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# Workers' Councils and Radical Democracy: Toward a Conceptual History of Council Democracy from Marx to Occupy

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Over the last ten years, scholars have rediscovered the relevance of council democracy and workers' councils for democratic thought. While these interventions are important, the literature lacks a coherent reconstruction of the development of council democracy in modern political thought. This article fills that lacuna by distinguishing between three conceptions of council democracy. One conception, advocated by Vladimir Lenin, interprets the councils as revolutionary organs able to destroy the old regime, but unable to govern afterwards. Another conception, favored by the interwar council communists, stresses the ability of workers' councils to democratize the workplace, providing the germs of economic democracy. The third, delivered by Cornelius Castoriadis and Hannah Arendt, emphasizes the radical democratic nature of workers' councils as an alternative to representative democracy. We argue that these three conceptions, notwithstanding their fundamental differences, share several core principles that can guide contemporary scholars to theorize the council as part of radical democratic repertoires. Moreover, we show the importance of these principles of council democracy for the constituent ambitions of contemporary movements like Occupy.

Keywords: council democracy, workers' councils, radical democracy, Marxism, democratic theory, Occupy movements

Council democracy and the workers' councils of twentieth century Europe have received a growing scholarly interest over the last ten years. Political thinkers and commentators who tried to understand the so-called anti-austerity Occupy movements—such as the American Occupy movement, the Spanish *Indignados*, and the Greek *Aganaktismenoi*—that appeared in the wake of the financial crisis of 2008 often discussed these with reference to forms of twentieth-century council

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organization.[1] Moreover, as 2017 and 2018 marked the centenary of the Russian and German revolutions, respectively, in which workers' councils—*soviets* or *Räte*—played a pivotal role, scholars have argued for a rediscovery of these councils and their relevance for radical democratic thought.[2] Recently, an entire anthology was published on themes relating to council democracy and its contemporary relevance.[3] While these important and timely interventions shed light on many issues relating to the tradition of workers' councils and their relevance for contemporary democratic theory, they lack a reconstruction of the historical and conceptual development of the idea of council democracy within political thought ranging from Karl Marx's analysis of the Paris Commune in 1871 to the last couple of decades of the twentieth century.

We argue that there is, in fact, a plurality of historical conceptions of council democracy, and hence a plurality of political projects that can be developed from the historical council experiences.[4] We excavate three different conceptions of council democracy from the various historical analyses of workers' councils. One conception, advocated by Vladimir Lenin and the Bolsheviks, interprets the councils as revolutionary organs able to destroy and tear down the old regime, but unable to govern afterwards; they are temporary organs of struggle, not permanent organs of popular self-government. Another conception of council democracy, predominantly found in the interwar council communists' interpretation of the German Revolution, stresses the ability of workers' councils to democratize the factory

1. Alberto Bonnet, "The Idea of Councils Runs Through Latin America," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 113 (2014): 271–83; Marina Prentoulis and Lasse Thomassen, "Autonomy and Hegemony in the Squares: The 2011 Protests in Greece and Spain," in *Radical Democracy and Collective Movements Today*, ed. Alexandros Kioupkiolis and Giorgos Katsambekis (London: Routledge, 2016), 213–34; Marina Sitrin and Dario Azzellini, eds., *They Can't Represent Us! Reinventing Democracy from Greece to Occupy* (London: Verso Books, 2014); and Dilar Dirik, "Building Democracy Without the State," *Roar Magazine* 1 (2016): 32–41.

2. Massimiliano Tomba, "Politics Beyond the State: The 1918 Soviet Constitution," *Constellations* 24 (2017): 503–15; Bruno Bosteels, "State or Commune: Viewing the October Revolution from the Land of Zapata," *Constellations* 24 (2017): 570–79; Antonio Negri, "Soviet: Within and Beyond the 'Short Century,' " *South Atlantic Quarterly* 116 (2017): 835–49; William A. Pelz, *A People's History of the German Revolution 1918–1919* (London: Pluto Press, 2018); and Gaard Kets and James Muldoon, eds., *The German Revolution and Political Theory* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

3. James Muldoon, ed., *Council Democracy: Towards a Democratic Socialist Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2018).

4. Although the term "council" is known from antiquity, this article will focus on its use in political theory in the modern (industrialized) context. As we will demonstrate later, all theorists discussed in this article conceive the council as an explicitly modern phenomenon embedded in a distinctly modern imaginary of the political.

and the workplace, providing the germs of a self-managing economic democracy beyond capitalist exploitation. Finally, a conception delivered after the Second World War by Hannah Arendt and Cornelius Castoriadis stresses the radical democratic nature of workers' councils, relates the councils to the concept of constituent power, and interprets them as alternatives to representative democracy and political parties.

Despite such marked differences, particular principles of council democracy can be recovered in all instances of what Arendt has called the "discontinuous tradition" of council democracy.[5] First, all three conceptions highlight politics beyond representation. That is, the councils constitute spaces of popular participation. Second, council democracy in each instance refers to politics beyond parliamentary politics. That is, it points to sites of political struggle beyond those traditionally understood as political arenas within liberal democracy. Third, all three conceptions highlight the prefigurative function of council politics: the transitory council already contains germs of post-revolutionary societal organization.

Beyond these similarities, we also identify crucial conceptual developments, since each new theorization of council democracy is also partly a critique of former conceptions. The interwar council communists depart from Lenin's understanding of the political role of soviets in important ways. In contrast to the primarily destructive function of Lenin's councils, the interwar council communists sought to theorize the institutional structures of a permanent economic democracy based on the practices of workers' councils. Whereas Lenin disregarded the council system as political form, the interwar council communists followed Marx's interpretation of the Paris Commune as "the political *form* at last discovered for the emancipation of the working class"[6]; hence, council communists sought to theorize the system's institutional structures. For Arendt and Castoriadis, in contrast, the primary significance of the council system is not its status as a constituted form, which could secure emancipation, equality, freedom, or other desired political principles. Instead, they relate the council system to constituent power; that is, they interpret the councils as political spaces in which the fundamental structures of the polity can be continually challenged, abolished, and reconstituted.[7]

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5. Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 254.

6. Karl Marx, *Later Political Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 163–207, at 185.

7. James Muldoon, "Arendt's Revolutionary Constitutionalism: Between Constituent Power and Political Form," *Constellations* (2015): 596–607; and Christopher Holman, "The Councils as Ontological Form: Cornelius Castoriadis and the Autonomous Potential of Council Democracy," in *Council Democracy: Towards a Democratic Socialist Politics*, ed. James Muldoon (London: Routledge, 2018), 131–49.

This critique within the tradition of council democracy provides at least three important insights. First, we argue that throughout the twentieth century, council democracy gradually loses its exclusive location within Marxism and Marxist interpretations of democracy. While the interwar council communists seek to invert Lenin's understanding of the relation between councils and parties, workers and revolutionary leaders, they utilize similar conceptual language. In contrast, as Arendt and Castoriadis were highly critical either of Marxism altogether (Arendt) or of parts of the Marxist tradition (Castoriadis), their theories of council democracy break with Marxism's focus on the working class as the primary political subject, on the factory as the primary locus of council politics, and with capitalism as the most important system of domination. Second, whereas the interwar council communists primarily understand the council system as the political form of economic democracy—a *constituted* power—Arendt and Castoriadis associate council democracy primarily with a novel version of *constituent* power. This shift makes council democracy relevant for contemporary theories of radical democracy, due to the affinities of constituent power with ideas often found in radical democratic theory, such as spontaneity, creation, novelty, becoming, and action.[8] Finally, that conceptual shift from understanding the council system as a constituted power to understanding it as a form of constituent power also makes the council system particularly relevant as a source of inspiration for contemporary radical movements.

