

# Introduction

“It is not those who fell wrapped in the unfortunate flag of the defeated Revolution whom we consider to be fraudulent squanderers of the Revolution, but those who afterwards, from their desks of wisdom or from their podiums as mentors of the masses, were unable to derive from that sacrifice anything more than a few phrases of demagogic admiration, accompanied by a defeatist commentary.”

Bordiga: *From the Commune to the IIIrd International*, 1924

I

The fact that the Russian Revolution of 1917 was only one aspect and one of the effects of a much broader movement, whose center was Germany, is presently more readily admitted. This recognition places the Russian experience in context. It is no longer possible to conceive of the events in Europe during that era in Russian “Leninist” terms. One cannot deplore either the *insufficient* or the *excessive* impact of “Leninism” on the western proletariat, whose practice must be understood on its own terms. The Russian influence was real, but it was limited to the accentuation of a complex evolution which it had not created. Conversely, it must be shown to what degree this evolution affected domestic events in Russia. Writing an international history of the revolutionary movement which followed the war of 1914-18 means evaluating the contributions of the various countries and regions, which implies shifting the focus of attention towards the moment when polarization over the miraculous experiences of Russia was at its height. Such a procedure also implies the refusal to anchor a “period” with well-defined characteristics and to explain everything by reference to that “period” itself.

There is no “particular situation” with a unique meaning in the history of society. Given the “period”, or, more precisely, given all the elements which directed the revolutionary drama, the revolution failed and had to fail. It can be lamented, and we lament it, but it is of no use to evoke the Bolshevik-style party or any other *deus ex machine* for explaining the development of an unreal past. It would, however, be just as false, and would also misrepresent the period, to replace the consequences of the abstract absence of the “party” or any other factor with the false plenitude of “it could not have been otherwise”; this would have been tantamount to negating the possibility of revolution. It would be yet more false, obviously, to present everything as a function of a necessary failure. We are determinists, of course, but determinism is not a historical factor which can intervene “a posteriori” in the explanation of events.

Such a procedure would foist a meaning upon even the most radical actions which these actions did not in fact possess, and would interpret the various revolutionary attempts as simple convulsive motions of capital’s adaptation, as outcomes of economic crises.

The “lessons” of the German Revolution? A historical analysis of the revolutionary movement would be interested in, among other things, discovering the reasons for the

failure of the previous attempts, but not in such a way as to derive from the latter a guarantee for future victory. We do not consider revolutions as simple “experiences”. We discover in them, beyond their time, men who live in community with today’s subversive tendency. And this discovery is consolidated by discovering that this tendency has always existed and has always occupied the front ranks of the historical stage on various occasions. It is not, then, a matter of learning simple “lessons” or of considering history as a school, but something quite different.

“We know only one science: history”, means that the other sciences, based upon “experience”, are not sciences at all. The transformation of Marxism carried out by its followers, starting at the end of the 19th century, which made Marxism into a “science”, reduced it to one of those pseudo-sciences which are not at all subversive of society, in order to accommodate to the latter and to seek nothing more than the reproduction of particular “reactions”; it was a question, for the orthodox Marxists, of socializing capital or, expressed differently, of subjecting it to real organization and regulation, to prevent some of its annoying effects, thanks to their Marxist “science” of economic reactions; but they did not speak of socialist production, or of socialist economics; they preserved the categories of political economy, such as value and all the rest, but forgot the only true science: human emancipation. The stance of the *proletarian* revolutionaries was identical with the confrontation with real history as it was unfolding. Some, like Gorter, felt quite profoundly that, with the unleashing of the world war, the bourgeoisie had dealt an almost irreparable blow to the proletariat; that the war meant, in the final analysis, the accession of capitalism to world domination (see *Imperialism, the World War and Social Democracy*, 1914); and from that moment (Autumn of 1914) he foresaw that a revolution, breaking out after the war as a result of misery, would face nothing but difficulties. Just like Marx who, viewing the general situation, had “counseled against” the insurrection of the Commune, saying that it was condemned to failure. Certain individuals in our camp thus possessed the elements necessary to predict failure. But this did not prevent Marx, Gorter and Pannekoek (who may very well have shared Gorter’s views) from participating in the movement from its very first moments; unlike Luxemburg, they did not apply the brakes (see below, for the increasingly negative role played by Luxemburg from the beginning of the war); they were present wherever the human community was being created, contributing their powers of classification and, while not holding back, not feeling the need to offer themselves as sacrificial victims to the holocaust, either.

