

Council communism or councilism? - The period of transition

A book review by Fredo Corvo

Book review of Philippe Bourrinet "The Dutch and German Communist Left (1900-68); 'Neither Lenin nor Trotsky nor Stalin!', 'All workers must think for themselves!'", Leiden/Boston (Brill) ISBN 978-90-04-26977-4.

This book in fact is based on a master thesis in French language, defended at the Sorbonne University Paris, 1988. Since then editions in several languages appeared, with or without permission of the author, or of the International Communist Current, who claims to be its 'collective author'. Therefore it is unfortunately that this new edition by Brill doesn't explain the differences with the master thesis. For readers that know the Porcupine Press English language edition, I found two additions. A fragment preceding chapter 1, on *Religion, Capitalism and colonial Empire: From the 'Golden Age' to the Decline*, gives a short overview of the history of the Netherlands before industrialization. A text added to chapter 11, *International Council-Communists up to the 1970s* adds interesting information of studies published since 1987, which can be found in the bibliography. On the other hand, some of the more recent works are missing here as well as in the 58 pages long section 'Further reading': for example, Gerber's and Boekelman's biographies of Anton Pannekoek.

No doubt this study is impressive for many reasons, of which its international scope and its internationalist approach are the most important. No coincidence the author identifies with the Communist left, consisting mainly of the German-Dutch left and the Italian left, having published several studies on the latter as well. Bourrinet not only presents the debates within the German-Dutch left, but also takes position in his studies, often from the perspectives of the Italian left. Such a debate between both lefts is far from complete and actually many misunderstandings from both sides obstruct a real debate. Bourrinet is not free from these misunderstandings, as nobody is.

In this review, I will show how Bourrinet develops a much subtler approach of the German and Dutch left than Authier/Barrot did for the German Left. This did not prevent Bourrinet to encounter in his approach certain contradictions in analyses of 'councilism' that might be explained in part by a certain bias for the Italian left. In order, not to go beyond the limits of a book review, I'll concentrate on the question of the period of transition. Because the Communist Left developed its positions of the period of transition on base of the experiences of the Russian Revolution, I'll pay some attention to this subject as well.

The bordigist origins of the concept of councilism

Since 1968 the German-Dutch left was rediscovered in France. After its first texts were translated for the first time or republished from previously obscure sources, Authier and Barrot (latter a pseudonym for Gilles Dauvé) published in 1976 a first French language history of "La gauche Communiste en Allemagne 1918-1921". In their introduction, they adopt Bordiga's critic on the supposed insistence by the German left on forms of organization (council, party), detrimental to its contents, the communist program. This is

why Authier/Barrot call the German and Dutch left 'councilist' depriving them of the attribute of 'communist'. Philippe Bourrinet's study gives a much more differentiated view, speaking of *council communist* and *councilist tendencies* in the German-Dutch left, and considering the tendency of Otto Rühle and Franz Pfemfert as the origin of *councilism*. For Bourrinet the Dutch left by its limited role in the Netherlands itself, had a certain theoretical influence internationally, that was counterbalanced till 1933 by the existence of the KAPD in Germany, that accepted the Russian revolution as proletarian. After the 1930-ties, isolated in the limited context of the Netherlands, its political and theoretical contribution was 'perhaps' less developed than that of the 'Bordigist' communist left, in particular in the theoretical discussion on the problems of a 'period of transition towards communism'.¹

Councilism according to Bourrinet

Far from wanting to establish here who had more developed positions on the question of the period of transition, I will limit myself to show some contradictions and omissions in Bourrinet's reasoning.

According to Bourrinet, *councilism* is defined by four characteristics²:

1. A workerist vision that sees the existence of revolutionary political parties within the workers' councils as a negative factor.
2. Rejection of the Russian revolution as a 'bourgeois revolution'.
3. The whole experience of the nineteenth-century workers' movement ("old workers' movement") is rejected as negative. This led the GIC to theorize the existence of small groupings as the form of the "new workers' movement".
4. An *economistic* vision on workers' struggles, the revolutionary process and the *dictatorship of the proletariat*.

