Chapter 3 - The German Left before 1914

The Dutch Left

Not surprisingly, the theoretical (and, to some degree, the organizational) sources of the German Left originated not outside of the classical workers movement, or in its heartland, but in its periphery. They are of German-Dutch origin. Northern Germany and the southern part of the Netherlands have comprised an economically integrated region since the 16th century. During the millenarian movements of the 16th century, subversive ideas and individuals spread from the south of Holland to the cities and states of Northwest Germany (Münster). Lenin was able to conceive a revolutionary strategy because his external position allowed him to take what was best from the European socialist movement without being completely swept away by it. But his Russian limitations led him into the same cul de sac as social democracy, all the more insofar as his revolutionary positions were contradictory: although a revolutionary, he shared the Kautskyist theory of class consciousness. The German-Dutch Left extracted the best from the German workers movement, and remained at that level. Unlike Lenin, it was at the center of the European communist movement. Unlike Luxemburg, however, it was not so immersed within social democracy as to be paralyzed by it.

In the Netherlands, the Social Democratic League (SDB), led by D. Nieuwenhuis, among others, gave way, in 1894, to the SDAP, after a struggle between Marxists and anarchists. Refusing to take either side, Nieuwenhuis, at the turn of the century, would warn of degeneration in his work, Socialism in Danger.1 The SDAP followed the same trajectory as the large parties in the Second International. At the end of the century, it was divided between revisionists and the orthodox (the latter being represented by the parliamentarian Troelstra, known as the “Dutch Kautsky”). Gorter and Henriette Roland-Holst, both poets, entered the party in 1897 and became the spokespersons for a new left wing tendency which attacked Troelstra’s supposedly radical center. They were joined by Pannekoek, who entered the Party in 1903, as well as by other future members of the Dutch CP including Van Ravensteyn and Wijnkoop.

Their organ was the journal De Nieuwe Tijd, to which De Tribune was added later (see below). This current attempted to go beyond traditional debates. In relation to the colonial question, for example, it did not restrict itself to endorsing the contemporary theory which held that capitalism was an “inevitable stage for the colonies in their march towards socialism . . . if socialism were to triumph in the old world, it would be possible to avoid the miseries of capitalism on the other continents by sharing capitalism’s technological advantages with them. Gorter and Pijnappel agreed with Mendels, and said that his analysis agreed with Marx’s writings.”2 Their analysis, in effect, returned to the view entertained by Marx, especially in regard to Russia.3 Gorter broached the theme of the proletariat’s isolation, which he would again address in his Open Letter to Comrade Lenin: “Attacking the Party’s illusions concerning the petite bourgeoisie and the peasants, Gorter stated in passing that a large part of this petite bourgeoisie had an interest in the products of the colonies . . . annually making hundreds of millions from the Indies . . . .” The International’s Stuttgart Congress (1907), interpreted by Lenin as a
healthy reaction against the Right, “opened the eyes of the Dutch Left.”

This development was not uniform, however: Roland-Holst, despite understanding the connection between German imperialism and the positions supported by the German socialists, concluded that the Congress had ended to the revolutionaries’ advantage.

In its essentials, the German-Dutch Left (including Radek) held a position close to that of its Polish and Russian adversaries on the question of the right of nations or of “peoples” to self-determination. For Wiedijk: “the colonial question is essentially situated, not in the colonies themselves, but in the colonizing countries, where the most important interests are at stake. . . . Colonial reform cannot come before class struggle.” Lenin was quite isolated on this issue. The other Bolsheviks did not accept the defense of the absolute right to self-determination before the revolution. Always on the lookout for anything which could undermine the power of the leading capitalist countries and lend support to the proletarian struggle, Lenin tried to find substitutes for proletarian action. He saw the centrifugal role which nationalist forces could play to weaken the Russian State, for instance. But this kind of realism overlooked capital’s ability to contain the proletariat within national borders. His theses on the national question derived from his position on democracy. In the internal Bolshevik polemic on this theme in 1915-1916, he denounced “the scornful attitude of imperialist economism in respect to democracy”, which will be indispensable in “educating” the proletarians.