If events are conceived in the light of their outcomes, all proletarian movements could be interpreted as phases of the social system’s self-adaptation. From this perspective, the proletariat has failed up to this point, because capital was not sufficiently developed and dominated neither the entire world nor life as a whole; today, however, the total rule exercised by capital will lead to a rebellion which will be just as total. This vision of a finally pure communist revolution to be unleashed against a capitalism which is the absolute lord and master of everything skips over the present and past contradictions of the movement of capital and the communist movement. Furthermore, in order to provide this total rebellion of pure negation with a certain coherence, an effort is made to discover some faraway movements (obviously despised and falsified by the official

“communist” movement which only knew how to speak of the insufficiency of the productive forces) towards the end of discovering within them the “*ne plus ultra*” of the total revolution, in comparison with which the Commune, the Russian Revolution, the German Revolution, etc., would be mere child’s play. Peasant uprisings are sublimated, while the KAPD is reduced to a transitional step towards the real domination of capital.<sup>1</sup> This dual movement, which on the one hand looks towards the past for truly radical movements, further back into the night of time, and on the other hand seeks to “demystify” more recent movements (this second aspect being a result of the first) only shows that it has “demystified” the most recent of all revolutionary movements: the future revolution, which is to say that it has renounced it.

It is not from the perspective of an unrealized ideal perfection, but, to the contrary, from that of the contradictions within which the revolutionary movement of 1917-21 developed, that this history is intended to be written. The German Revolution interests us precisely because it is the disturbance which, due to its extent and its social-economic background, most closely resembles the situations which we may be called upon to confront. The problems faced by the German revolutionaries remain, without having been solved in practice. Capital has today managed to perfect its new and specific forms of domination, forms which it had begun to experiment with in the First World War.

## II

It is symptomatic that the “German Revolution” has long remained in oblivion. The revolutionary movement, both within and outside of Germany, has been incapable of assimilating its past, particularly the great disturbance and rupture which broke out in 1917. Until fifteen years ago, the only serious study in French was that of A. and D. Prudhommeaux, *Spartacus et la Commune de Berlin 1918-19*, published in 1949 in the journal *Spartacus*: this study remained relatively unknown for a dozen years until The Old Mole Bookstore began to carry the *Spartacus* journal. C. Meijer’s text, “Le mouvement des conseils en Allemagne”, reproduced by *Internationalisme* in 1945 and later distributed by Informations et Correspondances Ouvrières (who republished it as a supplement to No. 101 of *ICO*), had a rather limited distribution. These two collections were the work of old left communists. Taken as a whole, however, the groups which descended from left communism hardly bothered with the clarification of the period spanning 1917 to 1921, preferring instead to elaborate later conceptual developments: reflection upon their *origins* would have been equivalent to self-examination concerning the “ideologization” of their movement. Instead of studying the communist left they preferred to recite the opposition between “council communism” and “party communism”.

It is quite surprising that *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, over the course of its 40 issues (1949-65), did not publish even one study, however brief, on this theme.<sup>2</sup> A whole series of obstacles prevented the comprehension of the phenomenon of the communist left. It is known how Stalinism (and Stalin himself) rejected “Luxemburgism” as an infantile disorder, worthy of sympathy but not very strong compared to its “Bolshevik” brother. Luxemburg, for her part, became for many people the symbol of the German Revolution

and the best fruit of the movement in the West. The Luxemburg cult has survived not only because of the social democrats who remember nothing about her except her democratic side (Spartacus, *Masses*) but also because of the revolutionaries who were misinformed concerning the gap which existed between Luxemburg and the communist left. The use of the term "Spartacist" to designate the movement's most radical current was based on the simplified version of events provided by the bourgeois counterrevolution. The use of this term has mystified the history of its time, much as the use of the words "Marxist" and "anarchist", employed anachronistically, were used to describe positions which were incompatible with their original meanings. Retrospection falsifies perspective.<sup>3</sup> Finally, the Italian communist left, linked to Leninism, by interpreting the German Left as a variety of anarchosyndicalism,<sup>4</sup> has sowed much confusion, abetted by the remnants of the German Left who were no more capable of understanding their own past.

German historians offer little information about the revolutionary movement after 1918. The works of Badia (*Histoire de l'Allemagne contemporaine* (Ed. Sociales, Vol. 1, on Weimar)) and especially *Le Spartakisme 1914-1919* (L'Arche, 1967), complemented by documents collected in *Les Spartakistes* (Juillard, 1966), are certainly useful. But the timeframe covered by Badia's works on Spartacism begins in approximately August 1914 and ends immediately after the massacre of January 1919; neither the movement's genesis before the war, nor its later evolution, is mentioned or explained. Considered only during the period of 1914-1918 and presented as the only radical current, Spartacism is completely falsified in Badia's books. Badia always minimizes Luxemburg's international dimension, while putting her on the highest plane in respect to Germany. Rather than a theoretician, he makes her a polemicist. His game has two facets: freezing the German Left under the heroic figure of "Rosa" and not taking her disagreements with Lenin seriously. Frölich's<sup>5</sup> and Nettel's<sup>6</sup> biographies of Luxemburg, in which one finds numerous important facts, unfortunately corroborate this tendency to privilege Spartacism. The greatest defect in Frölich's book is his desire to reconcile Luxemburg and Lenin at any cost, and Nettel, despite solid documentation, conceals the second stage of her evolution.

