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different sign, in the drive of its questions, in the experiments of its answers … The dead return transformed'.[120] Contrary to any hypothesisation of the past, the merits of the anarchist and councilist assessment of the Russian Revolution open up a political and theoretical space for the united action between anarchism and Marxism in and through a process of critical solidarity and self-criticism. This must be a unity in struggle, in the direction of the formation of a 'great international of all the workers of the world'.[121] There is a 'secret index'[122] that derives from their past struggles and points to the need to overcome fragmentation and mutual hostility so as next time, which is now-time, to be prepared and united in the struggle against capitalism. Their struggle is a still living struggle. Their legacy shows the way for new beginnings to be made and for the constantly repeated mistakes to be avoided. There is an imperative need to re-read the Russian Revolution not exclusively through the way it was read or the answers given by anarchists and councilists, but through the anarchist and councilist radical thinking, praxis and struggle. For realists and conformists, of course, their struggle was pointless and desperate. Anarchists and councilists were seen as naïve, as were struggling without hope. Even if, at times, it was so, the poet could wonderfully remind them that

> maybe there, where someone holds out without hope,
> maybe there what we call
> human history is beginning, and the splendour of humankind.[123]

[120] E. Bloch, Dialectics and Hope, *New German Critique*, 9 (1976), p. 8.
[121] P. Kropotkin, 'Letter to the Workers of Western Europe', p. 256.
[122] W. Benjamin, 'On the Concept of History', p. 390.
[123] Y. Ritsos, 'Helen', in Y. Ritsos, *The Fourth Dimension* (Princeton, N.J, 1993), p. 265.

ABSTRACT

The Russian Revolution, being part of the revolutionary tradition of the exploited and oppressed, encompasses sufferings, horrors and tragedies, but also unfulfilled promises, hopes and revolutionary inspirations. The subversive heritage includes, among others, the largely neglected radical critiques of the Russian Revolution that preceded analogous Trotskyist endeavours. All these forgotten critiques, unrealised potentials and past struggles could act as a constantly renewed point of departure in the fight for human emancipation. This essay examines the two radical currents of anarchism and Council Communism and their critical confrontation with the Russian Revolution and the class character of the Soviet regime. First, it outlines the major anarchist critiques and analyses of the revolution (Kropotkin, Malatesta, Rocker, Goldman, Berkman and Voline). Following this, it explores the critique provided by the Council Communist tradition (Pannekoek, Gorter and Rühle). The essay moves on to provide a critical re-evaluation of both anarchist and councilist appraisals of the Russian Revolution in order to disclose liberating intentions and tendencies that are living possibilities for contemporary radical anti-capitalist struggles all over the world. It also attempts to shed light on the limits, inadequacies and confusions of their approaches, derive lessons for the present social struggles and make explicit the political and theoretical implications of this anti-critique.

> *'Russia must return to the creative genius of local forces which, as I see it, can be a factor in the creation of a new life … If the present situation continues, the very word 'socialism' will turn into a curse. This is what happened to the conception of 'equality' in France for forty years after the rule of the Jacobins.'*

Kropotkin to Lenin, Dmitrov, 4 March 1920.

Prevailing ideas and analyses that deal with the historical and political significance of the Russian Revolution tend to reconstruct its history as past history, which is indifferent to current social and political conditions. There is an attempt for an image of a frozen past to be constructed that is separated from the present. The past is recognised only as past. The Russian Revolution is perceived as dead, past time that generated a monstrous totalitarian regime. According to this logic, it can only serve as an example to avoid. Having been disassociated from the present, then, the memory of the past struggles is expropriated by the status quo, the victors of history and it is utilised to legitimise the exploitation and domination of the ruling class. The demise of the Soviet regime is seen as being the tragic consequence of a pre-determined historical course that substantiates the triumph of western type liberal democracies. It also justifies neo-liberal policies even when neo-liberalism is going through a tremendous crisis: there is no alternative. Nothing important has survived from the Russian Revolution except the suffering and pain caused by the 'red terror'. In contradistinction to this approach, which reflects the idea of history as the history of the rulers and dominant, the history of the exploited and oppressed indicates that 'nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost to history'.[1]

For this concept of history, there is a continuity of the revolutionary struggles that breaks the homogeneous time of official history and unifies the militant legacy, arguing that 'most of the past is interrupted future, future in the past'.[2] Searching in the past for radical elements which are of vital importance for present and future anti-capitalist struggles, this paper presents and discusses

[1] W. Benjamin, 'On the Concept of History', in W. Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, Vol. 4, 1938–1940 (Cambridge, MA, 2003), p. 390.

[2] Ernst Bloch, quoted in M. Landmann, 'Talking with Ernst Bloch: Korčula, 1968', *Telos*, 25 (1975), p. 179.

olution. Their argument is not grounded in a dynamic analysis of the contradictory and fluid movement of the revolution. Rather the revolution is construed in a static fashion and as having reached a preconceived end. Their approach, then, is bound to examine the Russian Revolution in a non-processual manner. It is missing the open, conflictual, class antagonistic and uncertain character of the revolution which had gone through several phases and its final outcome was, even till the last moment, unpredictable and always at issue. On this, Rocker made a notable observation in regard to the English and French revolutions, which could be equally valid as a reply to the argument about the dual revolution that concerns the Russian Revolution: 'That the bourgeoisie prevailed at the end and took over power does not prove, by any means, that the revolution itself was bourgeois'.[118]

On June 6, 1924, Mussolini, interrupting a communist delegate in the Chamber, noted cynically and sarcastically: 'We have admirable masters in Russia! We have only to imitate what has been done in Russia … We are wrong not to follow their example completely'.[119] That was a time for 'victory' and 'success' for Mussolini and his 'masters' in Russia. Anarchists and councilists were the defeated, the lost who belonged irrevocably to the past. However, the dialectic understanding of the success-defeat relationship indicates that their loss was a loss within the process of struggle, struggle in process. And this struggle is not yet finished because it never comes to an end. It is full of anticipated freedom and oppression, hope and dissatisfaction, dreams and nightmares, ends and beginnings. In this regard and despite its own limitations, the anarchist and councilist critique of the Russian Revolution is neither lost nor dead. In the everyday struggles for social emancipation all over the world, their radical ideas and actions recur as an already existing possibility, as a living past, 'which continues to affect us under a

[118] R. Rocker, *The Failure of State Communism*, p. 60.

[119] Quoted in D. Guerin, *Fascism and Big Business* (New York, 1973), p. 123.

> cally proletarian weapon of struggle – the strike – was the principal means of bringing the masses into motion and the most characteristic phenomenon in the wave-like rise of decisive events.[116]

Expanding on Lenin's understanding, then, we can gain a number of insights. The class character of a revolution is determined by the social forces that play a crucial role in it and the specific methods of class struggle used, which in the case of a proletarian revolution concerns the means of 'strike'. Such a perception rejects any pre-established framework of social development and the emphasis is shifted to the transformative power of class struggle. Subversive human activity breaks the historical continuity produced by abstract schemata and homogenous time and radically questions the positivistic apotheosis of the concept of progress and any teleological certainty.[117] The Russian Revolution was neither a historical accident nor the result of historical necessity. It did not follow a predetermined course whose outcome was known in advance. Nor can it be judged as a bourgeois one from its 'end result' or due to the fact that it brought about the development of the productive forces and the rapid industrialisation of the country. By the same token, the views that existed within the councilist tradition that the Russian Revolution started as a dual revolution, that is, partly proletarian and partly bourgeois, and ended up as a bourgeois one, failed to grasp the contradictory and antagonistic nature of the rev-

[116] V.I. Lenin, 'Lecture on the 1905 Revolution', in V.I. Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 23, (London, 1964), p. 239.

