

## **Council Communism**

Christopher Huxley

---

Volume 12, 1983

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/llt12re03>

[See table of contents](#)

---

### Publisher(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

### ISSN

0700-3862 (print)

1911-4842 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

---

### Cite this review

Huxley, C. (1983). Review of [Council Communism]. *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 12, 216–222.

# Council Communism

Christopher Huxley

D.A. Smart, ed., *Pannekoek and Gorter's Marxism* (London: Pluto Press 1978).

Paul Mattick, *Anti-Bolshevik Communism* (London: Merlin Press 1978).

Ralph Miliband, *Marxism and Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1977).

ALTHOUGH THESE THREE VOLUMES offer quite different contributions written over a period of more than 60 years, the authors share an interest in controversies that continue to be at the heart of Marxist politics. Topics covered include the role of trade unions in capitalist society, the nature of revolutionary organization, the relationship of political parties to the working class, and a critical assessment of Marxist revolutionary movements.

A common theme running through all three books is the recognition that a Marxist theory of politics needs to take into account those spontaneous expressions of working-class power that have arisen in every significant revolutionary upheaval in the twentieth century. The classic model of popular organization for action and control was the appearance of soviets during the 1905 Russian revolution. The soviets represented a sudden and unexpected innovation which owed little or nothing to Marxist theory and practice. Since that time similar manifestations of workers' self-activity have repeatedly arisen, either parallel with, or counterposed to, the power exercised by established organizations claiming to represent the interests of the working class.

D.A. Smart's book contains a selection of essays by Anton Pannekoek and Herman Gorter, two leaders of the council communist current that once occupied a prominent place in the European revolutionary movement. Following a short-lived but eventful period between the end of World War I and the early 1920s, the ideas of these two thinkers largely disappeared from the political scene. For a long time what little awareness there was of Pannekoek was likely

to be derived from two mentions given him by Lenin, the one favourable in *State and Revolution*, the other the relentless criticisms in *'Left-Wing' Communism, An Infantile Disorder*. The revival of interest in the ideas of the council communists that has occurred since the New Left should ensure that continuing attention will be given to these writings, translated into English for the first time. In addition to his translations, the editor provides an introduction which helps place the political ideas within their historical context.

Pannekoek began his political activity at the turn of the century in the Dutch social-democratic party. There he met Gorter, some ten years his senior, who at the time was co-editor of the party's theoretical journal. In 1906 Pannekoek left his astronomical research at the University of Leyden and moved to Germany. The first text in Smart's collection is a critique that Pannekoek wrote of Karl Kautsky in 1912. Pannekoek argued that the growing numerical and sociological weight of the working class was producing important new forms of spontaneous mass action which pointed to the need to re-think the traditional tactics of trade-union and electoral struggle. The article revealed a major disagreement with Kautsky on the conquest of power, with Pannekoek insisting on the necessity to neutralize the institutions of the capitalist state.

The abandonment of the anti-war position by the German Social-Democratic Party (SPD) in 1914 confirmed Pannekoek and Gorter's worst fears about the politics of the leading party of the Second International. An extract from Gorter's work *Imperialism, the World War and Social Democracy* analyzes this defeat for workers' internationalism and points to the need to break with reformist tendencies within the workers' movement.

During the war Pannekoek was deported back to Holland where he collaborated with Gorter in the Left Radical opposition to the leadership of the SPD.

By the time the two activists were able to return to Germany at the end of the war the process of communist regroupment, stimulated by the success of the Bolsheviks in Russia in 1917, had begun to take clearer organizational form. Pannekoek and Gorter soon found themselves in sharp disagreement with the line and major actions of German Communist Party, the KPD(S), formed at the beginning of 1919. They shared the views held by a clear majority of the membership who opposed the leadership's policies for a centralized party which would campaign in parliament, in the trade unions, and in the institutionalized factory councils. For its part the ruling faction of the party was able to claim the support of Lenin and the Russian leadership. In 1920 the left communists declared themselves a separate organization, the Communist Workers' Party of Germany (KAPD), with the objective of affiliating with the Third International and winning support for their politics. The KAPD was intended to complement the General Worker's Union of Germany (AAUD), a loosely structured federation of factory organizations formed to provide the basis for a system of revolutionary worker's councils. Larger than the KPD(S), the KAPD numbered up to 40,000 and had Gorter as its theoretical spokesman.

Separate contributions by Pannekoek and Gorter, written in 1920 and 1921 respectively, examined the reasons for the failure of the German working class to seize power following military defeat and the collapse of the old regime. Both authors explained that the spontaneous establishment of a system of workers' councils proved to be much less radical in Germany than in Russia due to the counter-revolutionary role played by social democracy and the trade-union movement.