These two works are nonetheless proof of the growing interest in the German events. Flechtheim's volume on the German Communist Party<sup>7</sup>, despite Weber's final contribution which comprises a comparative study of the social bases of the SPD and the KPD, is, rather than a history of a social movement, the history of an organization. But even this book gives short shrift to the communist left. Flechtheim falls into one of the two traps which lie in wait for the academic faced with the temptation to write either a *political* history or history *plain and simple*. The former is centered on the institutional expressions of social movements, and results, in the worst cases, in considering everything in the light of the evolution of one or another political group. The latter, with its preoccupation to avoid dogmatism, accumulates facts without any organizing principle. In the case of the proletarian workers movements, on the pretext of avoiding a "totalitarian" conception of history, it privileges a putative spontaneity (preferably not too violent or else only violent in the past) over centralized action and organization. The first procedure frequently proclaims itself to be Marxist and in fact constitutes an institutional

theory of class struggle. The second is careful to *take no position* in regard to theoretical communism, it has a pretense to being independent and joyfully proclaims itself—outrageously enough—to be in favor of the formula whereby Marx declared that he was not a Marxist. It ignores the movement's center of gravity: the passage to communism, which is, however, essential; the proletariat can only be victorious by making that passage and organizing itself in accordance with that goal.

The Anglo-Saxon historians,<sup>8</sup> who have often written about Germany, denounce “communist” totalitarianism, but reason like Stalinists, adopting the sub-leninist and bourgeois conception according to which the workers were only stirred up by the actions of “instigators”, that is, by the “party”. They attribute to the Communist International (CI) and its sections the leadership role which the latter believed in and aspired to perform. The social movement, according to these historians, only exists in the form of political structures. Its action is only real when it is contained within these structures: it cannot be known except by means of the dissemination of information from more or less recognized organizations (press, official declarations, congresses, meetings, emissaries, etc.). W. Angress, author of a documentary study of the period between 1921 and 1923<sup>9</sup>, focuses not on spontaneous movements, but “on the movement which is organized from without.” His book assiduously follows the KPD and the CI, and briefly Max Hölz, as they confront the actions of the government. The Ruhr insurrection of 1920 hardly attracts his attention, while he devotes 50 pages to the 1921 “March Action” and its repercussions. For these historians, insisting on the specificity of the CI and Bolshevism was not only an ideological necessity, but a way to frame events in accordance with their material interests as specialists, which consists in presenting the authorities and the corporations which finance their research with a *mystery so impenetrable* that only the experts (that is, themselves) can unravel it. Modern researchers approach the social question in the most sophisticated manner: they must make everything very complicated to justify the continuation of their labors. One group explores what is alien and strange about a different, totalitarian world; the others explore the infinite subtleties inherent in the richness of life and spontaneity “concealed” by a series of “alienations” which they have done nothing to demystify.

Broué's monumental work, *La révolution en Allemagne 1917-23* (Minuit, 1972) is an excellent example of a *political* history. It is true, of course, that the author, in a recent article<sup>10</sup>, denied “having composed a history restricted to the level of the ‘leadership-elite’.” His objective is to study the “German communists in the light of their form of organization, within the framework of their party and their International, a framework which they, within that same movement, tried to construct in order to be victorious.” Note his declaration: “their party” is, of course, the KPD; “their International” is the CI. He has thus written a history of the KPD and the CI, the latter in the context of its relations with Germany. This leads him to a consideration of history based not on the actual events, but on the basis of what did not take place at all. His problem can be summarized as measuring the impact of the absence of the “party”. He bases himself on what did not exist in order to understand what did exist. The idealism of his investigation ultimately contaminates it to such a degree that he dedicates a disproportionate amount of space to facts of quite secondary importance (Radek's

influence, for example). Other historians even went so far as to consider the (French) “ultra-left” through the lens of police history<sup>11</sup>.

