

The New Blanquism

Pannekoek, Anton
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Published under his pseudonym of K. Horner in *Der Kommunist* on February 3, 1920, this article summarizes the main point of his longer *World Revolution and Communist Tactics* of the same year: that compared to the Russian proletariat, the proletariat of Western Europe had to face a much stronger bourgeoisie, one with centuries of ideology on its side; as such, the proletariat of Western Europe could not seize power as a clique, but only as a mass, consciously-acting class. See also Gorter's writing of the period. From <https://www.marxists.org/archive/pannekoek/1920/blanquism.htm>.

When the material situation is conducive to revolution, but the masses remain passive and are not at all inclined to revolt, doctrines then arise which seek to attain their goal by other means than the political revolution of the proletarians. So it was in France where, prior to 1870, the names of Proudhon and Blanqui were associated with two tendencies which, in different and opposed ways, elaborated the theories of the first seeds of future movements. Associated with the name of Proudhon, the petit-bourgeois critic of big capital, were those parts of the rising workers movement that sought to undermine capitalism by means of the peaceful construction of cooperatives; they instinctively felt that the power of the new class must rest upon the economic construction of new foundations, rather than on external political attacks. Associated with the name of Blanqui, the intrepid revolutionary conspirator, were those parts of the proletariat who felt that the conquest of political power was necessary; and that even if the bulk of the class is still passive, this must take place through the agency of a resolute minority, which will rally the masses behind it due to its wisdom and its example and which would hold power in its hands by strict centralized means. Both tendencies were rooted in previous movements and were therefore petit-bourgeois, because they still lacked the idea of the extensive power which could be brought to bear by a fully-unleashed proletarian class struggle, which would find its expression in Marxist teachings.

It is therefore easily understandable that similar doctrines should once again make their appearance, although, of course, in a much more advanced and elaborate form, based on everything which, in the form of the Marxist doctrine of class struggle, has in the meantime become the common property of all proletarian fighters; and they have thus taken shape as different versions of those teachings. The conviction that the proletariat must build up its economic power in the domain of the production process, by means of the factory councils, and that all the politics of force (*Gewaltpolitik*) practiced by Noske's people must be incapable of overcoming this economic power, could lead to a kind of neo-Proudhonism, if its proponents come to believe that this method is sufficient, by means of its miraculous power, to conduct society to the communist order without major revolutionary struggles on the part of the proletariat. On the other hand, a neo-Blanquist tendency is becoming evident in the conception that a revolutionary minority could

conquer and hold political power, and that this would be the conquest of political power by the proletariat. This tendency is displayed in the writings of Struthahns¹ on the dictatorship of the working class and the Communist Party.

Struthahns says, concerning the dictatorship of the working class: "What does this mean? That the interests of the working class come first and that these interests alone guide policy. Secondly, that it can only be administered by workers organizations." In other words: the "dictatorship of the working class" does not mean the dictatorship of the working class, but something else. It is not a class dictatorship, but the dictatorship of certain groups, and it calls itself a proletarian dictatorship because it is implemented by a workers organization (the SPD is also a workers organization) and because it puts the workers' interests first (which is what many social traitors assert about themselves). What is depicted here is the dictatorship of the communist party, the dictatorship of a determined revolutionary minority.

He then offers many qualifications of this definition, however; usually excellent explanations concerning the role of the Communist Party in the revolution, which display great political dexterity with words, to the effect that this idea is not to be understood as advocating blind coup attempts, and that its supporters have learned much from the Russian Revolution. But his theoretical principle deserves closer scrutiny. As an additional corollary of his doctrine, it is, again, not the Communist Party as a whole, but its central committee which exercises the dictatorship, first of all within the party, where it excludes certain people from the circle of its absolute power, and uses underhanded methods to expel the opposition. Now, much of what Struthahns says about this concept of dictatorship is also very valuable. But the proud words about the centralization of revolutionary power in the hands of proven champions would make a greater impression if it were not known that this argument was currently being used to defend a short-sighted, opportunistic policy intended to inveigle the Independents, and in the interests of a zealous pursuit of the parliamentary tribune. Nor is his appeal to Russia of any avail here, as the communist government there is not in retreat, like the great masses of the working class who have been demoralized by its deviations, but firmly exercises its dictatorship and defends the revolution with all its might. The conquest of power is no longer at stake; the dice were cast, the proletarian dictatorship has all the means of power at its disposal and cannot abandon them. One encounters the true Russian example in the days prior to October 1917. Then, the Communist Party never proclaimed or believed that it had to take power or that its dictatorship would be the dictatorship of the masses of the working people. It had always proclaimed that the Soviets, the representatives of the masses, had to take power; the Party itself formulated this program, it fought for it, and since the majority of the Soviets finally acknowledged this program to be correct, they took government power into their hands, at which moment the communists spontaneously took control of its executive offices, whose most powerful supporters were in the Communist Party, and upon whose members the burden of all the work fell.

