Real politics and revolutionary change: The political theories and strategies of Impossibilist Social Democracy, Council Communism, and Communist Anarchism.

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Abstract:

This thesis investigates the compatibility of revolutionary socialism with an understanding of politics as being the management of conflict in a world of persistent moral disagreement. The conclusion is that a compatibility can be found once socialist revolution is viewed as the culmination of a process of the development of an ethos of non-domination, rather than a coup d'état or minority political conquest. Such an ethos requires the members of a political community to view each other as equal citizens partaking in a process of collective self-governance and need not rest on a shared singular set of moral values or conception of the good life. The three socialist currents examined (Impossibilist Social Democracy, Council Communism, and Communist Anarchism) present three different theories and strategies for achieving a socialist revolution through such means. All three currents place an importance on political and economic education, horizontal organisation, and engagement in collective action, though they differ in terms of emphasis and form. These differences in emphasis and understanding lead to differing conceptions of the role of the state and the use of representative democracy during the course of socialist revolution, and how it is to be transformed, abolished or rendered obsolete. I assess each in terms of the degree to which they are cognisant of the perennial problem of having to navigate moral and ethical conflict while not collapsing into a new form of collective domination.

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Chapter One. Introduction

Chapter outline

The structure of this chapter will be to first outline the general motivation for my project, explaining why the avoidance of tyranny and social chaos are the preliminary problems for politics and explaining how this problem can be related to, and dealt with by, the theories and strategies of revolutionary socialism. Then, I will explain how and why these three candidate revolutionary socialist currents offer good criteria for meeting these challenges – explaining how their shared conception of self-emancipation functions as a way of achieving and maintaining social change while being mindful of the problems of tyranny and disorder. Next, I will go into further details of the realist political theory that underpins these concerns. I will then briefly describe the methods I have been using to examine and reconstruct the political concepts and theories from these currents before closing with a breakdown of the following chapters.

1. Introduction

> […] [T]he core challenge of politics is to overcome anarchy without embracing tyranny.[1]

The tumultuous years of the twentieth century saw the rise of a grand political movement which sought to transform the world and usher in a new era of freedom for the benefit of humanity. Nominally this movement was usually referred to as either socialism or communism.[2] If the purpose

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1 William A. Galston, "Realism in Political Theory." *European Journal of Political Theory* 9, 4 (2010): 391.

2 Before proceeding, it will be necessary to explain my use of terminology, especially the distinction (or not) between 'socialism' and 'communism'. Throughout the thesis I have chosen to use the term 'revolutionary socialism', though equally I could have opted for 'communism' or some lesser used varieties such as 'co-operative commonwealth'. The common and often used distinction between 'socialism' as a halfway stage towards

of this movement was to increase the sphere of political freedom, the end result can be seen as an abject failure. Instead of resulting in freedom, they resulted, for the most part, in single party dictatorships. With this apparent failure in mind, proponents of revolutionary socialism are commonly criticised for either promoting a situation that would, willingly or not, result in totalitarian domination. Or inversely, if their projections of the future and their proposed methods for getting there involve some level of democratic participation, they are criticised for overstating the possibilities of human co-operation and downplaying the perennial potential for conflict in society.[3] In this thesis, I will argue that, aside from the merely nominal types of socialism that held state power, there are three distinct and explicitly non-vanguardist types of revolutionary socialism that can overcome both of these objections. These socialist currents either entirely predate, or have roots that predate, the forms of socialism that held state power and, more importantly, can be seen as standing in opposition to them. These currents I will refer to as, first, Impossibilist Social Democracy,[4] a current of political parties that arose in the early twentieth century within English-speaking Marxism as a response against both reformism and hierarchical party organisation.

'communism' can be tracked back to Lenin's *The State and Revolution*. This is not a distinction that I will be using here, as it is not one that was used by the socialist currents that I am interested in, and whose theories predate the rise of Leninism. The 'social' in 'socialism' refers to social ownership and the 'common' in 'communism' refers to common ownership. I claim that social and common ownership are synonymous (and that state-ownership or nationalisation is something else).

3 Well known examples of socialist and anarchist texts that presume conflict away include G.A. Cohen's *Why Socialism?* and Colin Ward's *Anarchy in Action*. Cohen seems to forget the common saying 'life is not a picnic' and Ward forgets that the events he claims to have been spontaneous (such as the forming of anarchist militia and defence committees during the Spanish civil war) had been preceded by decades of organisational and propagandising work.

4 Stephen Coleman, "Impossibilism", in *Non-Market Socialism*, ed. Maximlien Rubel and John Crump (New York: Saint Martin's Press, 1987), 83-103.

Second, I will investigate Anarchist Communism, which developed out of the anarchist wing of the First International as a movement from the late 1870's onwards initially in Italy, France and Switzerland.[5] And, finally, there is Council Communism,[6] which was a movement which developed out of the Dutch and German left wings of the socialist movement following the failure to achieve socialism in both the German Revolution of 1918 and Russian revolution 1917. I will be giving more in-depth explanation of these currents later.

Here I will add first a more general clarification: I will be thinking of socialism as a complete negation of a capitalist society. 'Revolution' as I relate it to socialism refers to a total transformation in the way that a society organises its basis for attaining its means of life. This could be contrasted with 'reformism', the idea that it is possible to temper or resolve the central problems of capitalism by passing legislation without there being any need to get rid of the capitalist system as such; and with 'gradualism' the belief that socialism can come about solely through a slow and steady accumulation of reforms. For revolutionary socialists, reformism is seen as inadequate because the central problems of capitalist society are seen to be originating from the nature of capitalist commodity exchange itself, and not some accidental features of how this exchange is regulated. Gradualism is seen as defective for these reasons, too. There is, additionally, no reason to think that a gradual increase in conditions would necessarily lead to a total change in circumstances.[7] Reforms can be taken away as well as gained, and even if the transition from capitalist society to socialism was conceived as 'one big reform' (for example, the introduction of a new law that makes

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5 Caroline Cahm. *Kropotkin and the Rise of Revolutionary Anarchism 1872-1886*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989) 36-44. Nick Heath. *The Idea*. (Belfast: Just Books, 2022), 91-97.

6 Phillippe Bourrinet, *The Dutch and German Communist Left* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2018)

7 Gilbert McClatchie, "Gradualism and Revolution" *Socialist Standard*, September 1947. Accessed April 11, 2024. www.marxists.org/archive/mcclatchie/1947/gradualism.htm

commodity exchange and private ownership of means of production illegal), this, by itself, would not guarantee the success of socialism. Socialism, as it is being understood here and if it is to be both an ordered and non-dominating form of society, requires the conscious understanding and co-operation of the majority to make it work. This kind of socialism is not something that could be sprung upon an unsuspecting and uncomprehending population 'like a thief in the night'.[8]

Capitalist society is one in which all significant productive activity is, typically or predominantly, co-ordinated through the market. The guiding principle for this production is the reproduction and enlargement of capital. For the most part, needs (either for the means of life or for the means of production) can only be met by going to market. This reliance on the market means that buyers (owners of capital – state or private) and sellers (workers) of labour-power are locked into a mutually co-dependent (and potentially antagonistic) relationship. Rather than being a society where joint activities are coordinated directly from start to finish, productive activity is conducted by individual enterprises working in isolation that adjust their activity according to how goods exchange (or fail to exchange) on the market.

In contrast, a socialist society would be one in which productive activity is conducted directly by society working as a single unit, without a division between owners of capital and sellers of labour-power, and without a proprietorial division between enterprises (as competitive units seeking to grow their individual capital). My usage does rule out 'market socialism'. My interest here is in socialism as a real historical and political movement; what could be thought of as 'market socialism' as a theory comes (with the exclusion of Proudhonist mutualism) out of academia in the 1970s and 80s.

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[8] This phrase is attributed to Keir Hardie in *Labour Leader* 9th September 1904. He could claim this because for him "socialism" was equated with state nationalisation.

This choice of meanings will not be without dissenters, but no definition would be. I have chosen to opt for a usage that has a long historical vintage, one that predates the Soviet Union, and that makes explicit that socialism is not a kind of tempered or tamed capitalism, but another form of productive social organisation entirely. As politics is by nature partisan,[9] and political terms necessarily contested,[10] there will inevitably be contention about what precisely counts as socialist and non-socialist. I believe my chosen usage comes out of a clear rationale and is one that is historically recognisable.

2. The realism and tyranny tests

In reference to the possible failures that a revolutionary socialist theory could fall foul of, I will be referring to what I have term 'realism failure' and 'tyranny failure', respectively. Realism failure is the failure to take seriously the potential for moral and political conflict in human society and relationships. Tyranny failure is to underestimate the problems associated with imposing an order from above. I will use these two tests to assess if a revolutionary socialist theory is meeting these challenges or not. I will now describe these two failures in more detail, and especially in the ways that they could relate to revolutionary socialism.

2.1 Realism failure:

This failure relates to denying the problems of maintaining social order in conditions of perennial moral conflict. There are three separate but related errors I want to include in this category. The first and second errors concerns the spontaneous generation of order, and the third concerns the extent to which a moral consensus can be reached in a pluralist political society.

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[9] Raymond Geuss, *Philosophy and Real Politics*. (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2008) 29.

[10] Michael Freeden, *Ideologies and Political Theory: A Conceptual Approach*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996) 55-60

2.1.1 Type one realism failure – optimistic fatalism

This failure is a result of presuming that an egalitarian order will spontaneously arise and be able to maintain itself automatically and without difficulty, once present conditions of hierarchy are removed as there is a natural tendency towards egalitarian cooperative relationships in human behaviour which currently remains hidden and dormant 'like the seeds beneath the snow'.[11] To borrow a phrase from the Italian Anarchist Communist Errico Malatesta, this failure could be thought of as a type of 'optimistic fatalism'[12], a belief that there is some kind force, or tendency in nature, history, or society, that ultimately works towards the benefit of human wellbeing. This failure goes against an assumption that I will be making throughout this thesis: that is that human social behaviour can be understood as having both a tendency towards co-operation and a tendency towards domination. Following radical anthropology this idea could be referred to as an 'ambivalent' conception of human nature.[13] Or in reference to political theory, it could be referred to

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[11] This phrase originates from Colin Ward's *Anarchy in Action*; (PM Press 2018, 14) "[…] an anarchist society […] is always in existence, like a seed beneath the snow, buried under the weight of the state and its bureaucracy, capitalism and its waste, privilege and its injustices, nationalism and its suicidal loyalties, religious differences and their superstitious separatism." This idea neatly sums up the mistake I want to highlight. The presumption seems to be that once conditions of hierarchy are removed, people will naturally and easily revert to a more co-operative and egalitarian type of social organisation. The suggestion seeming to be that hierarchical behaviours are in some way 'unnatural' and that egalitarianism is the natural mode of human interaction. I want to counter this by claiming that both co-operation and domination are always potentially present tendencies in human behaviour and that neither is more 'natural' than the other.

[12] Errico Malatesta. "More on Individualism." In *The Collected Works of Errico Malatesta, Volume 3*, edited by Davide Turcato. (Chico: AK Press, 2016), 91-94.

[13] On Boehm's ambivalent conception, egalitarian co-operation arises out of the resentment of being dominated. It is this tendency to resent domination that leads to the formation of what Boehm calls 'reverse dominance hierarchies', broad social coalitions that are formed around a general acceptance of the need to defend non-dominating and

as a ‘realist’ conception of politics. The reasons for making assumption can be explained in the following way:

Human beings are required to live together in groups for their material survival, as it is impossible for an isolated individual to produce all the things they need for anything but the barest state of living. This means that it is necessary to utilise the abilities of others, and this can be done in two ways; either through mutual co-operation where agreements are continually sought and negotiated, or through domination where one gets what they want through the use of, or threat of, force.[14]

With this in mind, the claim I want to make here is not against spontaneity in general; neither is it the claim that any kind of order is impossible without some kind of external imposition from above. Instead, the claim I want to make concerns the specificity of moving from a politically and economically hierarchical social order to a politically and economically egalitarian one, and what is required to maintain it afterwards. Here it is useful to examine the relation between ‘spontaneous’ and ‘planned’. ‘Spontaneous’ is often counterposed against something that is planned or imposed, yet a situation can be spontaneous in the sense that it is self-developing, but also planned in the sense that actions are prepared for and organised. A plan could be either something that is devised and imposed by some higher authority, or equally it could be something that is created and enacted through a democratic process of mediation between equals. This second form of planning could be

politically egalitarian behaviours. A politically egalitarian society is achieved not by eliminating the tendency to dominate, but by keeping it in check through the coercive force of these coalitions applied against those that attempt to dominate. Christopher Boehm, Hierarchy in the Forest (Cambridge, Massachusetts, London: Harvard University Press, 1999), 237-247.

[14] Co-operation and domination can also exist in combination. For example, people can act in groups for the purpose of dominating others or the dominated may co-operate with each other in order to achieve the wishes of their dominator.

described as ‘spontaneous’, as there is no external force that is driving the process, yet it is different from the kind of ‘spontaneity’ associated with unconsciously emerging order. The idea of society as a spontaneously emergent order, for example as something that arises out of the actions of an ‘invisible hand’, can underplay the difficulties that arise in social and political relationships and the special care and attention that is needed to reach and maintain such relations. Spontaneous processes need not happen quickly, for example the development of language can be thought of a process that is both spontaneous and slow. There was no overseeing body that overlooked and planned the transformation of Latin into Italian, French and Spanish yet through time and repetition certain patterns establish themselves and others drop out of use, leading to the development of new languages out of another.[15]

But the kind of change that is needed to move from hierarchy to equality is not like the development of a language, it won’t happen by accident or all by itself as human social behaviour includes tendencies to both co-operate and to dominate. Something that is organised and prepared for ‘from below’ is still very different to something that happens ‘spontaneously’ all by itself without any effort or deliberate direction. In order to adequately take the considerations of an ambivalent human nature and a realist politics into account, a move from a strongly hierarchical to a strongly egalitarian society cannot happen instantly but would require a period of cultural change in which an ethos of non-dominating co-operation is developed within the population at large.

[15] The self-developing nature of actual languages explains why designed languages have never achieved a lasting popular success. While designed languages are more logical and simpler in their rules, they are culturally barren and emotionally thin when it comes to the kinds of connotation, metaphors, oral history etc that make languages a part of lived experience. James C Scott, *Seeing Like a State* (Yale University Press, 1998) 257.

This move from domination to co-operation can be understood as 'spontaneous' if it is taken to mean 'not imposed from the outside'.[16] The proletariat has to consciously prepare and organise for the reclaiming of its own freedom, but this taking back does not require some paternal input from outside of the working class. If socialism is understood as an attitude of solidarity that is held by the population, and the population at large directly inputs into the administering of society, then we have not a blueprint but an ethos that shapes the attitudes and therefore the actions of agents as they shape society. This acts as an underlying shaping factor behind an emergent social order in which people will disagree about important things, but the way in which they produce produces the conditions for non-dominating co-operation to be able to flourish and sustain itself.

It is not possible for any group or individual to fully determine events or to bring about situations as they please, but by encouraging the development of a certain mindset certain outcomes can become more likely should situations favourable to them arise in the future. For example, Rosa Luxemburg's emphasis on the need for both spontaneous action[17] and the need for education and preparatory work prior to socialist revolution bridges the gap between spontaneous action and conscious political organisation. Education, cultural, organisational work can be thought of as being 'spontaneous' in the sense that they arise from within the working class itself as a response to its situation – but not 'spontaneous' in the sense that it is something that arises suddenly or without sustained conscious effort or work.

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16 Adam Buick. "Leninism Versus Proletarian Self-emancipation." *Radical Philosophy*, 7, (1974): 28-33.

17 Paulina Tambakaki, "Rosa Luxemburg on the Dialectic of Spontaneous and Party Politics," in *The German Revolution and Political Theory*, ed. Gaard Kets and James Muldoon. (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 319-338

2.1.2 Type two realism failure – pessimistic fatalism

If the failure above could be thought of as a false kind of optimism, this failure can be thought of as its mirror image, a kind of pessimistic fatalism. What I am calling here the realism failure is not just about failing to acknowledge the potential for conflict, but about ignoring the tendency for co-operation too. Just as there is no natural and inevitable movement towards a politically egalitarian society of non-domination, there is no unavoidable movement towards hierarchical or tyrannical societies either. The shape that a society takes is the result of various struggles and conflicts that play out in real historical and geographical space. There is no single path that society will inevitably take, and what does happen is the result (which no individual or group could foretell beforehand) of the playing out of conflict, agreement, and compromise between parties. The role of agency, contingency and circumstance in society is such that we can conceive of the future as being radically open.

2.1.3 Type three realism failure

This failure relates to an overoptimism about the possibilities of moral consensus. There are multiple reasons for thinking that serious moral disagreements are a permanent and insoluble feature of human social life, though for the purposes of my thesis it will not be necessary to settle on a precise reason for why. Of the reasons we could choose, a strong one is the observation that competing moral claims are incommensurable. Competing moral claims exist in the form of closed self-referential systems and unless there is some shared common component there will be nothing for disagreeing views to latch on. Therefore, moral conflicts will be impossible or extremely difficult to fully resolve as there is no external, commonly accessible, moral viewpoint for the competing parties to refer to.[18]

[18] See for example, Bernard Williams *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (London and New York: Routledge, 1985)

We can think of the tendency for co-operation and domination to extend into to the moral sphere as well. If we have a moral disagreement we can try to reason, negotiate, or compromise or we can attempt to dominate and force the other party into accepting our point of view. The perennial nature of moral disagreement makes this a continually potent source of conflict. Therefore, any realistic conception of politics must contain some kind of mechanism for dealing with or mitigating these conflicts.

2.2 Tyranny failure

This is a two-part failure, both relating to the problems of imposing an order imposed from above. Firstly, there is one about the nature of power and human society: the argument that hierarchical power relationships encourage domination; at its most crude, the observation that 'power corrupts'. And secondly, regardless of intentions being benevolent or not, it is a problem to do with central planning and unintended consequences; an overconfidence in the ability of states to successfully impose detailed social engineering projects without the input of local knowledge. This part of the error relates to the importance of context (historical, social, geographical) in solving social and political problems.

Social groups, when left on their own, will develop an order to deal with their social problems but there is no reason to presume that there is any guarantee that this order will necessarily be of an egalitarian kind. Above I claimed that the only way that an egalitarian society could arise out of a hierarchical one is only after a concentrated period of planning, organisation, education and preparation beforehand. However, if this planning is not something that is developed from within the general population and that adjusts according to changing circumstances; if it takes the form of a

rigid blueprint which has been devised and imposed on a society from above; then we face two sets of problems – one relating to domination and one about knowledge and unforeseen consequences.[19]

Though these problems tend to occur together, it is worth looking at them separately for analytic clarity.

The first of these errors ignores the potential for domination in human behaviour; it presumes people (in this case specifically those in positions of political power) are naturally 'good' and will therefore use their position always for the common good rather than for their own benefit. If there was no tendency towards domination in human behaviour, we would not have to worry about a dictatorship of a minority or a single person; those in positions of power would act benevolently in the interests of those below them; 'good by force' would be something that could be achieved. But domination is a real tendency, and this is why revolutionary socialists developed a sceptical attitude towards hierarchical power.

Even if we disregard the problem of domination, we will still have to consider if a centralised power could ever have the kind of knowledge required to deal with an infinite complex social reality without their plans being stymied by undesirable results. To illustrate this more fully, I am going to use some ideas and examples from James C Scott's *Seeing Like a State*[20], a book about the failure of state-led social engineering projects, which can lead to lethal outcomes. In dictatorial states it is possible for grand schemes to be pre-planned on paper and bought into existence without

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[19] This problem may sound reminiscent of Hayek's 'information problem' criticism of central planning. However, the criticism here applies as much to plans to impose market relationships (such as the 'shock therapy' following the disbanding of the USSR) as it does to centralised plans to run the economy. For an assessment of the relevance of Hayek's critique see Paul Raekstad *Karl Marx's Realist Critique of Capitalism: Freedom, Alienation, and Socialism*. 183-191. (S.L.: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022).

[20] James C Scott, *Seeing Like a State* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998)

any real thought about the pre-existing environment and social life that these schemes would be realised within. These schematic plans are by necessity simplified models that ignore important, but often informal or improvised, facts and practices that allow any social order to function smoothly, and that work in a way that a prefabricated plan could not.[21] Trying to manipulate complex and emergent systems, such as societies, by focussing on a single or narrow set of variables inevitably leads to unforeseen consequences. For example, efficiency when defined in narrow terms – such as the free movement of traffic or yields per acre – leads to the creation of cities that allow for the fast passage of vehicle traffic but are a social desert for the people living within them, or to mono-cultural planting schemes which lead to an initial boost in yields but eventually result in a depletion of the soils. Only when plans for social change allow for the self-adjusting input of those affected by them can this type of error be avoided.

To conclude this section; avoidance of the tyranny and realism errors, for revolutionary socialists, means allowing for the possibility of political order to be developed 'from below' and to have a political strategy can deal with both tendencies of human behaviour, the potential to be both dominating 'hawks' and cooperative 'doves'. I will now begin to describe what such a strategy, or strategies, could look like.

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[21] "This truth is best illustrated in a work-to-rule strike, which turns on the fact that any production process depends on a host of informal practices and improvisations that could never be codified. By merely following the rules meticulously, the workforce can virtually halt production. In the same fashion, the simplified rules animating plans for, say, a city, a village, or a collective farm were inadequate as a set of instructions for creating a functioning social order. The formal scheme was parasitic on informal processes that, alone, it could not create or maintain. To the degree that the formal scheme made no allowance for these processes or actually suppressed them, it failed both its intended beneficiaries and ultimately its designers as well." Scott *Seeing Like a State*, 6.

3. The three currents

I can now briefly comment on why, as a thesis about revolutionary socialism I have pointed my attention towards three apparently unsuccessful and minor currents of socialism and not the more commonly known candidates which have actually held and controlled state power, e.g. those associated with Lenin, Stalin, Trotsky, Mao, Castro, etc. If we put my three currents on one side, and those of Lenin etc on another, I will demonstrate that there are two different conceptions of what is required for socialist revolution and that this distinction is important enough to give us reason to think about these two groupings as forming separate, and even opposing, political theories. Key to this distinction is the issue of how a civic ethos of active co-operation is required to both achieve socialism and for it to function once established. This commitment to the need to develop such democratic sensibilities enables the three currents to avoid both the Tyranny and Realism Errors. As democratic and co-operative tendencies are seen as a latent potential, rather than a natural default, they are viewed as something that has to be developed through partaking in intentional patterns of behaviour. This developmental approach is how the tyranny error is avoided. The political and economic relations of socialism are not imposed from above, or seen to arise automatically, but are developed through the nurturing of pre-existing but undeveloped potentials within the community. In contrast, there is no such requirement for the development of such an ethos in Lenin's vanguardist strategy, as socialism is seen to arise through the development of productive forces under the hierarchical supervision of a socialist state. This approach ignores the latent tendency for domination in hierarchical relations and also presumes a kind of behavioural or institutional determinism where socialism arises without the need of developing the behaviour tendencies required for it. This claim of a differentiation is not some post-hoc distinction of my own invention; the Impossibilists, Council Communists, and Anarchist Communists (and the Leninist parties) all express this differentiation and opposition in their writings.

For the three chosen currents, socialism is achieved through the self-emancipation of the working class; and this is dependent on a freely self-governing society. Socialism is understood as a democratic commonwealth that is made possible by the development of both democratic sensibilities and productive forces. Because of the importance of democratic participation, and because such a participation is inhibited by the current shape of society, socialism is seen as being dependent on the cultivation of what could be referred to as socialist civic virtues or an ethos of non-domination. This shared end goal of free association can only be bought about through self-emancipatory, self-directed mass action. Self-rule is something that could not be decreed by a power from above, as it is a capacity that has to be developed by those that wield it. Without the cultivation of the necessary civic virtues and ethos of non-domination an emerging socialist republic would not be able to transform current political and political institutions nor sustain their operation in a way that does not re-introduce deference to hierarchical authorities.[22]

A difference in conceptions of freedom can clearly be seen in the vanguardist role that Lenin ascribes to the revolutionary party. According to this conception, freedom can be thought of as consisting in the following of real interests; the real interests of the proletariat are achieved by its rejection of capitalist ideology and adoption of proletarian ideology. But due to the uneven influence of capitalist ideology, it is only the specialists of revolution, the revolutionary socialist party, who are able to possess the specialist knowledge that enables them to see through capitalist ideology. When this is coupled with the Leninist conception of 'the dictatorship of the proletariat', we can see how this kind of vanguardism cannot be seen as an expression of the same kind of self-developmental freedom as held by the Impossibilists, Council Communists, and Anarchist Communists. Rather than positioning themselves as equal interlocutors that aim to persuade through

[22] Michael Coleman. Securing non-domination in the social republic: A social republican theory of rights. *European Journal of Political Theory*. 0-0 (2023): 6.

argument and example (as would be required if committed to the self-development of democratic and co-operative social ethos), the Leninist revolutionary party uses its position as controller of the state and its coercive forces to push through and impose its prescriptions regardless of how popular they may or may not be within the general population.[23] We can see that historically such moves were spoken against by more democratically minded socialists, such as Luxemburg and Kautsky, as well as those from my three currents.

The strategies that each of the three currents pursued for developing these capacities, and for spreading socialist understanding, varied. The Impossibilist Social Democrats sought to build a mass, and fully horizontally organised, political party that would be able to use the majority position of the proletariat and the democratic structures of liberal democracy to gain control of the coercive powers of the state, and then to affect a transformation of these structures into ones that were suitable for administering associated production according to use. The Council Communists aimed to render powerless the existing powers of the state, and to bring about socialised production, by encouraging the development of mass strikes and wildcat industrial action. These actions would culminate in the development of workers and neighbourhood councils which would network together to bring about a system where production is co-ordinated through a multi-levelled network of mandated and recallable delegates. The strategy of the Anarchist Communists was to encourage a

[23] Rather than being a continuation of what had come before, Lenin's innovations can be seen as representing a break from the Marxism of before, which was firmly rooted in the radical democratic tradition and so committed to a republican conception of freedom. This can be related to the problems of the context of where the Leninist parties came to power, in underdeveloped countries without a large industrial working class and without a strong capitalist class. While sharing a conceptual vocabulary derived from Marxism, Leninism moved away from being a theory of proletarian self-emancipation through democratic means to one that aimed at the conquest of state power in undeveloped countries for the purpose of rapid industrial modernisation. See John H Kautsky *Marxism and Leninism: Different Ideologies* 2nd Edition (New Brunswick and London: Transaction Publishers, 2002)

non-hierarchical ethos by engaging in non-hierarchical methods of organisation. Amongst these was working within syndicalist workers unions. The hope being that when a rupture or rebellion arose from out of the struggles within society their influence would become such as to steer the events in the direction of anarchist communism. Production on the basis of "from each according to ability, to each according to need" would then be conducted on the basis of a federation of regional and industrial communes. I will explain and explore and evaluate these strategies in the further chapters.

3.1 Proletarian self-emancipation: an outline.

As the crucial idea of these three currents is that of proletarian self-emancipation, I will spend some time examining the concept here. 'Proletariat' is merely a synonym for 'modern working class'. The word made its entrance into English through the influence of French communist literature, and its usage was taken up by Marx who was influenced by this literature. *The Communist Manifesto* describes the proletariat as: 'a class of labourers, who live only so long as they find work, and who find work only so long as their labour increases capital.'[24] While the use of the word 'labourers' may suggest only manual or industrial workers, this would be a misunderstanding. The labour-power, or capacity to work, that the proletarians sell (as this is the only repeatably sellable commodity they possess) 'is to be understood the aggregate of those mental and physical capabilities existing in a human being, which he exercises whenever he produces a use-value of any description.'[25] On this understanding a nurse, a lecturer[26], or a council worker is

[24] Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. "The Communist Manifesto." Marxists Internet Archive. Accessed May 25, 2023. www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1848/communist-manifesto/ch01.htm

[25] Karl Marx. "Capital: A Critique of Political Economy. Volume One" Chapter 6. Marxists Internet Archive. Accessed May 25, 2023. www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch06.htm

[26] "If we may take an example from outside the sphere of production of material objects, a schoolmaster is a productive labourer when, in addition to belabouring the heads of his scholars, he works like a horse to enrich the

as much of a proletarian as a worker on an oil rig or an assembly line; as are book-keepers and supervisors. The key factor is economic, what must be sold in order to gain access to goods necessary for survival – proletarians are sellers of their capacity to work, not sellers of products. The proletariat is not people that work in such and such a job, it is everyone that needs to have a job in order to survive (or to do more than subsist on state welfare in places where such things exist). Or, in more negative terms, it is all of those to whom unemployment would be a problem.

The idea of proletarian self-emancipation presupposes the idea of social classes and a class society. In order to understand how different classes in society operate, and what makes one form of society similar or different to others, it is useful to make categories that relate to roles within that society. When we think about 'proletarian' and 'capitalist', we are thinking of functional roles within a specific form of society. A capitalist is someone who can and does throw capital into circulation with the view of increasing it (and has to if they wish to preserve their position within the society). The proletariat are – to reiterate the above – those who have to sell their labour-power in order to get the things they need to survive, while the capitalist class are those who buy this labour-power (along with buying other means of production) and put it into action with a view to expanding their capital. The proletariat is unfree in that, as a group, it has to submit its will to another in society (those that own the means of production and purchase labour-power) in order to maintain itself. It becomes free by ending the form of relationship that requires and enables this dependency.

Here the 'self' in proletarian self-emancipation is of crucial importance. As the proletariat is a group (the largest one in modern society), a liberation enacted by, and for the benefit of, this 'self'

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school proprietor. That the latter has laid out his capital in a teaching factory, instead of in a sausage factory, does not alter the relation." Karl Marx "Capital. Volume One". Chapter 16. Marxist Internet Archive. Accessed May 25, 2023. www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch16.htm

requires some kind of democratic commitment. If the change is imposed from above or without them, then it is not the 'self' that is doing the change, but another. If the proletariat is still required to submit to another group, for example state bureaucrats instead of capitalists, then there has not been a situation of emancipation. Self-emancipation is not something that can be forced upon the proletariat, since forcing is not something that is emancipatory but rather something that reinforces relations of dependency. In order to achieve its own emancipation, the proletariat needs to know not only what it wants but how to achieve it. Since the how is also the what, democratic ending of dependency and deference, acting democratically is as much something that is learnt by doing as it is something that is learnt about. Proletarian self-emancipation therefore takes the form of a collective action problem, one that relies on a convergence of conscious intentions.

I propose that the concept of self-emancipation, when understood as both the goal and means of socialist revolution, is compatible with a recognition of persistent moral disagreement. Moreover, it arises out of theoretical considerations that are acutely aware of, and seek to avoid, political and social domination. This is done by understanding self-emancipation not as a singular event that occurs in the future, but as a process of human development – elements of which may be starting to form in the present. As non-dominating democratic co-operation (which is the basis of the free association of the producers, i.e., socialism) is but one latent tendency in human interaction, there has to be something which helps foster this kind of interaction while discouraging others. This thing can be thought of as a shared cultural ethos (this could also be referred to as 'socialist consciousness' or 'class consciousness' or 'proletarian ethic') which is bought about through a collective educative process and takes hold due to a common position in society. It is by the proletariat recognising itself as having a shared interest in ending the forms of domination that it is subject to, and through forming a community to enact this change, that socialist revolution can occur. Cultures, and the communities that enact them, represent a mechanism for asserting values,

and it is through a transformation of culture that certain ways of acting gain predominance and others fall away.

The focus on consciousness here is not to deny the importance of historical and material context. Cultures are always embedded within historical, geographical and social contexts. When proposing that a new form of culture or ethos could take hold, this is because there is something within the current mode of life that enables it to. The historical context of the present situation is one in which capitalist production brings producers together, both in the individual workplace and globally, in a worldwide matrix of productive activities. As this form of co-operation is through market competition, it has also led to an increase in the capacity of productive forces. It is this increased interconnectedness, and increased ability to easily and quickly produce useful things that provides the material possibility of communism.

3.1.1 A freedom collectively arrived at.

Proletarian self-emancipation is not the same thing as individualist 'self-help' or spiritual enlightenment. It refers to a group acting collectively to end the conditions that have brought it together as a group. In this case that group is the proletariat, a collective that share the same position within society in relation to the means of production. So proletarian self-emancipation can be thought of as a group acting together to free itself from conditions that they are collectively subject to. Since the proletariat is a social category, emancipation is not something that an individual proletarian could achieve on their own efforts.[27] As an economic system is the result of the

[27] An individual could get lucky, by winning the lottery or by starting a highly successful business and joining the ranks of the capitalist class, but this a case of somebody changing their position within a society and not an example of emancipation as understood by the revolutionary socialists. According to the revolutionary socialist understanding of capitalist society, both capitalists and workers are in a state of unfreedom and the source of this unfreedom lies within the underlying compulsion inherent in market relations. Emancipation could not be achieved

combined behaviour patterns of the whole of society, the only way out of the well is for everybody to pull everybody else out of it. Proletarian self-emancipation is therefore the proletariat as a whole shaping society and driving its development in a certain direction.

Self-emancipation is to be differentiated from freedoms granted from above or a freedom thought to arise automatically out of the effects of grand schemes of social engineering. How the situation is arrived at is important, imposed situations from which self-emancipation are presumed to later automatically arise fail to take into account the developmental nature of what self-emancipation is.[28] A hierarchical imposition of any form of society reinforces further patterns of domination and submission rather than fostering the kinds of cooperative behaviours and abilities that are needed for free association. A classless society requires certain ways of relating to become commonplace in a society, in order to prevent a new political hierarchy from appearing. This means that the end-goal of a socialist revolution – proletarian self-emancipation – is also it means; a society of class domination can only be got rid of through means that erode, and not reinforce, patterns of domination between groups of people. It is not a question of trying to justify any means

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by everyone becoming a business owner, for example in a market society where everybody is a member of a worker's co-op, but only by bringing the means of production into common and conscious control – and for the revolutionary socialists this means moving away from a market economy. Proletarian emancipation is not just emancipation from the proletarian condition, but emancipation from the compulsions of capitalist social economic relations in their totality. This aspect of revolutionary socialist theory is forgotten in Cohen's famous essay on Proletarian Emancipation. See; G. Brenkert 'Cohen on Proletarian Unfreedom' *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, Winter, 1985, Vol. 14, No. 1 (1985), 91-98

[28] Furthermore, grand schemes of social engineering disregard the emergent nature of functioning social order – social order is built from the ground up with local knowledge and interest playing important roles, and so impositions from the top down are likely to be plagued by unintended bad effects. Pre-formulated plans cannot fully account for the full complexities of social life, the question of implementing socialism in an emergent social order highlights the need for it to be a democratic and self-realising movement. See Scott, *Seeing like a State.*

according to the ends they bring about, instead the means themselves must be constitutive, or prefigurative, of the ends.

With regards to 'prefigurative politics', although I have generally steered away from using this terminology, it is important to add some explicit discussion here. I have chosen to make sense of revolutionary socialist theory and practice by focussing on the idea of the necessity of the developing a civic ethos of non-domination. An ethos can be thought of as a set of social attitudes that have become habituated through repetition and social reinforcement. An ethos cannot arise naturally but must be cultivated through engaging in particular practices. This idea has a long pedigree that can be tracked as far back as Aristotle's writings on civic virtue.[29] As part of what is described as prefigurative politics includes an emphasis on the need to develop capacities through engaging in practices in the here and now, the radical republicans and revolutionary socialists can be labelled as 'prefigurative' in this sense of the term.

