

## Perspectives on Left Politics:

### On the Development of anti-Leninist Conceptions of Socialist Politics

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#### Introductory Comments

The history of the failure of the Soviet Union is today interpreted as that of 'socialism'. The crimes of Stalinism throw their shadows backward over Lenin, Trotsky, and even Marx. This is however only an inversion of that interpretation that had previously viewed the history of the Soviet Union since the Russian Revolution<sup>16</sup> as a history of success<sup>17</sup> connected with the name of Lenin. In both cases socialism is identified with the events of the Russian Revolution and with Lenin's political-theoretical conceptions. Lenin's theoretical reflections are advanced as the legitimation of socialist politics. But – it was quickly asked – what kind of revolution was this? What kind of politics was this? From what perspective was left politics from then on to be thematized?

Since the 1920s there has been a broad discussion about the character of this revolution and about the significance and efficacy of Lenin's politics. This discussion was not without influence on

<sup>16</sup> Thus Kolakowski, for example, also reads the writings of the social democrats through Leninist lenses which drives him toward an apology for Stalinism. Characteristic of Lenin, he insists, is the instrumental evaluation of theories, the inquiry into their *cui bono* for the revolution. Like many others, he remains caught in Leninist apology. See esp. Leszek Kolakowski, *Die Hauptströmungen des Marxismus*, vol. 2, Munich-Zurich, 1978, p.429ff.

<sup>17</sup> For a critique of Leninist notions of economy and politics after 1917, cf. Diethard Behrens and Kornelia Hafner, 'Auf der Suche nach dem "wahren Sozialismus": Von der Kritik des Proudhonismus über die Modernisierungsdiktatur zum realsozialistischen Etikettenschwindel', in Anton Pannekoek, Paul Mattick et al., *Marxistischer Anti-Leninismus* with an introduction by Diethard Behrens, Freiburg, 1991, p.205ff.

the perspective from which left politics were henceforth thematized.

### **Historical Considerations**

Until the beginning of the war in 1914, Lenin espoused German Social Democracy, with Kautsky as theoretical authority, just as Plekhanov was the theoretical-political point of reference for the young Lenin up until the founding of 'Iskra'.<sup>18</sup> Conceptually Lenin felt closest to the middle faction, the Marxist center, of Social Democracy,<sup>19</sup> which led him also to a mechanistic understanding of capitalism and revolution,<sup>20</sup> aimed only at the abolition of the relations of production extrinsic to society. As late as 1905, in 'Two Tactics of Social Democracy in the Democratic Revolution',<sup>21</sup> he still insisted on the identity of his politics with that of Bebel and Kautsky. This has several implications. In *What is to be Done?* (1902), an essay that was conceived for the second party conference of the SDAPR (Social Democratic Labour Party of Russia) in London in 1903, Lenin, leaning on Kautsky, emphasised the claim of the social democratic party to develop socialist insights. These had to be brought to the workers from the outside.<sup>22</sup> The party was endorsed as the 'vanguard and organizer, leader and ideologue of the workers'.<sup>23</sup> For Kolakowski, as well as for historians of the worker movement who use a similar interpretive schema, what fails to be acknowledged is first of all that Lenin's proximity to Kautsky also included

<sup>18</sup> 'Lenin on the other hand is more closely bound to the theoretical tenets of those against whom he struggled politically. In [his]...analysis, his theory is built on the economic foundations of the theoreticians of the Second International'. See Ulysses Santamaria and Alain Manville, 'Lenin, und das Problem der Übergangsgesellschaft', in Claudio Pozzoli (ed), *Jahrbuch Arbeiterbewegung*, vol. 5, Frankfurt, p.54f.

<sup>19</sup> This ordering of the factions still holds even if one pushes the 'Marxist center' out of the middle and characterizes it as the moderate left of Social Democracy.

<sup>20</sup> See Santamaria and Manville, 'Lenin...', loc cit pp.57, 65f. For Lenin, the main economic goal remained the increase of the forces of production and of worker productivity (see Lenin, LW 27, p.247); and his political goal was a better administration (see LW 27, p.232f). His notion of state capitalism included the maintenance of capitalist forms. On this see Santamaria and Manville, 'Lenin...', loc cit p.75.

<sup>21</sup> See Lenin, *Werke* 9, p.54; Kolakowski, *Hauptströmungen...*, vol. 2, p.428.

<sup>22</sup> See Annette Jost, 'Rosa Luxemburgs Lenin-Kritik', in Claudio Pozzoli (ed), *Jahrbuch Arbeiterbewegung*, vol. 5: *Kritik des Leninismus*, p.79.

<sup>23</sup> Kolakowski, loc cit p.433.

the latter's evolutionism,<sup>24</sup> just as his proximity to Plekhanov included the latter's mechanical materialism.<sup>25</sup> Secondly, Kautsky's high esteem for scientific socialism vis-à-vis the workers brings to the fore not only a simple vanguardist conception, but therewith also a privileging of the 'socialist' intellectuals – only a short distance from Lassalle's notion of 'social caesarism', which provides the intellectuals with dictatorial powers. The function accorded to intellectuals should thus be taken over by the party. Organizationally, this presumption became the foundation for the model of 'democratic centralism'. Not the least consequence of this was the division of Russian Social Democracy into Bolsheviks and Menscheviks. Kolakowski emphasizes that three of Lenin's innovations vis-à-vis the traditional conception of Marxism of the Second International were decisive for the successful 'Bolshevik Revolution':<sup>26</sup>

1. The alliance of the proletariat and the peasantry;
2. The recognition of the national question; and
3. The special role of the 'party as opposed to the spontaneous worker movement'<sup>27</sup> – that is, as Lenin would say, against the workers' 'tradeunion consciousness'.

The first point, according to all accounts in the more recent literature, proves to be an adaptation of the 'Narodnik Program' – one that was taken up only very late by the Bolsheviks, and remains determined by power politics. The second point, the question of national self-determination, did indeed play a role in the alliances made during the Russian Revolution; it emerges, however, that what really mattered was the development of the conditions of national sovereignty, the constitution of bourgeois society, the establishment of a domestic market, and participation in the world market. All this contains within itself a force that 'in the long run' serves to jettison socialist ideology. Thus only the third point remains as a matter of debate: Lenin's conception of the party, that is criticized by both anti-socialist and socialist opponents of Lenin as the essential feature of 'socialism' in its Soviet form.

<sup>24</sup> Engels had of course already prepared the way for the narrowing of the dialectic. On this, see Diethard Behrens, *Zur Kritik der marxistisch-leninistischen Naturtheorie* (Ph.D. thesis), Frankfurt, 1984.

<sup>25</sup> In Plekhanov's works, the most varied interpretations of materialism are slipped in so that mechanical materialism and dialectical method coincide.

<sup>26</sup> Kolakowski, loc cit p.431.

