

Rediscovering the Hamburg Workers' and Soldiers' Councils

Gaard Kets, Radboud University

James Muldoon, University of Exeter

Council communism was a socialist current that first emerged within the German and Dutch sections of the Second International. Council communists were critical of the bureaucratisation of the Russian Revolution, adhered to a principle of the self-emancipation of the working class and advocated the establishment of workers' councils. This body of theory was developed by key figures such as Anton Pannekoek, Herman Gorter, Otto Rühle, Richard Müller and Ernst Däumig, and responded to the experiences of the Russian and German revolutions. In this chapter, we aim to shed new light on our understanding of the development of council theory through an analysis of the early political experiences of council delegates in Hamburg at a formative stage of revolutionary activity in Germany.

Council theory is little known beyond the narrow confines of a seemingly dogmatic ideology with rigid principles based on the rejection of hierarchies, mediation and substitutionism. Characteristic of this position, Gilles Dauvé has argued that although council theorists rightly emphasised the importance of worker self-activity and the dangers of bureaucratisation, council theory ultimately developed into a rigid ideology of “councilism”.¹ While there are a number of excellent analyses of council thought that are exceptions to this general trend, it is unfortunately this stale image of councilism that predominates today.² One reason for this is

that some of the principle sources of knowledge of the European council movements have been transmitted by their political opponents and critics. John Medearis has shown how V. I. Lenin, Hannah Arendt and Joseph Schumpeter, produced distorted accounts of the councils and obscured their significance for contemporary politics.³ One of the earliest and still most influential negative accounts of council theory was provided by Lenin in his polemic against what he portrayed as a form of ultra leftism and an “infantile disorder.”⁴ For Lenin, this position adhered to a “rigid doctrinairism,” which rejected all forms of leadership, maintained a principled opposition to participation in parliamentary elections and trade-union activity, and repudiated all political parties and party discipline. Lenin concluded that such “hopelessly muddled thinking” in fact led to an “incapacity for sustained effort, unity and organised action, which, if encouraged, must inevitably destroy any proletarian revolutionary movement.”⁵ The authority of such negative and misrepresentative accounts of the councils has added to their neglect within contemporary political theory.

In this chapter, we contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the development of council theory by reconstructing political debates within the meetings of council delegates during the early stages of the German Revolution of 1918-1919. We examine the minutes of 76 meetings of the Workers’ and Soldiers’ Council of Hamburg from 6 November 1918 to 24 March 1919 in order to offer a rich portrait of a key moment in the development of council theory.⁶ We focus on the period of the councils’ greatest power and influence from the early days of November to the First National Congress of Workers’ and Soldiers’ Councils on 16 December 1918, at which point, the councils voted for elections to a National Assembly to take place on 19 January 1919 (a vote which council delegate Ernst Däumig referred to as a “suicide club” for the councils). The choice of Hamburg is ideal because it was a major city of industrial production, a centre for strike activities and in close proximity with the sailors’ revolt at Kiel at

the end of October 1918. The selection of Hamburg, rather than the councils in Berlin, also allows us to gain an insight into one of the less studied regional centres outside of the capital.

Delegates within the councils faced the daunting task of pushing through a transformative program in the interests of ordinary workers whilst maintaining basic administrative functions of a failing government and crippled economy. Placing their debates in political context offers an opportunity to study these ideas in action, which helps dispel the myth of council ideology as a set of abstract and dogmatic principles. Council theory is perhaps best known through Anton Pannekoek's *Workers Councils*, which has a more speculative and utopian bent to it than other writings in the tradition. Council delegates within the Workers' and Soldiers' Council of Hamburg were concerned with immediate problems and debated how they would grapple with enacting their principles in the face of the realities of a complex environment. In the course of our analysis, we show that council delegates held a variety of positions on different issues and demonstrate how theoretical principles often succumbed to the necessity of pragmatic solutions.

Studying council debates also offers an important perspective due to the relative lack of theoretical elaborations of council ideology before the emergence of workers' councils in the Russian and German revolutions. As workers' councils arose spontaneously in mass strikes across Europe with little planning or knowledge of how they would be developed, the initial meetings of councils are important moments of political contestation that contain crucial debates concerning different interpretations of political challenges. An examination of these records provides insight into the mindset of participants, rather than of council theorists often writing well after the events themselves. While we have a number of excellent monographs on some of the major theorists of council theory such as Anton Pannekoek, Richard Müller and Rosa Luxemburg, there has been less published on the local council delegates and the practices

of political movements during the revolution.⁷ We aim to contribute to filling this gap with a detailed examination of a short chapter in the history of the council movements. What we observe from the debates is that there is no single official position of council communism, but rather a set of shared underlying concerns and a number of different ways in which these ideas were put to work in different political contexts.

This chapter will proceed as follows. First, we introduce the political context of the formation of the Hamburg councils. The next section examines the first debates of the Hamburg Council concerning the relationship between councils and the institutions of the previous political order. This question would play a pivotal role in the formation of council communist ideology. Hamburg is a particularly interesting case for this question, because the Council not only had to relate to the national assembly in Berlin, but also to the two representative institutions that had governed this relatively autonomous city-state during the past decades: the *Senat* and the *Bürgerschaft*. Third, we analyse debates concerning the relationship between councils, political parties and trade unions. Finally, we analyse the issue of membership and democratic inclusion. The councils faced questions of who should be included in their political organisation, in particular concerning women, peasants, intellectual labourers and the unemployed. We conclude by reflecting on the meaning of these instances of bottom-up political thought for the development of the council idea.

