

## 2.2. From Anti-Parliamentarianism to the Utopia of Council Communism: The Soviet in Great Britain

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### **Abstract**

The term “utopia”, in this paper, refers to the project of a just society through the political path undertaken by the Council Communism movement. Ruth Levitas argues that, in the twentieth century, “utopia becomes a method, even a political one, for building programmes capable of redeeming all social classes” (2013: 22–25). The socialist utopia spread among intellectual circles thanks to historical events. The Soviet Union became the heir of utopian hopes of socialism. For several Western intellectuals of this period, the October Revolution represented humanity’s noblest hope. In this context, Marxist-inspired intellectuals advocated the emancipation of the people through revolution. Revolutions realized a transition from the myth of the “ideal city” to historical event. Within the Third International, a fierce debate arose on the role of the parliament, animated by militants such as Sylvia Pankhurst, Hermann Görter, Antoon Pannekoek, Otto Rühl, Amadeo Bordiga, and Antonio Gramsci. In 1921, they founded Council Communism, which came to reject the Leninist model of party and state centralization. The Workers’ Councils represented a new form of anti-parliamentary organization in which every citizen was to be a participant in political life. In the soviets, the workers would be prepared to face the real problems of society, and the political demands of the working class could be brought together to realize a “just society”.

**Key words:** Soviet, utopia, Council Communism, Anti-Parliamentarianism, Great Britain

Immediately after the October Revolution, the Consiliarist movement was born in Europe to redefine the workers' political project for the future. The Consiliarists advocated a form of authentic democracy realized, according to Miguel Abensour, through the struggle against the state and the affirmation of the Workers' Council as a new institutional body. Consiliarist political theory, which rails against Leninism and party power, aims at workers' redemption, and the factory councils become a viable alternative to post-revolutionary Soviet communism. With Lenin, capital is held and managed by the party-state and labour remains alienated and enslaved, with the result that the workers' movement does not develop a true class consciousness as Marx would have wanted. Because of this, the power of the party will take over the state, subordinating the proletariat and the entire people to itself, and depriving the revolution of its emancipatory outlet. Miguel Abensour observes that an idea of democracy, which is revealed through the struggle against the state emerges out of the Marxian text, *On the Hegelian Philosophy of Law* (1843). It is "the opening of an agonistic scene marked by an indefatigable and never completed struggle against inequalities and for emancipation" (Abensour, 2015: 119–24). This premise, surely known to an audience of specialists, is necessary to introduce an aspect of the history of Consiliarism that is less studied, but worth knowing.

In this paper, I analyse the history of British Consiliarism represented primarily by two groups within the Communist Party of Great Britain: the Worker Suffrage Federation (WSF) and the British Socialist Party (BSP). These sections initiated the Council or Left Communism movement, as an alternative to the political reality offered by post-revolutionary communism, to support an "international socialism" and direct democracy through the organization of factory councils. The goal of the Consiliarists was to redeem the workers through the elimination of Parliament, considered a bourgeois institution. This movement, mainly formed by pacifist and anti-militarist revolutionaries, already represents a "revolution", according to scholars such as Mark Shipway, because it was formed in the heart of world financial capitalism (Shipway, 1998: 35). As proof of how important the English Consiliarist movement was, Lenin wrote *"Left-Wing" Communism: An Infantile Disorder* in June 1920 to discredit the British Consiliarist policy in international public opinion.

A number of names stand out among the British Consiliarists who contributed most to proposing an anti-parliamentary alternative to the Leninist programme. For the BSP, they include George Peet (1883–1967), who was active in the Amalgamated Society of Engineers and at the Gorton Locomotive Works; Albert Samuel Inkpin (1884–1944), general secretary of the BSP from 1913 until 1917, first general secretary of the Communist Party of Great Britain and opponent of the First World War; and Joseph King (1860–1943), a pacifist and anti-militarist.