“The Marxist solution to the democracy question consists in the utilization, on the part of the proletariat conducting its class struggle, of all democratic institutions and aspirations against the bourgeoisie. . . . As for the Marxists, they know that democracy does not eliminate class oppression, but only makes the class struggle clearer, more extensive, more open; it is what we need. . . . The more democratic the regime, the more obvious, for the workers, is the origin of the evil which is capitalism. . . .”

The creation of a democratic national state thus constitutes progress, since such a state would then become a framework within which the proletariat could organize and educate itself. The proletariat needs democratic States because it needs democracy. For Pannekoek, however, the national solution is utopian under the regime of capital, because every nation is at war with the others and oppresses its own minorities. In 1912, his critique of the projects for cultural autonomy in the Austro-Hungarian Empire was also an indirect critique of Lenin: “It is not our advocacy of national autonomy, whose realization does not depend on us, but only the strengthening of class consciousness which will really smash the terrible power of nationalism to pieces. It would be false to want to concentrate all our efforts on a ‘positive national policy’ and to stake everything on . . . the realization of our program for national self-determination as a precondition for class struggle.”

In the same year J. Strasser, an Austrian left-socialist, published a similar text, in which he simultaneously attacked the federalism of Austrian social democracy (which sought the means to preserve the unity of the empire in concessions to the other nationalities), the nationalism of Czech social democracy and the supporters of pan-German unification. The socialist party, Strasser wrote, must be centralized, and all
national solutions are illusory: “it is not true that nations can in any circumstance live side by side without becoming rivals. In bourgeois society, each nation accuses the others of expansionist tendencies, and even aggression, whenever they get in each others’ way. Every national struggle makes a mockery of revisionist internationalism. What, then, will the proletariat do when the struggle between nationalities breaks out?”

During the war, Pannekoek did not participate in the debate on the national question. Lenin stated with satisfaction that while Gorter was against the principle of self-determination, he nonetheless allowed for it in the case of colonialism; for the Dutch East Indies, for example. Like the German Left he was not directly confronted by the reality of the national question, unlike the Russians, the Poles and the Austrians, nor was it a crucial theme in his experience or activity. Each time he systematically investigated the question, however, he did so in the sense of this observation of Bukharin’s: if the “right of nations” is not an empty, meaningless term, it must include the compulsory defense of the national State, and end in the demand for patriotism or, which is the same thing, in the absurd position of the revolutionaries’ denial of internationalism. The only meaning which the slogan of self-determination can have is opposed to the revolution. Bukharin was more aware than Lenin of the integral connection which existed between organized capitalism and any State, large or small.

Within the SDAP, the conflicts between the left and the center became increasingly acute. In 1901 they revolved around the agrarian question: the left refused to oppose the expropriation of small farmers for the purpose of the development of modern capitalist agriculture. It was not the Party’s job to incite the small-scale peasants to unite in defense of the small family farm, but to fight for socialism. This debate would be taken up again in the Open Letter to Comrade Lenin. On the education question (1902), the Left rejected any concessions to religious schools, which were desired by the Party’s leadership for reasons having to do with electoral deals. In 1903 the Left turned against the trade unions which sabotaged a railroad strike. Finally, in 1905, in the debate over the parliamentary question, it violently denounced the alliance with the radical bourgeois parties in the run-off elections, which granted a majority to the radicals against the Right. As these trade union and parliamentary trends were to continue to unfold (the same kind of alliance was made in the German elections of 1912), the Left would become abstentionist and critical of the trade unions.

In 1907 the Left established its own newspaper: De Tribune (whence the name “Tribunists”), which was particularly vehement in its attacks on the Party’s leadership. An extraordinary Congress of the Party in 1909 demanded that it cease publication. With the exception of a small circle around Roland-Holst, which would not join the others until some time later, the whole left wing left the Party and founded the Social Democratic Party (SDP). It was a “groupuscule”: it had no more than 700 members in contrast to the 25,000 members of the SDAP in 1913. It was not accepted as a member by the International, despite the support of the Bolsheviks, another schismatic party. Its application having been presented to the Bureau of the Socialist International in 1909, the latter was confronted by two motions. The motion of the SDP and the German SPD, which was supported by Lenin, was in favor of the new party’s petition for affiliation: but
the opposition motion, presented by the Austrian V. Adler, obtained a majority. Luxemburg condemned the split in the name of Party unity. The SDP did, however, engage in parliamentary activity. In 1918 it would become the Communist Party of the Netherlands (KPN), with two seats in Parliament. In 1919 Gorter denounced the opportunism of the Dutch communist party. His attack included, among other themes, the notion of a “pure” and “clear” “nucleus” which would be further developed in 1920-1921.