The Workers' and Soldiers' Council of Hamburg

In the final months of the war in 1918, German sailors mutinied and rebelled following an order from the naval command in Kiel for one final suicidal mission against the Allied forces. The

hardships of the war and the growing radicalisation of workers and soldiers had created conditions fertile for revolution. Attempts by the government to make concessions such as the appointment of Max von Baden as new *Reichskanzler* and the inclusion of social democratic ministers in his cabinet proved unsatisfactory to German workers who increasingly called for the abdication of the *Kaiser*. The first mutinies and strikes of October 1918 were crushed and political leaders were thrown into prison. On 3 November 1918, a series of demonstrations for the release of the prisoners led to the establishment of a soldiers' council, prompting a spread of strikes and the formation of councils across Germany.

On 5 November 1918, the Independent Social Democrats (USPD, an "anti-war" split-off of the SPD) organised a massive gathering in the *Gewerkschaftshaus* (trade union building) where sailors from Kiel were greeted with much enthusiasm leading to a solidarity strike. Wilhelm Düwell, editor of SPD journal *Vorwärts*, proposed a mass demonstration to take place on the next day and called for the establishment of a workers' and soldiers' council.⁸ This call was answered by over 40,000 people who gathered on 6 November 1918 at the Heiligengeist field in Hamburg. Many of the participants were armed sailors, soldiers and workers who marched to strategic positions across the city and captured the army headquarters, various military barracks and the city newspaper, *Hamburger Echo*.

By the evening of 6 November 1918 the workers' and soldiers' provisional council was acknowledged (even by representatives of the local senate and parliament) as the highest political and military authority in Hamburg. Except for maintaining order and protecting the outcomes of the revolution, the main priority of this council was to organise elections for a more permanent workers' and soldiers' council. On 8 November 1918, elections took place in the factories and workshops for the *Großen Arbeiterrat* (Grand Workers' Council) of

approximately 600 delegates. These industrial delegates gathered on 9 November 1918 to choose 18 delegates for the Workers' Council. The remaining 12 seats in the 30 seat Workers' Council were occupied by delegates from the three workers' parties (USPD, SPD and Left radicals [mostly communists]) and delegates from the trade unions.⁹ The USPD and Left radicals initially dominated the Council, demonstrated by the fact that USPD member Heinrich Laufenberg, was elected First Chairman.

Soldiers elected delegates to the Workers' and Soldiers' Council of Hamburg through their own council structures. From ships and barracks across the city, soldiers elected delegates to the "General Assembly of Soldiers' Councils of Hamburg-Altona and surroundings," which consisted of 350 members. From this group, 100 members were delegated to the "Delegates' Assembly," which was in turn led by a small executive committee of 15 (later 30) members called the "Soldiers' Council." Together the Soldiers' Council and Workers' Council formed the Workers' and Soldiers' Council of Hamburg with 60 members as shown in Figure 1 below. This council existed until its final meeting on 24 March 1919, a day after the elections for the city parliament, which made it obsolete. Having lost all their influence in the first months of 1919, the red flag hung by the revolutionaries on 11 November 1918 over the town hall was finally removed and the Workers' and Soldiers' Council was dissolved.

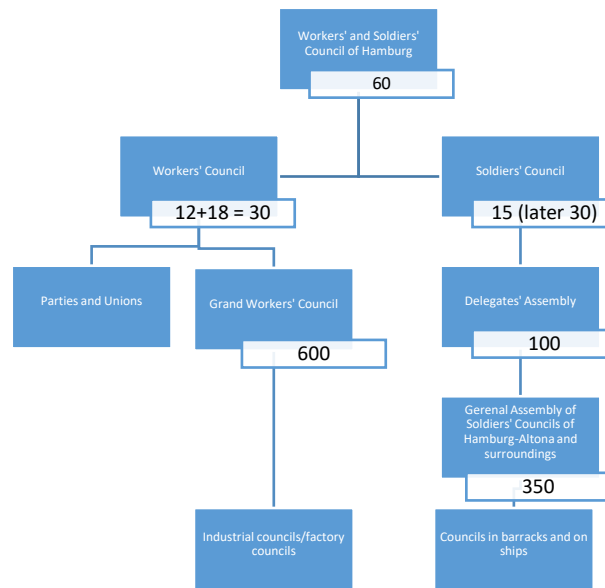


Figure 1. The Structure of the Workers' and Soldiers Council of Hamburg

The councils and the old institutional order

In some of the most well-known texts of council communism, by Pannekoek, Rühle and Korsch, for example, councils were envisaged as alternatives to bourgeois state institutions.¹⁰ Many council theorists considered workers' councils as proletarian organs that were distinct from bourgeois institutions due to their directly recallable delegates, system of voting from within the working class and workers' control over production. Many radical council delegates also imagined a council system as a complete break with the past. In a speech to the First National Congress of Workers' and Soldiers' Councils, Ernst Däumig declared: “[w]e have to abandon the entire old administrative machinery, on the federal, regional, and municipal level. The German people have to get used to self-management instead of governance.”¹¹ However, in most cities in Germany outside of Berlin, councils exercised little more than a supervisory function over existing government apparatuses. As the latter offered no resistance to the councils, the whole administrative structure tended to remain in place.¹² Many of the older industrialists, state authorities and other elements of the bourgeoisie were suspicious of the

councils, but they dared not risk directly attacking them.¹³ The revolutionaries perhaps naively underestimated the resilience of the old institutions and failed to foresee the difficulties of undertaking basic administrative duties without them. Ernst Däumig argued that “[t]he state apparatus had new men at its head but remained essentially unchanged.”¹⁴ Similarly, Karl Korsch also recorded that “[c]ouncils were in many if not most cases content with a very ineffective ‘control,’ when in reality they should have demanded full powers in the legislative, executive and judicial fields.”¹⁵ Only the Executive Committee of the Berlin council, headed by Richard Müller, demanded that full legislative and executive power should reside in the councils. However, even the Executive Committee conceded the necessity of maintaining certain existing government apparatuses, stating in a promulgation on 11 November 1918: “[a]ll the communal authorities of the various *Länder*, of the entire Reich, and of the army are to continue in their activities.”¹⁶

