

Inaccurate and Dogmatic

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The social revolutionary milieu is strategically haphazard because it is based on false assumptions about spontaneity and organisation, as was recently stated in the post "What is to be done in times of weakness?" on this blog; there is no getting around the form of the party if one wants to encourage the formation of the proletariat into a politically independent class. The following contribution to the debate disputes this perspective.

First of all: I have neither participated in the debates and organising attempts to which Katja Wagner, Lukas Egger and Marco Hamann (hereafter: WEH) refer, nor am I a member of Friends of the Classless Society. However, I consider the efforts to form an anti-authoritarian communist, theoretically grounded pole within the left to be absolutely worth supporting. It is all the more gratifying that with the blog Communaut a more flexible, open medium than Kosmoprolet has been brought into being - and all the more irritating that only a few weeks after the start of the blog, with *What is to be done in times of weakness?*, an article appears that is a rejection of the project of "pole formation" and in terms of its choice of words and gesture would have fitted much better in *analyse & kritik* or in the debate pages of *Neues Deutschland*. In 1986, the remnants of the Maoist-Stalinist KPD/ML united with the Trotskyists of the GIM (who had been physically threatened by them in earlier years) to form the United Socialist Party; a few years earlier, whole cohorts of K-groupers and Frankfurt Spontis switched to the Greens without a second thought, only to join the realists there just as quickly. Anything is possible, and miraculously - at least from the point of view of those involved - anything can be justified.

That is the problem with "What is to be done in times of weakness?": The analysis is too imprecise and, on the other hand, too self-assured, even complacent, to advance the strategic debate among communists. Therefore, in what follows, I will limit myself to a few interjections to point out what I consider to be the grossest inaccuracies. Perhaps its text can only be understood if one knows where it indirectly and implicitly refers to an internal debate. That is why its publication is all the more annoying, because who knows anything about this debate? (1)

My fundamental lack of understanding is the following: The article is published at a time when the party-organised left in Germany has suffered a historic defeat, measured against the last twenty years. What is meant is the horrendous loss of votes by Die Linke in the last federal elections (and if one is prepared to draw the circle even wider, one can observe that the Left in the SPD and the Greens, whose commitment was decisive for the respective electoral successes of their parties, play no role in the coalition negotiations or have once again only been left with the role of useful idiots). Why doesn't the text start with that? One can certainly understand this electoral defeat as the end point of an international cycle that began in 2002 with the success of two Trotskyist candidates in the French presidential elections (almost three million votes and almost ten percent of the vote). The arc of socialist attempts to organise and regroup spans from the success of the Partito della Rifondazione Comunista in the 2006 Italian parliamentary elections - the party was romanticised at the time as a "movement of movements" - to the successes of Die Linke here after 2005 due to the introduction of the Hartz laws, the triumphs of Podemos in Spain and Syriza in Greece after 2010, the election of independent socialist Jeremy Corbyn as leader of the Labour Party (2015), the 2016 rallying movement of Jean-Luc Mélenchon, and finally Bernie Sanders, the US President of Hearts (also 2016). Left radicals have accompanied these successes critically but ultimately affirmatively, often even acting in key positions in the movements. Nothing has remained of this round of socialist politics, at least in Europe - except, paradoxically, the dominance of left-liberalism, which was actually believed to be dead, over the remnant socialist militants in the movements. Today, these

parties have disappeared (Partito della Rifondazione Comunista), the hopefuls of yore are once again unknown (Olivier Besancenot), thwarted tribunes of the people such as Sahra Wagenknecht or Mélenchon have long since been acting only on their own account, and the behaviour of Sanders, who in 2016 acquiesced of his own free will to his intriguingly engineered defeat in the Democratic nomination marathon, or even of Corbyn was simply erratic. As great as the national differences between the parties, movements and candidates were, they all share a new type of organisation: the combination of social movement, of anti-authoritarian and spontaneous mass protest, and an institutionalised apparatus that - strategically, but sometimes also out of full conviction - acts in conformity with the system, participates in elections and downright lures the masses with the prospect of government participation. This intersection of spontaneity and institutionalisation - but this is just a thesis - has not only failed to sustain the momentum of the mass movements, but may also have neutralised many militants and integrated them into the political apparatuses - which is the real damage. These movements have not produced an avant-garde, but a (future) party and political, i.e. state, elite.