We divide our investigation into three phases, starting with Lenin's conceptualization of the council before and during the Russian Revolution. The second phase is the interbellum, when the emergence of councils in Germany, Italy, Hungary, and Russia sparked the development of council communism as a political ideology (in the work of Anton Pannekoek, Herman Gorter, Karl Korsch, Rosa Luxemburg, and Otto Rühle). This ideology provided new theories of council democracy, which were often directly contrasted to the council conception and revolutionary tactics of Lenin in Russia. The Second World War, seen by some theorists as the ultimate failure of representative democracy and the horror of totalitarianism, marked the shift towards the third and most recent phase of conceptualization, in the post-war theorizing of Hannah Arendt and Cornelius Castoriadis.

After outlining these three conceptions of council democracy, we analyze their relevance for contemporary movements. We conclude by discussing three core

8. For an introduction to the tradition of radical democracy, see Lars Tønder and Lasse Thomassen, eds., *Radical Democracy: Between Abundance and Lack* (Manchester, U.K.: Manchester University, 2005).

principles of the council tradition that can be found in all conceptualizations of council democracy, and the relevance of those principles for the contemporary Occupy movements.

## The Councils as Revolutionary Organs: Lenin and the Bolsheviks

In order to fully grasp Lenin's conception of the council, one needs to look at its conceptual "pre-history," most importantly Marx's depiction of the Paris Commune. Although it is of great importance as a resource for later theorists' construction of the council concept, Marx's depiction is itself not a conception of council democracy. Marx describes a form of communal democracy that involves participatory, emancipatory, and radically democratic forms of government, but it is only with Lenin and his interbellum critics that Marx's interpretation becomes entangled with a clear conception of the revolutionary council.[9]

In his pamphlet entitled *The Civil War in France* (1871), Marx aimed to explain to a broad international public the importance of the workers' struggle in the Paris Commune, a radical people's government that ruled the French capital in the spring of 1871. Marx considered the Commune to be a form of radical democratization and mass participation of society against what he deemed the parasite state. According to Marx, the Commune showed that the working class could not simply take hold of the existing state apparatus, because this would not dissolve the conflict between society and state. The Commune, according to Marx, was thus not a conquest of state power, but rather a transformation of the state into a different form of political organization. The Commune was an emancipatory, altogether new form of polity and expressed a new concept of popular sovereignty, which together provided an alternative political structure that neither dominated society, nor alienated itself from it.[10] For Marx, the proletarian revolution would not be the result of the mechanical workings of historical materialism, but rather the result of workers actively uniting in a particular revolutionary political form—the commune.[11]

More concretely, Marx detected four main institutional elements in his analysis of what he called the "communal constitution."[12] First, the Commune was split into

9. See also Oskar Anweiler, *The Soviets: The Russian Workers, Peasants, and Soldiers Councils, 1905–1921* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974), 11–19, for this argument.

10. Karl Marx, *Later Political Writings*, 163–207, at 181.

11. Miguel Abensour, *Democracy against the State: Marx and the Machiavellian Moment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

12. Karl Marx, *Later Political Writings*, 163–207, at 185.

local wards and districts, which delegated representatives under an imperative mandate to central coordinating institutions. These delegates were under instant recall from their local wards. The local districts were organized on the basis of political and economic self-government, meaning that the political structure of the Commune was federal and pyramidal with authority, legitimacy, and power generated from the bottom up.[13] Second, these mechanisms of *mandat imperatif* and direct recall could be generalized to the national level as well. The council system was hence a general model of governance applicable to many spatial and temporal contexts. Third, the Commune functioned as a working body: "executive and legislative at the same time."[14] This idea of a working body drew a strong contrast with liberal political theories of parliamentary democracy in which the executive and legislative powers are separated. In addition, the third branch of government, the judiciary, was also to be elected popularly. Fourth, Marx interpreted the Paris Commune as a working class government, "the product of the struggle of the producing against the appropriating class, the political form at last discovered under which to work out the economical emancipation of labour,"[15] and he emphasized that political delegates were only given a workman's wage. The Commune would provide the workers with democratic control over economic and social aspects of their lives, even though the Parisian assemblies and councils themselves were not based on the work floor, but on communal territories. Marx's interpretation provided a touchstone for later theorists of council democracy, as he had pointed to an anti-statist method of directing public affairs that included ordinary workers normally excluded from the political sphere.

Whereas Lenin surely drew from the experiences of the soviets during the revolutions of 1905 and 1917, his engagement with the councils was too tactically informed to consider him a council communist. Moreover, although the Russian soviets rhetorically formed the foundation of the Soviet Union, they were corrupted by the Bolshevik party's interference as early as 1918.[16] Lenin operated with two different council conceptions: one in line with Marx, and another very different from Marx. The shift in Lenin's understanding is crucial to any history of council democracy, because it was criticized by many subsequent theorists.

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13. Ibid.

14. Ibid., 84.

15. Ibid., 185.

16. For a full elaboration of this *Verfallsgeschichte* of the Russian soviets, see Oskar Anweiler, *Die Rätebewegung in Russland, 1905–1921* (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 1959).

In his writings from 1917, just before and during the revolutions, Lenin adheres to the Marxian conception of the council. Particularly in his *April Theses*[17] and *State and Revolution*,[18] Lenin appropriates the institutional features that Marx described in the Commune, projecting them onto the 1905 and 1917 soviet experiences in Russia. In these texts, as well as in some of his *Letters from Afar*,[19] Lenin understands the councils as anti-statist yet not anarchical political forms. State and parliament, according to Lenin, should be replaced by this new political form, which is both transformational and a model for organizing post-revolutionary society.

Lenin's conceptualization altered dramatically after the Bolshevik takeover of power and the subsequent chaotic situation in Russia. Catalyzed by a desire for swift political action, he now regarded the councils as mere temporary instruments for the Bolshevik party. After the Bolshevik conquest of state power, Lenin argued that the councils were never meant to become a permanent political form of self-governance. Instead, he depicted the councils as temporary, insurrectional organs. Precisely because of their inherent spontaneity, councils were not fit to function as permanent constitutional forms. Although this hierarchical relationship between the Bolshevik party and the soviets does express the ideological convictions of Lenin, one must also take into account the political situation in Russia after the October Revolution. With a world war raging outside Russia's borders, and a civil war as well as a severe food crisis inside her borders, it is understandable that the Bolsheviks sought to streamline the governance of the country.

This does not change the fact that Lenin, both before and after 1917, had a distinct understanding of the role of soviets as primarily destructive and temporary organs. The germs of this post-1917 theory of councils as subordinate to the Communist Party already surface in the pamphlet *Socialism and Anarchism*,[20] where Lenin argued against viewing the soviets as organs of proletarian self-government: "The Soviet of Workers' Deputies is not a labour parliament and not an organ of proletarian self-government, nor an organ of self-government at all, but a fighting

17. Vladimir I. Lenin, *The April Theses*, [1917], at https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/apr/04.htm.

18. Vladimir I. Lenin, *The State and Revolution* [1917], at https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/staterev/.

19. Vladimir I. Lenin, *Letters From Afar, Third Letter: Concerning a Proletarian Militia* [1917], at https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/lfafar/third.htm#v23pp64h-320.

20. Vladimir I. Lenin, *Socialism and Anarchism* [1905], at https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1905/nov/24.htm.

organization for the achievement of definite aims."[21] The overall primary goal of advancing and preserving the revolution should be left to the class conscious strata of the proletariat, which is embodied in the Bolshevik Party and its leaders. It was this particular conception of the council that would become the central object of criticism for the interwar council communists.