The precise relationship between the new councils and the older institutions was subject to heated debate within the councils. The example of Hamburg provides an illustrative case study of the practical problems faced by many of the local councils arising across Germany. In this instance, the old institutions were abolished by decree for only a few short days before revolutionaries were forced to acknowledge how dependent they were on them for administrative support, which led to a desire for compromise and co-operation. The arguments between delegates in Hamburg are also instructive because they prefigure the main debate at the First National Congress of Workers’ and Soldiers’ Councils in Berlin: the choice between parliamentary democracy and proletarian democracy, between “national elections or the council system.” Three main factors came into play in negotiations over the place of state administrative institutions alongside the councils. First, there were ideological differences between political parties over the role of the councils. While radical council delegates in the USPD and the radical

Left believed that councils should form the basis of new state institutions, the SPD was reluctant to view the councils as genuine alternatives to a parliamentary system. SPD delegates used their position in the councils to retain or reform existing state structures. Second, there was a lack of understanding amongst the workers about the nature of a council system and ideological hesitations about creating a full council republic. Due to the propaganda efforts of the SPD, liberals and conservatives, the rallying cry for national unity around parliamentary elections was very strong and workers were not convinced that a council system presented a desirable alternative to parliamentary institutions. Third, pragmatic concerns also prevented the swift abolishment of state apparatuses because it would have been impossible to fulfil basic administrative duties that were so desperately needed to keep the country functioning. Thus, even when radical elements dominated the councils, they hesitated at completely removing key institutions of the bourgeois state.

Hamburg was governed by a *Senat* (senate) in which a mayor, deputy-mayor and 24 senators were (from 1860 onwards) elected by a *Bürgerschaft* (citizens' council) and appointed for life. The *Bürgerschaft* did not consist of all citizens, but an elite based on wealth and social class. The provisional workers' and soldiers' councils that arose on 6 November 1918 did not immediately alter the official position of these old institutions, even after obtaining de facto power over the city. In the evening, delegates of the provisional workers' council marched on the town hall to meet with the senators. Delegates declared to the senators that "the workers and soldiers have taken political power into their hands, they will show that they are ready to use this power the right way."¹⁷ However, the Senate was not abolished, but only commanded to secure the supply of paper for the declarations of the Council. One newspaper even reported that although the councils had taken authority over police and military matters, the Senate and the *Bürgerschaft* would be able to function as usual.¹⁸ In its first public announcement, the

Council declared that it had conquered “most of the political power,” leaving the precise relation between the Council and the old institutions unclear.¹⁹

On 12 November 1918, at the Presidium of the Workers’ and Soldiers’ Council of Hamburg, a unanimous proclamation was issued stating: “The Workers’ and Soldiers’ Council has taken over the execution of political power in the state territories of Hamburg. The Senate and *Bürgerschaft* do not exist anymore. The Hamburg state territories will soon be part of the German People’s Republic. ... Public servants remain at their positions. Their wages will be paid. ... The Workers’ and Soldiers’ Council will from now on meet in the town hall.”²⁰ The Presidium’s desire to put an end to the old institutions is further emphasised by the fact that the meetings of the Council were now to take place in the town hall, the traditional home of the Senate and *Bürgerschaft*.

The meeting of the Workers’ and Soldiers’ Council of Hamburg followed directly after the meeting of the Presidium. The atmosphere of the meeting was *gewitterschwül* (ominous), with the door and room being guarded by armed sailors. Nobody was allowed to leave the room before the end of the meeting, and some members felt trapped.²¹ Laufenberg started off the debate by reading the proclamation of the Presidium, but a political difference soon emerged between the radical delegates and those of the SPD. Louis Gruenwaldt, council delegate and chairman of the SPD faction in the *Bürgerschaft*, argued that authorities would not have to be removed by violence and that rather than replace the *Bürgerschaft* and Senate, their voter base should be expanded to a universal suffrage. He was supported by Heinrich Schönberg, leader of the trade union cartel, who argued that social reform rather than revolution would be in the best interests of workers.²² In his opinion, dismissing the Senate would lead to economic turmoil, which would anger the masses and turn them against socialism. The radical council

delegates rejected these arguments as too conservative for the current revolutionary situation and considered that there was no time or capacity to hold municipal elections for a new *Bürgerschaft*. The Council voted in favour of the proclamation of the Presidium with six dissenting votes (presumably SPD). Gruenwaldt concluded that the radicals had decided on a “very unpleasant undertaking.”²³ However, this vote would not be the last word on the existence of the old institutions.