For her part, Roland-Holst occupied an intermediate position, somewhat like that of Trotsky in Russia, and, like the latter, would join the Left in 1917. She was, however, on the side of the Bolsheviks with the Zimmerwald Left (see the next chapter). Later, she would take the middle road between the communist left and the Communist International.

The significance of the Dutch Left is above all theoretical and international. The Dutch would provide a meeting place for the socialist opposition during the war; the Netherlands did not take part in the conflict. It was in Amsterdam that the Western European Bureau of the Third International would be founded (see Chapter 11), and it would be dominated by the Left. The SDP provided the Left’s two leading theoreticians in Northern Europe: Gorter and Pannekoek. Gorter was the theoretician of the SDP, while Wijinkeep and Van Ravensteyn were its political leaders. Gorter was the author of The Fundamentals of Social Democracy (1905; reprinted in 1920 under the title, The Fundamentals of Communism), Historical Materialism for Workers (1909), and Social Democracy and Revisionism (1909). As a leader of the KAPD he would direct the latter’s negotiations with the CI. Later, he would found the Communist Workers International (the KAI, in German).

Bremen
There are now some important historical works dealing with Pannekoek: we shall only focus on what distinguished him, even before the war, from the Luxemburgist Left. Almost from the start of his political activity, in 1904, he worked for the most part in Germany as a teacher of Marxism in the SPD’s Party Schools. With Luxemburg, he criticized the Kautskyist leadership of the Party, and was the spokesperson for a small group centered mainly in Bremen, whose organ was the Bremer Bürger-Zeitung.

Pannekoek and Radek attacked Kautsky in the Bremer Bürger-Zeitung, particularly in regard to international issues and imperialism, and posed the problem of the possible relation between war and revolution: “The struggle against imperialism does not have the purpose of hindering its development, but of mobilizing the masses against it . . .” This position, expressed by Pannekoek in 1910, would be taken up by Lenin in 1914. Of Polish origin, Radek was excluded from Polish Social Democracy in 1912 for embezzlement. He had previously been a supporter of the Warsaw Group which was at that time close to the Bolsheviks and opposed to the (Luxemburgist) Party leadership. He was excluded from the Party the following year, despite Pannekoek’s protests. A Russo-Polish court of honor ruled in his favor in 1915. He went to Switzerland during the war. In 1914-15, he was against the principle of self-determination, for Poland as
well as in general. His interpretation of the Easter Rebellion in Ireland in 1916 was in opposition to Lenin’s.17

In 1912, Pannekoek was among the first to connect the class struggle in Europe to the independence movement in the colonies: only by joining with the proletariat in the highly-developed countries could the struggles in the backward countries acquire a socialist character.18 This position was quite unlike both Lenin’s view as well as that of the other members of the Dutch left wing, which is outlined below, and which could at times border on indifference concerning underdeveloped regions.

The left-wing current which would coalesce in the KPD was born long before 1918-19, and by virtue of its actions had already demarcated itself from the first (Luxemburgist) leadership of the Party.19 The communist left which appeared after 1917 was not, therefore, without roots in the previous epoch. What is called the “communist left” became the communist left prior to 1914 through contact with other left currents (particularly those of Lenin and Luxemburg), and these currents mutually influenced one another. The revolutionary currents which would confront one another after 1917 had to a great extent already known and opposed one another before 1917, in relation to the national question, among other issues. Pannekoek made extensive contributions to the polemics on this question. By criticizing “infantile leftism”, Lenin was continuing a debate which started a dozen years earlier.