[117] This contradicts Kropotkin's views, whose, at times, positive attitude towards the Russian Revolution could be attributed, according to Burbank, to his loyalty to 'historical progress' and the stress he placed on 'progressive and evolutionary forces'. J. Burbank, *Intelligentsia and Revolution: Russian Views of Bolshevism 1917–1922*, p.104. See, also, Kropotkin's assertion that 'socialism will certainly make considerable progress' and that the revolution is 'a natural phenomenon, independent of the human will'. P. Kropotkin, 'Letter to the Workers of Western Europe', p.256.

the critique of the Russian Revolution and the Soviet Union developed by the two largely neglected political and theoretical traditions of anarchism and Council Communism. It argues that despite their theoretical and political inconsistencies, ambiguities and mistakes, both trends have provided valuable insights that could contribute to our better understanding of the Russian Revolution and the formation of the Soviet Union. A critical assessment of the anarchist and councilist evaluation of the Russian Revolution represents a fundamental part of the process of critically assessing the radical anti-capitalist tradition and, therefore, it constitutes part of the present struggles for human emancipation. In this sense, the essay, firstly, examines the anarchists' account of the Russian Revolution and their analysis of the new Soviet regime. Next, it considers the appraisal of the Soviet social formation carried out by the Council Communist tradition. It goes on to outline the contribution and the common perspectives that anarchists and Council Communists have shared. A large part of the merits of their radical critique amounts to the suppressed alternatives and the lost opportunities of the Russian Revolution. At the same time, the radical heritage of their critical endeavour, which concerns their emphasis on the self-organised struggle of the people and their critique of party politics and state, delineates the common ground on which the imperative need for a united action between anarchism and Marxism could be based. Finally, the essay examines the weak points of their critique, which are related to their confusion regarding the class nature of the Soviet Union, the character of the Russian Revolution and, at times, their espousal of a linear conception of history and time. The paper concludes by high-lighting the need for the valuable anarchist and councilist legacy to be considered as a living past and developed further.

THE ANARCHIST APPROACH

Despite the fact that anarchists disagreed with and opposed certain Bolshevik policies, their response to the Russian Revolution was initially positive and at times even enthusiastic. Having been attracted by its undoubted libertarian tendencies, the majority of rank-and-file anarchist militants adopted a friendly and supportive attitude to it. Anarchists saw, in both the theory and practice of the 'soviets', intimate connections with their own perceptions on councilism and a confirmation of the anarchist doctrine. In Russia, more precisely, many anarchists read Lenin's *April Theses* and *The State and Revolution* through anti-authoritarian lenses.[3] His determined will to smash the state and abolish the bureaucracy, the army and the police or his critique of parliamentarism were seen as a decisive step towards the espousal of more anti-authoritarian theses. For Russian anarchists, also, Lenin's attitude against the war 'was a departure from Marxism'.[4] The western European anarchists, likewise, supported the Russian Revolution primarily due to the Bolsheviks' stance against the Great War and the corresponding failure of the European radical movement to prevent it. One should not forget, however, that anarchists were not well aware of the political situation in Russia. Western European anarchists had great difficulties in getting access to accurate information about what exactly was happening in Russia owing to the problems with the flow of information from Russia to Western Europe, at least till 1920.[5] Hence, during the first three years of the revolution, the approval given to it by many western anarchists was warm and

[3] Other anarchists outside Russia shared these views too. For example, Rocker characterised Lenin's *The State and Revolution* as a 'strange mixture of Marxist and conspicuous anarchist ideas'. R. Rocker, *The Failure of State Communism*, Translated by J. Grancharoff, (2004), p. 53.

[4] G. Raiva, 'Marxism and Revolution', in P. Avrich (eds), *The Anarchists in the Russian Revolution* (London, 1973), p. 90.

[5] D. Berry, *A History of the French Anarchist Movement, 1917–1945* (Westview, CT, 2002), p. 77, 83.

tionary conception of a stages theory of history, it was claimed that the Soviet regime was the historically necessary and inevitable outcome of the bourgeois character of the Russian Revolution. Accordingly, the evaluation of the revolution was based upon the estimation that from the outset its future was foreclosed and inscribed in abstract historical laws, according to which it should follow a preconceived schema that could only lead from feudalism to a variant on capitalism, that is, state capitalism. Or, at times and espousing the same hypothetical judgment, the revolution was assessed as a bourgeois one, on the grounds that it produced a state capitalist system. In other words, its class character was judged by its outcome, its final result, independently of the social forces that made the revolution, the actual struggles of people and their means of fighting. Following the same reasoning and from a contemporary Marxist-Leninist vantage point, Callinicos articulates this point explicitly when he argues that, 'bourgeois revolutions are characterised by a disjunction of agency and outcome. A variety of different social and political forces – Independent gentry, Jacobin Lawyers, *Junker* and *samurai* bureaucrats, even "Marxist-Leninists" – can carry through political transformations which radically improve the prospects for capitalist development'.[115] We are far away even from Lenin, who broached the issue regarding the social content and nature of a revolution in a more radical and concise manner. Discussing the peculiarity of the revolution of 1905, Lenin held that it was a bourgeois-democratic revolution in terms of its social content and immediate aims. At the same time, however, for Lenin, the revolution of 1905,

> was also a proletarian revolution, not only in the sense that the proletariat was the leading force, the vanguard of the movement, but also in the sense that a specifi-

[115] A. Callinicos, 'Bourgeois Revolutions and Historical Materialism', in P. McGarr and A. Callinicos (eds), *Marxism and the Great French Revolution* (London, 1993), p. 160. See also p. 124.

ical evolution but its function has remained the same … Whether it is called a republic or a monarchy, or is organised on the basis of a constitution or autocracy, its historical mission has not changed'.[113] In this regard, the state was seen to have a historical character functioning differently in each society. The state, then, becomes naturalised and it is presented as having transhistorical properties. Its historical role and changes are emphasised, whereas its specific social constitution and unity with Soviet society is overlooked. An important consequence of this reasoning, which mainly concerns the anarchist approach, is the idolisation of the issue of power, or else, the anarchists' almost exclusive focus on the analysis of 'the sociology of power', as Paul Nursey-Bray calls it. This in turn implied an ideological treatment of the Soviet regime, according to which, anarchists to a large extent, explicated the relations of power in the former USSR by ascribing to Bolsheviks or Marxists in general, a motive or a lust for power. This approach lessened the effectiveness of their critique, since their focus on the analysis of power relations signalled their inability to grasp the dynamic and contradictory movement of the class relations that characterised the Soviet regime. Their critique thus operated within the framework of already existing power relations and turned out to become a static analysis that followed a closed and predetermined development of the Soviet regime.

This non-dialectical understanding of the Soviet society was fostered by the councilist and Kropotkin's perception of history and their theorising regarding the unavoidable bourgeois character of the Russian Revolution.[114] History was construed as advancing by following a linear conception of time, leading inevitably from one mode of production to another. Based on a teleological and evolu-

[113] R. Rocker, *The Failure of State Communism*, p. 55.

[114] Not all the anarchist current espoused this phaseological model of historical and social development. See, for example, Rocker's distinct approach and understanding of the bourgeois revolutions in R. Rocker, *The Failure of State Communism*, pp. 49–50 and 59–60.

wholehearted, as their interpretation of it was, in essence, a libertarian one.