Following the council meeting, Laufenberg visited the Senate accompanied by armed sailors and explained to them that their institution no longer existed. He stated that “the past had been definitively emptied” and that there were no more “bridges between the past and the present left.”²⁴ Nevertheless, he explained that the Council would still request the expertise and co-operation of individual former senators for the governance of the city. In a council meeting on 13 November 1918, it was decided that former senators could exercise their former offices under political control of the Council.²⁵ After some ambiguity about whether the senators could continue their work *as senators*, it was decided that the most prominent former senators could sit in a commission together with delegates from the Council, which would operate under political control of the Council.²⁶

On 15 November 1918, the Council discussed its plans for the old *Bürgerschaft* and the institutions that would replace it. The issue for the Council was that the *Bürgerschaft* was still required to pass finance bills that would allow government spending. The councils did not want to take on such functions and believed that a separate body should organise the city’s finances such as wages for policemen, benefits for the unemployed and veterans, housing for the poor, food distributions, etc. Delegates discussed the possibility of establishing a new communal parliament with universal suffrage that would replace the *Bürgerschaft*. Louis Gruenwaldt of

the SPD argued that holding elections was impossible at this point, so there was no other option but to use existing institutions. Berthold Grosse, SPD, agreed and added that there would be democratic benefits of maintaining the *Bürgerschaft* and expanding the voting population of the city's representative body to include all classes. It was decided in the Council that, in spite of their previous proclamation, the *Bürgerschaft* would still function, now with universal suffrage, as would the Senate. This was a marked reversal of the Council's initial intentions and can be viewed as a concession in its attempt at grappling with the difficult political realities of governing a country still in turmoil.

To explain this new constellation of political powers to the public and to the old institutions, Grosse proposed that Laufenberg hold a thundery speech before the first meeting of the *Bürgerschaft* in which he would directly explain their new capacities and how these related to the sovereignty of the Council.²⁷ The next day, Laufenberg and four other delegates from the Council met with five representatives of the Senate to explain the new power relations between the Council and the old institutions.²⁸ Six main issues were raised.²⁹ First, political sovereignty remained firmly in the hands of the Council. In order to achieve this, the Council was granted veto power over all decisions and the old institutions should only deal with non-political issues. Second, the Council was to appoint four delegates with full participation rights in the Senate. Third, one of the Council delegates in the Senate would act as third chairman, on equal footing with the first and second chair. Fourth, a new *Bürgerschaft* would be elected by popular vote based on universal suffrage as soon as possible. Fifth, the Council would participate in the financial commission of the Senate. The sixth and final issue related to a possible change in the names of the *Senat* and *Bürgerschaft* as they were so closely associated with the old political order. Various proposals were submitted (*Rat* or *Magistrat* for the senate, *Stadtverordnetenversammlung* for the *Bürgerschaft*), but none of them were agreed upon. The

main reason for this was the fear that foreign allies and investors would withdraw their capital from Hamburg if the main institutions were renamed. It was argued that the chaos that would result from a renaming could be catastrophic for the financial situation of Hamburg. Hence, in order to secure continuity and the state's capacity to deliver basic services, the traditional names of the old institutions were maintained.³⁰ Although an idea of a more direct democracy nested in factories and barracks animated radical council delegates, the practical demands of administration cut short any possible experiment with a "pure" council system.

Political parties and trade unions

Council communists are perhaps most well known for their vehement rejection of participation in political parties and trade-union activity. Their steadfast advocacy of the role of the masses over leaders and criticisms of the role of the Communist Party led Lenin to accuse them of "denying the necessity of the party and of party discipline" and of "completely disarming the proletariat in *the interests of the bourgeoisie*."³¹ This anti-party position is most clearly presented in Otto Rühle's 1920 pamphlet, *The Revolution is not a Party Affair*.³² Rühle was critical of the commanding role that leaders played in political parties and the depoliticising effect this had on the masses by decreasing their initiative and denying them effective agency. He also argued that the larger and more powerful a political party became, the more it would defend its power within the system at the expense of advocating for structural change and revolutionary activity. Rühle believed the separation between political parties and trade unions needed to be overcome by an organisation with a unified framework, which would be "neither a political party with parliamentary chatter and paid hacks, nor a trade union." He argued for a revolutionary organisation that was organised factory by factory such as the General Workers'

Union (AAU), which was formed after the German Revolution in opposition to the traditional trade unions.

However, this radical anti-party position was not initially shared by most council delegates, but instead slowly developed as a result of their disillusionment with traditional political parties following the Russian and German revolutions and the perceived betrayal of the working class by the Bolsheviks and the SPD. In 1918 at the height of the German council movements' power, although there was dissatisfaction with the SPD for their granting of war credits, and talk of the need for an "organisation of a new kind," there was only a limited anti-party discourse amongst council delegates. As late as 1920 in "World Revolution and Communist Tactics," Pannekoek still believed in the necessity of a well-disciplined revolutionary party in organising working-class consciousness.³³ Later, Pannekoek would grow more sceptical of traditional political parties and call for new organisations that would be "parties or groups based on opinions," which would act as "organs of the self-enlightenment of the working class."³⁴ Such educational groups would function mainly for propaganda purposes and would be organisations within which:

"persons with the same fundamental conceptions unite for the discussion of practical steps and seek clarification through discussions and propagandize their conclusions, such groups might be called parties, but they would be parties in an entirely different sense from those of today."³⁵

The idea that all political parties were bourgeois and that a revolutionary party was "a contradiction in terms," was a position that was developed later than 1918.³⁶