Notable for the WSF were Sylvia Pankhurst (Gabellone, 2015; 2018a: 51–67; 2018b: 58–67; 2018c: 111–28; 2019: 1–16); Leonard Augustine Motler (1888–1967), who also influenced Chinese Consiliarism; and C. Hagberg Wright (1862–1940), secretary and librarian of the London Library from 1893 until his death, and famous for translating the works of Tolstoy (Smele, 2006).

It is worth remembering that the echo of anti-parliamentarism resounded in Europe starting from the economic crisis after 1870, as a reaction to the defects of the parliamentary system. Precisely from this, Council Communism denounced the Leninist political strategy as responsible for the centralization of parliamentary powers, which had thrown the Russian people into despair and misery.

Council Communism considered parliament to be a reactionary and obsolete body, which should be abolished as quickly as possible. Therefore, at the meeting held in London in January 1920, the British Consiliarists planned a political strategy to eliminate Parliament. Their goal was to participate “ostensibly” in the election of the government, but only to cause its overthrow. An example was the candidacy of Sylvia Pankhurst in Sheffield, for the Hallam constituency. The leader of the WSF said, “We will be at the elections, but only to remind workers that capitalism must disappear” (Pankhurst Papers, Amsterdam). British Consiliarists believed that members of Parliament had failed to represent the people, and only advanced particular interests.

The British Consiliarist programme wanted to establish workers’ councils in all industries: for agricultural work, in the army, in the navy, and in every other productive sector. Elected delegates would be educated and could be replaced at any time. In the report of the above meeting we read, among other things, harsh criticism of Lenin’s Soviets:

On November 10, 1917, Lenin began to establish an unprecedented tyranny and started committees, called Soviets, in every district. Most of these committees quickly degenerated, and those that did not bow to the corruption of the party were closed, and their members “disappeared”. The educated man began to be regarded as a parasite and treated as such. What are the results of this policy today? Russia is starving and its people are always in terror. (Pankhurst Papers, Amsterdam)

As early as the beginning of 1918, the British Consiliarist movement published a statement in *The Manchester Guardian* in which Philips Proce publicly argued that the “parliamentary and local government system existing in this country today has been constructed to meet the needs of the capitalist system, and for the legislative and administrative suppression of the working class”. From the

WSF, Motler wrote in *Soviets for the British* that Parliament exists only to support a system based on inequality. If they were to assert full control of economic and social processes the people must establish their own soviets to directly manage factories, workshops, mines, ships, and control food and housing.

The WSF began to embrace anti-parliamentarism as early 1918. Later, in the aftermath of the British elections, a series of anti-parliamentarian articles began to be published in the WSF's newspaper, *The Workers' Dreadnought*, including "The Election", of 14 December 1918, and "Look to the Future", which appeared only two days later, both written by Sylvia Pankhurst. Among the articles of *The Workers' Dreadnought* one can read the report of a meeting entitled "The Socialist Workers' International", held in June 1924, between the European Consiliarists in Amsterdam. The result of this meeting marks the detachment of the Consiliarist movement from Lenin; and the English "comrades" were among the most convinced supporters of a detachment from Leninism. In this regard we read:

Dear comrades! We, socialists, prisoners of the Bolshevik government, turn to you, socialists and leaders of the world workers' movement to convey to the whole world the story of the unprecedented bloody tragedy that was carried out by the Bolshevik government and that would like to hide thousands of peasants from Tambov and sailors from Kroonstad to exterminate them physically in the Soviet concentration camp.  
(Pankhurst Papers, Amsterdam)

The document described in detail the concentration camps created in Russia for political prisoners who were deprived of any kind of communication and any form of freedom: "to begin with it was decided to deprive us of the freedom to walk in the courtyard of the prison" (Pankhurst Papers, Amsterdam).