Indeed, in Italy, according to Carl Levy, the Russian Revolution 'brought "rigid" socialists and libertarians closer together' and 'seemed to lessen rather to accentuate ideological differences', since both anarchists and socialists 'adapted a sovietist interpretation' of the revolution.[6] The support for the Russian Revolution provided by Italian anarchists was even expressed practically when the Unione Anarchica Italiana (UAI) organised an anti-Russian-interventionist meeting in Florence in August 1920.[7] In France, anarchists expressed a genuine admiration for the Bolsheviks and were strongly influenced by the Russian Revolution both theoretically and politically. The revolutionary current of 'sovietism' developed by the French anarchists drew on the experience of the soviets, that is, the workers' councils which had emerged in Russia since the revolution of 1905.[8] In broad terms, French anarchists emphasised the similarities between sovietism, councilism and the anarchist perception of revolution, without hiding their differences from and certain objections to Bolshevism. After 1920, however, anarchists began more openly and strongly to criticise Bolsheviks for their policies. They argued that their methods were incompatible with a socialist society and acted as a brake in the course of the radical transformation of the Russian society. Crucial to this turn were the formation of the Red Army, the Bolsheviks' shift to more and more authoritarian policies, which culminated in the bloody repression of the Kronstadt rebellion of 1921, the implementation of NEP and the publication of Lenin's *Left-Wing Communism: An Infantile Disorder*.[9] The

[6] C. Levy, 'Italian anarchism, 1870–1926', in D. Goodway (eds), *For Anarchism* (London, 1989), p. 61.

[7] Ibid., p. 71.

[8] For a detailed presentation of the current of 'sovietism', see D. Berry, *A History of the French Anarchist Movement, 1917–1945*, pp. 55–65.

[9] Ibid., pp. 76–84.

newly established regime was deprived of its ideological and political justification. As a consequence, the anarchist critique was vividly expressed both in practice (the Kronstadt Revolt and the Makhnovist movement in the Ukraine are the most remarkable cases but not the only ones) and theory.

On a theoretical level, the anarchist trend developed some of the first radical appraisals of the Soviet regime, though not without contradictions and ambiva-lences, which were principally depicted in Kropotkin's stance towards the Russian Revolution. Kropotkin returned to Russia in early summer 1917 and, unlike antiwar Russian anarchists, he reiterated his 'patriotic' positions for the continuation of the war in order to defeat Germany militarily. Unsurprisingly, due to his stand in favour of the war against Germany, on his arrival in Petrograd he was welcomed, along with sixty thousand people, by Kerensky and Skobolev on behalf of the republican government. Kropotkin's priority for the defeat of German militarism led him to maintain a close relationship with the liberal party of the 'Cadets', its leader Paul Miliukov, the Russian government and the Prime Minister Kerensky.[10] Having been detached from the struggles of the Russian people for many years, Kropotkin came to the point of speaking 'in favour of the Republic'[11] and 'urged the bourgeoisie to reorganise their enterprises so as to remedy the plight of the masses'.[12] As becomes clear, then, the Bolsheviks, because of their seizure of power, could not count on Kropotkin's sympathy and support. Kropotkin's views came under bitter attack from Lenin and provoked his sarcastic comments about the '"Plekhanovite" conversions of the Kropotkins … into

[10] See on this, M. A. Miller, *Kropotkin* (Chicago, IL, 1976), pp. 234–5 and G. Woodcock and I. Avakumovic, *Kropotkin: From Prince to Rebel* (Montréal, 1990), pp. 396–7.

[11] Quoted in G. Woodcock and I. Avakumovic, *Kropotkin: From Prince to Rebel*, p. 400.

[12] M. A. Miller, *Kropotkin,* pp. 236–7.

pushed to its limits, was meant to lead anarchists and councilists to conclusions akin to neo-liberals' construction of an ideal-type anti-liberal invariant. For neo-liberals, this economic-political invariant included the elements of economic protectionism, state socialism, planned economy and Keynesian interventionism and decisively hindered any advance of the market economy and liberal policy. A fundamental identity of statism was, then, constructed by neo-liberals that encompassed social regimes 'as different as Nazism and parliamentary England, the Soviet Union and America of the New Deal'.[111] Abstractions and the usage of economic or political invariants had as a result opposite political trends to resort to characterisations and labels that mystified the real content of the Soviet social formation and involved erroneous theoretical and political assumptions.

The non-relation between the economic and political spheres resulted in anarchists and councilists deriving social relations from hypothised political structures instead of understanding political categories from within and through definite social relations. As Marx argued, 'only political superstition still imagines today that civil life must be held together by the state, whereas in reality, on the contrary, the state is held together by civil life'.[112] Political forms, such as the Soviet state and the Bolshevik Party, were treated as having their own logic. They turned out to be the major agents and act as the real subjects within a presupposed and objective framework. The Soviet state was not understood as a social form of specific social relations, but rather it was defined and criticised ahistorically. Rocker, for example, saw the 'state in Russia' as the historical continuation of the 'modern State' that was created with the emergence of capitalism. As he observed regarding the role of the modern state, 'its forms have changed during histor-

[111] M. Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics* (New York, 2008), p. 111. On this issue see also pp. 106–116.

[112] K. Marx, *The Holy Family, or Critique of Critical Criticism* (Moscow, 1975), pp. 142–3.

despotic properties moving towards autocracy or fascism. In the anarchist and councilist approach, the economic structure of the USSR was perceived ahistorically as being part of a process of economic convergence that concerns varied and divergent social and political systems. The Soviet state was understood, then, as a different political form within the same universal economic framework, which was characterised by a general tendency to state capitalism. Anarchists and councilists attributed to the 'economic' an essential ahistorical character that had no inner relation with the 'political'. This split between economics and politics posited the political structures as being independent from the soviet economic mode of production. The economic and the political spheres of the Soviet regime were not comprehended as being 'distinctions within a unity'.[109] Consequently, the terms 'capitalist', 'socialist', 'communist', 'fascist' and 'totalitarian' were used as presupposed categories to be applied to the Soviet reality and not in order to explicate definite social characteristics. Political structures, such as the Soviet state and the Bolshevik party, were not understood on the basis of a concrete analysis of Soviet society. The fact that political methods and practices, as emerged in National-Socialist Germany and the Soviet regime, appear to bear common traits, should not lead to the abstract generalisation of 'red and black fascism'. Such an abstraction fails to grasp the distinct essence between the two systems. The common attributes between the two social formations do not explain anything. Nothing specific derives from this analogy between general characteristics. Foucault argued, for example, that concentration camps are an English invention, and remarked: 'That doesn't mean, however, nor does it authorise the view that England is a totalitarian country'.[110] Unsurprisingly, the development of a non-historical critique of the Soviet Union, when

[109] K. Marx, *Grundrisse* (London, 1973), p. 99.

[110] M. Foucault, *Remarks on Marx. Conversations with Duccio Trombadori* (New York, 1991), p. 170

social-chauvinists or "anarcho-trenchists"'[13] and their hanging on 'to the coat-tail of the bourgeoisie'.[14]

This controversy, however, did not keep Kropotkin and Lenin from meeting and exchanging a series of letters. More specifically, in their meeting in May 1919, Kropotkin pinpointed the similar goals that he shared with Bolsheviks, but at the same time, he emphasised their own differences in terms of the 'means of action and organisation'.[15] Kropotkin stressed the significance of the cooperative movement and observed that in Russia the cooperatives were persecuted by the local authorities and the previous revolutionaries who became 'bureaucratised, converted into officials'.[16]

In the following year, in March 1920, Kropotkin sent Lenin a letter in which he insisted on the necessity of a swift transfer of power to local forces and institutions and made it clear that the dictatorship of the Bolshevik party is 'harmful for the creation of a new socialist system'.[17] The new regime was 'a Soviet Republic only in name'.[18] In his second letter, in December 1920, Kropotkin put particular stress on the issue of hostages and fiercely criticised the Soviet government's practices regarding the treatment and extermination of hostages during the civil war. The taking of hostages as a means of the Red Army's self-defence was seen by Kropotkin as a 'return to the worst period of the Middle Ages and religious wars'.[19]

Nevertheless, Kropotkin closed his letter by acknowledging that the October Revolution had brought about 'progress in the

[13] V. I. Lenin, *The State and Revolution* (New York, NY, 1992), p. 88.

[14] Ibid., p. 106.

[15] P. Kropotkin, 'Conversation with Lenin', in M. A. Miller (eds), *Selected Writings on Anarchism and Revolution* (Cambridge, MA and London, 1975), p. 326.