Let us examine how events unfolded on the ground in Hamburg in relation to this issue. The initial formation of councils by sailors at Kiel and the solidarity strikes and councils in Hamburg

were not organised through existing political parties. The emergence of soldiers' and workers' councils across Germany began as spontaneous actions that had their origins in strike committees and industrial councils rather than the traditional institutions of worker representation such as the SPD and trade unions. However, as soon as the councils arose political parties such as the SPD and USPD organised to take action within the councils and dominated initial meetings and discussions. In Hamburg, the USPD initially held an advantage over the SPD due to its closer ideological and organisational connections to the councils. Following the demonstration at the Heiligengeistfeld on 5 November 1918, the first provisional workers' and soldiers' council consisted only of members from the USPD. At a meeting of *Vertrauensmänner* organised by the SPD and trade unions, Hugo Haase proposed to ban party and trade union members from the councils, since "these people cannot represent the interests of the revolutionary proletariat."³⁷ His proposal was met with enormous resistance. During a meeting of the USPD on the same day, however, this proposal to exclude party and union representatives from the Council had more success: his proposal earned "warm applause."³⁸ When the leadership of the SPD and trade union cartel met on the morning of 7 November 1918, they were aware that they were about to miss the revolutionary boat, and it was decided that they must do everything in their power to regain their influence on the working masses.³⁹

Although the USPD initially attempted to organise in the councils without the SPD and trade unions, the organisational power of the SPD and their threat to sabotage the councils by organising their own delegate assemblies led the USPD to compromise.⁴⁰ On the evening of 8 November 1918, representatives of the SPD, USPD, trade unions and Left radicals gathered to discuss the composition of the Council. The radical parties demanded that the Council be the new sovereign body that would lead the revolution. While sceptical of the organisational form of the councils, the SPD and trade unions were willing to co-operate within the council structure

on the condition of *Gleichberechtigung* (equal rights). This led to the executive of the Workers' Council consisting of three delegates from both the SPD and USPD.⁴¹ Thus, while initial aspirations were for the councils to transcend party divisions, pragmatic concerns for unity and organisational power led to a balance of power between the parties within the councils. Council delegates were not opposed to parties per se. Although many of the radical delegates were critical of the direction of the SPD, they still belonged to a political party and saw a pivotal role for a mass workers' party in leading revolutionary activity. The idea of dissolving all parties within the councils was only appealing to those delegates who believed they could already exercise control over the direction of events.

The compromise between the two parties was very similar to the one reached in Berlin, where council delegates also tended to be elected by the parties rather than directly through factory organisations. Council delegates in Berlin voted for an interim cabinet of six members called the "Council of People's Deputies" [*Rat der Volksbeauftragten*], which consisted of three SPD members and the three USPD members. These two factions also disagreed over the proper role of the councils, leading to factional fighting and an increasingly difficult relationship between different council organs.⁴² On the day of the First National Congress of Workers' and Soldiers' Councils in Berlin, both the SPD and USPD pre-caucused to organise voting, leading party-membership to be the strongest determinant of how a delegate voted at the Congress.⁴³ This conflict reflected the deep underlying ideological disagreements about the role of the councils in a future German state held by the two parties.

Writing afterwards, council theorists who experienced events were critical of the role of political parties. Both Ernst Däumig and Karl Korsch argued that the infighting between the parties had a distorting effect on the development of working-class consciousness and

organisation within the councils.⁴⁴ Däumig claimed that “[i]n many cases, the members of the workers’ councils were simply appointed by the leadership of the two social democratic parties without even consulting the rank and file.”⁴⁵ This increased the top-down nature of the councils, which prevented the rank and file from exercising adequate control over deputies. Secondly, factional strife between parties within the councils created a “conflict between ‘party discipline’ and ‘proletarian duty’” whereby a delegate could be torn between remaining faithful to their party and voting in the interests of the working class.⁴⁶ Particularly in the case of delegates from the SPD, which did not have much faith in the councils, delegates could be prevented from acting as local representatives for their factories and workplaces.

Yet it is hard to imagine a political system without parties or how, without the oppressive apparatuses of a one-party state, they could be prevented from arising in a council system. The idea of a strict opposition between the “parties” on the one hand and the “councils” on the other ignores the extent to which organised political parties were able to exert their influence over the emergence of new political actors and institutions. It is impossible to demarcate between two separate “systems,” since most actors within the councils were also party members and the dynamics of party politics played out within the councils. The council movements emerged without the organisational initiative of the main political parties but it was soon dominated by party factions. The position of the later council communists developed through a growing scepticism of the role of political parties, but even at the extreme end, theorists could not completely detach themselves from the necessity of an organisation that would co-ordinate and lead revolutionary activity.

Membership and democratic inclusion

The (self-)determination of any political community is defined through relations of inclusion/exclusion. The formation of a community requires a moment of closure in which a frontier is drawn defining who has membership and is able to participate in government. This closure and the resulting boundaries of the community can be contested and change over time. The revolutionary moment in Germany provided an opportunity to radically alter the power relations between classes and to redefine a new democratic collective. The Empire under Bismarck had been a relatively conservative, hierarchical and closed society, which had resisted progressive pushes for reform from liberals and socialists. With the abdication of the Kaiser and the councils' assumption of power in November 1918, the council movements faced a theoretical dilemma of reconciling their desire for the rule of the working class with their aspiration for an inclusive political community in a post-capitalist society. While their political program was based on class struggle against a ruling elite, the final aim of socialism was the elimination of class-based oppression and the inclusion of all individuals as free and equal members of a self-determining society.