Studying the revolutionary events in Germany from the perspective of the absence of a truly Bolshevik party is somewhat like studying the human digestive tract from the perspective of the mouth and discovering that the cause of gastrointestinal illness is the absence of four stomachs in the patient. There was a radical difference between the nature of Russian society and that of German society in 1917 (see Chapter 1), which can be summarized as follows: 90% peasants in Russia, 35% in Germany. In this connection we have elsewhere illustrated (see our preface to the translation of Trotsky’s *Rapport de la Délégation Siberienne*, Spartacus, 1970; see also *Nos Tâches Politiques*, also by Trotsky) how the Bolshevik party was a necessary product of the Russian social form and of the ambiguous (proletarian and bourgeois) movement which tried to completely change that form. Indigenous attempts to supersede the Bolshevik organizational concept in a revolutionary direction were as embryonic in Russia as were the indigenous German attempts to install an organizational practice which would have been of the same nature as Bolshevism. Germany possessed the seeds of a distinct revolutionary party in the KPD until the Heidelberg Congress (October 1919), and later in the KAPD and the other leftist organizations until the summer of 1921: one can demonstrate in this case what did not take place (the KAPD did not become *the* party of the German proletariat constituted as a class), but this explains nothing.

Broué’s Trotskyist inclinations lead him to ignore “leftist” and “infantile” organizations and to instead treat the diverse vicissitudes of the social democratic left as a communist movement. For our part, it is not a matter of opposing our version to a Trotskyist version, or of correcting one theoretical con game with another. We declare right from the start that we are studying one aspect—for us, the most important aspect—of the events in question. The reader will understand on his own that he has not read merely the chronicle of the “communist left”, but that of the epoch’s most profound social movement. Broué has undertaken a partial study with general pretensions: we shall undertake a partial study of general interest. One will, of course, find an infinite quantity of useful information in Broué’s book. But its erudition takes the form of mystification. Fixated on the theoretical expressions and established organizations but not on the contradictory social agitation and its more or less articulated manifestations, he devotes himself to the examination of parties and trade unions (especially the KPD), scorning to bother with a multitude of significant developments. So, how can it be doubted, after having perused his impressive bibliography, that he has told the whole truth? The method chosen, however, comes with a lie, by omission. His work on Germany reminds us of his previous book about the Bolshevik Party (published by Minit), written during the epoch when Stalinist legends were still widely believed. The latter volume apparently provides a vast quantity of data. Yet it fails to attain the stature of less ambitious but more serious texts from a dual perspective: historical and revolutionary. The “results” of Broué’s work are situated at the intersection point of the university and contemporary leftism. Broué’s book could be of some use. In the end, however, one will learn less from it than one would from the *History of the German Army* by the “reactionary” Benoist-Méchin. Despite his anti-Semitic prejudices and his hatred of the

“cruel Bolsheviks”, he views his subject from the point of view of class (albeit not our class).<sup>12</sup>

From a revolutionary perspective, the volume of selected texts of Pannekoek, ably presented by S. Bricianer, has cleared the way and disseminated knowledge of the German Left beyond a small circle of initiates.<sup>13</sup> A serious historical work, it is nonetheless primarily a biography of Pannekoek presented through his texts, and devotes few pages to the period 1917-1921, focusing above all on the lessons derived from those years by Pannekoek, especially in *World Revolution and Communist Tactics* (1920). This focus, which is perfectly legitimate in a work of this kind, ultimately fails to portray the reality of that epoch’s communist movement in Germany, and is dedicated instead to its later evolution and Pannekoek’s retrospective reflections on that period. In this respect, Bricianer’s work, while valuable for the reasons summarized above, is not satisfactory. While it is normal for a biography to follow the chronological evolution of its subject’s life and works, theoretical analysis demands that one *not respect* the evolution of his positions, which ends in councilism. To conclude with the council (as opposed to the “party”) may indeed be faithful to Pannekoek’s thought, but it does not respond to revolutionary problems.

This persistent focus on *form* (council, party) facilitates the current efforts on behalf of capital’s adaptation, which requires both the authoritarianism and regimentation transmitted by the degraded notion of the party so dear to the CP and numerous leftists, as well as the workers’ pseudo-self-management and the illusory freedom which the idea of the “council” denotes for other leftists. The concept of self-management is even more dangerous when it is stripped of its workerism: “if (this conception) is to be true to its *postulates*, it must assert that with the evolution of capitalism—which is constantly socializing all human activities—those organizations which are responsible for realizing the principle of councilism will have to be located outside of the factories.”<sup>14</sup> The demand for workers’ management refers to the management of *everyday life*.<sup>15</sup> The real *content* of the communist movement lies elsewhere and is replaced by questions of form.