## The Council as an Institution of Economic Democracy: Council Communists

The period from 1914 to 1918 heralded a new era of class struggle and called for new methods in which the proletarian masses *themselves* would act and organize.[22] In this section we will analyze council conceptions that emerged during the interbellum in Europe from 1918 onwards.

Whereas the "official" theorization of council communism only started in the 1920s by thinkers like Pannekoek, Gorter, Rühle, and to some extent Gramsci, the council experience was explored in practice all over Europe just after the Russian Revolution. In Hungary, communists established a council republic that was crushed after a couple of months. In many German cities, the highest authority was in the hands of workers', peasants', or soldiers' councils in November 1918. In Turin, Italy, workers occupied factories and formed councils during the *biennio rosso* period of 1919–20. Although all these council republics ended in disappointment for the councilists, the experiences were translated into council communist ideology.

The tradition of council communism that developed in Germany and the Netherlands in the interbellum was based on various historical experiences and political events, among which were the Russian revolutions of 1905 and 1917 (and sporadically the Paris Commune[23]), but the primary historical example was the German *Novemberrevolution* of 1918. During this revolutionary period, the Social Democratic Party and the traditional unions in Germany had hesitated to endorse revolutionary efforts and at times actively opposed and sabotaged them. This strengthened the idea among revolutionary activists and theorists that the old political instruments and institutions might not be suitable for real revolutionary struggle.

21. Vladimir I. Lenin, *Socialism and Anarchism* [1905], at https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1905/nov/24.htm.

22. Paul Lucardie, *Democratic Extremism in Theory and Practice: All Power to the People* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 83–84.

23. See, for example, Anton Pannekoek [Groep van Internationale Communisten], "Stellingen omtrent revolutionaire bedrijfskernen," 1931, in *Partij, raden, revolutie*, ed. Anton Pannekoek and Jaap Kloosterman (Amsterdam: Kritiese Biblioteek Van Gennep, 1972), 171–76, at 171.

For council communist thinkers, the Russian Revolution initially served as a source of inspiration, but as the Bolshevik party took control at the expense of the soviets, the support for the revolution among radical left-wing communists declined as well. The primary experience interbellum council communist thinkers drew from, then, was the German Revolution. In his open letter to "comrade Lenin," Gorter relates his arguments to the experiences in Germany; not once does he refer to the role of councils in the 1905 or 1917 revolutions in Russia or the Paris Commune.[24]

Theorists of council communism extracted three main dimensions of council democracy from the German experience. First and foremost, the council was understood to be a political instrument of revolutionary transition—a form of proletarian organization that did not rely on bourgeois state institutions. In this particular phase of capitalism, parliaments, parties, and unions were no longer suitable forms of organization for advancing proletarian interests and would not be able to transcend the very bourgeois structures in which they were created. Revolution was expected to come from workers themselves, organized in councils.[25] This implied that Bolshevik parliamentarian vanguard tactics were an inappropriate method of revolutionary struggle (at least in a Western European context). After the initial phase of the Russian Revolution, Pannekoek and Gorter heavily criticized their former ally Lenin on this method. According to Gorter, Lenin's *Führerpolitik* would smother any aspirations for revolution and make workers passive. In order to politically activate the workers, the labor movement should organize "everything bottom-up."[26]

The second dimension is that of post-revolutionary organization of society, in particular of the industrial workplace. Production processes would be organized via the councils in factories, united in a federative, bottom-up institutional structure. As Rosa Luxemburg put it in December 1918, the councils were not only the "organs of the revolution," but also the "pillars of the new order."[27] Gorter and many other council thinkers invariably used the term *Betriebsorganisationen* (industrial organizations), stressing their economic and not political function. The

24. Herman Gorter, "Offener Brief an Den Genossen Lenin—Eine Antwort Auf Lenins Broschüre: Der Radikalismus, Eine Kinderkrankheit Des Kommunismus," in *Organisation Und Taktik Der Proletarischen Revolution*, ed. Hans Manfred Bock (Frankfurt: Verlag Neue Kritik, 1969), 168–227.

25. Pannekoek, "Stellingen."

26. Herman Gorter, "Offener Brief," 170.

27. Rosa Luxemburg, "On the Executive Council," in *All Power To The Councils: A Documentary History of the German Revolution of 1918–1919*, ed. Gabriel Kuhn (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2013), 96–98, at 96.

revolution in Western Europe could and would only be organized in the workplace.[28] Comparable, although not similar, is Karl Korsch's idea that the councils played a pivotal economic role, both for the transformation of capitalist economy to a socialist one, and for the organization of post-revolutionary communist economy.[29] Italian Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci conceived of councils as a promising new revolutionary instrument, but also realized that their current form was not yet ideal or completed: he depicted the councils as a "model" for the future socialist state, or as the proletariat's "embryonic apparatus of government"[30] based on the control of production processes.

Third, the council was conceived to have an intellectual or spiritual dimension that was closely linked to the organization of production. Workers' councils would elevate the intellectual level and consciousness of masses and individuals by showing them how their struggle could obtain a concrete form: the best way to teach is by example—that is, by acting.[31] Gramsci also expected that councils would create a feeling of dignity, responsibility, and solidarity among the workers and would raise proletarian consciousness; workers would train themselves to become self-governing and to become intellectually independent from the ruling class. Additionally, Pannekoek had developed the idea that class struggle was a struggle of consciousness. In his analysis, the weakness of the proletariat was its *geistiges* (intellectual, spiritual) dependence on the ruling class. The councils could help to educate the masses and construct a working class *Geist* (spirit) that was capable of intellectual battle with the bourgeoisie.[32] Rosa Luxemburg, in her critical account of the Russian Revolution, likewise considers "the broadest democracy and public opinion" via the workers' and soldiers' councils to be a prerequisite for the necessary "complete spiritual transformation in the masses."[33] This is contrasted to Lenin's politics of party rule, centralism, and iron discipline, which are inherently demoralizing for the people.

Council communist theorists like Pannekoek and Gorter assume several institutional features in their notion of council democracy, even though these remain

28. Herman Gorter, "Offener Brief."

29. Karl Korsch, "What Is Socialization? A Program of Practical Socialism," *New German Critique* 6 (1975): 60–81.

30. Antonio Gramsci, "The Factory Council," in *Pre-Prison Writings*, ed. Richard Bellamy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 163–67, at 164.

31. Herman Gorter, "Offener Brief."

32. John Gerber, "The Formation of Pannekoek's Marxism," in *Pannekoek and the Workers' Councils*, ed. Serge Bricianer (Saint Louis, MO: Telos Press, 1978), 1–30, at 18.

33. Rosa Luxemburg, "The Russian Revolution," in *Marxism: Essential Writings*, ed. David McLellan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 127–33, at 129.

rather abstract. A first institutional element is the organic emergence of councils in the workplace, usually during strikes in the form of strike committees. Based on the experience of the German Revolution, councils should not be "constructed" top-down by party or union, but should be the spontaneous creation of workers themselves.[34] Second, the council is conceptualized as a body of a self-determining people, but this demos is not inclusive: only those who take an active part in the collective labor process are allowed to participate in the councils.[35] Capitalists are therefore not allowed to take part, and it remains unclear whether those that do not or cannot work would be represented in the council system. In other words, the council should be a purely working class government. Third, the delegates that workers' committees send to higher-level industrial councils have a limited, imperative mandate and can be immediately recalled if they fail to perform. These delegates are mere executors of the workers' collective decisions.[36] A fourth institutional feature is the institutional embedding of the councils. These councils form the foundation of a new type of pyramidal, federative union that would coordinate between the various councils. This federative structure is supposed to be organized bottom-up with ultimate power residing with the local workers' councils. There could be a political party that would function mainly as some kind of party school, which would further develop worker consciousness and where the most radical workers would have discussions.[37]

The council communists contrasted their conception of council democracy with other governmental structures. The first and most obvious of these was the state, which was considered an instrument of the ruling class that should not be conquered, but replaced by the rule of councils. Moreover, the council was contrasted with both parliamentarism and traditional unions. In the *Open Letter* that Gorter wrote in 1920,[38] Gorter cites Pannekoek, who argues that parliament embodies the intellectual power of the leaders over the masses and the union embodies the material power of the leaders over the masses. Although these forms of organization

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34. Anton Pannekoek, "De arbeiders, het parlement en het communisme" [1933], in *Partij, raden, revolutie*, ed. Anton Pannekoek and Jaap Kloosterman (Amsterdam: Kritiese Biblioteek Van Gennep, 1972), 63–80, at 79.