However, there are different meanings of 'prefigurative' and not all are compatible with my understanding of a realist politics or of revolutionary socialism. Raekstad[30] identifies three different senses of prefiguration. The first can be thought of as a kind of foreshadowing, which has its roots in a religious usage – Moses prefigured Christ – and it is something that can be determined only retrospectively. This is a different usage to the sense I am interested in here. There is another broader sense, associated with the New Left and New Anarchism, where 'prefiguration' means living how one would live as if one had already achieved liberation. This refers to the kind of utopianism – one that ignores political conflict and historical context and constraint – that I rule out as failing to meet my realism demand. But where 'prefigurative politics' is understood – thirdly – as

[29] Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethic*s Book 2

[30] Paul Raekstad. "Revolutionary Practice and Prefigurative Politics: A Clarification and Defense." Constellations 25 (2018) 359-272

"the strategic commitment to developing revolutionary organizations that embody the structures of deliberation and decision-making that a post-capitalist society to contain.",[31] there is a strong crossover with the themes and questions examined within this Thesis.

A possible objection that could be raised at this point is that this prefigurative activity requires a kind of bootstrapping that would not be possible to achieve in practice. If, to get itself going, the establishment of a fully co-operative and democratic society requires the pre-existence of something that is currently not in available, then we are stuck in a situation that cannot get itself off the ground. If the development of co-operative and democratic sensibilities requires the pre-existence of co-operative and democratic forms of action and organisation, and if there is no way to access these from within the present, then there is no way to bring them about.

This objection can be countered by noting that it is already possible to access the democratic capacities that socialism requires, but only in a latent or underdeveloped form. We can recall from my examinations of optimistic and pessimistic fatalism that the realist assumption of human behaviour I have been using includes tendencies not only to dominate and submit to domination, but also tendencies to resist domination and to co-operatively work together in non-dominating ways. Within the options available in present day society, there is already scope for developing and engaging in democratic practices and processes, for example in political and trade union work (this work could involve pushing for more democratic forms were these are missing or deficient), or in engaging community or self-education projects. It is through these kinds of activities that is possible for the right kind of capacities and know-how to be developed from within the general population. I will describe some possible real-world examples of what this type of activity looks like further on.

[31] Raekstad. Ibid. 363

Raekstad[32] also comments on the necessity of socialist organisational methods to develop the right kinds of powers and capacities, needs and drives, and forms of consciousness required for bringing a socialist revolution about. What I refer to as a co-operative ethos of non-domination, or as the socialist civic virtues, are the same as these capacities, needs and drives that are identified by Raekstad. I will comment on these in order.

For Raekstad, the democratic capabilities that are required for the operation of a democratic co-operative commonwealth are like a set of skills that have to be learnt through practice, rather than a set of facts that can be passively received and then acted upon without the need to develop the right capacities beforehand. Discussion of this idea is a recurrent theme throughout the whole of the following sections. In the individual chapters on each of the three currents of revolutionary socialism I examine and asses how each saw their particular methods and strategy as being the most effective way of developing these capacities.

As well as possessing the capabilities to organise democratically, a socialist movement must also be able to cultivate and grow the desire for participation in such democratic structures. Raekstad argues that while the reasons that initially draw people into organisations may be extrinsic (such as a desire to defend or improve working conditions, or to work against a perceived injustice), the experience of participating in deliberative and democratic decision-making processes will help foster and develop a desire to continue organising in this way, since the experience alters how people view themselves and the expectations they hold. As the organisations themselves already embody the kinds of practice that are required for democratic co-operation, they help concretise the co-operative end goal. Organising in a hierarchical manner would not provide the kind of frame of reference necessary for judging the success, possibility, or desirability of such forms of democratic organisation.

[32] Raekstad. Ibid.

Like Raekstad, my claim is that what draws people to organisations is largely extrinsic. I argue that the desire to avoid domination functions as a key extrinsic motivator. This claim is a negative one, it is the desire to avoid domination which acts as the stronger motivator. Rather than being about seeking to realise of a type of positive freedom, democratic participation is seen as the means of securing freedom – where freedom is understood as non-domination and democratic contestation understood as the instrumental means of preventing arbitrary interference.

However, there is an empirical question to be addressed here. Where such forms that could be described as prefigurative have been taken up, they have not led to an exponential or rapid growth in socialist ideas. For example, the participants in the German councils quickly decided to hand political power back to a representative parliament, and the assemblies of Occupy faded away without creating any lasting organisational or normative legacy. The failure of these movements can be put down to the strength of countervailing forces or the weakness of particular strategies and forms of organising. 'Prefigurative' organising need not be tied up with specific forms, such as workers councils or 'consensus decision making', just to the general idea that the kinds of activities engaged in need to be nurturing of the kinds of relations and capacities required for the desired end state. Arguing that a successful revolutionary socialist movement must adopt prefigurative methods is not at all the same thing as arguing that every organisation that uses such methods will be successful.

For Raekstad, consciousness – meaning theoretical knowledge (knowing that) – is different from the capacities (knowing how) and drives (wanting to) discussed above. The necessary capacities and drives cannot be reduced to pure theoretical knowledge nor substituted by it. A prefigurative consciousness would be one that has an understanding not only of the relevant theoretical knowledge, but also of how this knowledge is practically related to the development of capacities and drives. It must know not only what to do, but how and why. The difference between pure theoretical knowledge and practically developed capacities is discussed at various points throughout

the Thesis. As the Impossibilists could be seen as being the closest to failing to recognise the importance of this distinction there is a fuller discussion in section 5.2.

This idea of emancipation as the self-development of capacities is nicely illustrated with an analogy that contrasts a 'storming the fortress' model of socialist revolution, and a 'friendship' model of socialist revolution.[33] In the storming the fortress model, socialism can be achieved once certain barriers (ideological, personal, or material) are forcefully overcome. In the friendship model, socialism can only be achieved through the development of a certain kind of democratic sensibility. We can say that forging a friendship can only be done through friendly means, while a fortress can be stormed through any means that result in the overpowering of its defenders.

> Now suppose I want you to be my friend. I threaten you that, if you don't become my friend, I'll shoot you. In return for your friendship, I offer to give you money, drive your car, buy you presents, make you famous. None of this will make you my friend. Sure, you might feign friendship. But I'm not your friend; quite the contrary. So we won't arrive at friendship by any means whatsoever; to get there, we can employ certain means only. More succinctly: the end of friendship constitutively constrains the means. [...]
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> […] To get to socialism, we can employ certain means only. Sure, we might feign socialism. But as long as democracy is not reflected in our parties, unions, and strike

[33] Nicholas Vrousalis. "Revolutionary Principles and Strategy in the November Revolution: The case of the USPD." In *The German Revolution and Political Theory*, edited by Gaard Kets and James Muldoon, 126-129. New York: Routledge, 2022. Tangentially related is the shared etymological relation of 'free' and 'friendship'. This root shows us that the idea of freedom as a status relation, rather than a range of action, has long historical basis. Douglas Harper, "Free (Adj.)," *Online Etymology Dictionary*, accessed April 13, 2024. http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=free.

> committees—not to speak of workplaces and markets—we'll never get there. It therefore won't matter how many fortresses we take, or how many intellectuals we persuade and hegemonise, unless we do it the right way. […] [34]

The idea is not that socialism can only be achieved once everyone is one friendly terms, but that the kind of society that socialism is, reflects the types of means that can be used to achieve it. From this we can see that the meaning of socialist revolution and its requirement for the unity of means and ends had different meaning for thinkers from the three currents than it did for those such as Lenin.[35] For Luxemburg, Pannekoek and Kautsky,[36] socialist revolution was a democratic affair with the party playing an educational role that would help the working class to succeed in its own spontaneous activity. For Lenin, the role of the party was to lead on the behalf of the working class in a task that it would not attempt on its own.

The friendship model gets us some way in explaining why a proletarian self-emancipatory movement cannot use domination as a means, but we still need to further explain why proletarian emancipation must take the form of collective self-activity. The need for self-emancipation relates to the kind of society that socialism is and the kinds of capacities that are required for it to function. Socialism is a society collectively ruled by the associated producers and done so in a way which does away with the hierarchical division of labour – a society without classes. It is only by engaging

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[34] Vrousalis. Ibid. 127.

[35] The 'storming the fortress' analogy comes from Gramsci.

[36] Kautsky, like Lenin, thought that socialist theory had to introduced to the working class from the outside, by specialist intellectuals. But, unlike Lenin, he thought that a socialist revolution could only be achieved through democratic means; once the proletariat had become aware of socialist theory it would be able to develop and use it on its own accord. Kautsky was against the minority dictatorial methods of the Bolsheviks and spent the last years of his life criticising the direction of the Russian Revolution.

in democratic processes, first within the organisations that propagate and develop socialism and then through the transformation of the whole society, that these capacities can be developed. You can only achieve friendship through friendly means, but you can only get good at making friends by developing the capacities needed to do it, through practical self-experience – no one else can make friends for you on your behalf. Similarly, if socialist revolution and proletarian self-emancipation is the majority learning how to run society for its own benefit in a way that removes class distinctions there is no room for imposed schemes from the outside, the capacities needed for doing it have to be learnt by those that will be using them.

Recent commentary on Marx has been making this point more explicit. For example, Lea Ypi commented;

> Winning the battle of democracy demands that the oppressed control the conditions of their own emancipation. The contribution of political education to self-liberation consists in the learning process that democratic political activism makes available, not in reliance on the alleged competence of those who claim to know better. The contribution of political agency to just rule consists in establishing authoritative processes of impartial decision-making that ensure that one's will joins that of others in institutions that give everyone a say over how coercive power is exercised. There is no before and after the revolution when it comes to expressing the political agency of the oppressed in the construction and maintenance of a democratic constitution. Therefore, contrary to what the early communists advocated (as well as to many later

> interpretations), there is no way to sidestep or neglect the consent, endorsement, and full involvement of the oppressed themselves in overcoming their own oppression.[37]

Unfreedom, for the proletariat, consists in being politically and economically dominated. Its freedom is gained by achieving a situation of non-domination. As non-domination can only be maintained through democratic and collective self-rule, and as this self-rule requires the utilisation of certain participatory capacities which must be developed and honed through practice, proletarian emancipation itself must therefore be a self-directed and self-developing task which develops these capacities as it progresses. Because of what the proletariat is, and because of what its emancipation involves, it's gaining of freedom can only be one that can be collectively arrived at.

3.2 Why the focus on the proletariat? Why not some other category?

> The proletariat, the lowest stratum of our present society, cannot stir, cannot raise itself up, without the whole superincumbent strata of official society being sprung into the air.[38]

With regards to a socialist revolution, the proletariat is the only group within present-day society that has, on its own accord, both the motive and means for bringing about a such total transformation of the mode of production. Groups based around, for example, gender or ethnic identity will include both members of the capitalist and proletariat classes, and the capitalist element of these groups does not have the motive for seeking their own self-abolition. However,

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[37] Ypi, Lea. "Democratic Dictatorship: Political Legitimacy in Marxist Perspective." *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 24, no. 3 (2016): 282

[38] Marx, and Engels. "Manifesto of the Communist Party." Chapter 1. Marxists Internet Archive. Accessed May 26, 2023. www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1848/communist-manifesto/ch01.htm.

this does not mean that socialist revolution does not simultaneously require the overcoming of forms of discrimination associated with gender and ethnicity, but that the type of united and democratic action that proletarian revolution requires goes beyond claims for equal treatment within the existing system of exploitation. As the majority of women and marginalised groups are proletarians there is no tension between the goal of proletarian self-emancipation and the goal of increasing the freedoms of these groups – both are mutually dependent.[39]

Workers have the motive because their relation to capital is one of being dominated (once in the workplace the worker must obey the wishes and commands of the employer ultimately regardless of their own wishes or desires).[40] This is not to say that all workers are constantly interfered with, or always totally deprived of control – it is possible for a worker to be dominated and yet still have a broad degree of choice and autonomy in how to conduct the working day. Domination is usually understood as existing in the capacity of another to arbitrarily interfere,[41] not in the actual presence of interference – domination being more like a relation, rather than an action. Emancipation is the removal of this possibility, the gaining of a status within a society. For an individual proletarian this domination may, or may not be, experienced consciously or clearly, but the becoming aware of it and developing an understanding its origin represent the key reasons for wanting socialism. Domination, like deprivation or humiliation, is a universal bad and those that suffer it will have – at least on some level – the desire to be rid of it.

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[39] For a recent work on the relation of class-based domination, race and gender see; Lillian Cicerchia "Why Does Class Matter?" *Social Theory and Practice* 47, no. 4, (2021): 603-627

[40] It is true that the action of the capitalist is also constrained by capital, in that they have to meet the demands of the market if they wish to successfully remain being capitalists. But as their position at the top of society gains material advantages it seems unlikely that they would, on the whole, wish to do away with them.

[41] Philip Pettit *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997 52-58

The proletariat have the means because, firstly, they form the largest group within society; and, secondly, they are the section of society whose physical and mental activities materially produce and reproduce society. This section of society is already the one that conducts and co-ordinates productive activity and one which, with the appropriate form of collective action, could be overcome.

Emancipation from slavery and emancipation from serfdom were things that were, often, granted from above, but while emancipated slaves and serfs find themselves as being in the position of being able to freely sell their labour, they are also in the position of that being the only thing they do possess. They become proletarians. 'Proletarian self-emancipation' refers to the freeing of the proletariat from the condition of being a proletarian; in other words, it refers to the proletariat's self-abolition. Just as the emancipation of slaves meant the abolition of the category of person 'slave', the emancipation of the proletariat means the abolition of the proletariat as a category that exists within society. But as social classes are relational categories, and as the continued existence of capitalist societies requires the continual reproduction of capitalist and wage labourer as social categories, the end of the proletariat would mean the end of capital owning class. It is impossible to have a capital owning class without a proletariat. Since capital (understood as self-valorising value, i.e., abstract wealth that begets more wealth by being thrown into circulation) is dependent on the purchase of labour-power (people's capacity to labour, sold as a commodity) for its reproduction and expansion. If no one – more specifically, no social group in society – is dependent on the sale of their labour-power to survive (and is not deprived of the means of production), then there is no one that will sell their capacity to labour and no way for capital to reproduce itself. In an emancipated society means of production and labour exist, but no longer in the social form of capital and wage-labour/labour-power.

In sum, emancipation doesn't just mean that proletarians will be given more freedoms within the context of a capital-based form of society; it mainly means that the context itself will be

transformed and there will be no people who can be classed as proletarians. It means the former proletarian class will now collectively be able to live by directly having access and control of societies' means of production.

3.3 What could this look like in practice?

Proletarian self-emancipation can be thought of in two aspects: First, the gaining of conscious knowledge – the proletariats' collective self-realisation of its position in society coupled with a realisation that changing it is both possible and desirable – and second, the gaining of practical abilities, the knowing how of putting into practice of these ideas and desires. Proletarian emancipation is not something that has occurred. There are no fully realised real world examples to refer to. Still, we can still look for partial examples in history – from times where working-class movements succeeded in establishing strong countercultures that began to, at least partially, develop these forms of conscious knowledge and practical democratic albitites.

A commonly referred to first example is that of the Paris Commune, famously described by Marx as 'the political form at last discovered under which to work out the economical emancipation of labor.'[42] The shape of this form was:

> […] municipal councillors, chosen by universal suffrage in the various wards of the town, responsible and revocable at short terms. […] The Commune was to be a working, not a parliamentary body, executive and legislative at the same time.[43]

The council communists made much of the association with councils and recallable delegates of the commune, often using the 'form at last discovered' phrase to refer to the workers councils. But

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[42] Karl Marx. "The Civil War in France." Marxists Internet Archive. Accessed May 25, 2023. www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1871/civil-war-france/ch05.htm.

[43] Ibid.

the principle of mandated and recallable delegates can be used in a variety of organisational forms, and the Paris Commune was not organised in a way that could be described as a workers' council because the organisation was instead by municipality.

Another historical example could be seen in Spain in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.[44] On their own initiative, groups of workers set up various informal education networks, where they would teach each other how to read. The texts they would use would include a wide array of anarchist and socialist newspapers (in Spain it was the anarchist texts that were most popular) as well as books about sciences and other topics. One of the reasons working class men and women would teach themselves to read was so that they could read the publications of the anarchist press and would learn about their social position and aspirations to change it. Here we have an example of people, who, because of their experience of a shared position in society, sought to understand and overcome it. This educative and cultural effort penetrated into the general ethos to the extent that working class organisations were able to mount a successful response against the military uprising of 1936 and began, in however of an undeveloped and incomplete manner, to put their ideas into practice.

A similar parallel society of workers' organisation could also be observed on the other side of the Atlantic with the multitude of newspapers, educational and cultural groups organised by the labour union the Knights of Labour in the USA and Canada. For a certain period of time, it would have been possible for a worker to submerge their whole cultural life within organisations that were critical of capitalist social relations and consciously sought proletarian emancipation. The Knights did not have the same economic analysis as the revolutionary socialists; and one of the factors that

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[44] David Ortiz, Jr. Redefining Public Education: Contestation, the Press, and Education in Regency Spain, 1885-1902 *Journal of Social History* 35, no. 1 (Autumn, 2001): 73- 94

James Michael Yeoman. *Print Culture and the Formation of the Anarchist Movement in Spain*. AK Press 2023.

contributed to their demise (besides physical and legal repression) was the fact that the workers co-ops they set as the means of this emancipation were not in the long-run able to economically compete with larger capitalist enterprises.[45]

As these examples demonstrate – when self-emancipation is viewed as being a process of development of capacities and propensities, revolutionary activity can be understood – not as preparing for a coup d'état or political conquest – but as an attempt to nurture and propagate a certain kind capacity in the form of an ethos. Free co-operation is a tendency in human behaviour, but as it is not the only one. It has to be nurtured and social structures and attitudes built to assist its flourishing. Through the development of this ethos, which takes the shape of a general culture of solidarity and resistance against domination, we have a reason to think that the type of collective action needed to create and sustain a new form of society could become a possibility. In the concluding chapter I will elaborate how this ethos of non-domination can form the basis for an overlapping consensus in a situation of moral pluralism.

4. Theoretical and methodological background. Real politics; conflict and order.

Having described the political currents, their assumptions and methods, and the tests I will running against them, I will now elaborate further on the theoretical background I will be drawing

[45] Alex Gourevitch. *From Slavery to the Cooperative Commonwealth. (*Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015) 161-162, 165-166.

Alex Gourevitch. “Solidarity and Civic Virtue. Labour Republicanism and the Politics of Emancipation in Nineteenth-Century America”. In *Radical Republicanism: Recovering the Tradition's Popular Heritage*, ed Bruno Leipold, Karma Nabulsi, and Stuart White (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020) 149 – 171

Michael J. Sandel, *Democracy's Discontent*, new ed. (Cambridge, MA and London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2022) 101-105

upon while doing this analysis. I will further explain how and why I am claiming that politics is most fruitfully thought of as the management of conflict rather than the pursuit of consensus, and what this means with regards to the problems that socialism will have to solve or otherwise find some way of dealing with.

In developing my thesis, the approach I will be adopting is one that is in line with what in the recent literature has come to be described as 'political realism', notably, the versions championed by Bernard Williams and Raymond Geuss.[46] Modern day political realism can commonly be understood as standing in a dichotomous relationship with political moralism. Political moralists, of which utilitarians and social contract theorists are the main types, see politics as an arena for applying a prior conceived set of moral values. For them, political philosophy is taken as a branch of applied ethics, its task seen as advising states on how to act in order to best achieve, or to move towards, certain ideals. The realist dissatisfaction with this approach is multifaceted, but essentially comes from a judgement that to treat politics as a branch of applied ethics misses what is distinctive about politics.[47] The moralists see politics as the application of principles that have been agreed upon from a presupposed (or hypothetical) initial position of consensus, the realist approach sees politics as, amongst other things, a permanent negotiation between opposing moral claims. Therefore, for realists, politics is about making binding decisions when there remain deep disagreements, including ones about morality. The realists argue that, in modern societies, it is through the successful negotiation of political problems that society is able to provide a degree of

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[46] The important foundational texts are Williams *In the Beginning was the Deed*, and Geuss *Philosophy and Real Politics*. The positions of Williams and Geuss have both similarities and differences, but for my purposes here, I am mainly concerned with the similarities. When the differences matter, I will highlight them.

[47] Matt Sleat, "Liberal Realism: A Liberal Response to the Realist Critique." *The Review of Politics* 73, no. 3 (2011): 471.

order and security, and that without the provision of these goods, other values, such as justice or fairness, would not be achievable. Seeing politics as a distinct sphere of human activity means that we can think of specifically political goods, particularly those of order and security. All forms of human society, whether prehistoric, pre-modern or modern, need to develop some kind of social mechanism for the maintenance of their social order. This thesis is concerned with the question of what kinds of claims (ethical or otherwise) can be made about these mechanisms in a world where some important disagreements about values will remain insoluble.[48] The study of these mechanisms – namely politics – is concerned with the nature of conflict, the character of legitimacy, and how people can live together without their being one single agreed upon conception of human well-being.

Politics, thus understood, is not applied ethics, though it may draw on ethical considerations. Applied ethics is about recommending courses of action that lead towards a specific good. Politics is about having to make binding decisions when there is, often, no agreement about what the 'good' may be. The historically embedded nature of politics makes it different to applied ethics (as understood in terms of ahistorical principles). Saying that politics is not a form of applied ethics is not the same thing as saying that ethics plays no role in politics. For example, in judging their political institutions as legitimate or not, members of a society may have to draw on some other ethical principles – for instance, to view a political office as corrupt entails having some kind of moral account of what corrupt behaviour looks like.

Another important aspect of political realism is its contextualism: political situations do not occur in a timeless and disembodied realm; why and how people do things the way they do them now, is the result of the outcomes of political conflicts that have played out in the past and is

[48] Edward Hall, *Value, Conflict, and Order – Berlin, Hampshire, Williams, and the Realist Revival in Political Theory*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press) 2020: 16

historically, and culturally specific.[49] Likewise, people's political beliefs are largely shaped by contingent events and processes that happened in the past. Realist politics, rather than beginning by ascribing how things ought to be, must start with the way social and political institutions actually function and what actually motivates people to action in a given society at a given time.[50] If we want to understand a political situation, we need to know something about the historical context of it, what factors have led the people to the point that they are now.[51] For this reason, realist theorising has to be not only historically informed, but self-reflective: conscious of how the values of the status-quo may affect choices within the theorising process itself as well as within the institutions and situations within which people do politics.

Political realism has been criticised, by those favouring approaches based on morality, for abandoning normative theory and becoming pure description.[52] This seems to rest on a misunderstanding, one that is important to clear up before progressing. The confusion comes from a

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[49] This historically sensitive approach to politics is matched by methods used by those working in the field of the history of ideas; "[…] against all those neo-Kantian projects of our time in which we encounter an aspiration to halt the flux of politics by trying definitively to fix the analysis of key moral terms. I continue to harbour a special prejudice against those who, in adopting this approach, imagine an ideal speech situation in which everyone (everyone?) would make the same moral and cognitive judgements. There are no moral and cognitive judgements which are not mediated by our concepts, and it seems to me that even our most apparently abstract concepts are historical through and through." Quentin Skinner *Visions of Politics Volume 1: Regarding Method* (2002): 177.

[50] Geuss, *Philosophy and Real Politics*, 9.

[51] Geuss, Ibid. 13. Bernard Williams, *In the Beginning Was The Deed* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2005), 25-26.

[52] A description and criticism of this "strong" conception of realism is in Hall, *Value, Conflict, and Order – Berlin, Hampshire, Williams, and the Realist Revival in Political Theory*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020) 170 - 174

common association with political realism of the international relations type exposed by mid-20th century thinkers (Carr, Morgenthau, Niebuhr, etc.). Realism of this type was associated with the thesis that politics is purely about power and political agents act only to protect or extend their power. Politics in this sense had *nothing* to do with the pursuit of ethical or moral goals. Realists, in the sense that we are using it here, do not deny the importance of values in politics (including ethical and moral ones) and do not claim to be free of value convictions themselves. What they are interested in is the historical context of these values, how values are shaped by politics itself, and how politics forms a distinct sphere of human interaction that is irreducible to ethics.

Therefore, the realist task is most interestingly thought of not as one of constructing a viewpoint from which we can assess politics without referring to ethics, but instead it can be conceived as thinking about what kinds of ethical claims can be made in the modern world where conflict of one kind or another is an ongoing feature and where absolute agreement on important values is not going to happen. It seems unlikely that any fully developed realist theory would opt to fully exclude ethical considerations from its analysis as this excludes a whole chunk of the real world from its analysis – the values that people hold in their heads as they engage in political action. It is an essential feature of realist analysis to think that moral beliefs are the product of historical conditions, rather than the product of our own purely autonomous reasoning. It is possible to accept this, yet at the same time consider if moral beliefs nevertheless stand up to reflective criticism. It is not necessary to reject all ethical positions wholesale and at a stroke.

Values, beliefs, and theories are important, and propagating them is a form of action, but what differentiates a political situation from a debating society is that in a political situation there is a pressure to choose a certain course of action (and doing nothing is itself a course of action). How groups are compelled to act now with imperfect information, underdeveloped understandings and limited options is what is of interest, rather than the working out what the most true or consistent

theory is regardless of the pressures of time.[53] Politics is conducted by agents that have limited powers, imperfect reasoning and knowledge, limited time and who are in a situation of opportunity cost (pursuing one course of action means that they cannot pursue another). In a political situation there is a pressure to act, and action always takes place in an imperfect situation where it is impossible to know all the facts or fully work out all the implications of an action. Politics is not an ideal contradiction-free situation, nor is it a logical maths puzzle that can be solved through *a priori* reasoning. Geuss describes politics as a craft, it is about working out how to live with compromise and imperfection. Rather than being on an irresistible course towards 'the good', politics is about the pursuit of what is good in actual concrete situations.[54] Summarising Williams, Hall writes; "we cannot illuminatingly determine how we should act by elaborating our favored utopian ideals, values, or virtues and simply imagining an empowered agent who can enact whatever we please".[55] There is little that could be learnt about politics by only focussing purely on abstract principles. Context is crucial since politics is about the negotiation of disagreement within specific circumstances and not the examination of values shorn from their contextual existence.

4.1. Politics, domination and coercion

Politics, on Williams' account, can be seen as being conceptually distinct from pure domination.[56] Because of this, a demand for non-domination can be understood as being belonging

[53] Geuss, Ibid. 11.

[54] Geuss, Ibid. 15-16.

[55] Hall. Ibid. 11.

[56] Robert Jubb and Enzo Rossi "Political Norms and Moral Values" *Journal of Philosophical Research*, no 40, 455-458 (2015)

to what Williams calls the 'pre-political'; it is a political value, something that constitutes one of the basic conditions that must be met before we can speak of achieving a political situation.

> The situation of one lot of people terrorizing another lot of people is not per se a political situation: it is, rather, the situation which the existence of the political is in the first place supposed to alleviate (replace).[57]

This does not mean that politics is a situation where all coercion is absent, only that within a political community arbitrary interference is disallowed – in short, I am reading Williams as subscribing to a republican conception of politics (or at least as someone whose views on politics can be harnessed for republicanism).[58] The practice of politics is compatible with the practice of (non-arbitrary) coercion – in fact the considered application of coercion could be seen as one of the core tasks of politics itself.

As already mentioned, someone (or some group) is dominated when they can be arbitrarily interfered with according to the will of another.[59] It is this question of arbitrariness that distinguishes domination from other forms of interference. Interference can be thought of as some kind of intentional intervention that alters or limits choices. An act of interference could be understood as not being arbitrary in two ways:

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[57] Williams (2005) 5

[58] There are many striking parallels, for example, "The basic sense of being unfree is being in someone else's power" (Williams, Ibid. 61). See also, Thom Brooks "Bernard Williams, Republicanism, and the Liberalism of Fear" *Theoretical and Applied Ethics*, Vol 1, No.3, 57-60 (2011)

[59] The paradigm example of a relation of domination is that between a slave and the master; "The dominating party can practice interference, then, at will and with impunity: they do not have to seek anyone's leave and they do not have to incur any scrutiny or penalty." (Pettit 1997, 22)

(1) procedural terms: it is non-arbitrary if it follows a set of predictable and pre-determined rules.

(2) in substantive terms: it is non-arbitrary to the extent in which it sufficiently considers and tracks the interests of those to which it is applied.

Taken individually, each of these would allow for situations that are incompatible with freedom as non-domination – those of benevolent dictators and the tyranny of the majority. A purely substantive understanding could accommodate a benevolent dictator who only interfered in a way that was in line with the interests of the community. And a purely procedural account, where predictability is all that matters, could allow for tyrannies of either majority or the minority, as long as these were predictable and rule-based.[60] Following Pettit, I claim that we have non-domination when we have actions that are both procedurally and substantively non-arbitrary. This dual non-arbitrariness is achieved by ensuring that those who are subject to rules also have an adequate means of contesting them and have their actual interests tracked. This demand makes republicanism different from populist and pure majoritarian accounts of democracy. On majoritarian views, so long as the majority view prevails, there is no reason for concern. The republican concern for non-domination means that interests must be tracked, including those of minorities. For non-domination, such minorities must not be placed in a position of where they are constantly unable to defend their interests against a numerically larger majority.[61]

When it comes to coercion, the republican understanding is very different to the liberal account which is the most commonly used at the present time. On the liberal account, freedom is understood as non-interference and therefore any occurrence of interference will always be to the detriment of freedom. However, on the republican account, there could be interference but so long as this

[60] Eric MacGilvray *The Invention of Market Freedom* (Cambridge University Press, 2011) 50-52

[61] Pettit. Ibid. 144-146

interference originates from a non-arbitrary source there would be no corresponding loss of freedom. As coercion is just interference of a specific type, one that operates through threats, sanctions, or the use of force, what can be said about interference and freedom in general can also be said about it. As the republican account allows for non-arbitrary interference without their being a loss of freedom, coercion too can coexist with freedom so long as the type of coercion is of the non-arbitrary kind. Some degree of coercion is necessary in every political society since, in the absence of a moral consensus, decisions need to be made binding and some recourse to a greater force may be needed. While on liberal accounts this coercion would be seen as a necessary restriction of freedom, on the republican account there is no clash or contradiction between freedom and non-arbitrary coercion. For republicans it is not the absence of interference that signifies freedom, but an absence of domination. Mere awareness of the possibility of arbitrary interference is enough to be a limit on freedom since it causes agents to alter and restrict their behaviours.

4.2. Politics, power and ideology.

Beliefs that are formed through the influence of power structures can be called ideologies, but 'ideology' can be thought of in at least three ways: either (1) as a plain descriptive term for the collected beliefs and concepts of a particular society, or (2) in the pejorative sense of 'false consciousness', or (3) ideology in the positive or prescriptive sense, in the sense that Lenin counterposes 'proletarian ideology' against 'capitalist ideology'.[62] Radical realist analysis is mainly concerned with ideology in the sense of 'false consciousness', in that people may have been manipulated into having beliefs that they would not have held otherwise. Though this concern about ideological bias is not only held by the more radical realists. For example, Williams does not draw

[62] Raymond Geuss *The Idea of a Critical Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981) 4-26

radical conclusions from his realism but his concern for ideological bias forms the basis of his 'Critical Theory Principle' which I will outline below.

When we are talking about politics, we have to be talking – according to realists – about power.[63] We have politics when groups within a society are trying to pursue their interests (apparent or otherwise) in a situation of competing or differing claims and interests. When one groups realises their interests, this may be to the disadvantage or expense of another. As some options can only be pursued by a society at the exclusion of others, some people may have to do things that they would have not done otherwise. Political decisions mean that people may be compelled to act in certain ways, but politics differs from pure domination insofar as the ways in which people have to modify their behaviour have to be made acceptable in some way to the people compelled to do them. So, politics is not just power; it is power that is legitimated[64] or constrained[65] in a specific way. In order to realistically understand how a society functions we have to understand how people's behaviours are being shaped and we have to understand something about the reasons given for the legitimation or acceptance of these conditions. In short; "To think politically is to think about agency, power, and

[63] There are many ways of thinking about power. To go into detail here would require more space than could be given. For some realist analysis of power see Raymond Geuss. *History and Illusion in Politics.* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press) 2001, 21-31. Geuss. *Philosophy and Real Politics*. 27-28, 50-54, Williams. *In The Beginning Was The Deed*. 4-6 and Hall *Value, Conflict, and Order – Berlin, Hampshire, Williams, and the Realist Revival in Political Theory*. 16.

[64] Williams, *In The Beginning Was The Deed* 4-6

[65] Prinz, J. & Scerri A. From politics to democracy? Bernard Williams' basic legitimation demand in a radical realist lens. *Constellations*, 1-16. (2023)

interests and the relations among these"[66]; and these kinds of consideration boil down to the question, "Who does what to whom for whose benefit?".[67]

So political realism is not merely a surface level descriptive account of what political actors do, it is also concerned with thinking about why actors behave in the ways they do. It is concerned with examining power and entails thinking about how this power shapes and affects what people value and believe, and how values and beliefs might be different in the absence of this influence.

Where there is interference there has to be – according to Williams – some way of demonstrating its legitimacy, and this cannot "simply be an account of successful domination". Which types of legitimation stories people will find acceptable will vary across time and space. Williams refers to these as having to "make sense" to the people living within certain forms of culture and society. The conditions of modernity (William's "here and around now") are such that justifications that rely on the idea of a natural or God-given authority are ruled out, and those that refer to some kind of democratic justification are acceptable. Williams' 'makes sense' is different to being comprehendible, it refers to the reasons given for the legitimation of social structures, and these must relate in some way to value systems that are commonly accepted within a political community at a particular point in its history. For example, the idea of the divine right of kings is comprehendible to people living in the modern world, as the theological worldview of medieval Christian Europe can be understood from a distance, but this does not mean that such ideas make sense to us now as a legitimation of political power. While Williams claims that it is only liberal democracy that can make sense to us here and around now, I claim that the values of republican

66 Geuss, *Philosophy and Real Politics.* 25.

67 Ibid.

freedom and non-domination can also be used to meet his demands for a legitimising justification, and I thereby widen the scope of acceptable political solutions to include socialist republics.

Bernard Williams talks of a 'Critical Theory Principle', which concerns that what appears as consent may only be superficially so. Legitimacy is always a normative evaluation, but for Williams the legitimacy of a state is not granted by comparing its actions against a particular set of pre-conceived values but by the fact that it has secured order in a way that has popular approval.[68] Williams Critical Theory Principle is concerned with the causes of this approval. A state that gains approval by duping or manipulating public opinion would fail the critical theory test. The insight of Williams' Critical Theory Principle is that there is "something wrong with trying to justify a sociopolitical system through a normative commitment that is itself a direct product of the coercive power relations within that system".[69] If legitimacy is only achieved through people's beliefs and preferences being manipulated by power, is it really legitimacy at all? For realists like Williams and Geuss, the answer is in the negative.

The concern that unexamined ideological bias can form a part of people's thinking is also one of the reasons that the realists argue against political moralism. In moralist thinking, present day ethical norms are often taken as a given, without adequately considering how these preferences have been formed and how influential the presence of power has been in their creation. Positing ahistorical ethical first principles tend to project present day modes of thinking (which may turn out to be nothing more than our current prejudices and unexamined suppositions) into the past and the future. Instead of working from a presumption that an idealized situation of human nature and moral motivation can be (or already has been) reached, theorizing should be contextually situated and start

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68 Williams *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* 9-11

69 Janosch Prinz, and Enzo Rossi, "Political Realism as Ideology Critique." *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* 20, 3 (2017): 334–48.

from “a resolutely historical and sociological understanding, drawing on the concrete lessons we have learned about how human beings are in fact likely to act in various institutional settings”[70]

Similar to Williams Critical Theory Principle, Raymond Guess is interested in how ideological bias plays a role in legitimation stories. Geuss describes ideology as follows:

> […] a set of beliefs, attitudes, preferences that are distorted as a result of the operation of specific relations of power; the distortion will characteristically take the form of presenting beliefs, desires, etc., as inherently connected with some universal interest, when in fact they are subservient to particular interests.[71]

Guess claims that if ideologies in this sense exist there are at least two ways in that the concept could be related to political philosophy. Either political philosophy could serve to uncover ideological illusion (as in critical theory) or it could be that political philosophy itself plays an ideological role in society, making it harder to detect ideological distortions.

