

Council Communism & The Critique of Bolshevism

"Suppose the central leadership is able to distribute all of what has been produced in a righteous way. Even then the fact remains, that the producers don't have at their disposal the machinery of production. This machinery is not theirs, it is one used to dispose of them. The inevitable consequence is that those groups that oppose the existent leadership will be oppressed with force. The central economic power is in the hands of those who, at the same time, exercise the political power. Any opposition thinking in a different way about political and economic problems will be oppressed with any possible means. This means that instead of an association of free and equal producers, as defined by Marx, there is a house of correction as no one has seen before."

This quotation, freely translated from a seventy year old text, explains that the relations of production as they were developed in Russia after October 1917, have nothing to do with what Marx and Engels understood as communism. At the time the just-quoted pamphlet was published the terror of the thirties lay ahead. It was only prophecy. There was not any political event which had caused this criticism of Soviet society; this criticism arose from an economic analysis. On this base the rising Stalinism was understood as the political expression of an economic system that belonged to a state capitalist exploitation, and this counted not only for Stalinism.

The just-mentioned text was the work of a group whose authors belonged to a current that arose in the years after the First World War and won permanent meaning. This current was characterized by a sharp criticism of social democracy as well as Bolshevism. It was a current that carefully analyzed the daily experiences of the working class, and so it came to new ideas about the class struggle. The current saw social democracy and Bolshevism as the "old labour movement" ; the contradiction of this was "a new movement of the workers."

Among the earliest representatives of this current were German and Dutch Marxists who had always stood on the left wing of social democracy. In the course of their years long permanent struggle against reformism they became more and more critical of social democracy. The best known of this current were two Dutchmen, Anton Pannekoek (1872-1960) and Herman Gorter (1864-1927) and also two Germans, Karl Schroder (1884-1950) and Otto Ruhle (1874-1943). Later the much younger Paul Mattick (1904-1980) became one of its most important theorists.

Pannekoek's ideas drew attention shortly after the turn of the century for some Marxist reflections on philosophy. From 1906 up to the outbreak of the First World War he worked in Germany. First for a year as a teacher in the SPD party school then after he was threatened with expulsion from Germany, he worked in Bremen and wrote articles for different left papers. While in Bremen Pannekoek witnessed a very important wildcat strike by the dockers there. This experience influenced his ideas about the class struggle, and his interpretation of Marxism as well. As a consequence he rejected Bolshevik theories about organization, strategy and policy at a very early date.

Otto Ruhle never identified himself with a current in the German labour movement; however, he never neglected the general interests of the working class. Like Pannekoek he rejected Bolshevism in the 1920's and was one of the first to argue that the proletarian revolution was something completely different from a bourgeois revolution and as a consequence required completely different forms of organization. For this reason he rejected the fallacy that the proletarian revolution should be the case of

a party. "Revolution" he said "is not a party affair; politically and economically it is the affair of the whole working class."

These ideas, which would become far more detailed, were characteristic of the current which became known as Council Communism. Council Communism, from the beginning of the twenties was based on the experiences of the Russian and German Revolutions, and defended the councilists' democracy and rejected the power of the party. It sought to distinguish itself from Bolshevism and the Bolsheviks, and those who claimed the name communist. Nevertheless at its origin it was very far away from the opinions it later developed.

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In the beginning Council Communism was hardly different from Leninism. Ruhle however did not regard the parties of the Third International as communist ones. A few years later the Council Communists were to distinguish themselves much more clearly from Bolshevism. The so-called October Revolution finished Czarism and put an end to feudal relations and cleared the way for capitalist ones.

The Council Communists went further. They pointed to the fact that an economy such as the Russian one, based on wage labour, that is to say an economy where the labour force is a commodity, wants nothing more than the production of surplus value and the exploitation of the workers; It doesn't matter whether the surplus value goes to private capitalists or to the state as the proprietor of the means of production. The Council Communists remembered that Marx had taught that nationalization of the means of production has nothing to do with socialism. The Council Communists pointed to the fact that in Russia, production obeyed the same laws that exist in classical private capitalism. Exploitation can only come to an end - so said Marx - when wage labour no longer exists. The Council Communists explained, referring to Moscow, what communism was not. The differences between Council Communism and Bolshevism became clearer and more complete.

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What has been said before should not be understood as meaning that Council Communism is a special critique of Stalinism. It is a critique of Bolshevism in general. Council Communists don't see Stalinism as a sort of 'counter-revolution' that deprived October of its fruits. Rather they see Stalinism just as a fruit of this revolution, one that opened the door for capitalism in Russia. Stalin was the heir of Bolshevism and the Bolshevik Revolution. The development of this theory went slowly, just as the case was with social development. In their course the Council Communists changed their opinion and their own practice. Initially in Germany and Holland Council Communist parties were founded. This contradicted the opinion of some like Ruhle who, as stated previously, thought that parties were not an affair of the working class. Ruhle however, saw these organizations as parties "of a completely new character - a party that wasn't a party anymore."

Four years later in 1924 Ruhle spoke a different language. "A party with a revolutionary character in the proletarian meaning of the word" he said "is an absurdity. Its revolutionary character can only be in a bourgeois meaning and only when the question is the changing of feudalism into capitalism." He was perfectly right and for this reason the so-called absurdities disappeared from the proletarian theatre

within ten years. There was little exception and soon after the Second World War the expression was no longer used.

At the same time the Council Communists grew up. They had learned that the Russian Revolution was nothing more than a bourgeois revolution and that the Russian economy was nothing more than state capitalism. They had a clearer understanding of things which were ripe for new research. Other things not analyzed before, stood now in a clearer light.

The most important analysis in this respect was completed by Pannekoek in 1938. He published a pamphlet on Lenin's philosophy and produced a more profound analysis of Bolshevism. Pannekoek pointed to the fact that Lenin's Marxism was nothing more than a legend and contradicted real Marxism. At the same time he explained the cause: "In Russia," he said "the struggle against Czarism resembled in many aspects the struggle against feudalism in Europe long before. In Russia church and religion supported the existing power. For that reason a struggle against religion was a social necessity." For this reason what Lenin regarded as historical materialism hardly distinguished itself from the French bourgeois materialism of the 18th century, a materialism that, in those times, was used as a spiritual weapon against the church and religion. In the same way, that is to say, pointing to the similarities of the social relations in Russia before the revolution and those in the pre-revolutionary France, the Council Communists pointed to the fact that Lenin and the members of his party claimed the name Jacobins for themselves. They meant that their party in the Russian bourgeois revolution had the same function as the French Jacobins.

That Bolshevism in March 1918, only five months after October 1917, robbed the Soviets from their already minimalized power was - as the Council Communists said - a logical consequence of the October Revolution. Soviets were not suitable with a system that was the political superstructure of state capitalist productive relations.

What the council Communist movement mean by communism is a completely different thing from that system. The dictatorship of a party doesn't fit with social relations based on the abolition of wage-labour and the end of exploitation of the workers. A society in which the producers are free and equal can't be something different from the democracy of the producers.

Cajo Brendel

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