

# **Building Power to Change the World**

## **THE POLITICAL THOUGHT OF THE GERMAN COUNCIL MOVEMENTS**

During the chaos and political unrest of World War I, council movements arose across Europe through soldier mutinies, mass strikes and factory occupations. The council movements seized upon a moment of exceptional opportunity brought about by the crisis of the war to launch a project of political transformation unprecedented in its scale. Inspired by the momentum of the rising revolutionary wave of 1917-1920, workers and soldiers elected delegates to councils, which acted as revolutionary committees representing the interests of the lower classes. The desire for radical change spread rapidly across borders as council movements emerged in Russia, Germany, Austria, Hungary, Italy and the United Kingdom. Organising through these new models of democratic governance, council movements dramatically reshaped European politics by precipitating the fall of powerful empires and leading to the creation of new republics. Although frequently depicted as short-lived and abortive, these movements produced lasting social change in spite of their brief existence. In Germany, they contributed to ending the war, bringing down the monarchy, introducing the eight-hour workday and instituting women's suffrage.<sup>1</sup>

However, these challenges to established hierarchies also generated powerful counter-movements in defence of the old order. The fear of the council movements' demands for radical social transformation drove the German government to empower the right-wing *Freikorps*, sowing the seeds for the rise of Nazism and World War II.<sup>2</sup> Attempts to establish council states were quickly crushed across Europe by counter-revolutionary forces. The political programs raised by radical council delegates largely disappeared with the demobilisation of the council movements and were soon overshadowed by other historical events and political ideologies. In Russia, the council movements were suppressed by the centralising tendencies of the Bolshevik party, leading to the integration of council institutions into the bureaucratic structure of a one-party state. While in Germany, council delegates voted for the establishment of a liberal parliament in which non-socialist parties won a majority of seats at the first national election. A shaky coalition was formed between liberals, centrists and moderate socialists creating the dangerous instability of the Weimar republic. By 1923, the political ambitions of radical council delegates were shattered as any hope of achieving their broader political objectives had faded from view.

Due to the openness and uncertainty of the revolutionary uprisings, this transitional period of innovation gave rise to an incredibly fertile body of political thought. German council delegates developed a radical vision of a self-determining society in which all citizens would exercise freedom through direct participation in political and economic institutions. Debates between delegates consisted of how to equalise power between citizens and combine the twin objectives of democracy and socialism in a transformative political program. In particular, they sought ways to extend democratic principles to a broad range of social institutions such as the army, schools, cultural institutions, workplaces and the government bureaucracy. However, there has been

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<sup>1</sup> Ralf Hoffrogge, *Working-Class Politics in the German Revolution: Richard Müller, the Revolutionary Shop Stewards and the Origins of the Council Movement* (Leiden: Brill Publishers, 2014), 8.

<sup>2</sup> Mark Jones, *Founding Weimar* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

surprisingly little interest in the council movements in Anglophone scholarship and only a handful of historical studies of their political thought.<sup>3</sup> On account of this scholarly neglect and their ambiguous legacy, my aim in this book is to reconstruct their political thought as a distinct contribution to the history of ideas and of ongoing relevance for contemporary politics. Drawing from the practices of the council movements and the writings of theorists such as Rosa Luxemburg, Anton Pannekoek and Karl Kautsky, this book analyses the German council movements' program to democratise politics, the economy and society through building powerful worker-led organisations and cultivating workers' political agency.

## Germany at a Crossroads

In November 1918, as the German war effort showed signs of exhaustion, workers and soldiers organised into democratic councils that seized power from the old royalty, industrialists and elites of the German Empire. The formation of councils was inspired by a sailor mutiny in Kiel prompted by an order issued on 24 October 1918 by Reinhardt Scheer, Chief of Naval Staff, to launch the entire German navy in a final suicidal fight to the death against the British navy in an attempt to restore the prestige of the German Admiralty. Without consulting the civilian government, which was already in talks towards an armistice, Admiral Scheer hoped for “an honourable battle by the fleet” which would “sow the seed of a new German fleet of the future.”<sup>4</sup> Scheer belonged to the old German Empire, a closed and hierarchical social order ruled by a wealthy military elite that resisted pressures for democratic reform. When the councils of soldiers and industrial workers arose to resist this military order, they were inspired by a radically different vision of politics, one in which power was exercised collectively through democratic organisations with accountable and recallable delegates. The slogan of the early German councils was “*Freiheit, Friede und Brot!*” [freedom, peace and bread] and their demands consisted of calls for democracy, pacifism, and the transformation of the hierarchical and bureaucratic apparatuses that oppressed them.<sup>5</sup>