Revolutionary Socialist theory is typically understood as including some element of ideology critique, so its relation to political philosophy of this first kind should not be non-controversial. However, there are two other areas where its theory could be thought of as clashing with realism. Firstly, where realism assumes that the avoidance of social chaos necessarily involves the existence of hierarchical and coercive state institutions. This could be problematic as all the strands of revolutionary socialism, as will be shown in the following chapters, advocated the dismantling of these state institutions. And secondly, a concern about feasibility, a social revolution leading to socialism is generally not regarded as a feasible, and therefore realistic, strategy.

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[70] Hall *Value, Conflict, and Order – Berlin, Hampshire, Williams, and the Realist Revival in Political Theory,* 11

[71] Geuss, *Philosophy and Real Politics*, 52.

I will now explain how these two concerns can be met. I will do this by looking at mechanisms, other than hierarchical states, that can be used for maintaining social order and I will look to how questions of feasibility are connected to questions of power and ideology.

4.3. A hierarchical state as the essential provider of order.

As there is no singular inevitable, God-given, or 'natural' way for people to live together, and as there are immutable differences of interest and value (of varying importance or intensity) within societies, conflicts and disagreements (also of varying intensity and importance) will be a permanent feature of human social life.[72] This does not mean that human society is always on an irresistible course towards a conflict of all against all, but that the maintenance of predictable standards of intercourse within and between groups is a task that requires continual effort and maintenance. Society has to devise mechanisms for maintaining order so that these conflicts do not spiral out of control. The establishment of these mechanisms is not a once-off task but one that continually needs to be maintained. This is why realists see the maintenance of order as a continual problem, and why they think that political agreements must be continually renegotiated and enforced.

This idea finds its first written expression in Hobbes's *Leviathan*, a text which was written during a period of intense political strife and conflict – the English Civil War. The way that Hobbes sets up this problem to modern eyes takes the form of a prisoners' dilemma.[73] In short, the state is a

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[72] Edward Hall *Value, Conflict, and Order – Berlin, Hampshire, Williams, and the Realist Revival in Political Theory,* 10

[73] "For he that performs first has no assurance the other will perform after; because the bonds of words are too weak to bridle men's ambition, avarice, anger, and other Passions, without the fear of some coercive Power. … But in a civil estate, where there is a Power set up to constrain those that would otherwise violate their faith, that fear is no

necessary last resort in the enforcement of collective decisions, for without the possibility of sanctions, it would not always be rational for agents to reciprocate if they can gain benefits without doing something in return, even though not-reciprocating makes everybody worse off in the long run. Such conflict can also occur when a political actor seeks to forcefully impose their view or preferences upon others. This type of conflict can arise on the part of a single party, without warning, are potentially violent, resistant to logical argument, and in the long run largely unavoidable. This is an important problem because, as noted by Carlo Burelli:

> […] once someone unilaterally prompts a violent struggle, others are locked in it and cannot unilaterally de-escalate it. Thus, if one wants to defuse conflicts to prevent violence, the only solution is to rely on a larger force (i.e. public coercion) as a way to shift violence away from private relationships. [74]

Order is necessary as survival requires the cooperation of individuals, but without the presence of some greater social power that is able to wield coercive force, groups cannot overcome the tendency towards conflict and make their collective decisions binding. Therefore, the point of realism is a practical and not just a methodological one. Ignoring the possibility of violent conflict and the need for order (e.g. by using theories that rely on an abstract consensus) leads to recommendations that have no practical utility; "a good political theory is one that designs institutions that deal with the unavoidable recurrence of conflict and secure order."[75]

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more reasonable; and for that cause, he which by the Covenant is to perform first, is obliged so to do." Thomas Hobbes. Edited by Edwin Curley. *Leviathan*. (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett. 1994) 84-85

[74] Carlo Burelli "A Realistic Conception of Politics: Conflict, Order and Political Realism*." Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* 24, no. 7 (2021)

[75] Burelli, Ibid

The realists can be understood as offering a reminder of the obvious – that states of affairs require continual maintenance – and that, more specifically, peace and social order require continual effort and maintenance of a *particular* kind, that involves the finding and upholding of compromises. Political agreements can be thought of as *modus vivendi,* that is as arrangements of mutual compromise that are reached for the purposes of achieving social peace between parties that do not, initially at least, share common moral viewpoints. Over time political agreement may help bring about a moral agreement: people's morals are affected by how they live, and the shared way of life brought about through temporary agreement may help bring moral perspectives together. But this cannot be relied upon, and these kinds of agreements may remain stable only as long as the relative power between groups remains the same. As there is no overarching moral agreement to peg onto, and informal social pressure may not be a significant enough factor to encourage compliance, a recourse to coercion (or threats thereof) may be necessary.

Following this insight, Williams describes his first political question "that of securing order, protection, safety, trust, and the conditions of cooperation".[76] For Williams, the 'first political question' that a state must solve is that of securing order;

> I identify the 'first' political question in Hobbesian terms as the securing of order, protection, safety, trust and the conditions of cooperation. It is 'first' because solving it is the condition of solving, indeed posing, any others. It is not (unhappily) first in the sense that once solved, it never has to be solved again.[77]

But the securing of order is not the only thing a state needs to do. The state must secure order in a way that can be legitimated. Williams calls this the basic legitimation demand (BLD). The state

[76] Williams, *In the Beginning Was the Deed,* 3

[77] Ibid.

has to offer a justification of its power to each subject, power without justification is just pure domination or warfare, not politics. For Williams, the BLD is not a moral demand since it is not before politics, it arises out of political interests and situations not ethical principles. It is because of this particular delineation of the political that Williams and other realists are able to talk about the demands that arise from politics as having their own type of normativity that is different to those which they describe as being 'pre-political'. Demands for order, safety and legitimacy are foundational to what politics is, and without their satisfaction we would not be in a situation that enables us to pursue other values. To raise a demand for order and safety; "[…] does not represent a morality which is prior to politics. It is a claim that is inherent in there being such a thing as politics".[78]

However, radical realists question if legitimacy is the only way to distinguish politics from pure coercion.[79] Rather than thinking of legitimation solely as the alpha and omega of politics it can also be useful to think about it as a *constrained* form of coercion. While it is true that states do offer explanations aimed at individuals for what they do, they need not, and do not, do this all of the time. The need for legitimacy can be thought of as a relationship that exists between relatively equal people engaged in bargaining. But political relations are not a thing that only occurs between relatively equal agents. When faced with overwhelming force, it is rational for the less powerful to acquiesce in order to avoid the full force of coercion. At the same time, it is rational for the powerful to temper their recourse to coercion for fear of provoking vengeance or rebellion on the part of the powerless. Order and stability are in the interests of the powerful and this gives the powerful a motivation to hold back on their use of coercive force. Acquiescence, which on the

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78 Ibid.

79 Prinz, J. & Scerri A. "From politics to democracy? Bernard Williams' basic legitimation demand in a radical realist lens." *Constellations*, 0-0. (2023)

surface may look no different than acceptance, is a response to a bad situation, in order to make it less bad – the less powerful may choose to put up with a certain level of subjugation at the expense of avoiding a more unrestrained coercion. Excess coercion removes the reason for acquiescence, for when faced with unconstrained coercion it becomes more rational for the powerless to seek to rebel. And rebellion gives the powerless a reason to collectively combine in order to concentrate themselves as a competing power block. Politics as understood in this way, as a struggle between competing claims for power which results in certain patterns of compromise and forbearance, means that 'politics' need not be tied to democracy nor legitimacy but instead to the constraint of coercive force. The powerful may have recourse to total coercion, but they choose not to use it for reasons of wanting to preserve social stability.[80]

Although Williams talks about order, he has surprisingly little to say about who is to be protected against whom, which 'order' it is to be preserved, and what conditions of cooperation are to be preserved. Certain ways of ordering a society will present different advantages and disadvantages to different sets of people. As order and stability are things that may be achieved at a cost, it is important to consider who it is that is bearing these costs. When a given society is taken to be in a state of order, it is important to ask the question *whom* this order actually serves. Order within a society may be dependent on disorder outside of it – peace and stability at the centre may be dependent on violent struggles over access to materials and trade routes at the margins. Order is always historically situated and understood and never all-encompassing. Isolated instances of unruliness, rule-breaking and violence, etc. are never entirely eradicated within or between

[80] This elite fear of revenge or retribution on the part of the impoverished masses is one of the reasons why some liberals were resistant to democracy and the idea of freedom as self-governance. If the (poor) majority were able to gain control of the state, they could use this power to confiscate the property of the powerful. Hence the liberal preference for 'freedom' as non-interference from the state.

societies, and order will not be experienced uniformly amongst all members of a society. It is also socially, geographically, and historically relative.[81]

The question of the necessity of a hierarchical state for maintaining this modus vivendi is one that is tackled by more radical realists. Williams' claims that the state is necessary for politics in general; as without the state, there is no politics, just raw conflicts over power. Paul Raekstad takes aim at Bernard Williams' 'realism constraint', which restricts realist conceptions of liberty to options that could be delivered by the state.[82] Particularly he looks at Williams' claim that the existence of a hierarchical state is a necessary condition for politics. Raekstad argues that the 'realism constraint', as Williams' advances it, is not internally coherent; his conception of what political agents are like 'now and around here' is based on an unnecessarily narrow and uncritical adoption of liberal norms and expectations. Raekstad thinks that Williams, along with many other liberals, conflate state government with governance in general. Raekstad writes:

> States are forms of governance, since they exert direction and control over the members of the community. But there are also stateless forms of governance, including communities which are collectively self-governing and communities which are ruled by a minority lacking a distinct structure of power and authority.[83]

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[81] For example, it has been noted by Karl Widerquist and Grant McCall (2015) that in 1970 the US murder rate was 7.9/100,000. At the same time, the murder rate for black males in Cleveland was 142.1/100,00. The most violent tribal society at the time was the Yanomamo, with a murder rate of 165.9/100,000. While the rate of murder is slightly higher in Yanomamo society, life in that society did not include the possibility of being jailed or sent to Vietnam. Therefore, it's possible that a black male would feel safer amongst the Yanomamo than in Cleveland.

[82] Paul Raekstad, "Realism, Utopianism, and Radical Values." *European Journal of Philosophy* 26, no. 1 (2018).

[83] Raekstad, Ibid., 13

For Raekstad, Williams views states as the sole form that is able to provide order and stability (Williams' first political question (henceforth 'FPQ')). Raekstad claims that there are other, non-state, forms of human organisation that are able to answer the FPQ, citing anthropological examples such as Native American societies. Raekstad claims that these types of non-state society also exhibit a kind of '[…] full blown politics, in the sense that (a) they have featured social organisation, coordination, and carrying out of actions, (b) employed some measure of coercion, (c) raised and answered demands for legitimation, and (d) successfully answered the FPQ'.[84] Raekstad argues that Williams use of 'state' implies a hierarchical power relationship over its subjects, and, as these kinds of indigenous societies did not have a hard distinction between rulers and ruled, Raekstad classifies them as non-state.[85]

Nevertheless, Raekstad thinks that Williams can offer a defence to this. It could be claimed that while there are non-state answers to the FPQ, the state is an essential feature of modernity. Realist political conceptions have to be aimed at real concrete agents, not disembodied choosers, and Williams thinks that 'for us here and now' only liberalism can provide satisfactory answers to the question of legitimacy. The kinds of non-state societies that have existed in the past would not meet the conditions for legitimacy in modernity, they would not make sense to political agents as they are today.

Raekstad denies this. He argues that, in modernity, there is actually a political current, namely anarchism, that rejects the state and has at times held significant influence and for a limited time actually has provided control and order in regions of geographical space (Ukraine in the Russian Civil War; Catalonia, Aragon and the Levant in the Spanish Civil War; and during the years of the Mexican revolution). Moreover, the shortness of these experiences was, arguably, due to competing

[84] Raekstad, Ibid. 12

[85] Raekstad, Ibid. 9

military forces, rather than internal contradictions of these ways of organising. Historically, anarchism held a considerable influence, though mainly in Latin-speaking countries, and at around the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century, it was a significant force in the labour movement.[86] Today there are various protest and activist groups which make a reference to at least some aspects of anarchism. Anarchism, then, seems to be an option that makes sense to at least some in modernity. Raekstad concludes that the "realism constraint" as Williams described it is valid for its own specific context, that of state legislation and policy making, but is too limited to be used for political theorising in general. The 'us and here around now' that Williams had in mind was too narrowly focused on liberal values, without there being any reason to restrict them in this way.

It is correct to claim that we can have something like politics proper without having to have a separate structure that we would today refer to as a state. Any theory that holds that it is impossible to have an ordered society without a state is empirically wrong. But all of these non-state societies have been small and stable and with a competitively low level of technological development. Therefore, a more interesting question to ask is this; Is it possible to have a large, complex and pluralist society without the need for a strong hierarchical state? Can modern technological societies adequately function without a specialised and separate body that is responsible for maintaining order? This is the challenge that a realistic and revolutionary socialism has to answer. If revolutionary socialism is to be compatible with realism, then it will be with more its radical forms

[86] The authors of *Black Flame,* a well-known history of the Anarchist movement, over inflate the influence of anarchism in this period as they overly conflate syndicalism with anarchism. To illustrate, the French revolutionary syndicalist union the CGT had in 1912 around 50% of the unionised working class as its members, of these there were a significant number of anarchists but the CGT itself was politically neutral and composed of several factions. It was not until the mid – late 1930's that the term 'anarcho-syndicalism' became predominant, but by then the global influence of syndicalism had started to wane. Baker. *Means and Ends*. 259

– ones that need not be bounded by status-quo affirming assumptions – that it has the most affinity. I will now explain in more detail what this radical form of realism is.

4.4 Feasibility and realism

Crudely, there appears to be a problematic trade-off between a theory's groundedness in facts about the status quo and its ability to consistently envisage radical departures from the status quo.[87] For those with a partial knowledge of political realism, it may seem strange to be trying to incorporate several radically transformative political theories into such a framework. Realism has been taken to have some kind of inbuilt (or perhaps even unconscious) tendency towards not veering too far from the status-quo, with radical departures being ruled out due to reasons of practicality. If this is correct, then the compatibility of revolutionary socialism and realism would be ruled out from the start. However, in this section, I will argue that there is no necessary or in-build leaning towards conservativism in realism.

A common reason that realism is often seen as having an inbuilt leaning towards conservatism is because of its association with feasibility.[88] But as was previously noted, realism is concerned with facts about power and how these facts contribute to the formation of belief; so, realism is best thought of as entailing a set of practical and methodological commitments that come about once we conceive of politics as being about power and the management of conflict. Part of these commitments involves paying attention to where normative beliefs, and especially those about what is possible, come from:

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87 Janosch Prinz and Enzo Rossi, "Political Realism as Ideology Critique." *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* 20,3): 2017

88 Galston, *Realism in Political Theory,* 400

> […] what counts as an adequate or 'realistic' […] must depend above all on our politics – on what kind of place we think the world is and should be – and cannot be simply read off some supposedly pre-political ideal of 'realism'.[89]

While feasibility may play some part in a realist examination of politics, it is not the only, or most important, factor. For example, Enzo Rossi[90] argues that depending on how realism is understood, there is a distinction between it and feasibility concerns (and, indeed, non-ideal theory which is concerned with how to best balance the demands of our ideals against the facts of the world as it is now – what it is feasible to achieve.). This distinction can be explained as follows.

Realism's perceived status-quo bias comes from its dependency on facts. Rossi argues that it is important to consider what kinds of facts are being focussed upon. He outlines three types of concern for realists, three distinct but idealised ways of focussing on the facts within realism, noting that most actual theories will incorporate elements of at least two. The three approaches are: (1) Ordorealism (concerned with facts about order and legitimacy – the need for order and stability), (2) Contextual realism (concerned with the interpretation of facts about the function of institutions and practices – the context and boundaries of the political), and (3) Radical realism (concerned with facts about power and the formation of belief – how power and ideology are intertwined). Each type gives a different priority to each of the questions, but how a problem is solved may involve a trade-off in respect to one or two of the others. For example, Williams' realism contains elements of all three types: Ordorealism in his focus on the first political question, contextual realism in his connection between modernity and liberalism, and his Critical Theory Principle forms the radical element of his theory.

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89 Lorna Finlayson, "With Radicals like These, Who Needs Conservatives? Doom, Gloom, and Realism in Political Theory." *European Journal of Political Theory* 16, no. 3 (2017): 264–82.

90 Enzo Rossi, "Being Realistic and Demanding the Impossible." *Constellations* 26, no. 4 (2019): 638–52

Radical realism and Ordorealism are connected in that they both see concepts of morality and justice as instruments used by a political authority to maintain order and control of the masses. They differ in that Ordorealism is focussed on the establishment of order, while the radical realist wants to find criteria for criticising the formation of beliefs that support authority. Ordorealism is the type of realism that is closest to non-ideal theory as its primary concern is order, which means that like non-ideal theory it is tied to options that are reachable from the status-quo (and, thus, feasibility concerns). Unlike non-ideal theory, the task of radical realism is not so much to realise an ideal in the world as it exists right here and now, but to examine how an apparent perception of legitimacy comes about, and rejecting it, if it is shown to be the product of a false consciousness or ideology. By concentrating on facts about the relationship of power and belief formation, radical realism allows itself to be open to transformational possibilities.

In conclusion to this section, realism need not limit its prescriptions to those that are immediately reachable from the status-quo. It is perfectly compatible with realist outlooks to think about and to put forward proposals for changing the status-quo, but these proposals, and the reasons given for wanting them, must be originated from considerations that are based on realist methodology (attention to history, psychology, economics, biology, etc., rather than pure moral positions, such as ‘justice’), so as not as to slip into political moralism. This rules out certain forms of utopian moralism. Specifically, fixed blueprints of a future society are ruled out because they do not take political conflict into account and how our values may be the product of the society we are living in.

To recap all of the preceding sections about a realist conception of politics: politics is about how a society makes decisions and lives together in conditions of permanent moral disagreement. This disagreement may give rise to conflict and the management of this conflict may involve an element coercion. The situations under which these conflicts occur are not freely chosen and are the

outcome of historically contingent processes. Part of what defines a situation is what people believe and value, and what people believe may be at least partially due to the influence of power. As perfect knowledge, universal agreement or perfect foresight are not possible, all actions are constrained, and the best outcome is always only one that is relative to a given situation. Politics is therefore about finding ways to act in these imperfect situations, and this may involve the application of coercion.

> For realists, coercion is not an obstacle to be removed or bypassed. The question of achieving political results without coercion (e.g. through consent) is ill posed. The art of politics just is, to a large extent, the art of coercing with good judgement – of distinguishing between good and bad coercion.[91]

Realism then is best thought of as something not leading to a singular political conclusion, but as a methodology and a set of practical considerations out of which multiple political positions can be drawn. The claim that I will be making in the following chapters is that that the types of revolutionary socialism I examine are, to at least some significant extent, compatible with radical forms of realism. As I will demonstrate, the concerns of those who formulated Revolutionary Socialist theory had more in common with realist concerns about dealing with questions of power, rather than those associated with the 'ethics first' approach of political moralism – of finding ethical first principles.

5. Logical reconstruction

I will now explain how my project relates these ideas about politics and the importance of conflict, contestation and historical contextualisation to the way in which the meanings and

[91] Prinz, Janosch, and Enzo Rossi. 2017. "Political Realism as Ideology Critique." *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* 20 (3): 334–48.

concepts contained within politics texts are understood. In order to answer a specific question, it is often necessary to draw on fragments from various texts written at different times and by different authors and with logical reconstruction reassemble them in a way that is compatible with the core intentions of its authors. Beyond what was actually said, it is also useful to consider what could have been said, given the core concepts and how they fit together. But this is always done with the risk of putting words in people's mouths, so I have taken care not to tread too far from positions that can be found in their published materials. What I have attempted to do when analysing texts from the various socialist currents is to look for ways in which the same concept may be being expressed in different language and ways in which a shared vocabulary may nevertheless be being used to express divergent conceptions. I have looked for commonalities and differences in how political concepts are being expressed in the same or different language and how they used and related to one another. In performing this kind of logical reconstruction, I have tried to establish what the central ideas are and reconstructed them as a coherent whole in order to answer a specific set of questions. Throughout this thesis I have tried to illustrate, with actual examples, positions that were taken and the arguments used to support them.

When reading and analysing political texts, it is important to realise that the meanings of terms and concepts contained within them cannot simply be read off, they need to be interpreted and reconstructed. This can only successfully be done by paying attention to the particular context the text was written in, and to the particular purpose the text was trying to fulfil. Political concepts are potentially formed of many components, more than can be included in a singular definition, and as there is no independent fact of the matter to refer to it will never be possible for an absolutely correct or shared definition to be reached. We have to appreciate that the meanings of political concepts are necessarily contested because of the nature of human language; thought is expressed in

words, but concepts do not match to words in a one-one relationship.[92] One word may refer to several concepts or the same concept could be expressed with more than one word. As words and phrases carry multiple meanings, and without a universally shared common external reference point it is impossible for all shared meanings to fully converge. In response to this, political theories (or ideologies on Freeden's understanding of the term)[93] arrange concepts in fixed patterns, and by determining how concepts relate to one another, they seek to prescribe and fix the meaning of the political concepts they contain.

It is important to examine how the content and meaning of the concept is determined by its relationship to the other concepts that it sits with; the meanings we are interested in are dependent on frameworks of interpretation rather than being intrinsic to words. Political theories themselves develop specialised concepts, but they are composed of other more simple or less all-encompassing concepts, and it is the way these concepts come together, what they mean in relation to each other, that makes each political theory distinctive; they set the meanings of concepts for their adherents, e.g., "this is what freedom *really* means".[94] So, with this in mind, the struggle to fix semantic meaning also turns out to be a political struggle, the meaning of words determines the content of concepts and concepts determine how people think about political possibilities.

6. Chapter breakdown

The following chapters will be arranged as follows. In Chapter Two, I will look at the theories and strategies of Impossibilist Social Democracy. My particular focus will on the question of mass

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92 W.B. Gallie "Essentially Contested Concepts", *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Vol.56, (1956), 167–198.

93 Michael Freeden. *Ideologies and Political Theory: A Conceptual Approach* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996) 1-9

94 Michael Freeden. *Ideology: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2003) 54-55

socialist consciousness – how and when it arises in a revolutionary process – and on the democratic transformation of the state – from a coercive body that sits over and above society for the purposes of preserving class society, into one in which all of its socially useful functions (including the coercive capacity to preserve order) are absorbed into society as a whole for the maintenance and co-ordination of co-operative production.

In Chapter Three, the focus in on Anarchist Communism, in particularly the question of the unity of means and ends – the need for non-hierarchical ends to be bought about through non-hierarchical means, and what this means for participation in the structures of representative democracy. I also look at how this need relies on the development of a culture of counter-dominance, such that a non-hierarchical society could draw upon a certain form of public coercion, one that develops out of a shared desire to avoid domination, as a means of protecting the security of its citizens and its horizontal order.

Chapter Four focusses on the German (and Dutch) left of the socialist movement and its later development into Council Communism. I analyse the proposition of Council Communists that workers councils arising during a revolutionary upheaval are the sole means of proletarian self-emancipation, since other forms of organisation such as traditional trade unions or political parties necessarily collapse into hierarchy and the emergence of new modes of domination.

Chapter Five is the conclusion. Here I draw elements of all the currents together and show how each partially addresses the problem of revolutionary change in conditions of permanent moral conflict. I offer a synthesis that incorporates elements from all in a way that is capable of meeting the combined challenges. I also show how the conception of freedom that underlies all of the three currents has strong parallels with republican freedom and how this form freedom allows for a political value that can be endorsed from multiple moral backgrounds.

Chapter Two. Impossibilist Social Democracy: Mass Socialist Consciousness and the Democratic Transformation of the State.

Introduction

In this chapter, I will describe how the 'Impossibilist' social democrats envisioned the kind of changes required to bring about socialism as they understood it, as a democratic and collectively self-ruling commonwealth. They saw these changes as requiring, not only the development of the productive forces to the point of being able to abundantly produce the material goods needed for life, but also as requiring the development of conscious understanding and democratic capacities on the part of those that would be responsible for achieving and maintaining such a form of society, the working class as a whole. The aim is to demonstrate how this idea is compatible with the realist conception of politics as described in the previous chapter, according to which, in a nutshell, politics is about the management of perennial moral conflict and cannot be based upon an assumption of the reaching of moral consensus.

I have chosen to run the historical account and theoretical explanation in parallel. This is to demonstrate how these ideas did not arise out of a vacuum or a seminar room, but were developed in response, and sometimes in anticipation of, problems that arose within the broader socialist movement as it tried to work towards a new kind of society but clashed with an environment that was unfavourable and hostile. The main task of this chapter will be to consider the realism and tyranny tests from the previous chapter and consider to what extent the political theories of the Impossibilists can be seen as meeting them.

The political theory of Impossibilism

> Impossibilism can be defined as a political theory based upon the assertion that a prerequisite for the establishment of socialism is a revolutionary understanding and desire (consciousness) by a working-class majority.[1]

The central thesis of the late ninetieth and early twentieth century socialist theories that came to be referred to (initially by those hostile to them) as 'Impossibilist' is the conception of socialist revolution as being a self-emancipatory act of a conscious majority of the working class. Arguments around the acceptance or rejection of this thesis were the terrain through which the distinction between 'Possibilism' and 'Impossibilism' was formed.[2] Rejecting the need (or possibility) for mass consciousness pushed the Possibilists towards more reformist and statist conceptions, meaning that the debate can be seen not just as one about strategy, but one about what socialism itself actually is. The main political parties that can be gathered under the Impossibilist category comprise:

- The Socialist Party of Great Britain (1905 – present day),
- The Socialist Labour Party (1903 – 1980),
- The Socialist Labor Party of America (1876 – present day, though seemingly inactive since 2008),
- The World Socialist Party of the United States (1916 – present day), and

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1 Stephen Coleman. *The Origin and Meaning of the Political Theory of Impossibilism.* PhD Thesis, University College London, 1984. 229

2 For example: Concilio Et Labore "Who Are the Impossibilists?" *Socilaist Standard*. 48. (1908). Last accessed 17th April 2024. www.worldsocialism.org/spgb/socialist-standard/1900s/1908/no-48-august-1908/who-are-the-impossibilists/

- The Socialist Party of Canada (1904 – 1925 and 1931 – present day).

The focus of this section will be on the Socialist Party of Great Britain as its programme came to be adopted by other Impossibilists groups and it represents the longest actively functioning of the groups.

A brief historical outline can help situate the debate and help us understand its broader ramifications. The terms 'Possibilism' and 'Impossibilism' originally came into usage in France in the 1880s and were imported into English though the influence of French socialist literature. Their origins lie in a split within the Fédération des travailleurs socialistes de France (FTSF). Following a poor response to an election campaign, there was a call to abandon 'all-at-once'[3] tactics, which were based on a certain understanding of Marxism, and to develop ones that were seen as being more pragmatic and focussing more on reforms. One side of the argument rejected the idea that mass-consciousness of socialist ideas was possible, and if mass-consciousness is required for socialism, then it follows that socialism itself is impossible – therefore there should be a change in tactics to ones that do not rely on the masses having an understanding of socialism. Those that supported the change in tactics were labelled 'possibilists' by their opponents. It was not long until the label 'Impossibilists' became used by the 'Possibilists' to describe their opponents (albeit it was initially more common for this camp to be referred to as 'the Marxists').[4] Although somewhat

[3] This reference to the 'all at once' appearance of socialism can also be found in *The German Ideology*; "Empirically, communism is only possible as the act of the dominant people 'all at once' and simultaneously, which presupposes the universal development of the productive forces and the world intercourse bound up with communism." (Marx and Engels. 1970. p 56). Although the founders of Impossibilism could not have read this text, as it was not published until the 1930's, it does show that the idea of a revolutionary transformation as a rapid rupture had been developing for some time.

[4] Stephen Coleman. Ibid. 6-7, see also "The Second International: The First Congress(es), 1889". Marxist Internet Archive. Accessed 20th April 2024. www.marxists.org/history/international/social-democracy/1889/index.htm

parallel, the Impossibilism / Possibilism divide should not be taken as equivalent to the division between reform or revolution. Reform or revolution refers to strategic positions, while Possibilism / Impossibilism relates to beliefs about the possibilities of mass-consciousness.[5] Judgements about the possibility, or not, of a mass transformation of consciousness represent not just one of the particular reasons why a given political strategy may be adopted but also effect the nature of what socialism or socialist revolution is seen as consisting of. On the minority consciousness view, 'socialism' became more like an act of social engineering implemented by specialists, on the majority conscious view it was understood as a self-directed and ongoing democratic reconstruction. The reform / revolution distinction relates to the degree or speed of change. The Possibilism / Impossibilsm distinction relates to how that change comes about and who is in control of it, which also has implications for the nature of the change itself. On the mass consciousness view, a complete and total socialist transformation could occur when, and only when, the majority agreed with the goal. On the minority understanding view, it was only through the manipulation of the state that an otherwise passive population could be steered towards socialism – and by extension the nature of this 'socialism' becomes more top-down.

In the late 19th century and first decade of the 20th century the main socialist grouping in the United Kingdom was the Social Democratic Federation (SDF). At various times there were splits that paralleled those of the FTSF. In the mid 1880s a group including Eleanor Marx and William Morris became dissatisfied with the leadership and reformist direction of the SDF and left to form their own group, The Socialist League. Though the debates leading to the formation of the Socialist League never utilised the terms possibilism or Impossibilism, its context and some of the League's important texts, such as its manifesto, express perspectives that can be seen as a precursor of British

5 Stephen Coleman, Ibid. 7-8

Impossibilism.[6] The early 1900s saw two further splits from the SDF, a group that would form the Socialist Labour Party (SLP) and a few years later a group that would form the Socialist Party of Great Britain (SPGB).

The 'Impossibilist' label was not confined to groups in the UK and France: its most electorally successful manifestation was to be found in the Socialist Party of Canada, which in the first decade of the twentieth century had three candidates in the legislature of British Columbia. While the main purpose of standing in elections had been as a propaganda exercise, useful for building the socialist majority which would eventually take power, they were nonetheless able to win important reforms such as an eight-hour day.[7] The SPC, like the SLP[8] but unlike the SPGB, had a positive view of revolutionary unionism. Alongside socialist political parties, socialist industrial unions should be formed so that power could be tackled on both the economic and political front – the Impossibilist position not being one about the status of union organising, only one about the necessity of a conscious majority prior to the achievement a socialist revolution. Such a union was formed in Canada, The One Big Union, which was able to ride on a wave of radical industrial action that had

6 Stephen Coleman, Ibid. 158 onwards

7 Larry Gambone. *The Impossibilists. The Socialist Party of Canada and the One Big Union. Selected Articles from 1906 to 1938.* Nanaimo: Red Lion Press (2010) 6

8 There were Socialist Labour Parties in the UK and the USA, both of which could be classified as Impossibilist (The SLP associated with Arthur Scargill and formed in 1996 uses the same name but does not have the same politics). A leading figure of the US SLP was Daniel DeLeon, his idea of industrial unionism would also influence the SLP based in Britain. The SLP also differs from the SPGB and the SPC in that the former, or at least a significant section of it, was initially supportive of the Bolshevik seizure of state power in the Russian revolution.

been spreading across Western Canada;[9] and the organisation would, for a brief period at the end of the 1910's, encompass the majority of organised labour in the region.

The coming of the first world war and the events that followed would be a disaster for the Impossibilists, one from which they would never recover. While the SPGB, WSPUS, and SPC survive until this day, they have existed for over a century as small groups on the political margins. The apparent successes of the Russian Revolution meant that the influence of the Bolsheviks, and later Trotskyists, would drown out this earlier current; and 'Marxism' would largely come to be understood as something related to Leninism.

The Impossibilist critique of Bolshevism: free association versus state dictatorship.

Unlike other Marxism-derived socialist currents, which were initially supportive of the Bolshevik capture of state power but changed their mind once the dictatorial nature of the regime became more apparent, the SPGB were critical from the beginning. Their claim was that the problem was not with the people who were in control, but with the whole strategy itself, as they were to state both contemporaneously and retrospectively:

> When we are told that socialism has been obtained in Russia without the long, hard and tedious work of educating the mass of workers in Socialism we not only deny it but refer our critics to Lenin's own confessions. His statements prove that even though a vigorous and small minority may be able to seize power for a time, they can only hold it by modifying their plans to suit the ignorant majority. The minority in power in an

[9] Between 1917 to 1921 350,000, workers had been involved in a wave of strikes. The largest of which being in 1919 when there was a general strike in Winnipeg. Gambone. Ibid. 8.

> economically backward country are forced to adapt their program to the capitalist world around them. […][10]

> […] though dictatorship inevitably corrupts those who wield it – it has been the failure of the whole mistaken policy of the Bolsheviks. Had Lenin lived or Stalin died the result would not have been appreciably different.[11]

This position came from their understanding of socialist revolution as requiring a majority of consciously organised socialists to see it through. Any attempt to impose socialist measures from above would be doomed to failure. Free association of the producers, the central pillar of a socialist society, was incompatible with state enforced directives. A state directed commodity economy would just be another type of minority control – state capitalism – not the free association of producers that would characterise socialism. As there was no conscious socialist majority in Russia the revolution could not have been a socialist one, as reasoned in the *Socialist Standard*[12] of August 1918:

> Is this huge mass of people, numbering about 160,000,000 and spread over eight and a half millions of square miles, ready for Socialism? Are the hunters of the North, the struggling peasant proprietors of the South, the agricultural wage slaves of the Central Provinces, and the industrial wage slaves of the towns convinced of the necessity, and

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10 "A Socialist View on Bolshevist Policy". *Socialist Standard* 191. (July 1920) Last accessed 20th April 2024. www.worldsocialism.org/spgb/socialist-standard/1920/1920s/no-191-july-1920/socialist-view-bolshevist-policy/

11 SPGB. "Russia Since 1917: Socialist Views of Bolshevik Policy". SPGB,1948. p 114

12 The Socialist Standard is the monthly publication of the SPGB and has been published up to the present day and without interruption since 1904.

> equipped with the knowledge requisite, for the establishment of the social ownership of the means of life?
>
> Unless a mental revolution such as the world has never seen before has taken place, or an economic change has occurred immensely more rapidly than history has recorded, the answer is "No!"[13]

The SPGB's contemporary criticisms of the Russian Revolution and their emphasis on the importance of mass understanding and action demonstrates that they were critical of, and not seeking, a minority dictatorship.

However, another charge could be levelled against them – that of being non-attentive to the problem of the 'tyranny of the majority'. We can find out about the SPGB's attitude towards minority positions by further looking at their criticisms of the Bolsheviks, this time by focussing on the infamous 'dictatorship of the proletariat'. While the followers of Lenin have made much work of the phrase 'the dictatorship of the proletariat', the concept has never featured much in the theoretical work of the Impossibilists (nor Marx for that matter), except when criticising those who held vanguardist views. So, while it is true that the Impossibilists rejected the idea of a minority party taking control of the state, could they not be accused of wanting to put forward another kind of 'dictatorship of the proletariat' – one where the majority (in the modern world the majority of the population are proletarians) dominate and impose their will on an unwilling minority of former capitalists and their supporters?