Pannekoek and Gorter's analysis of the different conditions prevailing in Western Europe and Russia formed an important basis for their famous disagree-

ment with Lenin. In contrast to the attention given Lenin's criticisms, the positions actually advanced by the left communists usually escape careful scrutiny. In "World Revolution and Communist Tactics," Pannekoek explained why he thought revolutionaries should avoid participation in established unions and parliamentary institutions. Such forms of organization and struggle, he argued, might have been appropriate during the ascendant phase of capitalist development in which the emerging working class was able to wring certain concessions, but was quite unsuited to a period of world war and economic collapse in which the proletariat, through its new forms of organization, discovered its revolutionary potential. But even under these circumstances, Pannekoek had no illusions that the overthrow of capitalism would be either spontaneous or easy. Nowhere was this more true, he argued, than in Western Europe where, unlike in Russia, the working class had to be prepared to make the revolution alone, without relying on middle-class leaders to forge alliances with other social classes. *The importance of factory-based organizations and workers' councils was understood in terms of their genuinely proletarian and democratic character and hence their potential to transform the consciousness of millions of workers.*

Also of interest is Pannekoek's short afterword to the above article in which he replied to Lenin's attack on the left communists. Rather than attempt to answer Lenin's arguments for taking advantage of union and parliamentary activity as a way of making contact with less conscious workers, Pannekoek tersely dismissed such tactics as an opportunistic capitulation to the narrow needs of the new Russian state.

The period after 1921 was not favourable to the politics of Pannekoek and Gorter. There was little support for the left communists at the Third Congress of the Comintern and the affiliation of the

KAPD came to an end when it rejected an ultimatum to merge with the organization that went on to become the Communist Party of Germany (KPD). For the next two years the KAPD and the AAUD declined, with splits developing in both organizations over whether to participate in struggles for improved wages and other reforms. By the end of 1923 the movement was of little political importance. Gorter persisted in various attempts to regroup the council communists up to his death in 1927. Pannekoek turned to his intellectual work which he continued until shortly before he died in 1960.

Despite agreement on most political questions, marked differences of style characterize the work of Pannekoek and Gorter. The impassioned declarations of Gorter, expressed in almost verse-like form, are a reminder of his reputation as a lyric poet and stand in sharp contrast to the writings of Pannekoek, whose scientific background and sense of history combined to produce a more analytical approach to political problems. Through the contributions of both authors the reader gains a good appreciation of the main ideas of the council communists and of their differences with both Second and Third Internationals. North American readers might also be interested in Pannekoek and Gorter's critique of anarcho-syndicalism, as articulated in the revolutionary unionism of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). *Their basic objection concerned the IWW's failure to take sufficient account of such crucial institutional forces as the capitalist state, as well as the important spheres of ideology and culture.* Flowing out of this criticism, Pannekoek and Gorter stressed the need for a revolutionary party based on historical materialism, whose members understood the need to change more than just the ownership and organization of production. The goal of communism required an internationalist perspective that could not leave any sphere of political or intellectual life untouched; least of all did Pannekoek

and Gorter want to abandon these matters to a bourgeois intelligentsia.

Paul Mattick, the author of the second book, joined the youth section of the German Spartacus League at the height of the revolutionary developments in 1918. *Anti-Bolshevik Communism* is a collection of a dozen of his political essays and reviews written between 1935 and 1967. As the title suggests, the book offers a sustained critique of the theory and practice of Bolshevism. For Mattick there is an essential continuity in the work of Lenin, Trotsky, and Stalin.

Although no special justification would seem to be needed for publishing this collection, especially since it contains some relatively inaccessible writings, the one advanced by the author in his introduction is the need to inform a whole new generation of the radical left about the tradition of the council communists. This is especially important in Mattick's view since he sees this non-authoritarian Marxist tradition being all but eclipsed by the competing claimants to the legacy of Lenin, whether in the garb of Trotskyism, Stalinism, Maoism, or some New Left variant of anti-imperialism.