Class character of the Russian revolution

In chapter 7 Bourrinet affirms that since 1933 the Dutch Groups of International Communists (GIC) evolve towards "*a fully-fledged kind of 'councilism'*", adopting the theses (?) of Otto Rühle³ and Helmut Wagner's *Theses on Bolshevism* (p. 331). However, the informal functioning of the GIC made that there were no votes on texts or theses. Often texts were published that seemed to be interesting. One may agree with this mode of functioning or not, but Bourrinet's conclusion from the publication of the *Theses on Bolshevism* in German, English and Dutch that they expressed the theory of the international council communist movement, seems too hasty, certainly in the light of the fact "*they provoked little discussion or criticism*".⁴ On the other hand, referring to what the GIC published in 1936 and 1937, Bourrinet has to admit that the GIC hesitated to accept all

¹ Philippe Bourrinet "The Dutch and German Communist Left (1900-68); 'Neither Lenin nor Trotsky nor Stalin!', 'All workers must think for themselves!'", Leiden/Boston (Brill) ISBN 978-90-04-26977-4, p. 531.

² Bourrinet, idem p. 331/332.

³ Ibidem. p. 330.

⁴ Ibidem p. 333. Bourrinet states on p. 333 the theses were translated into German, what would imply they were written in Dutch, but most probably Wagner wrote his text in German.

the political implications of the *Theses on Bolshevism*.⁵ On p. 340 he adds to this the writings of the GIC on Spain 1936-37, citing Lenin on the need of a world revolution (p. 419). One could wonder that where Bourrinet sees contradictions within the Dutch left, there actually might be contradictions in his analyses.

Before he wrote:

“As the Russian revolution began to degenerate, and the Third International was subjected to interests of the Russian state, the left began to defend the idea of a ‘double’ revolution in Russia, first bourgeois, then proletarian (...) albeit from a different viewpoint to that of Menshevism. For the left, a bourgeois revolution could mean nothing but state capitalism and counter-revolution. It appeared not at the beginning, but at the end of the revolution”.⁶

This idea of a ‘double revolution’, was rather general at the time⁷. It was the position Bordiga stuck to till his end. In its specific form the left gave this analysis of a double revolution - when the world revolution failed that could have continued the proletarian revolution in Russia, the bourgeois revolution took over and gained victory over the proletariat - is another and probably better explanation for the reasons why the GIC published Wagner’s theses.

Notwithstanding the question to which degree Wagner’s theses were adopted by the *councilist* or *council communist* GIC, Bourrinet’s seven page arguments against these theses remain remarkable and are worthwhile studying in preparation of a discussion that still has to take place.

Principles of communist production and distribution

It’s tempting to undertake a similar approach as above to Bourrinet’s analyses of Canne Meijer’s *Towards a new workers’ movement*,⁸ but I have to renounce the subject of the organization of the revolutionary minority because it isn’t linked directly to the subject of this critique, the question of the period of transition.

Under the title An ‘Economistic’ Vision of the Revolution? The Grundprinzipien⁹, Bourrinet states on p. 352 “... the GIC ended up seeing the future revolution not as a political question, but as an economic one”. As an argument for this “strictly economic angle” Bourrinet states on p. 354: “Unlike the German and Italian communist lefts, the GIC did not show much interest in the political questions of the proletarian revolution, in theoretical reflections about the state in the period of transition.” This fragment is followed by a footnote: “The

⁵ Ibidem p. 339.

⁶ Ibidem p. 163. Note the confusions in this text. What comes first, and what comes later according the Left?

⁷ See note 28.

⁸ Ibidem p. 340.

⁹ *Grundprinzipien* and *Fundamental principles* are short titles for “Grundprinzipien kommunistische Produktion und Verteilung” by the GIC that was published as first edition in Berlin, 1930, and for a second and enlarged edition in Dutch published in 1935. The additions to several chapters in the second edition have not found their way into several translations and editions in languages other than Dutch. For an overview see on aaap.be: Theme [The Economic Solution for the Period of Transition from Capitalism to Communism](#). In this text I prefer *Fundamental principles* as short title.

question of the state in the period of transition was raised above all by the Essen tendency of the KAPD in 1927. The workers' councils were identified with the 'proletarian' state (see KAZ, Essen, p. 1-11, 1927). The only contribution by the Berlin tendency was a text by Jan Appel (Max Hempel) criticizing "Lenin's state communism": Marx-Engels und Lenin über die Rolle des Staates in der proletarischen Revolution, in: Proletarier no. 4-6, May 1927."