[16] Ibid., p. 327.

[17] Kropotkin to Lenin, 4 March 1920, in M. A. Miller (eds), *Selected Writings on Anarchism and Revolution*, p. 336.

[18] Ibid., p. 337.

[19] Kropotkin to Lenin, 21 December 1920, in M. A. Miller (eds), *Selected Writings on Anarchism and Revolution*, p. 338.

direction of equality' and 'demonstrated that social revolution is not impossible'.[20] A similar point was made in his *Letter to the workers of Western Europe*, where he recognised and endorsed the revolution's positive contribution in introducing in Russia 'new conceptions of the rights of labour, its rightful place in society and the duties of each citizen'.[21] For Kropotkin, the Russian Revolution resembled the bourgeois revolutions in England and France and could be seen as being their continuation in terms of achieving real economic equality.[22] On the one hand, he defended the revolution against the 'armed intervention by the Allies in the Russian affairs'23 and on the other hand, he opposed any attempt to emasculate the self-activity and self-organisation of the Russian people.

By rejecting the Bolsheviks' methods and their intention to impose 'from above' with the use of a centralised state the socialist transformation of society, he argued that the Bolsheviks sought to establish a communism akin to Babeuf's.[23] Seen through this prism, the new Soviet regime was designated as 'state communism'[24] and was perceived as the corollary of the practical implementations of Marxist theory through the dictatorship of the party. Talking to Emma Goldman in March 1920, Kropotkin noted: 'We have always pointed out the effects of Marxism in action. Why be surprised now?'[25] He was deeply convinced that the Bolsheviks' undertaking to radically transform society by means of absolutely centralised and bureaucratised state and party apparatuses would result in complete failure.[26] For this reason, Kropotkin emphatically stated

[20] Ibid., p. 339.

[21] P. Kropotkin, 'Letter to the Workers of Western Europe', in R. N. Baldwin (eds), *Kropotkin's Revolutionary Pamphlets* (New York, 1970) , p. 253.

[22] Ibid., pp. 252, 254.

[23] Ibid., p. 320.

[24] P. Kropotkin, 'Letter to the Workers of Western Europe', p. 253.

[25] Quoted in J. Burbank, *Intelligentsia and Revolution: Russian Views of Bolshevism 1917–1922* (Oxford, 1986), p. 104.

[26] P. Kropotkin, 'Letter to the Workers of Western Europe', p. 254

concerns the fact that both trends identified and made no clear distinction between the terms used. Also, by reproducing abstractions they equated under the term of totalitarianism different modes of social organisation such as fascism, National Socialism and the Soviet social formation. Placing both the fascist phenomenon and the USSR under the same category, they were led to the construction of an ideal-type conception of totalitarianism causing confusions and misconceptions concerning the actual nature of the Soviet System. Of course, searching for the appropriate terminology, or labelling and defining, are not adequate ways of disclosing the social constitution of the Soviet regime. The suggested terms cannot exhaust or fully grasp the essence of Soviet society. As Adorno put it, 'objects do not go into their concepts without leaving a remainder'.[108] Neither identifications nor classifications are revealing of the mystifications that have overshadowed the critique of the USSR. Conceptualisation does not resolve the issue of demystifying the social forms of existence, as whatever constitutes it socially disappears and cannot be conceptualised. Designations and concepts have to have a practical and historical meaning, otherwise they produce abstractions and generalisations. They cannot be purely logical constructions, nor exist outside history. Concepts must be socially and historically constituted in order not to obscure certain aspects of the Soviet reality. An endeavour to liberate anarchists' and councilists' approach from an ideological appraisal of the Soviet regime would amount to a return to critical theory and radical praxis. In this sense, the anarchist and councilist terminological confusion could have been avoided if they had grounded their analysis in recapturing the concrete social relations of the Soviet society.

For both anarchists and Council Communists, the Soviet social formation was seen in terms of a growing separation between economic and political structures. The new regime was driven economically towards state capitalism, whilst politically it possessed

[108] T. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* (New York, 2003), p.5.

the logic of 'gains and losses, more or less, credit and debit' according to which human relations were reduced to relations between mechanisms.[106] Human beings were manipulated by bureaucratic techniques and were degraded into external things that had to be dealt with as being 'membership figures, number of votes, seats in parliaments, control positions'.[107] Further, by attacking the Soviet state and in general the idea of the state as a means of human emancipation, anarchists and Council Communists prophetically foresaw the atrocities committed by the Soviet regime. They questioned the issue of power and how the Bolsheviks exercised it, the role of the state and its repressive methods. Finally, they underscored the gradual formation of a new privileged ruling class and stressed its link with Bolsheviks' party and governmental structures. Hence, both anarchists and Council Communists agreed that we have learned from the Russian experience how socialism cannot be realised.

Despite the radical character of their critique, however, the anarchist and Council Communist stance towards the Russian Revolution and the Soviet regime was not without inconsistencies and ambiguities. First and most obviously, there is a variety of designations utilised with a view to defining the social character of the Soviet regime: state communism, state socialism, state capitalism, dictatorship, autocracy, despotism, new imperialism, totalitarianism and fascism. Undoubtedly, the usage of all these characterisations had, at times, to do with really existing disparities that existed in proposed strategies between different currents in the European revolutionary movement. Or, at times, all these designations were broadly used by anarchists and councilists merely to distinguish the Soviet system from their own idea of socialism (e.g. the terms state socialism and state communism). Beyond this, however, what is highly problematic with the above terminological variety

[106] Ibid., p. 22.

[107] Ibid., p. 22.

that 'we are learning to know in Russia *how not* to introduce communism'.[27]

Likewise, Malatesta considered the Soviet social formation as 'the dictatorship of one party' and condemned Lenin's centralism and his idea of the dictatorship of the proletariat. The state communists in Russia had imposed a 'hateful tyranny',[28] a real dictatorship, and the Bolshevik government had just subjugated the revolution with a view to hindering its development and channelling it in the direction of its party politics.[29] For Malatesta, it was evident that the Bolsheviks had distorted the meaning of the term 'dictatorship of the proletariat' and instead of being the power of all workers, it had been transformed into the dictatorship of the Bolshevik party and more specifically, of its powerful leaders. Malatesta foresaw the persecution of the workers' councils and the cooperatives and the suppression of the labour movement, which reached its peak with the bloody and brutal repression against the Kronstadt revolt. He also anticipated the emergence and rise of a 'new privileged class' without going deeper into providing a more general analysis as far as the social characteristics of the new regime were concerned. It was just two years after the Bolsheviks' seizure of power and consequently too early for a comprehensive theoretical analysis to be carried out.[30] Nonetheless, one could see in his positions the germ of future approaches, which held the view that the Bolshevik party constituted the 'embryo' of a new ruling class.[31]

[27] Ibid., p. 254.

[28] E. Malatesta, 'Anarchism, Socialism and Communism', in R. Vernon (eds), *Errico Malatesta: His Life and Ideas* (London, 1965), p. 144.

[29] E. Malatesta, 'A Prophetic Letter to Luigi Fabbri' , London, July 30, 1919, in D. Guérin., *No Gods, No Masters. An Anthology of Anarchism*, Book two (Edinburgh, 1998), p. 38.

[30] Ibid., p. 39.

[31] For an extensive analysis of this issue, see M. Djilas, *The New Class* (London, 1966) and M. Voslensky, *Nomenklatura. Anatomy of the Soviet Ruling Class* (London, 1984).