During the meeting, the British Consiliarists announced the launch of an international inquiry to bring to light all that was happening in Leninist Russia. The inquiry intended to indict many Russian political leaders, followers of Lenin, for the dubious ways adopted in the Soviets. The British Consiliarists did not want to provide, during the meeting, any evidence of the inquiry initiated, but only a copy of the telegram sent to the Central Executive Committee of the Soviets of all Russia. They categorically accused the higher administration of the government responsible for management of the concentration camps and the behaviour of the state secret police (the GPU) of involvement in some puzzling events on 19 December 1919, which had befallen some opponents of Lenin. The international inquiry provided for the urgent appointment of a special commission with representatives from all over Europe — not only leaders of the

Bolshevik government, who would not have been impartial — to determine what had happened. In this regard, we read:

We wrote to Moscow demanding admission to the commission of representatives of the Amsterdam Trade Union Bureau and the Socialist Workers' International. We imposed these conditions; it was necessary to send our delegates to Moscow, even in rowboats, to testify before the Commission of Inquiry. Only such a Commission, composed of the representatives of the international proletariat, could ensure a minimum of guarantees that the truth would be revealed. (Pankhurst Papers, Amsterdam)

Moscow provided no response to this, as though the crimes had never been committed. The Amsterdam meeting concluded with the hope of unanimously raising a "cry" of indignation from workers all over the world to stop the Bolshevik dictatorship:

a new page has now opened in the history of Bolshevik terror against the socialists or Russia. The bloodshed at Solovitz has swept away the last barrier. Henceforth the shameful path of Russian Communism is marked. In the name of socialism, we protest before the world proletariat against the policy of bloody terror perpetrated on the socialists of Russia. And we know that our protest will find a fraternal response in the heart of every honest worker, of every socialist. (Pankhurst Papers, Amsterdam)

In 1919, Motler published *Anarchist Communism in Plain English*. He proposed an alternative anarchist-communist programme able to implement factory councils, and he distanced himself from the anarchist authors of attacks and riots. The political plan supported by the WSF (and, therefore, also by Motler) has always been pacifist and revolutionary at the same time. Motler states, "You can't learn to swim without getting wet. But because a Revolution MIGHT mean bloodshed, that is no reason why it *should* mean bloodshed" (Motler, 1919a: 3).

Many intellectuals of this period carried out a "revolutionary and pacifist" programme, despite the apparently contradictory nature of these two terms. The October Revolution provoked, in most cases, a revolutionary impulse that had the objective of defending life, and the councils represented a possible way to achieve that. Motler stated,

Anarchism means no rule. That is to say “Mind your own business”. And when the people start doing that, they have no use for tyrants, big and little, plain and coloured. Communism means working together for the good of all. Consequently, the people will be prepared to accept the ex-capitalists as fellow workers provided they do USEFUL work. (Motler, 1919a: 5)

The anarcho-communist programme was intended to induce the citizen to political and social responsibility, without necessarily resorting to the coercive activities of the government. Another element on which Motler dwelt was the controversial subject of the anarcho-communist programme. The author repeatedly argued that it is not only the working class that is the target of their renewal programme but all other social classes must be involved in this new political project. Motler stated: “Mind you, I don’t mean it is the working class only. We want to get rid of that pretty name. A shirker is a shirker whether he is a tramp or a Duke. When everybody gets to work then we’ll have more than enough for all. The principle is not to share and share alike, but help yourself to what is good for you” (Motler, 1919a: 8).

In the European context of the crisis of parliamentarism, Motler analysed the reorganization of the British Soviets on an anarcho-communist basis in *Soviets for the British*, and his words perfectly summarize the British Consiliarists’ movement:

the soviets do not, perhaps, give the best chance of all, but they are better than the present system. The soviets are not a perfect system. It is only a very good means to an end — and that end is complete freedom to live, love, and enjoy oneself. It must always be remembered that this system is just a plan of action that is being implemented right now. It is the duty of the soviets to keep the workers in touch with the People’s Commissars and to assist in the application of the laws passed, which recall those of nature. (Motler, 1919b: 11)

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