**The Sword and the Trowel:**

**Workers Councils and the Rule of the Poor**

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**Introduction**

Democratic theorists are now talking about the poor again. Plato and Aristotle once took the poor to be the obvious and central subject of democratic rule. Yet, as the centuries wore on, the poor were displaced in that role by ‘the citizen’ and poverty became a social ill to be solved rather than part of the logic of democracy itself (Kalyvas, 2019). Now, however, amid the yawning inequality of the second gilded age, there is an increasing body of work that is focused on the poor and their place as the democratic subject (See, for example, Breaugh, 2013; McCormick, 2011; Tambakaki, 2019; Vergara, 2020). Though this subject goes by many names—at times plebeians, at others the poor, and still yet the ‘part-of-no-part’—those who are deprived of power and property are being given renewed attention within democratic theory. One of the major divides in this nascent genre is whether the poor can actually rule in a sustained way. Some (McCormick, 2011; Vergara, 2020) argue for institutions that give the poor formal structure to allow them to fight the elites on equal footing. Others (Breaugh, 2013; Wolin, 1994) argue that the poor—and democracy itself—can only ever exist as momentary upsurge against an oligarchy that will inevitably reemerge. Neither of these standpoints are satisfying.

This paper seeks to answer the question of how the poor can truly rule in a sustained way. To do so, I turn to council democracy. Council democracy (otherwise known as workers’ councils or, in the Russian, soviets) represent one way that the poor have tried to rule. Council democracy comes into existence when workers take control of their places of work and rule them collectively. Each workplace then elects recallable delegates to nesting neighbourhood, municipal, regional, and national councils. Councils extend workplace democracy into democratic governance of the whole society. By looking at the history of the twin Russian Revolutions of 1905 and 1917, I argue that the unique features of workers’ councils make them particularly well-suited to institutionalize the rule of the poor. They do this by forging the poor into a political subject, abolishing the nexus between private wealth and political power, and by forcing a confrontation between oligarchy and threatening democracy. Writing about council democracy in the early twentieth century, Anton Pannekoek (2003) described part of what made this system unique. In a striking passage, he invokes the following metaphor:

Of the Jews in olden times building the walls of Jerusalem it is said that they fought sword in one, trowel in the other hand. Here, differently, sword and trowel are one. Establishing the organization of production is the strongest, nay, the only lasting weapon to destroy capitalism. Wherever the workers have fought their way into the shops and taken possession of the machines, they immediately start organizing work. … In their practical action they establish new right and new Law (p. 97).

Workers’ councils show that democracy is both a threat and a promise, a sword and trowel. It’s not only about building something new, but about the necessary destruction of unjustly and indefensibly monopolized power that must occur before the self-rule of the poor can come into being.

Relying on a combination of historical sources and first-hand accounts of the revolutionary Russian soviets, I demonstrate how council democracy enables the poor to rule in a sustained way and what is necessary for that rule to be established in the first place. The secondary historical literature I draw from is made up mostly, though by no means exclusively, of mid-twentieth century social historians who emphasized the role of average Russians in the revolutionary movements. Their perspective contrasts with earlier historians who tended to (over)emphasize the top-down nature of the Russian Revolutions due to a desire to locate the origins of Soviet state authoritarianism in the Revolution itself (Suny, 1983). The mid-twentieth century social historians also contrast with post-Soviet scholarship, which, in light of the demise of the Soviet Union and the seeming triumph of liberal capitalist values, is "more likely to see the revolution as the initiation of a cycle of violence that led inexorably to the horrors of Stalinism and Nazism rather than as a flawed attempt to create a better world” (Smith, 2015, p. 748). I turn to the social historians because I share their interest in ‘history from below’ and how the collective and democratic actions of the many contributed to the world-historic transformations that took place in Russia from 1905-1922. To understand the democratic possibility manifest in workers’ councils, I look to the historians most engaged with what happened on the shop floor and how workers themselves experienced the Revolutions.

For the poor to rule they first must exist as political subject. Workers’ councils play an important role in bringing that subject into existence, subjectifying the poor as such. People do not always identify on the basis of their exclusion from power. Workers’ councils foster popular identification on the basis of exclusion from power and property while simultaneously fueling their belief in their capacity for action, self-rule, and bringing about long-lasting change. They do so by creating exclusive venues for workers to wield democratic power and by highlighting their capacity to run their own workplaces, and, indeed, their common lives. Workers’ experience during the Russian Revolutions show that councils helped increase their political consciousness and their belief in their capacity for transformational change.

Council democracy further inaugurates the rule of the poor by abolishing the nexus between concentrated private wealth and political power. There is a growing literature in Political Science that identifies as oligarchy the undue influence that wealth has over ostensibly democratic institutions (Gilens, 2012; Soss & Jacobs, 2014; Winters, 2011; Winters & Page, 2009). At the same time, political theorists are reasserting the workplace as a political space and a site of rule or governance (Anderson, 2017; Dahl, 1985; Ferreras, 2017; Ferreras et al., 2022). Extreme unequal concentrations of wealth thus inhibit democracy by simultaneously giving some undue influence over formal democratic institutions and by creating what Elizabeth Anderson (2017) has described as ‘private government’ in the workplace.

Council democracy, predicated as it is on the seizure of workplaces by workers themselves, abolishes both of these ways that private wealth translates into political power. Most obviously, it does so by establishing democratic self-determination for workers in the place where we spend much of our lives. But, equally importantly, it also abolishes the nexus between private wealth and political power by dispersing the main form of concentrated wealth, private enterprises. The important connection between these two aspects is often overlooked, not only by liberal advocates of workplace democracy who fall short of calling for the complete transfer of enterprise ownership to workers (Anderson, 2017; Ferreras, 2017; Ferreras et al., 2022), but also by advocates of council democracy who detach councils from workplaces entirely (Vergara, 2020, p. 245) or portray the Occupy/Square Movements as the inheritors of the council democracy movement (Popp-Madsen, 2022, p. 193). By engaging with the history of the Russian Revolutions, I show that council democracy is well-suited to institutionalizing the rule of the poor precisely because, by claiming democratic control over workplaces, it strikes at the heart of oligarchic power. Indeed, the Russian workers’ control of the key sites of material power—railways, printing presses, and telegraph lines—that constituted their workplaces allowed them to fend off attempts by elites to reclaim their power. Thus, they simultaneously abolished ‘workplace autocracy’ while also weakening oligarchs’ grip on the state.