Previously denounced, the German Left enjoys a relative celebrity today thanks to its most flaccid and well-known aspects. This was only made possible by disconnecting its texts from their historical context. As an illustration of this tendency, we can be grateful for the work of R. Gombin<sup>16</sup>, who undertakes the task of fusing a series of different and *contradictory* contributions into a whole which is presented as the very trademark of what is most radical: but this is only possible after having separated these contributions from their respective sources. The essence of modernism consists in mixing the most radical aspects of revolutionary thought into an original synthesis while these aspects are, however, stripped of what makes, or made them, subversive, and taking delight in mere novelty. His secret lies in having associated Pannekoek with H. Lefebvre: this monstrous cocktail could only have been mixed by carefully erasing the *roots* of Pannekoek’s ideas. Evoking the mass media in support of this connection would be superficial. Society has always fed on revolutionary thought, which, in turn, has also caused the latter to become insipid. It was not at all strange when the magazine *Minuit*

published an extract from Pannekoek's *Workers Councils* in its seventh issue, having selected a section from that work which deals with democracy. But the councilist illusions of certain revolutionaries also facilitate this absorption, as is demonstrated by the Preface to *Workers Councils* written by former members of the ICO.<sup>17</sup> An introduction to the texts of P. Mattick situates Sorel among the "ultra-left", alongside the "socialism of the producers", "self-management" and "popular self-government".<sup>18</sup> The German Left defined itself precisely in contradistinction to syndicalism, including the "revolutionary" variety and, having suffered the effects of reactionary violence, did not accept the overabundant and misunderstood myths of the various experiences with soviets, councils or workers' pseudo-autonomy. In 1919 and 1920, left communists knew quite well that the "party-form" had contributed no more than the "council-form" to the defeat of the revolutionary movement. In any event, the publication of *Workers Councils* signaled the recognition of the German Left, in its councilist form, by the intellectual world. The "official daily newspaper of the powerful" even devoted almost an entire page to a good exposition of Pannekoek's work.<sup>19</sup> Following in the footsteps of Djilas, Lukàcs and Garaudy, the German Left, in turn, joined the family of Marxist heretics considered to be worthy of notice. An obsession with "recuperation" (a superficial myth) would be absurd. The fashionable interest in the German Left is accompanied by a revolutionary curiosity and a positive concern with information and clarification. The phenomenon of vulgarized distortion is inevitable. It is precisely this real and new interest which obliges us to set the record straight.

The councilists have done little to shed light on the period of 1917-1921. But the German Left was one of Bordiga's obsessions. It is surprising to consider that it was the journal *Invariance*, descended from the Italian Left, which in 1969 first republished a few essential texts, in particular almost all of Pannekoek's text, *Révolution mondiale et tactique communiste*.<sup>20</sup> A subsequent issue of the same journal is almost entirely devoted to the German Left: it comprises a study, both historical and theoretical, which heralds the further evolution of the journal, which we shall examine in another work currently in progress.<sup>21</sup> During the same period, a Danish group, also descended from the Italian Left, wrote an original study with a particular focus on the unions. A mere fifty pages long, it is one of the richest texts on this subject.<sup>22</sup> Significantly, it is unfortunately little-known. It has been photocopied and distributed on a small scale, and we have made ample use of it despite its Leninist vestiges.

A long article in Number 58 of *Programme Communiste*, organ of the International Communist Party (the "orthodox" descendant of Bordigism), published in April 1973<sup>23</sup>, dedicated to reassuring the faithful who remained in the ICP after the schism brought about by the sanctions imposed upon the Danes and *Invariance*, who had demanded and practiced "free inquiry" (particularly in regard to its principle opponent, the German Left), highlights the principle points of the German Left's defeat. However, whereas the Danes consider the German Left as a product of the proletariat, the ICP's article is primarily a study of the theoretical positions of the various actors, totally separated from their contexts (which confirms an absolute bad faith when it is compared to the pains Bordiga took to exculpate-explain, by means of endless expository forays, the most insignificant—and the not-so-insignificant—theoretical deviations of Lenin).<sup>24</sup>

Proletarian action (quite well-perceived elsewhere) is nothing but a backdrop in this article. The Left is judged on the basis of its “principles” and its adversaries are preferred for the rigor of their profession of the Marxist faith.

A collection edited by one of the authors of the present text, *La Gauche allemande, Textes*, reveals a German Left which is much more strict, dictatorial and “party-centered” than today’s councilists, as well as the image the latter entertain of their progenitor. This collection’s postscript focuses on the involution of *council communism to councilism*. ([www.internationalism.org](http://www.internationalism.org)). Rühle’s famous text has been posted in English translation on several websites and is readily available."

[25](#) We should also mention a good collection of biographies, recently published in French and brought together in one volume by the councilists.[26](#) But this list is already out of date.