The identification of the workers' councils with the 'proletarian state' actually was shared by most tendencies in the German-Dutch left, including the GIC, and it still is shared by many today. But what me strikes most is the author seems to have missed altogether the importance of the article by Jan Appel criticizing Lenin. It is surprisingly that the reader learns nothing at all about what Appel writes on the political question of the state in the period of transition. This article is nearly identical to *Marxism and State Communism ; The Withering Away of the State* (1932), published five years later by the GIC in Dutch as a pamphlet, showing the importance it attributed to this text. Parts of the text were taken over in *Fundamental principles*. Because Bourrinet mentions this article we know now that Jan Appel was originally its author, the same experienced German revolutionary Jan Appel that brought the ideas for *Fundamental principles* with him when he emigrated into the Netherlands. This article titled '*Marx-Engels and Lenin on the role of the state in the proletarian revolution*' clearly is the political framework Bourrinet misses in the *Fundamental principles* and therefore labels as 'economistic'. Or does he call the GIC 'economistic' because he supposes it doesn't see the "problem of the existence of a state - or a semi-state - in the period of transition towards communism." (p. 355). In the following I'll show that Appel and the GIC did see this problem, be it not in the way the Italian left in exile did, as nobody did at the time, and few do see it even at present.

The GIC's alleged admiration of war communism

Allow me first to demonstrate another contradiction when Bourrinet tries to see contradictions in the positions of the GIC. Not in a vain effort to prove the GIC was without contradictions, but to show that Bourrinet's vision on councilism is debatable:

"The GIC's Grundprinzipien showed a certain fascination for the experience of war communism between 1918 and 1920."¹⁰

This fascination for war communism may be right for Bordiga. Bourrinet gives no source to prove the GIC suffered from such fascination. Following quotation from *Fundamental principles* show that the position of the GIC was the exact opposite:

"Two Lessons from the Russian Revolution

The Great Bolshevik Experiment in founding a 'natural economy' contains two important lessons, the one economic and the other political. These lessons should serve to help the working class develop a proletarian consciousness. The economic lesson is that a rational economy is wholly impossible without a general measure for the accounting of relations in economic life. In order to draw up a production plan it is necessary to know how much labour in its various forms, measured in labour-time (labour-hours) is available and how this

¹⁰ Bourrinet idem, note op p. 338.

labour is to be distributed amongst the various branches of production. Since up till now it has proved impossible to add together tons of steam-coal and hectolitres of corn, it is necessary in the case of all products to leave out of account their form as useful articles, their “use-value”, and to concentrate solely upon that one characteristic which they all without exception possess in common. And that characteristic is that they all embody definite quantities of human labour. The drawing up of a production plan therefore makes it imperative that the quantity of labour required for its production is determined for each single product making up the plan. In a Communist society, it is possible to measure this labour directly, without the intermediate distorting-glass of money:

‘Society will be able to calculate in a simple way how many hours of labour are contained in a steam-engine, a bushel of the last crop of wheat, or a hundred square yards of cloth of a specific quality. It could therefore never occur to it to go on expressing the quantities of labour put into the products, quantities which it will then know directly and absolutely, in yet a third product, in a measure which, moreover, is only relative, fluctuating and inadequate, though it was formerly unavoidable as an expedient, rather than express them in their natural, adequate and absolute measure: time.’

(F. Engels: “Anti-Dühring”; Foreign Languages Press, Peking, 1976; p. 402.)

As for the political lesson, this consists in the fact that attempts to invest administrative control over the means of production in a central state authority can only lead, in ever increasing degree, to the elimination of the independent initiatives of the workers. Under such a system, it is not possible for the producers to have any control over the product of their labour; the divorce of labour from the product of labour is the essential characteristic of such a mode of production, exactly as under capitalism. Attempts to establish distribution of the product in kind, to proceed to ‘nationalisation of wages’ can, under these conditions, serve only to place control over the sources of the ‘people’s wealth’ ever more firmly in the hands of the central state authority. The growth of ‘wages in kind’, in its Bolshevik form, is therefore nothing other than the growth of the means for enslaving the working class. In the concentration of power over the objective means of control over the productive apparatus, over social labour and over the total social product in the hands of a central state authority, we perceive the process through which the revolutionary concept of the dictatorship of the proletariat is transformed into its opposite, into the counter-revolutionary concept of a dictatorship over the proletariat.” ¹¹

Here we see clearly that the GIC refutes the idea of planning in natura, temporarily adopted by the Bolsheviks during war communism, later cherished by Bordiga in the 1950-ties and presently by Gilles Dauvé. The latter developed in his political adventures¹² from anti-councilist to main ideologist of the ‘communisation’ current, turning his back to Marx since he was shown that the proposals of the GIC are entirely compatible with Marx.¹³

¹¹ [The Basic Theoretical Foundations](#) of the Work “Fundamental Principles of Communist Production and Distribution”. Supplement to “Fundamental Principles of Communist Production and Distribution” published by Neue Arbeiterverlag, Berlin 1931 from Dutch.