Building off these insights I argue that workers’ councils have an important lesson to teach political theorists about how to understand democracy. The emerging literature on oligarchy identifies real and serious problems with ostensibly democratic institutions in the West. Councils not only present a rival institution but force a confrontation with democracy as threat. As the Russian soviets show, councils overflow the bounds of existing institutions and set themselves up as a rival form of dual power. Consequently, in their very existence as exclusive organizations for the poor to wield democratic power, they challenge the legitimacy of oligarchy and the liberal institutions it dominates. The 1917 Revolution shows that once workers had institutions of their own, they quickly grew frustrated with liberal institutions that sought to preserve oligarchic power. As their respective interests diverged, workers came to see that their own democratic power was incompatible with oligarchy and eventually came to replace it with their own exclusive systems of governance.

This chapter proceeds as follows. The first section focuses on the poor as a political subject and argues that the workers’ councils of the Russian Revolution forged the subordinated masses into a political subject. They did this by politicizing workers as workers, setting up social clubs for political education, and demonstrating to the workers, through the fact of their own management, that they could rule society at large. The subsequent section shows how council democracy disrupted the nexus between private wealth and political power during the revolutions. By seizing control of their workplaces, the Russian workers were able to set up an effective dual power against the provisional government. I look at how, practically and ideologically, democracy in the factory became concomitant to democracy in the state for Russian workers, with particular attention paid to printworkers. The third section explores how council democracy forces a confrontation between the poor and the oligarchy. As workers use councils to assert their own interest it becomes impossible to ignore that their desire for democracy is incompatible with the elites’ desire to maintain power and wealth. It pushes the poor to seize power and abolish oligarchy. The final section explores the role of parties in relation to council democracy and argues, contra many contemporary council theorists, that parties have an important part to play in ensuring that council democracy can act decisively in the fight for power—even though the relationship between the party form and council democracy is characterized by dialectical tension.

Council democracy vindicates the fears, misgivings, and anxieties that canonical figures from Plato and Aristotle to James Madison and John Stuart Mill had about democracy. When it has existed, it came about by workers’ seizure of property, forged the poor into a collective subject, and set them up in antagonistic relationship with oligarchy. Council democracy thus changes the way political theory approaches democracy generally. Democracy comes not from quiet deliberation nor calm discussion in public fora. No, democracy is a threat. It emerges, as Plato (2007, §557a) teaches, from the dispossession of some in the name of the equality of all. It is meant to frighten those who presume to monopolize power, shoving them out of the way in order to inaugurate the rule of the poor.

**I Rule Therefore I Am: Councils and the Poor**

Canonical texts of political theory, prior to the Great French Revolution, generally spoke of democracy with a sentiment of anxiety or misgiving. Thinkers from Plato and Aristotle to James Madison and John Adams viewed democracy as a threat or a menace. They feared that democracy would usher in the rule of the poor and the abolition of unequal property relations. Though some, like Adams (1776; 1787), expected a straightforward relationship between the majority’s lack of property and their interest in redistribution, others, like Madison (1998) and John Stuart Mill (2008) understood that this relationship is more complex: deprivation of property and power is only one factor of many with which people may identify. Political Scientists like Jeffrey Winters (2017) and Sheldon Wolin (2010) argue that American political institutions were intentionally designed to prevent majorities forming and wielding power on the basis of their lack of power and property.

Consequently, the poor ought not be understood in demographic terms, but rather as a political subject, one that comes into existence through action when they throw their subordinate place in the ruling order into question. Drawing on the vocabulary of Rancière, Jodi Dean (2012) explains that

The part-of-no-part thus does not designate the objectivity of an empirical group excluded from the political domain. It’s not another way of referring to a politics of identity by locating a marginalized other. Nor is it a synonym for the proletariat. Rather, the part-of-no-part designates the *interruption* of a given order by those who have no part” (p. 80, emphasis in original).

In other words, the poor is not defined by their place in the relations of production or merely by deprivation, but instead by a belief that things can and should be otherwise and willingness to act in order to make that a reality. Even being keenly aware of subordination or deprivation is insufficient for political subjectivity. Indeed, empirical research in Political Science bears out this point: being reminded of one’s subordinate position in the social, political, and economic hierarchy tends to lead to despair and immobilization (Condon & Wichowsky, 2020). Something more than deprivation alone is necessary; they must also believe that the ruling order is unjust and that they have power to change it. Thus, the poor are much like Lisa Disch’s (2021) notion of a constituency: “not a demographic fact but a political achievement” (3).

The history of the twin Russian Revolutions shows precisely how workers’ councils help bring that political achievement about, as evidence by how, over the course of that fifteen-year period, as well as within each of the revolutions, workers’ consciousness gradually increased (Anweiler, 1975). Councils played a big part in that process. Workers in Russia did not have trade unions in 1905, as they had been banned by the czarist regime. Consequently, ad hoc factory committees would spring up when workers went on strike. The first instance of a soviet was in Ivonovo Voznesensk in 1905, where strikes spread from one factory to another, and the various factory committees sent elected delegates to a city-wide council. This first instance had limited political vision and focussed exclusively on immediate economic grievances due to “the undeveloped political consciousness of most workers” (Anweiler, 1975, p. 42). As time wore on and strikes spread from city to city, workers’ political consciousness developed.