Everything we have said up to this point sheds light on our method. This work on the German Left is obviously an intellectual work—and its authors are in this case intellectuals—but, just like other studies of this subject, even the most academic, this study is not the fruit of pure intellect, of the closed logic of “research”; the German Left’s anti-intellectualist critiques were perfectly justified when they attacked the domination of the intelligentsia, when they targeted the pretension of a certain kind of intellectual of being superior to the rest of mortal mankind, and especially the working class “rank and file”, when such intellectuals fought for their alleged right to lead the movement. Our work has no pretension to autonomy[27](#), which for us is not a goal in and of itself; it has no meaning except as part of a movement which goes far beyond it. The renascent radical movement must appropriate its own history. Nor do we frame what we see in the forms in which spoiled intellectuals take pleasure:

“Our purpose is not literary or aesthetic production. Comrades and readers do not have to waste their time evaluating a passage, a page or a text which we publish, but they should always take into account the relation between the different parts of the labors undertaken by our small movement. . .”  
(Bordiga, *Il Programa Comunista*, 1953)

In the following text, the reader will not read the history of the German Revolution, or even a reference work on the German Left. Our procedure consists in an attempt to extract the leading thread and the essential mechanisms from our field of study. We have not hesitated to go over facts already studied by others, often in detail, or to rapidly pass over some realities which have since become more accessible in more recent works. These works are “points of reference” for following the history of the left. Another kind of approach, which is also useful, would consist in giving more depth to the immediate reality of these movements by conducting a study of their everyday activities, based, for example, on their press and available archival documentation.

It is not enough to rehabilitate a hidden past. A subversive movement has existed, and still exists, whose action and expression have been “hidden” by official “discourse” (state, trade union, bureaucracy, politicians, academics, judiciary, schools, etc.). But the

simple unveiling of its expression is not in itself revolutionary. Its mere expression, that is, the only thing that remains of it, is not revolutionary unless it is put to a new use: not necessarily in the form of “action” in the strict sense of the word, but simply as a theory which once again embraces events within its framework. It is of little account that a “liberation” movement existed long ago: capital placidly accepts the reestablishment of the truth concerning Luddism or the German Left as long as this changes nothing. The world begins to tremble when the revolutionary facts of the past resurface in the practice of a renascent subversive movement. Only the dead bury the dead. Fashion and pedagogy (often united), on the other hand, take advantage of ideas when they are dead, or in the form in which they are no longer alive (councilism, for the German Left). Ideas die, too. A theory is dead when the movement which gave it life has disappeared, but it can be reborn when a movement arises which is its authentic continuation; then, however, it appears in the unpleasant form of a movement of “left fascists”, “hooligans”, “a society of thieves”, and other barbarians, like those who were called “Spartacists” in the epoch which concerns us in this text. *Socialism or Barbarism*, ignored when it was subversive, is becoming fashionable, now that its old theoreticians (Chaulieu, Lefort and Lyotard) have submitted to the rules of the game of modernism.

Any expression which is not an action, in the sense that it does not contribute to the clarification of current revolutionary problems, situates itself *within* capital. It shows that its author has no real need to change his situation. The record of the past plays the same ideological role for him, one of substitution and illusory excess, which politics plays for others. This past could be a future: one could take pleasure in the description of what is to come. What contributes to the revolution is neither the evocation of the past, nor of the world of the future, but the present effort to connect reality to both. It is not our intention to give lessons to historians. They can only be what they are. But one can and one must say what they are, and distinguish between thought which is merely critical and thought which is revolutionary. It is subversive to show how slavery constituted a form of progress for both the slaves and for humanity as a whole; it is conservative to restrict oneself to denouncing it. The same thing is also true within a mode of production, especially when one takes into account the shrewdness and adaptive capabilities of capital. Who defends Thiers against the Commune these days? Who reduces the War of 1914 to the activities of the Pan-Germanists? In relation, however, to anything that still has a direct role to play in the preservation of the social order, the issues remain obscure; the war of 1939-45, for example, which proves that it is the most important and the most anti-revolutionary war, whose consequences are still with us today and which must by all means be preserved. This is particularly true of anything which refers to “fascism”, where clarification is still a threat to the established order, and where mystification rules.<sup>28</sup> There is an abundance of intellectual methods to *avoid* such subjects: quantitative and statistical history fit perfectly with a “liberated” history operating at the level of everyday life, or with a history of opinions. One need only consult the catalogue of history journals to see that everything is studied, but almost never what is essential.