The councils developed spontaneously without prior theoretical elaboration or detailed plans for their proper structure and role. Upon hearing of the formation of councils across Germany, revolutionary shop steward, Richard Müller, recalled hastily drawing an initial plan for elections to councils in Berlin “without checking it thoroughly, responding to the need of the hour.”<sup>6</sup> The quick spread of the revolution took both the authorities and the revolutionaries by surprise. The rapid development of events on the ground left competing political groups struggling to keep pace. Although the uprisings were not initiated by the established political parties, the latter

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<sup>3</sup> Important studies include Oskar Anweiler, *The Soviets: The Russian Workers, Peasants, and Soldiers Councils, 1905-1921* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974); Hoffrogge, *Working-Class Politics in the German Revolution*; Yohan Dubigeon, *La démocratie des conseils: Aux origines modernes de l'autogouvernement* (Paris: Klincksieck, 2017). In German, see Hans Hautmann, *Die Geschichte der Rätebewegung in Österreich 1918–1924* (Vienna: Europaverlag, 1995); Axel Weipert, *Die Zweite Revolution. Rätebewegung in Berlin 1919/1920* (Berlin: be.bra, 2015); Arnold Volker, *Rätebewegung und Rätetheorien in der Novemberrevolution*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Hamburg: Junius Verlag, 1985).

<sup>4</sup> Otto Groos, *Der Krieg in der Nordsee* (Berlin: E. S. Mittler, 1922), 344.

<sup>5</sup> Alexander Bessmertny and M. Neven DuMont, eds., *Die Parteien und das Rätesystem* (Charlottenburg: Deutsche Verlagsgesellschaft für Politik und Geschichte m. b. H., 1919), 65.

<sup>6</sup> Hoffrogge, *Working-Class Politics in the German Revolution*, 76.

quickly strove to gain influence and power over the councils by proposing their own party delegates to be elected in the councils and caucusing before council meetings. Barely a week had passed between the initial mutiny and the organisation of hundreds of councils across Germany, leading to the abdication of the Kaiser on 9 November 1918.<sup>7</sup>

The events were met with a mixture of fear and jubilation. For the revolutionaries, the fall of the old regime sparked enthusiasm for the possibility of the beginning of a worldwide socialist revolution. Red flags were raised over the Royal Palace in Berlin as triumphant crowds of workers marched through the streets. But there were also widespread fears of impending violence, wild rumours of secret plots, and a general sense of desperation and exhaustion after years of wartime hardship.<sup>8</sup> During this unstable and contradictory period, desires for social change and a fundamental transformation of hierarchical social institutions were intermingled with fears of a violent revolution and a longing for peace and stability. At the same time as the Spartacus League proclaimed the revolution would be “driven forward by its inner contradictions” towards “the realization of the ultimate goal of socialism,” the new Chancellor, Friedrich Ebert, warned of the danger of “anarchy and the most terrible misery,” calling on protesters to “leave the streets... to ensure that there is peace and order.”<sup>9</sup>

With conservative and reactionary groups temporarily obstructed and overwhelmed, the Executive Council of the Workers’ and Soldiers’ Councils declared itself the highest political authority of the Socialist Republic of Germany and ordered that the councils’ power “must be secured and expanded so that the achievements of the revolution will benefit the entire working class.”<sup>10</sup> For the months of November and December, 1918, there was a precarious balance of power between the old government bureaucracy and radical council delegates which was the cause of great discord.<sup>11</sup> While the former, assisted by the leadership of the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD), wished to maintain the essential aspects of the old regime, the latter envisioned “a new worldwide society of workers, free, without fear or want, a society based on worker democracy developing into a single unit of mankind.”<sup>12</sup>

However, there were a number of competing forces within the council movements ranging from the moderate SPD to a number of more radical groups such as the

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<sup>7</sup> Eberhalb Kolb, *Die Arbeiterräte in der deutschen Innenpolitik, 1918-1919* (Berlin: Droste, 1962), 71–82.

<sup>8</sup> Mark Jones notes that these fears included “revolutionaries’ belief in non-existent armed counter-revolutionaries; fears that a single organization controlled the revolution as it spread across Germany; ideas that Karl Liebknecht possessed a secret army; and more general protean fears of the total breakdown of social and political order.” Jones, *Founding Weimar*, 2.