Councils foster the poor as a political subject by politicizing the workplace and causing workers to see it as a site of their collective political struggle in the broader society. The 1905 and 1917 revolutions both used strike action to achieve their political aims beyond the shop floor. Soviets were the mechanism by which the multitude of factory committees coordinated their strikes. Because workers voted on and sent delegates from their factories, the factories instantly became a site of collective politics. Instead of geographic districts, the workplace became the basis of representation. Beyond merely sending a delegate, this form of representation changed how workers understood themselves. Taking part in the work of the factory committees helped workers gradually become aware that “that factories are not merely sites of production, but also of reproduction—the reproduction of a certain structure of social relations based on the division between those who give orders and those who take them, between those who direct and those who execute” (Smith, 1986, p. 261).

In other words, the struggle of the workers through their factory committees had the effect of amplifying the antagonism between workers and bosses, thereby politicizing Russian workers qua workers. It wasn’t on the basis of their national identity that they were able to elect delegates to the soviets but based on their status as a worker. This was particularly important in the multiethnic czarist Russian Empire of the early twentieth century, which lacked a strong proletarian identity because most workers were peasants who had recently moved to cities from the countryside and from other parts of the empire, like the Baltic (Smith, 1986, p. 36). Though these workers could have identified on the basis of these other identities (or on the basis of other axes of oppression), councils helped foster identification as workers—not (primarily) as Jews, Estonians, Muslims, Kazakhs, Ukrainians, or Russians. Unlike the liberal democratic state, which atomizes people as so many individual citizens, council democracy has the effect of fusing the poor together as such. In some cases, this was quite literal: by preventing owners from shuttering their factories during the revolutionary crisis, factory committees frustrated attempts to disperse the workers (Mandel, 2018, p. 293). In these ways, workers’ councils thus forged the poor into collective subject.

The example of the 1917 revolution also shows how factory committees enabled workers to intentionally develop their own political consciousness. One of their central demands in this period was the eight-hour day, and workers explicitly justified it by arguing that it would give them more time to organize, educate themselves, and raise their political consciousness (Smith, 1986, p. 66). That’s precisely what they did. In his first-hand account of the 1917 Revolution, Eduard Dune (1993) describes how the strikes and the shift to the eight-hour day gave workers the time they needed for additional political organizing. Workers at his factory set up a “Third International Workers’ Club” without initially even knowing what the Third International was. The club had a library, an orchestra, dancing, and poetry recitals, creating a rich politicized social life for the workers. Dune describes the impact this experience had on workers. Whereas drinking had been common among the workers before, “in the new club vodka, and even beer, were to be forbidden” and if you drank “people would start to talk about you, embarrassing you at general meetings, saying you were lacking class consciousness” (Dune, 1993, p. 39). And whereas “before the revolution it had seemed that most workers were interested only in their wages, that other issues were alien or of no interest to them. Now the club became a center for those … who sought to supplement their knowledge and to broaden their social outlook and activities” (Dune, 1993, p. 40). Using the trowel of a workers’ council, the men and women in Dune’s factory laid the foundation for political consciousness and self-assurance that is necessary for democratic transformation.

It is not enough, however, that workers’ councils highlight the poor’s position in the socio-political hierarchy—they must also throw that hierarchy into question. I argue that council democracy does just that: it shows the many that they can rule, that they are as equipped to do so as any elite, and, in doing so, calls the ruling order into question. Workers’ councils did not immediately start managing their factories. Though they controlled firing and hiring, imposed demands of management, and largely took charge over who and what entered or exited the worksite, they initially left financial and administrative managers largely in place (Mandel, 2018). In state-run industries, however, it was more common for factory committees to take over the actual management of the worksites, and this initial period of self-management in state industries gave rise to the idea that workers could manage themselves (Smith, 1986, p. 61). As workers came to see that they could run their places of work, they also came to realize that they could govern society at large. A passage from Dune (1993) bears this out, as he describes his coworkers discussing their increasing desire to overthrow the liberal Provisional Government and transfer all power to the soviets:

“We no longer had guards and police, we worked an eight-hour day at the old rates, yet we earned as much as under the old twelve-hour working day. We lacked the tsar and the police, yet order was better than before the revolution. There was no robbery or stealing, no drunkenness or accompanying hooliganism. If we could organize a revolutionary government in one factory, then why could we not create a similar order across the whole of Russia?” (49)

This demonstrates, I contend, how council democracy helps workers see that they do not need managers and are capable of ruling, both at the level of the workplace and the broader society.

Workers’ councils thus, I argue, dispel the illusion that government can only be run by elite experts and instead teach that “every cook can govern” (James, 2003). This is a revolutionary claim and a serious threat to the ruling order. Indeed, in his analysis of the Paris Commune, widely regarded as the first instance of council democracy, Marx (2014) observed that when the Communards

“took the management of the revolution into its own hands; when plain working men for the first time dared to infringe upon the governmental privilege of their ‘natural superiors,’ and, under circumstances of unexampled difficulty, performed their work modestly, conscientiously, and efficiently… the old world writhed in convulsions of rage” (pp. 90-91).

Council democracy has such an effect precisely because it demonstrates that self-rule is not a fantasy. This shows the masses that things could be otherwise, that self-rule is possible, and that they have the power to create lasting change. The experience of the Russian Revolutions bears this out.

Lawrence Goodwyn (1981) argues that for mass movements to make a successful break with the status quo they need to transform people’s conceptions of themselves. To achieve that, people need to develop the self-respect necessary to question their place in the prevailing hierarchy and to demand better (Goodwyn, 1981, p. xix). Key to achieving this are independent spaces for where regular people can begin to develop their own analysis of their problems as part of a group and begin to recruit people to the movement. Only then can the critical transformation of consciousness take place. I argue that Dune’s examples show how the experience of council democracy fostered this type of transformation among the workers in his factory, making them see themselves as a collective politicized subject.

