

Anarchism, Council Communism and Rosa Luxemburg

Workers' councils are a form of organisation that has been mythologised by currents claiming to be Leninist, by those who call themselves "councillists". and even by some anarchists. In the ultra-left current, people speak of it with an emotion that is as sincere as it is idealised, ignoring the extraordinary speed with which it became bureaucratized – in just a few months.

In 1905, the Bolshevik party was opposed to the workers' councils because they competed with the parties. Lenin even tried to have the anarchists excluded from the soviets because they "didn't engage in politics". In 1905, the St Petersburg party committee, completely disoriented, sent an ultimatum to the soviets: adopt the party programme or dissolve.

From being an instrument of combat at the start, the Petrograd soviet became a well-oiled administrative apparatus. From 1,200 deputies at the beginning of March 1917, it grew to 3,000 in less than a month. No serious verification of mandates was carried out. There were many "occasional newcomers". The plenary sessions took place in confusion. Soon a smaller "soviet". of 600 members was created. Numerous commissions, offices and secretariats were created. Several hundred employees worked in the various departments. As Panekoeck says, "The soviets gradually were eliminated as organs of self-rule, and reduced to subordinate organs of the government apparatus. The name of Soviet Republic, however, was preserved as a camouflage, and the ruling party retained the name of Communist Party."¹

Oskar Anweiler, in *Soviets in Russia*², writes on this subject that what the soviet gained in terms of smooth running, it lost in terms of

1 Pannekoek, *The Workers' Councils*, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/pannekoek/1947/workers-councils.htm>

2 Cf. Oskar Anweiler, *The soviets : the Russian workers, peasants, and soldiers councils, 1905-1921*. New York : Pantheon Books.

direct contact with a considerable part of the masses. Almost daily during the first few weeks of its existence, the plenary sessions of the soviet became increasingly spaced out, often attracting only a small number of deputies. The executive of the soviet became visibly freed from the supervision that the deputies were supposed to exercise over it. In other words, the soviet became bureaucratised practically from the start of the revolution.

However, the mythification of the Russian workers' councils was nothing compared to what happened during the German revolution. The council communists attached themselves to a form which only lasted a few months in Germany and which was immediately appropriated by the reformists. At no point do they question the fact that workers' councils, which are entirely circumstantial and spontaneous creations of the workers' movement, and therefore extremely fragile, are perhaps not the most appropriate form for ensuring permanent control of society by the working class.

The workers' and soldiers' councils held their congress in Berlin on 16 December 1918. On the agenda: the constitution of a "National Assembly or Government of Councils".³ "The cardinal question of the revolution" was posed, said Rosa Luxemburg in *Die Rote Fahne*. The central organ of social democracy, *Vorwärts*, replied: "The masses are not ready. For the reformists, a constituent assembly should have taken over from the revolution."

The political weight of social democracy – which was in power, let's not forget – remained enormous. It had not openly opposed the workers' councils. It had even proposed legalising them. The workers' councils in Germany were born out of the political vacuum of the state. But like the Russian soviets, the German workers' councils were rapidly being transformed. From class organisations, they became bodies where political parties clashed: they became parliamentary-type assemblies. And in this process, as the social democrats were the most numerous and the best organised, they ended up dominating. The delegates to the workers' councils no longer received their mandates from the rank and file on the workplace, but from the various political organisations represented

3 For the record, Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht were unable to stand as candidates, because they weren't working...

there: the Social Democratic Party, left-wing socialists, trade unionists, cooperatives, consumers, etc. The law legalising the workers' councils was passed in the Reichstag and defined in detail the rights and duties of the councils, which became cogs in the State machine.

The social democrats had placed their men in the councils: the higher up the council apparatus you went, the more numerous they were. Their influence was all the greater because many revolutionary militants had refused to sit in councils where social democrats were present! A haughty attitude, but bordering on treason. Abandoning one's post seems to have been a constant attitude among German revolutionary militants. Thus, at the Congress of Councils, reformist socialists represented four-fifths of the delegates against a dozen Spartakists who had not deserted. The resolutions on the power of the councils were rejected. The Ebert-Scheidemann government was given full powers at the All-German Congress of Workers' and Soldiers' Councils (16 to 20 December 1918). Social democracy had won the day.