35. Anton Pannekoek, "De arbeidersraden" [1936], in *Partij, raden, revolutie*, ed. Anton Pannekoek and Jaap Kloosterman (Amsterdam: Kritiese Biblioteek Van Gennep, 1972), 118–27, at 126.

36. Pannekoek, "De arbeidersraden."

37. Herman Gorter, "Die Klassenkampf-Organisation des Proletariats," in *Organisation und Taktik der Proletarischen Revolution*, ed. Hans Manfred Bock (Frankfurt: Verlag Neue Kritik, 1969), 228–46.

38. Herman Gorter, "Offener Brief."

had been useful in the pre-1914 struggle, in revolutionary times both parliament and union actively work against the revolutionary masses.[39] True politics is, according to Gorter, completely nullified in parliament and unions, where workers comfortably wait for their leaders to take action *for* them, which instrumentalizes these workers; it makes them into slaves.[40] A fourth and final contrast with the council is the political party. Arguably the fiercest opponent of party involvement in council communism was Otto Rühle. In the influential journal *Die Aktion*, he heavily criticizes the Bolshevik interpretation of revolution, claiming that for Lenin "the revolution is a party affair. The dictatorship is a party affair. Socialism is a party affair. . . . Party is discipline. Party is iron discipline. Party is leadership. Party is the strictest centralism. Party is militarism. Party is the most strict, most iron, most absolute militarism."[41] In *Die Revolution ist keine Parteisache!* (The revolution is not a party affair!), Rühle emphasizes the bourgeois nature of the political party and stresses that revolution could only be the result of the proletariat taking action into its own hands through the installment of revolutionary industrial councils that lead strikes and take over factories.[42]

The heritage of Karl Marx's analysis of the commune is easily spotted in the interwar notions of council communism. Among these are in particular the federative institutional design, the imperative mandate and immediate recall, and the conceptualization of a new structure of political government that could transgress traditional conceptions of government involving the state. The council communist theorists diverge from Marx in basing the council system in the workplace instead of the municipality.[43] But council communists also draw on Marx in deviating from Lenin's notion of the council, in the way the council form is contrasted to the party form. Whereas Lenin mostly denied the councils a permanent place in the constitutional matrix of the polity, the council communists sought to theorize the institutional preconditions of an economic democracy on the basis of historical experiences with council democracy. In this way they followed Marx by understanding the council system to be "the form at last discovered" for the self-government of the working class.

39. Ibid., 180.

40. Ibid., 181.

41. Otto Rühle, "Moscow and Ourselves" [1920], at https://www.marxists.org/archive/ruhle/1920/moscow-and-ourselves.htm.

42. Otto Rühle, *Die Revolution Ist Keine Parteisache!* [1920], at https://www.marxists.org/deutsch/archiv/ruehle/1920/parteisache/parteisache.htm.

43. Karl Marx, "The Civil War in France," in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2nd ed., ed. Robert C. Tucker, 618–52, at 632.

Moreover, a consequence of the council communists' conceptualizing council democracy as a specific political form of economic democracy is that we must take the historical failures of this form into account. Historical examples of the council system are very short-lived, and although this was primarily the result of fierce and violent resistance by ruling powers,[44] the specificity of the council form itself deserves critical attention. Due to the lack of effective policy coordination between local councils as well as between local and central councils (i.e., the federal element of the council communists' concept), and to the unresolved issues of how delegates under imperative mandate and instant recall could reconcile local needs with region-wide or nation-wide political demands, the historical council systems were often too cumbersome and hesitant to make effective political decisions.[45]

## The Council as Radical Democracy: Arendt and Castoriadis

Whereas the council system played an important role in the interbellum debates on the radical left, it had little resonance outside these Marxist circles. This, as indicated above, changed after World War II, when it spread to broader discussions of democratic theory. Inspired by the first popular uprisings against Soviet communism in the mid-1950s in Eastern Europe, and especially by the emergence of workers' councils during the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, many thinkers, activists and radical groups—Marxists and non-Marxists alike—alluded to the political experiences of the councils. They related to the experiences of the Paris Commune, the Russian soviets, and workers' councils of interwar Europe to describe their present activities and their future hopes. In this period, the council was often understood as a novel alternative to representative democracy and as a mode of creating freedom, autonomy, and pluralism.

Hannah Arendt and Cornelius Castoriadis offer the most important re-evaluations of the tradition in the second half of the twentieth century. By turning to the council tradition, Arendt and Castoriadis aim, in different ways, to resolve the dominating Cold War dichotomy between liberal, representative democracy on the one hand and Soviet communism on the other—both of which, they argue, replace the experience of action, and hence political freedom and autonomy, with depoliticization.

44. Mark Jones, *Founding Weimar: Violence and the German Revolution of 1918–1919* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

45. This critique of council democracy has, for example, been delivered by Martin Jay, "No Power to the Soviets," *Salmagundi* 88/89 (1990), 64–71, at 67, 69; and Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996), at 480–81.

Initially a Marxist, Castoriadis ended up discarding parts of the Marxist tradition while still holding on to its revolutionary impulse;[46] Arendt was always critical of Marxism. As such, it is with Castoriadis and Arendt that the experiences with the council system are most effectively transposed from Marxism to democratic theory. Most exemplary of this conceptual transformation is Arendt's and Castoriadis's turn to the concept of constituent power in order to interpret the councils as institutionalized spaces for the continual reconstitution of the fundamental political structures of society.

### *Hannah Arendt: Councils as Constituent Spaces of Freedom*

At first glance, Arendt might seem to be a peculiar interpreter of the council tradition, as she was highly critical of Marxism and of the modern tendency to make economic questions central for politics. Arendt's major work, *The Human Condition*, is, among other things, a turn to ancient Greek political thinking and is devoted to showing the apolitical nature of work and labor, as necessity and freedom are fundamentally oppositional.[47] But Arendt does not confront the councils through ancient Greek categories; in *The Human Condition*, she barely pays any attention to a discussion of council democracy.[48] It is in her later work, *On Revolution*, that Arendt praises the councils at great lengths and describes them as the "lost treasure" of the revolutionary tradition. For Arendt, council democracy was an explicitly modern phenomenon associated with revolution and the idea of the people's constituent power.[49] Her interpretation of the council from an anti-Marxist

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46. Cornelius Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987), 14.

47. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 28–38.

48. Arendt discusses the council movement in *The Human Condition* in the section, "The Labor Movement," 212–20. For a detailed and revealing discussion of this section in relation to Arendt's other writings on the council system, see James Muldoon, "The Origins of Hannah Arendt's Council System," *History of Political Thought* (2016): 761–89, at 781–86.