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[13] Jack Fitzgerald. "The Revolution in Russia. Where it Fails". *Socialist Standard* 168, August 1918. Last accessed 21st April 2024. www.worldsocialism.org/spgb/socialist-standard/1910s/1918/no-168-august-1918/the-revolution-in-russia-where-it-fails/

Socialist revolution is in one undeniable sense a majority asserting its will against a minority. This is because the owners of the means of production currently form a minority of society and in order for a socialist revolution to take place this ownership must be wrested from them. The question of whether this act of expropriation amounts to a new form of tyranny, or if it can be considered as something else – the ending of a social form based on domination – cannot be answered independently of taking a political stance towards the world (in fact the answer will be determined by which political position one takes). If we grant that the dispossession of the capitalist class is actually the prevention of a greater domination, we could still have concerns about what the position of this dispossessed minority would be in the period immediately after a socialist transformation. These concerns can be addressed by looking at the SPGB's commentary on the Paris Commune, which they use as an example of what Marx actually meant by 'the dictatorship of the proletariat',[14] as they provide an answer to their attitude towards minority viewpoints:

> The Commune was an instance of majority control based upon democratic elections. There was no suppression of the newspapers or the propaganda of the minority, and no denial of their right to vote. The Communards, having once obtained control of the State, set about democratising the machinery of legislation and administration. For example, they filled all positions of administration, justice, etc., through election by universal suffrage, the elected being at all times subject to recall by their constituents. They also paid for all services at the workmen's rate of pay.

[14] Frederick Engels "[…] look at the Paris Commune. That was the dictatorship of the proletariat." *Civil War in France*. 1891 Post Script. Marxists Internet Archive. Last accessed 20th April 2024. www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1871/civil-war-france/postscript.htm

> This contrasts in a marked way with the Dictatorship in Russia—a dictatorship not of the proletariat, but of the leaders of the Communist Party.[15]

So for the SPGB, once this minority has given up, or been deprived of, their exclusive control, they revert to being standard members of society, with full political and civil rights. They would still free to pursue whatever causes they wished but deprived of disproportionate control of the press and the support of armed forces, their voices would be just one amongst many. Arguably, as socialist society progresses, a minority campaigning for the virtues of capitalist production would begin to look as strange as a minority campaigning in late capitalism for the reintroduction of feudalism or the divine right of kings. Not being dominated and having an input in a political society doesn't mean that your ideas are accepted, just that you have had a chance to put them forward. The SPGB position on the expression of minority viewpoints and freedom of expression has on occasion been stated in terms similar to that of John Stuart Mill in his essay 'On Liberty': minority and unpopular viewpoints may in time turn out to be correct, and so censorship is a barrier to the free development of ideas. However, unlike Mill, they also thought that capitalist society itself represents a barrier to freedom of expression, not only because the state or other powerful actors can use the law to supress critical or dissenting views, but also because access to mass media requires resources which the wealthy can disproportionally control.

> While accepting broadly the arguments of John Stuart Mill, Socialists point out how impossible it is to expect his case to be accepted under capitalism. The S.P.G.B. has always taken its stand on the method of argument and persuasion to gain acceptance of the Socialist case. Knowing that there can be no Socialism except through the use of

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15 SPGB. "Marx and Dictatorship". *Socialist Standard* 334. June 1932. Last accessed 17th April 2024. www.worldsocialism.org/spgb/socialist-standard/1930s/1932/no-334-june-1932/marx-and-dictatorship/

> democratic methods, we need to win over the majority to our side. The Socialist case is true and can be shown to be true. It is in line with the discernible facts of the modern world, and what has convinced us will in due time convince the majority of the workers. It is for this reason that the S.P.G.B. allows and invites opposition and discussion on our platform and at our meetings. We do not believe, as do the Communists, that Socialism can be attained by a minority who do understand Socialism acting as guides and leaders to a majority who do not understand.[16]

So, with this in mind, the charge against the Impossibilists cannot be one of wanting to impose dictatorship or being blind to the possibility of unintentionally forming one. Instead, the criticism could be that they have placed too much faith in the possibilities of discussion, that they haven't taken the problem of intractable moral conflict seriously enough. This will be discussed in more detail in the sections that follow.

The transformation of the state.

In line with their adherence to Marxian theory, the Impossibilists were against providing overly detailed descriptions or prescriptions of what a future society would be like; those establishing socialism would have to do so in accord with future historical circumstances, rather than the utopian desires of those living in a pre-revolutionary period. Nevertheless, they were able to draw out some general outlines of how decision-making could be structured in a socialist society, working from their assumption that the establishment of socialism could only take place as an act of mass proletarian self-emancipation.

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[16] H. "Can there be freedom of the press?". *Socialist Standard*, 440 April 1941. Last accessed 17th April 2024 www.worldsocialism.org/spgb/socialist-standard/1940s/1941/no-440-april-1941/can-there-be-freedom-of-the-press/

In these outlines the SPGB made a distinction between a state government, a system in which powers are centralised in a single body, and democratic administration where powers "flow from the broadest possible social base to represent the views of the whole community".[17] As they saw a mass socialist movement as being a prerequisite of a socialist revolution they saw this movement as being able to immediately take over and democratically run all of the existing means of political and economic organisation using them to bring about production for use. One of the reasons for seeing this mass movement as a pre-condition is that it is necessary to have some kind of alternative social organisation to hand immediately. An alternative of some kind has to be readily available from the beginning of a socialist revolution since people's needs still have to be met and disruption, which could lead to the reinstatement of capitalism, has to be avoided. Such an alternative could be readily available by transforming existing institutions as the first step of a socialist revolution. How the Impossibilists saw possible ways of conducting this transformation are detailed below:

> The basis of industrial organisation and administration will start from the arrangements existing under Capitalism at the time of the transformation, and this will present no difficulties because the Socialist movement will already be thoroughly international, both in outlook and practical organisation. As far as the machinery of organisation and administration is concerned, it will be local, regional, national and international, evolving out of existing forms.[18]

They specify further:

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17 Socialist Party of Great Britain: *Socialism as a Practical Alternative*. London, SPGB 1987 / 1994

18 SPGB. "Letters: Problems of Socialist Administration". *Socialist Standard* 414, February 1939. Last accessed 21st April 2024. www.worldsocialism.org/spgb/socialist-standard/1930s/1939/no-414-february-1939/letter-problems-of-socialist

> A democratic system of decision-making would require that the basic unit of social organisation would be the local community which could elect its delegates to a local council which could be given the responsibility for local administration. If, for example, local communities in socialism began by operating from the basis of the existing structure of district councils in England, this would give 332 local communities.
>
> This would be a democratic development of the existing procedures for electing local councils which could become the basic means for dealing with day-to-day local issues. Then, regional councils could provide organisation through which decisions affecting wider populations could be made at the regional level. Similarly, global decisions could be made by delegates elected to a world council.[19]

For them a combination of parish, town and county, and national councils would not form a 'state', a coercive body above society, if the councils were composed of mandated and recallable delegates always answerable to the community at large. How far this form of organisation differs from what we might typically describe as a state, I examine in the following. In order to do this, it will first be necessary to explain what the Impossibilists mean by the state and how this usage may be different from other commonly used conceptions, such as those associated with Weber.

Weber's famous "Politics as Vocation" was written during the German revolution, a time during which a socialist transformation of society could have seemed like a real and present possibility. Included in this essay is Weber's famous definition of the state; "a state is a human community that (successfully) claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory"[20]

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[19] Socialist Party of Great Britain: *Socialism as a Practical Alternative*. London, SPGB 1987 / 1994

[20] Max Weber. "Politics as Vocation". In *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology.* Translated and edited by H.H Gerth and C. Wright Mills. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946) 78

This definition differs from those used in socialist theories in that Weber focusses on the concept of legitimacy, while the socialists focus on the concept of class division. An early example of this socialist conception of the state can be found in a text by Deville[21] where he describes the state as "[…] the public power of coercion created and maintained in human societies by their division into classes, and which, having force at its disposal, makes laws and levies taxes"[22] This understanding of the state as being an essential component of class-based societies was taken up by the SPGB, as can be seen here:

> The function of the state is not then to impose an agreement on all classes in the interests of society as a whole but to impose an agreement on the subject class for the continuance of a condition of affairs not in line with its own interests. The state is not then the sublimation of social differences but the expression of irreconcilable class antagonism. The state will exist as long as classes exist.[23]

The SPGB, in common with most other revolutionary socialists, saw the state as being a historical response to the problems posed by class-based societies. Such class societies, they claim, are at base centred around irreconcilable differences of interest. These antagonistic relationships arise out of the nature of its property-holding and wealth-extracting arrangements, with a ruling minority class existing through the appropriation of surpluses from a larger collection of subordinate classes. The state develops, according to the SPGB and others like them, not out of a

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[21] Gabriel Deville was a French socialist who in the late 1880's wrote a popular condensed introductory version of Marx's Capital.

[22] Gabriel Deville *The State and Socialism*. (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr & Company, 1908) Last accessed 20th April 2024. www.marxists.org/archive/deville/1895/state.htm.

[23] Ted Wilmott "What is the state?" *Socialist Standard*, 551. July 1950. Last accessed 17th April 2024. www.worldsocialism.org/spgb/socialist-standard/1950/1950s/no-551-july-1950/what-is-the-state/

social contract as a means for the whole population to express and realise their preferences and desires but as a means for preserving society as a class-society, by preventing these antagonistic relations developing into all out conflict. This preserving function means that the state will on occasion act against the interests of individual members of the ruling class if these actions serve to protect and preserve the functioning of the social system as a whole. Still, the whole function and purpose of the state is centred around this relation of dominating and dominated classes.

It could be useful to contrast this conception with that of the Possibilists. The difference between the Possibilists and Impossibilists was not about the necessity of gaining control of the state, but about its nature. The Possibilists viewed the state as a neutral instrument that could be used for the benefit of all, regardless of class. In contrast, the Impossibilists viewed the state as a necessary outcome of the development of class society and as such its function is to protect and preserve class society. This function would not be altered by just changing who was in government; the structure of the state would have to be changed too, and this could only be done through the conscious actions of a mass movement both inside and outside of the government which not only takes control of the state but also changes the economic foundation of society. An early commentary, *Aphorisms of Socialism*, described the situation thus:

> [The State] postulates a condition which is entirely in favour of the class whose instrument it is, and the basis of that social condition in the present day is the private ownership of wealth. The ‘order’ which the state is to maintain must be in harmony with that property condition. Anything which is out of harmony with that basis is disorder, and must be suppressed. Therefore, of course, it must include the robbery of the working class. Under that condition the state and its machinery pretend to be the servant of the whole of the people, but it is ridiculous on the face of it. The fact that some workingmen have a little money in the teapot, or that the system breeds a certain number of maniacs or desperate beings against whom society at large needs protection,

> only serves to obscure the real reason for the maintenance of armed forces. It is not the private property of the workers that the armed forces exist to protect. It is not even the private property of the master class that it is primarily maintained to conserve. It is the central point, the pivot, of the present social system – the private property institution which is to be protected.[24]

This difference in conception of what the state is and what role it could play in the process of transforming capitalist society into a socialist one is bought out further by examining how each party saw the revolutionary process unfolding. For the Possibilists all that would be required was a change in those that administered the capitalist state. A new, more benevolent, government could attempt to manage capitalist production in a way that would be beneficial for workers. For the Impossibilists this was an impossibility, the problem was not with who managed the state but with the fact that no matter who was in control of the state they would themselves be constrained by the imperatives of the market economy.

> The possibilists argued the need for manipulation of the state machine by a socialist government. The SPGB denied the possibility either of a socialist government or of the possibility of its manipulating the state.[25]

In a sense, both the Possibilists and Impossibilists agreed that socialism required majority working class support to be put into practice; they disagreed in what they envisioned this support amounting to. The kind of support that the Possibilists envisioned was merely the passive desire for

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[24] A.E. Jacomb "Aphorisms of Socialism: Clause 6" *Socialist Standard* 98. October 1912. Last accessed 17th April 2024. www.worldsocialism.org/spgb/socialist-standard/1910s/1912/no-98-october-1912/aphorisms-of-socialism-vi/

[25] Stephen Coleman. *The origin and meaning of the political theory of impossibilism*. PhD thesis, University College London, 1984. 84

a new leadership, the support that the Impossibilists required was of the active kind that would enable the construction of a new form of collective self-rule, of which the winning of parliamentary power is but one part.

Socialism, not state control of industry.

The SPGB argued that state control of a capitalist economic system would not be socialism and would not alter the basic laws of capital accumulation, and that even in a state controlled by people who called themselves socialist, there would still remain a division between those who administer society and those who had to follow their directives. Such arrangements, the SPGB contended, would not be socialism but state capitalism, and would still leave the working class in a position of separation from the means of production. All that would have changed is who the working class is in an antagonistic relationship with, instead of private or joint capitalists they would now have to struggle against the state bureaucrats that managed production, as explained in this 1912 article from the *Socialist Standard*:

> The nationalisation fable is always very loosely handled by its advocates. They invariably forget to point out that, even if all the industries were nationalised, the workers would still have to organise politically in opposition to the class that owned them, before they could take and hold. Such a period – if the workers allow the system to develop so far – would be merely an advanced stage of capitalism. Class ownership of the means of life would still be the basis of the system, and the working class would still retain their merchandise character. Wealth would still be produced for profit and unemployment still be necessary in order that the price of labour-power might be kept at

or about the cost of living – the difference between the cost of living and the total wealth produced being the extent to which the workers are robbed.[26]

For the Impossibilists, the state and the market economy do not form two separate or antagonistic spheres but are part of the same system, state action being a necessary condition for market economies to come into existence and for their continued operation. Therefore, a socialist revolution would not just be the seizure of state power but a transformation of the economic basis of society. The first act of a socialist revolution would be the transfer of ownership in the means of production from private hands and into the ownership of the community in general. However, unlike the Possibilist social democrats, the SPGB did not regard state ownership as a form of common ownership. It was not a matter of the state taking control of the economy, instead we would see an end in the division of the political and economic as nominally separate spheres with democratic structures being introduced into the whole of the productive sphere. Present day structures for administering society would be adapted, so as to enable the whole of society, through means of various delegations, to co-ordinate common production for use.

The Impossibilists reasoned that with the elimination of class society, which is bought about by the abolition of private property in the means of production (factories, centres of administration, land, raw materials etc.), the central class-preserving function of the state would be rendered obsolete, since there is no longer any antagonistic relation based on the extraction of surpluses to maintain. Therefore, the state as a state, a coercive body that functions to preserve class society, ceases to be. This does not mean that there are no longer any potential disagreements to be had, but that the way in which society economically reproduces itself is no longer based on forced productive relations: society still needs to make and do things if it wants to eat, but there is no

[26] F. Foan. "Who Are The Impossibilists?". *Socialist Standard* 99. November 1912. Last accessed 17th April 2024. www.worldsocialism.org/spgb/socialist-standard/1910s/1912/no-99-november-1912/who-are-the-impossiblists/

longer an economically privileged section of society which extracts wealth by forcing another to perform labour for it. This is the idea that Engels famously expressed as "the government of persons is replaced by the administration of things, and the conduct of the processes of production".[27] Still, as people need things to survive, and as things need to be made by people, more needs to be said for this not to be a glib play on words (seeing as the administration of things and the direction of the processes of production involves governance over what people do and what things they can make use of).

Order and coercion

The challenge of taking seriously the problem of political disagreement and conflict is one that has to be balanced against the problem of avoiding domination. Social problems cannot be presumed away, or their solution thought to be adequately foreseeable and solvable in advance by a single individual or body, an all seeing and conceptually correct socialist party for example. If a detailed plan of rules and how to enforce them was to be put into practice without the input of, and possibly against the wishes of, the larger community, it is likely some kind of domination would be needed to put it into practice. Likewise, if it is presumed that social order will arise effortlessly and spontaneously without the need of considering how and how the development of such might be helped or hindered we are not taking the problem of politics seriously enough. What is needed is not a detailed blueprint which details every problem and its prescribed solution upfront, but a broad and generalised framework that demonstrates how mechanisms can be developed by and through society as it works to manage its conflicts.[28]

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[27] Frederick Engels *Anti-Dühring* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1959) 387

[28] James C. Scott's '*Seeing Like a State'* details and compares the approaches of Rosa Luxemburg and Lenin. For Scott, Lenin was a subscriber to 'high modernism', and thought that social problems could be overcome through the forced implementation of technocratic planning. Luxemburg, in contrast, viewed revolution as an organic process of

This brings us to the question of what other types of problems would remain, if conflict over ownership of economic resources was removed, and how these could they be dealt with or managed. Possible examples of such issues could include gender roles and work, regional conflict between local and global populations over access to resources, coordination of production across multiple branches of production, and problems along the classic lines of 'who will do the dirty work?'.

Some SPGB texts would seem to give the impression that, once the economic means of production take the form of common property, there would be no further clashes resulting from the various goals people would want to pursue.[29] While it is true that the types of class domination and conflict that the Communist Manifesto describes as forming 'The [written] history of all hitherto existing society' could not persist, if all of society was in the same relation to the means of producing wealth, since no group could dominate another in order to get it to perform labour for it, there still could exist interpersonal or intergroup tensions which could develop into instances of conflict.

A more recent text is more attentive to these kinds of problems:

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collective self-development. For her, the imposition of rigid blueprints would serve to hinder the process rather than aid it.

[29] Take the following as evidence, "Tyranny presupposes power, but when the instruments of production are commonly owned, power to oppress can no longer exist. Further, when wealth is no longer privately owned there is no incentive to tyrannise. There are no clashing interests —the mainspring of tyranny". - Adolph Kohn. "Why Socialists Oppose Anarchism. Its Fallacies and Dangers Exposed" *Socialist Standard*, August 1911. Last accessed 17th April 2024. www.worldsocialism.org/spgb/socialist-standard/1910s/1911/no-84-august-1911/why-socialists-oppose-anarchism-its-fallacies-and-dangers-exposed/

> [...] a society without any enforceable norms of behaviour would amount to a kind of tyranny of the individual and, as such, would not meet the definition of a civilised society. Socially-useful rules regulating human relationships and our relationship with the broader environment will persist in socialism. Enforceable rules and regulations which prohibit certain conduct towards environmental destruction and such things as violence, rape, drunk driving, child abuse and similar will continue in a socialist society, but its purpose will be to serve the interests of society as a whole, not the capitalist class. Such rules and regulations will be conceived and administered by members of the community as part of its democratic structures and adjudicated by ordinary people, perhaps through an expansion of the jury system, or similar.[30]

The end of class society does not mean that all social problems are instantly solved, but that the way of dealing with them becomes one in which the whole of society is more involved. Conflict resolution and anti-social behaviour, if not resolvable through more direct relationships, could be dealt with by trained, delegated, mandated and recallable bodies that are drawn from the community at large.

The revolutionary transformation: the role of parliamentary action in the pre-revolutionary period

Unlike the Possibilist social democrats, whose sole focus became the administering of alleviative reforms, the SPGB saw the purpose of parliamentary activity only in terms of an end goal. They would stand in elections, but only with the goal of publicising their cause and without a

[30] Tim Hart. "Law and Order. Reactionary Fantasies" *Socialist Standard*, October 2019. Last accessed 17th April 2024. www.worldsocialism.org/spgb/socialist-standard/2010s/2019/no-1382-october-2019/law-and-order-reactionary-fantasies/

programme of reforms. The position of the SPGB is that once the majority of the working class is conscious of socialism, they can use this majority position to win democratic elections and so gain control of the state, using it to bring about a socialist transformation. This socialist transformation will involve transforming;

> […] the machinery of government, including the armed forces of the nation, [which] exists only to conserve the monopoly by the capitalist class of the wealth taken from the workers, […] from an instrument of oppression into the agent of emancipation.

And to achieve this, "the working class must organize consciously and politically for the conquest of the powers of government, national and local".[31]

The focus on parliament is not because there is any universal reason for favouring parliaments but because that is where political power is concentrated today. In a socialist society it would be possible for people to use many different types of organisational models, as long as it involved delegates working together to make decisions. The principle of delegates could be just as easily applied to converted parish councils as it could be to extra-parliamentary bodies that rose up in the process of revolution, such as workers and neighbourhood councils, for example.

For the Impossibilists, the need for mass consciousness before a socialist revolution was intimately tied to their conception of what socialism is. As socialism was the free association of the producers and required the conscious direction of those engaging in production to operate it, state-imposed measures on an unconscious or unwilling majority would not be able to bring it about. It was not enough to get a passive mass to vote for a socialist party, perhaps attracted by the possibility of reforms; the masses must actively and consciously take part in the transformation of society since the type of conscious and free association required for socialism could not be bought

[31] SPGB *Declaration of Principles* 1904

about by decree. This is why socialist revolution could only take place through an act of self-emancipation,[32] the kinds of capacities and skills that are required to operate a society in the democratic and conscious ways that the Impossibilists envisioned are things that have to be learnt and developed, they cannot be given or granted from above. Though the organisation has never used the term, and would possibly object to it being referred to as such, this could be viewed as an example of 'prefigurative' politics – where the means of reaching the goal are the same as the goal itself.

The SPGB thought this kind of education and development of capacities could take place through the working class collectively engaging in the political task of establishing socialism. As such they organised the internal structure of their party along these lines, with no leader at the top of the hierarchy, with all practical and policy decisions being made through voting at branches and then at conferences. As all members have equal voting rights, membership is restricted to those who have passed a kind of entrance exam,[33] thus demonstrating a certain level of understanding of socialist principles and analysis. The purpose of this screening is so that the organisation can maintain full democratic relations internally, without running the risk of its socialist end goal being diluted or abandoned and without having to rely on an internal division which restrict decision making power according to knowledge or understanding.

When it comes to democracy at the society wide level, full democratic participation is something that the SPGB thought that no individuals or groups should be barred from. The goal is not to become an enlightened minority that pushes an otherwise unenlightened majority towards the

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[32] '[…] this emancipation must be the work of the working-class itself.' Socialist Party of Great Britain *Declaration of Principles*. London 1904.

[33] SPGB "Rules of The Socialist Party of Great Britain 2022". Last accessed 20th April 2024. www.worldsocialism.org/spgb/party-rules/

‘correct’ path but to campaign for a situation that the majority would have to enact and one that once achieved would make the socialist party obsolete.

Legitimacy during a revolutionary period.

Another reason for wanting to establish socialism through the winning of elections is for the reason of wanting to have a clear means of demonstrating legitimacy and wanting to minimise the potential for violent disorder. In a revolutionary situation there would be a recalcitrant minority including members of the dispossessed former ruling classes. Through other routes to revolution such as the ad-hoc seizing of productive facilities or establishment of counter-powers, workers councils, etc., it would be hard to know how much of the population was actually on board with the new changes. By having an election, it would be possible to demonstrate that the majority was in favour of the changes; and it would serve as a disincentive for those wanting to reverse any revolutionary changes. The hope being that possession of legitimacy would lessen the potential for a drawn-out period of civil war.

> Once there is an organised, determined majority the success of the socialist revolution is assured, one way or the other. It is then a question of the best tactic to pursue to try to ensure that this takes place as rapidly and as smoothly as possible. In our view, the best way to proceed is to start by obtaining a democratic mandate via the ballot box for the changeover to socialism. The tactical advantage of doing this is that, when obtained, it deprives the supporters of capitalism of any legitimacy for the continuation of their rule. This could be important should some of the pro-capitalists think of staging a coup: any wavering elements, especially in the armed forces, would tend to side with those who

have the undisputed democratic legitimacy, i.e. in this instance those who want socialism.[34]

Passages such as the above may give the impression of a certain kind of naivety or wilful blindness to historical events. The twentieth century provides multiple examples of political parties (some of them claiming adherence to one or another version of "socialism") winning democratic elections to only later be usurped through a military coup. However, it should be stressed that the SPGB and the other Impossibilists didn't see their strategy as being able to be carried through with only a simple majority (or as in first past the post electoral systems being the largest minority); nor did they think that obedience to a certain conception of legitimacy would definitively stop hostile parties from acting against them. In order to safely secure a socialist revolution, it was necessary to win over an immense majority of the working class. Once this critical point had been reached, the thought was that socialist ideas would have also significantly penetrated into the military and the other coercive bodies of the state. Since the majority of the military are recruited from the working class, they would share the experiences which socialist propaganda can speak to. The reason for thinking that such a majority would be possible is that most of the population share the same position of being members of the working class.

Realism and the possibility of mass socialist consciousness

This demand for mass-consciousness may be seen as presenting us with a problem in classifying revolutionary socialism as realist politics. Is projecting mass agreement and engagement with a particular political project not the same as projecting an agreement to a moral consensus? If disagreement about important issues is a permanent feature of human life, isn't the hope of the appearance of a mass movement agreed on a central principle futile or naïve?

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[34] SPGB. *What's Wrong with using Parliament?* (London, SPGB 2010) 19.

The type of agreement required for the kind of non-dominating and co-operative ethos required for socialism is not the same as that required for a complete moral consensus. As socialism would be a society where people meet their material needs by engaging in a system of collective self-rule, this would shape what people consider important.[35] In this way, self-rule, and the principle of non-domination that it entails, would be a value for people of different moral convictions, not least because it provides a means of defending their convictions. As will be described in more detail in the concluding chapter, a socialist ethos can be thought of as more like an overlapping consensus which is accessible to people with different moral beliefs.

If all this is correct, then it could still be objected that all I have succeeded in doing is moving the degree of difficulty from 'impossible' to – at best – 'highly difficult'. Isn't this still an unrealistic proposal? This question can be answered by disentangling realism from feasibility, and by considering what kinds of agreement are necessary for economic forms to function and following from that what kinds of agreement would be necessary for people to establish a new one.

While in common parlance being "realistic" may mean to constrain one's ambitions in the light of likelihood of success, to draw a similar conclusion in regards to political philosophy is a conceptual mistake. This mistake that was often made in commentary on the initial revival of political realism,[36] where there was a tendency to associate realism with concerns about feasibility, taking it to be a form of non-ideal theorising.[37] Debates about ideal and non-ideal theorising are

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[35] Likewise, we could see how in market societies based around the freedom of contract and exchange 'fairness' becomes a core value – people's existence is dependent on the exchange of equivalents.

[36] Galston. Ibid.

[37] Matt Sleat "Realism, Liberalism and Non-Ideal Theory Or, Are There Two Ways to Do Realistic Political Theory?". *Political Studies* 64, no. 1 (2014): 27-41. Lorna Finlayson "With Radicals like These, Who Needs Conservatives? Doom, Gloom, and Realism in Political Theory." *European Journal of Political Theory* 16, no. 3 (2017): 264–82.

about the role that feasibility constraints play in constraining normative demands. Debates about realism are, at least in the sense that I am using the term, about the nature of and relationship between moral and political normativity.[38] To run the two together is to mix two separate issues, and misses what is distinctive about realism, its critical potential to theorise against the status-quo. So, while non-ideal theorising is concerned with examining how, in the world at is now, we can best shape our political norms to allow us to move towards a pre-selected moral value, realist theorising need not give itself this restriction. It can be perfectly realistic to demand the (currently) impossible, so long as the underlying rationale is not grounded in a pre-political moral value.

With this in mind, the demand for a mass conscious movement cannot be dismissed from a realist perspective simply because of its distance from the current situation. The concern with realism is how we can orient our theorising if we understand politics to be about power and conflict, not how we should adjust our ambitions according to an apparent likelihood of success.

Perhaps a stronger realistic objection to the idea of mass socialist consciousness is that it is too much like wanting to achieve an overarching moral consensus. However, what is meant by socialist consciousness need not be a shared subscription to a common moral value or singular conception of the common good. Indeed, arguments for socialism can be grounded in different moral values, or they can be understood as being about the conditions of politics itself. Politics is usually taken to be, to a lesser or greater degree, distinct from raw domination. If the socialist case, that capitalist production is a form of concealed domination, is taken to be true then we can see socialist arguments as being about what kinds of social-economic structures can be viewed as truly political societies, ones not based on domination. As is observed by Philip Pettit,[39] non-domination can be thought of as what in Rawls's vocabulary is a 'primary good', something that is always desirable

[38] Enzo Rossi. "Can Realism Move Beyond a Methodenstreit?". *Political Theory* 44, no. 3 (2015): 410-420.

[39] Pettit. Ibid. 90

regardless of what life plans one is adopting. If one is free from the possibility of domination, then one can securely plan towards whatever ends one wishes without the fear of being arbitrarily interfered with, there is no need to adjust plans or to strategically bow down to those who could use their powers against us. The reverse also holds, if non-domination is as near to a universal good as you can get, the domination can be thought of as a 'primary bad'. The experience of being dominated is one that gives rise to feelings of resentment and indignity. Even amongst those who place themselves into some form of dominion for cultural or religious reasons, there will be some desire to repress or otherwise justify these experiences.[40] It is this focus on non-domination that enables the socialist case to be accessible to holders of different moral and religious belief systems, since it allows for a common linking point onto which the systems can attach themselves.

As recent work has rediscovered, the centrality of non-domination in socialist theory can be traced back to the influence of republican ideas in the 18th and 19th century. Indeed, up until the turn of the twentieth century the idea of freedom as non-domination was the dominant one, it was only as the twentieth century progressed that this conception became eclipsed by the now familiar idea of freedom as non-interference. While presently the question of if the wage relation actually represents domination is a contested one, for republicans of this earlier period the question would not have been controversial. For them, having to submit to an employer was clearly a form of domination. While these republicans in no way drew conclusions that we could regard as socialism from this observation, it should remind us that how people view freedom and commonplace ways of relating does change through time, and can change in radical ways.

While the scale of the socialist task is undeniably huge, it should also be remembered that socialist theory was something that arose from within the workers' movement, drawing from and

[40] Pettit. Ibid. 96

adapting ideas from this republican tradition, rather than injected from the outside.[41] The majority of the world's population comprises wage and salary workers who share a common relation within system of production, such a shared consciousness could be possible because of the share common experience in how they experience life and in how they gain their livelihoods. If wanting to be free from domination really is as near a universal political good as can be got, and if capitalist social relations are a form of domination, there are a lot of people who have, at least in potential, a motive for wanting to establish a new form of life, even if other moral disagreements persist among them.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have looked at how the Impossibilist's ideas of the democratic capture and transformation of the state can be seen as being compatible with the realist understanding of politics as described in the previous chapter. Central to these ideas was the idea of the necessity of building a conscious and active majority before such a transformation could take place. I have argued that the posing of such a majority is different to wanting a moral consensus and comes from the political value of non-domination which is a good accessible from multiple moral standpoints. I also demonstrated how the Impossibilist case was not built around a presuming away of conflict, but that their proposals for the transformation of the state could be developed for managing conflict without recourse to a hierarchical coercive force.

The idea that order can only be maintained by a specialist body placed in coercive authority above the rest of society, which is commonly believed today, comes from a period in which people have become accustomed to passing responsibility for conflict resolutions to the state. In other forms of social organisation conflict resolution becomes a common feature of everyday life, which

[41] For example, Alex Gourevitch's *From Slavery to the Cooperative Commonwealth* documents how ideas about freedom as non-domination were taken up by the early labour movement as they adopted and adapted popular themes from the republican tradition.

people become more accustomed with and skilled in.[42] Certain modes of maintaining order may seem unworkable from the perspective of today, but it should also be worth remembering that other ways of living lead people to develop their capacities in ways that suit that mode of life. The idea of self-emancipation, which is common to all the revolutionary socialist currents I discuss in this thesis, is one about the development of human capacities – the kinds of capacities that people will need to have in order to enable the functioning of a society that takes the form of a co-operative commonwealth. The different currents of socialism had different ideas about what kinds of activities would allow these capacities to develop. The SPGB and the other Impossibilist groups were the only ones within the three currents to think that party political activity could achieve this. This can be explained by how they envisioned their political party being run, instead of being a hierarchical body with leaders and led, the principle of democratic self-emancipation structures the whole apparatus. Through participating in collective decision making, capacities of the type that would be required for socialism are developed. While running a political party is not the same thing as running the whole economic apparatus of society, the party's continued existence shows that longevity of an organisation is not dependent on hierarchical structures.

The forms of delegated and federated collective self-rule[43] that are outlined above could be applied to any set of problems that a community faces, including problems relating to the enforcement of rules as well as deciding what the rules may be. In this way we have a non-state way

[42] This is explored in Taylor, Michael. *The Possibility Of Cooperation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1987 and Taylor, Michael. *Community, Anarchy and Liberty*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1987

[43] For a realist account of democracy as collective self-rule see: Raekstad, Paul. 2018. "Democracy Against Representation: A Radical Realist View". *Abolition*. Last accessed 19th April 2024. abolitionjournal.org/democracy-against-representation.

of securing 'order, protection, safety, trust, and the conditions of cooperation'[44] that could work in a modern technological and pluralist society, without having to develop a separate body that is responsible for maintaining order. The coercive functions are a part of the larger civil society, in which everyone is able to participate, due to the delegation of powers.

However, the temptation to paint an overly rosy picture should be avoided. The ideological and cultural barriers to such transformation remain immense. In an era of international conflict, rising 'culture wars' and permanent threat of ecological disaster, the scope for any revolutionary socialist project to take off, may seem more remote than ever. The SPGB's call upon the working class to '[…] muster under its banner to the end that a speedy termination may be wrought to the system which deprives them of the fruit of their labour […]',[45] now reads with certain sense of irony or over-optimism, given that almost a century and a quarter had passed since it was declared. At the turn of the twentieth century perhaps more of a sense of optimism could be justified; that the events of the twentieth century turned out in the way they did, was not something that could have been controlled by a small party on the political fringes.

The SPGB emphasis on discussion and the power of persuasion may seem overly optimistic, too. If the idea was that they, as a small group, would be able to communicate with and convince everyone of the validity of their positions, then the charge of over-optimism would stick. But it is not just that idea that is at work in this perspective. Instead, the more important driver is that the common experience of the struggle to defend and improve conditions leads people to become receptive to socialist ideas. The hope is that the always existing, but periodically weaker and stronger, workers' movement eventually supersedes itself as a movement for better conditions

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44 Williams. Ibid. 3

45 Socialist Party of Great Britain – Declaration of Principles (1904)

within a system of exploitation and instead becomes a movement to abolish the conditions of exploitation. The SPGB offer a template of how that supersession could take place.

Chapter Three. Anarchist Communism: Developing a Culture of Counter-Dominance.

Introduction

In this chapter, I will be describing how and why anarchist communist theory and practice historically developed and then, with a knowledge of this context, logically reconstruct its key principles and asses if they can, or could with modifications, meet my realism and tyranny challenges. A key question, perhaps the central one and already examined in the introductory chapter, is that of the avoidance of social chaos and disorder. As anarchism is an anti-state theory, what would the mitigation and management of social conflict look like without recourse to a hierarchical body that is able to monopolise coercive force? Do the anti-hierarchical methods proposed for maintaining order presume a moral consensus of the type which would be ruled out by the realism challenge? Another key issue is that of mass consciousness, understood as both an ethos of co-operative non-domination and active democratic participation, and as an understanding of capitalist social relations as a form of domination. Specifically, I will investigate if the development of this consciousness, as it is described in anarchist communist theory, relies on any kind of assumption of automatism – the 'optimistic fatalism' of my realism test.

Defining Anarchism

There has been somewhat of a convention in popular surveys of anarchism to describe it as something that is contradictory, inconsistent, or paradoxical in nature. Take the three following examples:

1. ‘An ongoing challenge for those who would seek to understand anarchism is to realize how historically and ideologically diverse approaches fit under the general anarchist umbrella.’[1]

2. ‘[Anarchism] is amorphous and full of contradictions.’[2]

3. ‘Anarchism is a creed inspired and ridden by paradox […]’[3] etc.

Going against this trend, I claim that any air of paradox can be dissolved, once it is realised that ‘anarchism’ refers to several partially related, but conceptually distinct political theories.[4] Instead of trying to subsume different and contradictory viewpoints into a singular category, it is more fruitful to make distinctions and to make these on the grounds of principles and strategy. Principles (how the world is understood and what changes are seen as desirable) and strategy (how these principles are to be realised in the world)[5] are a good basis for making political distinctions, since the function of political theories is to enable groups of people to work in concert to achieve shared goals. If a political category includes contradictory sets of principles or strategies, that would typically not be possible to be pursued in concert, then it is best to make a distinction and form another category. For example, if the principles and strategic position of one theory rules out a certain course of

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1 Andrew Fiala “Anarchism.” Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Stanford University, October 26, 2021, https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/anarchism/

2 David Miller, *Anarchism* (London: J. M. Dent and Sons ,1982), 2.

3 George Woodcock *Anarchism. A History of Libertarian Ideas and Movements*. (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1962), 35.

