November 1918: Revolution in Central Europe

New Politics, 21/11/18

The end of World War I in November 1918 signaled the collapse of two bastions of feudalism: the Hohenzollerns in Germany and the Habsburgs in Austria-Hungary. Victory for the Entente therefore meant victory of the western bourgeoisie over the militarism of central Europe. In the words of Otto Bauer, the First World War was "the greatest and the bloodiest bourgeois revolution in the history of the world."

The resulting relative weakness of the central European ruling classes created elbowroom for a democratic revolution. So much elbow room, in fact, that an entire continent of democratic tasks was annexed, exclusively, to the *peoples* of central Europe. Such tasks extended from parliamentarism and the rule of law, to popular control over market and workplace. The weakness of central European liberalism, accentuated by the war, had folded bourgeois and proletarian revolution into one political program.

The unification of bourgeois and proletarian revolution engendered a new strategic perspective, spontaneously invented by the popular revolutions of November 1918 in Austria, Germany and Hungary. We can call it *council Erfurtianism*: 'council', because it was based on workers' and soldiers' councils, and 'Erfurtianism', because it drew heavily upon the Erfurt program, the ideological centerpiece of European social democracy since 1891. The November revolutions, in other words, did not discover the *form* of socialist rule, but endowed its content with the newly discovered institution of the workers' council.

The Rise of the Councils

The councils—an institutional legacy of the Russian Revolution of 1905—were a result of the power void left by the collapsing empires. The void was originally filled by radicalized soldiers, demanding an end to militarism, and by revolutionary workers, demanding political and labor rights. The convergence of their struggles was expressed in the pyramidal, direct-democratic structures that spread like wildfire throughout central Europe. In Austria and Hungary national councils were established on 30 and 25 October 1918, respectively. In Germany, an Executive Council was convened on 10 November 1918; it was the reincarnation of the Greater Berlin strike committees set up in February of the same year. The councils created a new kind of bottom-up legislature, appointed temporary governments and set themselves two principled tasks: to crush militarism and to democratize the economy. The anti-militarism task meant subordinating military administration to parliament and councils; the economic-democratization task meant expropriation of the 'great industrialists' and socialization of major industries under worker control.

For a moment, the breadth and intensity of the council movement encouraged the illusion that central Europe was headed towards revolution on the Russian model. But Bolshevism was never on the revolutionary menu of central Europe, where parliamentary and trade-unionist traditions were deeply inscribed into the psyche of social democracy and where putschism and insurrectionism were unthinkable. In Germany, this became transparent in December 1918, when the congress of councils, having won all political power, voluntarily delegated it to a future national assembly. The Bolshevik Karl Radek was therefore right when he said that in Germany "you could hardly skip over [the parliamentary] stage." Skipping-over was neither feasible nor—as I will argue below—desirable.

Like the German Executive Council, the Austrian and Hungarian national councils delegated executive power to their respective national assemblies during the first weeks of the revolution. It followed that, for the vast majority of workers in central Europe, “all power to the councils” meant at least at least *some*power to national parliaments. This is, moreover, why the Bolshevik recipe was absent from the revolutionary menu: the temporary soviet governments in Hungary (March-August 1919) and Bavaria (April-May 1919) were putsches without democratic legitimacy and little chance of success. According to Peter von Oertzen, one of the foremost historians of the German councils, the only revolutionary strategy with some chance of success during the febrile days of late 1918 and early 1919 was council Erfurtianism, that is, a strategy denouncing both the anti-council parliamentarism of traditional social democrats and the anti-parliament councilism of the Bolsheviks. Instead, the strategy envisaged ‘a parliamentary democracy supported by the councils’.

Democracy and Council System

How was the cohabitation between parliament and workers’ councils supposed to work? In Germany, Karl Kautsky proposed a model of institutionalized cohabitation in the midst of the revolutionary drama of December 1918. Roughly, parliament was to control the state, councils were to control the factories. A slightly more sophisticated theory was sketched by the Austromarxist Max Adler. In his book *Demokratie und Rätesystem*, Adler explicitly linked parliament-council dyarchy with Engels’ account of the withering away of the state. For Adler, the gradual expansion of democratic self-management returns conscious control to those subject to political and economic decisions, rendering state and capital superfluous vestiges of an outdated mode of production. The dictatorship of the proletariat, by implication, is a process of gradual

democratic reabsorption of workplace, state, and market by society itself.

According to Adler, this process meant that the national organs of the workers' and soldiers' councils should be tasked with investment planning, finance, and socialization; they were also to have veto power over decrees brought forward by parliament. Parliament, for its part, was to deal with non-economic matters, such as criminal law and foreign policy. Adler believed that the councils would furnish bottom-up agitation for a socialist majority in parliament, which would, in due course, eventuate in a worker-led government. The resulting dual majority would first initiate the devolution of power directly to working people and, from there, the withering away of the state. If, on the other hand, no dual majority materialized, the council would block a return of the factories into capitalist hands. Any attempt to restore private property—beyond the limits set by this newly established socialist constitution—would mean civil war. And civil war, Adler thought, may be worth fighting if, but only if, it issues from capitalist intransigence in response to these institutional arrangements.

