



Between Form and Formlessness: Thinking Council Democracy with Cornelius Castoriadis, Hannah Arendt and Claude Lefort

PhD Dissertation 2018 · Benjamin Ask Popp-Madsen



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Hannah Arendt and Claude Lefort

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PhD Dissertation

Department of Political Science

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PART 1: INTRODUCTION

Chapter 1 Introduction

1.1 Introducing the Councils

The theme of this dissertation is the council system and democratic theory. In the chaotic aftermath of World War 1, many workers, soldiers and peasants organized in local councils in order to challenge social and political hierarchies, coordinate strikes and demonstrations, enhance self-management of economic production and introduce mechanisms of self-government and workers' representation. The emergence of the councils was most often spontaneous and without great preparation, and although the councils quickly became of interest to the established political parties of the working-class, they most often emerged without their interference. The councils demanded social reform, the termination of war, an eight-hour workday, democratization of the economy and a general transformation of dominating social structures.

The councils continually emerged all over Europe for almost a century. The self-governing neighbourhoods (*société populaire*) of the Paris Commune of 1871, the strike movement and self-managing factories (*soviets*) of revolutionary St. Petersburg in the failed Russian Revolution of 1905, the delegates from army regiments and factories (soldiers' and workers' *soviets*) of Petrograd and many other industrialized cities during the Russian Revolution(s) of 1917, the German workers' and sailors' councils (*die räte*) responsible for the German Revolution of 1918-1919, the factory councils of Turin, Milano and Genoa (*commissioni interne*), instrumental for bringing about the Italian *biennio rosso* from 1919-1920, and the Hungarian council movement of 1956, which was actively involved in the first Eastern European uprising against Russian oppression, are all examples of nascent council systems.

These historical experiences have been pivotal for a number of political thinkers, who have developed various theories of council democracy. The classic picture of such council democracy developed by political thinkers often involved a federation of councils from the local level over city and regional level to a nation-wide level. The councils would have both economic and political tasks, legislative and executive functions, and the delegates from each level of the federation of councils would be under imperative mandate and subject to instant recall. Such council democracy was often conceptualized by left-wing political thinkers as a higher form of democracy compared to liberal democracy and parliamentarianism because it involved actual popular self-government, politicization of the economy and a de-hierarchization of oppressive relations of power. As such, during the last 100 years, the council system has been a focal point for a heterodox group of left-wing critics of liberal democracy, parliamentarianism, representation, state communism and bureaucratic rule, and it has repeatedly been interpreted as the democratic kernel of socialism. Towering figures on the left such as Peter Kropotkin, Mikael

Bakunin and Karl Marx as well as revolutionary leaders such as Vladimir Lenin and Leon Trotsky all admired the councils. Interwar council communists such as Anton Pannekoek, Herman Gorter and Otto Rühle also agitated for the council system. Other important early 20th century political thinkers such as Rosa Luxemburg, Georg Lukács and Antonio Gramsci were politically involved in the workers' councils. Central figures associated with the first generation of the Frankfurt School, Max Horkheimer and Herbert Marcuse, argued that both the starting point as well as the end point of revolution would be the establishment of a republic of councils. After World War II, a new generation of political thinkers also admired the councils. Cornelius Castoriadis and Claude Lefort, both founding members of the French radical group *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, envisioned the council system as an antidote to totalitarianism and the harbinger of novel forms of democracy. Outside the traditional left, Hannah Arendt gave a republican paenegyric of the councils as the lost treasure of the revolutionary tradition. Finally, in the wake of the protests known as 'May 1968', figures such as Guy Debord, the group *Situationists International* and the main spokesperson of the German student movement, Rudy Dutschke, described the events of the tumultuous year in the language of the council tradition. In total, the councils have served as a persistent stimulus to a remarkable tradition of intellectual creativity and political radicalism.

In this dissertation, I approach the council system from the perspective of political theory, as such scholarship has neither thoroughly analyzed the historical councils nor elaborated theoretically on the idea of council democracy to a satisfactory degree¹. Hence, in the dissertation I analyze the historical councils and reconstruct the history of the political theory of council democracy. Most importantly, I engage in depth with the political theory of Cornelius Castoriadis, Hannah Arendt and Claude Lefort and their understandings of council democracy to finally develop my own contribution to a theory of the councils.