4 No claim to originally can be made in taking this approach. Although it had occurred to me before, extra clarity has been provided by *Black Flame*, *Means and Ends*, and partially influenced by an understanding of ideologies as relational clusters of meanings as concepts derived from Freeden.

5 Tactics can be thought of as the individual steps or actions intended to realise a larger strategy.

action, and another rules it in, then it normally makes little sense to group these theories together. Such people would typically not be able to engage in joint action, as they would be seeking contradictory goals or methods. There could be exceptions, for example in the case of temporary coalitions against a common threat, but once these passing conditions have passed these more fundamental and long-term differences would remain. Hence, it makes sense to keep to these kinds of distinction for the purpose of analytic clarity.

My understanding of anarchism is partly genealogical and partly conceptual. The meanings of political concepts do not exist outside of history, but instead are continually debated, drawn and redrawn as groups of people engage in political contestations. Political theories can be understood as both logically arranged clusters of concepts and as bodies of theory, which develop and change over time as they are developed by real people embedded in real historical situations and conflicts. While it makes sense to think about how the parts of a theory (once a specific version of a theory has been isolated) logically fit together, it is also worth looking at the contexts in which they were developed in order to get a better sense of what problems they were attempting to address.

According to *Black Flame*, the idea of a broad and eclectic anarchist canon can be tracked back to Eltzbacher's 1900 work *Anarchism*.[6] Here a now familiar, but rather arbitrary, list of thinkers makes its first appearance: the names of Godwin, Stirner, Proudhon, Bakunin, Kropotkin, Tucker and Tolstoy are grouped together as founding figures of anarchism. However, rather than sharing a commonly developed theory, the only real common factor uniting them all, was some kind of opposition to the state, but even then the content of that opposition differs among them.[7] While it is obviously true that anarchism is an anti-state theory, it is not the only political theory to be critical of the state; and there are other theories which have a minimised or stateless society as an end-goal

6 Michael Schmidt and Lucien van der Walt. *Black Flame*. Oakland and Edinburgh: AK Press, 2009. 17-18

7 Schmidt and van der Welt. *Black Flame*, 39.

but are not anarchist, Marxism being the most pertinent example. Conflating anarchism with anti-statism confuses more than it illuminates, and has led to some truly through the looking glass moments such as in Peter Marshall's *Demanding the Impossible* where it is claimed that Margaret Thatcher's attempts to roll back the state where influenced by anarchism.[8] This state of confusion has not been helped by some anarchist writers themselves, beginning with Kropotkin, who sought to add credence to the anarchist cause by pushing back its historical genesis. Kropotkin extended the anarchist lineage all the way back to the beginnings of human society, linking anarchism to a perennially present libertarian impulse in human nature, suggesting anarchism had been existing since time immemorial.[9] This widening up is taken to even broader plateaus in Peter Marshalls's *Demanding the Impossible*. Here we find that; 'The first anarchist was the first person who felt the oppression of another and rebelled against it',[10] which could be read to mean that almost everyone, everywhere, at some point in their life has been an anarchist without realising it.

Out of this amorphous and eclectic mix, I am going to pull out and briefly describe several clear conceptual clusters and explain which of them is the best candidate for meeting the criteria of being a type of revolutionary socialism, while passing my realism and tyranny tests. I claim that the best candidate for a type of anarchism that is both realistic and revolutionary is anarchist-communism. This can be thought of as a political theory that arose as a historically specific form of revolutionary socialism in the late 19th century, specifically from discussions within the federalist wing of the First International.[11]

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8 Peter Marshall *Demanding the Impossible* (London: Harper/Perennial, 2008) xiii, 559

9 Peter Kropotkin "Anarchism" in *Anarchism, Anarchist Communism, and The State*. (Oakland: PM Press, 2019) [1910] 10-12

10 Marshall. *Demanding the Impossible*. 3-4.

11 Baker *Means and Ends* 29-40, and Schmidt and van der Walt *Black Flame*, 44-47

Individual freedom is the goal of all forms of anarchism. Social anarchists (of which collectivists and communists are two types) held that that freedom (understood as both the development of human capacities and potentials, and as non-domination)[12] can only be realised through the community and in a certain kind of society, and as present-day capitalist society is a barrier to such freedom; it can only be achieved through the establishment of a new form of society. The type of anarchism I am focussing on here can be differentiated from individualist anarchist like Godwin, Stirner and Tucker, who thought that freedom was something that could only be achieved at the level of the individual.[13]

The development of Anarchist-Communism. Differentiating Individualism, Mutualism, Collectivism, and Communist Anarchism

The label 'anarchism' has been applied and used by a wide variety of different political positions, here I will further explain why I will be focussing on the current that came to be known as anarchist-communism.

Proudhon is often referred to as the founding figure of anarchism and the political thought of Proudhon, which can be referred to as mutualism, certainly played a real influence within the First

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[12] "[…] anarchy means non-government, non-domination, non-oppression by man over man" (Errico Malatesta "Anarchism and Individualism" in *Method of Freedom.* 459) "I have in mind the only liberty worthy of that name, liberty consisting in the full development of all the material, intellectual, and moral powers latent in every man […] " "We understand by freedom, from the positive point of view, the development, as complete as possible, of all faculties which man has within himself, and, from the negative point of view, the independence of the will of everyone from the will of others […]" (Mikhail Bakunin in GP Maximoff (editor) *The Political Philosophy of Bakunin*. 270-271) "Communism is the best basis for individual development and freedom; […] that which represents the full expansion of man's faculties, the superior development of what is original in him, the greatest fruitfulness of intelligence, feeling and will." (Peter Kropotkin *Modern Science and Anarchy*. 79)

[13] Schmidt and van der Walt *Black Flame*, 35-36

International. So, to call Proudhon 'anarchist' would make sense, but it is important to note that the communist form of anarchism marks a break with Proudhon's mutualism rather than a continuity. The mutualists thought that all that was needed was for workers to own and manage their own enterprises, and that this situation could be developed within capitalist society as these workers enterprises would gradually and peacefully be able to usurp the owners of capital. The collectivist and communist anarchists rejected this idea and thought that the kind of change needed to bring about an anarchist society could only come about through means of a complete rupture, a move from individual to collective or communist property was needed. Proudhon's mutualism is therefore excluded from my study as it is not a *revolutionary* socialist theory; it sought to soften commercial relations through a gradual shift in ownership patterns, not bring about an entirely new form of society in a rupture.

The adoption of a communist position was not the initial starting position within the anarchist movement. Bakunin sought to distance himself from 'authoritarian' communism which he associated with Marx, and he and others would refer to themselves as collectivist anarchists, differentiating themselves from the individualists and the mutualists. The term 'anarchist-communism' came to prominence after being adopted in the 1880 conference of The Jura Federation, which represented the anarchist faction during the split of the First International.[14] Also originally calling themselves 'collectivist' (or sometimes 'socialist') anarchists this current would eventually adopt the label anarchist-communist. I will be following this convention. Kropotkin described the political and economic basis of anarchist communism in the following way:[15]

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[14] Heath. Ibid. 91-98. Cahm. Ibid. 57-58

[15] Kropotkin was the most famous exponent of anarchist communism, but he was in no means the originator of it. Early precursors include the writing of Joseph Déjacque, who in 1857 described an anarchist society as 'the state of affairs where each would be free to produce and consume at will and according to their fantasy, without having to

> As regards socialism, most of the anarchists arrive at its ultimate conclusion, that is, at a complete negation of the wage-system and at communism. And with reference to political organization, […] they arrive at the conclusion that the ultimate aim of society is the reduction of the functions of government to *nil* – that is, to a society without government, to anarchy. […][16]

Anarchist-communism can be distinguished from other anarchist theories, including collectivism, by its adherence to the principle of 'to each according to need'. Working for wages or any kind of time-related compensation, 'to each according to work done', as had been advocated by the collectivists, was taken to be a remnant of hierarchical society. If the means of production were to be held in common,[17] then the fruits gained would be commonly held too. Reimbursement according to work done meant dividing social output according to some metric, but as production

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exercise or submit to any control whatsoever over anything whatever; where the balance between production and consumption would establish itself, no by preventive and arbitrary detention at the hands of some group or another; but by the free circulation of the faculties and needs of each.' Quoted in Alan Pengam "Anarcho-communism". In *Non-market Socialism in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*. Edited by Maximilien Rubel and John Crump. New York, Saint Martin's Press (1987). 64.

16 Kropotkin "Anarchist Communism Its Basis and Principles" in *Anarchism, Anarchist Communism, and The State*. 31

17 "In common with all socialists, the anarchists hold that the private ownership of land, capital, and machinery has had its time; that it is condemned to disappear; and that all requisites for production must, and will, become the common property of society, and be managed in common by the producers of wealth. […]" Kropotkin. Ibid. 31. "Common possession of the necessaries for production implies the common enjoyment of the fruits of the common production; and we consider that an equitable organization of society can only arise when every wage-system is abandoned, and when everybody, contributing for the common well-being to the full extent, of his capacities, shall enjoy also from the common stock of society to the fullest possible extent of his needs." Kropotkin. Ibid. 56.

was entirely socialised there was no clear metric that could be found, there would be no clear way to calculate how much an individual's input had contributed to social output.[18] Commodity-exchange and distribution according to need are, on the anarchist-communist view, two separate and mutually exclusive modes of fulfilling needs.[19] It was reasoned that common ownership was not something that could peaceably exist side by side or intermingled within a collectivist private property society; placing a private claim on goods produced with common property, or a common claim on means of production that were held privately, would lead to conflict between the two types of producer – one that would require the kind of coercive power that is exercised by states.

I will next explain how Anarchist Communists sought to realise the kind of non-state society they saw as being necessary for the realisation of freedom, and how they saw the co-ordination of production and mediation of conflict could occur within such a society.

Anarchist-Communist Strategy

To effectively understand the anarchist-communist strategies, it is necessary to understand how they understood an anarchist revolution could be bought about and what role they saw within this for the development of consciousness.

An anarchist revolution was not something that could be bought about solely by the actions of a small but militant minority of dedicated anarchists. A successful anarchist revolution required that it be the result of the actions of the labouring classes themselves. The anarchist-communist

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18 Cahm. *Kropotkin and the Rise of Revolutionary Anarchism.* 55.

19 "[…] the collectivist ideal seems to us merely unrealizable in a society which has been brought to consider the necessaries for production as a common property. […] It appears impossible that the mitigated individualism of the collectivist school could co-exist with the partial communism implied by holding land and machinery in common -- unless imposed by a powerful government, much more powerful than all those of our own times. […] " Kropotkin. Ibid.

understanding of power meant that minority attempts to impose anarchism through force would not be successful, since what was achieved through force would require force to sustain it and a society engaging in such acts of coercion would not be one based on free agreement, it would not be an anarchist society. Neither could the act of revolution be put off until everybody, or at least an overwhelming majority, was in agreement with anarchist ideas. The nature of hierarchical societies was to reproduce and reinforce hierarchical relationships and attitudes, until the structure of the society was changed, it would be futile to hope that an anti-hierarchical co-operative ethos would become the majority view.[20]

The whole of anarchist revolutionary strategy was geared to answering the question of how an anarchist minority could bring about and take advantage of a revolutionary situation of which the outcome was dependent of the actions of non-anarchists.[21] It was a question of finding which situations that already existed within the present society would best lend themselves to the development of the kinds of co-operative and self-organising capacities and dispositions that where necessary for anarchism. In short, the unity of means and ends was of crucial importance. It was a question of finding which forms of organisation and activity lent themselves to the development of a self-confident and co-operatively organised working class.

There were two broad types of strategy that were developed in response to this question: one revolving around the action of small groups (or sometimes individuals) and the other more concerned with building mass movements. The small group strategy hoped to provoke a revolution through the example of insurrection. The mass anarchist strategy sought to build a wider movement by influencing the working class through either operating within workers unions or through setting

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[20] Errico Malatesta "Further Thoughts on Revolution in Practice". In *Method of Freedom*. Edited by Davide Trucato, 426. Errico Malatesta "Gradualism". In *Method of Freedom*. Edited by Davide Trucato, 470-471

[21] Errico Malatesta "An Anarchist Program". In *Method of Freedom*. Edited by Davide Trucato, 284-286

up formal anarchist parties, or some combination of the two. By promoting forms of organisation and activity that encouraged active and co-operative participation, the hope was to effect a slight change in the conditions experienced by the working class, to tip the scale a little more in the favour of anarchism. While these mass movements would not initially be majority anarchist or socialist, it was thought that when some kind of rupture or revolution emerged from within society the landscape would be such that workers would gravitate in the direction of anarchism.

I will argue that the small group strategy places too much hope in the spontaneous release of a 'libertarian impulse' – thinking that a revolution would appear naturally and without any preparation – and so it fails the realism test. The mass strategy moves away from this kind of thinking to some extent, but not entirely. In the way that a period of revolutionary upheaval is seen as providing the tipping point that leads towards the mass uptake of anarchist communist ideas and the establishment of an anarchist-communist society there still can be seen a remnant of the same kind of wishful thinking. There seems to be some kind of faith that the dynamics of the situation itself will lead in one direction, when they could just as likely go in the other.

Anarchism of small 'affinity' groups: Insurrection and propaganda of the deed.

The insurrectionalist tactic is tied up with the concept of 'propaganda of the deed';[22] the hope that the spectacle of a small minority undertaking daring actions against existing power structures would inspire the masses to rise up with them and so lead to a successful anarchist revolution. Those engaging in propaganda of the deed did not totally disregard the need for writing or oral propaganda too, but thought that strong and powerful actions would have a more forceful effect on

[22] "[…] we must spread our principles, not with words but with deeds, for this is the most popular, the most potent, and the most irresistible form of propaganda. […]" Michael Bakunin. "Letters to a Frenchman on the Present Crisis (1870)". In *Bakunin on Anarchism*, edited by Sam Dolgoff. 195-196. Montreal, Black Rose Books 2002.

the imagination and so drastically speed up the process of revolutionary transformation – especially since many of the those they were trying to influence, peasant farmers for example, were largely illiterate. The thought was that even if insurrectional efforts did not immediately lead to revolutionary success, mere knowledge that such actions were possible would lead to a building up of confidence of what Kropotkin called 'the spirit of revolt' in the masses. To place this strategy in its historical context, it is worth remembering that at the time that historical events such as the Paris Commune would still have been a strong influence in the popular imagination. It was hoped that the continuation of similar events would lead to a growing popular sympathy for anarchism. The taking over of the city of Paris in 1871, showed that the working class could run things for themselves and the subsequent massacre of 20,000 communards was not something that was easy to have a neutral opinion on.

The era of 'propaganda by the deed' took the form of either bands trying to gain control of towns or villages through armed insurrection, or in a later phase where often lone individuals would engage in acts of bombing or assassination. Some success was gained through the first period of propaganda of the deed, as publicised court trials helped spread awareness and sympathy for anarchist ideas. But ultimately, the period of violent propaganda by the deed had isolated the anarchists from the working class. Police repression had diminished and dispersed the anarchist movement and the fallout of innocent victims of bombing campaigns of its second phase had caused anarchism to be viewed less sympathetically in the wider public.[23]

By the late 19th century there was growing dissatisfaction with this strategy amongst the anarchists themselves, and the view emerged that another approach was needed. Indeed, over time the small group strategy was rejected by most of the anarchist movement itself in favour of the mass

[23] Zoe Baker. *Means and Ends.* 185- 210.

movement strategy.[24] Anarchists changed and modified their positions with regards to these two strategies as events and theoretical understandings of them progressed. In the end, Kropotkin noted;

> […] we have realized that one cannot *begin* a revolution with a handful of people. It was foolish to imagine that the strong effort of a few could succeed in inciting the revolution: things did not happen that way, and it was necessary to organize the preparatory movement which precedes all revolutions. It was necessary, in addition, to have an ideal for the revolution. […][25]

This was echoed by Malatesta:

> […] [T]he youthful illusion (which we inherited from mazzinianism)[26] of imminent revolution achievable through the efforts of the few without due preparation in the masses had left us alienated from any long and patient work to prepare and organize the people.[27]

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[24] Michael Schmidt and Lucien van der Welt. *Black Flame*. 133

[25] Kropotkin "Kropotkin to Nettlau, March 5, 1902. On Individualism and the Anarchist Movement in France". Last accessed 21st Apri 2024. www.marxists.org/reference/archive/kropotkin-peter/1902/kropotkin-to-nettlau,-march-5,-1902.html

[26] Giuseppe Mazzini was an Italian nationalist republican, who partook in insurrectionary activity that eventually led towards the unification of Italy. Malatesta's early insurrectionist period can be understood as drawing inspiration from a strategy and tactic that had been historically successful, though for nationalist rather than anarchist or socialist purposes.

[27] Errico Malatesta "Anarchism's Evolution" in *The Complete Works of Malatesta Volume 3*. Edited by Davide Turcato. 336

Too much faith was placed initially in the idea that once certain barriers were removed (such as local police forces or a lack of arms), there would an automatic movement by the popular masses to bring into being a more anarchistic system of society. But, in reality, although peasants were sympathetic and often applauded the efforts of insurrectionalists, they were hesitant to take action themselves, wary of the prospect of later reprisals, or uncertain of the motives of the insurrectionalists, thinking it possible they were actually provocateurs sent to trick them.

This failure can be seen as an example of what I described as type one realism failure; the insurrectionalists thought that if an insurrection could remove or weaken the existing powers then the natural tendency towards anarchism and non-hierarchical organisation within the masses would manifest itself, like 'seeds beneath the snow'. With the failure of this approach the realisation was made that more work would have to be done before, to change people's preferences and beliefs, before a transformative social revolution could be attempted. Nevertheless, the period of propaganda of the deed illustrates an important theme that is continued in later strategies, that of education through action or leading by example. The question now was what kinds of action would more effectively lead the masses to taking up anarchist ideas.

Mass anarchism: Syndicalism and anarchist-communist strategy.

Coming to see the assumptions of the era of insurrection and propaganda of the deed as unrealistic, anarchists such as Malatesta began to argue that there was a need for a different strategy that would enable the anarchists to engage with the wider populace.[28] As the working class was already engaged in a combative struggle with the property-owning classes, the wage-labour-capital relation being one of domination of employers over employees not of free agreement between

[28] Errico Malatesta "Let Us Go to the People" in *The Method of Freedom: An Errico Malatesta Reader.* Edited by Davide Turcato. 169-173. Oakland and Edinburgh: AK Press, 2014

equals,[29] it made sense for this to be a prime locus of anarchist activity. Anarchists would enter the unions with the hope of pushing them in directions that would help achieve the anarchist communist end goal. Emphasis was placed on the direct action of the workers themselves, rather than the actual outcome of these struggles. A minor reform would be more useful than a major reform if the reform had been won through the independent action of the working class. Reforms granted from above, through benevolent governmental action, would represent an improvement in conditions but would help foster passivity rather than then combative spirit that would be needed to win a final confrontation with the defenders of the propertied classes.

The term 'syndicalism' is derived from the French word for union, with its modern usage coming from the French Confederation Generale du Travail (CGT). The term gained currency as a way for more radical and militant trade unionists to differentiate their activities from those of the more reformist, or social democratically aligned unions. A syndicalist union was one that placed emphasis on horizontal organising and industrial direct action, rather than relying on hierarchical union structures and the influence of political parties. The end goal for syndicalists was to bring about a general strike which would see the means of production being expropriated from the capitalists and a new worker-led system of society being bought into existence. Anarchist syndicalism, or 'anarcho-syndicalism' (a term originating in abuse but one that was co-opted by the anarchists for their own use) was a fusing of this type of union with explicitly anarchist goals. The strategy of syndicalism is one used by anarchist communists but not all syndicalists or syndicalists unions are anarchist – they don't all have anarchist communism as a stated goal. Even among the

[29] It should be noted that Marx's criticism of capitalist were widely, although not universally (Kropotkin rejected what he understood as Marx's theory on grounds that it was unscientific), accepted and studied by anarchist communists. In fact, the only abridgement of *Capital* that was approved in Marx's lifetime was that done by the Italian anarchist communist Carlo Cafiero. (Last accessed 20th April 2024. www.marxists.org/archive/cafiero/1879/summary-of-capital.htm)

explicitly anarchist-syndicalist unions, such as the Spanish CNT, the majority of the membership, while not being actively hostile, were not fully committed anarchist-communists either.[30] In many industries and geographical areas, the CNT would have been the largest union and so workers would have joined for simple workplace reasons rather than for strong ideological ones.

While all anarcho-syndicalists have a commitment to anarchist-communism, not all anarchist-communists are anarcho-syndicalists. The difference is one over tactics and strategy rather than one over differing end-goals.[31] While some anarchist-communists were opposed to or cautious about unions, most anarchist-communists decided that they would best achieve their goals by working within workers unions. But there were debates to the extent in which unions should restrict their membership only to anarchists and should state their goals to be anarchist. All anarcho-syndicalist unions had anarchist communism (or, as it was also known, 'libertarian communism') as their stated goal. There was some disagreement about the role that the unions would play in this new society, whether production would be organised solely through unions or through communes or some combination of the two. Anarchist-syndicalism became seen as a way of achieving anarchist communism.

The hope of anarchists that organised within the syndicalist unions was that their work to achieve reforms or better working arrangements through extra-parliamentary trade union activity would bring successes that would grow and develop self-confidence and self-organisational skills of the working class and so help to move towards the anarchist communist end goal. This strategy was based on two assumptions. Firstly, that meaningful and significantly lasting reforms could be

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[30] Stuart Christie's *We the Anarchists* (Hastings: Meltzer Press. 2000. 25) quotes figures for FAI (an explicitly anarchist organisation that existed within the CNT) membership in Barcelona, an anarchist heartland, as never reaching greater than 300 in the years leading up to 1936.

[31] For an example of this disagreement see Murray Bookchin *To Remember Spain. 20 - 22*

achieved.[32] And, secondly, that the result would not be an endless cycle of struggle for the gaining and defending of reforms, or descend into the pursuit of purely sectional interests, but would eventually lead to a point where a rupture with the economic system that made the struggle necessary was possible.

There were differences in how the syndicalist strategy was to be pursued. Three distinct types can be discerned;[33] I will call these 'pure syndicalism', 'dual-organisation syndicalism', and the 'separate but within' strategies. Pure syndicalism thought that a revolution could be organised solely through means provided by the union structure, the French CGT being an example. Dual-organisation syndicalism saw the need to have unions specifically aiming at anarchist goals, but open to all, and within the unions an organisation of dedicated anarchists steering its action in an anarchist direction, such as the FAI operating within the CNT and Bakunin's Alliance within the First International. Separate organisation anarchists thought that it would be necessary to establish something like an anarchist party (understood in the non-parliamentary sense) outside of the unions and, while anarchists would be participating within the unions, the activity and propaganda of the party would guide and educate for anarchist-communism. Malatesta's position and the *Platform* fits within this category.

The pure syndicalism strategy immediately falls foul of the realism error. There is a presumption that a general strike would somehow lead to an unhindered mass taking up of revolutionary ideas, without their being a need for them to have been seriously considered or discussed beforehand.[34] This disregarding of the need for preparatory mental educative work beforehand, and the

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[32] Contrast this with the Lassalean 'Iron Law of Wages'

[33] Baker. Ibid. 250

[34] This strategy is illustrated in the 1903 utopian novel *Syndicalism and the Co-operative Commonwealth. (How We Will Bring About the Revolution)*, written by French syndicalists Emile Pataud and Emile Pouget.

assumption of the possibility of a rapid conversion in viewpoints, seems to rest on the assumption of a latent tendency towards egalitarianism, neglecting the counter influence of other factors. As this was how I described the realism failure, a kind of 'optimistic fatalism' this strategy fails the test.

The dual and separate organisation strategies do not rely on anarchist and socialist understanding arising spontaneously with the experience of a general strike. Both of these strategies place an emphasis on the need for written and oral propaganda, as well as the propaganda effect that is gained through engaging in workplace struggles. These strategies are more promising, since they suggest a recognition that egalitarian relationships can only be made and maintained through concerted effort, and that they don't automatically arise when existing hierarchies are challenged or have fallen.

As an example of the 'separate but within' strategy, I will draw on Malatesta's position which is sometimes described as being against syndicalism. This is not really the case. Malatesta argued that any union that restricted its membership to only anarchists would be small and therefore ineffective; and a large union could adopt anarchist communism as its end goal, but this would remain a paper commitment, since in pre-revolutionary times the majority of the members would not be anarchist. Malatesta argued that anarchists should work within general unions composed of all workers and through example and education lead them in a more anarchist direction.

> A union may be founded with a socialistic, revolutionary or anarchistic program and, in fact, the various labor organizations generally were born with such programs. But they remain true to their program only so long as they are weak and powerless, that is, so long as they still are groups of propaganda, initiated and animated by a few enthusiastic and convinced individuals rather than organism capable of any efficient action. Then, as they succeed in attracting the masses into their midst and in acquiring sufficient strength to demand and command ameliorations, their original program becomes nothing more but an empty formula to which nobody pays any more attention; the tactics adapt

themselves to the necessities as they arise and the enthusiasts of the first hour must either adapt themselves or give their place to "practical" men, who pay attention to the present only, without giving any thought to the future.

[…]

[…] Anarchists should not want the unions to be anarchistic; they should only work within in them for anarchistic purposes as individuals, as groups and as federations of groups.

[…]

They should, in a word, remain Anarchists, always keep in contact with the Anarchists and remember that the labor organizations do not constitute the end but only one of the various means, no matter how important it may be, of preparing for the advent of Anarchy. [35]

This perspective is highly compatible with a realist perspective since it recognises a differentiation between working to alleviate conditions within capitalist society and working to change the fundamental structure of society itself. A recognition of this distinction means that there is no presumption that working to achieve the first will automatically lead to the second, indeed in some circumstances union type activity would obscure the political end goal of an anarchist transformation. As unions, and in the workplace in general, was where the working class coalesced it was here that anarchists could propagate their ideas either through example or plain explanation. There was nothing special about union organisation that would automatically turn workers into

[35] Errico Malatesta "Syndicalism and Anarchism" in *The Method of Freedom: An Errico Malatesta Reader*. Edited by Davide Turcato. 465-467

revolutionaries; instead, it presented anarchists with a potential platform through which they could seek to spread their ideas from a common shared starting point – that of struggling against domination in the workplace.

Having looked at how the anarchists sought to organise themselves within the unions, I will now look at how they sought to organise themselves as a specific political force and what bearing this has on the dual challenges of avoiding tyranny while maintaining social order.

The Anarchist Party: 'The Organisational Platform' and 'The Synthesis'

The events of World War One had a negative effect on the anarchist movement. The movement had been fractured over the issue of whether or not to support the war. Many anarchists had been killed in the fighting. The Bolshevik seizure of state power in the Russian Revolution had led to the execution of thousands of Russian anarchists. The rise of Bolshevism and the 'Communist' parties drew away many workers who may have been sympathetic. Those that remained within the anarchist movement were facing profound disillusionment. In response to these events, two different approaches to anarchist organisation where proposed, *The Synthesis*[36] and *The Platform.*[37] *The Synthesis* sought to bring all types of anarchists (individualists, collectivists, and communists) together in a single organisation. The authors of *The Platform* rejected the idea of synthesis, claiming that it would be impossible for a group that contained various and contradictory principles to work in concert, instead they proposed a grouping centred around the acceptance of anarchist-

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36 *Voline "*On Syntheis" [1924] Last accessed 21st April 2024. www.marxists.org/subject/anarchism/voline/1924/on-synthesis.html

37 Dielo Truda (Workers Cause) *The Organisational Platform of the Libertarian Communists [1926]*. The Anarchist Library. Last accessed 21st April 2024. theanarchistlibrary.org/library/dielo-truda-workers-cause-organisational-platform-of-the-libertarian-communists

communist principles. Only if principles and strategy where significantly shared could a group work towards shared goals using common methods. As this conclusion is in line with those I made at the start of this chapter, it will focus on how *The Platform* details the relations between anarchist groups for indication on how anarchist-communist federalist organisation could work.

Federalism as a key aspect of anarchist-communist theory has two aspects: Firstly, in how anarchists in the here-and-now choose to structure their organisations and the relationships between them, and secondly, how anarchists envisioned a communist society would organise itself for meeting its various needs without having the recourse to a central political authority. Both of these aspects inform one another, but the implications of federalism are different depending on if we are considering it in pre- or post-revolutionary contexts. Within the context of present-day society, anarchist groups are purely voluntary associations, since members are free to come and go as they please. Political associations are by nature non-voluntary for the simple reason that one enters into them by the virtue of being born in a certain place and at certain time. This somewhat complicates the situation for post-revolutionary anarchism, especially when considering things at a global scale. Anarchist theory makes much of 'free association', referring to a lack of economic compulsion in forming associations, but world commonwealth implies that everyone is, at the most general level, part of the same political community – whether they wish to be or not. So, while individuals may be free to choose which of society's projects they participate in, all of society's projects are nevertheless associated with one another, to a lesser or greater degree, due to the communal nature of society. This gives rise to a potential tension that would need to be navigated, that between the communist principle of world commonwealth and the federalist principle of free association, the conflict between the demands of regionality and common ownership of world's resources. How well this tension is navigated, I outline and assess in the following.

We can think of an anarchist communist society as being organised along various interrelating networks that are federally related with each other in order to meet the various needs of society. As described by Kropotkin:

> […] the voluntary associations which already now begin to cover all the fields of human activity would take a still greater extension so as to substitute themselves for the state in all its functions. They would represent an interwoven network, composed of an infinite variety of groups and federations of all sizes and degrees, local, regional, national and international temporary or more or less permanent — for all possible purposes: production, consumption and exchange, communications, sanitary arrangements, education, mutual protection, defence of the territory, and so on; and, on the other side, for the satisfaction of an ever-increasing number of scientific, artistic, literary and sociable needs.[38]

We can see that the anarchist communist idea of federation was not something that was geographically bounded in the sense of being a relationship only between regionally separated communes, though the purpose of some federations would be related to specific geographical issues. Instead, the basic unit, which Kropotkin called ‘the commune’, would be a grouping based around the pursuit of common interests and projects.

The authors of *The Organisational Platform of the Libertarian Communists* set out how the principle of free association and production in common can be made compatible when production is conceived of in a properly communist manner. Instead of thinking that production would take the form of “[…] several independent productions, isolated industries, separate trusts and maybe even separate factories producing and disposing of their products as they see fit”, which would not be

[38] Kropotkin. Ibid. 7

communist since “the federated units will be nothing more than small private entrepreneurs (to wit, the united workforce of a single plant, trust or industry), […] based on the parcelisation of ownership, which will not take long to provoke competition and antagonisms.” They proposed that production should be thought of in terms of “one single, giant workshop of producers, created by the efforts of several generations of toilers and altogether the property of everybody and no one in particular.” They elaborate further:

> Particular branches of production are inseparably interconnected and they can neither produce nor exist as separate entities. The unity of that workshop is determined by technical factors. But there is only one unified and coordinated production capable of existence in this mammoth factory. Production carried out in accordance with an overall scheme prescribed by the workers’ and peasants’ production organisations, a plan drafted in the light of the needs of society as a whole. The products of that factory belong to the whole of labouring society. Such production is truly socialist.[39]

If there is an apparent conflict between this model and the one outlined by Kropotkin, then it can be removed once it is remembered that both are talking about a society where production is carried out in common. In federal systems there is always the question of how powers should be split. As communist production is in common (or what *The Platform* authors called ‘unitary production’), rather than private, organisations for the purpose of co-ordinating and regulating production would be global in remit. But these would not represent a central state power since they would be “[a]ppointed by the masses and continually subject to their supervision and control, [and] constantly renewed, thereby achieving the idea of genuine self- management of the masses”.[40] They would not

[39] Dielo Truda. Ibid

[40] Dielo Truda. Ibid.

be able to make, or impose, decisions that have not been approved at the more localised levels. The more localised levels of federation would consist of "specially-created agencies, purpose-built by the working masses: workers' councils, workplace committees or workers' administrations of factories and plants"; and these would be related to each other "at the level of municipality, province and then country," making up "municipal, provincial and thereafter general (federal) institutions for the management and administration of production."[41]

Individualist anarchists rejected this idea, seeing in it a return to statism. But this is because they held onto a different conception of freedom. For the anarchist-communists, freedom and the development of human capacities was something that could only happen through society. While co-operative organisation was an anathema for individualists, unitary production co-ordinated through different levels of delegation was how the anarchist-communists saw this freedom being realised – individualist methods of production would not solve the problems of capitalism, but merely be a continuation of them. Each individual's freedom depended on the productive efforts of all other members of society, and only through socialised production would this be a means of mutual self-development, rather than the basis for renewed competition and conflict.

It would be a mistake to look to federalism, or any other form of political organisation, as a fully pre-worked out blue-print solution that will solve all the problems of politics. Rather, if political conflict is perennial, it is a matter of thinking about what kinds of problems particular systems address and how well, or badly, they do so compared to others. What is valued by a society will affect, and be affected by, the forms of political organisation that are employed. Federalism, in the context of anarchist-communism, will share some of advantages and disadvantages the kinds of federalism that exist in present-day society but will have its own distinct problems and advantages, too. I will now consider these in terms of the realism and tyranny constraints.

[41] Dielo Truda. Ibid.

Federal systems provide a counterbalance against centralisations of power, with decision making powers being split across a broad base of institutions. In terms of the tyranny constraints, federalist systems also have the advantage of being more able to adapt and adjust their component parts to fit localised conditions and can be more freely self-adjusting as material and social conditions change. Hierarchal organisations tend to be self-preserving, often at the expense of those subject to them. This pressure would be somewhat mitigated in a federated system, its flexible nature allowing for these problems to be tackled in ways that a system of fixed nation-states cannot:

> Moreover, such a society would represent nothing immutable. On the contrary — as is seen in organic life at large — harmony would (it is contended) result from an ever-changing adjustment and readjustment of equilibrium between the multitudes of forces and influences, and this adjustment would be the easier to obtain as none of the forces would enjoy a special protection from the state.[42]

However, the problems of federalism become apparent when considering potential clashes of interest between different branches of federation, and between regional and global interests. Without the presence of a centralised body to mediate conflict or, enforce a decision should the need arise, the question arises how conflicts between competing claims could be managed. This issue is most relevant when it comes to global issues relating to the environment and access to scarce resources, though such issues are not adequately answered by the current nation-state system either. Federalism can represent a horizontal method through which political problems like this could be worked through, although there is a danger that, without a guarantee of consensus, decisions could become frozen.

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[42] Kropotkin. Ibid. 7

Making anarchism work: developing an ethos of non-domination and structures of counter-dominance

Federalism can explain how non-hierarchical relations can be established and maintained between organisational units. I will now explain how a shared ethos of non-domination is necessary to establish and maintain non-hierarchical relations within them.

The basic challenge of politics, how to achieve social stability whilst avoiding tyranny, has in relation to anarchism, and revolutionary socialism in general, two dimensions: firstly, the problem of how to achieve co-ordinated action that leads to social revolution, and secondly how to maintain social co-operation and order without recourse to hierarchical power. This problem can be framed as a collective action problem in the form of a prisoner's dilemma.[43] Without recourse to a larger body, which enables the dilemma to be resolved, social conflicts will have the potential to spiral out of control; since there is nothing that guarantees that individual agreements will be reciprocated, or that force or threats will not be used to further personal interests or preferences. In liberal theory a hierarchical state is thought of as the *only* solution to this dilemma since it can offer a greater force against individual acts of coercion. In this section, I aim to demonstrate how anarchist-communism can provide its own answer to this dilemma.[44] I do this by claiming that the principle of mandated and recallable delegates together with the federated structures that anarchist-communists propose could serve as an organisational framework of 'counter-dominance' that preserves its non-

[43] This game theoretic way at approaching the problem, and proposing stateless, voluntary co-operation as an alternative solution, is followed in depth in Taylor *The Possibility of Cooperation*. Taylor *Community, Anarchy and Liberty*. Taylor *Rationality and Revolution*.