<sup>9</sup> Institut für Marxismus-Leninismus, *Dokumente und Materialien zur Geschichte der Deutschen Arbeiterbewegung, Band 2 November 1917 – Dezember 1918* (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1957), 418–421, 333–334.

<sup>10</sup> Gabriel Kuhn, ed. *All Power to the Councils! A Documentary History of the German Revolution of 1918-1919* (Oakland: PM Press, 2012), 33.

<sup>11</sup> Friedrich Ebert had called for all government personnel to remain in their posts, while many of the councils sought to exercise “control” rights over the decisions of the government bureaucracy rather than completely replace them. Walter Tormin, *Zwischen Räterediktatur Und Sozialer Demokratie: Die Geschichte Der Rätebewegung in Der Deutschen Revolution 1918/19* (Düsseldorf: Droste Verlag, 1954), 89–90.

<sup>12</sup> Anonymous pamphlet quoted in Kuhn, ed., *All Power to the Councils!*, 13.

Independent Social Democratic Party of Germany (USPD), the Revolutionary Shop Stewards and the Spartacus Group. While the SPD leadership wished to hold the revolution back to prevent further social change, the more radical groups demanded more extensive transformations of German society. The brief months of the council movements' existence were the occasion for some of the most important debates in the history of European politics. At stake was the question of the scope and extent of transformations necessary to restructure Imperial Germany into a free republic. Of particular concern was social and economic changes to the production process and economic institutions. Would a genuine democracy require a socialist organisation of economic life and how would this function in practice? Drawing on debates that occurred within the workers' movement over the preceding two decades, socialists developed new political programs through the application of their theories to rapidly changing circumstances.

At an institutional level, debates were dominated by the question of "National Assembly versus Council Republic." Moderate delegates within the councils from the SPD were in favour of holding elections to a national assembly. They called for the creation of liberal parliamentary institutions with universal suffrage and supported the maintenance of existing social and economic structures with minor social reforms. On the other hand, radical delegates in the Revolutionary Shop Stewards and Spartacus League argued that a national assembly would allow existing elites to retain power and prevent more significant and wide-reaching democratic transformations to German society. They advocated for sovereign power to remain in the council system that had arisen organically over the course of the revolution. Fearing that old elites would reassert their control, they pushed for a more profound reorganisation of German society and the democratisation of key social institutions such as the army, schools, cultural institutions, civil service and workplaces. They questioned whether liberal democratic institutions could adequately challenge relations of domination between social classes or redress fundamental economic inequalities.

In addition to the "councils or parliament" debate, radical council theorists produced an expansive vision of a participatory, self-determining society, which called for "the workers' permanent and active participation in all economic and political areas."<sup>13</sup> Revolutionary Shop Steward, Ernst Däumig, anticipated "a Germany whose affairs are really determined by active people doing more than running to the ballot box every two or three years... It can only be changed by a dedicated attempt to make and keep the German people politically active."<sup>14</sup> In line with this vision, they supported a form of positive liberty that I call freedom as collective self-determination, according to which freedom must be exercised rather than enjoyed as a state or condition. Workers' control did not simply entail a centralised socialist party administering the economy. Council theorists were inspired by a vision of socialism from below in which ordinary citizens would engage in deliberation and decision-making at a local level. Däumig argued that "it is mandatory to make it a true people's movement that includes the bottom of society."<sup>15</sup> They believed structures of power should be organised from the bottom up such that rank-and-file members of the councils would play a key role in political processes. For the council movements, the very idea of

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<sup>13</sup> Ernst Däumig, "The Council Idea and its Realization," in *All Power to the Councils!*, ed. Kuhn, 52.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Ernst Däumig, "The National Assembly Means the Councils' Death," in *All Power to the Councils!*, ed. Kuhn, 41.

what it meant for individuals to live as free and equal citizens in a free society involved a conception of active citizenship and participation in economic and political institutions.

Radical delegates also called for the extension of democratic principles from the political sphere to other domains of society where democracy-resistant institutions and forces remained embedded. Democracy was not dismissed as a bourgeois sham that needed to be replaced by a utopian alternative. Rather, a participatory democratic socialist society was envisaged as an extension and radicalisation of democracy from the political domain to demands for more substantive social, economic and cultural equality. In this sense, political democracy was understood as the basis for more radical egalitarian reforms. Democratising authority structures was viewed as the pathway to a participatory society in which citizens would play an active role in self-determining institutions.