This tension was not always easily resolved and produced different accounts of socialist political organisation and objectives. For example, by council democracy, Pannekoek understood “workers power to the exclusion of the other classes” and was critical of discourses of abstract universality insofar as they would empower “the war profiteers, black market speculators, landowners, moneylenders, rentiers, all those who live off the labor of others without doing any work themselves.”⁴⁷ In a clash between the desire for democracy and workers' control over production, Pannekoek tended to come down on the side of the latter. While Luxemburg, in one formulation, argued that “Social Democracy has always contended

that it represents not only the class interests of the proletariat but also the progressive aspirations of the whole of contemporary society. It represents the interests of all who are oppressed by bourgeois domination.”⁴⁸ Although she was no less aware of the dangers of counter-revolution, Luxemburg felt the importance of achieving socialism through democracy and reaching out to other marginalised groups. These positions represent different attempts at negotiating the often-conflicting demands of the need to organise for power and protect the revolution against counter-revolutionary tendencies, while fulfilling underlying socialist goals of struggling for an egalitarian and inclusive society.

During the revolution, grappling with this theoretical problem entailed answering the practical question of who could be a member of the councils. This issue took on particular significance once councils assumed political power and membership of the councils involved the opportunity to actively participate in self-government. The debates within the Hamburg Workers’ and Soldiers’ Council provide the opportunity to analyse how council delegates faced challenges from three different partially excluded groups: women, peasants and the unemployed. Our analysis reveals that in the early days of the revolution, council delegates were relatively inattentive to how not only the bourgeoisie, but many of the lower classes were effectively excluded from participation in the councils. They confronted issues of democratic exclusion only when they were thrust upon them, and even then, often haphazardly and inadequately. These debates reveal many of the ideological limitations of the era and the failure to properly grapple with questions of internal power hierarchies and other forms of exclusion outside of the capital/labour relation.

Before addressing these three groups, there was one group over which there was little disagreement amongst socialists about the need to remove the bourgeoisie from positions of

structural power. The councils were recognised as class-specific institutions that were intended to counteract the bourgeoisie's economic and political power. As Müller addressed the National Congress:

“the people who produce must be in the councils, whether they are manual or intellectual workers—but not every parasite exploiting the labor of others! Comrades, be aware! We already have ‘landlords’ councils.’ What’s next? ‘Millionaires’ councils’? Such councils we don’t need.”⁴⁹

The council system would not allow members of the bourgeoisie forming their own centres of power in the form of councils because these would be aimed at oppressing workers and reinforcing class rule. As a result, Pannekoek considered that “the ruling class must be excluded from exercising any political influence whatsoever.”⁵⁰ If a member of the bourgeoisie wished to give up their private ownership of capital and participate in the new society alongside workers then he could “make his voice heard in the factory assemblies” and “have the same decision-making power as any other worker.”⁵¹ The exclusion of the bourgeoisie was not a permanent ban on all individuals, but rather on a particular formation of political power designed to expropriate surplus labour from workers.

The exclusion of marginalised groups in society was partly due to the organisation of councils in workplaces. The council movements sought to eliminate the distinction between the political and the economic, in other words, to remove the need for a separate political sphere by workers directly administering the production process for the benefit of the community. This would place processes of self-government directly in workplaces as primary sites of production and socialisation. However, with political membership organised through workplaces rather than artificial electoral boundaries, participation in a political community became dependent on and conditioned by the size and type of an individual's workplace. Pannekoek recognised that

“whoever does not work as a member of a production group is automatically barred from the possibility of being part of the decision-making.”⁵² Yet for those outside of the organised industrial labour in the cities (which was the majority of the population), this entailed a reduced capacity for participation in government.

The first example of exclusion is women who played a pivotal role in the organisation and maintenance of society during the war, working in the factories and providing the front and their families with resources. Moreover, these women had organised demonstrations and strikes (such as the one that had toppled the Tsar in Russia in 1917) and were at the centre of the political struggle for universal suffrage. In spite of all this, women were both severely underrepresented within the councils as delegates and also as a class who were more likely to have undertaken unpaid reproductive labour outside of a workplace environment and therefore excluded from participation in workplace-based councils.⁵³

In the Hamburg Grand Workers’ Council only three of the 600 members were women. In the smaller and more influential Hamburg Workers’ and Soldiers’ Council, this figure was reduced to just one, Erna Halbe. These figures reflected national trends, with only two female council delegates among the 489 who attended the National Congress.⁵⁴ There were also barely any women who acted as officials within the council movements when compared to the significant numbers within rank and file workers.⁵⁵ Efforts by advocates for women’s rights to redress this vast inequality were never taken seriously. At a preparatory meeting of the *Vertrauensmänner* (trustees) of the Hamburg workplaces on 9 November 1918, the membership and composition of the workers’ council was discussed. While it was agreed that there would be representation from different categories of labour (i.e. metal, wood, coal, etc.), a proposal from two members to elect women to the executive of the council was neither discussed nor put to a vote and soon

fell of the agenda.⁵⁶ On 19 November 1918, the issue was discussed once more because the council had received a letter from the Hamburg-Altona Organisation for Women's Rights concerning the establishment of a Women's Council to form part of the Hamburg Workers' and Soldiers' Council in order to defend women's interests. Their request was denied and as a consolation the women's organisation was allowed to elect a delegate to the socio-political commission of the council.⁵⁷ However, an invitation to this meeting never arrived and repeated efforts to rectify the matter fell on deaf ears.