**Rule at Work and Beyond: Abolishing the Nexus Between Power and Wealth**

A critical way that council democracy allows the poor to rule is that it abolishes the nexus between power and wealth. Political theorists concerned with the notion of democracy as the rule of the poor are attentive to how democracy must counteract concentrations of wealth that underpin oligarchy. Andreas Kalyvas (2019) argues that “the politics of the poor enacts a rupture with the order of oligarchic command; that is, with the political order of wealth, and breaks the dialectic of power and property” (p. 545). Inequitably concentrated private wealth leads to unjustifiable political power in two distinct ways: by allowing the wealthy to dominate ostensibly democratic government institutions (Birch, 2022; Gilens & Page, 2014; Vergara, 2020; Winters, 2011) and by giving bosses tremendous amounts of unjustifiable power over people’s working lives (Anderson, 2017; Dahl, 1985; Ferreras et al., 2022). The experience of the dual Russian Revolutions show how council democracy works to nullify these structures. It does this by making explicit the connection between private workplace governance and governance of the broader society. Furthermore, it helps the poor establish control over critical sites of material power that allow them to secure their rule.

Council democracy highlights the way that the two faces of the nexus between private wealth and political power are connected. The strikes that were the driving force of the dual Russian Revolutions made demands in both the economic and the political spheres. In 1905, the political demands included demands for a constitution and parliamentary institutions to limit the czar’s power (Anweiler, 1975; Trostky, 1973); in 1917, workers demanded the czar’s overthrow, an end to the First World War, and, eventually, soviet rule (Anweiler, 1975; Mandel, 2018). And it wasn’t just that workers put forward separate economic and political demands: they clearly understood that the two aspects were firmly intertwined. One example of this was the central demand for an eight-hour workday. Though “on the face of it an economic measure, workers considered [the eight-hour day] to be an integral part of the democratic revolution” (Mandel, 2018, p. 103). For the workers, democracy was deeply bound up with autonomy and having the freedom to live thriving lives. Workers in the Petrograd soviet spoke to the belief that absent improvements to quality of life, democratic gains at the level of the state would be inconsequential (Mandel, 2018, p. 102). Over time, workers’ experience in the councils helped them recognize that liberation in the political sphere would be incomplete without liberation in the economic sphere. They recognized the workplace as a site of governance, and their “conception of the democratic revolution also included an end to ‘factory autocracy’ or, as they sometimes expressed it, the ‘democratization of factory life’” (Mandel, 2018, p. 115). The workplace could be seen as a site of ‘autocracy’ because council democracy presented workers with an alternative. Democratic rule in the workplace in turn led workers to be more aggressive in their demands for democracy at the level of the state.

Council democracy strikes at the heart of the nexus between private wealth and political power because it enables workers to seize control of sites of concentrated material wealth—their workplaces. The Russian Revolutions show how much power can be seized by workers who are able to assert control over their worksites. Once workers’ councils were established at the factory level, workers did not even need management’s assent to implement the eight-hour day; such was the power of their factory committees (Mandel, 2018; Smith, 1986). Control over industries in Petrograd, Moscow, and beyond established the soviets as a dual power versus the liberal Provisional Government that had replaced the czar in February 1917. Dune (1993) reports that, practically speaking, “the power of [the Provisional Government and Moscow Duma] was only formal. To get anything done you had to go through the soviet” (p. 48). In particular, control over key sites of material power—the telegraphs, railways, the postal service—meant that the Provisional Government effectively ruled in name only. As early as March 1917, the Provisional Government’s Minister of War wrote that,

“The Provisional Government has no real power. Its orders are followed only if endorsed by the Soviet of Workers and Soldiers Deputies. The Soviet possesses the actual power, such as troops, railroads, and postal and telegraphic com­munications. Stated bluntly, the Provisional Government exists only by the Soviet permission. The military especially can issue only orders that do not openly contradict those from the Soviet” (quoted in Anweiler, 1975, p. 128)

Control over these key sites of material power and coordination among the network of local soviets made it possible for the workers to ward off the abortive Kornilov putsch in August 1917. Railway workers prevented the bulk of Kornilov’s troops from reaching Petersburg and tens of thousands of workers who were connected to the soviet mobilized for the armed defence of their Revolution (Miéville, 2017). Just as concentrated material wealth underpins oligarchic power, its seizure through council democracy lays the foundation for the rule of the poor.

The example of newspaper print workers and typesetters in the 1905 Revolution clearly demonstrates the power of council democracy to break the grip of wealth on power and use it for its own ends. Even today, privately-owned media remain a bulwark of oligarchic power. The past few decades have seen an “erosion of editorial independence” in the media, driven by “successive rounds of recapitalization” (Cagé, 2022, p. 80). This means that a significant share of global media is controlled by oligarchs—elites like Rupert Murdoch, Jeffrey Bezos, or Elon Musk—whose power and authority is both unaccountable and unjustifiable. The workers in 1905 were faced with an even worse situation: in addition to the press barons of their time, they also faced the czarist censorship regime. Typesetters were among the very first workers to launch the 1905 revolutionary strike wave. Print worker committees began to force the publication of banned literature and newspapers, refusing to print any newspapers that cooperated with censors—effectively forcing owners to ignore the censors and causing the collapse of the censorship regime (Trostky, 1973, pp. 156-161). Print workers further refused to print counterrevolutionary materials, such as the czar’s conciliatory manifesto or pamphlets and posters inciting pogroms. Instead, they made use of their presses to print the Petrograd soviet’s own newspaper, *Izvestia*, and other social-democratic literature. Though Trotsky (1973) admits that a certain level of armed coercion was needed for the workers to seize control of the presses to print *Izvestia*, he also argues that it “would not have been possible without the passive or active sympathy of the entire personnel” (171). Thus, we can see how, through enterprise-level committees in coordination with the Petrograd soviet workers were able to take over a site of oligarchic power and put it in service of the rule of the poor. Democracy at the level of the individual enterprise supported democracy at the level of the state.