While specific proposals for democratising authority structures differed between groups, radical council delegates argued for the election of military officers, the dissolution of the police, the creation of a peoples' militia, the replacement of state bureaucrats by elected officials, the institution of workers' management of factories and the socialisation of key industries. Their transformative program involved overcoming the liberal separation of the private from the public sphere and intervening into closed and hierarchical institutions from which workers' voices had been excluded. Claiming new rights of democratic control, the council movements aimed to restructure social and economic institutions to guarantee workers more meaningful influence and control over authority structures.

Most importantly, this consisted of workers' control over economic production through self-managed enterprises and the creation of new institutions to exercise democratic control over the economy. Even moderate council delegates were in favour of a rapid socialisation of German industry to achieve greater levels of worker autonomy in the workplace. The "socialisation" debates within the council movements concerned the appropriate methods for transferring ownership of major industrial enterprises such as coal mines into public hands and establishing workers control over individual workplaces. Participants in the Socialisation Committee, established in November 1918 in the wake of the revolution, considered ways in which new economic institutions could be established that would balance the interests of workers in individual workplaces with broader social needs.<sup>16</sup>

Theorists within the council movements also emphasised the subjective role that class-consciousness played in political struggle and believed that changes in the economic sphere would need to be accompanied by widespread cultural transformation and spiritual renewal. A self-determining society would require public-spirited citizens who naturally tended towards promoting the common good and acting in solidarity with their fellow citizens. Rosa Luxemburg articulated these concerns through the language of "socialist civic virtues," which remains an important and overlooked contribution to democratic socialist political thought.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> See Karl Kautsky, "Speech on 'the Socialisation of Economic Life' at the Second Congress of Councils in April 1919," in *The German Left and the Weimar Republic: A Selection of Documents*, ed. Ben Fowkes (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 33.

<sup>17</sup> Rosa Luxemburg, "What does the Spartacus League Want?"

Pannekoek also emphasised the necessary changes in what he considered a people's "spirit" [*Geist*] or mentalities in order for revolutionary action to be successful. For Pannekoek, the transformation of economic institutions "must be accompanied by an equally fundamental spiritual revolution" through which a new ideology would gain "ground step by step, waging a relentless battle against the traditional ideas to which the ruling classes are clinging, this struggle is the mental companion of the social class struggle."<sup>18</sup>

The struggle for a self-determining society necessitated challenging entrenched hierarchical structures, which upheld strict class divisions in German society. Questions of structural power were central to the political strategies of the council movements because they believed elites would never voluntarily give up their position of dominance. They sought to shift the balance of power between classes in order to undertake social and political transformation. Although differences in perspective existed between council delegates, the general method they proposed for challenging the dominance of elites was building the independent power of the working class through strengthening worker-led institutions and cultivating the agency of ordinary workers. They operated with an expansive understanding of what constituted the "working class," which included intellectuals, white-collar workers and the unemployed. This position of building workers' power stood in contrast to moral reformers such as Friedrich Förster who argued that those in power could be voluntarily persuaded to adopt new norms through the influence of ethical ideals without the need for coercion or open political conflict.<sup>19</sup> Many liberals at the time hoped that moral principles of co-operation and civility could play a pedagogical role in political life and lead to the development of a common national interest.

Council delegates, on the other hand, considered that the only way to secure lasting social change would be to develop the independent power of the working class as an essential pre-condition for political transformation. In contrast to liberal reformers, council theorists strategized ways in which workers' power could be enhanced while sapping the organisational and ideological power of the bourgeoisie. They held no illusions of the collapse of the bourgeois world following one single event in which the old regime would be overthrown. Rather, they thought that revolutionary transformation would be an ongoing struggle over the course of years in which the power of workers would be pitted against their class enemy. Rather than seeking out ways in which social change could be achieved without the need for developing collective power, the council movements placed considerations of the struggle for power between classes at the centre of their political strategy.

### **Returning to the Council Movements**

The relative lack of historical scholarship on the political thought of the council movements is partly a result of their unexpected rise and rapid collapse. It is easy to view this period as an insignificant and minor episode in the history of socialist political thought. After all, by the early 1920s, the council movements had all but disappeared, with the prospects of their democratic socialist programs buried for a

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<sup>18</sup> Anton Pannekoek, "The Position and Significance of Joseph Dietzgen's Philosophical Works," in Joseph Dietzgen, *The Positive Outcome of Philosophy* (Chicago, 1906), 12–13.