I have chosen to engage in particularity with Castoriadis, Arendt and Lefort because they are the most influential political thinkers in the second half of the 20th century to analyze the councils. To an even greater degree than other political thinkers, Castoriadis, Arendt and Lefort analyze the councils through the perspective of democracy, and they are especially interested in the councils in relation to the possibilities of democratic renewal after totalitarianism. Castoriadis, Arendt and Lefort followed similar intellectual developments, as all three thinkers began with

1 See section 1.3.1 in this introduction for a short literature review of existing research on the councils.

the ambition of criticising totalitarianism². Up until the middle of the 1950s, Castoriadis, Arendt and Lefort display no positive evaluations of modern society and little hope of a democratic remedy to totalitarian domination. This may come as a surprise, as the three thinkers are generally known for their appraisals of *the political* as such and for the attempts to restore the importance of popular politics³. The fundamental moment of political change for Castoriadis, Arendt and Lefort came with Hungarian Revolution of 1956 and the emergence of revolutionary councils. It was this experience with the councils that made it possible for Castoriadis, Arendt and Lefort to develop new concepts of politics and democracy.

According to democratic theorist John Dryzek, council democracy is a “dead duck”⁴ and in the evaluation of intellectual historian Martin Jay, the councils “died a long time ago; now they are likely to die in theory as well”⁵. As it may be clear, I disagree. The ambitions of developing novel concepts of politics and democracy on behalf of the historical experiences with the councils that are shared by Castoriadis, Arendt and Lefort, also provide me with the reasons for reviving this specific political tradition at this specific moment in time. I argue that we need alternative ways of speaking about politics and popular participation; we need new ways of imagining the relationship between the economy and politics and between state and society, and we need novel modes of understanding and institutionalizing the democratic idea of popular self-government. In the face of rising dissatisfaction and disinterest with the institutions of liberal democracy, growing global economic inequality and exploitation, increasing right-wing extremism and rising populism, I find it necessary to search history for past political experimentation, past institutional solutions and forgotten struggles. The council system cannot, of course, function as an institutional blue-print for today’s problems, but it can re-orient political thinking towards answers that do not involve increased technocracy, the politics of necessity or supranational bureaucratism as the primary responses to today’s political challenges. The council system can remind us of the importance of what Étienne Balibar has called “active citizenship ...

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- 2 Cornelius Castoriadis, 1988, ‘On the Regime and Against the Defense of the USSR’, in *Political and Social Writings, vol. 1, (PSW 1)*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 37-43; Hannah Arendt, 1968, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*; Claude Lefort, 1986, ‘Totalitarianism Without Stalin’, in *The Political Forms of Modern Society: Bureaucracy, Democracy and Totalitarianism*, Cambridge: The MIT Press, 52-88.
 - 3 Arendt’s relationship to democracy is a contested issue in the secondary literature; for a brief discussion, see Andreas Kalyvas, 2008, *Democracy and the Extraordinary*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 264-267.
 - 4 John Dryzek, 2004, ‘Democratic Political Theory’, in Gerald F. Gaus et al. (eds.): *Handbook of Political Theory*, London: Sage, 143.
 - 5 Martin Jay, 1990, ‘No Power to the Soviets’, *Salmagundi*, no. 88/89, 69.

without which there exists no polity (*cité*) but only a state form cut off from society”⁶. In a rather enigmatic phrase, Karl Marx once argued that “democracy is the solution to the *riddle* of every constitution”⁷. What Balibar and Marx allude to is that every political system – if it is to remain vibrant and responsive to political challenges and new forms of domination as well as continue to be an expression of the will of the people – needs to incorporate the active participation of its citizens. Without such an active component of popular participation, the political system will be reduced to a lifeless form. I regard the historical councils and their theoretical interpretations as such an attempt to revitalize the hierarchical political systems and societies, in which they emerged, and from which we can draw inspiration that we can discuss, learn from and disagree with.

1.2 Constituent Power and The Storming of the Winter Palace

The council system could be discussed in a variety of different ways. Theoretically, I have chosen a perspective on the council system that follows from the interpretations of Castoriadis, Arendt and Lefort and their discussions of the councils. This perspective is that of the *constituent power*. According to Castoriadis, Arendt and Lefort, the council system could be understood as a way to institutionalize and formalize the constituent power, which is a power normally understood as non-institutionalizable and inherently formless. But before I go too deep into their arguments, let me first explain the concept of the constituent power and its paradoxical nature.