Social democracy swallowed the revolution

Within a few months, social democracy had literally swallowed the council revolution.

It should be pointed out that the councilists were, for the most part, fiercely anti-anarchist. The main point of opposition between them and anarchism lay in their rejection of any form of permanent organisation. Right at the heart of the German revolution, fierce debates shook the councilist currents and caused cascading splits within them:

– Herman Gorter confined himself to a typically social-democratic vision of the division of labour between “political”. and “economic”.: the party – the KAPD in this case – was the workers' elite, while the Union – the AAUD – was the mass which engaged in spontaneous action... but not in economic defence. Curiously, nothing distinguishes it from the social-democratic point of view,

shared by Kautsky and Lenin, on workers' consciousness and the role of intellectuals.

– Otto Rühle thought that the party was an outdated form that was detached from “the class”.; it was an institution linked to the bourgeois revolution, whereas consciousness was the self-production of the class. In the jargon of the ultra-left, we speak of “the class”. to designate the working class: “the class has done this”, “the class must do that”, as if only the working class were a social class worthy of the name. But we are never far from the teacher talking about his “class”.

– As for Pannekoek, he wondered whether the distinction between parties and Unions was valid, insofar as the latter were in fact a kind of base committees of the parties. He considered that the German proletariat was not living up to its historic mission.

– Another fundamental question that was vigorously debated was whether organisation should precede action.

– Canne-Meijer mentioned that “some even went so far as to create anti-organisation organisations...”, as was the case in 1928-1929 with the KAPD, which was reduced to a micro-group. When one of the revolutionary groups of the time, the AAU, found itself in 1929 in the position of leading a strike – the summit of horror! – the KAPD sent it a letter of reprimand: it was the triumph of a “horse-trading policy”. consisting of “haggling with the capitalists around a green carpet, waiting until the proletariat was strong enough to mount the final assault”.

It's hard not to think of the scholastic *disputatio* of the Middle Ages, when fundamental questions were raised such as: “Does sweat from the scalp stink more than sweat from other parts of the body?”, “Did the body of the Resurrected Christ bear scars?”, or “Are fools even more stupid when the moon is full?”.

Council communism and “self-management”

Spanish anarcho-syndicalism certainly failed, but we can at least say in its favour that the experiment lasted about three years and was militarily crushed by very superior forces. The results of the two main experiments in which workers' councils were able to develop

to a certain extent - Russia and Germany - do not plead in favour of this form of organisation, despite the fact that this current of thought has provided thinkers whose analyses remain unparalleled.

This is why it is regrettable that the authors who represent this current today remain far below their elders of the 1920s and 1930s. Contemporary representatives of this current are obsessively focussed on the concept of “self-management”, which they wrongly attribute to the anarchist movement. This error leads them to develop a series of completely delusional theories. In fact, the fairly recent term “self-management”. did not originally figure in the conceptual panoply of anarchism and anarcho-syndicalism, And it of course figured even less in the conceptual panoply of Marxism. Let’s not forget that soviets were a totally foreign concept to Bolshevism before April 1917. Before self-management became fashionable, around May ’68, the anarchist movement [in France at least] spoke of *direct management* and *collective management of the economy*: this was not limited to the management of companies.

After May 68, a plethora of left-wing intellectuals marvelled at the discovery that workers knew how to manage their workplaces. For anarchists, this was not a scoop, since on the initiative of the anarcho-syndicalists, the economy – industry, agriculture and transport – had been collectivised during the Spanish Civil War. It should be noted that the communists did everything in their power to destroy this work of collectivisation.

For anarchists, the fact that a company is run by its employees is neither a scoop nor a panacea. It is perfectly possible, in principle, to imagine companies that are self-managed by their employees, in a market economy with the appropriation of surplus value by the bosses. This does not change the nature of the system, which remains perfectly capitalist; it just means that the management method is slightly modified. On this point, we are in complete agreement with the council communists.