Pannekoek distinguished himself from the Luxemburgist Left on two important points. He thought that radical elements should abandon social democracy and regroup outside it. Luxemburg, however, condemned the SDP’s schism: one must persevere wherever the masses are found: “one cannot remain outside the organization, one must not lose contact with the masses. . . . The worst workers party is better than no party at all.”20 This presaged the rupture between the Spartacus League and the ISD, and later that between the KPD and the KAPD.

An important polemic also set Pannekoek against Luxemburg, concerning the theory of the “final crisis” of capital, as expounded in The Accumulation of Capital.21 Pannekoek criticized it on two levels. On the “mathematical” level, Luxemburg took as her starting point one of Marx’s “errors” in his accumulation schemas in Sections 2 and 3 of Volume II of Capital. Defending Marx, Pannekoek showed that it was impossible to prove that capital’s movement must of necessity come to a halt should it be deprived of possibilities for expansion outside of the “capitalist zone”. Without, however, making the proletarian movement the motive force of history, he criticized the idea that one could speak of the crisis of capital in purely economic terms, as well as the content which Luxemburg conferred upon necessity. According to Luxemburg, the necessity which drives capitalism towards collapse is mechanistic: the proletariat is not included as one of its factors. Her catastrophic vision overlooks this factor although it is an element even at the “purely economic” level. Pannekoek would return to this theme much later, explaining this concept of mechanistic necessity as a resurgence, on the theoretical plane, of a typically social democratic trait which Luxemburg criticized on the political plane: Kautskyist fatalism, the negation of the revolutionary character of the
proletariat. Nonetheless, after the war, and unlike the case of the first divergence summarized above, the German Left (although opposed to Luxemburg’s tactics), would again take up the Luxemburgist thesis, simplifying it instead of developing it, under the rubric of the “death crisis” of capitalism.

Paradoxically, a historian (Schurer) has viewed Pannekoek as one of the precursors and founders of “Leninism”. Bricianer was right to reject this hasty assimilation, but did not go far enough in his examination of the genesis of the Left prior to 1914. Schurer relies upon real analogies, which do not, however, justify his comparison of Lenin and Pannekoek, even before 1914. It is true that each was opposed to the Luxemburgist theory of imperialism; and that Pannekoek was undoubtedly the first to grant importance to the notion of a “labor aristocracy”, and in particular was the first as well to once again resuscitate Marx’s thesis on the need to destroy the State. But he approached these questions in a way dissimilar to that of Lenin.

_Tactical Differences in the Workers Movement_ (1909) effectively examined the root of the reformist tendency, which Pannekoek attributed to the weight of the middle classes, and of the employees and officials of the workers movement; on the other side, the workers in large industry constituted the revolutionary nucleus. Lenin, however, in _Marxism and Revisionism_ (1908), insisted upon the role of the petite bourgeoisie. Even more than “small-scale production”, which Lenin would never cease to discuss (even in _Infantile Disorder_), Pannekoek showed that it is the very mode of existence of the workers in a non-revolutionary period which defines the nature of the “labor aristocracy”. Merely by virtue of their numbers, the workers must join together into a bloc (in fact, into numerous rival blocs) which requires representatives to deal with capitalists and the State, from whom concessions must be wrested. The workers bureaucracy was more than a kind of activity or a leader-masses relationship; it was above all sociologically a relation in which a privileged, entrenched minority was formed. In the higher ranks, the leaders even hoped to enter the bourgeoisie, even if this hope was based on nothing but the inevitable financial and commercial activities of the workers movement, through the funds which it absorbed: social welfare, sick benefits, cultural centers, publishing, etc. In the lower ranks, the cadres possessed socio-cultural means for the advancement of their offspring. It is in this sense that one can speak of a social layer which reproduces itself as privileged, and not simply of categories which enjoy more advantages than others.