It would have made much more sense, even been more honest, if WEH had analysed these party-movement hybrids, if they had gone into the details and recapitulated the ultimately fruitless debates on a "New Anti-Capitalist Party" or the founding of the "Movement Left" within Die Linke. The useful starting question would have been how power hierarchies, social conformism and state affirmation permeate the very circles that claim to formulate, even embody, 21st century socialism. The clear distinction between a non-parliamentary or even anti-parliamentary wing and a left that is close to the state has become increasingly blurred in the course of the (apparent) success of these hybrids - personally, morally, ideologically and structurally -, all the more urgent would be a reappraisal of the last twenty years of organisational and movement history. (2)

None of this with WEH. Instead, one gets the impression that they consider the marginalised, no: the long-historicised current of council communism as the standard that has to be patricidally overthrown (look in the catalogue of the National Library to see how many books by authors from the council communist milieu have been published in German in the last twenty years; if I have counted correctly, one still gets by with one hand), and as if a left still dazed by the confusion of spontaneity is waiting for a new organising approach to be made palatable to it. When WEH state:

"on the strategic questions of what role one should play as a communist in social struggles and political confrontations, what mediating steps are necessary between our ultimate goal of a communist society and the present struggles, and what relationship the theoretical debate in small theoretical circles has to political events, our milieu, seen in the light of day, has little to say " (3)

one can only shrug one's shoulders: Who would have much to say? And why do they say so little about it themselves? Or rather, why do they say it, the expression has already been used, so imprecisely?

For example, they talk about the "ultimate goal of a communist society". Communism, however, is not only a form of society (and as such it cannot be a final goal), but also and above all the movement that leads to this form of society. And movement in every sense: as a tendency of increasing socialisation in capitalism itself (formation of the general intellect; tendency towards the self-abolition of value); as the programme of the historical party since Marx and Engels (and Hess, Weitling, Proudhon, Cabet, Bakunin, Fourier, Stirner ...); as a spontaneous mass movement against all forms of capital's domination; as a diffuse underground of common life (the moments of solidarity in everyday life, the subversions at the workplace ...), lived in order to be able to endure the madness raging around us and through us in the first place. Understanding communism as a movement and not so much as a form of society already implies an analysis of the steps that lead

beyond the local and historical limitation of struggles and self-understandings - that is, an analysis of the mediations that are nothing other than our practice.

The inaccuracies run through the whole text: For example, when WEH speak of "phases of calm", which are in reality phases of counter-revolution, in which it is important at least not to let the thread of theory break, which is hellishly exhausting in the face of rampant disappointment and dejection; when they speak of the "failure" of "reformist and state-loyal social democracy" and Stalinism - in what have they failed?! When they speak of the "self-destructive class alliance(s) of the social democrats with the national, bourgeois forces", when it was only that class alliance after 1914 and then again after 1916 (which only turned into the open what had been apparent since the founding of the party and was manifested not only in Bernstein-style revisionism) that paved the way for social democracy to become the state party par excellence (which secures its existence to this day, right up to Olaf Scholz); when they finally talk about "developing an alternative to the ruling order", communism is not another offer from the commodity world of political morality, but a movement that dialectically, i.e. via contradictions and setbacks, frees itself from its entanglements in the capitalist system of needs - every workers' movement begins as immanent to capital.

Let's continue with the inaccuracies: "As long as the proletarianised do not gain consciousness of the actual economic and political conditions against which they are struggling, as long as their hopes are disappointed, their energy and courage fizzle out or are appropriated by the forces loyal to the state." What consciousness do they mean? Because the proletarianised obviously have (class) consciousness, otherwise they would have no hope, the statement is contradictory in itself. Shouldn't it rather be "knowledge" ("As long as the proletarianised do not gain knowledge about the actual economic and political conditions"...)?) And shouldn't we first find out about the knowledge that the proletarianised already have before we hope to make them happy with our knowledge?