¹² Bourrinet “[Dictionaire...](#)”.

¹³ “In Marx’s Critique of Socialist Labor-Money Schemes & the Myth of Council Communism’s Proudhonism, libcom, 2013, David Adam rebuts my former critique of the councilist vision of communism on the ground that the GIK’s notion of value is the same as Marx’s. The discussion is becoming rather tricky, no fault of D. Adam or mine, it is just that the question is complicated. In the past, I wished to refute the GIK in the name of Marx’s

Unfortunately, many still believe that it was the 'councilist' GIC of the 1930-ties that was not communist anymore.

So far for the GIC's supposed admiration of war communism.

But let's follow Bourrinet. After falsely having supposed on p. 338 an admiration of war communism by the GIC, on the next page he states:

"Showing its contradictions, the GIC republished the Grundprinzipien in Dutch in the 1930s. Here it was asserted that 'Russia had, as far as industry was concerned, to set up an economic life along communist principles' in 1920. In fact, the GIC had not completely abandoned the old conception held by the Dutch and German lefts of a "dual revolution", part bourgeois, part proletarian." (p. 339).

By the way, it is interesting to read that when Bourrinet believes that the GIC has a certain (Bordiga's) fascination for war communism, then he suddenly attributes the GIC with the idea of the double revolution, also cherished by Bordiga, instead of Wagner's idea of a bourgeois revolution, the latter being an argument to call the GIC 'councilist' instead of communist. One wonders if his method is deliberate or merely biased.

But is it really true the GIC thought that the Bolsheviks had set up a system along communist principles in 1920? On p. 356 Bourrinet give a full quote from the same page of *Fundamental principles* he only mentioned before as a proof of the GIC's fascination for war communism. This quote shows what the GIC really wrote:

".. at least as far as industrial production was concerned... Russia has attempted to order economic life according to the principles of communism... and in this has failed completely! [...] Above all else, it has been the school of practice embodied in the Russian Revolution which we must thank for this knowledge, because it is this which has shown us in unmistakable terms exactly what the consequences are of permitting a central authority to establish itself as a social power which then proceeds to concentrate in its exclusive hands all power over the productive apparatus." (Fundamental Principles of Communist Production, 1930)." (underlined by FC).

The discovery of two studies in preparation of 'The fundamental principles...'

Actually, Appel's 1927 article in *Proletarier* was not the only study in preparation of the *Fundamental principles*. Another study, attributed to then 22 years old Ben Sijes¹⁴, was published as a pamphlet of 47 pages by the GIC in 1930, the same year that the *Fundamental principles* were published in Berlin. Sijes' study deals with the agrarian question, that later, in the 1950-ties, obtained much attention from Amadeo Bordiga. The GIC based its study on experiences in both the German and Russian revolutions and on

analysis of value, with special reference to the Grundrisse. I now make the point that there is something highly debatable in Marx's vision itself, both in *Capital* and the *Grundrisse*, and that the GIK did follow Marx's footsteps and was wrong to do so: far from being a useful and fair instrument of measure, labour time is capitalist blood. This is more than a causative link: labour time is the substance of value. Marx was indeed a forerunner of the councilist project." Gilles Dauvé "[Value, time and communism: re-reading Marx](#)".

¹⁴ Bourrinet idem in a note on p. 358.

recent publications on the industrialization of agriculture. On p. 358 Bourrinet claims that "according to the GIC, agricultural production was already completely industrial and socialized". The GIC really wrote: "The position of the Group of International Communists in relation to the essence of proletarian revolution arises in no small part from the development, which agriculture has taken in the high-developed capitalist countries. The very fact that farming has been entirely integrated in the process of social division of labor, that agriculture has proceeded to industrial production (...)." (Underlined by FC). "[Ontwikkelingslijnen in de landbouw \(Ontwikkeling van het boerenbedrijf\)](#)". In the more complete Dutch second edition of 1935 of *Fundamental principles* the GIC explicitly talks about Western Europe, America and Australia.