The notion of a “labor aristocracy” was frequently employed in England during the 1880s to designate a quite numerous minority of “artisans (skilled workers and craftsmen) and above all those who were members of the trade unions and other labor organizations”. The privileged social layer(s) varied from country to country depending on the background of the working class and its organizations, and in 1890 Engels invoked the “aristocratic minority” of unionized workers. In the United States, this issue was inseparable from that of racial and ethnic minorities: in England Marx also emphasized the antagonism between the English and the Irish. What was new about Engels’ 1892 Preface to _The Condition of the Working Class in England_ was his connecting this phenomenon to British industrial monopoly: a thesis appropriated by
Lenin. In that same year, Wilhelm Liebknecht declared at the Socialist Congress: “The majority of you are certainly, for the most part, aristocrats of labor, insofar as income is concerned.” The German Left went beyond a sociological view in understanding that a certain kind of workers struggle, in a calm period, gives rise to structures which immediately turn against the revolution. Lenin, on the other hand, saw in this phenomenon nothing but the corruption of one part of the workers who held the leadership of the movement: he might have asked himself how this minority could have led the movement against the wishes of the majority. In regard to which Lenin logically deduced that one must re-conquer these organizations, while the Left perceived them as the products of a non-revolutionary phase and, consequently, as structures which must be destroyed. Luxemburg, although she emphasized the trade unions’ regressive role, did not address this problem (see Reform and Revolution). But her opposition to the trade unions had its origin in her distrust of purely economic action, since she saw this as jeopardizing socialist education. The respect (in her case one cannot speak of fetishism) which Luxemburg had for the existing workers organizations, and which was well-evidenced by her refusal to create new schismatic organizations, was an aspect of her fetishism of education which she shared with the immense majority of the revolutionaries of her time.

Between 1910 and 1912, Pannekoek made a theoretical “breakthrough” by evoking the proletariat’s need to create new organs of power, which meant that the proletariat could not use parliament as a political form. Pannekoek defined the proletariat’s need to exercise Machtmittel, instruments of force or of power, which Bricianer translated as “elements of force”. Such an idea illustrates the complexity of Pannekoek’s thought and the twists and turns of subversive theory. Much later, Bordiga would define the communist movement as a question of “force” rather than one of “form”. Lenin rendered homage to Pannekoek in 1917, in State and Revolution, but also accused him of not having drawn all the conclusions which follow from this idea. The critique was probably justified, but Lenin continued to nourish illusions about the pre-1914 socialist movement. Pannekoek, furthermore, implicitly criticized Kautsky’s (and also Lenin’s) view of class consciousness. His great merit was having discerned communism in the nature of the class, and not just as a program. But rather than in its deepest being he discerned it in its organization. His preoccupation with “spontaneity” was not focused on the self-destruction of the proletariat as such: that is, as commodified human activity reappropriating the means of life and with these its humanity. He discerned the rise of the proletariat in its forms rather than its content, because its content was hardly discernable in that era.

In September, 1918, Radek recognized Pannekoek’s contribution, saying that the existing political forms, even the most democratic, must not be used, although he did not say what new institutions would replace them. But these two questions—the State and the labor aristocracy—highlighted the differences between Lenin and Pannekoek. Lenin was animated by the will to seize power, which involved advocating the destruction of the old State (and not its conquest as he had long thought, thus imitating almost all the world’s social democrats). But he did not understand the “how”, he did not see what was potentially contradictory in the proletariat’s being which would rise to the
fore in a revolutionary period: this explains his exaggeration of the “Party”. Quite unlike his usual views on the matter, the short shrift given to the idea of the Party in *State and Revolution* is neither a trick to flatter the workers nor something positive about which one should be pleased. *State and Revolution* simply testifies to one facet of Lenin’s contradiction, sometimes inclining towards an exaggeration of the role of the Party (What is to be Done?), and at other times allowing for democratic self-management (*State and Revolution*, which does not prevent this book from being an excellent revolutionary text). The way he dealt with the example of the Commune is significant; he once again took up Marx’s position, which is, however, susceptible to criticism, in *The Civil War in France*. Pannekoek, however, did not explicitly refer to 1871, concerning which he had a more lucid and quite well-justified judgment. It is also true that his ideas about the labor aristocracy had influenced Lenin and Zinoviev, but Pannekoek viewed the issue from a different angle. Later experience would show that Lenin and Pannekoek would deduce the opposite conclusions from their analyses of the labor aristocracy. What is essential is not denouncing a privileged minority, but understanding the (inevitable) expansion of reformist activity among all the workers organized in trade unions, parties, etc., and seeing that the revolution must be made outside of these institutions. Between 1910 and 1912, Pannekoek began to be aware of this, denying that the trade unions and parties could be used as structures of proletarian power: the proletariat must therefore create new organs for this purpose. He would later understand that the revolution must be made not outside of the classical organizations, but against them. Lenin, on the other hand, fought and would continue to fight for the impossible conquest of these organizations, upon certain class bases, and through the creation of “new” trade-union-type organizations, which involved the same kind of activity conducted by the old reformist trade unions, which is to say reformist activity.