<sup>27</sup> *ibid.*

### Early Critique of Lenin

The earliest and most advanced critique of Lenin's position, dating from the period before the first world war, comes from Rosa Luxemburg. She repeatedly criticized his political insistence on Bolshevik autonomy vis-à-vis the other factions of Russian and Polish Social Democracy.<sup>28</sup>

In her contribution, 'Organizational Questions of Russian Social Democracy',<sup>29</sup> her answer to Lenin's 'One Step Forwards, Two Steps Back',<sup>30</sup> Luxemburg develops a critique of 'ultracentralism',<sup>31</sup> which she considered to be the legacy of the 'Jacobin-Blanquist' party type.<sup>32</sup> Here she criticized the position, held not only by Lenin, that Social Democracy was the heir to the Jacobins.<sup>33</sup> Her concern was to emphasise the difference between

<sup>28</sup> In one of her motions to the International Bureau of the Second International, Rosa Luxemburg demanded the reunification of the Russian Social Democratic Party and criticized Lenin's divisive tactics. She was referring to the exclusion of the Mensheviks at the Party Conference of 1912, and thus to the constitution of the Bolshevik Party. See *Vorwärts*, no. 306, 21 Nov. 1913; from Rosa Luxemburg, *Gesammelte Werke* vol. 3, Berlin 1978, p.356f.

<sup>29</sup> Rosa Luxemburg, 'Organisationsfragen der russischen Sozialdemokratie', in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 1/2, Berlin, 1979, p.422ff.

<sup>30</sup> Lenin, 'Ein Schritt vorwärts, zwei Schritte zurück', in Lenin, *Werke*, vol. 7, Berlin, 1963, pp.199–430.

<sup>31</sup> Rosa Luxemburg, 'Organisationsfragen...'. loc cit, p.425. The central committee is in this formulation, 'the real active core of the party'. All other organizations are only instruments. While Luxemburg's notions aimed at a 'self-centralism' of the masses (Jost, 'Rosa Luxemburgs...'. loc cit, p.80), Lenin's is rather bureaucratic and hierarchical. See esp. Lenin, 'Ein Schritt...', loc cit, p.418. The critique that Rosa Luxemburg raised in her article on the Russian Revolution is that this centralism would lead to the rule of a group over the population, to the rule of a 'new' elite, to a bourgeois dictatorship. See Jost, 'Rosa Luxemburg...', loc cit., p.95.

<sup>32</sup> As an example of this, cf. Maurice Dommanget, 'Blanqui – ein Vorläufer der Bolschewiki', in *Arbeiter-Literature*, Sonderheft 1, Vienna, 1924, pp.71-87; Hugues Portelli, 'Jacobinisme et antijacobinisme de Gramsci', in *Dialectiques*, no. 4/5, mars 1974, pp.28-43; Bernd Rabehl, Wilfried Spohn, Ulf Wolter, 'Der Einfluss der jacobinischen und sozialdemokratischen Tradition auf das leninistische Organisationskonzept', in *Probleme des Klassenkampfes*, no. 17/18, pp.99–142.

<sup>33</sup> Lenin had written: 'The Jacobin who is inseparable from the organization of the proletariat, who has become conscious of his class interests – that is precisely the revolutionary social democrat.' Lenin, 'Ein Schritt...', loc cit, p.386. In his 'Antikritik' Lenin said that not he, but Axelrod had declared this. He himself had mentioned that the comparison is only admissible in terms of the difference between the revolutionary and opportunistic wings, between the Jacobins and the Girondins (See loc cit, p.483). See also Diethard Behrens, *Zur Kritik der marxistisch-leninistischen Naturtheorie* (Ph.D. thesis), Frankfurt, 1984.

social-democratic and Blanquist centralism.<sup>34</sup> Social Democracy has no group of the population opposite to itself that could be directed. Accordingly, she criticized as an illusion Lenin's formulation of the fundamental problem as the struggle against a virulent opportunism, which he intended to defeat by means of organizational statutes.<sup>35</sup> The proletariat and the intelligentsia cannot be assigned to the opposite poles of class-consciousness and opportunism.<sup>36</sup> Whether the intelligentsia acts opportunistically – that depends on the historical circumstances. In Russia, the situation is not unambiguous. The theory of 'going to the people', as well as that of the 'pure' proletariat, are first of all ideological moments; the one developing through agrarian romanticism just as the other espouses industrial romanticism.<sup>37</sup> The questions of organization and of the struggle against opportunism cannot be linked in such an immediate and direct manner. She argued on the one hand that opportunism is indeed flexible, but on the other hand that it is better served in centralized and socially oriented organizations.<sup>38</sup> For this reason opportunism cannot be held at arm's length by means of organizational statutes and 'ultracentralism'.<sup>39</sup> Even if 'opportunism [appears] to be a product of the workers' movement itself', as 'an unavoidable moment of its historical development' and immaturity, this needs to be understood quite differently from, and in distinction to Lenin's conception.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Marx also expresses himself against centralism. See Karl Marx, 'Letter to Baptist von Schweitzer', 13.10.1868, MEW 32, p.570.

<sup>35</sup> See Lenin, 'Ein Schritt...', loc cit, p.271 and p.400f.

<sup>36</sup> 'Above all it must be said that in the strong development of the inborn capacities of the proletariat toward social-democratic organization and in the suspicion of the "academic" elements of the social-democratic movement, there is not yet anything that can be called "marxist-revolutionary"; rather such notions can easily be shown to be related to opportunistic positions' (Luxemburg, 'Organisationsfragen...', loc cit, p.436).

<sup>37</sup> For Rosa Luxemburg, Russia stood before 'not a proletarian, but a bourgeois revolution' (loc cit, p.440).

<sup>38</sup> 'To attribute to opportunism, as Lenin does, an enthusiasm for some specific form of organization – let us say decentralization – is to mistake its nature... But if we understand opportunism, as did Lenin, as the attempt to tame the independent revolutionary class movement of the proletariat in order to make it serviceable to the bourgeois intelligentsia's desire for power, then this purpose cannot best be reached in the beginning stages of the workers' movement through decentralism, but precisely through rigid centralization that delivers the still immature proletarian movement, head and tail, to a handful of leaders' (loc cit, p.439).

<sup>39</sup> See loc cit, p.441.

<sup>40</sup> It 'seems to be an all the more curious idea, right at the beginnings of the workers' movement, to be able to forbid the emergence of opportunistic tendencies

The question of organization, then, came to the fore as one of the central problems in the discussions of the old Social Democracy and in the 'new' organizational formations that emerged in the labour movement at the beginning of the twentieth century. For this movement too, the organization, its genesis and its form, became the focus. If working people were to be organized through a central committee, then the structure and relations of dependence, as well as ingrained conceptions of authority, remain in place. How, then, under these conditions, could a socialist consciousness emerge, that is, a consciousness capable of understanding and transforming social relations? How should a consciousness of socialism as a vision of the abolition of all enslaving and alienating relations assume its place? Organization, as Rosa Luxemburg rightly emphasized, cannot be presupposed in *a priori* fashion; it cannot be conceived in abstraction from existing social relations. In short, organization cannot be presupposed to existing social relations, but is always a form of political-social cooperation. The peculiar form of Social Democracy developed from the results of the 1848 Revolution; it emerged from a historical context in which social relations had not fully developed in capitalist terms. For Luxemburg, this should give us pause for thought and cause us to think through the organizational question anew and better.