Following Kropotkin's line of thought, Malatesta argued that the methods and practices of the Bolsheviks could be comprehended on the grounds that they were authentic Marxists. As he indicated, 'the Bolsheviks are merely Marxists who have remained honest, conscientious Marxists'.[32] And though he acknowledged and respected the sincerity of the Bolsheviks, he declared prophetically:

> Lenin, Trotsky and their comrades are assuredly sincere revolutionaries … and they will not be turning traitors – but they are preparing the governmental structures, which those who will come after them will utilise to exploit the Revolution and do it to death. They will be the first victims of their methods and I am afraid that the Revolution will go under with them.[33]

Malatesta's eerily prophetic observation found its tragic confirmation in Stalin's period and Trotsky's assassination. According to Paul Nursey-Bray, however, his critique shifted from the analysis of the political structures and institutions that generated the mechanisms of authoritarianism of the new soviet power to the critique of the personalities of the Bolshevik leaders and their own failures.

Consequently, he did not attempt an analysis of 'the sociology of power' and focused more on Lenin's personal responsibility.[34] For Malatesta, 'Lenin was a tyrant',[35] therefore the announcement

[32] Malatesta E., 'A Prophetic Letter to Luigi Fabbri' , London, July 30, 1919, p.38.

[33] Ibid., p. 39.

[34] For Nursey-Bray's appraisal of Malatesta's positions regarding the Russian Revolution, see P. Nursey-Bray, 'Malatesta and the Anarchist Revolution', *Anarchist Studies*, 3:1 (1995), pp. 27–34.

[35] Quoted in P. Nursey-Bray, 'Malatesta and the Anarchist Revolution', p. 33.

'the suppressed alternatives have to be concrete alternatives and specific to concrete situations'.[103] The council system, the democracy of the councils, represented the concrete and specific radical alternative to the Bolsheviks' centralism and authoritarian party policy and simultaneously, it was going against and beyond the parliamentarianism of Mensheviks and Social Democrats. Opposition to fetishised state organisational forms did not entail that the struggle against the capitalist social relations had to be developed without organisation. Anarchists and Council Communists recognised that the workers' councils, as the form of working class self-determination, could lead not only to the overthrow of capitalism, but also to the creation of a new society of free and equal associated producers. The suppression of the councils' movement, therefore, was seen as one of the major tragedies of the Russian Revolution.

Linked to this idea of the social revolution by means of council organisation was undoubtedly their critique of the Bolshevik party and party politics in general. This critique was developed from the standpoint of non-party forms of struggle and against the conception that the revolution is a matter of professional revolutionaries. In particular, elements of Bolshevik theory and practice that furthered unconditional discipline, uncritical presuppositions, conformist attitudes, semi-religious beliefs and elitist views that distinguished between the rulers and the ruled were castigated as being of bourgeois origin. For anarchists and Council Communists, social revolution had to be strictly dissociated from the bourgeois type hierarchy and reasoning of the Leninist party functionaries.[104] Lenin introduced into radical politics the 'machine age in politics'[105] and

[103] B. Moore, *Injustice. The Social Bases of Obedience and Revolt* (London, 1978), p. 377.

[104] See on this, for example, R. Rocker, *The Failure of State Communism*, p. 21 and pp. 43–5.

[105] O. Rühle, *The Struggle Against Fascism Begins with the Struggle Against Bolshevism*, p. 16.

against the idea of common action with the anarchists'.[100] On the other hand, Rocker argued that the idea and theory of the workers' councils as emerged in Russia should find their origins back in the years of French revolutionary syndicalism. During that period, he reminded us, the vast majority of the socialists, especially in Germany, 'who pretend to be supporters of the Council System today, were then looking at this "later incarnation of Utopia" with scorn and contempt'.[101] In spite of their differences, however, both anarchists and Council Communists made a valuable contribution to our understanding of the Russian Revolution and the comprehension of the Soviet regime, which is also of great contemporary relevance.

More specifically, they shed light on intentionally neglected events and periods of Soviet history. In this regard, as Benjamin would say, anarchists and Council Communists did well in liberating the radical tradition of the Russian Revolution from 'the conformism that is working to overpower it'.[102] The Kronstadt rebellion, the suppression of the workers' movement for self-organisation, the proletarian struggles through strikes, and marches against authoritarian Bolshevik power, the Makhnovist movement in Ukraine and the repression of the Workers' Opposition and the anarchist movement came under public discussion. The non-socialist character of the USSR was disclosed, and at the same time, the suppressed historical alternatives were revealed. Both anarchists and Council Communists made it clear that the history of the Russian Revolution contained suppressed possibilities and alternatives that had been obscured by the official propaganda and Soviet power. For Barrington Moore,

[100] Ibid., pp. 258–9. For Pannekoek's later critique on anarchism see ibid, p. 259. Bricianer quotes from Pannekoek's article entitled 'Anarchism Not Suitable' , *Southern Advocate for Workers' Councils*, 42 (1948).

[101] R. Rocker, *The Failure of State Communism*, p. 47.

[102] W. Benjamin, 'On the Concept of History', Thesis VI, in W. Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, Volume 4, 1938–1940 (Cambridge, Massachusetts 2006), p. 391.

of the latter's death had to be celebrated: 'Lenin is dead. Long live liberty!'[36]

On this issue and by following the anarchist reasoning, it was Rocker who took the argument a step further. He wrote in 1920 and published in 1921 *The Failure of State Communism,* which according to Daniel Guérin was 'the first analysis to be made of the degeneration of the Russian Revolution'.[37] In his analysis, Rocker seems primarily interested in showing the imperative need to deal with the vexed issues addressed by and the atrocities committed throughout the course of the Russian Revolution by going beyond personal issues and individual responsibilities.[38] He took great pains to defend the anarchist stance towards the revolution and demonstrate, against Bolshevik propaganda, that anarchists were neither reactionaries nor counter-revolutionaries. Rocker contended that the idea of the dictatorship of the proletariat as it had emerged in Russia was the expression of the dictatorship of the Bolshevik party, which led to the development of a new class, the 'commissariocracy'.[39] This new ruling class is 'merely a new instance of an old historical experience' and it is 'rapidly growing into a new aristocracy'.[40] Rocker made a clear distinction between the idea of councils and the notion of the dictatorship of the proletariat.

On the one hand, the 'soviets' is a creation of human social practice, of radical activity, that reflects the emancipatory meaning of a social revolution and represents the most constructive elements of

[36] Quoted in Paul Nursey-Bray, 'Malatesta and the Anarchist Revolution', p. 32.

[37] D. Guérin, *Anarchism: From Theory to Practice* (New York, NY, 1970), p.106 .

[38] R. Rocker, *The Failure of State Communism*, pp. 10 and 43.

[39] Ibid., p. 54.

[40] R. Rocker, 'Anarchism and Anarcho-Syndicalism', in P. Eltzbacher, *Anarchism: Exponents of the Anarchist Philosophy* (New York, NY, 1958), p. 234.

a self-determined society.[41] On the other hand, Rocker argued that the notion of the dictatorship of the proletariat 'is not a product of socialist thinking' and it is 'closely linked with the lust for political power, which is likewise bourgeois in its origin'.[42] For Rocker, the Bolsheviks, as pure state socialists, wanted political power. And as the historical experience showed, by imposing the militarisation of labour, iron discipline, statism and centralism they gave birth to bureaucracy, the socialist bourgeoisie. In this sense, Rocker made the claim that the Russian Revolution resulted in the formation of a particular 'variety of communism', which 'was being revealed as the bankruptcy of state socialism in its worst form'.[43]

Yet, the terms 'state socialism' and 'state communism' were not the only ones used by Rocker in order to describe the social physiognomy of the USSR. Rocker, for example, wrote in his *Anarchism and Anarcho-Syndicalism,* that in Russia the Bolsheviks' occupation of political power has prevented 'any truly socialistic reorganisation of economic life' and has forced the country 'into the slavery of a grinding state-capitalism'.[44] He added, also, that the Bolsheviks' power had been reduced to a 'frightful despotism and a new imperialism, which lags behind the tyranny of Fascist states in nothing'.[45] As he emphatically noted, Russia belonged to the categories of 'totalitarian states' along with Italy, Germany and later on, Portugal and Spain.[46]

Accordingly and despite his pioneering and radical approach to the Russian Revolution, Rocker's positions appeared to ascribe the same meaning to very distinctive designations and eventually

[41] R. Rocker, 'Anarchism and Sovietism', in *The Poverty of Statism*: *Bukharin, Fabbri, Rocker* (Minneapolis, MN, 1981), p. 64.