The breaking up of press monopolies and the czarist censorship regime demonstrates how workers use councils to wield the sword against oligarchy. Yet, the press also represents an important example of how they wield the trowel, how workers’ councils and collective ownership of the press can enable a more democratic society. Lenin gives a blueprint for what this might look like in an editorial from September 1917. He argues forcefully that the rights of the bourgeois press owners rest “not [on] ‘freedom of the press’ but the exploiters’ sacrosanct ownership of the printing presses and stocks of newsprint” (Lenin, 1917a). That right is illegitimate and must be abrogated. Instead, he proposes that the Soviet seize all presses and share them out equitably, prioritizing the state first, then big parties, small parties, and lastly “any group of citizens which has a certain number of members or has collected a certain number of signatures” (Lenin, 1917a). In this way, council democracy, by seizing the material basis of oligarchic power, lays the foundation for a deeper democracy.

**Forcing the Issue: Council Democracy and Antagonism**

Extreme concentrations of wealth give oligarchs access to power and authority that is not subject to democratic constraint. Overthrowing that power requires a confrontation with elite oligarchs who will need to give up the material basis of their power before meaningful democracy is possible. Power is rarely given up without a fight. Indeed, Winters (2011) notes that while the concentrated wealth on which oligarchic power is based has been dispersed “many times in history as a consequence of war, conquest, or revolution”, such a feat “has never been successfully attempted as a democratic decision” (p. 285). I argue that council democracy awakens democratic theory to the possibility that this feat might be attempted as a democratic decision. In such cases, democracy is threatening because it is aware that this type of political power is a zero-sum game. If the poor are to gain power, it must come at the expense of those who currently wield it. By forming councils, the poor not only seize and disperse the source of oligarchic power, but also create a set of institutions that exclude oligarchs and force a confrontation with them. As the incompatibility between democracy and the oligarchs’ interest in maintaining their unjustifiable power becomes more evident—and as the insufficiency of existing ostensibly democratic institutions becomes more apparent—the poor become more willing to overthrow them and institute their own rule.

The experience of workers during the great revolution of 1917 is a testament to how council democracy forces a confrontation with oligarchy. When the czar was overthrown in February 1917 and workers councils were first established, the vast majority of enterprises were not immediately fully taken over by workers. The factory committees, at least initially, took a more supervisory role vis-à-vis the factory’s owners and managers, known as “workers’ control”. This situation became increasingly untenable as the interests of the two groups began to diverge and resulted in an “escalating struggle for power between the workers and management” (Mandel, 2018, p. 290). Owners began to try and close their factories and ship their machines to rural areas where they would not be threatened by revolutionary workers. Seeing this, workers began to demand control over their factories and the rights of management (Mandel, 2018, p. 184).

The example of the Vulkan factory in Petrograd shows how this process played out (Mandel, 2018, pp. 287-290). The owner initially tried to shutter the factory for the putative reason of falling productivity. The factory committee conducted an investigation into his claims and put into place new rules that increased productivity in the plant. Through these practical actions, the factory committee began to take on the functions of management: administering and controlling plant operations. Despite gains in productivity, the owner still tried to shut the factory down and began to cut the wages of factory committee members. In this way, “the struggle for production led inexorably to the struggle for political power” and the Vulkan workers began to call for worker management and state intervention to bring it about (Mandel, 2018, p. 290). Workers didn’t initially want full control over their factories and didn’t bring it about due to a blind drive for power. They were pushed into it by structure of the relationship between their factory committees and the factory owners. If factory committees were meant to end ‘workplace autocracy’, they could not coexist with factory owners and management whose interest they opposed and who wanted to use their power as owners to undermine the workers. Confrontation became inevitable.

The escalating conflicts at the factory level were mirrored by the same process at the level of the state. The existence of the dual power with which the soviets challenged the liberal Provisional Government heightened tensions between the two as their respective interests diverged. The political strike connects these two sites of power and has the result, as Trotsky (1973) notes, of “putting the opponents face to face” (119), making clear which side every actor is on. The Provisional Government was never in favour of many of the workers’ demands, and, like most social democratic parties at the time, opposed ending the deeply unpopular imperialist world war. Consequently, workers began to see that just as their factory committees could not coexist with management that sought to undermine them, so could their system of soviets not coexist with a Provisional Government that was looking for the first opportunity to disperse them. This is no exaggeration: the provisional government’s invitation to general Kornilov to impose martial law demonstrates that they were at times more supportive of a return to autocracy than leaving workers’ councils in power (Miéville, 2017). The nature of the councils as a site of dual power exposed the Provisional Government as dominated by oligarchs who did not have the same interest as the majority of the people. These experiences pushed workers like Dune (1993, pp. 56-57) toward action. He was growing tired of meetings and talk and came to recognize the truth of Lenin’s (1917b) assertion that “that there is *no* way out … *except* a dictatorship of the Kornilovites or a dictatorship of the proletariat”. The rule of the oligarchs cannot be made compatible with the rule of the poor. It would have to be one or the other.

Council democracy provoked a confrontation with oligarchy. Democracy would have to manifest as a threat if it were to prevail. It failed to do this in 1905. Then, the czar was able to deflate the poor’s revolutionary fervour by agreeing to a concessionary constitution. That constitution would later be revoked, but not before the czar had smashed the incipient soviet and sent its leaders to prison. According to Trotsky (1973), the forces of counterrevolution proved successful in 1905 because of “the fact that the revolutionary strike, having laid down the hammer, had not yet taken up the sword” (116). This would not be the case in 1917. Then, workers had learned to wield sword and trowel at once. As the conflict between workers and owners became more acute, the former knew they would have to prepare for conflict. In addition to the military units that themselves sent delegates to the soviet, individual factories set up their own detachments of red guards. These were meant to assert the workers’ control over their plants—and, indeed, often replaced guards hired by the factory owners—but they also had the political function of “protect[ing] the gains of the revolution” (Smith, 1986, p. 100). Dune himself was a member of the red guards. In October 1917, by then a Bolshevik partisan, Dune was ready to take up arms to defend the revolution. He describes his logic in a powerful passage:

“This was not 1905, but a real revolution. How could I be caught and hung when I had a rifle in my hands? They had hung revolutionaries then because they didn't have any weapons and had not been able to carry the people with them. Now the people were with us.” (Dune, 1993, p. 60)

Dune had clearly learned the same lesson as Trotsky from 1905: oligarchy will not give way to democracy without a fight. Democracy would need to take its threatening, coercive form to emerge victorious.

