

Conclusion

A historian of ideas, tying up loose ends and going over the themes of his research, could establish a series of correspondences between the German and Italian Lefts, Luxemburgism and the German Left, the Italian Left and Leninism, and Leninism and the German Left. This complexity testifies to the fact that there can be no theoretical synthesis without a practical synthesis through proletarian action. The German Left was influenced by the SPD left, the SDKPL and Bolshevism (united in the personality of Radek prior to 1914), the IWW, the wartime mass workers organizations, and revolutionary syndicalism. Only by virtue of being linked to an active movement could theory reform itself by avoiding the double pitfalls of eclecticism and sectarianism. The least that can be done now is to examine problems on the basis of their real contradictions, and not of their secondary effects. In conditions which were characterized by both class struggle as well as revolutionary weakness, as in 1917-1921, one cannot speak of a "correct" line unfortunately defended by a small minority, whose more generalized application would have prevented the disaster which befell it. Conversely, even within currents which were as much the prisoners of the old movement as was Spartacism, there were tendencies toward clarification.

The communist left was not the brain of a movement, but the highest expression of its contradictions and, not manifesting a comprehensive vision, was itself contradictory. It was much more the product of a situation which was a revolutionary dead end, than the most advanced element of a generally revolutionary movement which was defeated. In reality, only a fraction of the proletarians had entered the fray. What J. Andrieu had feared after the Commune had come to pass:

"The proletariat has always been beaten because it has drawn back in fear from silent challenges. It has given the impression that it would attack. . . . Later it has fought without order or preparation. These are the facts! Neither time nor means allow us to be defeated again. . . . The struggle for power is nothing but a pretext for the next day's throat-cutting."¹

The new movements will not be like 1919 writ large. It is criminal to idealize this period, from which the movement must above all retain the clearest example of categorical and democratic evisceration, on a continental scale, in the history of the proletariat. It is not in order to reject the past in its totality that revolutionaries point out some of the defeats of the proletariat (which are also *their own defeats, since they form an integral part of the proletariat*), but in order, by every possible means, to avoid them in the future. To conceive of the extent of the counterrevolution is not to pass from one extreme to another, and to completely transform the classic leftist outlook in order to suddenly discover that . . . nothing at all had taken place. Interpreting the period as a simple adaptation on the part of capital to its problems would mean abandoning one naïve stance for another. This point of view is as "undialectical" as the concept of the "heroic period" of the "first four congresses" of the Communist International. Nothing justifies the assertion that the German proletariat was condemned in advance. The *a posteriori*

judgment which attributes its defeat to “objective conditions” forgets to situate itself and to re-situate action in relation to those conditions: revolutionary action does not create these conditions, but *modifies* them. Absolute determinism is nothing but an inverted voluntarism, which explains everything by the absence of the “party”.

“The outcome is not always the same victory frustrated, one must not always attribute it to the same causes, and it is always difficult to affirm that a different line of conduct on the part of the revolutionaries would have altered the result.”²

In considering the confrontation between the German Left and the rest of the revolutionary movement, or what is taken to be such a confrontation, it would be tempting to quote Engels’ commentary on the Gotha Congress: ³ “On the theoretical level we are a hundred times superior to the Lassallians, but we are far from being their equals in political skill.” Once again, “honest folk” have been cheated by slick politicians. To leave it at that, however, would amount to making this a political history. The class struggle in Russia assumed more acute and violent, but less profound forms: hence the *contradictory* re-activation of communist theory in its social democratic version by the Russians. Although more effective, the Russian theory is at the same time ill-adapted for European revolutionary problems. With regression (which the Bolsheviks did not themselves cause, although they did contribute to it), this lack of adaptability became an adaptation to the counterrevolution (return to trade unionism, mass parties, parliamentarism, nationalism in the name of the “right to self-determination”). The texts and the deeds of the Communist International translated an over-optimistic assessment of the situation⁴ linked to the will to advance matters by gathering together large numbers of people. The formation of the Italian Communist Party offers the clearest example of incoherence: the Communist International’s emissaries were in favor of a split by the left, which the Executive would always deplore. Even assuming that the Communist International had at any time effectively directed its sections, something which remains to be proven, it was only able to do so after the revolutionary reflux. Centralization, advocated by the Russians and the Italian Communist Party, among others, would not be employed until it had lost its usefulness in playing any kind of subversive role.

Both Lenin’s *Infantile Disorder* and Gorter’s *Open Letter to Comrade Lenin* are equally incapable of defining a strategy for victory. The former submerges the proletariat into the old ruts. The latter does not indicate the revolution’s means of social transformation: by the time it was written, the forms of organization which it advocated were without content and were collapsing. After having witnessed the difficulties encountered in the transition from one world to another in the revolutionary movements of that era, Mattick concluded: “The lesson learned was how not to proceed.”⁵ Paraphrasing Lenin on the Commune, we could say about Germany in 1917-1921: it is a movement which *must not be ours*.⁶ If one compares the insurrection of January 1919, the red army of the Ruhr and the March Action, the characteristic which all three of these uprisings have in common is that they always evolved within a social framework which, at bottom, remained the same. The sailors who arrived in Berlin from Kiel were roused to revolt by not being paid. The armed revolutionaries of Munich got their pay. Hölz *distributed trade*