The worry that a political stance adapts itself to the currently most favorable relations, and is always ready as it were to sacrifice fundamental principles to a favorable opportunity, mostly an opportunity for individual advance, is not rendered obsolete in centralist models of organization. In these models there is even more room for such opportunistic behavior. And opportunism is not limited to the intellectuals either. Lenin acknowledged this with his thesis on the labour aristocracy. Nevertheless, the differentiation between unskilled and skilled labour is also quite inadequate as a conceptual means of explaining opportunism. Class membership says nothing about the

through this or that formulation of organizational statutes. The attempt to defend against opportunism with such paper means will actually cut in the flesh, not of opportunism, but of social democracy itself...such an attempt weakens the ability to resist not only opportunistic tendencies, but also...the existing social order. The means turns against its own end' (loc cit, p.443). Against the 'elevated majesty of a central committee' other means must be emphasized: 'In this way the audacious acrobat overlooks the fact that the only subject to whom this roll as pilot falls is to the mass-I [*Massen-Ich*] of the working class, that always insists on making its own mistakes in order that it may itself learn the historical dialectic. Finally, we must say openly, among ourselves: Missteps that a truly revolutionary workers' movement make are immeasurably fruitful historically and more valuable than the infallibility of the very best "central committee"' (loc cit, p.444).

content. Certainly, opportunistic elements can also be found among different leadership groups. Centralism<sup>41</sup> appears as the simple flipside of opportunism. Talk of opportunism rather obscures the problem that people [*Menschen*] in their existing social context are not only antagonists, but also contemporaries, that they are not only workers, but also participants in the sphere of circulation. If simple models of organization are abandoned, then we open the way to focusing on the forms of conflict in which working people are involved and on the experience that workers make in the course of their struggle. This is where the consciousness of the possibility of socialism is formed. From a socialist perspective, the characteristics of Soviet power, summed up in the formula of state capitalism and electricity, do not provide alternatives to bourgeois society. Lenin formulated his politics on the basis of the autonomously conceived social relations of production and the forces of production, where the former stands for capitalism, the latter for socialism. This formulation alone indicates that capitalism was not understood. The unfettering of productivity, already recognized by Marx in the *Communist Manifesto*, is a progressive moment of the capitalistic dynamic. Notwithstanding the few indications provided by Rosa Luxemburg, the debate about what this ‘unfettering’ could mean from a socialist perspective has hardly begun.

### **Workers’ Movement and Emancipation**

This section summarizes briefly the history of the left opposition within, and on the edge of Social Democracy and thus provides the prehistory of the opposition to Leninism.

Before 1914 German Social Democracy was the strongest party within the European workers’ movement. Its beginnings lay in the results of the 1848 Revolution: concentration and organization of the growing ‘worker population’ and opposition against the emerging ‘Wilhelminian’ society and state. Its main strength lay in the organization of the ‘journeymen’<sup>42</sup> among the artisanry and industry.<sup>43</sup> This had a formative side – social formation of the skilled workers – and a status or guild-like side – warding off the lower

<sup>41</sup> Russian social-democratic centralism is also the legacy of the structure of their respective societies, Wilhelminianism and czarism.

<sup>42</sup> See Thomas Welskopp, ‘*Das Banner der Brüderlichkeit*’. *Die deutsche Sozialdemokratie vom Vormärz bis zum Sozialistengesetz*, Bonn, 2000.

<sup>43</sup> The Party focused on skilled workers as its industrial basis, and this continued to be the case well beyond the first World War.

social layers, denounced as ‘lumpenproletariat’.<sup>44</sup> Politically, social democracy also functioned as a focal point for a part of the bourgeois opposition: social democracy inherited the main legacy of ‘democratic Germany’, even if the understanding of democracy became increasingly disputed.

The ‘Socialist Laws’ led both the Party and its followers to a certain radicalization, that, after the repeal of those laws, both the Party and the unions were relieved to abandon. This was also the moment of the emergence and formation of the left opposition, that formulated its demands as ‘social emancipation’, self-determination and democracy.

Five factions of this left opposition can be differentiated, which appear partially in historical sequence and partially contemporaneously:

1. The so-called ‘Young Ones’, German anarchism of the *fin de siècle*, Anarcho-syndicalism;
2. The syndicalists;
3. The ‘Rosa Luxemburg’ faction;
4. Radical intellectuals: Julian Borchardt, Heinrich Laufenberg, Karl Liebknecht, Franz Pfempfert, Fritz Wolffheim; and
5. The ‘Bremen Radicals’: Pannekoek, Knief, Gorter.

The Opposition of the ‘Young Ones’

After the repeal of the ‘Socialist Laws’ and the beginning of the ‘new politics’, left Social Democrats<sup>45</sup> – partly those who led the opposition to the ‘Socialist Laws’ – began to resist politics of the Party and the unions. The social democratic opposition can be differentiated from that with an anarchistic profile.

In the context of these conflicts with the leadership of the Party and the Unions, the ‘faction’ of ‘the Young Ones’ was formed.<sup>46</sup> They too were anti-parliamentary, anti-centralist and opted for a federalist union movement. A further target of their criticism was the increasing bureaucratization in the Party and union movement. They also criticized the

<sup>44</sup> This estate [*ständische*] terminology was taken over by the Leninist tradition.

<sup>45</sup> See Manfred Bock, *Syndikalismus und Linkskommunismus von 1918-1923*. On the history and sociology of the *Freie Arbeiter-Union Deutschlands* (syndicalists), the *Allgemeine Arbeiter-Union Deutschlands*, and the *Kommunistische Arbeiter-Partei Deutschlands*, Meisenheim, 1969, p.2ff. See *ibid.*, *Geschichte des ‘linken Radikalismus’ in Deutschland. Ein Versuch*, Frankfurt, 1976.

<sup>46</sup> See Jacques Droz, ‘Die deutsche Sozialdemokratie (1875-1914)’, in *ibid.* (ed), *Geschichte des Sozialismus*, vol. 4 (1974), Frankfurt-Berlin-Wien 1975, p.39.

'reform course' of the Party as mere adaptation, the politics of balancing between the bourgeoisie and proletariat in the unions, and the adoption of the leadership principle in place of the democracy principle in the party organization.<sup>47</sup> As a consequence a large number of the 'Young Ones' were forced out of the Party and the Unions.<sup>48</sup>

### **The Syndicalist Opposition**

After the abolition of the 'Socialist Laws' in 1890, Legien instituted a General Commission for union activities. Previously, the activities of the half-legal unions were carried out by a network of shop stewards. After the Union Congress of 1892 in Halberstadt, large central organizations<sup>49</sup> were created whose existence, however, was dependent on the renunciation of political activity.

Already at this Congress a minority voted for locally rooted organizations and for the right to engage in political activity. This minority was dubbed the 'localists'.<sup>50</sup> They were led by the 'Regierungsbaumeister a.D.', Gustav Kessler. From 1897 on, their publicity organ was the 'Unity'.<sup>51</sup> Their demands aimed at the elimination of the separation of social-democratic politics and union activities. The existence of tariff treaties and funds for

<sup>47</sup> See Bock, *Syndikalismus...*, loc cit, p.10f. These 'revolts' were also supported by Domela F. Nieuwenhuis. As is shown by Nieuwenhuis's politics, there was quite an opportunity for integration. The lack of a capacity for integration can often be seen in the history of the SPD (Social Democratic Party of Germany). Engels on the other hand denounced the movement as a rebellion of literati and students which ignores the fact that they were anchored among the workers in the large cities.