[44] Raekstad, P, "Realism, Utopianism, and Radical Values." has already provided some initial work explaining how anarchist communism could be seen as a solution to Wiliams' 'first political question'. I mentioned this in Chapter One.

hierarchical social order and collective forms of production. This counter-dominance works, and could only work, because there is a shared egalitarian non-dominating ethos which is enabled and reinforced by society's common forms of economic production and distribution.

In explaining this, I want to refer to an idea from radical anthropology, the idea of counter-dominance, which comes from Boehm's book *Hierarchy in the Forest*. Boehm's thesis is that the social life of mobile hunter gatherer bands was one of political and economic egalitarianism. This egalitarianism was able to establish and sustain itself because the physically weaker members of the band were able to form coalitions large and powerful enough to keep stronger members from dominating them. Instead of thinking of egalitarianism as resulting from an absence of hierarchy, Boehm claims that it is better to think of these societies as 'reverse dominance hierarchies'; instead of an individual or small group being at the top of the pyramid, we have an inverted pyramid with the band as a whole at the top. This reversed hierarchy has the specific function of coercing those individuals who might attempt to gain hierarchical advantage or achieve positions of dominance within the group, with coercion taking forms ranging from verbal ridicule and mocking all the way up to physical annihilation. The two key developments that made this kind of egalitarianism possible where the development of projectile weaponry for hunting (physically weaker members could now easily dispatch those stronger than them with little bodily risk to themselves), and the invention of symbolic culture (which allows for the development of moral communities through which a strong egalitarian ethos can be developed).[45] So long as these coalitions are able to maintain themselves, which is a task that requires continual vigilance and effort, the band would continue to exist in an egalitarian manner.

Boehm takes an ambivalent view towards human nature. People are neither solely Rousseau's 'doves' or Hobbesian 'hawks'; instead, they are a combination of both. Psychologically this results

[45] Boehm Ibid. 14, 171-196

in a three-way pull between dominance, submission, and the resentment of domination. How these competing influences resolve against each other is determined by an interplay of social and material factors. In immediate return hunter gathers, the resentment of domination gains the upper hand, since there is no mechanism that enables actual or would-be dominators to defend themselves against the morally united and lethally armed rest of the band. In other situations, the pull of influences could play out differently, and as societies become more complicated different factors become stronger or weaker. For example, if a tribal chief successfully leads a defence against an invading enemy the resentment against domination may be not present such a strong influence, as submitting to the chief provides security against an external threat. The longer a chiefly power exists, the more coalitions can be built to defend it. Once one group becomes dependent on another, and there is less opportunity for exit, patterns of domination and submission become solidified. The resentment of domination can also be muted by the tendency to rationalise what already exists. This highlights the importance of historical conditions and context in how forms of society are able to sustain themselves. Any form of society has to maintain itself, but this work may be thrown of balance due changes in the pressures from within and outside of the society.

Anarchist-communism can make sense, once its strategy is understood as one aiming to bring about popular self-emancipation through means of changing preferences, goals and expectations – through the development of the kind of egalitarian ethos that is described by Boehm. This strategy seeks to cultivate the kinds of abilities and propensities that would be needed for an anarchist society by only engaging in the kinds of activities that encouraged and reinforced these tendencies and ignoring those that did not. I.e., as anarchism was conceived as a politically and economically horizontal society based on free agreement and federalism, anarchists would promote activities that encouraged self-activity and avoid those that fostered passivity and deference to hierarchy. In contrast to vulgar Marxist understandings of social change – which saw communism unfolding automatically out of the internal contradictions of capitalism or being imposed through the actions

of a party carrying out the 'historic mission' of the working class – the anarchist strategy placed emphasis on changing the preferences of individuals; outcomes depended greatly on what goals were aimed for and which means where employed in attempting to reach them.[46] Through the development of an egalitarian anarchist ethos which enables the development of 'counter-dominance' from below (the establishment of political community and power structures that are arranged horizontally and subject to the control of the wider community through means of recall etc.), we have a theoretical solution to the dilemma of politics which does not depend on the existence of a hierarchical state.

The key lesson from Boehm's hypothesis is that politically non-hierarchical organisation is not a 'natural' or default state of human society – indeed, there is no natural default. When non-hierarchical organisation is achieved, it has to be strongly enforced through social mechanisms that keep down or discourage behaviour that would threaten the non-hierarchical structure.

I will now take this idea of 'counter domination' and show how it was applied in Anarchist theory, specifically as related to decision making processes and the protection and enforcement of non-hierarchy and non-domination. Before proceeding, and to clear up some possible misconceptions, it will be useful to describe the relationship between anarchism, majority decision making and consensus.

Modern anarchism has come to be associated with 'consensus' as not only to the goal of achieving unanimous agreement (which is a good in all political systems), but more specifically 'consensus decision making', such as the codified procedural forms adopted by the Occupy

[46] Marx's actual theory is closer to the latter. See, for example, Paul Raekstad *Karl Marx's Realist Critique of Capitalism: Freedom, Alienation, and Socialism*. (S.L.: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022).

Movement and various protest and environmental groups.[47] However, there is no evidence that such procedural methods were used within classical anarchist organisations. Rather than being derived from the practices of classical anarchism, the consensus decision-making models of the new anarchists have their roots in the US civil rights and feminist movements where they were used to encourage participation within groups that were already united in the pursuit of a common goal.[48] Consensus decision making processes, of the type utilized by the new anarchists, *may* be empowering to those engaging in them, but, on the other hand, if individuals or small minorities have the ability to freeze up decision making processes, they have clear dangers of becoming dictatorships of the most stubborn or time rich – and the classical anarchists seem well aware of this danger.

While classical anarchist-communists did view consensus as a desirable goal, they did not place consensus decision-making processes at the centre of their politics – when large groups of anarchist delegates met to hold congresses, majority decision making was often adopted.[49] The reason for this

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47 C.T. Butler & Amy *Rothstein On Conflict and Consensus: a Handbook on Formal Consensus Decisionmaking.* [1987] Last accessed 21st April 2024. theanarchistlibrary.org/library/c-t-butler-and-amy-rothstein-on-conflict-and-consensus-a-handbook-on-formal-consensus-decisionm

V Coover et.al *Resource Manual for a Living Revolution. A Handbook of Skills and Tools for Social Change Activists.* (Philadelphia, PA: Movement for a New Society, 1977)

48 Andy Blunden. *The Origins of Collective Decision Making*. Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2016. 122-127, 228-229.

49 As evidence of how alien the formalised methods of 'consensus' would be to classical anarchists take the following; "Let us come to the question concerning majority and minority. We think that all discussion on this subject is superfluous. In practice, it has been resolved a long time ago. Always and everywhere among us, practical problems have been resolved by a majority of votes. It is completely understandable, because there is no other way of resolving these problems inside an organisation that wants to act." Dielo Trudo *The Organisational Platform of the Libertarian Communists and the Synthesis* (London: Anarchist Communist Group, 2021) 88

was not some slip in principles, for the sake of convenience, but a recognition that non-domination does not require universal agreement (and such a thing would be unachievable anyhow). What non-domination required was mutual recognition, respect and accommodation on the part of both minorities and majorities. If decisions are held off until everyone agrees, minorities or individuals could block issues indefinitely. As Malatesta was to comment on anarchists who took objection to all forms of voting and non-unanimously agreed upon action:

> […] going from the principle: The majority has no right to impose its will on the minority; they came to the conclusion that nothing should be done without the unanimous consent of all concerned. […] I assert that no social life would be possible if we should never undertake any united action without unanimous agreement. […] in all matters not amenable to several solutions running simultaneously, or where differences of opinion are not so great as to make it worthwhile parting company, with each faction doing as it will, or where the duty of solidarity imposes unity, it is reasonable, fair, and necessary for the minority to defer to the majority.[50]

> […] everything is done to reach unanimity, and when this is impossible, one would vote and do what the majority wanted, or else put the decision in the hands of a third party that would act as arbitrator, respecting the inviolability of the principle of equality and justice which the society is based on.[51]

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[50] Errico Malatesta "From London. For the Record" in *The Complete Works of Malatesta Volume 3*. Edited by Davide Turcato. 17-19. Oakland: PM Press, 2016

[51] Errico Malatasta. "Between Peasants". Marxist Internet Archive [1884]. Last accessed 21st April 2024. www.marxists.org/archive/malatesta/1884/between-peasants.htm

That is not to say that the anarchists held some populist notion that the majority is always right. Malatesta was to comment:

> […] where truth and justice are concerned numbers don't count, and often one person alone can be right against one hundred or a hundred thousand.[52]

And because of this, he thought that minorities should not be deprived of the opportunity of further attempts to persuade the majority:

> […] if it is impossible to exactly suit everybody, it is certainly better to suit the greatest possible number; always, of course, with the understanding that the minority has all possible opportunity to advocate its ideas to afford them all possible facilities and materials to experiments, to demonstrate, and to try to become a majority.[53]

An ethos on non-domination doesn't mean that every individual or minority gets an absolute veto on any decision that goes against their personal preferences – such a thing would be minority domination. But if majority decisions were to be enforced, coercion could only be used for reasons of preserving non-domination – where actions interfered with the freedom or safety of others.[54] (Though the question of what counts as interfering with freedom is a complicated issue and would

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52 Malatesta. Ibid.

53 Errico Malatesta "Anarchism and Parliamentarism" in *The Complete Works of Malatesta Volume Three*. Edited by Davide Turcato. 18-19. Oakland and Edinburgh: AK Press, 2016

54 "[…] the submission of the minority must be the effect of free will determined by a consciousness of necessity, must never be made a principle, a law, which must, therefore, be applied to all cases, even if there is no necessity for it. […]" Malatesta "Anarchism and Parliamentarism". In *Collected Works of Malatesta Volume 3*. Edited by Davie Turcato. 19

always be a matter of contestation). This was put forward by one of the protagonists in Malatesta's dialogue pamphlet *Between Peasants*:

> Bert: But if nonetheless there were some who for one reason or another were opposed to a decision made in the interest of all?
>
> George: Then of course it would be necessary to take forcible action, because if it is unjust that the majority oppress the minority, it's no more just that the contrary should happen. And just as the minority have the right of insurrection, so do the majority have the right of defence, or if the word doesn't offend you, repression.[55]

Anarchist society is sometimes described as a society without coercion,[56] and if this 'coercion' is understood as the actions of a force that stands separate and above society in general then that would be correct. But on the realist understanding of politics that I have been adopting, all human societies are by necessity political and so contain some element of coercion. If the value of non-domination forms the predominant ethos of a society, as it would have to in an anarchist society, then those who would seek to gain dominance or act in anti-social ways would be subject to the counter-dominance of the community.[57] The coercion within an anarchist society (and recall here that 'coercion' could range from verbal disapproval or mocking to the impositions of fines or penalties, and all the way to capital punishment) would exist for the purpose of protecting the non-hierarchy rather than persevering a hierarchy. Consensus would be something that was constantly strove for, but there does not need to be an assumption that everyone – all the time – would refrain

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55 Malatasta. "Between Peasants". Marxist Internet Archive [1884]. Last accessed 21st April 2024. www.marxists.org/archive/malatesta/1884/between-peasants.htm

56 For example in David Miller *Anarchism*. London and Melbourne: JM Dent (1984) 6-7

57 Schmidt and van der Welt. Ibid. 69 -71

from attempting to dominate. In these cases, if coercion was required it would in the first instance arise through direct community and neighbourhood relations – then if suitable resolution could not be found, through the wider network of federated bodies.

This discussion of decision making brings us to the question of the use of the state in anarchist politics. As we will see, opposition to parliament was not based around a simplistic rejection of voting, delegation, or even majority decision making, but around a more complex set of considerations around the unity of means and ends.

Anti-parliamentarianism. Tactic or Principle?

The question of abstinence from parliamentary activity was the defining one in the history of the development of anarchism within the First International.[58] The anarchists were against parliamentary activity as they thought that using the state to effect a socialist revolution would not result in free association but another form of state domination, and that party political activity was necessarily hierarchical and pacifying, counter to the development of the kind of independent and self-directing capacities that would be necessary for those operating a freely associating society to have. In this section, I am going to look at the arguments the anarchists put forward to support this position, examining if they could be seen as expressing a kind of latent optimistic or pessimistic fatalism, what I have referred to as a 'realism error'.

I outline what I take to be the key anarchist arguments against parliamentarianism here. These are as follows:

[58] For a history of this split see Wolfgang Eckhardt. *The First Socialist Schism: Bakunin vs. Marx in the International Working Men's Association*. Oakland: PM Press, 2016

1. The function of the state is to preserve hierarchy. It will do this no matter who is in charge. This is because state power changes the perspectives and interests of those that wield it.

2. Parliamentarianism is a slippery slope towards passivity. While there are some uses that could be made of elections without contradicting anarchist principles,[59] participating in these runs the danger of leading to an erosion of the more active style of activities, and encourages a move towards passively waiting for changes to be enacted from above.

3. A conscious socialist majority is not possible before a revolution. An election could only be won by pandering to non-socialists by offering various reforms, etc.

4. Even if socialists were to gain control of parliament, other elements of the state – such as the army or police – would not allow it and would use force to expel them from power.

The key arguments of the anarchists against parliamentary political organisation depend on the assumption that parliamentary parties must be organised hierarchically, that they are seeking to come to power in order to effect reforms and manage capital society, and possibly with the goal of imposing or otherwise introducing social change upon an unconscious or indifferent population. These criticisms seem valid when applied to most, and certainly all of the major, political parties including those that call themselves socialist or labourist. But hierarchical leadership structure is not something that is necessary for a political party to have, nor the goal of the conquest of political power for the purposes of managing capitalism and administering reforms only reason for engaging in elections, as I explained in my examination of the Impossibilists in the previous chapter. The Impossibilists were as critical of the 'state socialists' as the anarchists. They envisioned a self-

[59] For example, Italian anarchists nominated imprisoned comrades as electoral candidates as a method of getting them freed from prison.

directing majority using democratic means to win control of the state solely for the purpose of ending capitalism. Control of the state would be used to immediately bring about common ownership, and with it a transformation and dismantlement of the state apparatus.[60]

The question here arises whether organising into a parliamentary political party was necessarily as authoritarian as the anarchists imagined. This must depend on how the party chooses to organise itself. The Impossiblists followed methods that are compatible with the anarchist idea of the unity of means and ends; leadership roles were rejected and instead group-wide decisions were made on the basis popular vote, mandated delegation, and conferences of branches.

There also seems to be an implicit assumption in anarchist theorising, that there is no possibility of mass socialist consciousness arising *before* a social revolution. Anarchists would be acting as a minority until a change in conditions bought about a change in consciousness. A mass change in consciousness would come about during a period of insurrection and disruption in which the existing system of society would suffer a loss in legitimacy and anarchists would be able to exert enough of an influence for things to come out as they favoured. But, if we accept the ambivalent description of human nature from the previous section, why think that? The kinds of conditions that allowed hierarchies to establish themselves in the first place were a response to the types of threats of violence and insecurity that would be rife in such a period. Reactionary minorities, offering security and safety at the expense of freedom, would be able to exert a strong influence in such a period too. The key to success would seem to be in the extent that anarchist ideas had become an ideological force before such an insurrectionary period. The anarchists thought they had the best chance of spreading these ideas, and the anti-domination 'spirit of revolt', through methods that

[60] This should be differentiated from the Leninist idea of 'socialism' being a separate mode of society that exists between capitalism and communism. For the Impossibilists an immediate transformation would be possible because the conscious socialist majority was already in existence.

were outside parliament. The extent to which this idea can be judged to be realistic depends to the extent in which preparatory work is deemed necessary. If the mass transformation is seen as something that will happen as an automatic response to the situation, then this would indeed be a case of the 'seeds beneath the snow' error. But if the change is seem as reaching a tipping point achieved through long and extensive work of changing people goals and perceptions of what is possible, then there is nothing in the realism test to rule it out.

The final of these four criticisms also seems to rest on the assumption of there being no conscious socialist majority outside of parliament. If the armed forces did try to dispossess a socialist majority, it would seem a strange assumption to make that the masses who had just voted for them would be passively sitting about and not doing anything about it. Though of course something seeming strange is no reason to think that it couldn't happen. Typically, arguments claiming the impossibility of achieving socialism through parliamentary means, due to the inevitability of a military coup, refer to things like the 1973 coup that ousted the Allende government in Chile. While the 'socialism' of Allende was not the same kind of socialism as supported by the revolutionary socialists, some further comments are worth making. Firstly, Allende did not command a majority in parliament at the time of his election, nor did he enjoy majority support within the population at large. Secondly, the coup occurred not at the time of his election in 1970 but three years later – by which time his support had been further eroded as his attempted reforms had not improved the condition of the working class.[61] The argument is not whether or not socialism can be achieved without their being an active and organised socialist movement outside of parliament, (neither the Impossibilists nor Anarchists Communists think that) but that a socialist majority should abstain from taking advantage of its strength in numbers by sending delegates to parliament through the use of democratic elections. The Chile case presents an argument, not for

[61] SPGB *Parliament Arguments For and Against*

abstaining from parliamentary activity, but for not trying to establish socialism from a minority position – which is not something that the revolutionary socialists that favour the use of parliament would argue for either. All of three revolutionary socialist currents place vital importance on building some kind of mass socialist civic culture either before or during the revolutionary process, and this is the key factor for ensuring success. If the anarchist strategy is to bring about a situation where a final showdown with the existing powers is bought about, then going for the tactic of sending delegates to parliament doesn't seem to be such a contradiction of anarchist principles after all.

The important thing to extract from anarchist debates about the use of parliament[62] is the centrality of the unity of means and ends in anarchist theorising. But the question of to what ends various means can be put does not always contain an obvious answer. The anarchist critique of parliamentary tactics makes sense when it is used against those against whom it was developed, the social democratic 'state-socialists' of the time. But if the use of parliament is not as necessarily hierarchical and pacifying as the anarchists claim, then their insistence on the unity of means and ends is not automatically an argument to abandon parliamentary action.

Conclusion

The anarchist-communist strategy changed and adapted through time; these changes were due to a recognition that the trend in the population towards anarchism would require more nurturing than initially hoped. Thereafter, anarchism placed a strong emphasis on the need to change preferences and develop capacities for freedom. As what people believed, and how they behaved, was influenced by the circumstances and situations in which people found themselves, anarchists sought

[62] The most illuminating of these is probably the debate between Malatesta and Merlino which graced the pages of various Italian language anarchist publications over a number of years in the late 19th century. A summary can be found in Turcato *Making Sense of Anarchism*, 156-162.

to organise in ways which were compatible with their anti-hierarchical and non-dominating end goal – with the commitment that there has to be a unity of means and ends. By working within the unions, the anarchists hoped that they could spread their ideas through such a means and affect a change in how people viewed domination and their willingness and abilities to organise against it. However, there remained in the later strategy a residue of the former. It was thought that, due to the inescapable influence of capitalist social relations, it would not be possible for a majority anarchist movement to appear until some kind of rebellion or rupture had begun to shake up and loosen these relations. But this can be seen as somewhat of a reversion to the earlier 'seeds beneath the snow' way of thinking about a socialist revolution. While the later strategy hoped to change the cultural landscape to make such a switch more likely it still seems to require a leap of faith. Periods of social disruption, rather than inevitably leading to a final flip towards a society of non-domination are just as likely, if not more, to give advantage to authoritarian elements claiming to restore order – especially the more extensive the disruption is. Hoping that the automatic pressures of a situation would lead to a sudden switch-over of the unconverted is a fraught position from a realist understanding, it suggests that there is some kind of natural movement towards non-hierarchy – which is something that should not be presumed.

We can further understand anarchist theory by using the idea of counter-dominance from Boehm. While the social conditions of band hunters are very different from those of modern societies, we can still apply the idea of counter-dominance to a socialist revolution and to the maintenance of society. A socialist revolution can be thought of a mass act of counter-dominance as the majority of the population reassert themselves against the domination of the capital-owning class. Once a socialist society is up and running, counter-dominance would require that coercive power not be concentrated at the top of society but on the level of society as a whole. This counter-dominance could express itself in the way that organisations are internally structured and external related, and how mechanisms for dealing with social disagreements and problems are arranged.

Counter-dominance requires some kind of shared ethos to enable collective action, and we could say that the idea of class consciousness or socialist consciousness could be thought of as forming this ethos. But this brings us to a challenge:

> *Challenge*: If a mass change in consciousness (e.g., a change in values, or a change in how people view their position in the world and what is possible) is required to bring about some kind of egalitarian ethos (either before, during or after a revolution), how is this different to wanting to achieve a moral consensus? Can such a change in consciousness accommodate various and conflicting moral viewpoints? How (or are) are the kinds of (conscious or otherwise) agreements that keep a society / economic order functioning in a certain form over time different from an overarching or overlapping moral consensus?

I believe this challenge can be answered, since every system of society has and requires a kind of shared ethos in order for it to continue existing in its present form. An ethos need not be as all-encompassing as a moral consensus since they can be adopted from various moral positions. This question will be developed in the final chapter.

Chapter Four. The Dutch and German ‘Communist Left’ and ‘Council Communism’: Workers Councils and Proletarian Self-Emancipation

Section One: Introduction

The central idea of Dutch and German left (and of what later became known as ‘council communism’) was that socialism was something that had to be won by the working class themselves; it couldn’t be announced by decree nor forced upon an unwilling or ignorant majority. This meant that revolutionary socialist activity was about finding ways to nurture the kinds of co-operative and self-directing capacities and attitudes that would be needed to bring into existence and operate a socialist society. This current can be thought of as a critical movement against the predominant forces within the Marxist wing of revolutionary socialism (first the reformist and orthodox wings of the SDP and then Bolshevism[1]) that arose through the events leading up to, and following on from, the failure of the German and Russian Revolutions to bring about socialism. It makes sense to speak of the Dutch and German communist left together since many of its key figures where known and active in both countries.[2] Prominent figures of German left included Rosa

[1] Initially the communist left had been supportive of the Russian Revolution, eager to defend it as the first stage of a proletarian revolution that would spread worldwide. As events developed, and it became clear that the proletariat were not in control in Russia, they revised their position and became much more critical. In this ‘councilist’ phase they were now fully against vanguard revolution, parliamentary parties, and trade unions – which they saw as all playing a pacifying role in society. See Bourrinet. Ibid. 161-165

[2] Bourrinet. Ibid. 1-5

Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht. Of the Dutch left, its most prominent figures are probably now more well-known for things other than their politics. Anton Pannekoek is known for his work in astronomy and a research institute bears his name.[3] Herman Gorter (author of the *Open Letter to Comrade Lenin*[4], which was a reply to Lenin's '*Left-Wing' Communism: An Infantile Disorder*), is one of the most famous names in Dutch poetry with his work being taught and studied in high schools.[5]

The theory of council communism was developed by theorists such as Anton Pannekoek, Herman Gorter, Otto Rühle, Karl Korsch, and Paul Mattick in the years and decades that followed the German revolution, and after workers councils had ceased to be an existing political form in the real world.[6] Following the decline of revolutionary events in German, Council Communist groups continued to exist only as small-scale propaganda bodies. From the 1930's onwards a group of German émigrés in the US, centred around ex-KAPD member Paul Mattick, published the journal *International Council Correspondence* (later titled *Living Marxism* and then *New Essays*) with contributors including Karl Korsch, Otto Rühle and Pannekoek[7]. The Dutch group, Group of

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3 *Anton Pannekoek: Ways of Viewing Science and Society.* Edited by Chaokang Tai, Bart van der Steen, and Jeroen van Dongen. Amsterdam University Press B.V., Amsterdam 2019. Relates Pannekoek's political work to his scientific.

4 Herman Gorter. "Open Letter to Comrade Lenin". Marxists Internet Archive [1921] Last accessed 21st April 2024 www.marxists.org/archive/gorter/1920/open-letter.htm

5 Herman Gorter. *Poems of 1890: A Selection*. Translated by David Colmer. London: UCL Press, 2015
Herman Gorter. *The Essential Gorter: Selected Poems*. Translated by Lloyd Haft. 2 vols. Aremi Books 2021

6 Gaard Kets. "Working Class Politics in the Bremen Republic." In *The German Revolution and Political Theory*, edited by Gaard Kets and James Muldoon, 92. New York: Routledge, 2022.

7 Mark Shipway "Council Communism". In *Non-Market Socialism in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries.* Edited by Maximilien Rubel and John Crump. New York, Saint Martin's Press (1987). 108

International Communists (GIC) was also of importance in this period, publishing amongst other things the *Fundamental Principles of Communist Production and Distribution* which sought to explain how socially average labour-time could be used a co-ordinating principle in a post-capitalist society.[8]

After fading into relative obscurity, Council communist ideas resurfaced independently around the period leading up to and following on from the events of 1968, through the writings of Cornelius Castoriadis and the group Socialisme ou Barbarie (Socialism or Barbarism).[9] It was through the influence of Socialisme ou Barbarie that Guy Debord and the Situationist International, as well as the Solidarity group in the UK,[10] developed their ideas about workers councils.

In this chapter, I will be examining and reconstructing the ideas of these groups, to see to what extent they can be understood as a form of revolutionary socialism that provides an adequate response to what I described in earlier chapters as 'the problems of politics'[11] – particularly as they

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[8] Here I do not comment on if this represents a workable model of how a non-market society could operate. There was controversy within the council communist movement, see Paul Mattick's 1970 introduction to *The Fundamental Principles*. Last accessed 21st April 2024. https://libcom.org/library/introduction-paul-mattick

[9] There was some correspondence between Pannekoek and Socialisme ou Barbarie, though his influence was not formative on the group. Anton Pannekoek, Edited Robyn K. Winters *The Workers Way to Freedom & Other Council Communist Writings (1935-1954)* PM Press (2024) 213-224

[10] Solidarity was a small libertarian Marxist group that was active between 1960-1992. It introduced articles from Socialisme ou Barbarie to an English-speaking audience. No connection with the Polish trade union of the same name.

[11] In short, this problem can be stated as: "how can a political society make decisions and live together, without collapsing into chaos or dictatorship, in conditions of persistent moral and ethical disagreement?". The answer to this question can be answered in multiple ways and is itself context dependent. There are always issues and conflicts within a society, but what these problems are and how they are embedded within different relations of

relate to the problems of revolutionary change, those of moving from one form of society to another. What marks this current out from the others is the political form that the council communists saw as being the sole vehicle for proletarian self-emancipation. This form was one where political and economic problems would be managed through a system of workers councils. These were councils within workplaces that would delegate between each other through a system of mandated and recallable delegates that met through various levels of regional and technical federation. Not to be confused with 'works councils' which are a way of managing and softening conflict between employers and employees within a capitalist enterprise, what the councilists proposed was a form of political and economic governance for establishing a socialist transformation which would become established during the course of a mass strike or other mass disruption of the economy.

I will argue that, in the end, the councilists tended to place too much faith in these types of struggle and organisational forms (wildcat strikes spontaneously leading into the development of workers councils); in short, they fell into a kind of optimistic fatalism. I will suggest that their correct emphasis on self-emancipation became too rigidly associated with a particular form of action and organisation – mass strikes and workers councils. In effect they became overly convinced that socialism could come about as a near unconscious side effect of how the working class had organised itself, thinking that if a particular form of struggle and organisation was achieved this would almost automatically lead to the taking up socialist ideas within the working class.

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power will vary across geography and history. What is an appropriate answer to this question in one period, may not be an appropriate one in another.

Historical and theoretical context

The German revolution

The history of the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) in the early twentieth century was one of competing conceptions of what socialism and what a socialist revolution entailed. These struggles would lead to several splits and an eventual bloody climax. In the early decades of the twentieth century, the SPD could be understood as being split into three competing groupings:(1) The reformists, such as Bernstein; (2) the left: Luxemburg, Liebknecht, Mehring and Pannekoek; and (3) the centre, around Kautsky, that was trying to stick with their orthodox understanding of Marxism.[12] These tensions came to a head over the issue of whether or not to support Germany's entry into The First World War. In April 1917 Anti-war socialists from both the left, right and centre split from the SPD (which would from now on be known as the Majority Social Democratic Party – MSPD) to form the Independent Social Democratic Party of Germany (USPD)[13]. Liebknecht and Luxemburg's Spartikusbund (Spartacus League) would eventually split from the USPD and combine with other socialist groups at the end of 1918 to form the Communist Party of Germany (KPD), which would affiliate to the Third International.[14] The formation in April 1920 of the KAPD (Communist Workers Party of Germany), which was formed after a bureaucratic purging of those to the left of the Sparticists within the KPD, was a key moment in the development of council communism.[15] At its peak, in the early years of the organisation, the KAPD had a membership in

[12] Paul Mattick. *Anti-Bolshevik Communism*. (Melin Press, 1978) 5

[13] Vrousalis, Ibid 113

[14] Gerwarth. Ibid. 139

[15] Bourrinet. Ibid. 184-185

excess of 40,000 and a further 200,000 closely associated through the anti-trade union factory organisation the AAUD (General Workers Union of Germany).[16]

The German Revolution of 1918[17] and the political theories that lead up to, and were developed after it, provide a fruitful avenue for analysing which forms of political and economic governance are compatible with modernity. The workers councils as they appeared in the German Revolution, and as they are theorised by the council communists, provide an alternative model for thinking about how society could organise itself and how a revolutionary transformation could be bought about.

The German Revolution of November 1918 was sparked by naval mutiny in Wilhelmshaven, where sailors refused to set sail in what would have amounted to a final suicide mission. The mutiny spread throughout the country, starting in Kiel, and workers' and soldiers' committees were spontaneously set up as a new form of political governance.

Strike committees giving themselves the name of 'workers councils' had already appeared in Germany in the spring of 1917, and the idea was spread nationwide when the leaders of Berlin's January 1918 strike adopted the term.[18] Their origins were in workplace organisations that had appeared after 1914 when the traditional workers parties and unions had subsumed themselves to the war effort; there was a spontaneous need to organise resistance since there was now no pre-

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16 Philippe Bourrinet. *The Dutch and German Communist Left (1900–1968). 'Neither Lenin nor Trotsky nor Stalin! All Workers Must Think for Themselves!'* Haymarket Books, 2018. 184 -185

Shipway. Ibid. 108

17 A good introduction to these events and their background can be found in Robert Gerwarth *November 1918: The German Revolution* (Oxford University Press 2020).

18 Ralf Hoffrogge. "Richard Müller, Ernst Däumig and the 'Pure' Council System." In *The German Revolution and Political Theory,* edited by Gaard Kets and James Muldoon, (New York: Routledge 2022), 199-200.

existing body that could represent workers' opposition to the war and the conditions it imposed. Following the formation fof the USPD in 1917, many of the key members, The Revolutionary Shop Stewards, would also become USPD members.

The workers' and soldiers' councils of November 1918 became the de facto power for a short time, leading to the abdication of the Kaiser and the declaration of a republic on the 9th November 1918. From the beginning of the revolution, there was a conflict over what form the new society would take, between those who saw the councils as the new form of society and those who favoured a return to a parliamentary system. Two declarations were made on the same day, one by Philip Scheidemann of the SPD who pronounced a republic from a window of the Reichstag (against the wishes of the leader of the party, Friedrich Ebert, who had hopes for preserving the monarchy). And a second declaration was made from the Royal Palace by Karl Liebknecht, who declared a *socialist* republic.[19] Two new institutions were soon created: (1) the Council of People's Deputies, which formed the provisional government, and (2) the Executive Council of the Workers' and Soldiers' Councils, which represented the power of the workers councils. While the Executive Council was supposed to have some oversight over the People's Deputies, its resolutions where often ignored, and a tension developed between the two bodies. The Council of People's Deputies, which was under the sway of the SPD took a moderate line, fearful of a collapse into violence and starvation which they saw the Bolshevik revolution as representing. The Executive Council was more radical, wanting to push through a more thorough democratisation of society. The question of councils or parliament was put to a vote at the First German Congress of Workers' and Soldiers' Councils. The councils had arisen from the initiative of workers themselves but there was controversy as to whether the councils were to transform the nature of the economy, or to be merely used as a

[19] Gaard Kets and James Muldoon. "The 'Forgotten' German Revolution: A Conceptual Map." In *The German Revolution and Political Theory*, edited by Gaard Kets and James Muldoon (New York: Routledge 2022), 4

temporary means of representation until the previous order was returned. A large majority of the representatives from the workers councils voted in favour of establishing a national parliament, which would have its first elections on 19th January 1919. The result of the election was that the majority votes go to non-socialist parties, although SPD became largest single party. The old rupture within the labour movement, over the question of reform or revolution, which had been submerged during the war years resurfaced once the conflict had been bought to an end – and was only to be settled in the most bloody of ways. The struggle between those who wanted a political system based around workers' councils and those wanting a parliamentary democracy would eventually collapse into armed conflict, marking the next phase of the revolution.

January of 1919 began with the so-called Spartacus Uprising. The events themselves had not been planned or orchestrated by the Spartacus League (of which Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht were key members) but came about following mass protests against the dismissal of the Berlin police chief Emil Eichhorn, who was a member of the USPD and had acted sympathetically towards demonstrators by refusing orders to attack. The protests were followed with the occupation of the SPD newspaper office and various other sites, and which in the following days were forcibly put down by the regular army and free corps (voluntary army units largely sympathetic to the far-right). These events saw the capture and murder of Luxemburg and Liebknecht.

Less than a week after the beginnings of the Spartacus Uprising, a council republic was proclaimed in Bremen. Though none of the major figures of the left were present, their ideas had a significant influence, due to the prior influence of the left communists in the region. After around month of existence, the republic was put down by armed forces under the command of the SPD. Later, similar republics are declared in Bavaria and other regions and are likewise overpowered by force. The constitution of the Weimar Republic was implemented on August 14th 1919. Germany became a federal republic with a presidential and parliamentary system, and in January 1920 a new law was passed that ends the power of the workers councils.

The final acts of the revolutionary period see an attempted coup by the far right, the Kapp Putsch of March 1920, being put down by the actions of workers. The putsch was an attempt to roll back the results of the revolution and establish an autocratic government. Working class action against the putsch transforms into outright rebellion in the Ruhr Valley and Vogtland. This is followed by an uprising in central Germany. These uprisings were violently put down by government forces, again with the assistance of the Free Corps.[20] This contributed to an emboldening of the radical right which in the following decade would eventually be able to outmanoeuvre the forces of the republic. An unintentional side effect of this repression was growing working class dissatisfaction with the SDP and the administration of the Weimar Republic in general and a later reluctance to defend it from the threat of National Socialism.

While the result of the German Revolution was not socialism, nor proletarian emancipation, there were achievements that really did represent a real and significant widening of democracy for ordinary people. The actual successes of the revolution, such as the ending of the war, the enfranchisement of women, and the establishment of a liberal-democratic republic, should not be downplayed and would not have been possible without the spontaneous efforts of the workers' and soldiers' councils.

In summary, the workers' councils as they appeared were in response to a real problem, that there was no effective vehicle of representation for those that wanted to end the war. Amongst the participants of the councils, there was no singular agreement of what their wider purpose was to be. Whether they were to be the new sole power with the purpose an enacting an economic transformation, or merely a temporary passing form of governance until the usual order could be restored was a question that played out over a period of months. After this period of contestation,

[20] Gabriel Kuhn. *All Power To The Councils!: A Documentary History of the German Revolution of 1918-1919*. (Oakland, CA: PM Press 2012), xxiv-xxviii

which often descended into violent struggle, the more radical wings were defeated. The theory of council communism was developed in response to this failure, and it is this I will now move on to examine.