49. In *On Revolution*, p. 11, Arendt argues that "revolutions are the only political events which confront us directly and inevitably with the problem of beginning" and that "antiquity was well acquainted with political change and the violence that went with change, but neither of them appeared to it to bring about something entirely new." In the preface to *Between and Past and Future*, moreover, where Arendt again discussed the council system as the "lost treasure of the revolutionary tradition," she proclaims that "the history of revolutions—from the summer of 1776 in Philadelphia and the summer of 1789 in Paris to the autumn of 1956 in Budapest . . . spells out the innermost story of the *modern* age." As such, the council system in Arendt's evaluation is both theoretically related to the modern problem of revolution and new constitutional beginnings, as well as refers to modern historical experiences. See Hannah Arendt, *Between and Past and Future* (New York: Penguin, 1961), 5, emphasis added.

position amounts to a re-evaluation of the entire tradition, to such a degree that many commentators argue that she fundamentally distorts and misrepresents it.[50]

In Arendt's analysis, the council form did not emerge with the Paris Commune, but around the modern revolutions in America and France. Although Arendt's initial acquaintance with the council system stems from her celebratory observation of the Hungarian councils of 1956, Arendt locates the origins of the councils in the neighborhood assemblies of the French Revolution—*sociétés populaires*—and of American townships during the colonial period, as well as in Thomas Jefferson's proposal for a ward republic.[51] Instead of self-managing committees in relation to production and factory life, which were the central phenomena on which Lenin and the interwar councilists built their theories of council democracy, Arendt bases her councils on residence. She argues that in many of the modern revolutions, both so-called revolutionary councils and workers' councils had emerged.[52] Whereas the workers' councils were confined to self-management in production, the revolutionary councils led the revolution and coordinated the many dispersed struggles. Arendt even argues that the failure of many council systems stemmed from their attempt to induce self-government in the economic realm, whereas the more promising form of council organization was found in the neighborhood assemblies.[53]

Arendt, particularly in comparison to the other theorists, thus broadens the empirical phenomena that constitute the council tradition and gives the councils novel functions and objectives. The council system in Arendt's understanding is first an alternative to the traditional idea of "revolution," and second an alternative to what most often followed a revolution—namely, either representative democracy (America) or revolutionary dictatorship (France, Russia). Arendt argues that the concept of revolution has become hegemonized by the Marxist-Leninist tradition, which understands revolution as a planned activity, performed by a group of specialized revolutionaries. The councils—according to Arendt—arose spontaneously, without prior planning and without theoretical anticipation.[54] This

50. John Medearis, "Lost or Obscured? How V. I. Lenin, Joseph Schumpeter, and Hannah Arendt Misunderstood the Council Movement," *Polity* 36 (2004): 447–76; and Mike McConkey, "On Arendt's Vision of the European Council Phenomenon: Critique from a Historical Perspective," *Dialectical Anthropology* 16 (1991): 15–31.

51. Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 223–40.

52. Hannah Arendt, "Totalitarian Imperialism: Reflections on the Hungarian Revolution," *The Journal of Politics* 20 (1958): 5–43, at 28; and Arendt, *On Revolution*, 265–66.

53. Arendt, *On Revolution*, 266.

54. Ibid., 254.

"contradicted all their [Marx's and Lenin's] theories and, even more importantly, was in flagrant conflict with those assumptions about the nature of power and violence which they shared."[55] For Arendt, the councils thus show an opposition between politics as spontaneous, popular activity and as planned, schematic, and elitist endeavor. She also makes another distinction, between revolution as negation and destruction and revolution as the constructive foundation of freedom—that is, as the constitution of spaces for popular participation. As Arendt asserts, "the councils, moreover, were always organs of order as much as organs of action."[56] Her conception ran counter to the negative (Leninist) notion of revolution that understands the councils as temporary fighting organs:

> The councils, obviously, were spaces of freedom. As such they invariably refused to regard themselves as temporary organs of revolution and, on the contrary, made all attempts at establishing themselves as permanent organs of government. Far from wishing to make the revolution permanent, their explicitly expressed goal was . . . no paradise on earth, no classless society, no dream of socialist or communist fraternity, but the establishment of "the true republic."[57]

With this formulation of the ambitions of the councils, Arendt not only expresses a different notion of revolutionary action, but also emphasizes how the historical experiences with council politics entail the germs of a different post-revolutionary political project, which can neither be subsumed under the category of representative democracy, as it developed after the American Revolution, nor under the category of revolutionary dictatorship, as it developed after the revolutions in France and Russia.

As such, the council system stands in direct opposition to the political party, be it parliamentary (representative democracy) or revolutionary (Leninist). In her analysis of the French Revolution, Arendt detects the birth of two different political systems: the council system and the party system. These systems inaugurated two different modes of politics that "came to the fore in all twentieth-century revolutions. The issue at stake was representation versus action and participation. The councils were organs of action, the revolutionary parties were organs of representation."[58] The various emerging council systems shared the fact that they were

55. Ibid., 248.
56. Ibid., 255.
57. Ibid., 265.
58. Ibid., 265.

organs of the people, emerging spontaneously through "the organizational impulses of the people themselves."[59] In contrast, the party system in representative democracy, as well as the revolutionary avant-garde party of the Leninist kind, was founded upon the party as an organ separated from the people. According to Arendt, all political parties "agreed that the end of government was the welfare of the people, and that the substance of politics was not action but administration."[60] As such, from the experiences of council systems, communal organizations and neighborhood assemblies throughout modernity, Arendt formulates a vision of a post-revolutionary society in which political participation and collective action, rather than representation or bureaucratic leadership, are central.

Arendt's alternative understanding of revolution as well as of post-revolutionary society, interpreted through the practices of council democracy, in sum, amounts to a novel conceptualization of constituent power. The concept of constituent power was first introduced by the French revolutionary Emmanuel Sieyès, whose pamphlet *What is the Third Estate?* was of paramount importance in the early stages of the French Revolution. The constituent power designates the power of the people to constitute their own political forms of collective existence—that is, to give themselves a constitution.[61] According to Sieyés and the tradition he inaugurated, constituent power stands in fundamental opposition to constituted powers. The constituent power of the people "exists prior to everything; it is the origin of everything. Its will is always legal. It is law itself . . . is independent of all forms . . . it is the source and supreme master of all positive laws."[62] That is, the constituent power cannot be subsumed under positive law or institutionalized, because it is the very origin and creator of law and institutions. This dominant conceptualization has the peculiar consequence that the constituent power, although it is the highest power of the commonwealth, is only a momentary and episodic power that after the foundation of the polity must exhaust itself in constituted politics.[63] If one does not favor the "permanent revolution," as Leon Trotsky did, the revolution must at some point come to an end, and normal politics and positive law must replace constituent

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59. Ibid., 249.

60. Ibid., 265.

61. Bruce Ackerman, *We the People, vol 1: Foundations* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988); Andrew Arato, *The Adventures of Constituent Power: Beyond Revolutions?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); and Andreas Kalyvas, *Democracy and the Politics of the Extraordinary: Weber, Schmitt, Arendt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

62. Emmanuel Sieyès, "What is the Third Estate?," in *Political Writings* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2003), 92–162, at 136, 138.

63. What Martin Loughlin and Neil Walker have called the "juridical containment thesis"; see their *The Paradox of Constitutionalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 6.

politics. As might be clear from this brief description, the constituent power in the Sieyèsian modality has clear affinities with Lenin's analysis of the council system as a revolutionary power that must relinquish its power to constituted authority (i.e., the Bolshevik Party) after the revolutionary break. In short, Lenin—who was himself well read in revolutionary theory—understood the soviets as a constituent power insofar as the soviets were responsible for insurrection and revolution, but they had to exhaust their power in constituted politics led by the Bolsheviks.