<sup>48</sup> As a reaction to the exclusion of parts of the opposition, the *Vereinigung unabhängiger Sozialisten* was founded with the journal *Sozialist* as its publicity organ. This group swung back and forth between anarchistic ideas, an individualethical socialism, and left social-democratic positions. The reception of early socialist ideas is unmistakable: justice, ethical education for work, social ethic, comradeship and socialist living communities. Revolution, so they generally argued, was possible at all times, if the people only wanted it. Landauer was later active in this circle. On the history of German anarchism, see Ulrich Linse, *Organisierter Anarchismus im deutschen Kaiserreich von 1871*, Berlin, 1969.

<sup>49</sup> The central unions had approximately 340,000 members in 1891; approximately 2.5 million in 1914. See Bock, *Syndikalismus...*, loc cit, p.24.

<sup>50</sup> The 'localists' initially had approximately 10,000 members; then the number declined slightly and toward the end they again had approximately 17,000. They were made up in large part of the urban working class. They were strongest among construction workers, especially in Berlin.

<sup>51</sup> This newspaper was forbidden in 1914.

economic support of workers were criticized as a means of ‘moderating the willingness to fight’ [*kampfmindernde Elemente*]. In 1901 they renamed themselves the ‘Free Alliance of German Unions’ (*Freie Vereinigung deutscher Gewerkschaften*).

At the beginning of this conflict, the SPD remained neutral, trying to reunite both wings of the union movement. This changed, however, in the phase characterized by the ‘Mass Strike Debate’. While the unions rejected the mass strike, the ‘localists’ supported it. Formally, the SPD (Social Democratic Party of Germany), influenced by Bebel, also supported it. But the secret agreement between the Union- and Party-leadership to prevent all mass strikes was publicised by the ‘localists’. This was, however, for the ‘localists’ only a Pyrrhic victory.

In its wake the ‘localists’ divided into anarchistic and social-democratic factions. After Kessler’s death, the anarcho-syndicalists under Friedeberg managed to gain the leadership.<sup>52</sup> The division came over the question of syndicalism.<sup>53</sup> Focal points of their political activity up to 1914 were: antireligious propaganda, enlightenment about pregnancy reduction from the perspective of a proletarian Malthusianism, and anti-militarism. Operating in political proximity with them for a while during his time in the workers’ movement, but increasingly critical, was also Robert Michels.<sup>54</sup> He too criticized the ‘petite bourgeois’ character of the SPD and considered it a result of bureaucratization.<sup>55</sup>

Discomfort about the ‘bourgeois’ leaders became increasingly general, especially as the socialist ‘tribunes’, Bebel and Liebknecht moved into the background. In this period the tendencies that develop in modern large organizations as moments of cooperation and hierarchy – that is, the same tendencies that critics viewed as subordination and accommodation to bourgeois stereotypes – became increasingly apparent.

<sup>52</sup> Under Friedeberg’s leadership they fell back to a position of strict antiparlamentarism and propagated the general strike as the starting point of the uprising – this in contrast to the social-democratic understanding of the mass strike as an instrument of class struggle. See Bock, *Syndikalismus...*, loc cit, pp.28-30. The revolutionary syndicalist orientation was only found in the CGT.

<sup>53</sup> The result of the argument between Kater and Friedeberg was that of the approximately 17,000 members, about 8,000 returned to the central unions. A remainder of about 6,000 (1914) voted for Kater’s syndicalism.

<sup>54</sup> See Bock, *Syndikalismus...*, loc cit, p.35.

<sup>55</sup> His law of oligarchy focused on the SPD.

### The 'Rosa Luxemburg Faction'

Rosa Luxemburg is one of the most important figures of revolutionary Social Democracy. In the struggle over the direction Social Democracy should take, she chose – at that time still with Kautsky's support – to combat Bernstein's revisionism. Her essay, 'Social Reform or Revolution', is devoted to this battle.<sup>56</sup>

Rosa Luxemburg's critique focuses on the notion that a new form of sociability, socialism, could be reached step by step through reforms and that therefore Marx's theory was now of only historical interest. She railed against Bernstein's<sup>57</sup> concept that continuous growth of the unions and the Social Democratic Party would lead more or less automatically to Socialism. She considered this idea to imply a mongrel hybrid between socialism and capitalism.<sup>58</sup> In terms of the economic theory, she accused Bernstein of accepting only the guarantees of bourgeois economists.<sup>59</sup> In short: Bernstein's undertaking was that of classical social-democratic opportunism. In equal measure she criticized the renunciation of reflection about the relation between theory and praxis. This critique was shared by most of the leftists. Thus in her attack on Bernstein, Rosa Luxemburg found a range of support from the Marxist center all the way through to the 'Bremen Faction'. In the mass-strike debate, provoked by the strike movement at the beginning of the twentieth century, above all, by the Russian Revolution of 1905, the question of a revolutionary proletarian strategy was raised again; and Rosa Luxemburg took a middling position. On the one hand, she criticized the anarchistic identification of mass strike and general strike, while holding on to the form of this struggle because of the many contemporary occurrences of mass strikes; and thus, on the other hand, she criticized the leadership of the unions and the Party to whom the independently active masses were an outrage. Against the background of the course of the Russian strike movement and of the political movement accompanying it, Rosa Luxemburg – as explicated in her essay on the mass strike<sup>60</sup> – developed her specific understanding of theory and praxis. She differentiated the forms of the strike into demonstration strikes, combat strikes [*Kampfstreik*], and mass strikes. For her, the mass strike was

<sup>56</sup> Rosa Luxemburg, 'Sozialreform oder Revolution?' in *ibid.*, *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 1/1, Berlin, 1979, pp.367–466.

<sup>57</sup> Oskar Negt, 'Rosa Luxemburg: Zur materialistischen Dialektik von Spontaneität und Organisation', in Claudio Pozzoli (ed), *Rosa Luxemburg oder Die Bestimmung des Sozialismus* (Frankfurt: 1974), p.191.

<sup>58</sup> See Rosa Luxemburg, 'Sozialreform...', p.420.

<sup>59</sup> See *loc cit*, p.438.

<sup>60</sup> Rosa Luxemburg, 'Massenstreik, Partei und Gewerkschaften', in *ibid.*, *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 2, 1974, pp.91–170 (Hamburg, 1906).

not only an economically motivated strike; it was above all a political weapon.<sup>61</sup> Mass strikes, she replied to the anarcho-syndicalists, do not happen for no reason.<sup>62</sup> With this she touched on the classical union position.<sup>63</sup> Mass strikes have a different course, they are stormier and more intensive.<sup>64</sup> The mass strike documents the 'creative form of expression of the experiences and needs of workers.'<sup>65</sup> The driving force here is the spontaneous.<sup>66</sup>

Oskar Negt argues that Luxemburg's understanding of dialectics can be found in her conception of the mass movement<sup>67</sup> which is also the place of the proletarian public sphere.<sup>68</sup> In contrast to the architects of the theory of spontaneity,<sup>69</sup> of course, Luxemburg points toward the ambivalent role of spontaneity, that may in one case be a driving force, in another a retarding force.<sup>70</sup> Just as the focal point of the struggle can constantly change from an economic to a political one, so too is the character of spontaneity to be viewed in relation to the process of becoming conscious of social relations. If in quiet times the division of labour between party and unions is sensible,<sup>71</sup> it becomes in revolutionary periods an ideology; for in such times the unity of the economic and the political struggle is formed in real terms.<sup>72</sup> In such periods the separation of the economic and the political is transcended<sup>73</sup>, and they are fused.<sup>74</sup> This emerging unity has as its

<sup>61</sup> See Peter Nettle, *Rosa Luxemburg* (Köln-Berlin, 1969), p.183.