A socialist society is one in which all sectors of the economy are managed collectively, i.e. according to the principles of federalism, and where the allocation of the social surplus is the subject of collective debate and decisions. So it’s not so much the way in which the company is run that matters, although that’s not

insignificant because in the capitalist system the company is often a place of oppression. What matters above all is the way in which the working population determines global needs, the objectives of production and the means to be used to achieve these objectives.

In the capitalist system, it is the market – in fact the shareholders of the companies – who assume these functions under the benevolent protection of the state. In state capitalism such as the former USSR, it was the state. In both cases, the proletariat has nothing to say. I take the term “proletariat”. in the sense in which it was understood by the French CGT-SR:

“... the worker in industry or on the land, the craftsman in the city or in the fields – whether or not he works with his family – the employee, the civil servant, the foreman, the technician, the teacher, the scholar, the writer, the artist, who live exclusively from the product of their work belong to the same class: the proletariat.”⁴

Libertarian communism can only be identified with self-management insofar as it is the proletariat (in the sense defined above) organised in its class structures – industrial and geographical – which defines the overall objectives and the means. Curiously, the best definition of anarcho-syndicalism is probably to be found in... Pannekoek:

“Since the revolutionary class fight against the bourgeoisie and its organs is inseparable from the seizure of the productive apparatus by the workers and its application to production⁵, the same organisation that unites the class for its fight also acts as the organisation of the new productive process.”⁶

However, Pannekoek did not invent this idea: it was a recurring theme among the federalist militants of the IWA, particularly Bakunin. But similarities cannot erase differences: the main

4 Pierre Besnard, *les Syndicats ouvriers et la révolution sociale*. This definition covers at least 80% of the population.

5 In the French version we have: “ and its extension to the social product”.

6 Pannekoek, “General Remarks on the Question of Organisation”, *Living Marxism*, vol. 4, no. 5. November 1938.

opposition between the council communists on the one hand, and the anarchists and anarcho-syndicalists on the other, lies in the fact that the former are opposed to any permanent organisation.

What are we supposed to do in the meantime?

The council communist movement is not at all in favour of self-management, which is seen as a specifically capitalist form, a “corporatist, localist and syndicalist mystification”. within the working class.⁷ Workers’ councils and self-management are therefore not at all the same thing. According to the councilists, workers’ management of companies is a simple extension of the capitalist organisation of production. That’s not what workers’ councils are for, they’re a political tool with which the proletariat will achieve world revolution:

“...it must be asserted that the workers’ councils are first and foremost organs of political power, which must serve to unite the workers not simply to administer the economy but to conquer power on a world scale.”

Anarchists agree with the council communists on one point: they do not aim to organise a system where companies are self-managed without any links between them, without a common project and without having brought down the political and economic power of the bourgeoisie. The self-management of a company in the capitalist system is simply called a cooperative. Not that anarchists are opposed to co-operatives, on the contrary, but on condition that, as Bakunin said, we do not imagine that capitalism can be overthrown simply by multiplying the number of co-operatives. The problem is that council communists attribute to anarchists positions that they do not hold.

According to the council communists, self-management is the “final resort of capitalism in crisis, and emasculated workers’

7 “The proletarian revolution”, [International Review 1970s: 1-19](https://en.internationalism.org/ir/1_prolevn.htm), https://en.internationalism.org/ir/1_prolevn.htm

councils are being advocated by numerous left factions of capital, from the social democrats to Trotskyists and sundry libertarians. “

Self-management would be a watchword used by the bourgeoisie to lead the proletariat to its own exploitation, without calling into question the capitalist state and commodity relations.

“Thus the bourgeois Republic in Spain was able to co-opt a certain amount of self-management into the war-effort against France’s rival capitalist faction.”⁸

I don’t know if the author of these lines realises what he is saying. First of all, the Spanish Republic did not “co-opt”. many cases of self-management: it was the entire economy of the zone dominated by the anarchists that was collectivised, thanks to which the population was able to produce, harvest wheat and transport food to the towns for three years – something the Russian communists had been incapable of doing. It was the organised proletariat that restructured the economy. Without the proletariat organised in its unions, the fascist putsch of 19 July 1936 would have ended on 20 July and there would have been no talk of a Spanish revolution.