The Council Communist idea in the German revolution

The first detailed outlines of what a council system could look like, did not come from any of the well-known theorists of the left, but from within the Revolutionary Shop Stewards movement, which had taken the leading role in the events of and leading up to the November revolution. Richard Müller and Ernst Däumig, leaders in the shop steward's movement, detailed what they described as a "pure council system", which was intended to be an alternative to parliamentary democracy. They did this in the months and years following the 16th December 1918 political defeat of those wanting a political system based solely on workers councils at the First German Congress of Workers' and Soldiers' Councils[21]. This model was devised from the practical experience of the councils and was intended to demonstrate how a system based solely on councils could organise present day political and economic activity, while at the same time guiding the transformation from capitalist to socialist society and eventually becoming the mechanism through which this new type of society would function. Conceptually, the model could be thought of as a half-way point[22]

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21 Hoffrogge. Ibid. 200-204

22 "[…] district councils and the national economic council were to work toward reconciling various interests and enabling interregional planning. By contrast, most contemporary syndicalist-federalist discussions simply fail to consider the overall organisation of production in society […]" Hoffrogge 116

It should be understood that the 'unitary production' put forward in the last chapter by the authors of *The Platform*, was a specific proposal coming from anarchist-communists, and so should be differentiated from and not confused with syndicalism in general.

between the centralised tendencies of Leninism and the total federalism proposed, though not fully elaborated, by the syndicalists.[23]

In Müller and Däumig's plan, the councils were envisioned as having both economic and political functions. Economic councils elected from workplaces would operate in parallel with political councils which were also elected from workplaces but represented geographical regions.[24] The councils would be related to each other in a pyramidal manner, with the most regionally specific councils at the bottom with remits getting wider as the pyramid was scaled. The economic and political councils would be joined together in a central council to which all other councils would be subordinate. At every level, the councils were composed of mandated and recallable delegates with each level electing delegates to send to the higher levels. Only at the bottom level of pyramid were delegates chosen by the general rank and file. At the higher levels the delegates were chosen by the delegates themselves.

With respect to my Tyranny test there is a criticism that can be made here of the council model, in the way it delegates it allows for bureaucracy or a build-up of power at higher levels, since higher level delegates are only chosen from among the ranks of the delegates. But both delegates and representatives could act in ways that serve their own interests rather than of those they are serving. Though delegations have the added layer of protection against corruption in that delegates can be more easily removed from their position, this protection is somewhat hindered once higher levels of delegation are not recallable at the base.

The definition of the proletariat within the council model was of a purely economic nature, white collar and service workers would be represented as 'mental workers'. But this emphasis on

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23 Ralf Hoffrogge. *Working Class Politics in the German Revolution: Richard Müller, the Revolutionary Shop Stewards and the Origins of the Council Movement.* (Haymarket 2016) 116

24 Hoffrogge. Ibid. 113

the workplace also disenfranchised some elements of the proletariat, namely women, the unemployed and those unable to work due to disability or sickness. This problem was not only one with the theoretical model but with the actually existing councils. During the war years women made up the majority of the workforce, due to men being sent to the fronts, but at the end of the conflict there was a move to encourage women to return to the home and to restart more traditional roles. As this removed them from the centre of the councils it could explain why many women saw in the representative parliament a vehicle that could be more responsive to their needs.

The focus on the workplace, is both a strength and a weakness. The strength is that it encourages democratic participation in the daily life of those who labour. The weakness is that such a focus can marginalise those who are not present at such places. For this reason, other socialists, such as Kautsky, preferred the idea of councils working in tandem with a parliament – issues relating to the workplace could be dealt with via the councils and more broader issues by the parliament. Councils widen people's involvement in decision making but the council form itself is not necessarily more democratic than other forms of organisation.

As we saw, despite the wishes of those aligned to the German left, the temporary power of the workers councils of the November 1918 Revolution did not lead to the establishment of socialism. Summing up the experience, Pannekoek was to write that;

> [...] state power slipped from the nerveless grasp of the bourgeoisie in Germany and Austria, the coercive apparatus of the state was completely paralysed, the masses were in control; and the bourgeoisie was nevertheless able to build this state power up again and once more subjugate the workers. This proves that the bourgeoisie possessed another hidden source of power which had remained intact and which permitted it to re-establish its hegemony when everything seemed shattered. This hidden power is the bourgeoisie's ideological hold over the proletariat. Because the proletarian masses were

> still completely governed by a bourgeois mentality, they restored the hegemony of the bourgeoisie with their own hands after it had collapsed.[25]

Karl Plättner, member of the KPD and later founder member of the KAPD, saw this bourgeoise influence upon the working class as something that had been transmitted through the Social Democratic parties themselves. Instead of teaching independence they had further instilled a sense of deference into the masses:

> The German proletariat was not revolutionary because it had been educated in the spirit of the counterrevolution. Order and conformity were the two central values taught by the socialist pedagogues and their subordinates to the masses of workers going through the schools of the trade unions and the social democratic parties of Schulze, Haase, and Kautsky. The workers who have not gone through these schools do not embrace these values. Good! The young ones, the new generation of workers, have a different spirit. They say to the older generations: “You have paid a heavy price for going through these social democratic schools!” But the older generations have internalized this spirit and they depend on it despite all the punishment that came with it.[26]

Although the workers’ councils, during the brief period when they were the sole power, had failed to bring about socialism and had instead chosen to restore the old state power, the council communists continued to view them as the sole way of achieving socialism and in the years and decades after the revolution led to a strengthening, rather than a weakening, of this position. For the council communists, the reason that the councils had not chosen to become the sole power and

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[25] Anton Pannekoek. "World Revolution and Communist Tactics." Marxists Internet Archive [1920] https://www.marxists.org/archive/pannekoe/1920/communist-tactics.htm. Accessed May 26, 2023.

[26] Kuhn. Ibid. 165.

ultimately chose their own dissolution was not because of the council form itself, but because of the influence of bourgeois ideology and this influence had been strengthened by the pre-war modes of workers organisation. Instead of leading to an ultimate showdown the workers parties and unions had increased the workers acceptance of the current conditions; since they had been able to achieve some degree of improvement in conditions and had reinforced an attitude of passivity and deference to leaders. The councilist strategy was therefore based around avoiding what they saw as the inevitable pitfalls of these forms of organisation.

But if the influence of bourgeoise ideology had irreversibly stunted the goals and activities of those organised in political parties and trade unions, why think that this ideology would not find an expression if people were organised in councils?

To further understand and assess why the council communists thought that this would not be the case, I am now going to examine how they understood the formation of consciousness and values, and how they thought such consciousness could be transformed of reshaped. Here I will be concentrating on the work of Anton Pannekoek as he was, over many decades, a highly influential figure within the German Left and was especially interested in the question of how socialist consciousness could come about.

Anton Pannekoek and the ‘spiritual’ side of self-emancipation. How consciousness is made and re-made.

The kind of unfreedom that is faced by the proletariat is not only of the economic kind but also of the mental kind. Mental attitudes are factors that contribute towards the reproduction of bad situations and can serve to prolong them by acting as coping mechanisms. This why an important aspect of self-emancipation is of a mental and educative kind. By placing the crucial importance on consciousness, what people think and desire, rather than treating people as an amorphous mass to be shaped and moulded through technocratic adjustments of institutions, the Dutch and German left

present a potential solution to the problem of social change. The problem that trying to impose something on an ignorant or indifferent mass will only be about a renewed situation of domination; and likewise acting as if a capacity (specifically, the capacity to consciously organise democratically) already exists without regard of if it actually does, will lead to a situation of confusion and the possibility of a reestablishment of hierarchy. Seeking to develop and nurture a working-class ethos of solidarity is the solution that the was sought by the Dutch and German Left.

For Pannekoek, the struggle for socialism was a struggle for consciousness. He argued that in order for the proletariat to assert itself ideologically, it would have to be able to develop its own culture and values. For this reason, he was interested in answering the question of how individuals and groups form ideas about the world and what could cause these ideas to change. One of Pannekoek's early works involved a critique of the neo-Kantian influence within socialism in which he drew on the theories of Joseph Dietzgen, a one-time popular but now largely forgotten socialist philosopher who was interested in the relationship between consciousness and material reality;

> Ethics is therefore closely connected with the mode of production, with the material basis of the whole social life. People do not live individually for themselves, but form a community; they must therefore be considerate with each another. "The individual human being," said Dietzgen, "finds himself deficient, inadequate, limited. He needs for his completion the other, the society, and must therefore, in order to live, let live. The consideration that arise from this mutual neediness is what is called, in a word, morality." This mutual consideration is different according to the particular circumstances and conditions of their living together. But these conditions are not freely chosen, but are determined by the relations of production; the external circumstances, the level of development of technology and the other material conditions of life determine the social order. People must submit to these externally given conditions; they cannot do otherwise; and these conditions thus determine the way in which people

> have to be considerate towards each other, in other words, what is moral. What the order of production demands is moral because it is necessary. What is a necessary condition of social life under the given circumstances cannot be bad, no matter how barbaric it may seem to a human being who has grown up under different circumstances. Thus every particular social order produces its own ethics with iron necessity.[27]

For Pannekoek, people's consciousness – what they thought of as morally 'good' or 'bad' – was shaped by the kinds of relationships and societies that they lived under. But for him this did not mean that, as we currently live in a capitalist society, people's conscious would unavoidably be shaped in ways that favoured the continuation of capitalism. For Pannekoek, the relationship between conditions and consciousness within capitalism could only meaningfully be understood as something of a double-edged sword. As capitalist society was one in which different and competing class interests faced off against each other, what was experienced as 'good' or 'bad' would not be experienced universally – it would depend on one's class position within society. It was the political situation, the fact that the proletariat within capitalist society exists under conditions of domination, that potentially gives rise to an ethos of solidarity, the values he called a 'proletarian ethics'. Pannekoek claimed that these socialist and proletarian ethics were not rooted in the application of some a-priori schema, but arose from the political situation that the proletariat faced under capitalism and in the unrealised potentials that this situation contained:

> […] If we denounce capitalism as immoral with such convincing force, it is because we have a new world order in our minds and hearts, against whose institutions and with whose ethics we measure it. *It is therefore completely inaccurate to say that capitalism*

[27] Anton Pannekoek "Ethik und Sozialismus" [1906]. *Marxists Internet Archive*. Last accessed 21st April 2024. www.marxists.org/deutsch/archiv/pannekoek/1906/ethikzukunftsstaat/1-ethik.htm. Machine translation by DeepL, corrected Fabian Freyenhagen.

> *should be abolished and replaced by a better order because it is bad and unjust. Just the other way round it must be said: because capitalism can be abolished and a better order is possible, therefore it is unjust and bad.* Our propaganda is not based on indignation about capitalism, but on the recognition of the necessary tendencies of capitalist development; we point out to the workers that a lasting and substantial improvement of their living conditions is not possible within capitalism.[28]

It was through this experience of life, through the experience of the struggle against bad conditions, that a fully developed socialist consciousness could arise from within the context of a capitalist society.[29] When some kind of partial movement or rupture arising out of the struggle against capitalism presented itself – such as the November 1918 revolution – there would be an opening through which new forms of organisation could assert themselves. While these structures would not yet be fully socialist, the experience of participating in them, Pannekoek hoped, would start some kind of virtuous circle creating a more fertile ground in people's mind for socialist theories and practices to take root.

But this brings us to the question of how much hope could be placed in such a virtuous circle, if the movement to socialism is thought of as not resulting from some kind of natural tendency. How much could the experience of partaking in democratic organisation achieve on its own accord, without its also being coupled to some kind of widescale cultural and educative movement that consciously discussed and propagated socialist ideas and promote the kinds of values necessary for it?

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[28] Pannekoek.. Ibid. Emphasis mine.

[29] Anton Pannekoek *The Workers Way to Freedom.* 202

Worker's Councils as the vehicle for self-emancipation: in practice and theory. The sole structure for changing mass consciousness?

To recap, the council communists saw the workers councils as something that would spontaneously arise out of wildcat strikes. These councils would then be the form through which the proletariat could collectively take hold of the means of production and bring about socialism. This reorganisation of society would take place by the councils forming a network through means mandated and recallable delegates. Local and workplace councils would be network together to form larger regional and industrial delegations.

However, there is a mismatch between, on the one hand, the observations the German left made of the actual councils, and, on the other hand, the projected role of the councils in the theories of the council communists. In explaining how this mismatch comes about I turn to another largely obscured theorist from the period of the Russian and German revolutions, Julius Martov. Martov, in his *The State and Socialist Revolution*, was concerned with how the councils (referred to soviets in the Russian case) of the Russian Revolution had become manipulated by a minority and had not led to a furthering of democracy but to its opposite. In this work, Martov shows this mismatch by quoting, amongst others, co-author of the Pure Council System Däumig's commentary on the councils of the German Revolution:

> Gentlemen, no revolutionary parliament in history has shown such a timid, narrow, pedestrian spirit as the parliament of the revolution assembled here. Where are the great, uplifting, spiritual ideals that dominated the French National Convention? Where is the youthful enthusiasm of March 1848? Not a trace of either can be seen today.

Martov explains this mismatch in the following way:

> And it is precisely when Däumig discovers the "timid, narrow, pedestrian" spirit that dominates the German soviets [councils], that he seeks the key to all the problems raised by the social revolution in the slogan "All power to the soviets!" All power to the timid, narrow, and pedestrian as a means of skipping the pedestrian character of universal suffrage! A strange paradox! But this paradox makes perfect sense, if in the "subconscious" sphere the process is already taking place that, when it passes into the sphere of consciousness, will find its expression in P. Orlovskii's formula: "With the aid of the soviet system, state power passes into the hands of the Communists." In other words, through the intermediary of the soviets, the revolutionary minority subjugates the "pedestrian" majority.[30]

One reason for the preference for councils was a belief that, while the majority will always be conservative, councils would allow a minority that wanted socialism to gain leadership roles and to bring socialism about through these means. However, if we think about socialism as something that requires a certain understanding and capacity on the part of the majority, this course of action runs the danger of falling into some kind of tyranny. If socialism is not enacted by the masses themselves, then a new tyranny of bureaucrats that dictate the organisation of production could emerge. While the Bolsheviks certainly did use their organisational advantage to manipulate the soviets and to bring themselves into a position of power whilst still remaining a minority, could the same be said of what was proposed by the Council Communists, despite their intentions to the contrary?

While it is highly likely that some of the participants in the German councils would have shared ambitions and an outlook similar to the Bolsheviks, the Council Communists themselves favoured

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30 Iulii [Julius], Martov. *World Bolshevism*. Translated by Mariya Melentyeva and Paul Kellogg. Edmonton: AU Press (2022) 78

wildcat strikes and councils not so that they could insert themselves into positions of leadership, but because they saw such forms of struggle as the means for developing of the kinds of capacities and powers that were needed for socialism. However, the assumptions the council communists made about spontaneous strike action and workers councils could be taken to demonstrate a kind of institutional determinism in their thinking. A telling example of this can be seen in this text written by Pannekoek that was published in *The Western Socialist*[31] at the around the same period as his 1947 *Workers Councils,*[32] which was a book length exposition of how a socialist transformation based on councils could be envisioned.

> In Europe, in England, Belgium, France, Holland — and in America too, we see wild strikes flaring up, as yet in small groups, without clear consciousness of their social role and without further aims, but showing a splendid spirit of solidarity. They defy their "Labor" government in England, and are hostile to the Communist Party in government, in France and Belgium. The workers begin to feel that State power is now their most important enemy; their strikes are directed against this power as well as against the capitalist masters. Strikes become a political factor; and when strikes break out of such extent that they lay flat entire branches and shake social production to its core, they become first-rate political factors. *The strikers themselves may not be aware of it* -- neither are most socialists-- *they may have no intention to be revolutionary, but they are*. And *gradually consciousness will come up of what they are doing intuitively, out of necessity*; and it will make the actions more direct and more efficient.[33]

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[31] Journal of the World Socialist Party of United States and the Socialist Party of Canada.

[32] Anton Pannekoek. *Workers Councils*. Oakland and Edinburgh: AK Press (2003)

[33] Anton Pannekoek. "Strikes". *Western Socialist*, January 1948. Emphasis mine. Last accessed 21st April 2024. www.marxists.org/archive/pannekoe/1948/strikes.htm

According to this view, the type of active and democratic capacity needed for the establishment of socialism can only be cultivated through action. This cultivation could not take within the traditional workers parties and unions, since these organisations operated on a hierarchical basis and fostered a culture of dependence on the part of the working class.[34] In order to be successful the participants of wildcat strikes and workers councils would *have* to learn how to act in solidarity, and once this was learnt they would be on the way to developing the capacities needed for the establishment of socialism. Through a process of trial and error, spontaneous working-class struggles would eventually settle on methods which broadened solidarity and co-operation and so lead to success.

But the trouble with this is that saying that something has to happen, in order to achieve a certain end-state, does not mean that that thing will happen or is even likely to. There is no teleological or natural reason why the working *has* to overcome the subjugation it experiences under capitalism. While it is true that strikes, if successful, can lead to increased confidence and independence of action, the reverse can be and often is also true. Strikes, when they fail, can lead to long periods of withdrawal and passivity. Instead of imagining Pannekoek's positive spiral of failures leading to a refinement in techniques and successes leading to a widening of struggle, we could just as easily imagine a negative spiral where a series of large scale but organisationally unconnected spontaneous strikes are defeated one by one and confidence and enthusiasm ebbs as the movement faces defeat after defeat. Such a description probably matches more closely to the latter half of the twentieth century than does Pannekoek's projections.

While it is true that hierarchical organisation can hold back the development of independent and self-directing capacities, and the council communists were correct to criticise this, the question

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[34] Pannekoek *The Workers Way to Freedom & Other Council Communist Writings (1935-1954).* (Chico: PM Press, 2024) 202

remains whether this is really something inherent in the nature of political and parliamentary organising in general, or if hierarchical relations are more the result of the internal structure or composition of specific organisations. As was described in Chapter Two, political parties do not need to have a hierarchical internal structure, nor need to pursue a reformist 'minimal' programme. The model of the German Social Democratic party is not the only way in which a political party could be structured, meaning that there is not really a dichotomic choice between hierarchical and reformist political parties or workers councils. The principle of mandated and recallable delegates is something that can be applied to political parties and parliamentary activity too. What's more there are undoubtedly ways in which political parties and councils could be linked together, which would serve as a way of maintaining and transmitting knowledge and of preserving activity in times of low industrial unrest.

While the SPD did have some form of a on paper commitment towards 'socialism' what was meant by this was somewhat vague and open to different interpretations, due to the competing factions within the party.[35] And as this goal was something that was projected into the distant future it meant that, in practice, very little present-day activity was directed towards it. The ultimate day-to-day activity of the SPD was around securing legal reforms which would alleviate the condition of the working class, and the bulk of its membership was attracted on this basis.

Similarly, the aim of the trade unions was to just gain and secure better conditions within the capital labour relation and not to overcome it. Such conflicts over the nature of pay and conditions, when pursued by either political parties or unions, are not in and of themselves things that aim to step outside the structure of capitalist relations, no matter how militant a form they may take. If

[35] For example, draft versions of the Erfurt programme that criticised the idea of state-socialism and nationalisation did not make the final version. "Synoptic Overview of the Drafts of the Erfurt Programme". In *Karl Kautsky on Democracy and Republicanism*. Edited by Ben Lewis. (Chicago: Haymarket Books) 312

there is no presumption of a tendency towards socialism within the working class, then it cannot be a surprise when these organisations, whose membership is not explicitly or consciously seeking socialism, do not seek to achieve it.

Conclusion:

An assumption I have been making throughout this thesis is that there is no singular natural or inevitable way for people to live together, and there is no automatic tendency towards relations of either domination or non-dominating co-operation. From this it follows that there is no automatic tendency for the working class to want to organise production in a socialist (or any other particular) way. In order for the goal of a socialist society to be chosen in preference against others, there has to be some shared and consciously worked out understanding of why this goal is both possible and necessary. Even if a society chooses to organise itself co-operatively, there are still many different ways in which co-operative production could be organised collectively and democratically. Socialism, as understood by the revolutionary socialists, is not just a democratic society but one where production and distribution of goods and the organisation of labour take place in common and without reference to a market mechanism.

The main criticism of the later council communists is that there seems to be a certain determinism in how they envision the form of organisation affecting how people act. The assumption that is implicit in the writings of the council communists is that once people are organised into workers' councils, they will automatically begin to organise production and distribution communally rather than co-ordinate on some other basis, or even worse, seek instead to promote the sectional interests of their individual workplace. This assumption is one that is not compatible with the realist assumptions I have been making in this thesis. The re-organisation of society in a revolutionary socialist (that is non-market) way can only come about once two conditions are met: firstly, socialism is consciously understood as a corrective to certain inherent

tendencies inherent within present day society; and, secondly, a democratic ethos of solidarity is developed within the population to the extent that it is able to enact, reproduce and maintain these changes. While workers councils could contribute towards the nurturing of democratic and participatory behavioural tendencies, this nurturing should be thought of as a necessary but insufficient condition – there also has to be some mechanism of explicitly arguing for and propagating the conscious element.

Instead of thinking that of workers' councils as a form that supersedes existing political structures, I propose they are more usefully thought of as being a supplementary part of a wider system of political organisation, in which localised workplace decisions about the running of productive units are aligned with considerations regional and global decisions. Current parliamentary and regional councils could be supplemented by workers councils (and in the German Revolution this is how such forms operated). Through this kind of self-organisation, revolutionary change can be achieved without relying on tyrannical impositions, without a universal moral consensus, and without assumptions of some kind of deterministic tendency within history that favours socialism or determinism about the outcomes produced by particular organisational forms.

Chapter Five. Conclusion.

1. Introduction

In this study, I have focussed on the political theories of three neglected, and often simply ignored or dismissed, currents of socialist thought, showing how their shared central concern – the ending of the systemic domination of the working class through an act of self-emancipation that transforms the basis of society – and their respective solutions and strategies for achieving this, while different, are all cognisant of and at least to some significant extent compatible with a realist understanding of politics. Other historical and theoretical studies have been made of Impossibilism, Anarchist Communism, and Council Communism. What is novel about mine, is the way I link them together and use them to answer specific questions about political and moral conflict in relation to societal change.

The political theories of the three currents of revolutionary socialism can be seen as providing a useful tool for aiding political orientation by providing means for an understanding of group and structural domination and acting as a rallying point for those that want to be rid of it. They do this by providing a specific understanding of how economic power represents a form of domination in modern society and by offering strategies for the reorganisation of this power so as to end its dominating aspects. Rather than existing as some criticism of the status-quo without presenting any practical means of moving beyond it, revolutionary socialism can provide some insight into how to navigate the problems of politics while moving towards its goals.

In this concluding chapter, I am going to make the connections between these currents more explicit. As I have shown in the preceding chapters, the three currents, in their accounts of freedom, place emphasis on the importance of democratic participation and warn against the dangers of vanguardist domination. In this concluding chapter, I will be arguing that it is fruitful to view these concerns as being a common expression of a socialist form of republican freedom, and that doing so

provides fertile ground for demonstrating how socialism can be legitimated in ways that are compatible with moral pluralism.

I will briefly describe what, for the three currents studied, this socialist form of republicanism of is. As demonstrated in the previous chapters, these currents all share a common conception of the socialist goal of self-emancipation, one that differentiates them from other types of socialism. I want to propose is that this commitment reveals a conception of freedom as non-domination, whereby domination is understood as something that arises from economic relations (specifically the relationship between capital and labour), and non-domination requires participation in productive, not just political processes. Emancipation means the gaining of freedom, which requires the ability to participate in, and collectively manage the productive activities that enable living needs to be met – gaining access to materials needed for life without being subject to any forms of domination. For the working class, this means being free from the compulsion of having to submit to an employer in order to gain access to goods needed for life.[1] Taken together, both of these concerns can be understood as representing the two sides of a socialist theory of republican

[1] Capitalists too are subject to economic imperatives; production and investments must be made in such a way as to maximise profits or else risk bankruptcy and ceasing to be a capitalist. I think being subject to this kind of imperative may best be thought of as a form of compulsion rather than domination. The worker is directly faced with the personification of capital in the form of the foreman or supervisor (or the policeman if they are resisting) and must continually adapt their behaviour according to demand. If a capitalist chooses to cease investing or producing, they could do so and live off their stored wealth for a time. What compels them to continue producing and to produce in a way that maximises profitability is the 'mute compulsion' of the market and a desire to preserve their position within the owning class. If capitalists are dominated, it is by the group that they themselves form a part. There could also be some sense in speaking this way, but it would seem capitalists do not assert their will on other capitalists in the same way that workers are subject to their wills.

freedom. The concern for non-domination and political participation can meet realist demands for legitimacy, without needing to presume – as I will detail below – a wider moral consensus.

In a socialist republic, legitimacy comes from the way in which citizens are enmeshed within the collective decision-making processes. Forms of socialist democracy extend across spheres currently regarded as political and economic, and control is not restricted to a minority or elite. Legitimacy, in such a system, would correlate with the extent to which those subject to political authority are able to participate in, and are a part of, the decision-making processes. How society co-ordinates and meets, or fails to meet, its productive needs are determined not by the blind imperatives of market forces but by the deliberations and organisational efforts of the world human community as a whole. In a sense, everything becomes political. Socialism should be understood not as wanting to bring about an end of politics, but as bringing about the end of the politics of class relations; and this is done by ending the separation between the economic and the political.

What actual forms these decision-making structures could take was answered differently by the three currents of my study. In terms of tactics and strategies, each of the theories presents a different focus, while putting other problems into the background. These differences can be illuminating when contrasting one theory against another. These differences in focus come about in relation to the extent in which mass consciousness is seen as being shaped by circumstances, particularly the question of to what degree it would be possible for a socialist majority to come into being within a capitalist society.

I will use insights from each of the currents to make up for shortcomings of the others and come up with a final position that is somewhat of an amalgam of all three. In brief, I will suggest that the political strategy most suited to overcome the problems I have described is one in which the use, and transformation of, the democratic tools that are already available in liberal democracies, as suggested by the Impossibilists, is supplemented with the Councilist focus on the necessity for direct workplace organisation as a means of cultivating democratic capacities, and the anarchist

focus on building a culture of resistance and non-dominating co-operation. This combination emphasises the key problems that are highlighted through the use of a realist concern; the need to pay attention to the development of capacities as well as theoretical understandings, a mechanism for demonstrating legitimacy during a transformational stage, and for mediating conflict afterwards, thus minimising risks of violence or domination.

The structure of this chapter is as follows; firstly, I recap how the currents can be understood as being cognisant of the problems of negotiating perennial moral conflict without collapsing into disorder or tyranny; and as responding with the project of developing an ethos of non-domination (sections 1 and 2). Secondly, I show how demands for political legitimacy can be reached in the forms of political and economic organisation that are proposed by these currents, and how this rests on a specific conception of republican freedom which is compatible with moral pluralism (section 3). And, thirdly, I will show how it is possible, and necessary, to merge insights from all of the currents to come up with a robust, multi-faceted position that is well able to cope with the challenges of engaging in mass action in an environment of moral pluralism, while working to minimise the potential for violence and disruption (sections 4 and 5). This is followed by some concluding general remarks (section 6).

2. The problem restated. What ‘real’ politics is and why we need it.

A premise of this study has been that no society ever reaches a full moral consensus – and there are good reasons to think that such a consensus is unreachable. If this is so, then moral disagreement, and the potential for conflict arising out of it, becomes a permanent feature of social life. Navigating this disagreement, without collapsing into social chaos or dictatorship, is the first task of politics. Before we can pursue other moral goods, such as “equal rights” or “justice”, we must first have politics, since these things can only exist within a system of politics. This is the

'realist' idea put forward by Bernard Williams as a criticism of the idea that the primary function of politics is the systematic application of some form of independently formed morality.

On this understanding, politics can be differentiated from both ethics and pure domination. To successfully deploy power and achieve social order is not yet to have accomplished politics. If groups within a society can exercise political power over others, this power has to be accompanied by some kind of legitimating explanation that can be generally accepted by those subject to it. This explanation does not have to be universally accepted by all those it is aimed at, Williams' is not a theory of legitimacy through consensus, but there would be some kind of minimum threshold of acceptance that would have to be reached. What this threshold is would vary according to what kind of culture or society we had in mind. It is also important, on Williams account, to not take surface appearances as all – if legitimacy has been generated by the powers that are seeking it, through some act of coercion or deception for example, then we do not have a case of legitimacy.

As there is no singular inevitable, God-given, or 'natural' way for people to live together, part of politics and political theory concerns the envisioning, arguing for, and organising to achieve, new ways of living. A society based organised around the principle of non-domination would not be a static society. While politics can be thought of a conceptually distinct from non-domination, part of the content of politics itself can be thought of as an ongoing contestation about where the line between arbitrary and non-arbitrary interference falls. This allows for the notion of legitimacy and interests to be dynamically adjusted according to a changing plurality of views.[2] How a particular society is organised will determine what abilities and powers certain groups of people will or will not have. Some people or groups of people will fare better out of some forms of society while others do less well. In order to function as an effective orientation in the world, the study and practice of politics must take the centrality of conflict into account, recognising that politics is about

[2] Pettit. Ibid. 297-298

questions of power, and that this includes questions of economic power – of how a society produces wealth and how this wealth is dispersed, as well as the power to influence and shape ideas.

The task of revolutionary socialism is to move from the kind of society we have today – one of class domination based on the minority ownership and control of the means of production – to a different form society where the conception of freedom as non-domination is realised in a society where productive decisions are regulated through democratic processes and where the coercive forces have been absorbed into the populace as a whole.

The realist challenge is to show how this task can be accomplished, while being attentive to the permanence of moral conflict and to the plurality and often conflicting nature of human motivations, so as to avoid descending into dictatorship or social chaos. Socialist revolution can be understood as arising from a desire to escape domination, but, as the realist conception of human nature is ambivalent, it has to be accepted that, while a desire to avoid domination may be a strong or even near universal one, it is balanced against other desires such as ones for security, order and avoidance of conflicts that could be costly. How this challenge is dealt with, I will now recap and clarify.

2.1 Revolutionary socialism as real politics and the ethos of non-domination

A realist socialism is one in which social harmony and non-dominating co-operation in a society organised along socialist lines are seen as things that cannot emerge automatically, or naturally, due to some feature of human nature, teleology of history or as an inevitable result of technological development. The establishment and maintenance of a socialist order is something that requires continual effort, and this cannot be done by ignoring or denying the potential for conflict. I will show here how the revolutionary socialist strategies examined here deal with these problems by recognising the need to develop both knowledge and capacities within the working class.

Socialist consciousness can be thought of in terms of knowledge and as a set of practical capacities. In order for the proletariat to successfully mount a successful socialist revolution it must possess both knowledge and practical capacities. It must have a certain knowledge of what capitalist society is, and how to begin organising socialist production. But it must also have a capacity to act. Both are essential. It is one thing to know what has to be done, it is another to be able to do it. Therefore, we can think of the 'subjective side', the mental transformation that is needed to establish and maintain socialism, as being constructed of two elements – a civic culture that encourages non-dominance and co-operation, and a theoretical knowledge which understands capitalist society as inevitably being a form of impersonal or structural domination. The first, the civic culture and co-operative attitude, has to be developed through practice. The second has to be developed through reflective theoretical learning. Socialist revolution requires people to collectively take action according to a certain understanding. A co-operative ethos is necessary for collective action but without the theoretical understanding there is no reason to think that the kinds of actions undertaken would be those that reorganise society in a socialist manner.

The task of a socialist revolution involves disposing the present ruling class and establishing a new form of social productive activity which can sustain itself without collapsing into a new form of domination or being overran by a counter-revolution. Both of these tasks require an active participation from the majority. This capacity to actively participate in a co-operative manner is something that has to be learnt and developed through practice, rather than through abstract consideration. This does not require an ability to bootstrap, to develop a capacity out of nothing, if we allow that there is always the latent potential for non-dominating co-operation in human nature, albeit one that, as a latent tendency, has to be developed and nurtured. This need for a transformation in consciousness can present itself as a dilemma; transforming society requires transformed people, but transformed people require a transformed society. This dilemma can be overcome by realising that non-dominating co-operation currently does exist, but as an

underdeveloped tendency. The dominated have reasons for wanting to end their domination, and there is scope for the cultivation of free activity in the form of participating in struggles, and political organisation.

Throughout the earlier chapters, I have also argued that another important function of a shared ethos of co-operative non-domination (or what could also be called a socialist civic attitude) is to minimise the potential for conflict when conditions of disagreement persist. Radical change undoubtedly endangers some degree of disruption and risk of violence, and while it would be a mistake to view the status-quo as a situation of permanent non-violence, any adequately realistic theory of social change must take this danger seriously.

By focusing on the need to develop an ethos of non-domination, rather than taking its development for granted, a way of beginning to deal with these dangers becomes apparent. Such an ethos requires the members of a political community to view each other as equal citizens partaking in a process of collective self-governance but does not require them to share the same moral values or conception of the good life. This ethos is compatible with an observation of persistent moral disagreement, since it allows for actual specific conceptions of the good to be left open. The desire not to be dominated, and the recognition that this requires the non-domination of others, can be justified by different people holding multiple moral or ethical standpoints. In this way it can be thought of as forming the basis of an overlapping consensus. The reasons for wanting political and economic institutions to be arranged in such a way as to curtail domination need only be prudential, rather than fully moral. Wanting to avoid being the victim of an arbitrary exercise of power, coupled with the historical knowledge of which forms of political and economic organisation have given rise to arbitrary power, gives a reason for accepting the legitimacy of socialist republics that is not

dependent on the full uptake of any singular moral outlook. Moral arguments can play a complementary role, but they need not be central.[3]

The greater degree with which this ethos has taken hold, the lesser the potential for conflict during a revolutionary transition. If people view themselves as joint and equal members of a political community that is undertaking a specific task, they are more likely to engage in compromises and to work together to navigate difficult material circumstances. The more people share an ethos of non-domination and organise in ways that help foster this ethos, the harder it would be for recalcitrant elements to create a disruption using threats of violence.

I have argued that the strategies of the three currents of revolutionary socialism I have studied are developed, not because the tendency for domination is ignored, but precisely because there is a concern that minorities in power (even if they profess to have an interest in establishing socialism) will have a tendency to dominate, rather than act benevolently. The transformation of society requires not just the transformation of an ethos but also a transformation of the actual institutions, structures, and productive relations of society. These institutions are to be redesigned so that opportunities and tendencies to dominate are minimised.

The main, and crucial, difference between the three currents studied was their respective positions regarding the use of existing state and democratic mechanisms for this task. The key distinction was one around seeking to annul state power by raising organisations that become more powerful than it, as with the workers councils of the Council Communists and with the unions and communes of the Anarchist Communists, or as with the Impossibilist Social Democrats, by democratically gaining control of the state machinery and transforming it into a body that co-

[3] Fabian Freyenhagen "Taking reasonable pluralism seriously: an internal critique of political liberalism" Politics, Philosophy & Economics, 10, no.3 (2011): 336

ordinates socialism. Though for all, the desired outcome of this transformation is the same – the coercive powers that formally stood above society, such as the standing army and police, were to be absorbed into the general political community and transformed into civil militia and neighbourhood dispute committees – all subject to recall and temporary in nature. In short, though none of the currents would directly use this language, the creation of a socialist republican democracy.

3. Ethos of non-domination, republican freedom, and legitimacy in a situation of moral pluralism.

Building upon the discussion in the previous chapters I want to suggest that all three of socialist currents studied share a conception of freedom. Specifically, I will argue that it amounts to a specific conception of republican freedom.

The historical influence of republicanism upon socialist thinking has been somewhat obscured, though recent studies are bringing it back to light.[4] Unlike other forms of republican freedom, such as those developed by Pettit, a socialist republican freedom allows for and understanding of domination that takes place on a collective level.[5] What distinguishes a socialist theory of freedom as non-domination from others is its specific account of collective or non-personal domination. As

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[4] See, notably, Bruno Leipold, "Marx's Social Republic: Radical Republicanism and the Political Institutions of Socialism", in *Radical Republicanism: Recovering the Tradition's Popular Heritage*, ed Bruno Leipold, Karma Nabulsi, and Stuart White (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020); James Muldoon, A Socialist Republican Theory of Freedom and Government. *European Journal of Political Theory*, 21, no, 1, (January 2022); Tom O' Shea, Socialist Republicanism, *Political Theory*, 48, no. 5, (October 2020), 548 – 572.