[42] Ibid., p. 69.

[43] Quoted in M. Vallance, 'Rudolf Rocker — A Biographical Sketch', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 8: 3 (1973), p. 84.

[44] R. Rocker, 'Anarchism and Anarcho-Syndicalism', p. 233.

[45] Ibid., pp. 233–4.

[46] Ibid., p. 245.

STRENGTHS, WEAKNESSES AND IMPLICATIONS

'Uncomfortable truths', as Primo Levi remarked, 'travel with difficulty'.[98] The attempt made by both anarchists and Council Communists to put in question the newly established Soviet regime was annoying for the traditional Marxism of the official communist parties and inconvenient for the stereotypes reproduced by the conservative and liberal sovietologists. As a result, ideas and critiques formulated by anarchists and Council Communists were circulated with difficulty and were intentionally neglected or marginalised. For traditional Marxists, especially the Trotskyist tradition, the anarchist and Council Communist critique felt uncomfortable, as it contravened the claim that the Trotskyist movement was the first and the only one which provided a radical critique of the Soviet social formation. It also destroyed the Leninist-Stalinist propaganda according to which anarchists and left communists were counter-revolu-tionists who were at the service of reaction. Anarchists and Council Communists appeared to be the best defenders of the most radical elements and aspects of the Russian Revolution. Likewise, their critical stance dispelled the conservative and liberal myth that tends to generalise the Soviet experience and places the whole radical anti-capitalist movement under the term totalitarianism. Of course, a critical examina-tion of the anarchist and Council Communist critique must neither romanticise it nor conceal the differences and conflicts that admittedly existed between the two trends. For instance, Pannekoek criticised anarchism for 'slowing down events',[99] and in 1920, according to Bricianer, he was 'clearly

[98] P. Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved* (London, 1989), p. 129.

[99] S. Bricianer, *Pannekoek and the Workers' Councils*, p. 259.

of the Council Communist tradition, the insoluble contradictions inherent in capitalism and expressed in the general trend towards concentration and centralisation of capitalist production, implied that 'capitalism as a whole was moving economically towards state capitalism, and politically towards fascism'.[91] Within this context and based on his views about the emergence of 'world fascism',[92] Rühle was led to the theoretically and politically erroneous conclusions about 'red fascism'.[93] This assumption enabled him to declare without hesitation that 'fascism is merely a copy of bolshevism'[94] and that 'the struggle against fascism must begin with the struggle against bolshevism'.[95]

Rooke has argued that the left/Council Communist current 'produced many contradictory and incomplete theoretical positions – on the nature of the Russian Revolution, the analysis of its degeneration, the nature of Stalinism'.[96] On the other hand, Cleaver writes that 'only the Council Communists developed a coherent critique of the emerging Soviet State as a collective capitalist planner'.[97] Yet, how coherent and systematic was their critique? And what are the limits and merits that the Council Communist trend shares with the anarchist critique of the Soviet regime?

[91] International Communist Current, *The Dutch and German Communist Left*, p. 278.

[92] Ibid.

[93] Ibid, p. 280. According to International Communist Current, 'in seeing (German councilists) fascism everywhere, in all countries – from Germany to Russia – they fell into political simplification. The "state capitalist foundations of society" could only have one political superstructure, not several. Fascism was this form and, in typical councilist manner, it was mixed up with "Bolshevism", which Rühle saw as "red fascism"'. Ibid, p. 280.

[94] O. Rühle, *The Struggle Against Fascism Begins with the Struggle Against Bolshevism*, p. 26.

[95] Ibid., p. 11.

[96] M. Rooke, 'The Dialectic of Labour and Human Emancipation', in W. Bonefeld and S. Tischler (eds), *What is to be Done? Leninism, Anti-Leninist Marxism and the question of revolution today*, p.95.

[97] H. Cleaver, *Reading Capital Politically* (Edinburgh, 2000), p.34.

to identify the concepts of state communism, state socialism, state capitalism and totalitarianism in order to define the new Soviet regime. A similar usage of the above terms as identical manifestations that expressed without differentiation the class character of the Soviet Union can also traced in other anarchists. In this respect, Emma Goldman maintained that there were no signs of communism in the USSR, there was no evidence of a libertarian communism that would be based upon the free and conscious association of working men and women. On the contrary, in Russia, a form of repressive state communism had been developed.[47] At the same time, the Russian Revolution was seen by Goldman as 'a libertarian step defeated by the Bolshevik State' and 'fanatical governmentalism' that 'demonstrated beyond doubt that the State idea, State Socialism … is entirely and hopelessly bankrupt'.[48] Goldman drew a sharp boundary between the idea of socialisation of land and production and the nationalised-state property that characterised the Soviet economy, and came to the conclusion that the Soviet social and economic structure 'may be called state capitalism, but it would be fantastic to consider it in any sense Communistic'.[49] The Bolsheviks had established a 'dictatorship', a 'personal autocracy more powerful and absolute than any Czar's',[50] which resulted in the formation of a 'privileged class of "responsible comrades", the new Soviet aristocracy'.[51] Goldman's central argument offered a simultaneous critique of the Bolsheviks' policy and of Marxism itself and arrived at the conclusion that Soviet Russia was 'an absolute despotism politically and the crassest form of state capitalism eco-

[47] E. Goldman, 'There Is No Communism in Russia' in *Red Emma Speaks. An Emma Goldman Reader* (Amherst, NY 1998), pp. 405–406.

[48] E. Goldman, 'Afterword to *My Disillusionment in Russia*', in *Red Emma Speaks. An Emma Goldman Reader*, p. 392, 393.

[49] E. Goldman, 'There Is No Communism in Russia', p. 407.

[50] Ibid., p. 409.

[51] Ibid., p. 416.

nomically'.[52] Likewise, for Alexander Berkman, the Soviet system is usually defined as 'state communism'.[53] It is also called 'state socialism'.[54] In his *What is Communist Anarchism*?, he argued that the Soviet system was a combination of state and private capitalism.[55] Finally, Voline, in condemning the dictatorship of the Bolshevik party, opined that the total nationalisation of life in Russia created a totalitarian regime, an 'example of integral State capitalism'. In his own words:

> State capitalism: such is the economic, financial, social, and political system of the U.S.S.R., with all of its logical consequences and manifestations in all spheres of life – material, moral, and spiritual.
>
> The correct designation of this State should not be U.S.S.R., but U.S.C.R., meaning Union of State Capitalist Republics.[56]

The theory of state capitalism seems to have been held and become prevalent in more recent anarchist approaches despite their ideological and political differences. In a parallel way, many Marxist scholars, political parties and groups have described the USSR as a state capitalist society. Amongst others, this was the case of the Council Communists, who have a close affinity and a great deal of common ground to share with the anarchist movement.

[52] Ibid., p. 420.

[53] A. Berkman, *The Bolshevik Myth* (London, 1989), p.340 and A. Berkman, 'The Russian revolution and the Communist party', in A. Berkman, *The Russian Tragedy* (Sanday, 1976), p.59.

[54] Quoted in N. Walter, 'Introduction' in A. Berkman, *The Bolshevik Myth*, p. xii.

[55] A. Berkman, *What is Communist Anarchism*? (New York, NY, 1972), pp. 127–169. See also, A. Berkman, *The Russian Tragedy*, p. 28.