It was clear that most council delegates believed that all workers, not simply factory workers should be allowed to form councils and be part of the federal council system. Ernst Däumig argued that "the council system is not only relevant for the manual worker but also for the intellectual worker" as it should "build the necessary bridges uniting all proletarians."⁵⁸ On the meeting of the Hamburg Workers' and Soldiers' Council that took place on 13 November 1918, the announcement that public servants (teachers, policemen, fire fighters, etc.) were establishing their own councils was greeted with enthusiasm as it provided an opportunity for bureaucratic personnel sympathetic to the revolution to play a greater role in the city's governance.

On the question of peasants, the council movements were generally more hesitant. On the one hand, the imperative of the "Zusammenarbeit von Stadt und Land," (co-operation between city and country) was an important ideal for council delegates, yet they also expressed concerns over the conservatism of rural organisations.⁵⁹ When the topic of food shortages arose, it was immediately suggested that the best public speakers be sent to the surrounding villages to secure the delivery of food from the farmers to Hamburg. These speakers were to convince the farmers to elect farmers' councils that would co-operate with the Workers' and Soldiers' Council in the

city.⁶⁰ Delegates considered that even the existing liberal farmers' clubs could play a role, although there were fears that the empowerment of these peasant organisations could result in counterrevolutionary activities. Ultimately, the immediate need to avoid food shortages overrode any ideological concerns and it was agreed that delegates would be sent.

A third example of the question of inclusion in the Hamburg Workers' and Soldiers' Council was the representation of the unemployed. Since council delegates were elected in the workplace, the unemployed had no direct influence on council politics. Nevertheless, in its function as governing body of the city, many decisions had to be taken with regard to questions of unemployment, rounds of discharges in industry (especially in relation to the military) and unemployment benefits. In the first weeks, there was no discussion within the councils about decisions concerning the unemployed being taken without their knowledge or input. It was only at the end of 1918 when a large number of unemployed workers gathered in front of the town hall and demolished a car of one of the delegates, that they were considered. Although these unemployed men and women did not demand membership of the council, eventually the council decided that representatives of the unemployed should be in permanent contact with the council through the establishment of a commission.⁶¹

As a sociological reality, the working class did not include all lower and oppressed classes in society. Radical labour leaders were generally sceptical of the capacity of peasants, petite bourgeoisie and other declassed individuals to exercise power in a manner that furthered the aims of the revolution. They had good reason to doubt whether certain other groups would follow their political program, but the exclusion of such groups raises serious questions about the councils' democratic credentials. There was also a theoretical lacuna concerning members of society who were connected to the working class but not engaged in paid productive labour

for various reasons. Certain council theorists adhered to a troubling connection between a conception of productive activity and political rights. Furthermore, while council delegates aimed to extend council forms of organisation to all productive workers, the reality was that only the major centres were included. In Berlin, for example, initial plans for the formation of workers councils were drawn up without any consideration for the huge industrial and working class neighbourhoods outside of Berlin's city limits.⁶² The three examples of exclusion we have examined reveal a common theme: questions of membership were discussed only in response to problems raised by marginalised groups themselves rather than as a result of the desire to clarify the proper *demos* of these new democratic institutions and to establish adequate democratic principles of inclusion. Yet the democratic character of the councils meant that marginalised groups could voice their concerns and demand inclusion, even if these demands were handled arbitrarily and imperfectly.

In conclusion, revolutionaries wished to depart from existing repertoires of politics, but struggled to create new ones. The collapse of the legitimacy and authority of the old order and the organisation of councils into a force capable of taking de facto power created the possibility of radical transformation. Yet attempts to create a new society were impeded both by ideological hesitation and the practical realities of attempting to govern in a divided society and with the collapse of basic administrative functions. Existing political parties certainly did not make the revolution, but they were quick to seize opportunities to advance their programs. The unfamiliar radical council ideas eventually gave way to a much more well-known program of social democratic reforms that the SPD managed to find support for among a broad variety of (also moderate and conservative) forces.

There were no clear blueprints for the political challenges faced by revolutionaries. The Russian Revolution, by and large, was seen as a cautionary tale. While some of the radical delegates believed that important lessons could be learnt from this experience, even Laufenberg sought to distance Germany from the Russian example. As a result, the actions of council delegates reflected a number of pragmatic compromises and the competing interpretations over the proper structure and role for the councils that existed amongst council delegates. Nevertheless, the experience of participating in workers' councils would inspire a generation of Left intellectuals and activists, some of whom would continue to theorise the experience of workers' councils as a third path between the bureaucracy of state socialism and the inequalities and exploitation of capitalist democracy.

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¹ Gilles Dauvé, *Eclipse and Re-Emergence of the Communist Movement* (London: PM Press, 2015) 95.

² Exceptions include Oskar Anweiler, *The Soviets: The Russian Workers, Peasants, and Soldiers Councils, 1905–1921* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974); Phillippe Bourinet, *The Dutch and German Communist Left (1900–1968): 'Neither Lenin Nor Trotsky Nor Stalin!' - 'All Workers Must Think for Themselves!'* (Leiden: Brill Publishers, 2016); Immanuel Ness and Dario Azzellini (eds.), *Ours to Master and to Own: Workers' Control from the Commune to the Present* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2011).

³ John Medearis, “Lost or Obscured? How V. I. Lenin, Joseph Schumpeter and Hannah Arendt Misunderstood the Council Movement,” *Polity* (2004) 36 (3), 447–476.