Also annoying is the ostentatious misunderstanding when WEH get worked up over the assumption that "the proletarian masses should, in a chaotic, spontaneous process of all things, form a revolutionary consciousness and a clarity about their political interests that will enable them to overturn society". What exactly is chaotic about a strike movement? In an occupation of a square or a militant demonstration? The opposite is true: everyone knows how to move, in these situations of uprising everyone does the right thing, as if by themselves, people rise above themselves and the fearful are suddenly courageous. These events are only "chaotic" from a very specific point of view: because they cannot be prolonged, because they cannot be planned. They cannot be conserved, and that triggers fear in observers: what will tomorrow bring? This fear speaks from the entire text: sublimated to the vague hope of finding a guarantee formula with which one can make movements permanent, transform their sudden flare-ups into politics and a programme in order to prevent their equally sudden decline. To insinuate that council communism failed in this ("and yet they too have failed everywhere they have appeared") betrays a completely false understanding of council communism – council communism is, however limited, the critique of all guarantee formulas. The council communists therefore neither wanted to be a movement nor to found a new one, but understood their work as a form of reflection on the failure of previous workers' movements.

WEH evoke an all too idyllic image of the workers' movement - as if it were a football team that changes its playing style when it continues to be unsuccessful: social democracy, Bolshevism, now council communism. Anti-authoritarian, "ultra-left" currents, however, have been fought, marginalised and stigmatised by the established organisations, whether social democratic or (post-) Bolshevik. Another hope implicit in the text, that anti-authoritarian knowledge, as accumulated in the texts of Endnotes or the Friends, could be transferred into a new, permanent party form, would probably prove to be another delusion: it would be just as marginalised and stigmatised as the earlier knowledge.

It is now no surprise that the three theses WEH develop from their analyses are inadequate: "The revolutionary mass movements of the early 20th century would not have been at all possible without the organisational groundwork of the social democratic parties." Plain and simple: no. This thesis is not supported by any social history study worth mentioning, whether it refers to the Russian Revolution, the American Wobblies or the Western European movement of mass strikes (4). It is the other way round: these mass strikes were the starting point for a refounding of Marxism as a revolutionary theory against revisionism and centrism (Kautsky). It is true that the socialist and social democratic parties provided the framework within which the reappraisal of the mass strikes and first attempts at revolution took place - a framework that proved too narrow at the latest after the second, depressing mass strike debate in German social democracy after 1911. If the first thesis is wrong, the following ones based on it also buckle: "Workers can only act as a class through their organisations." This is also historically wrong. More correct would have been: Socialist organisations could only gain agency if they related to the class. Finally, the third thesis: "The constitution of the wage-dependent into a politically independent class is inevitably linked to the party as a form of political organisation." The class of the wage-dependent is always a variable of the capitalist system; it becomes its negation only in the class struggle and there only after some time and in the intensification of a crisis. The idea that the class can constitute itself into a "politically independent" class - at what point in time, actually: before, during or after a class struggle? - is, dogmatically set like this, a fantasy: as a "politically independent" class, i.e. as one that is recognised and as such can hope for participation, it would always already be integrated into democracy.

The conclusion from these three theses is another oblique sentence: "The hope, on the other hand, that the previously unorganised masses will become the driving force of the revolution seems questionable at least on the condition that those in pre-revolutionary times have not yet formed even rudimentary forms of class consciousness." Well, this society permanently organises us in the coercive forms of its reproduction - and it is only in these that the moments of resistance are to be found: "All socially integrated activity, although a means of domination, at the same time draws limits to domination", writes Paul Mattick, and: "the labour process, dependent on anonymous forces and direct decisions, contains sufficient starting points in organisational and technological terms to make centralist manipulations more difficult, even to prevent them. The manipulators cannot free themselves from the forms of division of labour which often limit the power of centralist control; they cannot eradicate certain consequences of industrialisation without endangering their own domination." (5) The working classes were - and are - never unorganised. Just as an aside: if the "previously unorganised masses" did not give rise to the party in the first place as the "driving force of the revolution", where would it actually come from? Which demiurge would have created it so that it could impregnate the passive, alienated masses with class consciousness?

One last sentence on the "council-communist tradition". WEH write: "If we want to learn from the history of the early workers movement, we should not only name the weaknesses and mistakes of their organisations, but also understand that at the same time they produced the subjective conditions for the possibility of a successful proletarian revolution. This positive contribution is largely denied in the council-communist tradition and the political failure of the revolutionary tendency in social democracy is not reflected as such ..." How oblivious to history! The council communists were men and women of the party, they had sometimes decades of organisational experience, it was a painful process before they could bring themselves to break with their own past. They knew what they were talking about...