Arendt's redefinition of constituent power through the practices of the councils aims to think constituent power and constituted politics together.[64] As she argues, the councils "invariably refused to regard themselves as temporary organs of revolution and, on the contrary, made all attempts at establishing themselves as permanent organs of government."[65] But the unique feature of the council system as "permanent organs of government," as *constituted* organs, in Arendt's evaluation, was that the local councils did not relinquish their own constituent power after the revolution "in such a way that its own central power *did not deprive the constituent bodies of their original power to constitute*."[66] That is, even though the council systems of Russia, Germany, and later Hungary grew larger through processes of federation, the decentral workers,' soldiers,' and peasants' councils were still self-governing and had power to enter into new political relationships and create novel political institutions. Even though the council system expanded, the local councils did not alienate their political power due to mechanisms of imperative mandate and instant recall. In the apt phrasing of Andreas Kalvyas, in Arendt's interpretation of the councils, "normal political action becomes a constituted constitutional action." Thus, council democracy "combined legal stability with constitutional change and institutional novelty," so that "ordinary politics could still retain its dignity, even its extraordinary character, by turning the constitution into an unfinished project, open to further interventions, modifications, and amendments by an active demos."[67] In this way, Arendt's concept of council democracy combines Lenin's focus on the councils as a revolutionary power (pure Sieyèsian constituent power) and the council communists' focus on council democracy as the institutional form of economic democracy (constituted form). As she contends, the council system's

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64. For this argument in its entirety, see Muldoon, "Arendt's Revolutionary Constitutionalism: Between Constituent Power and Political Form"; and Kalyvas, *Democracy and the Politics of the Extraordinary*, 254–80.

65. Arendt, *On Revolution*, 256.

66. Ibid., 259, italics added.

67. Kalyvas, *Democracy and the Politics of the Extraordinary*, 277, 278, italics added.

"effort to recapture the lost spirit of revolution must, to a certain extent, consist in the attempt at *thinking together and combining meaningfully* what our present vocabulary presents to us in terms of opposition and contradiction."[68]

In sum, for Arendt, the councils disclose a mode of democratic politics that seeks to combine constituent power and constituted political form in order "to make the *extraordinary* an *ordinary* occurrence of everyday life." Or, as she argued, the ambition of council democracy is "to enable men to do *permanently*, albeit under certain restrictions, what otherwise had been possible only as an *extraordinary* and *infrequent* enterprise."[69]

### *Castoriadis's Self-Governing Council System*

Castoriadis develops his theory of workers' councils by combining a critique of Soviet politics with his own theory of bureaucratic domination. The Russian Revolution, Castoriadis argues, had initially given birth to the genuinely democratic soviets, but the Bolshevik regime quickly developed into "a new and monstrous form of exploiting society and totalitarian oppression."[70] With the emergence of a bureaucratic class after the revolution, the state became evermore powerful, since it controlled the means of production. The opposition between capital and labor was simply replaced with the opposition between bureaucracy and labor, and Castoriadis argues that very little had changed by this replacement. As a bureaucratic society, Russia was divided "into a narrow stratum of directors (whose function is to decide and organize everything) and the vast majority of the population, who are reduced to carrying out (executing) the decisions made by these directors."[71]

In addition, Castoriadis strongly criticizes the bureaucratic degeneration of the institutions originally established by the working class. Similar to the interwar councilists, Castoriadis claims that trade unions and parties had merged with the state apparatus. "The main point," Castoriadis argues, "is that such organisations have become the strongest opponents of their original aim: the emancipation of the proletariat."[72] The bureaucratic relationship between directors and executants

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68. Arendt, *On Revolution*, 215–16; emphasis added.
69. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 197; emphasis added.
70. Cornelius Castoriadis, "On the Content of Socialism, II," in *Political and Social Writings*, Vol. 2, ed. Cornelius Castoriadis (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 90–154, at 90.
71. Ibid., at 93.
72. Cornelius Castoriadis, "Proletariat and Organization," in *Political and Social Writings*, Vol. 2, 193–222, at 201.

had thus been reproduced within the labor movement, ultimately leading to the bureaucracy's rise to power. This insight especially applied to the communist party itself. Castoriadis therefore argues that the revolutionary project should find new inspiration outside the framework of official communism.

This new inspiration Castoriadis would find this new inspiration in the experiences of the Hungarian Revolution of 1956. He writes:

> For years to come, *all questions that count* can be summed up as follows: Are you for or against the action and the program of the Hungarian workers? Are you for or against the constitution of workers' councils in all sectors of national life and workers' management of production?[73]

As the insurrection of the Hungarian workers was the first popular uprising against bureaucratic communism, the revolutionary project, according to Castoriadis, stood in need of a "revision" from the "raw materials" found in "vast experience of . . . the Hungarian workers' councils, their actions and their program."[74] Castoriadis's theoretical discussion is thus primarily a re-interpretation of political experiences, not an abstract institutional blueprint. Ultimately, for Castoriadis, such a re-evaluation could be initiated only by the restructuring of "*all of political theory* around the principles embodied in the soviets and the councils."[75]

Castoriadis draws not only on the experience of the Hungarian Revolution, but also on the experienced tradition of councils in a broader sense:

> The working class has repeatedly staked its claim to such management and struggled to achieve it at the high points of its historical actions: in Russia in 1917–1918, in Spain in 1936, in Hungary in 1956. . . . The Russian factory committees of 1917, the German workers' councils of 1919, the Hungarian councils of 1956 all sought to express (whatever their name) the same original, organic, and characteristic working-class pattern of organization.[76]

The different organizations constituted through working-class struggle all had the same political objective, according to Castoriadis—namely, the elimination of the distinction between directors and executants. This implies that the council system

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73. Cornelius Castoriadis, "The Proletarian Revolution against the Bureaucracy," in *Political and Social Writings*, Vol. 2, 57–89, at 61–62, emphasis in original.

74. Castoriadis, "On the Content of Socialism, II," 90.

75. Castoriadis, "Proletariat and Organization," 214, emphasis added.

76. Castoriadis, "On the Content of Socialism, II," 95.

as an alternative to both capitalism and bureaucratic communism is equal to the "people's self-organization of every aspect of their social activities."[77] Only if economic and political decisions are taken by those affected can the development of a bureaucratic class be avoided. Hence, for Castoriadis, the council is an institution that governs itself, takes care of the interests of its members and influences the overall direction of society without instituting a hierarchy between directors and executants.

For the councils to perform such political tasks, Castoriadis highlights a range of institutional features that characterize the council system, and which are also continually stressed by both Marx and interwar councilists: Local self-management and direct democracy, re-integration of the spheres of "civil society" and "politics," and convergence of "the individual" and "the citizen." In order to terminate the independent bureaucratic stratum, Castoriadis especially emphasizes institutional features of imperative mandate, instant recall, and bottom-up federalization.[78]

In total, by abolishing the managerial stratum, Castoriadis imagines that the councils can become a sovereign power from below and replace the state with a novel institutional framework for the self-management of society.

Castoriadis is not content, though, with interpreting the council system only as a constituted political form of self-management. Like Arendt, Castoriadis turns to constituent power in order to reinterpret council democracy, especially in the later writings after his break with Marxism and the publication of his magnum opus, *The Imaginary Institution of Society*. The core concept of Castoriadis's later writings is that of autonomy. For Castoriadis, a society becomes autonomous when it begins to have a specific relation with itself: when society evaluates its institutions, traditions, and laws as creations brought into the world by itself, and therefore changeable by itself. That is, a political system becomes autonomous once it recognizes and utilizes the constituent power or what Castoriadis calls the *instituting power*.[79] According to Castoriadis:

> The Commune of 1871, the soviets of 1905 and 1917, the factory committees in Russia in 1917–1918, the factory councils in Germany in 1918–19,

77. Castoriadis, "On the Content of Socialism, II," 95.

78. For a detailed discussion of his proposal for an institutional design institutionalization, see Castoriadis, "On the Content of Socialism, II."