In *Terrorism and Communism*, Trotsky disparages council Erfurtianism, at once mocking Kautsky's "musty pedantry" and Adler's "erudite impotence." He argues that dyarchy is undesirable and infeasible. Undesirable, because the separation of powers between councils and parliaments is merely the resultant of class forces: in the case of the councils, the power of the proletariat, and in the case of liberal parliaments, the power of the bourgeoisie. It follows that proletarian dictatorship must eventually do away with parliaments. Dyarchy is also infeasible, because inherently unstable: eventually power must fall in the hands of one class. Therefore the only sustainable expression of proletarian rule inevitably does away with parliaments.

Trotsky's argument is multiply confused. For one, democratic parliaments are perfectly compatible with proletarian dictatorship—just as they are with bourgeois dictatorship. Indeed, proletarian rule *presupposes* such parliaments, for it presupposes those liberties that feed the revolutionary fire, including freedom of speech and association, and equal opportunities to affect its course. The purpose of communist revolution is to abolish all manner of ruling class, as such, not to install a new one. Trotsky's instability argument, moreover, is irrelevant: it took decades—sometimes centuries—for the separation of powers to find stable expression in *bourgeois* democracies. Why should things be any different in socialist democracies?

The End of the Revolution

The revolutionary pirouettes of central Europe never conformed to the Adlerian choreography. One Austro-Marxist who anticipated the hazards of the revolutionary ballet, including capitalism's impending duet with militarism, was Otto Bauer. Bauer was secretary of the Social Democratic Party of Austria (SDAPÖ) and foreign minister in the first post-war Austrian coalition government. Like Adler, Bauer believed that the success of the revolution depended on socialization of the means of production. Socialization would strengthen the hand of parliament against the capitalists, simultaneously denying them resources that would otherwise end up in the pockets of militarism.

Bauer drew up a plan to nationalize steel, iron, coal, and electricity, which was never implemented. The subset of his proposals that did make it into law—extension of unemployment insurance, an eight-hour working day, the creation of codetermination for firms with twenty employees or more—never threatened capitalist private property. It is relevant, in this connection, that Bauer assigned minor and conjunctural significance to the councils. Despite, and

because of, this neglect, the Austrian councils survived until late 1920, when the unions absorbed them. Something similar happened in Germany, where the political subordination of the councils proved fatal to Kautsky's socialization program.

Thus the reticence of the social-democratic leadership in respect of socialization, coupled with its neglect of the councils, gradually reinstated the pre-war capitalist oligarchy. The elections of 1920 in Austria and Germany gave majorities to the centrist parties, which were largely funded by the "great industrialists." The industrialists, for their part, turned to the militarists, their old political patrons. In Germany, such counterrevolutionary germs infected the young republic from early 1919, with the government's decision to forego a popular militia and rely exclusively on the pro-monarchist officer corps—the proto-fascist battalions of the *Freikorps*. In Austria, where military structures collapsed completely at the end of the war, the counterrevolution took more time. But even there, the social democrats were slow to set up a popular militia, giving militarism time to regroup. The result was the proto-fascist battalions of the *Heimwehr*.

If 1920 Austria had just been infected by the counterrevolutionary germ, then its Hungarian sibling was in a state of septicemia: it had already sustained two revolutions, a military intervention by Romania, a White Terror, and the beginning of the dictatorship of Admiral Horthy. The putrid state of Hungary prefigured the macabre future of the rest of central Europe.

The Democratic Road to Pleonasm

In November 1918, some weeks before his Damascene conversion to Bolshevism, Gyorgy Lukács noted that, if the Hungarian social democrats enlisted Beelzebub to destroy Satan, they

could end up worshipping Beelzebub. His idea was that you can't get to communism—the complete democratization of social relations—by undemocratic means. If Beelzebub helps you defeat Satan, for example, then you might end up thinking that Beelzebub is not *that* bad, especially if you're stuck with Beelzebub thereafter. As Lukács was soon to discover, things could be even worse: under state capitalism, he had to worship *both* Satan *and* Beelzebub.

The social democrats of central Europe understood this lesson better than the Bolsheviks. That is, they did not exclude revolutionary violence as a means, but they did think violence justified only if it reflected democratic ends, *as such*. The only revolutionary program evincing this relationship between communist means and ends—taking parliaments and councils as complementary means to the same inclusive end of democratization—was council Erfurtianism. In Austria, Germany and Hungary, that strategy was buried by the social democratic leadership, with some help from the newly-founded Communist parties. Decades later, the emaciated body of council Erfurtianism sought shelter in the smoke-filled salons of the Eurocommunists, where it continued to slog slothfully; they called it the "democratic road to socialism." The European Left had taken half a century to recall a pleonasm it itself had invented.

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