The major concern of the first group of essays by Mattick is to analyze the strengths and weaknesses of the post-World War I European revolutionary movement. Different essays focus on the political thought of Kautsky, Lenin, Luxemburg, and Trotsky, as well as on the lesser-known contributions of Otto Rühle and Karl Korsch. The assessment presented of the failure of the German revolution is somber. "In retrospect," Mattick writes, "the struggles of the German proletariat from 1919 to 1923 appear as minor frictions that accompanied the capitalistic re-organization process which followed the war crisis." (95)

Mattick describes how the German workers' councils owed their origin to the action committees which led the wartime strikes. These committees represented substitute bodies which took over from the

discredited pro-war and anti-strike social-democratic leadership of the established trade unions. When this clandestine activity subsequently expanded to involve the establishment of a widespread system of workers' and soldiers' councils, for a time effectively replacing the government, the SPD, other reformist political currents and workers remaining loyal to the traditional trade unions found themselves with little choice but to recognize, enter, and actively participate in the councils. This had the effect of blunting their radical potential so that any call for the councils to take power lost all revolutionary content. The prevailing social democratic ideology that the socialization of production was a governmental concern also dissuaded workers from attempting to use the councils to take over the means of production.

A modified version of the workers' councils was eventually institutionalized as part of the Weimar Constitution. Even today the memory of the original councils has not entirely been erased, finding expression in the semi-incorporated structures of contemporary West German industrial relations. But what was the fate of the council communists? Mattick recalls how the almost unbearable tension between theory and the prevailing conditions in the 1920s gave rise to feelings of discouragement and eventually despair as the small groupings of council communists were reduced to no more than "discussion clubs trying to understand their own failures and that of the German revolution." (108)

Yet despite their lack of success, Mattick maintains that up to the triumph of German fascism, "The fight of the 'ultra-left' against the official labour movement proved to have been the only consistent struggle against capitalism that had thus far been waged." (111) Here one is struck by Mattick's apparent lack of concern with alternative tactics which might have forestalled or prevented the rise of fascism. For example, he seems to reject the

perspective of those who called for the existing leaderships of the main working-class forces — the SPD and the KPD — to form a united front to resist Nazism. Interestingly, Mattick draws no balance sheet of the Comintern's disastrous experience between 1929 and 1935 with the ultra-left policies of the "Third Period." These included sectarian attempts to build revolutionary unions and the rejection of any collaboration with social-democratic organizations. The bitter irony is that during this period the Comintern actually adopted, in however a distorted fashion, some of the maximalist tactics apparently favoured by Mattick.

Although much of Mattick's analysis builds upon and extends the ideas of Pannekoek and Gorter, he differs with them on the role of a revolutionary party. Mattick expresses abhorrence with what he views as Lenin's authoritarian and Jacobinical conception of a vanguard party, but he is less clear on the sort of party organization, if any, that is needed. This is in sharp contrast to Pannekoek and Gorter who explain the difference between the sort of party that might have been appropriate for the Bolsheviks in Tsarist Russia and the party organization needed in the more developed conditions of Western Europe and North America. The latter conception involved an attempt to achieve a dynamic inter-relationship between insurgent spontaneity and the programmatic leadership offered by a mass revolutionary workers' party.

Paul Mattick is better known to most readers for his writings on Marxist economics. Apart from his trenchant critique of Baran and Sweezy's *Monopoly Capital*, the essays in this collection are not primarily concerned with economic analysis. It is, however, precisely such an emphasis that is sometimes most needed. Consider, for example, Mattick's analysis of new forms of working-class organization. The promise offered by developments such as the Russian soviets of 1905 and 1917, or the shop stewards' move-

ment in England during and following World War I, was the possibility of such bodies serving both as agents for revolutionary change and as the embryonic organizational form for the new society. Unfortunately Mattick devotes little attention to the task of elaborating the economic and organizational principles that might actually guide a society structured around workers' councils.

The concepts of Marxist political economy could also have been further developed in the same author's discussion of the socio-economic character of the Soviet Union. The analysis presented of the regime as a new form of state capitalism, advanced by certain council communists as early as 1921, begs many important questions which Mattick fails to answer. This is especially apparent in an essay written in 1947 where he claims that in all essential aspects the systems of monopoly capitalism, fascism, and state capitalism "are identical and represent only various stages of the same development." (71)

The author of the third book has the advantage of greater historical hindsight over the writers so far considered. Unlike the previous contributions, Ralph Miliband's work is prepared with an eye to the need, particularly felt in academic circles, for an introductory study which sets out the elements of a Marxist theory of politics.

In addition to drawing upon the classic texts of Marx and Engels, Miliband's theorization pays special attention to the writings of Lenin and, to a lesser extent, Gramsci and Trotsky. Such an approach is needed, it is argued, since the two founding fathers of Marxism provide little guidance for understanding the complex relationship between relatively spontaneous manifestations of popular power — which Miliband considers under the general rubric of "counciliar" forms of organization — and established working-class political parties. As already noted in this review, the relationship proved to be particularly

contentious in Germany and Russia and has continued to be a source of tension in subsequent revolutionary experiences.