The council communists stressed “the bureaucratic and statist nature of most of the so-called collectivisation carried out under the auspices of the anarchist CNT”.⁹ This somewhat simplistic reasoning leads the author of the article to the conclusion that the collectivisation of industry, agriculture and transport by the CNT and sometimes by the CNT-UGT was nothing more than a tactic in the service of one capitalist faction against the other. This reasoning is so caricatural that this political current is totally disqualified in any discussion where a minimum of common sense is necessary.

Council communists are opposed to the constitution of what they call “individual productive units”. which maintain the divisions imposed by capitalism. Such methods of organisation divert the workers from their primary goal: to destroy the capitalist state. It allows the state to “launch its offensive against a fragmented

8 *Loc. cit.*

9 *Ibid.*

working class”. The socialisation of production requires, on the contrary, the abolition of autonomous enterprises and “the subordination of the whole productive apparatus to the conscious direction of society, without the medium of exchange.”. But the anarchists agree with that! The supporters of self-management, on the other hand, are characterised by their “common rejection of the need for the proletariat to destroy the bourgeois state on a world scale before actual permanent socialisation can begin”.¹⁰

It’s funny, though, that those who’ve been bugging anarchists about the idea of a “transition period”. should reproach the Spanish libertarians for not having introduced communism in a week. These comrades are simply not credible¹¹.

In short, workers’ councils serve to “destroy the bourgeois-state on a world scale before any real socialisation can be undertaken”.

What are we supposed to do in the meantime?

Rosa Luxembourgn an “anarchist” .?

Rosa Luxembourgn was deeply affected by the accusations of “anarchism” made by the German Social Democratic leaders. Of course, this accusation should not be taken seriously. At the time, all militants who advocated a general strike and expressed reservations about parliamentary action were accused of anarchism. No distinction was made, for example, between revolutionary syndicalists and anarchists. In reality, Rosa Luxembourgn was fiercely anti-anarchist.

In her pamphlet *Mass Strike, Party and Trade Unions*, published in 1905, she questioned the role played by anarchism during the Russian Revolution of 1905:

“It has become the sign of the common thief and plunderer; a large proportion of the innumerable thefts

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ The idea that anarchism is opposed to any period of transition is deeply rooted, but it is totally false. See: “Esquisse d’une réflexion sur la période de transition”. [Outline of a reflection on the transition period], monde-nouveau.net/spip.php?article324

and acts of plunder of private persons are carried out under the name of “anarchist-communism” – acts which rise up like a troubled wave against the revolution in every period of depression and in every period of temporary defensive. Anarchism has become in the Russian Revolution, not the theory of the struggling proletariat, but the ideological signboard of the counter-revolutionary lumpenproletariat, who, like a school of sharks, swarm in the wake of the battleship of the revolution. And therewith the historical career of anarchism is well-nigh ended.”

This is the usual litany of the “anarchist doctrine of the lumpenproletariat”. In 1893 a congress was held in Paris, bringing together representatives of the entire French Labour movement of the time¹². The minutes of the congress contain an eight-page list of the organisations present. The congress discussed the organisation of a general strike if war broke out between France and Germany. Unanimously, minus one delegate, the congress adopted the principle of a general strike. For the record, the delegate who voted against declared that he had been mandated to vote that way but that he was going to go back to his constituents to make them change their minds.

So if we believe Rosa Luxemburg, the entire organised French working class present at the congress was made up of “lumpenproletarians”. Similarly, it was probably 600,000 “lumpenproletarians”. who, in 1912, followed the CGT's call for a general strike to protest against the coming war – an initiative that the German “scientific”. socialists, led by Rosa Luxemburg, were never able to take. In fact, Rosa Luxemburg's speech served in fact to conceal the fact that the “anarchist”. movement had precedence over the question of the general strike, which Luxemburg called a “mass strike”, in order to distinguish herself.