<sup>19</sup> Friedrich Förster, *Weltpolitik und Weltgewissen* (München, 1919).

generation. Yet it would be a mistake to overlook these movements as a mere historical anachronism. The problems that the council movements faced – how to challenge social hierarchies, equalise power between citizens, and implement a transformative political program in the interests of the many – are still vexing questions for contemporary progressive political groups. The European council movements instituted the first worker-led revolutions in industrialised countries to seriously consider the necessary practical steps for socialising major industries and establishing democratic controls over the economy. They engaged in vigorous debates over the nature and scope of democratic government including the extent to which authority structures outside the governmental sphere should be democratised. They also sought to combine Marxist analyses of political economy with theories of modern representative democracy in an attempt to conceptualise the institutional dimensions of a post-capitalist, democratic socialist society. These debates present conceptual resources that can still inform contemporary discussions.

It is a shame, then, that socialist political theorists of this era have long since fallen out of fashion in mainstream political discourse. Many of the seminal theoretical projects of the Left in the 1980s and 90s, such as Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau's *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* and Andrew Arato and Jean Cohen's *Civil Society and Political Theory*, were *post-Marxist* in orientation and began with a repudiation of the perceived out-dated perspective of the "Old Left." For Mouffe and Laclau, the theorists of the Second International were captive to a logic of historical necessity and adhered to an unrealistic and dangerous ideal of emancipation understood as the construction of a rational and self-determining political order.<sup>20</sup> Theoretical attention was turned from economic considerations to questions of "the social" and potential alliances between new social movements.

One aim of this book is to demonstrate that the theorists of the council movements were not as rigid, dogmatic or simplistic as has been assumed. The selection of theorists in this book who participated in or wrote about the council movements shows that there were a variety of political positions adopted towards the councils and different programs for how they could be incorporated into a new society. There was no single political ideology of "councilism" or "council communism," which only emerged later through polemics with the Bolsheviks and criticisms of the progress of the Russian Revolution.<sup>21</sup> Political disagreements over the correct structure, direction and purpose of the council movements revealed important differences in principle and strategy between theorists within the German socialist movement. The debates that occurred leading up to and during the German Revolution are an important yet overlooked chapter in libertarian socialist political thought. There are also interesting parallels with other neighbouring traditions of thought. In many respects, the generation of the council movements anticipated certain aspects of the "participatory democracy" program raised by the Students for a Democratic Society of the New Left. These endeavours are rooted in "the ancient, still unfulfilled conception of man

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<sup>20</sup> See the discussion of Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Kautsky in Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London: Verso, 1985), 8–19.

<sup>21</sup> See James Muldoon, "The Birth of Council Communism," *The German Revolution and Political Theory* (London: Palgrave, 2019), 339–360.

attaining determining influence over his circumstances of life.”<sup>22</sup> There is still much that participatory (and deliberative) democrats today can learn from the original efforts of the council movements to create a more participatory society a century ago.

Another barrier to interpretation is the distorted historical accounts offered by some of the most influential interpreters of the council movements.<sup>23</sup> A theory of council democracy is perhaps most well known in political theory through the famous interpretation provided by Hannah Arendt at the end of *On Revolution*.<sup>24</sup> However, Arendt’s retrieval of the “council system” fails to engage in a historical analysis of the main participants in the European council movements. She offers a “mythic” idealised account of the councils depicted as the regular re-emergence of a spontaneous institution that sprang directly from the peoples’ political activities and posed an alternative to parliamentary democracy. However, from the European council movements of 1917-20 to the 1956 Hungarian Revolution, Arendt disregards council delegates’ socialist ideology and socio-economic concerns, arguing that councils “have always been primarily political, with social and economic claims playing a very minor role.”<sup>25</sup> As a result, she is confounded by the councils’ emergence within the workers’ movement and provides an unconvincing attempt to separate instances of revolutionary councils concerned with purely political matters from workers’ councils seeking to organise economic production. Arendt’s depiction of the councils has led her interpreters to view the final chapter of *On Revolution* as the outline of an abstract theoretical model without due consideration of the historical manifestation of the council movements.<sup>26</sup> The result has been a neglect of theorists directly participating in the council movements who remain largely overlooked in Arendt’s interpretation.