[56] Voline, *The Unknown Revolution, 1917–1921* (Montreal, 1974), p. 358.

lated and advocated by Marx, after feudal tsarism in Russia there had to come the capitalist bourgeois state, whose creator and representative is the bourgeois class'.[87]

In contradistinction to anarchists, Rühle criticised Bolsheviks for not being faithful Marxists and for having forgotten the 'ABC of Marxist knowledge', according to which a socialist society can only be the result of an 'organic development which has capitalism developed to the limits of its maturity as its indispensable presupposition'.[88]

Far away from constructing a socialist society, Bolshevism established state capitalism and represented 'the last stage of bourgeois society and not the first step towards a new society'.[89] This conception, which perceives historical and social evolution as a linear process and a progressive development of the means of production without gaps, led Rühle to abstract generalisations by primarily identifying Bolshevism with fascism. More specifically, in 1939, he accused Bolshevism of nationalism, authoritarianism, centralism, leader dictatorship, power policies, terror-rule and mechanistic methods and maintained that all these characteristics not only destroy any illusion about the socialist nature of the Soviet regime, but bring it closer to fascism. Hence, he argued that 'Russia must be placed first among the new totalitarian states', since by 'adopting all the features of the total state' in a manner similar to Italy and Germany, it became 'an example for fascism'.[90] For a large part

[87] Ibid.

[88] Ibid.

[89] O. Rühle, *The Struggle Against Fascism Begins with the Struggle Against Bolshevism* (1939), (London, 2006), p. 26. According to International Communist Current, in 1931, and in contradistinction to his later views, Rühle argued that Russian state capitalism was 'tending towards and preparing the way for socialism'. On Rühle's contradictory analysis regarding the concept of state capitalism see, International Communist Current, *The Dutch and German Communist Left* (London, 2001), pp. 276–80.

[90] O. Rühle, *The Struggle Against Fascism Begins with the Struggle Against Bolshevism*, p. 9.

clique; communism no springboard for the rise of a new Soviet bourgeoisie.[84]

In this line of thought, Rühle deemed the Bolsheviks' foreign policy (especially the Peace of Brest-Litovsk) and the distribution of land, which re-established private property in the agricultural sector, as acts of bourgeois politics. Unlike Trotsky, he argued that the nationalisation of the basic branches of the economy did not relate to socialism and emphatically pointed out that 'nationalisation is not socialisation.

Through nationalisation you can arrive at a large-scale, tightly centrally-run state capitalism, which may exhibit various advantages as against private capitalism. Only it is still capitalism'.[85] By the same token, the Red Army was considered to have been a bourgeois army because of its organisational structure and the function it served for the benefit of the bourgeois-capitalist interests. Diametrically opposed to any socialist principle, the Bolshevik authorities persecuted the social and political fighters, imprisoned and sentenced them to death. The Soviet capitalist state was run by a 'centrally organised commissariat-bureaucracy' which imposed its will by following a 'bourgeois capitalist policy'.[86] Rühle did acknowledge that there was a substantial proletarian-socialist element within the Russian Revolution, which played a vital role in overthrowing tsarism, primarily due to the incapacity of the Russian bourgeoisie to fulfil its historical mission. In an apotheosis of the most positivist and deterministic elements of Marx and orthodox Marxism, however, Rühle came to argue that the Russian Revolution could only be a bourgeois revolution. Thus, he noted that 'according to the phaseological pattern of development as formu-

[84] O. Rühle , *Report from Moscow* (1920) www.marxists.org Anarchist Studies 20.2

[85] O. Rühle, *From the Bourgeois to the Proletarian Revolution* (1924) www.marxists.org

[86] Ibid.

COUNCIL COMMUNISM AND THE SOVIET SOCIAL FORMATION

Lenin wrote his book *'Left-Wing' Communism, an Infantile Disorder* in 1920 as an attack against the Left Communist organisations, which criticised the Bolshevik policies from a left and radical standpoint. These left communist organisations emerged as an opposition and resistance to certain policies adopted by the Socialist and Communist parties throughout the First World War period. The Social Democratic practices were seen as a variant of bourgeois policy, which, in the last analysis, strengthened the capitalist system by being completely integrated into it.

Later on, left communists came to criticise Leninism and Soviet Marxism since they had resulted in establishing a new authoritarian, suppressive and exploitative state, that is, the Soviet regime. Defending the idea of self-organisation of the working class and workers' control in the sphere of production, their principles would be vindicated by the emergence of the workers' and soldiers' councils in Russia and Germany and the militancy of the English shop stewards. At the same time, they further elaborated and expressed these new forms of class struggle theoretically. Espousing some of the most libertarian elements of Marx's theorising, many of their views had much in common with the anarchist movement. This was the case with the prominent figure of Rosa Luxemburg and her early critique on Lenin and the Bolsheviks' policy. Her confrontation with Leninist centralism and authoritarianism, as well as her views regarding the general mass strike and the workers' councils, made Daniel Guérin write that Rosa Luxemburg 'is one of the links between anarchism and authentic Marxism'.[57]

Luxemburg was not the only one who espoused a critical attitude towards the Bolsheviks' methods. While at the very beginning Left-wing communists greeted the Russian Revolution with great

[57] D. Guérin , *Anarchism and Marxism* (Sanday, 1981), pp. 2–3.

enthusiasm, they gradually developed a more pene-trating critique of Leninism. Linked to this was the effort they made to explicate the character of the Russian Revolution and the class character of the new Soviet society.

The clearest example of this critical stance was provided by Karl Korsch, who argued that Russian Marxism had possessed a clearly ideological character and took up the form of the ideological justification of the rapid capitalist development, which had occurred in an economically backward country. It was also utilised as a means of emasculation and suppression of the radical movement of the working class.[58] According to Behrens, one could find in Korsch 'analytical moments similar to those of the Council Communists',[59] while Marcel van der Linden considered Korsch as 'an independent Marxist thinker', who 'from time to time … seemed to develop in a council-communist direction'.[60] Council Communism emerged in Germany and Holland in the 1920s and expressed both theoretically and politically a significant part of the Left-wing communist movement during this period. Council Communists were among the first Marxists who directed their critique against the Bolshevik policies from a radical perspective and Anton Pannekoek was undoubtedly one of the most recognised spokesmen of this tendency. Though in 1919 he made the claim that 'in Russia communism has been put into practice for two years now',[61] later on, he went so far as to criticise and finally reject Bolshevism. More precisely, in his work *Lenin as Philosopher* he argued that

[58] K. Korcsh, 'The Marxist Ideology in Russia', in D. Kellner (eds), *Karl Korsch: Revolutionary Theory* (Austin, TX, 1977), pp. 159, 163.

[59] D. Behrens, 'Perspectives on Left Politics: On the Development of anti-Leninist Conceptions of Socialist Politics', in W. Bonefeld and S. Tischler (eds.), *What is to be Done? Leninism, Anti-Leninist Marxism and the question of revolution today* (Aldershot, 2002), p. 45.

[60] Marcel van der Linden, 'On Council Communism', *Historical Materialism*, 12: 4 (2004), p. 32.

[61] Quoted in Marcel van der Linden, 'On Council Communism', p. 28.

anything but a bourgeois State'.[79] In his essay *The Organization of the Proletariat's Class Struggle* (1921), Gorter maintained that the Russian Revolution was not a 'truly proletarian revolution', but 'only partly proletarian' and 'predominantly peasant-democratic', that is to say, a bourgeois one.[80] According to Shipway, Gorter held the Russian Revolution to be a 'dual revolution', that is, 'in the towns, a working-class, communist revolution against capitalism, and, in the countryside, a peasant, capitalist revolution against feudalism'.[81] It was the implementation of the New Economic Policy that reduced the soviet state into a capitalist state. Shipway notes that later on, and more specifically in 1923, Gorter abandoned his 'dual revolution' views and advocated the thesis that 'even in their first, revolutionary, so called communist, stage the Bolsheviks showed their bourgeois character'.[82]

A more fierce critique of the Soviet regime undertaken within the Council Communist tradition is to be found in Otto Rühle's writings. Though in 1918, in his *Speech in the Reichstag*, he expressed his 'boundless sympathy' towards the Russian Revolution,[83] Rühle's critique of the Soviet system could be better grasped if one takes into consideration his following views:

> The revolution is no party matter, the party no authoritarian organisation from the top down, the leader no military chief, the masses no army condemned to blind obedience, the dictatorship no despotism of a ruling

[79] A. Pannekoek, *A life of struggle-Farewell to Herman Gorter* (1927). www.kurasje.org.