<sup>62</sup> See Rosa Luxemburg, 'Massenstreik,...', loc cit, p.130f.

<sup>63</sup> See loc cit, p.166.

<sup>64</sup> See Peter Nettle, *Rosa Luxemburg*, loc cit, p.185.

<sup>65</sup> Oskar Negt, 'Rosa Luxemburg...', loc cit, p.160.

<sup>66</sup> See Nettle, *Rosa Luxemburg*, loc cit, p.188.

<sup>67</sup> See Negt, 'Rosa Luxemburg...', loc cit, p.160: For her, '[d]ialectics was the method, the form, the consciousness of the self-movement of its content'. loc cit, p.161 – What is dialectical in the figure of a content that gives itself a form?

<sup>68</sup> See loc cit, pp.171, 193. On the question of the bourgeois public sphere, see Jürgen Habermas, *Der Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* (Neuwied-Berlin, 1969).

<sup>69</sup> This is mostly a creation of her opponents: Social-democracy, Leninism, and Stalinism are in agreement here.

<sup>70</sup> See Rosa Luxemburg, 'Massenstreik,...', loc cit, p.132.

<sup>71</sup> This division of labor, Luxemburg emphasized, has its historical justification, especially in the quiet phases of bourgeois society. See loc cit, p.156.

<sup>72</sup> See loc cit, p.162.

<sup>73</sup> See loc cit, p.155. The division between economic struggle and indirect forms of political struggle fall away in this period.

<sup>74</sup> The economic and the political are no longer to be separated. See loc cit, pp.127, 128, 154. Marx too had also pointed out the close relation between the economic and political struggles with the example of the struggle over the reduction of the

consequence a different form of organization. And this form cannot be decreed, nor be determined in a technical-voluntaristic manner.<sup>75</sup> At a certain point the mass strike becomes a people's movement [*Volksbewegung*]. For this reason, it is injurious to the analysis of this movement to underestimate the potential of the unorganized workers – although Social Democracy is naturally the organized centre of the working class.<sup>76</sup> As Social Democracy is itself part of the movement, it must of course intervene and back the movement up tactically and supportively so that the movement is able to unfurl its full force.<sup>77</sup> But it can only do this insofar as it spreads enlightenment about what it is that the masses are striving for.<sup>78</sup> In this situation, the organization then appears as the quintessence, the product of such mass activities.<sup>79</sup>

The attempt to think the relation between organization and spontaneity as a 'dialectical-democratic process'<sup>80</sup> also implies a different understanding of the idea of participating in traditional parliamentarism in order to have at least a controlling influence on the process of political power.<sup>81</sup> This attempt is immediately embedded at the very root of the democratic process itself. The 'process of spontaneity and organization' should be understood as a 'process of learning and experience'. In her view this process of experience in practical democracy generates not only a proletarian public sphere. It also generates organization. It is, then, the process that generates consciousness, and it does so in and through the practical and theoretical assertion of a class perspective that is conscious of its own transcendence as length of the workday. See Karl Marx, 'Letter to Friedrich Bolte', 23.11.1871, in MEW 33, p.332f.

<sup>75</sup> See Rosa Luxemburg, Speech against a unified economic and political organization of the workers' movement, presented at the founding conference of the KPD (30.12.1918-1.1.1919), in *ibid.*, *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 4 (Berlin, 1979), pp.483–485. See also Bock, *Syndikalismus...*, loc cit, p.44.

<sup>76</sup> See Rosa Luxemburg, 'Massenstreik,...', loc cit, pp.143, 144.

<sup>77</sup> See loc cit, p.133.

<sup>78</sup> About the leadership, she wrote: '[t]he Social Democratic Party is the most enlightened, most class-conscious vanguard of the proletariat...It must, as always, be out in front of events, trying to accelerate them. Social Democracy can do this by making the broadest layers of the proletariat understand the inevitability of entering into a revolutionary period and the most important social moments and political consequences of that period' (loc cit, p.145f).

<sup>79</sup> Nettl especially points this out. See *ibid.*, *Rosa Luxemburg*, loc cit, p.188.

<sup>80</sup> See for a detailed discussion: Diethard Behrens, *Elemente einer Demokratietheorie*, loc cit, p.53ff.

<sup>81</sup> A weakness of these early discussions, and this is true for almost all of the participants, is the ignorance concerning the problem posed by the state and the law.

a class. The ‘self-knowledge of the proletariat’, mediated through specific actions, contains political and economic experiences and, as Luxemburg sees it, these should lead to self-organization as well as to new organizational forms. In order to mediate theory and praxis with one another, there needed to be the possibility of ‘proletarian’ communication (*‘proletarischen’ Verständigungsmöglichkeit*). It is this critical understanding that transports and mediates experience. It is also a process of self-communication and selfunderstanding. The initially separated dimensions of social reality – the economic struggle for distributional justice and the state-oriented perspective of politics – are only apparently independent, and their seeming separation will be recognized as illusion and mere appearance; and this is a practical as well as a theoretical process, about which *a priori* nothing can be said. As these experiences appear however briefly in historical moments, they need analysis and further development, and that is, in turn, a theoretical *and* a practical process.

Social democrats of various positions belonged to the circle around Rosa Luxemburg. Although these persons worked in different departments of the workers’ movement – like Zetkin in women’s issues, Mehring in cultural matters, and Liebknecht in the youth and peace movements – they were able to come together to form a ‘left’. Thus the ‘alliance’ included people like Franz Mehring, Clara Zetkin, Karl Liebknecht, but also Radek and Karski. In 1910 at the latest, the break between the ‘left’ and the Social Democratic Party was complete, when the party leadership refused an article by Rosa Luxemburg on the movement for the right to vote in Prussia.<sup>82</sup> In their opposition to the war the different factions came together one more time. Radical Intellectuals: Julian Borchardt, Heinrich Laufenberg, Karl Liebknecht, Franz Pfempfert, Fritz Wolffheim

In February 1911 Franz Pfempfert became the editor of *Die Aktion*<sup>83</sup> in Berlin, in which many authors to the left of center published their work. They had a diverse [*weitverzweigte*] readership.<sup>84</sup> The declared aim was to build the ‘greater German Left’.<sup>85</sup> Pfempfert’s initiative was aimed above all at the organization of the ‘intelligentsia’. *Die Aktion* stood in solidarity with Rosa Luxemburg, but already very early on preferred organizational

<sup>82</sup> See Bock, *Syndikalismus...*, loc cit, p.46f.

<sup>83</sup> Rosa Luxemburg also published her most important later articles in *Die Aktion*.

<sup>84</sup> The young Horkheimer was also among its readership.

<sup>85</sup> See *Die Aktion*, 1911, No. 2.

independence vis-à-vis the SPD. Along with Otto Rühle, Pfempfert opted for a new 'syndicalist Workers' Party'.<sup>86</sup>

In September 1913 Julian Borchardt became editor of the *Lichtstrahlen*. He too voted after 1914 for an 'independent oppositional workers' party'<sup>87</sup> and worked within the context of the *Internationalen Sozialisten Deutschlands* (ISD).