We are by no means fanatics of democracy, we have no superstitious respect for majority decision nor do we render homage to the belief that everything the majority does is for the best and must succeed. Action is crucial, activity overpowers mass inertia. Where power enters as a factor, we want to use and apply it. If, nonetheless, we firmly reject the doctrine of the revolutionary minority, this is just for the reason that it must lead to a mere semblance of power, to merely apparent victories, and thus to serious defeats. It could be applicable in a country where the apathy of the masses is a characteristic of their class situation, such as, for instance, in a country with a peasant majority, who do not see anything outside of their villages and turn their backs on national politics; there,

¹ A pseudonym employed by Karl Radek.

an active proletarian minority of the population could conquer State power. But if this tactic has never been attempted or recommended in Russia, it should be all the more surprising were it to be recommended for the western European countries, where the situation is very different.

It is therefore correct to emphasize that the process of the revolution will be much slower and more difficult in Western Europe, because the bourgeoisie is much more powerful here than in Russia. But in what does this power consist? Does it consist of control over the State apparatus? The bourgeoisie already lost this control on one occasion. Does it consist of numerical superiority? The bourgeoisie confronts an overwhelming number of workers. Does it consist of the power of command over production? Or the power of money? In Germany, these things hardly mean anything anymore. The roots of Capital's power are much more deeply set. They lie in the reign of bourgeois culture over the population as a whole, as well as over the proletariat. Over the span of one hundred years of the bourgeois era, the spiritual life of the bourgeoisie has soaked into all of society, and has created a spiritual structure and discipline which, by way of thousands of channels, penetrated and dominated the masses. This will have to be gradually purged from the proletariat through a long and tenacious struggle. First, the liberal and Christian ideology was fought by social democratic enlightenment. But it is precisely the social democracy which shows how profoundly rooted and how adaptable Capital's spiritual rule over the masses actually is: it seemed to spiritually free the masses and to unify them in a new proletarian world-view, and now it is demonstrated that this organization created by the masses themselves has been fully converted to the side of the bourgeoisie and prevents their revolution. It is thus the case that the resistance which must be overcome by the proletariat alone in the old bourgeois countries is infinitely greater in its immense scale than in the new countries of Eastern Europe, where bourgeois culture of any kind is lacking and where a communal tradition favors the revolution. Respect for the bourgeois legal order is deeply ingrained in the masses, and becomes visible in the fear inspired by the outcry over terrorism, in the belief in all the lies, in the hesitancy to undertake the necessary measures. Bourgeois ethics are deeply ingrained in the ethics of the masses, which confuses them with noble words, which disorients them with its hypocrisy, which mocks them with its clever deceitfulness. The old bourgeois individualism is deeply ingrained in their blood, so that today they think they can win everything with one furious assault and tomorrow they recoil before the enormity of the task.

This does not mean that victory is not possible here: the proletariat also has vast untapped resources; the revolution here will take place on a much greater scale. Nor does this mean that revolutionary expropriation must be postponed to a distant future: circumstances could somehow compel the masses to take power into their hands at any time, despite all the spiritual impediments, which can then only be overcome later, within a subsequent process of struggle. But this does mean that the revolution is not possible as a result of the actions of a resolute minority. Everything the latter does is done to seize a hostile power in the hands of the bourgeoisie, rather than on behalf of the revolution.

In this social environment the revolutionary Party is not embedded among the masses, who look on with indifference – or so it seems; everything which may appear to be an apparently apathetic stance towards communist propaganda is capable of turning into an instrument of the counterrevolution thanks to the power of capitalist-bourgeois ideology. While one part of the proletariat, upon whom crucial struggles rely, is paralyzed, passive, and rendered indecisive by the old ideology, the more backwards elements, whose passivity is expected, become a force for the bourgeoisie. The history of the Munich Council Republic is a rich example of all these distinct tendencies.

In the capitalist countries with a spiritually powerful bourgeois culture, any deviation in the direction of a Blanquist tactic is consequently doomed and must be condemned. The doctrine of the revolutionary minority, of the communist party dictatorship (Parteidiktatur), is a sign of the underestimation of the enemy's power, and of the underestimation of the necessary work of propaganda, which must lead to the most serious setbacks. The revolution can only issue from the masses, and it is only through the masses that it is carried out. The Communist Party has forgotten this simple truth and, with the insufficient forces of a revolutionary minority, it wants to do what only the class can do, in such a way that the consequence will be defeat, which will set back the cause of the World Revolution for a long time, at the cost of the most painful sacrifices.

Table of Contents