From this study on the agrarian question, only those parts that were reproduced in the *Fundamental principles* have been translated in languages other than Dutch. We have to limit ourselves here to translate its final conclusion:

"But the social revolution which sees communism as the implementation a new law of motion for the circulation of goods, has something to offer the farmers. In addition to the liberation of all rent, mortgages and corporate debt, the uniform distribution of the social product will lead to the direct and complete equivalence between town and countryside, which results in practice of favoring the farmer. However, the agricultural proletariat, these outcasts of capitalist society makes a great leap forward, so that will be completely in its interest to integrate agriculture into the communist production." (Underlined by GIC).¹⁵

Though not in political terminology, an informed reader will recognize in this future perspective a *programmatic* and *political* answer to the question of the relationship between the proletariat and the peasants, and therefor that of a state, a question that the Russian revolution had posed, but for several reasons was not able to answer.

The second study in preparation of the *Fundamental principles*, Jan Appels critic of Lenin's *State and revolution*, applies a much more political language. Here follows a presentation of what in fact is the missing political framework for understanding *Fundamental principles*.

The missing political framework

In the pamphlet *Marxism and state communism*,¹⁶ the question is raised, "whether transfer of the means of production to the state by the victorious working class, as reflected in Bolshevik theory and practice, is the way to communism." The reply of the GIC to this question is 'no'. Following Marx and Engels, the GIC adopted the view that after the revolution the "association of free and equal producers" take control of the means of production. In its *Fundamental Principles of communist production and distribution* the GIC elaborated this position into a critique of the views of state capitalist planning as developed by reformism and taken over by the Bolsheviks in power. Instead, the GIC gave the broad outlines of a system in which the workers' councils manage production and distribution. In doing so, a victorious working class can also apply the dictatorship of the proletariat through

¹⁵ GIC idem.

¹⁶ GIC [Marxism and state communism; the withering away of the state](#).

the councils in the economic domain. And most important, by understanding the operation of production and distribution, it can see the limitations of “freedom” and “equality” that in essence are still bourgeois, and the proletariat can ensure a further development towards communism in which giving and taking at wish and the individual unique development of the self, are paramount.

If we follow the GIC in the criticism of Lenin, one can at most speak of *state socialism*. I would prefer the much clearer term *state capitalism*. Engels has warned clearly for the tendency towards state capitalism which appeared at the end of the 19th century. The GIC shows in *Marxism and state communism* that Engels in his *Anti-Dühring* declares that the means of production will be state property and that for this reason Lenin bases his theory on this statement. This fragment can also be found in Engels’ *The development of socialism: utopian and scientific* (separate reissue of a part of the *Anti-Dühring*). Engels notes in the Preface to the German edition of 1891, *The development* that he has added significant text by the end of Part III of the “*new form of production of the Trusts, that now has become important.*” (MEW Bd. 19, p. 523). “*In this*”, so Engels warns “*The workers remain wageworkers — proletarians.*”¹⁷

The GIC shows that Lenin in fact embraces state capitalism and presents is as *socialist* by doing some research on following Lenin quote from *The state and revolution*:

“A witty German Social-Democrat of the seventies of the last century called the postal service an example of the socialist economic system. This is very true.”¹⁸

The GIC indicates that in the view of the young social democracy the management and administration of production and distribution would accrue directly to the producers and consumers themselves and not along the detour of the state. The equation of state and society is only an invention of later years. However, in the struggle for *social reform*, this position was given up around 1900 and *nationalization*, bringing several industries to the state or municipality, was increasingly suggested as a move to socialism. The Russian Revolution went perfectly according to the programme of *nationalization* of industry. In Russia as well, those branches that were considered *ripe* for this purpose, were added to the central state apparatus. In 1917, producers began to expropriate the owners in different companies, to great discomfort of those who wanted to lead and manage the business “*from above*”. The workers wanted to organize production on new bases according communist rules. Instead the Communist Party issued guidelines, according to which the companies should unite into trusts, as to get them under single management. What could not be included in the central disposal plan was returned to the owners, as these companies were considered not yet “*ripe*”.