As a consistent Marxist, Luxemburg attacked anarchism not through theoretical criticism but, like her predecessors, through slander and deliberate distortion. On this terrain, she was all the

12 See le compte rendu du congrès : http://monde-nouveau.net/IMG/pdf/--Debat_sur_la_greve_generale_1893.pdf

more frenzied as she had to clear herself of the accusation of “anarchism”. hurled against her by her Marxist comrades.

Thus Luxemburg felt obliged to devote several pages of her pamphlet to attacking Bakunin on the idea of the general strike, accusing the Russian revolutionary of artificially manufacturing revolutions, whereas he never ceased to warn militants against the risks of unpreparedness.

“One fine morning”, says Luxemburg, quoting Engels, “all the workers in every industry in a country, or perhaps in every country, will cease work, and thereby compel the ruling class either to submit in about four weeks, or to launch an attack on the workers so that the latter will have the right to defend themselves, and may use the opportunity to overthrow the old society.”¹³

Of course, we find nothing of the sort in Bakunin, who insists that a revolution must be prepared and that it is irresponsible to commit the proletariat to a revolution if one is not certain of victory.

Luxemburg continued:

“The fatal thing for anarchism has always been that the methods of struggle improvised in the air were not only a reckoning without their host, that is, they were purely utopian, but that they, while not reckoning in the least with the despised evil reality, unexpectedly became in this evil reality, practical helps to the reaction, where previously they had only been, for the most part, revolutionary speculations.”.

Luxemburg declares that his theory of the mass strike is “directed against the anarchist theory of the general strike”. Indeed, the whole pamphlet is peppered with criticisms of anarchism and Bakunin. It concludes with the shocking argument of recourse to “dialectics”, the secret weapon of the Marxists:

13 R. Luxemburg, *Mass strike...*”.

“Thus has historical dialectics, the rock on which the whole teaching of Marxian socialism rests, brought it about that today anarchism, with which the idea of the mass strike is indissolubly associated, has itself come to be opposed to the mass strike which was combated as the opposite of the political activity of the proletariat, appears today as the most powerful weapon of the struggle for political rights.”¹⁴

This little paragraph is particularly interesting. Once you've decoded it, it basically says this:

– The general strike (“mass”. in Luxemburgist vocabulary) had hitherto been the stock-in-trade of “anarchism”. (in fact, of revolutionary syndicalism, but as I said, the German social democrats didn't know the difference).

– Thanks to the “dialectics of history”. (*sic*), this “rock foundation”. of Marxism, anarchism enters into contradiction with the “mass strike”. (we don't know why or how, but it's enough for the “dialectics of history”. to say so through the mouth of Saint Rosa Luxembourg).

– The mass strike, hitherto fought by the social democrats, became “the most powerful weapon”. of the proletariat's political struggle. A weapon that the German social democrats were careful not to use to prevent war.

– In conclusion, for the mass strike to become a positive and operational element for Marxism, the general strike of the “anarchists”. must cease to be so.

The question that every normally constituted reader asks is: since the “dialectics of history”. is so clear and obvious, why was the “mass strike”. not recognised earlier as an operational element and, above all, why, despite Rosa Luxembourg's intervention revealing the projects of the “dialectics of history”.¹⁵, did the whole of German

14 *Ibid.*

15 The expression “dialectics of history”. means absolutely nothing. Marx was not at all fixated on the “dialectic”.: he says very little about it. Henri Lefebvre points out that we have to wait until 1858 to find a non-pejorative reference by Marx to the Hegelian dialectic. The text in which Marx explains that he is

social democracy not have the revelation? And why did German social democracy call Rosa Luxembourgn an “anarchist”?

The idea of a general strike had been launched by the congress of the First International held in Brussels in September 1868, but it was a measure designed to oppose the war. In the years leading up to the First World War, the leaders of the French CGT constantly tried to convince the German leaders of the need for a general strike if war broke out between the two countries. They made many attempts, but always came up against a brick wall.