The constituent power is the generative and productive power to constitute the constitutional rules and political forms of the polity. It is the power to abolish and alter the existing constitution or create a new one. The constituent power is closely linked to the advent of the concept of ‘the people’ in modern political thought. As ‘the people’ has replaced the ‘divine right of monarchs’ or the ‘natural order’ as the legitimizing force of the polity, the constituent power denotes the self-instituting power of the people to decide on its own modes of collective existence⁸. As such, the power to constitute and the sovereignty of ‘the people’ are conceptually and

6 Étienne Balibar, 2004, *We, the People of Europe? Reflections on Transnational Citizenship*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 48.

7 Karl Marx, 1992, ‘Critique of Hegel’s Doctrine of the State’, *Early Writings*, London: Penguin Classics, 87.

8 For an introduction to the constituent power, see Martin Loughlin and Neil Walker (eds.), 2007, *The Paradox of Constitutionalism: Constituent Power and Constitutional Form*, Oxford: Oxford University Press; Andreas Kalyvas, 2005, ‘Popular Sovereignty, Democracy, and the Constituent Power’, *Constellations*, vol. 12 (2), 223-244.

historically coeval⁹. Moreover, the constituent power is the superior power of the commonwealth, as the constitution, the legal system and all positive laws are derived from it as well as subject to the constituent will of the people.

But as a superior power, the constituent power is fundamentally paradoxical¹⁰. The first paradox lies in its relation to and exhaustion in constituted powers. Although the constituent power is the origin of the constitution and instituted legality, the constituent power only emerges in extraordinary moments of revolution, insurgency and mass upheaval. It is hence an episodic and momentary power, which cannot function in ordinary, normal politics. According to this conception, the constituent power is vested in an extraordinary organ such as a constitutional assembly that grants authority to the new regime, whereafter it is replaced by public officials, political institutions and elected representatives, who take care of the business of politics on behalf of the people. Martin Loughlin and Neil Walker have called this the “juridical containment thesis”, whereby “constituent power is exhausted and absorbed within the settled constitutional form”¹¹. Hence, the difference between constituent politics and constituted politics is thought to be absolute and clear-cut, and the survival or faintest trace of the constituent power in constituted politics is perceived as a danger to the stability and order of the polity.

This leads to the second paradox of the constituent power, namely its arbitrariness, normlessness and circularity. Even though the constituent power is the origin of all political forms, it is itself thought to be formless, normless and arbitrary. As Loughlin has aptly argued, the constituent power is a “juristic expression” of something that is not itself juridical; a formal expression of something that cannot be formalized, as this form of power is above and beyond positive law¹² – as such constituent power is “not easily reconcilable to law”¹³. A simple question asked

9 Two of the primary interpreters of the concept of the constituent power, Antonio Negri and Andreas Kalyvas, have both argued this point. According to Negri, “to speak of constituent power is to speak of democracy”, 1999, *Insurgencies: Constituent Power and the Modern State*. In the phrasing of Kalyvas, “constituent power is the truth of modern democracy”, 2013, ‘Constituent Power’, *Political Concepts: A Critical Lexicon*, vol. 3 (1), online publication, no page numbers. According to others, constituent power analytically denotes the power to create the constitution of the polity and can be held by both monarchs, aristocratic bodies and popular organs depending on the historical situation. See for example Carl Schmitt, 2008, *Constitutional Theory*, Durham: Duke University Press, 126-130.

10 As for example Filippo Del Lucchese has argued, “modern theories of constituent power generally agree on its paradoxical essence: a power that comes before the law and founds the law is at the same time a power that, once the juridical sphere is established, has to be obliterated by the law”, 2016, ‘Spinoza and Constituent Power’, *Contemporary Political Theory*, vol. 15 (2), 182.

11 Loughlin and Walker, 2007, ‘Introduction’, in Loughlin and Walker (eds.): *The Paradox of Constitutionalism: Constituent Power and Constitutional Form*, 6.

12 Martin Loughlin, 2003, *The Idea of Public Law*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 100.

13 Loughlin, 2003, *The Idea of Public Law*, 100.