To its own misfortune, revolutionary theory plays a double role: revolutionary and . . . non-revolutionary. By seriously presenting the real problems faced by society, it helps

society adapt to these problems. The mass media *accumulate* information with the intention of incessantly reproducing capitalist relations. How could one not take a position in relation to all the critiques, including the most virulent ones, which form part of *capitalist society's auto-critique*, despite the occasional honesty of their authors? Each major capitalist country has its own way of absorbing revolutionary theory. In England and the United States, and in Germany in a slightly different way, *monographs* and the fondness for exact empirical research are dominant: in Germany, there are numerous monographs on the period of 1918-1920, categorized according to region or city. In France, the “theoretical” current frequently predominates, privileging interpretation, in the name of a particular school of thought, over the examination of the facts. Theoretical communism met its global downfall, in every country, each with its own traditions of thought, not because of useless polemics, but due to the very nature of its task. It is obvious that only a rebirth of the movement—which is far from being obvious or automatic—will limit the inevitable absorption of its theory. Meanwhile, the discovery of new theories, bowdlerized versions of revolutionary themes which had been developed by the German communist left, among others, will not cease. The academic and the political worlds (the worlds of dogmatism: Stalinism, for example) will merge and multiply. The goal of academic reflection is to pose problems in order to discover other problems, just as cars are manufactured so as to be hauled to the junkyard after ten years and to be replaced by others. Its labors are endless, although the State and Capital take from it whatever they find useful. Theoretical communism does not attempt to know or to say everything, but to know enough to show the leading thread of its times and to point out, at any given moment, the outlook for the future. It knows what questions to pose, because it feels a real need to discover them (which is not to say that it always does so or does so immediately). Others have just as pressing a need to constantly beat around the bush. The researcher makes his living by researching; he negates himself as a researcher when he makes a discovery. In this manner one problem must engender another. These people and their companions in their wearisome labors seem to distinguish themselves simply by the different forms given to the same ideas: but a different form of expression in fact contains a different content. They retain only the critical aspect of the revolutionary attitude, forgetting its prospective aspects. Instead of indicating the practice which corresponds with the theory, they conclude with the need of always inventing something new. The revolution demolishes idols, but never in the manner of these false iconoclasts.

- [1.](#) See C. Juhl's preface to L'Internationale Communiste Ouvrière by Gorter, in *Invariance*, No. 5, New Series.
- [2.](#) For a critical study of *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, particularly in regard to Russia, see P. Guillaume's postscript to P. Chaliou's *Rapports de production en Russie*, reprinted by La Veille Taupe, 1972.
- [3.](#) See Stafford's bibliography of the works of P. Brousse in *From Anarchism to Reformism*, Weidenfeld-Nicolson, London, 1971, pp. 14-16.
- [4.](#) Bordiga, *Les fondements du communisme révolutionnaire*, Programme Communiste.
- [5.](#) Frölich, *Rosa Luxemburg*, Maspero, 1965.

- [6.](#) Netti, Rosa Luxemburg, London, 1966, 2 Vols.; French translation published in 2 Vols. by Maspero.
- [7.](#) Flechtheim: Le PC allemande sous la République de Weimar, Maspero.
- [8.](#) See, for example, the various volumes of Communism in Europe, edited by W. Griffith, MIT Press; F. Borkenau, World Communism, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 1962; B. Lazitch, Lénine et la IIIe Internationale, La Baconnière, Neuchâtel, 1951; as well as the journals Problèmes du Communisme, Est et Ouest, and Le Contrat Social edited by B. Souvarine. The common basis for the thought of all these authors resides in a cultivated pessimism, which is quite well-expressed by the following formula of Montesquieu, quoted by Plamenatz in German Marxism and Russian Communism, Longmans, London, 1945: "One can, moreover, establish, as a general maxim, that every revolution which was predicted in advance never arrived." For another perspective, see D. Mitchell, 1919: Red Mirage, J. Cape, London, 1970. See also R. Coper, Failure of a Revolution, Cambridge University Press, 1955.
- [9.](#) Stillborn Revolution: The Communist Bid for Power in Germany, 1921-23, Princeton Univ. Press, 1963. See pages 105-66, concerning the March Action.
- [10.](#) Le mouvement social, July-September 1973, pp. 89 and 95. For a critique of Broué's book, see Cahiers de l'ISEA, December 1972, pp. 2454-56, and D. Authier, La gauche allemande (cf. infra No. 23).
- [11.](#) A. Kriegel, Aux origines du communisme français, Flammarion, 1969, p. 329.
- [12.](#) Volumes I and II, Albin Michel, 1964.
- [13.](#) Pannekoek et les conseils ouvriers, EDI, 1969. English translation: Pannekoek and the Workers' Councils, Telos Press, St. Louis, 1978.
- [14.](#) Programme Communiste (abridged), No. 56, p. 32.
- [15.](#) "Pourquoi nous quittons ICO", January-February 1973.
- [16.](#) Les origines du gauchisme, Seuil, 1972. English translation: The Origins of Modern Leftism, Penguin Books, Baltimore, 1975.
- [17.](#) Bélibaste, 1974.
- [18.](#) R. Paris, Introduction to P. Mattick, Intégration capitaliste et rupture ouvrière, EDI, 1972.
- [19.](#) Le Monde, December 6, 1974.
- [20.](#) Invariance, old series, No. 7, which also contains: Manifestes des CP et CLP des EU (1919), La victoire du marxisme (Gorter, 1920), Pensée et action communistes dans la IIIe Internationale (S. Pankhurst, 1919) with an editorial note by Il Soviet, Le mouvement communiste internationale and La situation en Allemagne et le mouvement communiste, published in 1920 in Il Soviet, Le KAPD au IIIe Congrès mondiale and the report of the KAPD's Central Committee of July 31, 1921, Le principe de l'antagonisme entre le gouvernement des Soviets et le prolétariat (KAI), Pour la question du parlementarisme by Lukàcs (1920), the Thèses sur le parlementarisme by the Amsterdam Bureau and the Thèses of the Congress of the Belgian communists (May 1920).
- [21.](#) Ibid., new series, No. 1, "Le KAPD et le mouvement prolétarien".