“The debates on the general strike made the union leaders fear that they would be overtaken by events: they declared that they did not have the means to support it. The revisionists were opposed to a mass strike. Rosa Luxembourgn, on her return from Russia, asserted that it was through struggle that workers could organise and self-emancipate, which earned her being called an 'anarchist'. by the trade union bureaucrats.”¹⁶

putting dialectics back on its feet is in the 1873 Afterword to Capital, where he says, in passing, that all you have to do is put Hegel's method straight and “you will find that it looks quite reasonable”. –

a rather trivial remark. Franz Jakubowski also points out that “all we find in him [Marx] on the subject of Hegel is a multitude of scattered remarks.”. (*Ideological Superstructures in the Materialist Conception of History*, EDI, p. 77.)

What was at stake in the assertion of the “dialectical method”. was revealed belatedly. In other words, all the fuss about the “Marxist dialectic”. is an a posteriori construction. The question of Marxist “method”. only took on disproportionate importance after Marx's death, when it became a question of “proving”. the “scientific”. character of Marxism. Engels was largely responsible for this process, which became a caricature under Lenin. The dialectic was used for every purpose, and more often than not served to mask false knowledge. People took refuge behind the “dialectic”, and above all behind those who spoke of it, to avoid thinking and to give themselves the illusion of knowledge that they did not have. Confronted with contradictory social phenomena, they simply explained that the contradiction was “dialectical”, which avoided examining the factual causes.

16 René Berthier, *Digressions sur la révolution allemande*, Éditions du Monde libertaire.

Rather than hysterically attacking “anarchism”. on the principle of the general strike, Rosa Luxembourgn would have done better to envisage ways of forming an alliance with the French workers' movement on this question, in order to jointly oppose the war. Right up to the last moment, the CGT leadership tried to win over the German socialist leaders to the idea of joint action against the war, but without success.

When she made the critique of Bolshevism that would make her famous, Rosa Luxembourgn showed that the main tactical and strategic innovations (from the point of view of social democracy) did not result from the programmatic discoveries of a few social-democratic leaders or even of the party's governing bodies, but that they arose spontaneously from the working class. Luxembourgn “discovered”. at the time of the Russian revolution of 1905 something which was then commonplace in the French trade union movement. The principle of the general strike, as I said, had been adopted in France by a congress in 1893, unanimously minus one vote. At this congress, for which we have detailed minutes, it is clear that the general strike was identified with revolution. It is understandable that German social democracy consistently rejected any discussion on the subject.

Rosa Luxembourgn discovered that the working class was not limited to political leadership of the working class. In short, she discovered warm water, as we say in France. But it is also true that for the German social democrats, her discoveries were an innovation: just think, the working class was also an actor, independently of its leadership! This observation was echoed some twenty years later when Trotsky said in his “Transitional Programme”. that “the present crisis of human civilisation is the crisis of the leadership of the proletariat”.

In the 1970s, Daniel Guérin sought to give a libertarian reading of Rosa Luxembourgn¹⁷ that made her a “quasi-anarchist”. Her criticism of Bolshevism and its concepts of organisation, as well as her views on spontaneity, undoubtedly tipped her over into the

17 *Rosa Luxembourgn et la spontanéité révolutionnaire*, Éditions Flammarion, 1971.

“anarchist”. camp in the eyes of some students and intellectuals. Many activists, including anarchists, found her speech “sympathetic”, because her opposition to Lenin helped turn her into a myth.

Rosa Luxembourg is highlighted as a dissident from Marxism for her criticism of Leninism and centralism, for her defence of freedom of expression, etc. But no one can say that she would not have aligned herself with the positions of the Communist International, had she lived. She appeared as a representative of what would later be called “socialism with a human face”, a socialism where dialogue was the rule, but her criticism of Leninism did not go to the heart of the matter, it only attacked his methods of action. We forget that she remained fundamentally a social democrat, sectarian, fiercely anti-anarchist, using the trade union movement as a mere auxiliary of party policy.

René Berthier
Adapted from
Affinités non électives,
Éditions libertaires, 2015

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