This analysis also gives a clue as to why Plato (2007) defined democracy in threatening terms, as that which “comes into being after the poor have conquered their opponents, slaughtering some and banishing some, while to the remainder they give an equal share of freedom and power” (§557a). Oligarchy and democracy are not compatible. For the latter to take hold, the oligarchs must be banished and the concentrated wealth that underpins their power dispersed. This will not come about through deliberation but by the poor using the power of their numbers to assert their sectional interest. True to Lenin’s (1905) words, councils are “fighting organization[s] for the achievement of definite aims”: the end of oligarchy and the inauguration of the rule of the poor. But while councils aim to end oligarchy, they do not claim to achieve a fully reconciled society. Society will still have competing interests and people will have to remain vigilant against the emergence of new forms of elites. Instead, in the vein of Miguel Abensour’s (2011) concept of insurgent democracy, council democracy “promote[s] the people’s political action” (XXVI) and “recognizes the people’s right to insurrection” (XXV).

**Spontaneity versus Party Planning**

I’ve made the case for why council democracy practiced in Russia during the revolutions of the early twentieth century provides a framework for how the rule of the poor can be institutionalized. By subjectifying the poor as such, by seizing and dispersing the concentrated wealth that underpins oligarchy, and by forcing a confrontation, workers councils lay foundation for the rule of the poor. These elements are perhaps necessary for the rule of the poor, but it is not clear if they are sufficient. Important questions remain. First, while councils help bring the poor into existence as a political subject, it isn’t clear how workers are to achieve the level of consciousness necessary to form councils in the first place—a sort of chicken and egg problem. Second, although councils provoke a confrontation with oligarchy it is less certain whether council democracy is equipped to win that confrontation. The historic record of council democracy—from the Paris Commune, to the abortive post-WWI German Revolution, and the Hungarian Revolution of 1956—is hardly a list of victories. Theories of workers’ councils need to account for how this mode of democracy might have staying power.

The relationship between partisan organizing and workers’ councils provides a window into these tensions in council democracy. Much of the contemporary literature on council democracy views councils as the product of the spontaneous action of the workers and treats the party form with suspicion (James et al., 1974; Popp-Madsen, 2022; Wollner, 2018). These theorists lionize this spontaneity, arguing that it is an essential part of what makes councils exemplary as a democratic form. Their skepticism toward parties, on the other hand, is largely a reaction to the role of the Bolshevik Party in crushing notable instances of council movements: the Kronstadt Rebellion of 1921 and the Hungarian Revolution. In particular, these thinkers are suspicious of Lenin, whom they accuse as favouring top-down action and of having an instrumental attitude to workers’ councils (seeing them merely as a vehicle for the Bolshevik seizure of power). Indeed, James Muldoon (2018) notes that “the dominant, although disputed, interpretation of historians sympathetic to the council movements is that Lenin adopted a cynical strategy of supporting the councils until the Bolshevik Party gained power, after which he moved to curtail their democratic agency and autonomy” (14). The result of this line of reasoning is, at times, to posit a binary opposition between democracy qua spontaneity and parties qua hierarchy. I take the opposite tack, arguing instead that Lenin’s thought can help clarify the history of the Russian Revolutions and the contradictory, yet important, ways that parties interact with council democracy.

Contrary to the views of theorists of council democracy, Lenin’s understanding of the relationship between party and masses is both nuanced and insightful and can help clarify how workers come to form councils in the first place. For him, the party plays the key role of forging the oppressed masses into a collective political subject capable of action. The party—through conversations, slogans, literature, and action—helps crystalize the masses’ spontaneous discontent and resistance into a coherent political analysis, programme, and strategy. In Marxist terms, the party plays a necessary role in transforming the masses from a class in itself to a class for itself. For Lenin, therefore, the party cannot be seen as fully distinct from the people or the class, as it gives form to the latter and allows it to have a sense of its unified interest and act toward that end. This is why, for him, the question of top-down or bottom-up, “of ‘from above’ or ‘from below’, ‘the dictatorship of leaders’ or ‘the dictatorship of masses’ cannot but appear as childish nonsense” (Lenin, 2018, p. 34). The task is instead “to connect leaders-class-masses into one single indissoluble whole” (Lenin, 2018, p. 35). In other words, the party and representation do not stand in the way of the masses and their self-government, but actually enable it by forging them into a political subject—the poor. That is the Leninist ideal.

Yet, the relation of the party form to mass popular democratic action is nonetheless one of tension. As Ernest Mandel (1983) notes, a revolution is no more likely to succeed on the basis of pure spontaneity—i.e., “without really trying” (p. 3)—than it is if it were engineered by a small cadre of professional revolutionaries. This is why Lenin (1988) argued that the spontaneous movement of the masses makes “the organization of the struggle [via the party] not less… [but] *more* *necessary”* (p. 173, emphasis in original). Though the contradictions inherent in the system will inevitably lead to spontaneous acts of resistance, these are unlikely to achieve a thoroughgoing transformation by themselves. The existing powers may be able to peel off segments of the movement by offering them concessions (as the czar did in 1905), or the movement might be unable to form a coherent strategy for seizing power. The spontaneous movement of the masses might be able to overthrow power, but it is unlikely to seize power and hold it—that requires organization and definite programme (Le Blanc, 2015, p. 249). It is the task of the party to provide the masses with the framework through which they can take power themselves. For Pannekoek (1978), it means permeating the masses with analysis, slogans, and programmes so that they come to “express their own aims in their most adequate form and thus achieve greater clarity of purpose” (p. 101). The task of the party is, however, not to provide “simple services to the working class movement” but, instead, “to fuse this spontaneous movement into one indestructible whole with the activity of the *revolutionary party*” (Lenin, 1899, p. 3). Ideally, the goal of the party is not to replace the spontaneous action of the people, but to give it direction and purpose. It is to make the struggles one and the same.

