a more "egalitarian" capitalism, without appropriating the indispensable work of "critique of political economy," which implies the struggle for the rigorous deconstruction of all the categories of capital: value, commodity, money, profit... It corresponds to the mythical vision of the possibility of reforming the company, without abolishing wages, but thanks to factory committees that replace the bosses.

«***Socialism consists in denying the capitalist enterprise, not in its conquest by the worker.***» Prometeo, cited in : J. Camatte, Bordiga et la passion du communisme, p17, Spartacus, Paris, 1974.

On the other hand, "councilism" increasingly questioned "Marxism" as a political method for appropriating and understanding reality. The "old" labor movement became a bourgeois movement whose sole objective was "the integration of the proletariat as a class into capital." The rejection of bourgeois politics became the rejection of politics in general, becoming interested only in "fragmented struggles" and day-to-day survival (squatters, environmentalism, feminism... and marginalism of all kinds). The denunciation of the impossibility of "socialism in one country"[13] evidently led to a radical critique of all so-called socialist states, which for the councilists were nothing more than the expression of "state

[12]On this topic, we have published the text "Critique of the myth of self-management" in our magazine Matériaux Critiques No. 7, as well as on our website: https://materiauxcritiques.wixsite.com/monsite/textes

[13]On the critique of the concept of State capitalism, see: Matériaux Critiques No. 2: «State and Capital: A Consubstantial Relationship», as well as on our website: https://materiauxcritiques.wixsite.com/monsite/textes

capitalism." In the face of the many leftist movements, councilism increasingly asserted itself as "anti-Bolshevik" and anti-party, de facto merging with the anarchist movement. However, Pannekoek (along with Gorter) began, as early as 1912, to question the "classical" and bourgeois position of support for "national liberation" and "national self-determination." He firmly opposed the defense of a nationalism that would be considered "acceptable" in the case of so-called "weak," "small," or "oppressed" nations.

«*To the nationalist propaganda of the bourgeoisie, the workers countered the reality of their lives by proclaiming that workers have no homeland. Socialist propaganda, fundamentally opposed to capitalism, elevated internationalism to the rank of a principle of the working class*.» Anton Pannekoek, Les conseils ouvriers, p.260, bélibaste, Paris, 1974.

This principled stance also anticipated the clear demarcation with the official positions that the Third International would later adopt (1919), in continuity with the social democratic legacy of supporting the young independence-seeking bourgeoisies. For Pannekoek, on the other hand, the nation and national sentiment are specific creeds of the bourgeoisie that cannot in any way obscure the proletarian point of view.

«*According to our conclusions, however, the nation is nothing more than a temporary and transitory structure in the history of human evolution, one of the many forms of organization that succeed one another or manifest simultaneously: tribes, peoples, empires, churches, rural communities, states.* ***Among these, the nation, in its specificity, is essentially a product of bourgeois society and will disappear with it.*** *Seeking to find the nation in all past and future communities is as artificial as interpreting, in the style of bourgeois economists, the set of past and future economic forms as varied forms of capitalism(...)*.» Anton Pannekoek, Nation and Class Struggle, p.166, 10/18, Paris, 1977.

«*Like religious antagonisms, national antagonisms constitute an excellent means of dividing the proletariat, diverting its attention from the class struggle by means of ideological slogans, and preventing its class unity. Increasingly, the instinctive aspirations of the bourgeois classes to prevent the proletariat from uniting, becoming lucid and powerful, constitute an important element of bourgeois politics. (...) Our politics and our agitation can only focus on the need to wage always and solely the class struggle, to awaken class consciousness so that the workers, thanks to a clear understanding of reality, become insensitive to the slogans of nationalism.*» idem, pp. 186-188.

The anti-nationalism of the council communists is one of the fundamental proletarian principles that this movement managed to uphold, despite the wars and attempts at polarization. This is one of the main achievements that this historic movement was able to defend, despite its shortcomings, and pass on to younger generations of activists.

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