79. Andreas Kalyvas, "The Radical Instituting Power and Democratic Theory," *Journal of Hellenic Diaspora* 64 (1998), 9–28; and Holman, "The Councils as Ontological Form: Cornelius Castoriadis and the Autonomous Potential of Council Democracy," in Muldoon, ed., *Council Democracy*, 131–49.

> and the workers' councils in Hungary in 1956 were organizations formed to combat the ruling class and its state [that is, a constituent power] *and at the same time* new forms of human organization based on principles radically opposed to those of bourgeois society [that is, constituted political forms]. . . . It shows that the proletariat has the need and at the same time the ability to argue the question of social organization as such not simply during a revolutionary explosion, but systematically and permanently.[80]

According to Castoriadis, the councils functioned *initially* as a constituent power, as they challenged existing legality, functioned outside established institutional structures, and transgressed the established political order (Lenin's concept of council democracy). Over time, though, the workers, soldiers, and peasants were not satisfied with only playing an insurrectionary role, which is why they began to employ the councils as permanent political forms of self-government. Arendt espouses a conception of council democracy in which the councils function as constituted spaces for constituent politics. Castoriadis, however, argues that the councils disclose a conception of constituent power that is not "some kind of paroxysm," but which instead functions as "the prefiguration" of ordinary, participatory politics.[81] "In this sense," Castoriadis argues in relation to council democracy, "the main problem of post-revolutionary society is the creation of institutions that allow for the continuation and the development of this autonomous activity, without requiring heroic feats twenty-four hours a day."[82] Council democracy in Castoriadis's rendition is hence a form of "derevolutionized, constituent power" or a "normalized, extraordinary power," which makes participation in the creation of society's fundamental laws open and accessible to all citizens. In a self-reflection on his entire political project, Castoriadis argues:

> Politics is not a struggle for power within given institutions, nor is it simply a struggle for the transformation of institutions called "political," or of certain institutions or even of all institutions. Henceforth politics is the struggle for the transformation of the *relation* of society to its institutions, for the instauration of a state of affairs in which man as a social being is able and willing to regard the institutions that rule his life as his own collective

80. Castoriadis, "Proletariat and Organization, I," *Political and Social Writings*, Vol. 2 (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 193–222, at 19–99, italics added.

81. Castoriadis, "On the Content of Socialism, II," 96.

82. Cornelius Castoriadis, "The Hungarian Source," in *Political and Social Writings*, Vol. 3 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 250–71, at 262.

> creations, and hence is willing to transform them each time he has the need or the desire.[83]

According to Castoriadis, the council system is, within a modern context, precisely the institution that has most thoroughly created an autonomous relation between the citizens and their institutions, so that the councils foster the recognition of society's self-instituted character—that is, the fact that every political system is a product of constituent power and can therefore be changed.

For Castoriadis and Arendt, then, the problems of modern politics, such as bureaucratization, apathy, indifference, and alienation, could be countered by the council system's attempt to reject the managerial stratum governing the population (Castoriadis) or remedy representative politics' exclusion of the many from the public realm (Arendt). By interpreting the councils as genuine democratic remedies to inherent problems of representative democracy and "actually existing socialism," Castoriadis and Arendt transfer the council concept from its location within Marxist theory into the broader realm of democratic theory and practice. Moreover, instead of regarding the councils as either a revolutionary, constituent power (as does Lenin) or as a constituted, institutional structure of economic democracy (as do the interwar council communists), Arendt and Castoriadis understand council democracy as a combination of constituent power and political form through which the people could continually debate and decide on the fundamental structures of their political co-existence.

## Contemporary Occupy Movements and Council Democracy

The three conceptions of council democracy, as we will show in this section, are not equally applicable models for analyzing the contemporary Occupy movements.

The Leninist conception of the councils—as temporary, revolutionary organs, ultimately subordinate to an avant-garde party—offers limited usefulness as a framework for understanding the contemporary Occupy movements for two reasons. First, the council for Lenin serves as a strictly revolutionary instrument, rather than as a prefigurative democratic form that contains the germs of post-revolutionary socio-economic organization. This prefigurative ambition was clear in Occupy Wall Street's ambition of creating "a general assembly in every backyard" and "on every street corner"—that is, the ambition of multiplying and expanding the assembly form

83. Cornelius Castoriadis, "General Introduction," in *Political and Social Writings* Vol. 1, 3–36, at 31.

beyond Zucotti Park. Second, the hierarchical relation between the party and the council appears incompatible with the democratic aims of this political form. Contemporary experiences of "council politics," such as the Occupy movement or its Spanish and Greek counterparts, have predominantly been critical of political hierarchy and traditional conceptions of leadership. However, one of the critiques of the Occupy movements has been that they lacked leadership in order to move to a subsequent phase of political organization.[84] One could argue that a closer relationship between the radical democratic movements and traditional political forms (leadership of political parties, unions, etc.) could benefit these movements in terms of short-term results. Nevertheless, the history of the Russian councils has shown that even if the combination of councils and strong, centralized (party) leadership might be effective for the destruction of existing oppressive structures, it is indeed likely to create new hierarchies and oppressive structures. In other words, we argue that the Occupy movements might be justified in their fear of cooptation by traditional political actors such as parties and unions.

The concept of council democracy stemming from the interwar council communists—in which the councils serve as the foundation of economic democracy beyond capitalism—serves as a more useful framework for contemporary movements but has two main shortcomings that limit its usefulness for those movements. First, as discussed above with reference to Habermas's and Jay's critiques of council democracy, is the problematic relationship between various different types and levels of councils and the associated difficulties of aligning local and national or regional interests. Second, typical institutional features like imperative mandate and instant recall historically proved to decrease the effectiveness and decisiveness of political decision-making processes and functioned in contrast to more unitary and homogenous notions of popular sovereignty.[85] Interestingly enough, even though policy coordination problems might have been reduced in

84. Ivan Krastev, *Democracy Disrupted: The Politics of Global Protest* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014).

85. For a critique of imperative mandate due to its lack decisiveness and rejection of popular unity and homogeneity, see Carl Schmitt, *Constitutional Theory* (Durham: Duke University Press,) 289. Moreover, in 2009, the European Commission for Democracy Through Law concluded—for the same reasons as Schmitt—that "the imperative mandate is generally awkward for Western democracies." European Commission for Democracy Through Law, *Report on the Imperative Mandate and Similar Practices*, 2009, at http://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=CDL-AD(2009)027-e.

contemporary Occupy movements due to improved means of communication, they were marked by hesitant and laborious processes of decision making.[86]

Yet even though the political movements and networks in the United States and across Europe and Latin America rightfully could be said to have incorporated some elements of council organization and principles (instant recall, imperative mandate, and a critique of traditional representative institutions as part of the problem instead of the solution), they have neglected a fundamental part of the interwar council communist conception of the council, which is the conviction that the best basis for further (political) emancipation of the 99% is an expansive democratization the workplace. Even though contemporary Occupy movements have incorporated in their democratic experiments a fundamental critique of neoliberal capitalism, including criticisms of traditional party and union organization, the extension of democratic self-determination from the political realm towards the workplace has seldom been part of their repertoire.[87] In this regard, the Occupy movements more closely resemble Marx's interpretation of the Commune—which would use a political form to change economic conditions—than a council communist conception that locates the very core of democratic practice within the workplace itself.