The text of WEH is full of dogmatism: abstract positing of supposed facts that are supposed to have happened in this way and no other. Alternatives meet, preliminary work takes place (where exactly? In parliament? In a quiet chamber? In exile in London?), parties or currents fail or collapse, and all this merely because the party lacked the right compass. As a negative consequence of their

organisational fetish, the authors impute to council communism the abstract radical condemnation of the party form. There's nothing more absurd than this: workers' parties (at best) provide for "the dissemination of knowledge and learning, as well as the study, discussion and formulation of social ideas, in order to enlighten the masses intellectually through their propaganda. The workers' councils are the organs of practical action and struggle of the working class; the parties have the task of developing the intellectual forces. Their work is an irreplaceable part of the self-liberation of the working class," wrote Anton Pannekoek as late as 1947. (6)

The "times of weakness" that the text declares, it expresses in itself. It is therefore quick to pass over an accurate insight into the behaviour of communists and to dismiss it: the intervention of the communist minority in social struggles "amounts (...) essentially to bringing out the narrowness of the struggles and nudging them in the direction of a radical overturning of existing conditions". So it is. So simple, so tedious, so small-scale in everyday life. But careful, this is supposed to be "fundamental anti-politics"... Really? Then let's have it!

Notes

(1) For this reason - because I do not know what the actual course of the debate was - I will not put forward any "alternatives" or suggestions for improvement, nor will I give any advice, but will refer exclusively to WEH's theses.

(2) To avoid any misunderstanding: This is not to imply that WEH follow this latest movement approach and are supporters of Die Linke in disguise, but merely to suggest that an investigation into the question of organisation should start where leftists - and left radicals - have recently referred to organisations in a particularly euphoric way, and where they have also had some success.

(3) All quotations not shown are from their text *What is to be done in times of weakness?*

(4) For my introduction to the history and theory of council communism (Schmetterling Verlag 2021) I worked with the following studies: Oskar Anweiler, *Die Rätebewegung in Russland 1905-1921*, Leiden 1958; Michael Grüttner, *Arbeitswelt an der Wasserkante. Sozialgeschichte der Hamburger Hafendarbeiter 1886-1914*, Göttingen 1984; Lothar Machtan, *Streiks im frühen deutschen Kaiserreich*, Frankfurt/M. u. New York 1983; S.A. Smith, *Red Petrograd. Revolution in the Factories, 1917-1918*, Cambridge et al. 1983; Leon Trotsky, *Russia in the Revolution*, Dresden 1909; Marcel Van der Linden, *New Reflections on Leninism*, in: Contributions to the History of the Labour Movement, 34th ed, Berlin January 1992; Benjamin Ziemann, *Violence in the First World War. Töten, Überleben, Verweigern*, Essen 2013.

(5) Thus Mattick in his key essay *Spontaneity and Organisation* (1949; quoted in: Ders, "Spontaneity and Organisation. Vier Versuche über praktische und theoretische Probleme der Arbeiterbewegung", Frankfurt/M. 1975, p.63). WEH also quote from this essay - with the intention of cunningly invoking a council communist to confirm their intentions: "The flight into spontaneity [on the other hand] characterises the real or imagined inability to form effective forms of organisation and to deal 'realistically' with existing organisations." Look, Mattick says it himself! Admittedly, the quote is directed against the abstract spontaneism of a Rosa Luxemburg. In his essay, Paul Mattick refers implicitly to the reflections of Heinz Langerhans, with whom he was in intensive exchange at the time. Langerhans had already written in 1931: "Eternal innocence of action was regarded by her as the true life of the revolutionary class. (...) But with her believing reverence for the 'creative power of the masses', Rosa Luxemburg, through this faith, abandoned the traditional Marxist conception of the relationship between theory and practice. She is already no longer concerned with a rational grasp of the irrational moments of action, but is content to describe the irrational of action phenomenologically." (HL, *Rosa Luxemburg*, 1931, in The Society. Internationale Revue für Sozialismus und Politik, 8. Jg., Heft 1, p. 22ff.)

(6) In: *5 Theses on the Struggle of the Working Class against Capitalism*, Thesis 4, quoted from:
marxists.org/german/archive/pannekoek/1947/05/5theses.htm