The political thought of the council movements has also been marginalised as an object of serious historical investigation due to Lenin’s criticisms of the radical theorists within the German and Dutch sections of the Communist International as representing an “infantile disorder” of ultra-leftism within the workers’ movement.<sup>27</sup> While there are differences between the participants in the council movements of 1917–1920 and the later development of council communism as an ideology opposed to Leninism, Lenin’s negative portrayal of theorists such as Anton Pannekoek has adversely impacted upon the interpretation of the council movements.<sup>28</sup> Contrary to Lenin’s interpretation, many of the council theorists made significant theoretical innovations within Marxism, particularly by advancing democratic republican aspects

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<sup>22</sup> Students for a Democratic Society, *The Port Huron Statement* (Chicago : Charles H. Kerr Publishing Co., 1990).

<sup>23</sup> John Medearis, “Lost or Obscured? How V. I. Lenin, Joseph Schumpeter, and Hannah Arendt Misunderstood the Council Movement,” *Polity* 36, no. 3 (2004), 447–476.

<sup>24</sup> Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Penguin, 2006), 247–273. See also Hannah Arendt, *The Jewish Writings* (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), 343–374, 388–401; Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958), 215–220; Hannah Arendt, *Crises of the Republic* (New York, NY: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972), 189–191; Hannah Arendt, *Men in Dark Times* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1970), 52.

<sup>25</sup> Arendt, *On Revolution*, 266. James Muldoon, “The Origins of Hannah Arendt’s Council System,” *History of Political Thought* 37, no. 4 (2016): 761–789.

<sup>26</sup> Kalyvas, *Democracy and the Politics of the Extraordinary*, 187–300.

<sup>27</sup> V. I. Lenin, “‘Left-Wing’ Communism: An Infantile Disorder,” in *Collected Works, Vol. 31* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1965).

<sup>28</sup> On the development of council communism on the basis of the experiences of the council movements see James Muldoon, “The Birth of Council Communism,” in *The German Revolution and Political Theory*, ed. James Muldoon (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).



of Marx's political thought. Within socialist political theory, the council movements have been most associated with a rigid form of "councilism," which has been depicted as a dogmatic ideology based on the rejection of party discipline, parliamentary elections and trade unions.<sup>29</sup> This book examines the political theories of participants in the council movements in order to reveal a more complex picture of the diversity of their theoretical programs.

The return to the political theories of the German council movements in this book is primarily a project in the history of political thought. The council movements arose during an overlooked transitional period in European history that warrants further examination. The council movements led to the unexpected transformation of the Russian, German and Austro-Hungarian Empires into a number of independent republics. This represents a significant chapter in the development of modern political thought. Yet rather than interpreting this transformation as a simple movement from one set of political institutions to another, this study raises the question of forgotten political alternatives. Following the abdication of the Kaiser in early November 1918, a number of different political possibilities were open for the future direction of German politics. Germany was in no sense pre-destined to transition from monarchical to liberal democratic institutions, which resulted from a set of historically contingent factors. An important part of this study involves uncovering the competing ideals and political programs, which were supported during this revolutionary period, but which may not have achieved full realisation in practice.

Quentin Skinner has warned that "once a political idea achieves a position of hegemony it comes to be regarded as the only coherent way of thinking about the concept involved." Returning to the history of the German council movements helps remind us that "our present ways of thinking... reflect a series of choices made at different times between different possible worlds."<sup>30</sup> The current dominance of liberal democracy as the only viable conception of democratic government is partly a result of this historical forgetting. Historical scholarship enables us to denaturalise hegemonic accounts of politics and expand our sense of historical possibility through encounters with foreign ways of interpreting politics. Far from being an antiquarian historical footnote, the council movements raise important questions for democratic and socialist theory today. This study seeks to reignite discussion of the possibility of the compatibility of democracy with socialism, of democratic intervention into the economy and of achieving a more participatory democratic society.

There is also an Arendtian element to this recovery of the political thought of the council movements. I have not attempted a systematic exposition of every important theorist within the council movements. Rather, I have focussed on specific ideals and programs at the intersection of democratic and socialist thought that speak to current concerns about how democracy could be deepened and expanded. Arendt imagines the political theorist as akin to "the pearl diver who descends to the bottom of the sea," in order to bring to the surface "thought fragments" as something "rich and strange" that might allow us to interpret current events in a new light.<sup>31</sup> This history of the councils is not aimed at resuscitating a past era, but rather seeks to uncover

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<sup>29</sup> Gilles Dauvé, *Eclipse and Re- Emergence of the Communist Movement*, (London: PM Press, 2015), 95.