[80] H. Gorter, 'The Organization of the Proletariat's Class Struggle' (1921), in D. Smart (eds), *Pannekoek and Gorter's Marxism* (London, 1978), p. 153.

[81] M. Shipway, 'Council Communism', in M. Rubel and J. Crump (eds), *Non-Market Socialism in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (London, 1987), p. 107.

[82] Ibid.

[83] O. Rühle, *Speech in the Reichstag* (1918) www.marxists.org

of the working class could be successful. These councils were 'the form and expression of the New Society, of the New Humanity'.[75]

However, the revolt of Kronstadt, the suppression of the workers' councils in Russia, Lenin's parliamentarism (expressed, among others, by his pamphlet *Left-Wing Communism, An Infantile Disorder*), as well as the defeat of the Spartacists in Germany, proved to be the turning point in Gorter's attitude towards Bolsheviks and the Russian Revolution. Gorter replied to Lenin with his *Open Letter to Comrade Lenin* (1920) and opposed the Bolsheviks' opportunist methods and their intentions to impose the Soviet model on the labour movement of Western Europe.[76] He placed his emphasis on the different historical and social conditions between Russia and Western Europe and argued that revolution must be the product of the radical initia-tives of the people, not of the party leaders. He fiercely condemned the dictatorship of the Bolsheviks and repudiated Lenin's views on the role of the party. Simultaneously, he questioned the Leninist policies regarding parliamentary and trade union activity and concluded that the methods and conditions of the revolution in western European countries must be quite different from those of the Russian Revolution.[77] On this, Rachleff has remarked that Gorter 'avoids attacking Lenin directly or questioning the class nature of the Russian Revolution' and by adopting a 'somewhat naïve position', he made an effort to convince Lenin to 'reconsider his position'.[78] Yet, Gorter very soon came to understand, according to Pannekoek, that 'Russia could not become

[75] Ibid., p. 76.

[76] Many years later, in his letter to Mattick (May 10, 1935), Korsch commented on Lenin's book: 'With Lenin, it would be in fact better *never* to cite his "infantile disease" essay without some kind of fundamental critical reservation. It was in fact in its content, function, and intention a basically counterrevolutionary work'. Quoted in D. Kellner (eds), *Karl Korsch: Revolutionary Theory*, p. 112.

[77] For an extensive and analytical exposition of Gorter's ideas see, H. Gorter, *Open Letter to Comrade Lenin* (London, 1989).

[78] P. Rachleff, *Marxism and Council Communism* (New York, 1976), p. 184.

> in Russia a system of state-capitalism consolidated itself, not by deviating from but by following Lenin's ideas (e.g. in his 'State and Revolution'). A new dominating and exploiting class came into power over the working class. But at the same time Marxism was fostered, and proclaimed the fundamental basis of the Russian state.[62]

According to Pannekoek, Lenin's doctrine and mainly his philosophical insights, as they had been formulated in his *Materialism and Empiriocriticism*, proclaimed the official state ideology of the new state capitalism established in Russia. Under the name of 'Leninism', this state-philosophy was 'a combination of middle-class materialism and the Marxian doctrine of social development, adorned with some dialectic terminology'.[63] For Pannekoek, Lenin's theoretical views were reliant upon two contradictory pillars: 'middle-class materialism in its basic philosophy' and 'proletarian evolutionism in its doctrine of class fight'.[64] This split that undermined Lenin's thinking reflects the conflicting aspects of the Russian Revolution, that is, 'middle-class revolution in its immediate aims' and 'proletarian revolution in its active forces'.[65]

Based on this estimation, Pannekoek argued that the Russian Revolution was in a direct line with the English and the French revolutions and argued that 'it was the last bourgeois revolution, though carried out by the working class'.[66] At the outset, the Russian Revolution appeared to be a proletarian one thanks to the mass action of the working class. Yet, little by little, and due to the in-

[62] A. Pannekoek, *Lenin as Philosopher* (London, 1975), p. 7.

[63] Ibid., p. 100.

[64] Ibid., p. 96.

[65] Ibid., p. 96.

[66] A. Pannekoek, 'Letter to Socialisme ou Barbarie', *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, 14 (1954) www.marxists.org For Pannekoek's positions regarding the bourgeois character of the Russian Revolution and its differences with the French one, see also, S. Bricianer, *Pannekoek and the Workers' Councils* (Saint Louis, 1978), p. 229.

ability of the Russian working class to exercise full control over production, the Bolsheviks seized power and dominated the working class and its autonomous organisation and radical action. This development was fostered by the backward economic and social conditions, which were insufficient for the outbreak of an authentic proletarian revolution. The direct result achieved was that 'the bourgeois character (in the largest sense of term) of the Russian Revolution became dominant and took the form of state capitalism'.[67] Accordingly, in Pannekoek's words:

> 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.[68]

In the later theoretical exposition of his accounts with respect to the workers' councils, the new Soviet regime was defined as 'State socialism'. Pannekoek argued that some years after the outbreak of the Revolution a new privileged social category, a new ruling class was formed. This dominant class, however, was not the bourgeoisie, but the bureaucracy, which 'had risen from the working class and the peasants (including former officials) by ability, luck and cunning'.[69] In other words, the Russian Revolution was seen as a bourgeois revolution, limited by the peasantry and actuated by the working class, which led to the formation of a state capitalist system run by the bureaucracy. The proletariat was exploited by

[67] A. Pannekoek, 'Letter to Socialisme ou Barbarie'.

[68] A. Pannekoek, *Lenin as Philosopher*, p. 102.

[69] A. Pannekoek, 'Why past revolutionary movements have failed', *Living Marxism*, 5: 2 (1940). www.marxists.org.

this middle class bureaucracy by means of a dictatorial form of government.[70] The bureaucracy undertook the task of industrialising a 'primitive barbarous country' in a manner similar to the bourgeoisie in other advanced capitalist countries. Thus, Pannekoek espoused an approach, according to which the terms state capitalism and state socialism could be applied equally and identically to the new regime.[71]

An analogous attempt to comprehend the Russian Revolution was made by the Council Communist Herman Gorter. Initially, the Russian Revolution found in Gorter an enthusiastic advocate since immediately he was wholeheartedly on the Bolsheviks' side. He considered that the Russian Revolution could mark a departure point for a world revolution and serve as an inspiring example to the Western European working class. He also saw Lenin as 'the foremost fighter of the world's proletariat',[72] the leader of the Russian Revolution, who 'may be the leader of the World Revolution', who 'surpasses all other leaders of the proletariat' and argued that Lenin 'alone deserves to be placed side by side with Marx'.[73] Gorter was of the opinion that in Russia 'the Socialist society has been founded' and 'Communist society should soon spread over the whole of Russia'.[74] On the other hand, Gorter acknowledged the difficulty of establishing a socialist society in a mainly agricultural country and high-lighted the important differences between Russia and Western Europe. For Gorter, the real challenge was rather how to draw some valuable lessons from the Russian experience. Most important of all, the Russian Revolution developed and provided us with the organisational forms, that is, workers' councils, by which the radical struggles

[70] Ibid.

[71] A. Pannekoek, *Workers' Councils* (Oakland, 2003), p. 78.

[72] By using these words, Gorter dedicated his book *The World Revolution* to Lenin in 1918. Quoted in H. Gorter, *The World Revolution* (Glasgow, 1920), p. 5.

[73] Ibid., p. 60.

[74] Ibid., p. 63–4.