Lenin did not understand the proletarian experience of his time in its most profound aspects. He was only able to theorize a few of its most essential orientations: his best efforts (his defeatist position in 1914) were negative. From the moment that the proletariat of the advanced capitalist countries engaged in revolutionary action, Lenin was superseded. Then, at that precise moment, although he was not situated at the most advanced stage attained by the movement, he imposed his will. Lenin’s success at the head of the Russian Party and the CI is the theoretical and organizational expression of the historical compromise: the proletariat attacked society without destroying it. This is why Lenin became the highest expression of a combative but not a communist movement. The experiences acquired during this assault would survive, but they would be deformed and truncated by capital: this is Leninism, a tendency which was nonetheless revolutionary in its origins, despite its weak points. The communist left, however, the expression of the most radical but also one of the least popular aspects of the movement, would be crushed.

- 1. Le socialisme en danger, published by Payot in 1975, with an introduction and notes by J. Y. Bériou.
- 3. Invariance, No. 4.
4. La IIe Internationale et l'Orient, p. 239.
8. Cf. his biography in the Dictionnaire biographique du mouvement ouvrier international. L’Autriche, Ed. Ouvrières, 1971, pp. 301-302. Strasser was a member of the Austrian CP and adopted an “anti-putschist” position close to that of Levi; he would later be excluded for “Trotskyism”.
11. Ibid., p. 261.
12. L’économie mondiale et l’impérialisme, Anthroposes, 1967, Chapter XIII.
13. Pannekoek and the Workers Councils.
14. He was the author of Révolution mondiale (1918), L’organisation de la lutte de classe du prolétaire (1921), La nécessité de la réunification du KAPD (1923), a large number of articles in the KAPD and AAUD press, as well as pamphlets from which we provide some extracts below. See Herman Gorter, The Organisation of the Proletariat’s Class Struggle, in Pannekoek and Gorter’s Marxism, ed. D.A. Smart, Pluto Press, London, 1978, pp. 149-173.
15. Pannekoek and the Workers Councils.
16. Concerning the relations between German and Polish socialists, see, as well as the work of Nettl, H. Schurer: “Radek and German Revolution”, Survey, October 1964; and especially the upcoming book by C. Weil, to be published by Champ Libre.
18. Cf. his article “Révolution mondiale” in Le Socialiste of January 21, 1912, quoted in La IIe Internationale et l’Orient, pp. 36-37.
19. Pannekoek and the Workers Councils.
22. In this context we can only provide a basic outline of the positions taken in relation to this problem: for more extensive elaborations which treat the issue in depth, cf. Pannekoek’s essay “The Theory of the Collapse of Capitalism”, translated by Adam Buick, published in Capital and Class, Spring 1977, and currently available online at the marxists.org website.
• **25.** Pannekoek and the Workers Councils.
• **28.** Cf. the texts collected in J.-P. Carasso: La rumeur irlandaise, Champ Libre, 1969.
• **29.** Marks: p. 354.
• **31.** Pannekoek and the Workers Councils.
• **32.** Eléments d’orientation (1946), reproduced in Invariance, No. 7 and as a pamphlet, Ed. Programme Communiste, 1972.
• **34.** It is true that this view can be contrasted with other texts of a private and confidential character: cf. La Commune de 1871, UGE, 1971. In 1905, Lenin warned against imitating the Commune: “it was a movement which our movement must not copy” (quoted by Haupt in Le mouvement social, April-June 1972, p. 213).
• **35.** Pannekoek and the Workers Councils.
• **36.** Zinoviev: The War and the Crisis of Socialism, written in 1915-16, published in 1917 (influenced by Michels).