According to the GIC, Lenin was aware that the concentration of the entire production in the state meant a strengthening of state power and therefore was contrary to the idea of the withering away of the state. But according to the GIC it was not good intentions, but the situation in Russia itself, that developed the Leninist theory of state communism. The way

¹⁷ Engels [The development of socialism: utopian and scientific](#).

¹⁸ Lenin [State and revolution](#).

to make the state increasingly stronger, firmer, was gradually dictated to those who disposed of Russian state power.¹⁹

Bourrinet's critic of the GIC

Equality is a recurring theme in Bourrinet's critique, that leads him to following conclusion:

"For the GIC, communism appears as an absolute equality between producers, which is to be realized right at the beginning of the transition period. It is as though, under communism, there is no longer any natural (physical or psychological) inequality in production and consumption. But in fact, communism can be defined as 'real equality in a natural inequality.'" ²⁰

The GIC would have "distanced itself from the Marxist vision of the period of transition, which distinguished two phases: a lower stage, sometimes described as socialism, in which the 'government of men' determined a proletarian economic policy in a society still dominated by scarcity; and a higher phase, that of communism proper, a society without classes, without the law of value (...)." ²¹

And:

"The Fundamental Principles actually only deal with the evolved phase of communism, where the government of men had been replaced by the 'administration of things', according to the principle of "from each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs" enunciated by Marx." ²²

Note that Bourrinet in these citations takes over Lenin's division of the period of transition into two phases, a novelty in Marxist theory, that it fact makes it impossible to understand the political, economic and social process of transformation of society. This is especially true for the 'sometimes described' attribute of *socialism* for the first phase, a term that only with Lenin (and later with Stalin's *Socialism in one country*) becomes something different than *communism*.²³

Let's have a look at the beginning of the transition period, that accordingly to Bourrinet isn't dealt with by the GIC. But in reality they do deal with it, when the GIC explains how and why distribution of most produced goods in a first time will be on base of hours worked. May be Bourrinet believes that for the GIC labor time coupons are the highest expression of communism, because of *equality*, but the contrary is true. In the Baker translation, an pivotal fragment on the subject of the evolution from the beginning of the period to its higher forms, can be found in Ch. VI *General Social Labor*, under the heading [The socialization of distribution](#) (p. 97). Here the GIC explains that in the evolution of communism less and less products are distributed according to the labor time principle and more and more products can be taken for free from society. Paul Mattick in his abstract

¹⁹ GIC [Marxism and state communism; the withering away of the state](#).

²⁰ Bourrinet idem p. 360.

²¹ Ibidem p. 358/9.

²² Ibidem p. 358.

²³ The *law of value* also is brought in by Bourrinet, *merci* Gilles Dauvé!

explains this process of transformation in short as follows:

“In the General Social Labor (GSL) enterprises the ‘taking according to needs’ was, as we have seen, already realized. With the growth of communism, this type of enterprise receives an ever-increasing extension, means of consumption, dwelling, passenger transport, etc. The more society grows in this direction and the more enterprises are transformed into the GSL type, the less will individual labor be the measure for individual consumption. This tendency serves to illustrate the general development of communist society.”²⁴

Apparently Bourrinet – blinded by Lenin’s theory of two phases and by the GIC’s refusal of *State Communism* - hasn’t understood that the GIC follows Marx’ idea of the transformations during the period of transition.

The question of equality is dealt with in the more complete Dutch second edition of 1935 of *Fundamental principles* the GIC, in Ch. IX under the heading ‘*Equal’ distribution?*’:

“In communist production, we therefore demand that the working time will be the measure of consumption. Each worker determines by his work at the same time his share from the social consumer stores.

Or as Marx says,

"Accordingly, the individual producer receives back from society -- after the deductions have been made -- exactly what he gives to it. What he has given to it is his individual quantum of labor. For example, the social working day consists of the sum of the individual hours of work; the individual labor time of the individual producer is the part of the social working day contributed by him, his share in it. He receives a certificate from society that he has furnished such-and-such an amount of labor (after deducting his labor for the common funds); and with this certificate, he draws from the social stock of means of consumption as much as the same amount of labor cost. The same amount of labor which he has given to society in one form, he receives back in another."²⁵ (See the end of Chapter III.)

Erroneously, this is sometimes regarded as a ‘fair’ distribution of the social product. And that is true to the extent that no one could make a living by doing nothing, as the coupon-clippers do. But that’s all on justice. At first glance it seems very fair that all wage differentials be eliminated and all functions in society, both mental and manual labor, give the same rights to social stocks. But a closer look this same law works very unfair.”