The understanding of council democracy expressed by Arendt and Castoriadis—in which councils are the foundation of radical democracy beyond representation, bureaucracy, and leadership—speaks directly to contemporary experiments with council-like organizations, insofar as protesters and activists often demanded new forms of public interaction, a more egalitarian politics, and the pluralization of spaces of participation, but without necessarily demanding institutional features traditionally associated with the council system,[88] such as instant recall, imperative mandate, and federalism. The Occupy movements raised these demands not only in relation to the capitalist sphere of production, but as a means to democratize society at large. As such, the Occupy movements often functioned along the same logics as Arendt's and Castoriadis's concept of council democracy seen through the constituent power. The occupants of the Squares directly saw

86. Manuel Castells, *Networks of Outrage and Hope: Social Movements in the Internet Age* (Cambridge: Polity Press), 174–87.

87. In Greece, a country especially hard hit by the financial crisis of 2008 and by the austerity demands by the EU, the occupation of Syntagma Square was accompanied by a widespread worker recuperation of factories and workplaces. See Alexandros Kioupkiolis and Theodoros Karyotis, "Self-Managing the Commons in Contemporary Greece," in *An Alternative Labour History: Worker Control and Workplace Democracy*, ed. Dario Azzellini (London: Zed Books), 298–328.

88. Castells, *Networks of Outrage and Hope: Social Movements in the Internet Age*, 1–20.

their camps as novel and nascent political forms in which "the 99%" could debate and eventually decide on the future of their societies.[89] The camps in Zucotti Park, Syntagma Square, Puerta del Sol, Tahrir Square, and Gezi Park (among others) definitively aspired to be a constituent power, as testified by the enormous civil society initiatives as well as the immense creation of new organizations after the occupations came to an end. The Occupy movements sought to institutionalize their protest—their claim to the constituent power—through institutional structures internally in camps such as spokes councils, the human microphone, and consensus-seeking decision-making through hand-signals, which all had the aim to make discussions and decisions open and accessible to all "citizens of the camp."[90]

In this way, the third concept of council democracy seen through the perspective of constituent power can remind contemporary protesters of the important task of staying clear of the Scylla of co-optation by constituted powers[91] (as the Occupy movements in Spain and Greece were replaced by political parties such as Podemos and Syriza, just like the Russian soviets were replaced by the Bolshevik party) and the Charybdis of disorganized insurrection and revolutionary violence. By stressing the combination of constituent power and political form, council democracy can be a practice of continual political self-alteration, without the normlessness of revolutionary politics and without the hierarchy and elitism of normal parliamentary politics.

## Conclusion

Despite their important differences, these three different conceptions of council democracy—those of Lenin, the council communists, and Castoriadis and Arendt—share at least three underlying principles, which we argue hold together a council tradition, even if only a discontinuous one. We will conclude by showing how these three principles of council democracy can benefit contemporary movements in their experiments with radical self-governance.

89. Ibid.

90. Jon Wiltshire, "After Syntagma: Where are the Occupiers Now?," *Open Democracy*, May 24, 2013, at https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/opensecurity/after-syntagma-where-are-occupiers-now//; and Saul Newman, "Occupy and Autonomous Political Life," in *Radical Democracy and Collective Movements Today*, 93–110.

91. For a discussion of the relation between horizontality and leadership as well as direct democracy and representation in the Square movements, see Marina Prentoulis and Lasse Thomassen, "Political Theory in the Square: Protest, Representation, Subjectification," *Contemporary Political Theory* 12 (2013): 166–84.

The first principle is a notion of democracy that considers representation of the political agent as a distortion of true, participatory democracy. All council concepts considered here have in common that the council is a way to engage people in politics: councils encourage citizens to act and to organize themselves. Even though there can still be a representative function in the council system, like the imperative mandate, its primary aim is to make people organize their own lives—whether this be in the workplace or in the neighborhood. Of course, most of the theorists discussed here considered the need to construct a system of representation to discuss issues that transcend local concerns, but unlike liberal representative structures, and unlike one-party centralism, the main aim is to politically activate the people.

This principle was an important element of the Occupy movements of recent years, and we argue that one of the attractions of these movements was exactly this activating function of council democracy. By more strongly branching out into neighborhoods and workplaces, and hence bringing their innovative democratic, self-organizing principles closer to people's everyday lives, the movements might have increased the participatory potential. The strong symbolic act of occupying public spaces might have been accompanied by the occupation of private spheres—which is related to the second core principle of council democracy.

The second principle shared by all theorists analyzed here is that politics should not be limited to what has become the traditional arena of politics. This principle is closely related to the first one, and also closely related to contemporary experiences of the Occupy movements. From the interwar councilists to the postwar radical democrats, all agree that the council is a political form that can transfer politics from its formal arena(s) (parliaments, governments, elections, media) to other spheres of society that need to be democratized. Although the theorists differ on which spheres deserve democratization—all but Arendt would say the socio-economic sphere—they are in agreement that the council as a political form is suitable for such a transfer.

In our analysis, the Occupy movements can be seen as the embodiment of the transfer of politics to non-political places. The occupation of public squares, like the occupation of the workplace, barracks, and neighborhoods, has made the council a democratic form visible to citizens. In the words of Castoriadis: "What is at stake here is the 'deprofessionalization' of politics, the abolition of politics as a special and separate sphere of activity and skill, and, conversely, the universal *politicization* of society, which means just this: the business of society is, in act and not in words, everybody's business."[92] Our analysis of the history of council democracy

92. Castoriadis, "The Hungarian Source," 250–71, at 261.

shows that contemporary protesters and occupiers, who considered their camps in the Squares as spaces for genuine political debate and decision making, challenged traditional arenas of politics. Indeed, they could have challenged the liberal divide between public and private even further, for example by expanding their activities into workplaces or schools. In the language of Arendt and Castoriadis, the constituent power of Square—like that of revolutions in which the councils emerged—can only hope to survive the moment of occupation by being institutionalized and formalized in various, more permanent forms of democratic organization.

The third principle that can be excavated from the heterogeneous and discontinuous council tradition analyzed in this article is the prefigurative function of the council. Not only is it considered a political instrument for change, it is also thought to contain the embryonic form of post-transitory socio-political organization. For Lenin, at least in his pre-revolutionary writings, the self-organization of workers in revolutionary strikes foreshadows the organization of the economy after the revolution. For the council communists, the self-management and self-determination of workers in their political struggle (independent from political leaders) prefigures the way the new society would be organized. In Arendt's analysis, the councils were always organs of order as much as organs of action, meaning that they emphasized both formal and transformative elements of politics, and for Castoriadis, the councils are directly described as both temporary organs for political struggle and permanent organs of popular self-rule.

Again, much of this prefigurative function was incorporated by the Occupy movements, which in general adhered to procedures of participatory, consensus-seeking democracy—exactly because they aspired to create a future society with these qualities. However, this strict adherence to participatory, inclusive democratic principles resulted in periods of indecisiveness, which also haunted earlier council democratic experiences. On the one hand, Lenin would probably advise contemporary protesters to relate their spontaneous, grassroots activity to dedicated and enlightened (party) leadership to overcome this problem, but he would have a hard time to prove that this would be the road to a more democratic social order. On the other hand, the historical council experiences in Germany and Hungary saw meaningful progress that proved so threatening to the ruling powers that they were violently destroyed.

The process of democratization is neither linear nor inevitable, but relies instead on the words and deeds of citizens acting in concert. A thorough analysis of the history of one such tradition of "acting in concert," namely that of council democracy, might inspire, if not guide, such a process of further democratization.

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