Heinrich Laufenberg who came to the SPD from the Catholic Center Party and Mehring suggested that he go to Hamburg to write a history of the workers' movement. He was excluded from the Party in 1912 because of his leftist demands. He played a large role in the leftist factions in Hamburg during the war. Theoretically, he was more critical of the notion of spontaneity than other contemporaries. Together with Fritz Wolffheim, he became one of the representatives of the left wing of the KPD (Communist Party of Germany) after the war. Later he briefly played a role in the KAPD (Communist Workers Party of Germany) until he and Wolffheim were both excluded as representatives of German National Bolshevism.

Karl Liebknecht, a well-known lawyer, tried before the war to organize the youth movement of the SPD as well as the anti-militarist movement. He advocated an ethical-socialist position that, after the outbreak of the war, quickly led him – and Pfempfert – to a rejection of the war credits. His work in the USPD (Independent Social Democratic Party of Germany) and *Spartakusbund* made him – next to Rosa Luxemburg – one of the leaders of the young communist movement.

#### *The 'Bremen Radicals': Pannekoek, Knief, Gorter*

After Rosa Luxemburg, the most significant theoretician of left social democracy before 1914 was doubtless the astronomer Anton Pannekoek. Recommended by Mehring for the Party School of the SPD, he taught there from 1905 onwards. With Herman Gorter and Henriette Roland-Holst theoretical elements of the radical opposition of the Dutch democratic party were enunciated. Beginning in 1907 he published the socialist opposition paper, *De Tribune*. With the founding of the SDP<sup>88</sup> in 1909, he distanced himself from social democracy.

The political and theoretical influence of Pannekoek's writings reached the *Bremer Bürgerzeitung* under the editorship of Johannes Knief and the

<sup>86</sup> See Bock, *Syndikalismus...*, loc cit, p.47.

<sup>87</sup> See loc cit, p.48.

<sup>88</sup> Several hundred of the approximately 30,000 members of the Social Democratic Party of the Netherlands made this same switch. See Bock, *Syndikalismus...*, loc cit, p.49. The KPN emerged from the SDP in 1918.

Bremen *Arbeiterpolitik*, and also the Bremen and Hamburg left. The focal point of his writings was the mass strike.

His opposition to traditional versions became clear in the polemic between him and Kautsky.<sup>89</sup> Kautsky insisted that the interests of the organized and unorganized masses were not the same, and he accused the leftists of political encroachment. Pannekoek in contrast emphasized that decisive power lay beyond parliament; and he accused Kautsky of having a 'too mechanistic conception of the organization',<sup>90</sup> of identifying organization with institutions, and of being afraid of revolution. The basis of organization is rather a different, more voluntary one; and thus the party must be understood as only one part of the 'power of the masses for action'.<sup>91</sup> Summarizing Pannekoek's position on the question of organization, Bock writes: 'The basis of understanding organization is the voluntary discipline of the masses in action and with unlimited freedom of discussion.'<sup>92</sup> Nevertheless, the party should assume leadership. The mass strike toward which this movement is heading will only occur on the basis of proletarian power. Organization, as Bock makes clear, was for Pannekoek determined by the 'spirit of belonging'.<sup>93</sup> Marxist theory must be made complete by inclusion of the subjective factor.<sup>94</sup> Despite the differences, Pannekoek's similarities with the syndicalist position are obvious. Subjective morality reappears here as the mere will toward revolution.

<sup>89</sup> See *Die Neue Zeit*, 1912, vols. I and II.

<sup>90</sup> Bock, *Syndikalismus...*, loc cit, p.52.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Loc cit, p.53. This thesis rests on the notion that the economy has direct causal efficacy and causes the masses to react.

<sup>93</sup> Loc cit, p.54. The KAPD later based itself systematically on Dietzgen's writings that were popularised by Roland-Holst. See Henriette Roland-Holst, *Joseph Dietzgens Philosophie gemeinverständlich erläutert in ihrer Bedeutung für das Proletariat* (Munich, 1910). As Bock shows, Pannekoek, who followed her efforts, remarked to Dietzgen (see *Neue Zeit*, 1913, vol. II, pp.37-47): 'Marx showed the efficacy of the world, society, and the economy by showing how they affect people and offer them a certain content. Dietzgen showed the efficacy of mind itself by giving this content a particular form'. Bock, *Syndikalismus...*, loc cit, p.55. Pure neo-idealism!

<sup>94</sup> Bock interprets this, in agreement with Lenk, as an anticipation of the position that Lukács and Korsch later adopted. See Kurt Lenk, *Ideologie, Kritik und Wissenssoziologie* (Neuwied, 1961), p.37.

### *First World War*

Not immediately, though in due course, the first World War and the politics of civil peace [*Burgfriedenspolitik*] brought the various factions of the opposition together. This began with the refusal of Karl Liebknecht (December 1914) and Otto Rühle (March 1915) to vote for the war credits. By the end of 1915 there were already 15 Reichstag representatives who voted against the credits. The group organized itself first as the *Sozialdemokratischen Arbeitsgemeinschaft* and then as the USPD. In 1916 the founding of the *Spartakusbund* followed in order to provide opposition to the power politics of the majority SPD.<sup>95</sup> The *Arbeitsgemeinschaft* included the leftists, the earlier Marxist center, the Haase faction, Ledebour and some of the reformists. This group was unified by opposition to the war. There were various notions of organization from the USPD, the *Spartakusbund*, and the ‘Bremen’ leftists. The USPD organized itself according to the adoption of moderately decentralizing elements. The *Spartakusbund* represented a moderate centralism in the context of a revolutionary International, but rejected conspiratorial activities. The decentralizing tendencies were rejected. The Bremen and Hamburg left<sup>96</sup> cooperated early on with the Zimmerwald movement, and then opted against the ‘social democraticism’ of the USPD and the *Spartakusbund*. Increasingly they understood themselves as a part of the Zimmerwald left with Lenin as their spokesman.

### **The Revolutionary Period**

The revolutions of 1917 strengthened the revolutionary tendencies in Europe.<sup>97</sup> In this context the economic caesura seemed to be a break with

<sup>95</sup> The SPD majority allowed the offices of the centrist newspaper *Vorwärts* to be occupied and the editorial board dispersed by the military authorities. See Bock, *Syndikalismus...*, loc cit, p.59. On the general history of the first World War and the Weimar Republic, see Karl Dietrich Bracher, Manfred Funke, Hans-Adolf Jacobsen (eds), *Die Weimarer Republik 1918-1933* (Bonn, 1987); Arthur Rosenberg, *Entstehung der Weimarer Republik* (Frankfurt, 1961). On the social history of this period, cf. Jürgen Kocka, *Klassengesellschaft im Krieg* (Göttingen, 1978); Hans-Joachim Bieber, *Gewerkschaften in Krieg und Revolution*, 2 vols. (Hamburg, 1981).

<sup>96</sup> This also included those associated with the newspaper *Lichtstrahlen* (Berlin).

<sup>97</sup> A study that proves to be an implicitly apologetic interpretation of the developments in Russia is that by Rainer Rotermundt, Ursula Schmiederer, and Helmut Becker-Panitz, “‘Realer Sozialismus’ und realer Sozialismus: Bedingungen und Chancen einer sozialistischen Entwicklung in Gesellschaften

the past,<sup>98</sup> a new time. The period before the war had already been perceived by many contemporaries to be a period of crisis. Contributing to this perception were not only the political-militaristic chest-beating of the European leaders, but also the signs of a serious economic crisis. The World War accelerated the decline of the economy. The Russian revolutions signaled not only the end of the first World War, but also the end of traditional power. Revolution, economic crisis, and political crisis were thus interpreted as a unity and perceived as a historical break. Because the protagonists of this study saw in socialism an alternative, the year 1917 seemed to be an epochal break – the beginning of a new era, of socialism.