Follows an examination of all kinds of ‘injustices’, and the GIC concludes:

“The requirement of equal right to social resources thus has nothing to do with justice. It is a political requirement par excellence, which we propose as a wage laborer. For us, the abolition of wage labor the central point of the proletarian revolution.”²⁶ (Underlined by FC).

²⁴ Paul Mattick [What is Communism?](#), 1938.

²⁵ Translation from [Critique of the Gotha Program](#).

²⁶ GIC [Grondbeginselen van de communistische productie en distributie](#).

Following this political reasoning we find in Ch. XVI, under the heading *the economic dictatorship of the proletariat*:

“Finally, we need to devote a single word to the dictatorship of the proletariat. This dictatorship is for us a matter of course, something you do not actually have to speak particularly about since the implementation of the communist economy is no different than the dictatorship of the proletariat. The implementation of the communist economy essentially means the abolition of wage labor, the implementation of the equal right for all producers to take from the social stocks. That is the abolition of all privileges of certain classes. The communist economy gives nobody the right to enrich himself at the expense of the labor of others. Who does not work shall not eat. The implementation of these principles is not ‘democratic’ at all. The working class implements it through the violent, bloody battle. A ‘democracy’ in the sense of cooperation between classes, as we know it from the time of the parliamentary and trade union system, is out of the question.

If, however, we look at this dictatorship of the proletariat from the angle of the transformation of social relations, from the reciprocal relations of people, this dictatorship is the true conquest of democracy. Communism does not mean anything else than that mankind rises to a higher level of culture, because all social functions will be under the direct guidance and supervision of all workers, who thus take their destiny into their own hands. That is, democracy has become the vital principle of society. Therefore, a substantial democracy, which has its roots in the management of society by the working masses, is exactly the same as the dictatorship of the proletariat.”²⁷

Bourrinet either doesn’t know the real positions of the GIC – important parts were only translated from Dutch in the 1990s – , or he knows, but doesn’t understand them. This may explain why he completely misinterpretes Pannekoek, he cites from on p. 355:

“The traditional view is the domination of politics over the economy ... what the workers have to aim for is the domination over politics by the economy.”

However, when we read the whole 1940 article from which this citation is taken, it becomes clear what Pannekoek actually understands with *traditional view*. Pannekoek does not mean the Marxist position of the political dictatorship of the proletariat over other classes, economics and society, as Bourrinet suggests, but ideas of state capitalist planned economy, in its Stalinist, National-Socialist or Social-Democratic forms, that dress in ‘socialist’ clothes to mobilize the workers for capitalist aims.

Pannekoek explains: “... only by politics the bourgeoisie (meaning: by the bourgeois state; FC) succeeds in maintaining an obsolete form of ownership to prevent the workers using the means of production properly. And new ‘revolutionary’ politics must bring a new form of ownership (meaning: state-ownership; FC) which control again the workers and production altogether. What the workers have to implement is be domination of politics by economics (meaning: the ‘economic dictatorship of the proletariat’ as explained by the GIC above; FC).

²⁷ GIC idem.

Toward a real discussion

In this review, I can't discuss all details of Bourrinet's criticism of the supposed 'economistic' view of the period of transition. Anyway, I hope to have showed that a real understanding of the actual positions of the Dutch left on this matter²⁸ is a precondition for a real discussion of the positions of the Italian left in exile and the Dutch left.

It is true that the GIC already in its text on *State communism* showed of certain naivety in its identification of the *workers' state* with the *dictatorship of the proletariat* and *power of the workers' councils*. In *Fundamental principles*, the same naivety can be seen in the question of necessary modifications in remuneration for certain categories of workers in case of serious scarcity, in the relationship with other classes, for example with the peasants, and the relationship between the '*highly industrialized region of the world*' where the workers have taken power, and the rest of the world.²⁹ But I believe this question of threatening impasse of a future world revolution and of necessary temporal compromises or emergency measures, can only be understood in the framework of the dynamic of the movement towards full communism that the GIC had the merit to shown.

Fredo Corvo, February 23rd 2017.

²⁸ See the corresponding [theme](#) on the invaluable website [aaap.be](#).

²⁹ See for my position on the historically linked question of the adequacy of the theory of double revolutions in [Instead of a Foreword](#) under Communism, Crisis and Consciousness.