The limits of spontaneity can be seen in studies of pre-modern movements of the impoverished, such as *Primitive Rebels* by Eric Hobsbawn (1965) or *The Crowd in History* by George Rudé (2005). Both look at social movements—such as Robin Hood-esque social bandits, Millenarianism, and ‘the mob’—on the cusp of achieving the full class-consciousness needed to assert transformational demands. Though these movements directly challenged the authority of those possessing concentrated wealth and were explicitly hostile to the rich, they were still characterized by “political innocence” and never thought of “overthrowing the government or established order” (Rudé, 2005, p. 31). Lacking “a specific language in which to express their aspirations about the world” (Hobsbawm, 1965, p. 2), these movements might call for the removal of the king’s ministers (who they believe to be poisoning his mind) rather than the abolition of monarchy as such. Many of the early demonstrations in Russian in 1905 followed this pattern. Absent the party, these movements were unable to properly articulate an alternative vision of the world nor advance a compelling strategy for seizing and holding power.

The experiences of the Russian Revolutions, on the other hand, show how party planning can give coherence, determination, and follow-through to the spontaneous action of the masses. The first councils did not arise solely out of the workers’ spontaneous action but were engendered in part by Menshevik organizing and literature aimed at “revolutionary self-government” (Anweiler, 1975, p.45). The soviets themselves, from the country-wide soviet down to the local factory committees, elected partisan delegates. This meant that socialist party members often found themselves in the role of “intellectual leadership” in their factories (Anweiler, 1975, p. 53). This tracks with Dune’s (1993) experience. In his factory, Sapronov, a Bolshevik partisan, quickly emerged as a leader. Sapronov played a key role in organizing the factory committee and the club activities that helped politicize the workers. Indeed, over the course of Dune’s narrative there is a shift in the way he speaks of the Bolsheviks: instead of the third person “they” he begins to refer to them in the first person, as “we”. This trend—of workers coming to identify themselves with the party—follows the course of Lenin’s thought: rather than see a hard division between workers and ‘professional revolutionaries’, he advocated for ensuring that “as many workers as possible become fully class-conscious and professional revolutionaries” (Lenin, 1902, p. 3). Dune’s experience is thus exemplary of the ideal Leninist process. Yet, Dune was not an outlier: by October 1917, 7% of all Petersburg industrial workers were Bolsheviks and 61% of Bolshevik members were workers (Le Blanc, 2015, p. 228). This example brings Lenin’s ideal to life. From 1917 until 1923 (by which point, the Civil War had drawn many Bolshevik workers into the army or the state bureaucracy) the party was not external to the workers, but of them. Rather than tell them what to want or what to do, it gave shape to their collective subjectivity and helps realize their collective interest.

The party form also facilitates decisive, unified action which can be difficult for large and deeply participatory organizations like workers’ councils. When workers’ councils have been formed, their downfall was often linked to a lack of coordination and an inability to act decisively (Kets & Popp-Madsen, 2018, p. 172). I argue that the history of the Russian Revolutions suggest that the party form can fill this gap, though not without presenting problems of its own. Regarding the 1905 Revolution, Trotsky (1973) notes that “a general strike only creates the necessary preconditions [for seizing power]; it is quite inadequate for achieving the task itself” (p. 119). This perspective is surely one of the reasons why in October 1917 the Bolshevik party toppled the Provisional Government and seized power. Though they took power in the name of the soviets, they did so without making the decision there (Anweiler, 1975, p. 192). It is unlikely the Provisional Government would have been toppled absent the Bolshevik’s intervention. A key function of the Leninist party is to draw out a broader perspective from the multiplicity of spontaneous local struggles and to orient these individual struggles toward a unified aim. Though, Lenin (1899) argues, these local struggles can only be “amateur” in character if they are disconnected from the leadership and organization of the party, they nonetheless constitute “the *basis* of all Party activity” and their importance cannot be understated (p. 3). This dialectical tension between the need for spontaneity and organization played out in 1917. In the initial period after their seizure of power, the soviets remained deeply democratic institutions and Bolshevik repression was fairly limited (Le Blanc, 2017, p. 147). Other parties were, for a time, allowed to operate and to run for election to the soviets. Yet, as the country lurched towards civil war, the Bolsheviks began to sideline the soviets in favour of greater centralization. There is debate over how much of a choice this really was. Smith (1986), for example, argues the crisis made “the limited use of forms of compulsion … probably unavoidable” (p. 263). This is supported by Le Blanc (2017, pp. 147-148) who cites both eyewitnesses and secondary sources to argue that the repressive measures of War Communism represent a break with the period immediately after the October Revolution. Nonetheless, by separating proletarian power from the point of production this had the long-term effect of sapping the Soviet Union of its dynamism.

Research by social historians suggests of the Russian Revolutions demonstrates that the party form did play a critical role in heightening the workers’ political consciousness and organizing the concerted action that finally allowed them to seize power. Nonetheless, the subsequent history shows the importance of maintaining councils and rooting worker power at the place of production. The Bolshevik seizure of power was only possible because of how workers’ councils controlled these key sites of material power and because they had disrupted the nexus between political power and material wealth. The critical importance of the council democracy being rooted in sites of material power, therefore, cannot be understated.

To say that the legacy of the Bolshevik Party and the Soviet experiment is contested would be an understatement. The reaction to repression by the Bolsheviks in the USSR coloured Soviet historiography to such an extent that social historians had to make a conscious break from prior scholarship in the 1970s and 80s (Suny, 1983). This history led even communist stalwarts like C.L.R. James and Grace Lee Boggs to remark that they “have seen the Party for the prison that it is” (James et al., 1974, p. 86). Yet, these critiques leave out an important aspect of the story and elide the important period I’ve sought to highlight in which the party form complimented council democracy and led to its brief ascendancy. The party form thus offers something essential to council democracy even as the relationship between the two is filled with dialectical tension. The party is at once of the people and external to it; populist and elite; spontaneous and organized; participatory and representative. These tensions cannot be resolved one way or the other. Absent spontaneity, no revolution can occur; but absent organization no revolution can succeed. It is the task of the party to navigate these tensions as it faces the challenges of the hoped-for confrontation with oligarchy.