The most original part of *Marxism and Politics* is the last chapter where Miliband presents the case for re-thinking the mutually opposed positions commonly associated with the strategies of reform and revolution. He argues that "the terms of the contraposition are mistaken, in so far as *neither* 'model' represents realistic perspectives and projections." (179, emphasis in original)

Turning first to the revolutionary perspective, Miliband states that the main problem with the Leninist variant of insurrectionary politics is its failure outside of Russia. Of the many explanations usually advanced, Miliband is impressed with those arguments which stress the attraction that liberal-democratic traditions have had for the supporters of working-class movements in the advanced capitalist countries. Insurrectionary politics of the Leninist type have long been abandoned by the major Western Communist parties and have been replaced by various reformist strategies.

The classic objection to reformism is the spectre of obstruction or defeat by conservative class forces. Events in recent history cited by Miliband as chilling reminders of this danger include the 1967 take-over by the Colonels in Greece and the overthrow of the Allende government in Chile in 1973. These, along with other similar experiences, are regularly used in support of the argument that all efforts to achieve a fundamental transformation of society by constitutional and electoralist means are doomed to failure. Miliband attempts to answer these objections by presenting an alternative "scenario" of social change involving what he describes as a "strong" version of anti-capitalist reformism. At the outset he notes that the premise for any such perspective is the existence of bourgeois democracy; in its absence radical social change is liable to take other forms, most

likely involving recourse to force of arms.

In advancing his model of social change Miliband draws selectively from the divergent traditions of reformism, Leninism, and council communism. Features of the reformist project of electing a socialist government to re-direct state institutions are immediately evident. But he also acknowledges the validity of the warning, first given by Marx and Engels, and re-asserted by Lenin, that the working class cannot take over the existing state apparatus and expect to use it to achieve radically different objectives. Miliband's response, however, qualifies Lenin's call to smash the existing state and replace it with a new form of class power. According to Miliband, the process of transition "both *includes* and *requires* radical changes in the structures, modes of operation, and personnel of the existing state, as well as the creation of networks of organs of popular participation amounting to 'dual power.'" (189, emphasis in original)

This attention to manifestations of popular power which are autonomous from, although not necessarily counterposed to, political parties, is a central theme in the writings of the council communists but has been cause for some unease in the Leninist tradition, especially arising out of the Bolsheviks' resolve to hold on to power in Russia. Other revolutions in which anti-capitalist forces have come to power have experienced similar tensions between the requirements of state direction on the one hand, and of democracy and popular power on the other.

While Miliband places his primary emphasis on the possibility of electoral gains by mass working-class political parties, he leaves considerable scope for action by a variety of conciliar forms of power. The latter could include the appearance of workers' councils as well as new types of organization involved in all manner of attempts to redefine political priorities. One of the strengths of Miliband's contribution is that it suggests

the possibility for linking the controversies from early twentieth-century Marxism over workers' councils with contemporary debates concerning a Marxist

orientation to the growing, but still fragmented, assortment of potentially anti-capitalist movements which have developed in recent years.

**studies  
in  
political  
economy**  

---

**a  
socialist  
review**

**A CANADIAN  
SCHOLARLY JOURNAL  
featuring:**

- Interdisciplinary perspectives on current and controversial topics
- Prominent writers on international and theoretical issues
- In-depth analysis of Canadian questions

**FORTHCOMING IN '82/3**

- JAMES PETRAS, MORRIS MORLEY: *Reagan and the New Cold War*  
PAT CONNELLY, MARTHA MacDONALD: *Women's Domestic and Wage Labour*  
CHANTAL MOUFFE, ERNESTO LACLAU: *Socialism and the Working Class*  
ELLEN WOOD: *E.P. Thompson and His Critics*  
GREGORY KEALEY: *Stanley Bréhaut Ryerson*  
GILLES DOSTALER: *Labour Theory of Value*

**IN PREVIOUS ISSUES**

- MICHAEL LEBOWITZ: *Marx's Theory of Crisis*  
ANN LEGARE: *Canadian Federalism: A Marxist Theory*  
LIISA NORTH: *El Salvador: Historical Roots of Civil War*  
LEO PANITCH: *Dependency in Canadian Political Economy*  
LARRY PRATT: *Energy: Roots of the National Programme*  
ADAM PRZEWORSKI: *Democratic Socialism in Poland?*

SPE is published three times annually.

RATES: C\$12.00 (Regular) C\$20.00 (Sustaining)  
C\$22.00 (Institutional).

Foreign subscribers: U.S., Mexico - please add \$1.00;  
Overseas - please add \$3.50.

**STUDIES IN POLITICAL ECONOMY**

P.O. Box 4729, Station E, Ottawa, Ontario K1S 5H9, Canada