⁴ V. I. Lenin, “‘Left’ Communism: an Infantile Disorder,” available at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1920/lwc/>.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ We were able to benefit from the recent publication of the source book, “The Hamburger Workers’ and Soldiers’ Councils, 1918-1919”. Volker Stalman (ed.), *Der Hamburger Arbeiter- und Soldatenrat 1918/19* (Düsseldorf: Droste Verlag 2013).

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⁸ Stalman (ed.), *Der Hamburger Arbeiter- und Soldatenrat 1918/19*, 126–128.

⁹ From 1917-1922 the SPD was called the *Mehrheitssozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands* (MSPD) to distinguish it from the USPD. For simplicity, we use SPD in this chapter for this party throughout its history.

¹⁰ See for example Anton Pannekoek, *Workers' Councils* (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2003).

¹¹ Ernst Däumig, “The National Assembly Means the Councils’ Death,” in Gabriel Kuhn (ed.), *All Power to the Councils! A Documentary History of the German Revolution of 1918-1919* (London: PM Press, 2012) 48.

¹² Walter Tormin, *Zwischen Räterediktatur und Sozialer Demokratie: Die Geschichte der Rätebewegung in der deutschen Revolution 1918/19* (Düsseldorf: Droste Verlag, 1954) 89–90.

¹³ Ernst Däumig, “The Council Idea and Its Realization,” in Kuhn (ed.), *All Power to the Councils!*, 53.

¹⁴ Ibid., 57.

¹⁵ Karl Korsch, “Evolution of the Problem of the Political Workers Councils in Germany,” accessed at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/korsch/1921/councils.htm>.

¹⁶ Quoted in Korsch, “Evolution of the Problem of the Political Workers Councils in Germany”.

¹⁷ Stalman (ed.), *Der Hamburger Arbeiter- und Soldatenrat 1918/19*, 136–137.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid., 143–144.

²⁰ Ibid., 176–177.

²¹ Ibid., 180–182.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid., 182.

²⁴ Ibid., 187–189.

²⁵ Ibid., 183–186.

²⁶ Ibid., 189.

²⁷ Ibid., 199–207.

²⁸ Ibid., 215–222, 217.

²⁹ For the debates of these issues, see the minutes of the meetings in: Ibid., 199–237.

³⁰ Ibid., 208–214, 222–228, 223.

³¹ V. I. Lenin, “‘Left’ Communism: an Infantile Disorder”, italics in original.

³² Otto Rühle, *The Revolution is not a Party Affair*, available at

<https://www.marxists.org/archive/ruhle/1920/ruhle02.htm> .

³³ Pannekoek, “World Revolution and Communist Tactics,” available at

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³⁶ Pannekoek, “Party and Class”.

³⁷ Stalman (ed.), *Der Hamburger Arbeiter- und Soldatenrat 1918/19*, 44.

³⁸ Ibid., 126–128.

³⁹ Ibid., 144–146.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 148–149.

⁴¹ Ibid., 153–157.

⁴² Müller, “Democracy or Dictatorship,” in Kuhn (ed.), *All Power to the Councils!*, 59.

⁴³ Sabine Roß, *Biographisches Handbuch der Reichsrätekongresse 1918/1919* (Düsseldorf, Drosste Verlag, 2000) 166.

⁴⁴ Korsch, “Evolution of the Problem of the Political Workers Councils in Germany”.

⁴⁵ Däumig, “The Council Idea and its Realization,” in Kuhn (ed.), *All Power to the Councils!*, 55.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 55–56.

⁴⁷ Anton Pannekoek, “Social Democracy and Communism,” accessed at

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⁴⁸ Rosa Luxemburg, “Marxism or Leninism?” in *Reform or Revolution and Other Writings* (Mineola: Dover Publications, 2006) 94.

⁴⁹ Müller, “Democracy or Dictatorship,” in Kuhn (ed.), *All Power to the Councils*, 64.

⁵⁰ Pannekoek, “Social Democracy and Communism”.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ The role of gender in the German revolution is yet to be thoroughly studied. Although recent decades have seen some first steps in this direction, most notably Helga Grebing, *Frauen in der deutschen Revolution 1918/19* (Heidelberg: Stiftung Reichspräsident-Friedrich-Ebert-Gedenkstätte 1994); Kathleen Canning, “Gender and the Imaginary of Revolution,” in Klaus Weinbauer, Anthony McElligott and Kirsten Heinsohn (eds.), *Germany 1916-23: A Revolution in Context* (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag 2015) 103–126.

⁵⁴ Roß, *Biographisches Handbuch der Reichsrätekongresse 1918/1919*, 209–212.

⁵⁵ “The Unions and Women,” *Der kommunistische Gewerkschafter* (1921) 2; Helga Grebing, *Frauen in der deutschen Revolution 1918/1919* (Heidelberg: Stiftung Reichspräsident Friedrich Ebert Gedenkstätte, 1984).

⁵⁶ Stalman (ed.), *Der Hamburger Arbeiter- und Soldatenrat 1918/19*, 161–163.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 248–252.

⁵⁸ Däumig, “The Council Idea and its Realization,” in Kuhn (ed.), *All Power to the Councils!*, 58.

⁵⁹ Stalman (ed.), *Der Hamburger Arbeiter- und Soldatenrat 1918/19*, 190–194.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 183–186.

⁶¹ Idem., 431–438.

⁶² Hoffrogge, *Working-Class Politics in the German Revolution*, 76.