As 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.