<sup>30</sup> Quentin Skinner, *Liberty before Liberalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 117.

<sup>31</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Men in Dark Times*. New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1968), 205.

certain unfulfilled hopes and aspirations of political transformation that remain alive in the present.

This historical work, then, could be seen as playing a double role. First, it serves as a critical tool against existing institutions, demonstrating the contingency of the current order and countering the effects of dominant political narratives.<sup>32</sup> Many of the political ideas and programs of the council movements go beyond that which the present order can assimilate on its own terms. Considered in light of the future directions of democratic governments across the globe, a return to the council movements may unsettle and provoke us. Their vision of active citizens participating in a self-determining society with economic independence and participatory structures of governance prompts us to rethink the necessary underlying conditions for popular government. Comparing the council movements' ideals and political programs to present forms of democratic government helps us reflect on our political inheritance from a new perspective.

Second, returning to political debates during a decisive period of political transformation in which a wide number of possibilities were still open expands our political imagination. This includes not only the dominant ideologies of the period, but also the partially forgotten alternatives. The radical openness of the future at times of great disruption and transition gives rise to a diverse body of new political ideas. Radical delegates within the council movements held a fundamentally different vision of political life that differs significantly from contemporary approaches to thinking about freedom and democracy. I hope to bring part of this extraordinary experiment in democratic politics to the surface to shed new light on the possibilities for democratic practices today. However, my approach does not involve a project of simple reclamation. We should be wary of methodological approaches which seek to translate past political experiences directly into present circumstances. The emergence of the councils is connected to a particular historical epoch and socio-economic environment. I address these questions in the conclusion with further discussion of the contemporary significance of the councils.

## Chapter Outline

The structure of this book on the German council movements reflects a number of prominent themes in their political thought. Chapter one examines the underlying democratic and socialist impulses of the rank-and-file delegates of the German council movements with a look back to the main historical precedent for councils in the Russian Revolution. It focuses on two periods of council activity: Russia (from the strikes in February 1917 to the crushing of the Kronstadt uprising in 1921) and Germany (from the heightened revolutionary activity of 1917 to the establishment of the Weimar Constitution in August 1919).<sup>33</sup> I show that while a diversity of political views were held by participants in the council movements, there was broad support for the deepening and extension of democratic conditions in major political, economic

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<sup>32</sup> See Aletta Norval, "Writing a Name in the Sky: Rancière, Cavell, and the Possibility of Egalitarian Inscription," *American Political Science Review* 106, no. 4 (2012), 810–826.

<sup>33</sup> For a broader periodisation that includes a second period of activity of the German councils in 1919–1920 see Weipert, *Die zweite Revolution. Rätebewegung in Berlin 1919/1920*.

and social institutions. This analysis offers a concrete historical context for the examination of political theorists later in the book.

The next four chapters address important questions in the political thought of three main theorists: Anton Pannekoek, Karl Kautsky and Rosa Luxemburg. Each chapter is organised around a different thematic concern and pursues connected interpretive arguments related to these theorists' views on freedom, power, socialist democracy, and civic virtue. In each chapter, I tend to focus on the writings of one theorist to bring to light a partially obscured way of thinking about the political phenomenon in question. The three thinkers have been selected due to the way in which their debates reveal the political divisions of the council movements. I have aimed to offer an introduction to important theoretical questions that were debated within the council movements, but I have not aspired to create a comprehensive introduction to each of the main protagonists' political thought.<sup>34</sup>

A special note is needed on the inclusion of Karl Kautsky, a figure not frequently associated with the council movements. Indeed, Kautsky was critical of other council theorists and engaged in a polemic against Rosa Luxemburg and Anton Pannekoek during this period. I have chosen to include him here for two reasons. Firstly, tracing the debates between Kautsky and his interlocutors helps us uncover important questions raised within the German socialist parties over the role of council movements and the future of Germany. Secondly, his thought is not as antithetical to the council movements as is usually considered. Kautsky presents an important "centrist" position within the USPD, which has been neglected in the history of political thought and is developed in this book.