[5] James Muldoon, A Socialist Republican Theory of Freedom and Government. *European Journal of Political Theory*, 21, no, 1, (January 2022), 57; Michael J. Thompson, The Radical Republican Structure of Marx's Critique of Capitalist Society. *Critique. Journal of Socialist Theory,* 47, no.3, (August 2019), 391-409

well as being cognisant of coercive and ideological power, socialist theories recognise economic power as a form of impersonal, collective domination. Economic domination arises because groups of people are deprived from using society's means of production to produce what they need to exist. As domination arises from being removed from the means of production, what being non-dominated, i.e., what being free, would look like, is being able to undertake and develop productive activities and capacities, and to participate in the political processes that administer them.

Economic power shapes the landscape through which the other forms of power can operate but is distinct from them.[6] In socialist theory, the economic sphere, rather than being a sphere of opportunity, is thought of as a sphere of compulsions. Both the capitalist and working class are subject to this compulsion. In order to maintain their position as members of the property-owning class the capitalist must invest their capital and this capital must be deployed in such a way that it valorises itself. As a result of this competitive struggle between capitals, capital continually flows from less profitable spheres into more profitable ones, and the productive processes are continually updated and improved in order to increase productive capacity. Similarly, since the workers are compelled to exchange their capacity to labour, their labour-power, for the things they need to live (as they have no independent means of producing these things). Moreover, while working, they are compelled to comply with the imperatives of the employer. The workers are – in the ideal case, if not always in practice – free to search for employers as they please, but as the employers themselves are subject to economic compulsion conditions tend to equalise over regions, trades, and time periods. The workers, as a group, are dominated by the employers as a group because of the

[6] This is explained at length in Søren Mau *Mute Compulsion: A Marxist Theory of the Economic Power of Capital* (London: Verso, 2023) and also Ellen Meiksins Wood, Larry Patriquin (editor) *The Ellen Meiksins Wood Reader* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2013), 39-40

structure of the economic system. The domination is not the result of pure force, nor pure ideology, but a structural one due to how the materials for living must be acquired.

For these reasons, according to the revolutionary socialist analysis, any socio-economic system that is based on the private ownership of means of production and universal market exchange will result in domination. This claim comes down to two points. Firstly, private ownership of the means of production tends to involve wage-labour, slavery or similar kind of work arrangements that, on the revolutionary socialist analysis, all count as domination. Secondly, it comes down to an understanding that, within societies where all significant production is subsumed under the market, the structures of markets themselves act as a form of impersonal domination. Other forms of life that are non-dominating are possible, but when it comes to modern technological societies, where production takes the form of global inter-dependent co-operation, socialism would be the only one which doesn't contain some form of domination, either in the form of wage-labour or the 'silent compulsion' of the market.

If politics is distinct from pure domination, and if the status quo is at base reliant on some form of domination, then the demands of the revolutionary socialists could be best understood as a move to attain a more genuinely political form of society. Therefore, an answer to Williams first political question need not result in some kind of liberal democracy (which leaves economic domination untouched) but could also be answered in a socialist republic (in which the political community navigates all questions, including ones currently regarded as economic). Legitimacy is achieved not by the fact that the coercive body above society can give reasons to each individual subject to its power but because in a socialist republic (as understood by the three currents of this study) the structure of (a socialist) society would place all people in direct relationships – the distinction between civil society and the state is erased – each individual is involved in the decision-making

process. In other words, legitimacy becomes not a question of consent but of contestability.[7] The dissolving of the distinction between the political and the economic, and a widening of the decision-making apparatus is the basis through which non-domination is achieved.

On Pettit's account of republicanism, a form of governance is legitimate when those who are subject to its coercive power are able have a robust democratic input in how this power is directed – interference is legitimated to the extent that it can be contested.[8] This would seem to involve a much higher degree of participation than the periodic election of representatives, as in a liberal democracy, and so could be seen as having a requirement that is too demanding for people here and around now. After all, the expectations, time restraints, and life conditions for those living within a modern market society are very different than those of the empowered minority that participated in the politics of the classical republics.

The standard way of understanding the motives of those who live within a market society is as being private self-interested agents who are only interested in increasing their utility. Such agents pursue individual independence through the satisfaction of needs through the market. However, the kind of radical and labour republicanism that I am drawing upon here would question this narrow conception of self-interest, claiming that there are other ways of thinking about it that are equally accessible to the people of modernity.

The vast majority of people living within a market society do not exist solely as consumers, but also as wage labourers. Their experience is not only of choosing goods on the market so as to privately satisfy wants, but also of having to gain an income through engaging in the sale of their labour power. With this end in mind, and from very early on, a central aim of radical and labour

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7 Philip Pettit. *Republicanism*. 61-63

8 Pettit, *Ibid.* 63

republicans (whose ideas the revolutionary socialists would later take up and develop) was to enable such wage labourers to gain proper understanding of the situation they existed under.[9] Their thought was that those who experience domination have an interest in wanting to end it. A feeling of powerlessness during the working day is something that falls within the lived experience to the vast majority of working people here and around now, but the predominate language of liberal conceptions of freedom do not provide an adequate vocabulary or conceptual toolkit for expressing and understanding this domination experienced in the labour relation.[10]

The labour republicans and Revolutionary Socialists were looking for an ethos whose function was not to preserve the existing institutions (as in the classical republics) but to transform them. This was not based upon nostalgia for classic republics (which would not 'make sense' for people here and around now) but a progressive project based on overcoming irreconcilable problems within the current context of society.[11]

4. Realist problems that face socialist revolution

To assess the different revolutionary socialist strategies, to see to what extent they form a realist politics, I subjected them to a number of considerations. Firstly, there must be no presumption of an end of moral conflict, either one that arises automatically because of some fact about human nature or one that is reached through the culmination of a process of discourse. Secondly, the strategy must not be an attempt of achieving good by force; vanguardist political methods are ones of domination. Thirdly, the theories must be more than just a utopian critique of the present, there must be some

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9 Alex Gourevitch 'Solidarity and Civic Virtue' Chapter in *Radical Republicanism*, 160-162

10 Elizabeth Anderson. *Private Government* (Princeton University Press, 2017) 62-64

11 James Muldoon. *Building Power to Change the World. The Political Thought of the German Council Movements.* Oxford: Oxford University Press 2020. 154-55

real means of moving towards its end goal. And fourthly, there must be no assumption of a natural or automatic tendency towards socialist production and distribution; there must be some way of propagating a conscious understanding – both in terms of co-operative capacities and explicit knowledge – before (or during) the transition to socialism.

As this revolution is a dynamic process I considered these problems according to different phases, thinking about how the problem changes as the process progresses. Socialist revolution can be thought of in terms of both a process and as event. The process (which ebbs and flows) of building understanding and organisations, which if successful leads to a rupture (an event – which also occurs over a time period of weeks, months or years) or is able to exploit a rupture when one arises. This can be thought of as encompassing three overlapping phases. The first phase is the building up of a socialist consciousness, the other is the achieving of a societal rupture through which the existing powers are appropriated, and a new form of society is achieved. I have been considering socialist revolution as a multi-staged process that occurs over time, rather than as a singular event. This process builds up to, and continues for some time after, some kind of tipping-point or rupture where the economic and political basis of society undergoes a period of transformation.

At different stages of the process there will be different problems to be overcome. I will analyse these by thinking in terms of before, during and after the revolution. While in reality, from the points of view of those who are actually engaging in it, such a clean splitting would not be possible. Those participating in historical processes never know what the full outcome of their actions will be nor what will come next. It would not be possible to know what phase one was actually in at the time – the phases are presented for analytical purposes. Making such splits would be the job of a future historian.

Below I will describe which problems are relevant at which stage of the revolutionary process, then in the following section I will examine how the three currents are conscious of these problems

at the different stages, considering what they place emphasis upon, and which of the problems are obscured. Then, in the final section, I will show which parts of the three strategies can be combined.

4.1 The ‘before’ phase: building and propagating a socialist ethos and consciousness.

The initial task of a revolutionary socialist movement is to have its ideas penetrate into the general population to the extent that they could provide an adequate base for moving into their realisation. What this education has to be comprised of, can be thought of as including two elements. Firstly, an economic understanding of how capitalist society operates and how these operations are relations of domination. And secondly, the propagation of an active ethos of non-dominating co-operation, a kind of socialist civic virtues, that help foster the types of active solidarity that are needed to be sustained for the achievement of socialism. The achievement of socialism requires that both these elements to be in place. It is not enough to have just a knowledge of domination; this knowledge must also be accompanied with an active capacity to act in ways that can bring such a society about. Likewise, an egalitarian ethos without an economic understanding could not be expected to automatically give rise to an attempt to bring into being fully socialist economic relations. As there is no inevitable tendency towards socialism and there are always multiple other routes of action that are more readily open from the status quo. Without some shared conscious understanding of market relations or state control as sources of impersonal domination or compulsion there would be no reason to think that people would spontaneously begin to re-organise society in a fully socialist manner.

The transition from capitalism to socialism would not be possible without first attaining a certain level of conscious understanding and some kind of organisational structure that is able to enact the change. This conscious understanding is something that can be built up over time and can start a long time before any revolutionary rupture or tipping point takes place. A revolutionary

organisation, or initiative of some kind, is necessary to help propagate this understanding and to help preserve it in the memory of the working class so that they progressively building understanding. To propagate this consciousness about socialism, it is necessary to have contact with the general population. The forms this contact can take are multiple; from becoming involved in existing workers organisations such as trade unions, to engaging in propaganda and education, to attempting to become embedded in the general culture, through clubs, leisure societies, films, plays, music etc.

In assessing these activities, it is worth reminding ourselves again of what I have taken to be a key insight. That is, due to both the ambivalent nature of human motivations and the opaque nature of capitalist social relations, the development of capacities for active and non-dominating co-operation are a necessary, but insufficient, condition for the accomplishment of socialism. Rather than being revolutionary in and of itself, such capacity-building activity has to be accompanied by a conscious understanding about the structural nature of present-day society and a general understanding of why socialist transformations are necessary. Otherwise, there is a danger of making a presumption that doing one thing – co-operatively organising within present day society or taking action to mitigate against the conditions of domination – will automatically or inevitably lead to something else – actions that end domination by transforming the basis of society. As well as being a criticism of purely workplace or community-based activities, this criticism can be made of explanatory propaganda too; pure classroom type education about capitalist economics doesn't by itself foster the kind of active capacities needed to transform society. The main danger being highlighted here is that of an overcommitment to one side of the educative task, when the focus needs to be on developing both capacities and knowledge.

4.2 The ‘during’ phase: transitioning while maintaining social order and minimising disorder.

The task here is to keep production going, without collapsing into dictatorship or social chaos, and in a way that establishes socialism. In the previous stage, socialist organisations where not yet in any position of power. During this phase they are beginning to, or are in the process of getting closer to, power. It is that here considerations about political power and domination will become more important. What being in the ‘during’ of a revolutionary phase means and what this phase could be expected to look like is different according to the different currents. Though all agree that some kind of rupture is taking place at this stage, what kind of event this rupture could be and what could lead up to such a rupture is different according to the different currents (examples could be the gaining state power through election, the state becoming weakened or rendered obsolete through the emergence of a stronger counter power, or a general strike or some other political crisis). I will be tackling this question not in terms of trying to guess which kind of situation would be more likely to happen, but instead focussing on what kind of presumptions lay behind each of the projections and to what extent are these presumptions compatible or not with a realist understanding of politics.

What separates the currents here is the question of minority or majority revolution. While all the currents agree that the end goal is to have a society in which all can play an active role in the administration of production and society, and that such a society could not be reached through a minority gaining control of the state, they differ in the extent that they think it would be possible or necessary to have a majority of conscious socialists before action to bring about socialism could successfully be initiated. The Impossibilists thought that such a majority was a necessary prerequisite, while the anarchist communists and Council Communists saw mass socialist consciousness as something that would only arise through the kinds of actions that the working class would be engaging in through the process of a revolutionary rupture. To analyse this from a

realistic perspective there are two main challenges. Firstly, the question of to what extent the idea of a pre-revolutionary majority is like a moral consensus. And secondly – given what I have previously said about socialism requiring both practical capacities and theoretical knowledge – the question of the idea that engaging in certain forms of action not only leads to the development of practical capacities, but also in and of itself to the development of theoretical understandings.

The first point can be dealt with as follows: if we think of socialist politics as a form of radical republicanism concerned with realising freedom as non-domination, then we can see that a mass socialist consciousness does not need to rely on a *moral* consensus, since as has been outlined above, non-domination is compatible with multiple moral viewpoints. Since domination is not politics, socialism can be seen as an attempt to properly achieve politics – those seeking to dominate are not doing politics, it is only when we seek (and succeed) to end domination that politics proper begins. This does require agreement about certain things, such as the nature of domination and a desire to avoid it – but these are not, in the end, moral issues that exist above or before politics, but foundational questions about what it is that is actually constitutive of a political society. If non-domination is thought of in this way, not as an overriding moral conception but as a specifically political value that allows other values to be realised, then the scope to which it can be compatible with multiple conceptions of the good life is constrained only to the extent to which these conceptions are non-dominating.[12]

Rather than being a specific description of human flourishing or the good life, non-domination can be thought of as being one of the essential ingredients out of which any good life could be built (others include nutrition, shelter, health, companionship, community etc). What the shape of this good life is, can be left open in insisting on non-domination. For example, a political community

[12] Iseult Honohan. "Toleration and Non-Domination," Chapter in Jan Dobbernack and Tariq Modood (eds.), *Tolerance, Intolerance, and Respect: Hard to Accept?*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan (2009). 86

can contain members with varied religious or ethical beliefs but non-domination can be seen as a mutual basis for their association, as a means of the groups mutually preserving their preferences and values. In this way non-domination can form the basis for the kind of tolerance needed to establish and maintain a modus-vivendi.[13]

The second point is that while forms of organisation may influence courses of action in terms of behavioural dispossessions (e.g., if people are engaged in forms which require democratic interactions, they may get good at doing this kind of thing and become more primed to act in this way), the change to socialism requires some explicit knowledge as to why doing so would be necessary and what it would involve. According to the criteria I have been ascribing to a realist form of socialism, a presumption that can't be made is that certain organisational forms or types of struggle will automatically lead to socialism. I will return to this in the section about Council Communism.

Another relevant question at this stage is that of legitimacy and the control of coercive forces. It is likely that recalcitrant elements of the ruling class, and their sympathisers, once threatened with dispossession would seek to use force to stem the growth of a socialist movement. In order to be able to counter this, while also not falling back into some form of minority rule, a socialist movement must be able to gain control of society's coercive forces and utilise them in a way that is not incompatible with democratic rule. I have claimed that the extent and ease to which they will be able to do this will depends on extent to which socialist ideas and ethos have penetrated society. This socialist majority must have a way of demonstrating its numbers, and so, its legitimacy.

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[13] Indeed, many anti-capitalist or proto-socialist views have been written from different religious backgrounds, and with reference to non-domination. See for example the writings of Winstanley, or the Islamic prohibitions on interest from money lending as it seen as a form of economic domination. Admittedly, of course, religious texts are also used as a means of justifying other forms of domination.

Minority action that succeeded in capturing control of the armed forces would not be able to forcefully implement socialism as it has been understood here, since non-dominating co-operation is something that can only arise out of the community, not be implemented by force.

4.3 The 'after' phase: maintaining and reproducing a socialist society.

This phase considers problems that arise once the establishment of a new form of society has taken place. Such a society would represent, to realist revolutionary socialists, not the end of politics per se, but the end of *class* politics – the end of domination based on ownership of the means of production. Disagreements and clashes over values would still occur, but the way in which the basis of society affects these disagreements and the mechanisms available for dealing with them would be different. The task of maintaining a socialist society would be to ensure that these disagreements do not spiral out of control causing an obstacle for the continued reproduction of non-dominating co-operative social and productive relations.

The problems to be considered here is how the society could continue to reproduce itself as a non-hierarchical form of co-operation without the emergence of a new form of social stratification; how it could organise itself and mediate conflicts, including ones about economic co-ordination, without their being a coercive body above society. For this to be achieved it is important that any proposed system has a way of enabling checks and balances across all levels of its organisation.

5.1 The three revolutionary socialist currents, their respective strategies, and what aspects of the realist problem they solve.

I will briefly recap here how the three socialist currents I examined concretely proposed the transition to socialism, and what mechanisms they saw as necessary for enabling a transformation of society, and for operating the new society. All three currents place an importance on political and economic education, horizontal organisation, and engagement in collective action as ways of

developing the socialist ethos, although they differ in terms of emphasis and form. These differences in emphasis and understanding lead to differing conceptions of the role of the state and the use of representative democracy during the course of socialist revolution, and how the state is to be transformed, abolished or rendered obsolete. As we have seen in earlier chapters, these differences come down to two dimensions:

1. Different understandings of how consciousness is shaped or determined by context; and in relation to that:
2. The extent to which a conscious movement for socialism could come into being before there has been some kind of disrupting or revolutionary event that has weakened the status-quo's hold over society.

5.2 Impossibilist social democracy – Mass socialist consciousness and the democratic transformation of the state.

What differentiates this current from the two following is the insistency that it would be both possible and necessary to achieve a majority socialist understanding within capitalism, before some incident of major upheaval or disruption – such as a general strike or mass insurrection – has taken place. With this majority in place, it would then be possible to win control of the state using representative democracy, and then with this control bring about measures to socialise the economy, while ensuring that disruption and the possibility for a violent counter-revolution are minimised. This transformation would include the transformation of the state, bringing its coercive functions under the control of the whole of society, and an ending of the economic sphere as something operated by private interests, whether individuals or enterprises.

It should be noted that the Impossibilists saw such a transformation as coming not just from their own efforts, but also as a result of the experience of daily struggles which confer a shared experience of the conditions of domination. As working-class people share a similar experience and

will be looking for answers about their condition, they could find and come to agree to those put forward by socialists. The working class does not feel or experience its domination as a result of reading socialist literature, but what such literature does is provide a sense of clarity, understanding and breadth to experiences that are commonly felt. Without this kind of general understanding, uninformed actions could either lead to isolated moments of rebellion, or disengagement, despair, withdrawal and the pursuit of theories of consolation or distraction.

However, an understanding of domination does not automatically lead to action to get rid of it. A criticism of the Impossibilists, then, could be that there seems to be too much faith placed in the persuasive power of discourse and purely theoretical learning without paying enough attention to the need to develop active capacities. The perceived danger is that an overemphasis on explicit education, standing in elections, and parliamentary activity, at the expense of other forms of activity, would foster passivity on the part of the population in general. If all that is required is an electoral majority, and decisive action cannot be taken until this majority is formed, then there is a danger of waiting for a forever that never comes. It could seem like the Impossibilists' view society as being too much like a debating club, where the pressures and problems of everyday life do not bring an imperative to action.

While the educative material of the Impossibilists may, on a surface reading, suggest less of an explicit focus on the need to develop capacities with the focus of parliament and voting could be seen as something that could foster passivity and give the impression that socialism is something for others to implement – the internal democratic structure and organisational shape of the Impossibilist groups, such as the SPGB, is very much based around the principle of active non-hierarchical democratic participation. The party has no single leader, but instead an (elected and recallable) executive committee whose job is not to dictate or issue orders but to see through the decisions that were agreed by the membership as a whole. Within the party activity is driven from the bottom up, rather than decreed from above, and is of the kind that I have been describing as necessary to

develop capacities for active and non-dominating co-operation.[14] But for those outside the party, which even at the time of a mass socialist movement must be presumed to be a significant number of the population, it can appear that the need for self-directed activity, beyond choosing socialist representatives, is often downplayed or ignored.

Here I do not want to claim to have discovered a fatal flaw that would rule Impossibilist Social Democracy out as being a realist form of politics. Instead, I want to present this problem as highlighting a danger of de-emphasis which can nevertheless be corrected and without abandoning or altering core principles.[15] As a socialist revolution requires the active participation of the majority, it is not just a question of their knowing what is to be done but also of how it is to be done. The Impossibilists correctly emphasise the importance of democratically capturing political power and the necessity for conscious understanding in this task, but in doing so de-emphasise the necessity for the development of co-operative behavioural capacities, especially for those outside of the socialist political organisations. Here we can draw upon the anarchist communist emphasis on the need to foster the active side of revolutionary activity and the council communist insistence on

[14] The SPGB has been operating with this horizontal method of organisation since its conception in 1904. Evidence that non-hierarchical organisations can, at the very least, persist over time without needing to fall back upon leadership methods.

[15] SPGB literature has never denied the necessity of industrial organisation, though on their understanding such action can only be defensive and its importance as a form of developing democratic sensibilities is never fully explored. The focus on conscious understanding seems to rest on an assumption that this knowledge will be translated into self-directed democratic action without overly considering how such capacities are to be developed. As an early example, from a time when syndicalist methods were more widely known and practiced, see; Fiat Lux "Methods of Organisation. Which Is Correct?" *Socialist Standard* no.161 January 1918. Accessed 16th April 2024. www.worldsocialism.org/spgb/socialist-standard/1910s/2018/no-161-january-1918/methods-organisation-which-correct/

democratic workplace organisation as a counter to the dominating force of capital and use these as a corrective to serve as a reminder to supplement the general Impossibilist strategy. For the Impossibilists the purpose of gaining control of the state is to enable its transformation through means of opening up and widening democratic processes. There is no reason to think that industrial workers councils could not be incorporated into these structures.

5.3 Anarchist Communism – developing a culture of counter-dominance.

The ultimate guiding principle for the Anarchist Communists was the unity of means and ends. As Anarchist Communism was to be a politically non-hierarchical society it could only be reached through non-hierarchical means. As the anarchists viewed political activity, in the sense of parliamentary or representative democracy, as being necessarily hierarchical – a view which is contradicted by the activity of the Impossibilists – they eschewed such means and sought to build a movement outside of the state that would eventually become large and strong enough to replace state power as the organising force of society. The end goal of anarchist communists is a federation of regional communes which co-operate with one another through means of mutually agreed associations.[16] Though there is some ambiguity and disagreement question of how regionally separate communes would co-ordinate common production. Purely localised methods for organising labour and politics, such as the idea of fully independent regional communes, would not an adequate basis for dealing the problems of co-ordinating labour. Common production requires the co-ordination of multiple factors across multiple geographical regions and branches of industry. Decisions made in one sector have knock on effects across other sectors. Hence, instead of purely

[16] Of relevance historically is a lengthy motion from the CNT Zaragoza congress of May 1936, entitled "The confederal concept of libertarian communism", as published in: José Peirats, *The CNT in the Spanish Revolution. Volume One.* Oakland: PM Press, 2011. 101-110.

localised forms of decision making, there is a need for some overarching structure of co-ordination. The 'unitary production', as proposed by the authors of *The Platform*,[17] is more promising in this respect where productive decisions are co-ordinated on a broader level and other decisions left to more local delegations.

While the anarchist communists saw a role for education in the form of written and spoken texts, for them the deciding factor would ultimately have to come through the educating force of practice and learning through example. Ultimately people's consciousness and attitudes were formed by the circumstances they were in. This is why they thought that those consciously wanting socialism would be in a minority until the process of a revolutionary upheaval of some sort was underway. Revolutionary activity would give rise to more revolutionary activity in a kind of virtuous circle. Anarchist activity, when it is successful, acts as a form of propaganda for more anarchist activity. As more people saw anarchist methods working, more people would be willing to take them up.

Herein lies the key weakness of anarchist approach. Relying on a period of social disruption to provide the final push that tips people into accepting socialism comes down to an assumption that there is something that automatically pushes people towards it. Periods of conflict lead to insecurity, and this is, arguably, the main reason why people put up with domination in the first place. If a strongman leader can guarantee, or persuasively promise, material safety in a time of shortages and insecurity, then many will go along with it.[18] With this in mind, it would seem that the success of an

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[17] Dielo Trudo, Anarchist Communist Group [eds] *The Organisational Platform of the Libertarian Communists and the Synthesis* 42

[18] This familiar pattern can be observed in all mass modern revolutions which begin as mass movements but end in one-man dictatorships, perhaps the Paris Commune is the only example where collective rule was sustained until the end. The idea that it necessary to submit to a hierarchical order in order to guarantee security has a long pedigree.

anarchist approach would depend on the amount to which they were able to deliver stability during a revolutionary period, and that seems to depend on the extent to which a conscious majority wanting socialism was in existence before such a period had begun. Organising in the socialist way of common ownership and control, especially in times where society is under pressure, is not something that can happen by accident – there has to be some kind conscious understanding behind it. Is there a good reason to think that a period of disruption would cause people to be more likely flip towards a communistic way of living? A more realist, and therefore ambivalent,[19] view of human nature – that the tendency towards non-dominating co-operation always exists alongside tendencies to dominate and submit to domination – would suggest otherwise.

Nevertheless, this does not mean that there is nothing of use within anarchist communist theory and strategy. The emphasis on the unity of means and ends, if understood in the weak sense as meaning a co-operative society can only be bought about by co-operative means (rather than in the stronger sense that all co-operative practice is already an achievement of the goal), serves as important reminder of the need to develop capacities and as a functional mechanism against vanguardism within revolutionary socialist organisations.

5.4 Council Communism – Workers councils as the means of proletarian self-emancipation

What differentiated this current from other revolutionary socialist traditions was the *means* they suggested for achieving socialism – mass strikes and workers councils –, and the *theoretical background* they drew upon to reach these conclusions. For them, traditional modes of working-class organisation – parliamentary parties and trade unions – came to be seen as no longer suitable vehicles for revolutionary activity; instead, mass strikes, 'industrial unions' (non-permanent

[19] To recall, I borrow this phrase from Christopher Boehm's 'Hierarchy in the Forest', which is an anthropological study of the development of hierarchy in human society.

workplace organisations existing for the sole purpose of propagating revolutionary activity), and workers councils (or soviets) were seen as the new and independent forms of activity through which the working class could assert itself and establish socialism. While the anarchist communists also advocated an abstention from parliamentary activity, the Dutch and German left and the council communists did so for different reasons, and from a Marxist perspective. The anarchist rejection of the use of elections and parliamentary parties was based on an assessment of the unity of means and ends, rather than a tactical assessment of a particular historical situation. For the anarchists, as the state is always an instrument of domination, actors that sought to gain control of it would end up being transformed by it and engage in acts of domination themselves – a non-dominating society could only be bought into being by non-dominating means. Furthermore, as parliamentary activity was about convincing others of the need to act on their behalf, engaging in such activity would foster passivity rather than the active kind of attitude that was needed to bring about social revolution. The councilists differed in that they thought that, while in capitalism's ascendant phase (pre-WW1) parliamentary parties and trade unions had been useful vehicles in winning concessions for the working class, but in the current decadent phase of capitalism[20] further concessions would not be achievable and these institutions had now become fully incorporated into the structure of

[20] I will put the question of capitalism's 'decadence' to one side here, while noting that the idea of an inevitable and automatic collapse of the capitalist system was not one shared by all of those on the German and Dutch left. While Luxemburg most famously expressed a collapse theory in her *The Accumulation of Capital*, this view was not shared by Pannekoek who in the 1930's authored an article entitled *The Theory of the Collapse of Capitalism* which criticised both Luxemburg's and Grossman's theories of capitalist crisis and collapse. The idea of a terminal and irreversible decline of the capitalist era could have been appealing from the point of view of the Weimar period of hyperinflation, but 100 years later it doesn't seem so likely that capitalism is going to keel over on its own accord. And even if such a collapse was likely, why assume the result would be socialism?

capitalism and served a status-quo preserving function, holding back the possibility of a revolutionary socialist upheaval.

The main criticism of the Councilists is that there is a danger of a certain optimistic fatalism in how they envision the form of struggle affecting how people think and act. Without prior widespread knowledge or acceptance of socialist ideas, they suggest that the councils would nevertheless choose to produce and distribute communally. The Council Communists were correct to say that socialism requires democratic organisation, but incorrect in how they pin this down to a specific form of organisation and over optimistic in how they see the influence of this form leading to socialism.

6. General conclusion

My aim above has been to show how each of the currents highlight a certain aspect or aspects of the realist problem, but at the expense of either ignoring or de-emphasising others. I have also aimed to show how the ideas of radical republicanism are compatible with both political realism and revolutionary socialism and can be used as a basis for formulating a realistic socialist strategy. With this in mind, I now propose that it is strategically and theoretically possible to use insights from each of the three socialist currents to come up with a robust, multi-faceted position that is well able to cope with the challenges of engaging in mass action in an environment of moral pluralism. By combining insights from the different currents, I hope to demonstrate how realist considerations are not only compatible with, but can also productively illuminate and inform, socialist theory and strategy.

For socialist change of the kind described by the three currents to occur, there would have to be firstly, a conscious effort to nurture the kind of co-operative and active attitudes that – though always potentially present as a tendency, among others, in human nature – need to be developed and strengthened in order for them to prevail against tendencies to dominate or submit to domination.

Secondly, there has to be an effort to explain and increase an understanding of present-day society as a form of domination that can be overcome with the right kinds of actions. Thirdly, some new kinds of political and social institutions need to be worked at, which enable socialist transformation to be enacted and for conflict to be mediated without themselves becoming new forms of domination.

The amalgam I have in mind combines aspects from all three currents with these tasks in mind. It combines (1) the need for conscious understanding of the dominating aspect of capitalist economic relations with the need to develop an active ethos of non-domination, and it does this through seeking to develop a strong socialist civic sphere. It (2) recognises the possibility (and necessity) of using existing liberal-democratic political institutions but seeks to combine these with other forms of democracy, such as workers' councils. This is so that the existing institutions of power, both economic and political, are directly challenged at root. And (3) in transforming existing political institutions, it seeks to build a system where there is no single concentration of powers and where those subject to decisions always have the possibility of contestation through being able to participate in democratic processes. I present this amalgam not so much in the vain hope of providing some kind of easy-to-follow, fool-proof blueprint for political action, but to show how considerations of the various currents can inform institutional forms and strategic activities when faced with realist challenges. I will now go through these points in order.

Phase One: before a revolutionary transformation

In order to achieve revolutionary socialist change without relying on minority force, or without presuming its automatic appearance, there has to be a mass educative movement that spreads socialist understanding within the general population. This education has to be not only of a technical kind, that clarifies the opaque workings of capitalist society, but one that encourages the development of an active and participatory ethos of non-dominating co-operation. Here the

Impossibilist emphasis on the necessity of economic education and conscious understanding is coupled with the Anarchist Communist insistence on methods that encourage active participation. The kinds of activities that this could include are things like education groups, cultural groups, educative publications (print, film etc), and the general encouragement of mass participation in non-hierarchical forms of organisation (which can include political parties in the parliamentary sense). The idea of the need to build a non-dominating ethos of this kind is very similar to the idea of civic republicanism – a non-dominating republic can only come into being and function if the norms and values of those within the republic are in line with its functioning.

Some comments on the relationship between the pursuit of reforms and the goal of a revolutionary transformation can be made here, as the idea of an automatically arising socialism was one that I took realism to be ruling out. Here I take the Anarchist Communist and Impossibilist critiques of reformist political parties to be correct. A political party may make gains in popularity by expressing a platform of reforms, but there is no reason to think that this will automatically translate into revolutionary desire or understanding. The pursuing of reforms or palliatives within capitalism is a qualitatively different task then that of specifically seeking to transform the basis of society. Reforms can be sought without wanting to challenge the underlying basis of society; revolutionary change can only be pursued once there is an agreement about the need to transform society and some idea of what these changes may be. Working to defend and extend protections is an essential task and is one that can be done in a way that encourages participatory engagement. But there is requirement of a separation of this day-to-day task from the end goal of transforming the conditions that make such struggles necessary. Rather than allowing all its activities to become swamped with economic struggles, there is a need for a revolutionary political organisation to clearly articulate the end goal and to work towards it. This is reflected in the strategy of the Impossibilists, who thought that socialists should be involved in trade unions, etc., but as informed individuals rather than as a political party, and the Anarchist Communists, who saw the need of a

separate political organisation of anarchists as well as working within the unions (Malatesta provides the most well-known view along these lines from among the anarchists).

Phase Two (during the revolutionary period):

Here an amalgam is made based on a recognition of both the importance of the state as a centre of existing political and coercive power and existing democratic processes as a means of demonstrating legitimacy, along with the combination of these with direct workplace organisations as a means of furthering democracy and democratic participation. In this way it can be seen as an amalgam of both Impossibilist Social Democracy and the part of Council Communism which called for the need for direct control of workplaces and their co-ordination through layers of delegation – but rejects the Councilists claims of parliamentary activity as being something unsuitable for mass action within the present period of late-capitalism.[21] In Phase One, the amalgam highlighted the need for the development of an active socialist civic society. Here, in reference to the period of transition from capitalist society to communism, the importance is to pursue methods which enable mass participation of this civic society, while guarding against retributions from recalcitrant minorities from, or in support of, the formally ruling class.[22] The emphasis is about gaining control of the coercive forces of the state, and also having a means to demonstrate the numerical force of those wanting to engage in the transition, so as to serve as a means of discouragement against those seeking to reverse the progress.

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[21] This maps it closer to the actual intentions of many of those involved in the German councils, those of Hungary 1956, and also Martov's criticism of the policy of the Bolsheviks.

[22] James Muldoon "Institutionalizing Radical Democracy: Socialist Republicanism and Democratizing the Economy" *New Political Science*, 43, no. 2, 189-207 (2021) 195.

Phase Three (after the revolutionary period):

If this final stage is an amalgam, it takes a recognition from all the currents - that of the need to actively maintain the civic culture of co-operative non-domination, and the need to structure political institutions in ways that make it harder for structures of domination to resurface.

None of these tasks are incompatible with realism because of the following considerations. First, the reason for thinking that a socialist ethos could take hold within the population rests on an assumption that there is a common desire to avoid domination (one which is balanced against other desires, such as one for material security), and that it is possible to reach a shared understanding of present society as being a form of collective domination that can be overcome with the right type of collective action. Crucially, such conceptions do not rest on any particular singular conception of the good and are themselves built on an understanding of struggles around power and the negotiation of conflict. For this reason, they can be seen as meeting the realist challenge surrounding moral pluralism.

Second, as explained in the preceding chapters and this conclusion, the currents studied, with varying levels of success, take ‘realism’ seriously both in how they devise their strategies and how they seek to organise social institutions in the future. The reasons for what they pursue and the way in which they pursue it neither suppose an ending of, nor ignore the potential for domination but are organised that way specifically because domination is possible. Socialist organisations are to be organised horizontally, without leaders, so that domination can be avoided, and the future institutions are deliberately organised in such a way as to not be above society with appropriate levels of checks and oversights in place so as to make domination harder.

This conclusion brings us to the question of what we can reasonably expect a political theory to do. As conflict is a permanent feature of human social life, and as social order is itself something

that emerges through the interactions of the people within a political community, rather than through a preconceived design that is imposed, it is a mistake to look to any particular political theory as an instant preconceived solution for social problems. Instead, political theories can suggest frameworks through which, given certain understandings of society, problems could be mediated and they offer steps towards their realisation. Politics is about action, but the kind of change that the revolutionary socialists envisioned is not something that could be instantly stepped into from the status-quo. But engaging in the task of fostering an ethos of solidarity and resistance within the working class, and of spreading knowledge about the necessarily dominating nature of capitalist society is always something that can be done. Writing in 1897, Malatesta was to comment on the necessity of '[…] a long and patient work to prepare and organize the people'[23], a century and a quarter later it seems much patience is still required.

[23] Errico Malatesta "Against Forced Residence and the Cost of Bread". In *The Complete Works of Malatesta Vol. 3.* Edited by Davide Turcato. Chico: AK Press (2016) 336.

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