After the strikes at the end of the war, the foundation of the Communist Party was accomplished. This encompassed three factions: one that aimed at a unification with the USPD; one that followed a strategy oriented toward the masses, including Luxemburg; and the Bremen, Hamburg, and Berlin leftists who pushed the strongest for a republic of workers' councils or soviets. The leftists were accused of 'syndicalism' and were forced out of the KPD by Levi. They then organized themselves into the new KAPD.<sup>99</sup> This new party proved to be divided into three wings: the nationalbolshevist, a syndicalist wing renouncing politics, and an authentic leftcommunist wing. The highpoint of the KAPD was the period from 1918-1924. It then collapsed, having splintered several times. Part of its membership returned to the SPD, while others worked on in small groups.

sowjetischen Typs', in Claudio Pozzoli (ed), *Jahrbuch Arbeiterbewegung*, vol. 5, loc cit, pp.9-37. This work repeats the thesis of the belated development of Russia and the need for the Soviet Union to catch up with the West as well as the thesis of the Soviet Union as 'really existing substitute of socialism'. See esp. pp.19f,21,22.

<sup>98</sup> A new epoch appeared to have begun. That which Marx had written about the industrial pirates proved itself to be the stronger law. Concerning the general concentration of capital, Santamaria and Manville maintain: 'The result of the abolition of capital within the boundaries of the capitalist mode of production is itself only a formal abolition. Marx...shows...that this abolition is an imposed force...A historical form of the manifestation of capital, the form based on private property, is abolished, but not the relation itself...' (Santamaria and Manville, 'Lenin...', loc cit, p.61).

<sup>99</sup> Though the federalist principle could not be established in the KPD, especially after Liebke's death, it remained the programmatic centerpoint of left communism.

*The Critique of Bolshevism*

Early on, a clear profile of anti-Leninist notions of organization had developed. The critique of Lenin was then extended to his philosophy.<sup>100</sup> The focal point of left political thinking remained the 'soviet' or 'council' movement. Similar notions can also be found in Italy during this period. The critique of Bolshevism became general.<sup>101</sup>

The 'Theses on Bolshevism' by the Group of International Communists of Holland begin with praise of Lenin for his struggle against the war and for having decisively led the Russian Revolution. Concerning the discussion of the prerequisites of the Russian Revolution, the 'Theses' based its interpretation on the following: Russian history had been determined by two opposing forces: lying geographically between Europe and Asia, and with a political economy caught between feudalism<sup>102</sup> and capitalism.<sup>103</sup> The uniqueness of the Russian conditions, of course, remains uncomprehended in this mechanistic interpretation, which transposed in schematic fashion western structures onto Russia.

For that reason, the following theses are also problematic, although their details are partially based on correct facts. Russia of the late nineteenth century was seen to have been based on an equilibrium between the propertied classes and faced the task of industrialization. For this reason, a certain form of bourgeois revolution was due. The 'Theses' argued that this situation could to a certain degree be compared with that of prerevolutionary France. The decisive difference is seen by the 'Theses' especially in the fact that the classes were ambivalent in their interests. On the one hand, they should feel as opponents of czarism with which, however, they co-operated on the other hand. However, while the Russian nobility attempted before 1917 to extend its influence over the absolutist state, the bourgeoisie was weak and dependent on czarism, and ultimately signed on to the program of 'reforming czarism'. The Russian peasantry

<sup>100</sup> Anton Pannekoek, 'Lenin als Philosoph', in *Rätekorrespondenz*, vol. 1, 1938 (and New York, 1948); reprinted in Anton Pannekoek et al., *Marxistischer Antileninismus* with an introduction by Diethard Behrens (Freiburg, 1991).

<sup>101</sup> Gruppe Internationaler Kommunisten Hollands, 'Thesen über den Bolschewismus' (August 1934), in *Rätekorrespondenz*, no. 3. See Gottfried Mergner (ed), *Gruppe Internationaler Kommunisten* (Reinbek, 1971) and in Anton Pannekoek, Paul Mattick et al., *Marxistischer Anti-Leninismus*, loc cit, p.19ff.

<sup>102</sup> Russian feudalism is generally considered a form of rule analogous to that of feudalism in the West. This analogy, however, ignores the particular structure of the Russian bureaucratic nobility after the Petrine reforms.

<sup>103</sup> There were only a few initiatives to develop capitalist agriculture; these resulted, however, only in the destruction of the Russia village communes, which brought great immiseration in its wake. See loc cit, p.20f.

was petite bourgeois and dependent on alliances with other social groups. Later, in the phase of struggles in 1917, it is alleged that the peasantry became counter-revolutionary. Nevertheless, the peasantry is seen to have helped secure the victory of the revolution by having represented their own interests against the large landholders. The Russian proletariat, on the other hand, even though numerically small, is said to have developed a huge readiness to fight. Finally, the petite-bourgeois intelligentsia, the Jacobins, had put its 'stamp' on the Revolution.<sup>104</sup> The Russian Revolution supposedly occurred within this class-triangle – czarism, feudalism, bourgeoisie against peasants and proletariat; and because the peasants were too dependent and the workers too few, Bolshevism is seen to have entered the picture as a substitute.<sup>105</sup>

Bolshevism is seen to bear all 'the essential tendencies of revolutionary bourgeois politics', plus the Marxist 'insight into the laws of the movement of classes'. Bolshevism is deemed to be the revolutionary social democrat, 'the Jacobin in alliance with the masses' (Lenin). In short, it is to be compared with the revolutionary petite bourgeoisie of the French Revolution. This is seen to be most apparent in its politics and organization: mobilization and seizure of power by means of a centralized organization. Theoretically Lenin's theory was seen to have been hitched onto bourgeois materialism which did not prevent a 'sliding back into philosophical idealism'. Insofar as Bolshevik politics were aimed against Russian absolutism, it was seen to be justified. In terms of the groups who were bearing the alliance against czarism, Bolshevik politics were instrumental. This instrumentalism, it was emphasized, also has a theoretical side concerning its relation to Marxism.<sup>106</sup> At this point it becomes clear that the critique delivered in the 'Theses' is developed from the perspective of the critique of Stalinism. The emphasis on the 'people's revolution' is seen to reveal that the Russian Revolution was a bourgeois revolution: the masses under bourgeois leadership.

Against this background, the slogans about the workers' councils are seen to be merely tactical. The council model<sup>107</sup> was in fact abandoned as the Bolsheviks found other means to carry out their struggle against the Social Revolutionaries.<sup>108</sup> The end of the council model was at Kronstadt.

<sup>104</sup> See loc cit, p.24.

<sup>105</sup> See loc cit, p.25.

<sup>106</sup> See loc cit, p.29f.

<sup>107</sup> On the Russian council movement, see Oskar Anweiler, *Rätebewegung in Russland* (Leiden, 1958).

<sup>108</sup> See loc cit, p.31.

From then on, the idea of a democracy of workers' councils was only represented by the worker opposition which brought about only its own persecution.