**Conclusions**

The history of the Russian Revolutions is one of hope and disappointment. Though it showed the world that it was possible for the poor to seize and hold power, the shades of the red terror and the authoritarian impulses of the Soviet state continue to haunt the left. There is a strong desire to generalize about this period, to discredit the Bolshevik party project as always already tyrannical and instead to put all hope in the spontaneity as the essence of democracy. The telling of this particular story and focussing on critique of the Bolsheviks has limited our imagination. It has diminished our very understanding of democracy and all it could entail. I have sought to tell a different story, one focussed on a moment where workers councils, in conjunction with a democratic Bolshevik Party, were able to bring about the rule of the poor. However brief this moment might have been, it vindicates the conception of democracy that seeks to abolish the oligarchic translation of wealth into political power. In so doing, it throws into sharp relief the inadequacy of the version of democracy that we’ve settled for today, suggesting instead that the poor could rule.

For the poor to rule they must first exist as a political subject, and the example of the Russian Revolutions shows how workers’ council bring this about: by heightening the workers’ awareness of their unjust subordination while simultaneously throwing the legitimacy of that subordination into question. The party plays a critical role in the initial push: channeling individual workers’ latent dissatisfaction into the collective project of self-rule through workers’ councils. It is their goal to ensure the struggle “is directed, not against individual employers, but against the *entire class* of capitalists and against the government that class supports” (Lenin, 1899). In Russia, once factory committees were established, they transformed the workplace into a site of politics and thereby heightened the workers’ sense of being part of a broader struggle. They did this both through intentional community, like Dune’s ‘Third International Workers’ Club’, and through their very structure, which attached the demands of individual factories to each other and the broader society via system of district, city-wide, and national soviets. Workers’ councils also undermined the legitimacy of elite rule by showing workers’ that they could manage their worksites and, indeed, the broader society. As the Russian example shows, as workers took on more managerial tasks in their factories, their confidence grew, and their subordination became more unjustifiable. In this way, I argue, council democracy forges the many, the subordinated, the excluded into a political subject with a discrete interest and the ability to act. Consequently, building lasting spaces, rooted in sites where people already congregate, in which they can come together to develop and act upon their political analysis should be a priority for contemporary mass movements.

The rule of the poor depends on the abolition of the nexus between political power and private wealth that is the essence of oligarchy. I argue that the example of the Russian Revolutions shows how council democracy dealt with both of the way that private wealth manifests as political power: as workplace autocracy and by allowing to dominate the public sphere. Claiming authority in their workplaces gave workers dignity and democratic oversight there, while also laying claim to key sites of material power. This allowed them to challenge the bourgeois Provisional Government and defeat the Kornilov putsch. The example of printworkers in particular shows how, in 1905, instituting democracy at the level of the individual enterprise allowed the broader Petrograd soviet to smash the czar’s censorship regime and disseminate their own newspapers and literature. Council democracy, I argue, draws our attention to how the two as aspects of the power-wealth nexus relate to one another and disrupts them by seizing the material basis on which they are built. This insight helps clarify why square movements and neighbourhood councils, to which some council democrats (respectively, Popp-Madsen, 2022; Vergara, 2020) turn as the 21st century expression of this tradition, are insufficient. Without being attached to and disrupting the material basis of the political power of the few, council democracy cannot hope to usher in the rule of the many.

By laying bare the antagonism between rulers and ruled, between those who have monopolized power and property and those who seek it, workers’ councils force a confrontation with democracy as threat. By creating institutions through which the poor can advance their sectional interest, council democracy makes clear the incompatibility between oligarchic power and the democratic rule of the poor. As an insurrectionary form of democracy, workers councils acknowledge the insufficiency of existing liberal democratic institutions and instead solicits democratic movements that exceed them. Council democracy highlights the way that democracy is the product of struggle and that coercive action whereby the majority assert their sectional interest is a key feature of democratic movements that seek to break up the entrenched power of oligarchy.

The party plays a critical role in ensuring that the council movement is able to emerge victorious from the confrontation. An essential aspect of this project is seeing the broader goal of this victory beyond the multiplicity of spontaneous local struggles that make up the mass movement. The leadership that the party provides relates dialectically to the spontaneous energy of the masses: at once complimentary and contradictory. In telling this story, this paper has sought to challenge two ways of thinking. The first equates workers’ council with spontaneity and argues that that is its strength, what makes the form uniquely democratic. I’ve argued instead that parties and councils function symbiotically, making each other democratic by allowing councils to achieve sustained rule and by resisting the tendency of parties to centralize. The second point that I’ve challenged is the idea that parties are always oligarchic and detached from those they’re meant to represent. While such a tendency is undeniable, it is not an iron law that sets up parties against democracy. The soviet moment opens up a different possibility, one in which a party can be true to Lenin’s ideals and bring about a deeper democracy and the rule of the poor.

During the rebirth of democracy in the early modern period, its critics—such as Henry Ireton and John Adams—worried that democracy would mean the end of private property. They strenuously argued against extending the voting franchise to the propertyless majority for that reason. But, as Dahl (1985) observes, the tension between democracy and property cuts both ways: “democracy may be seen as a danger to property; or property rights may be seen as a danger to democracy” (p. 68). Through institutional design and inertia, property has come to dominate democracy in the West. Council democracy presents a real threat to that domination and instead heralds, in the words of Lenin (1934), “a democracy for the poor, and not a democracy for the rich” (31). It is the sword that conquers old power and the trowel that builds up the rule of the poor.

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