- [22.](#) Kommunistik Program, La question syndicale et la gauche allemande dans la IIIe Internationale, Bagsvaerd, 1972. See also Note No. 1.
- [23.](#) Journal of the International Communist Party (“Bordigist”), No. 58, “La gauche marxiste d’Italie et le mouvement communiste internationale”. The same issue also reproduces a series of articles published in 1920 in Il Soviet concerning Germany and the CI. Some chapters of the History of the Italian Left (2 Vols., in Italian) have been edited and translated in Nos. 28, 29, 31, 33, 59 and 60 of PC.
- [24.](#) Structure économique et sociale de la Russie d’aujourd’hui, L’Oubli, 1975.
- [25.](#) Invariance, supplement to No. 2 (n.d.), with a postscript by D. Authier, where one can read: the 1920 Program and the Appeal to the German Proletariat of the KAPD; the KAPD’s interventions in the 3rd Congress of the CI; the Program of the AAUD and extracts from its Guidelines; the AAUD-E’s Guidelines; Rühle’s The Revolution is Not a Party Matter; and an extract from the Guidelines of the KAI. See Part Two of this book, below, for English translations of these AAUD, AAUD-E and KAI texts. English translations of the interventions of the KAPD delegation in the 3rd Congress of the CI may be viewed at Wage Slave X’s Revolutionary Anti-Capitalist Homepage website. An English translation of the Program of the KAPD is available at the website of the International Communist Current ([www.internationalism.org](http://www.internationalism.org)). Rühle’s famous text has been posted in English translation on several websites and is readily available.
- [26.](#) Conseils ouvriers en Allemagne 1917-21, Vroutsch, Serie La Marge, No. 9-11, 1973, which contains: Le mouvement des conseils en Allemagne, (ICO, No. 101); Anton Pannekoek, by Mattick (Lénine philosophe, Spartacus, 1970); Karl Korsch, by Mattick (Cahiers de l’ISEA, No. 140); Otto Rühle, by Mattick (Cahiers du communisme des conseils, No. 2); as well as Landauer et Mühsam, essais de biographies, Notes sur la République des conseils de Bavière, Les conseils ouvriers en Alsace. In English, see: “Anton Pannekoek (1873-1960)”, by Paul Mattick (in Pannekoek’s Lenin as Philosopher, Merlin Press, London, 1975); “Karl Korsch: His Contribution to Revolutionary Marxism” and “Otto Rühle and the German Labour Movement”, by Paul Mattick (in Mattick’s Anti-Bolshevik Communism, M. E. Sharpe, Inc., White Plains, 1978).
- [27.](#) Marx: Oeuvres, Gallimard, Vol. II, 1968, p. 81.
- [28.](#) For the period as a whole, we recommend the bibliographies of The German Left... and those of the excellent book by H. Gruber, International Communism in the Era of Lenin, Fawcett, Connecticut, 1967, which brings together a well-organized collection of documents. A general exposition can be found in G. Landauer’s history of world socialism (in English) and Droz’s history (PUF, Vol. II). See also the issue of Cahiers de l’ISEA devoted to the councils, in press; O. Ihlau, Die Roten Kämpfer, A. Hain, Meisenheim am Glan, 1969; F. Jung (former member of the KAPD), Der Weg nach Unten, Neuwied, 1961; C. Klein, Weimar, Flammarion, 1968; K. Meyer, Karl Liebknecht, A Man without a Country, Public Affairs Press, Washington, D.C., 1957; for a critical bibliography, with particular emphasis on German history after 1918, see G. Castellan, Revue historique, April-June 1970. For a brief study from a revolutionary point of view, see the Revue théorique du Courant Communiste Internationale, No. 2.