In contrast to the usual division of the events of 1917 into first a bourgeois, then a proletarian revolution, the 'Theses' argue that the whole period should be considered a fundamental and unitary process of social restructuring – a process that began with the collapse of czarism and that can be characterized as a bourgeois revolutionary process. The old power triangle 'czarism-feudal nobility-bourgeoisie' was dissolved by the new one: Bolshevism-peasantry-working class.<sup>109</sup>

The revolution was considered a Blanquist one and transposed elements of a 'politics of Jacobin conspiracy', of a bourgeois revolution against the bourgeoisie. After the revolution the bourgeois element clearly focused on industrial politics, but at issue was not socialization, but 'control of capitalist production by the workers'<sup>110</sup> – not socialism, but state economy. Thus, Bolshevism was considered to be above all a 'dictatorial leadership of the Jacobin intelligentsia' and as such the modern form of bourgeois revolution. In this respect, it was also considered to be the largest obstacle to proletarian struggle.

Analytical moments similar to those of the council communists are to be found in Lukács and especially Korsch. While Lukács<sup>111</sup> begins *History and Class Consciousness*<sup>112</sup> with subjectively oriented elements and ends up in accommodation with Leninism,<sup>113</sup> Korsch's critique of Lenin after his break with the KPD was more fundamental.<sup>114</sup> The focal point of Korsch's critique consists of questions of epistemology and notions of praxis. In this regard it is clear that he is much closer to the left communists.

<sup>109</sup> Thesis 44: '...Just as the czarist state apparatus ruled autonomously over both property owning classes, so too did the new Bolshevik state apparatus begin to gain autonomy from the two classes on which it was based' (loc cit, p 33).

<sup>110</sup> Loc cit, p.34.

<sup>111</sup> The Lukács in question here is the political Lukács. His significance as a social theorist and philosopher is disproportionately greater. His theoretical work concentrated on society, reification, fetishism, and knowledge. These issues must be treated elsewhere.

<sup>112</sup> Georg Lukács, *Geschichte und Klassenbewusstsein* (Berlin, 1923).

<sup>113</sup> Lukács's was concerned here with the limits on what could still be said in the KP. This forced him to make many changes of direction, self-criticisms, and recantations.

<sup>114</sup> Karl Korsch, 'Lenin's Philosophy', in *Living Marxism*, Nov. 1938, p. 138–144. Karl Korsch, *Die materialistische Geschichtsauffassung und andere Schriften*, edited by Erich Gerlach (Frankfurt, 1971). Korsch's critique speaks of Kautsky, but it is aimed at Lenin.

### *Dilemmas of Left Politics*

The dilemma of left politics in the 1920s can be described as follows:

1. The general politics of the KPD is characterised by its accommodations with Russian relations and politics. Because several different factions were involved, these politics were, at times, not successful. Eventually the Bolshevization of the Party was accomplished, even if it remained an open question as to what that meant in specific historical situations. An opposition movement in the style of a left opposition to Lenin, like that of Fischer and Maslow (who later formed the *Lenin-Bund*) did not go beyond this framework.

2. In view of the rise of fascist movements and parties, the politics of the Communist Party-Opposition aimed at closer cooperation with the SPD and the unions. Thalheimer's analysis, known as the 'Bonapartism Thesis',<sup>115</sup> studied the social situation against the background of fascist movements. These attempts were mostly torpedoed by the central organizations of the party. The shortcoming of this politics was obvious: it was oriented toward short-term cooperation and information, but largely had to accept the undertakings of social-democratic politics in the Party and unions; and it had a close pragmatic relationship to social conflicts.

3. The syndicalist orientation had some influence in, and outside of, the unions. Its federalist program was partially accepted in many parties to the left of the Communist Party. Similarly, the politics of left communism had some influence periodically. As a democratic and federalist group that was oriented towards workers' councils and that concentrated on the working class, it formulated – partially through its critique of Lenin – various perspectives beyond day-to-day politics. The demand for a 'pure proletariat', though itself not without prognostic value, contradicted, however, not only the premises of spontaneity theory but also the insight, adopted from syndicalism and social anarchism, that the revolution is possible at all times, that is: it depends solely on the will of the actors. As clear as its perspective on revolution was, its concept of revolution was equally unclear. From a theoretical perspective, however, questions were raised that led to attempts to

<sup>115</sup> See Nils Kadritzke, *Faschismus und Krise. Zum Verhältnis von Politik und Ökonomie im Nationalsozialismus* (Frankfurt/New York, 1976).

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connect to a new conceptualization of experience, which posited a different conception of revolution.

### **After the War**

After the war – as a consequence of national-socialist and Stalinist politics – all communist groups found themselves marginalized once again. This remains true even though several groups were able to carve out positions of local significance.<sup>116</sup> German left communism seems to have emigrated to the United States.<sup>117</sup>

Several earlier followers, however, hibernated in various university cities and exercised some influence on the SDS (Socialist German Student Union) that formed an independent organization in 1959-60 – namely in Berlin, Frankfurt, Giessen, Göttingen, and Stuttgart. It was therefore not surprising that in the wake of the struggle associated with 1968, and in the wake of the Maoist and Soviet re-dogmatizing of political discussion, the

idea of the council movement emerged once again, though articulated somewhat naïvely as opposition. In the course of these re-emerging discussions, classical anarchism became marginalized because its bourgeois-individualistic forms were again revealed and it was therefore conceptualized as a faction of liberalism. The ‘own history’ of council communism, however, the tradition of council communism was wholly inadequately studied. This was reserved for only a very few.<sup>118</sup> The collapse of the Soviet Union had to some degree opened the possibility for a new debate and new politics. The aura that had surrounded Lenin’s politics has dissipated. The fragile foundation of Soviet politics has become obvious. Even if one follows the findings that Lenin’s politics follow a bourgeois notion of revolution, the memory remains of constellations that opened possibilities, even though many, for a number of internal and external reasons, were not realized. Two moments immediately spring to mind: internationalism and the conception of the economic. A specific international constellation made the Russian Revolution possible. But it was only possible because it conceived of itself both as a movement against the war and as an international movement. The demand of a proletarian internationalism became universal – a demand that,

<sup>116</sup> The KPO in Bremen among others.

<sup>117</sup> See the writings by and about Paul Mattick.

<sup>118</sup> Bordiga’s influence was first recognized in the German discussion, although generally without any critical evaluation.

cautiously formulated, is already found in the writings of the First International. But in post-1917 politics, internationalism was not pursued in real terms. For this reason, internationalizing the workers' movement is still a fundamental task.

Lenin's understanding of the economy has been widely discussed. Yet, a fundamental understanding and critique of the capitalist economy cannot be found in Lenin.

If an understanding of economic forms cannot be offered in dogmatic terms, then one must confront the question of what indeed is meant by a capitalist economy. What makes the economy 'capitalistic'? This leads to further questions as to how to overcome it. In this regard it is necessary to problematize the relation between the political and the social, and to explain how they are bound together in the economic sphere. This conceptualization cannot be made from the outside – one has to stand in the things in order to understand and, through their understanding, to criticize them. It would therefore be of great value to remind ourselves again of Rosa Luxemburg's concept of experience and its further elaborations, and to reapply and renew it as a topic for critical thought and reflection.

**Note**

Translated from German by Joseph Fracchia.