union funds to the unemployed. The Italian workers who occupied the factories in 1920 did not put anything essential into question. Prudhommeaux put it this way: military struggle and complete transformation of social relations, neither the *one* nor the *other* are possible unless they are both carried out simultaneously.⁷ For the KAPD: “The proletarian revolution is an economic process and a political process at the same time.” This assertion could be interpreted in a reformist sense (conquest of power in the economy without seizing political power).⁸ But the thought and activity of the KAPD are proofs to the contrary: there is a great difference between organization born of reformist demands (in one factory, or anywhere else) without going beyond that stage, and *territorial* organization (such as, for example, the AAU’s “economic regions”) which breaks out of the framework of the workplace or the terrain of particular reformist demands, in order to confront society as a whole, beginning with the State. But it is not enough to *invert* Gramscist and DeLeonist gradualism by advocating the seizure of “political power” *before* carrying out social transformations. The Communist International only distinguished *successive* stages.⁹ In its own way, and within a context in which the proletariat did not practically go on the offensive against the very essence of capital, the German Left had distinguished the revolutionary mechanism which was both “political” and “economic”, military and social. In 1919, military forces had moved from one region to another in order to crush the revolution. Today, capital is much more socialized and ubiquitous, but will still have to be dealt with militarily. As Gorter said, revolutionaries cannot act without a party, ¹⁰ giving this word the meaning of an *organization* of the communist movement. But this organization can only be constructed within the process of a complete transformation of capitalist social relations, the formation of the human community and the destruction of the world where “life itself appears as a simple means to living”.¹¹

The German Left anticipated certain aspects of the “modern” revolutionary critique: its analysis of parliamentarism as a spectacle (“theater”, “stage”, etc.), for example. But its defeat can also be measured by the fact that it, too, suffered from a gap between its *movement* and the *organizations* which it had provided itself. The 1921 March Action is testimony to how the KAPD, too, acted like “a party in the traditional sense”, exhorting the workers to make the revolution, despite its rank and file’s “break with the leader/follower tradition”.

It is strange to see how Gorter, in his *Last Letter to Lenin*, denies the divisions on the left. By way of a revolutionary, yet numerically small movement, the activity of the German Left was also one of the last mass attempts undertaken to “provide an organization” to the proletariat, within the midst of the bourgeois democratic revolution faced with the problem of creating *representative institutions*. But this attempt took place at a time when it was no longer possible. In this sense the German Left was undoubtedly the expression of the first great proletarian assault, but one which was still carried out within an *organizational* perspective whose debates before and after the war (party/class, leaders/masses, centralism/federalism) led to a conception which was partly false. The war of 1914, by allowing capital to really penetrate all of society, obliged the communist revolution to situate itself on the same terrain or be defeated, as in Germany after 1917. After that time and outside of any revolutionary period, no

permanent workers organization independent of capital, or any radical group which is part of the working class environment, has existed.

Afterwards, some people made a total ideological about-face: “All the objective conditions were present. Only one detail was lacking, but this was a detail which, in reality, vulgar Marxism had never taken into account: the subjective will, self-confidence, the value of moving towards what is new. And this detail was everything.”¹² But this was because the previous struggles had not led to a new movement (by integrating the workers struggles into capital) and because the disturbances were too feeble to break with that past (the democratic political revolution of November 1918).¹³

The communist left was the expression of the *crisis* of the proletariat. The communist movement was in a state of crisis at every crucial moment, because it had left capitalist society behind and was building another society at the same time. Some lost hope; others transformed secondary forms into fetishes. But the sign of the subversive power of the German Left is undoubtedly that it prevents us from falling into revolutionary complacency, the idolatry of the proletariat and the anti-materialist belief in the inevitability of communism. Because the defeat of the most combative proletarians affects us so profoundly, it helps us in our efforts to avoid being defeated next time.¹⁴

^{1.} Mémoires pour servir à l’histoire de la Commune de Paris de 1871, Payot, 1971, p. 185.

^{2.} Bordiga: De la Commune à la IIIe Internationale, in La question syndicale..., p. 52.

^{3.} Selected Writings, Penguin, 1967, pp.133-134.

^{4.} “Comrade Hungarian workers, you have provided a better example to the world than soviet Russia, because you knew how to win over all the socialists at one stroke on the basis of a program of true proletarian dictatorship.” Message from Lenin, May 27 1919, Vol. 28, p. 396.

^{5.} “Otto Rühle and the German Labour Movement”, p. 95.

^{6.} Cf. Chapter 3, Note 34.

^{7.} La tragedie de Spartacus, in Spartacus et la Commune de Berlin.

^{8.} PC, Nos. 53-54, p. 78.

^{9.} The IC, No. 12, p. 246.

^{10.} Réponse à Lénine, p. 47.

^{11.} Manuscrits de 1844, Oeuvres, Gallimard, II, p. 63.

^{12.} Brauner und roter Faschismus.

^{13.} This regression allowed the official Communist Party, in 1958, to detect in this “a bourgeois democratic revolution...realized to a certain degree by proletarian means and methods”. (Ulbricht, quoted by Badia, p. 136).

^{14.} All theoretical work is a reaction against other theoretical works and tends to exaggerate certain aspects. In general, this study should be read in conjunction with Pannekoek and the Workers Councils and La gauche allemande....