Chapter two develops political insights into the nature of political freedom from the writings of Anton Pannekoek. It proposes that Pannekoek espoused a particular conception of freedom I call freedom as collective self-determination, which is distinct from both the dominant liberal and republican views of liberty.<sup>35</sup> Pannekoek was selected as the theorist who offers the clearest articulation of how the activities of the councils were connected to questions of freedom and emancipation. The chapter claims that the framework of the recent liberty debates in political theory has obscured important dimensions of freedom from within the positive liberty tradition. Pannekoek understood political freedom as a political community's ongoing struggle against forces of domination *and* the experimentation with new practices and structures of governance. He identified the state and capitalist relations of production as two of the principal sources of domination in German society. He also saw bourgeois ideology as exercising a stultifying effect on workers' capacity to struggle for their freedom. Democratic participation, on this account, was an essential aspect of the freedom struggle because an emancipatory movement should be led by the workers themselves as the main agents of political transformation. To be free entailed

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<sup>34</sup> In particular, I have paid less attention to the Revolutionary Shop Stewards whose political thought has been carefully reconstructed in Hoffrogge, *Working-Class Politics in the German Revolution*. For other aspects of the political thought of the council movements see Muldoon, *The German Revolution and Political Theory* and James Muldoon (ed.), *Council Democracy: Towards a Democratic Socialist Politics* (London: Routledge, 2018).

<sup>35</sup> Philip Pettit, *On the People's Terms: A Republican Theory and Model of Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

actively participating in deliberation and decision-making and having a direct influence over the laws and character of a political community.

Chapter three argues that council theorists considered it important to shift the balance of power between social classes in order to achieve political transformation. It theorises differences between those who advocated “organisation” (Kautsky) versus those who advocated “mobilisation” (Luxemburg, Pannekoek) as the most effective method of developing the independent power of the working class. It claims Kautsky advocated a strategy of developing power through building worker-led organisations such as the party, unions and the press. His strategy involved the gradual growth of power through organisation building, parliamentary activity and developing workers’ consciousness within existing organisations. Underlying this strategy of organisation lay a conception of power as something that could be incrementally developed and stored through sound organising, discipline and patience. In contrast, Luxemburg and Pannekoek considered that power could only be developed through political struggle and direct clashes with the ruling class. They argued that previously unorganised workers could be mobilised through the escalating dynamics of political struggle and that consciousness-raising was best conducted in militant action rather than administrative party activities. These two fundamentally different analyses of how workers should develop their power cast light on different aspects of the council movements’ political struggle.

Chapter four reconstructs a theory of socialist republicanism from the writings of an overlooked figure of the German Revolution, Karl Kautsky. Comparing it with the theories of Rosa Luxemburg and the SPD leadership, I argue that during the revolution Kautsky proposed an innovative socialist republican program that called for the radical transformation of the state and society. The dominance of the “National Assembly versus Council Republic” ideological framework of the revolution has obscured Kautsky’s “centrist” third option. Kautsky argued for the presence of workers’ councils *alongside* a parliamentary system and understood democracy and socialism as the twin goals of a socialist revolution. He sought to combine the benefits of political democracy and civil rights for minorities with the gradual socialisation of the economy. This interpretation challenges the dominant view of Kautsky as a bourgeois reformist who advocated political quietism during the revolution.

Chapter five shows that the German council movements struggled not only for the deepening of democracy and the social ownership of the means of production, but also for a broader project of human emancipation couched in terms of ideological transformation and cultural rejuvenation. A significant barrier identified at the time to the realisation of democratic socialist goals was the strong ideological hold of bourgeois mentalities over workers. As a result, radical theorists such as Anton Pannekoek and Gustav Landauer emphasised the subjective role that a people’s class-consciousness and “spirit” [*Geist*] played in political struggle. An overlooked yet significant contribution to this topic was Rosa Luxemburg’s theorisation of “socialist civic virtues” as a key element of class struggle and socialist democracy. Luxemburg incorporated republican language and themes into a socialist political ideology of workers’ self-emancipation. She understood that worker-controlled institutions would need to be supported by widespread socialist norms that would be common knowledge and followed as a matter of habit. It would be necessary to direct workers away from the egoism, individualism and competition that predominated in capitalist

societies and towards a socialist culture of self-discipline, public-spiritedness, solidarity and self-activity. She believed it was primarily through their own political activity and the experience of political struggle that workers could acquire the necessary habits and dispositions of self-government for living in a self-determining society. Her ideals of socialist civic virtues help provide content to the council movements' vision of the institutional and cultural order of a future socialist society. Council theorists were motivated by a participatory ideal of a self-determining society in which active citizens would be the main actors in processes of self-government and economic self-management. Reflecting on the political thought of the council movements provides an important standpoint from which to reassess our own forms of democratic government.