



Ancient Athenian Democracy, Workers' Councils, and Leftist Criticism of Stalinist Russia

Vittorio Saldutti*

INTRODUCTION: MARXISM AND ANCIENT DEMOCRACY

“The political form at last discovered under which to work out the economic emancipation of labor.” With these words, Karl Marx, addressing the General Council of the International precisely 150 years ago, described the revolutionary experiment of the Paris Commune.¹ The German philosopher had always been very cautious in defining the political form of the new society that would come into being following the seizure of power by the working class.² Even though in the years following the establishment of Bonaparte’s government he continued to have hopes about the political potential of universal suffrage for the proletariat, in general, he had been silent about the future political organization of a socialist society and increasingly suspicious of any

* Università degli Studi di Napoli “Federico II,” Corso Umberto I 40, 80138 Napoli, vittorio.saldutti@unina.it.

1 Marx, “Civil War in France,” 142. This phrase was added in the third draft of the text, with many other observations on the political nature of the Commune lacking in the first two drafts.

2 His main task after his break with the Hegelian tradition had been the analysis of how to obtain the “economic emancipation of labor,” but “the features of this future order were [...] never outlined,” as Nippel says in *Ancient and Modern Democracy*, 288. Hudis, in “Marx’s Concept of Socialism,” describes the general solely economic predictions as “intimations of the future” and sketches a brief history of their evolution through Marx’s works.

election as a potentially revolutionary tool.³ The French proletarian revolt filled that gap. In Marx's eyes, there was a novelty in the organization of the Paris Commune of 1871 and how the communards took decisions amid their resistance against the German army. Marx underlined that the revolutionary government "was formed of the municipal councillors, chosen by universal suffrage in the various wards of the town, responsible and revocable at short term [...] a working, not a parliamentary body, executive and legislative at the same time." He then went on to say that the Paris Commune "supplied the republic with the basis of *really* democratic institutions."⁴ The revolution of 1871 thus demonstrated that representative democracy was not a real democracy.

The impression left by the French events was so deep that it led Marx and Engels to make their only revision to the *Communist Manifesto*. In the preface to the German edition published in 1872, they wrote, "One thing especially was proved by the Commune, viz., that 'the working class cannot simply lay hold of the ready-made state machinery, and wield it for its own purposes.'"⁵ This belief – which, as we shall see, was fundamental in the later struggle between Bolsheviks and social democrats – was, moreover, the starting point for further studies on the meaning and nature of democracy, ancient and modern, which engaged Marx and Engels in their late years.

A much-debated question is whether Marx's reflections regarding the meaning of democracy influenced his opinion about ancient democratic Athens. Indeed, he did not share a classicist notion that saw ancient Greece and Rome as a golden age and model for a future society, and that is also true for Athens. Even if he recognized the outstanding achievements of Hellenic culture and civilization, a social order economically based on slavery was hardly suitable as a model for an exemplary society.⁶ However, it

3 Doveton, in "Marx and Engels," 555–591, analyses the development of Marx's ideas regarding democracy from the warm support of his early works to a more skeptical later vision of any kind of electoral and representative governing system.

4 Marx, "Civil War in France," 139–142 (my emphasis).

5 Marx and Engels, "Preface to the German Edition," 175. The German original runs as follows: "Namentlich hat die Kommune den Beweis geliefert, daß, die Arbeiterklasse nicht die fertige Staatsmaschine einfach in Besitz nehmen und sie für ihre eigenen Zwecke in Bewegung setzen kann."

6 According to Marx, in "Economic Manuscripts," 47–48, Greek art shows that ancient times were "the childhood of humanity" in "the most beautiful form." Nevertheless, he recognized the "immature social conditions" and the "imma-

is also evident that his judgment was not limited to this general statement. In his last years, Marx deepened his analysis of ancient societies. After reading the works of Lewis Henry Morgan, he was confirmed in his idea that ancient societies were initially egalitarian and that the State was coincident with society.⁷ In this framework, Athenian democracy was a peculiar form of communitarian resistance, implemented by the demos, against the development of social classes. This interpretation of ancient societies emerges clearly from a reading of Marx's *Ethnological Notebooks*, written in 1880–81. Here the philosopher traces the evolution of Greece, and Athens in particular, from its primitive gentile institutions to the political State. The economic evolution of Athenian society enabled the transition from a pristine society, organized according to the gentile origin of everyone, to a political society, where “all registered citizens [were] free and equal.”⁸ Cleisthenes' reforms were a crucial moment in that progress, marking the point at which “the relations to gens or phratry ceased to govern the duties of an Athenian as a citizen. The coalescence of the people into bodies politic in territorial areas [was] now complete.”⁹ Only after the Roman period did “the element of property, which [had] controlled society to a great extent during the comparatively short period of civilization, give mankind despotism, imperialism, monarchy, privileged classes, and finally *representative democracy*.”¹⁰

In Marx's line of reasoning, slavery was in the background. Engels brought it to the fore in the *Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, a work inspired by the same readings as his friend. Concluding a chapter on “The Emergence of the Athenian State,” he writes, “the class antagonism on which the social and political institutions rested was no longer between the nobles and the common people, but between slaves and freemen, wards and citizens.”¹¹ Engels exonerates the Athenian democratic system from the allegation that it had caused

ture stage of the society in which it originated.” The concept was brilliantly summarized by Engels in “Anti-Dühring,” 168: “Without slavery, no Greek state, no Greek art, and science; without slavery, no Roman Empire.”

7 This idea was first developed by Marx in *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law*, 31, where he writes, “in the states of antiquity, the political state makes up the content of the state to the exclusion of the other spheres.”

8 Krader, *Ethnological Notebooks*, 214.

9 *Ibid.*, 215.

10 *Ibid.*, 233 (my emphasis).

11 Engels, “Origin of the Family,” 222.

the fall of the polis,¹² distinguishing economic and political structures; however, the emphasis on the first element made it prevalent among the first generation of Marxist scholars, who were unable to read Marx's *Notebooks*, since these were only published almost a century later.¹³ In any case, neither Marx nor Engels explicitly stated that ancient Athenian democracy could be a model for the future proletarian real democracy.¹⁴

During World War I, the split inside the social democratic parties was fought in the field of theory and politics. The red line dividing the two political factions was the democracy they were fighting for. Right-wing and centrist social democratic theorists such as Eduard Bernstein and Karl Kautsky thought that the only possible democracy was the parliamentary and representative form that existed at that time. The main task, in their view, was to acquire universal suffrage and win general elections to lead the society from capitalism into socialism. On the other hand, Leftist leaders defended Marx's ideas about breaking up the old state machinery and establishing a new democratic order.¹⁵ In *The State and Revolution*, Lenin, defending the Dutch revolutionary Anton Pannekoek against the criticism of Kautsky, returned to the problem of the early examples of an actual democratic regime. Writing on the eve of the October Revolution, he prophesized: "Under socialism much of 'primitive' democracy will inevitably be revived, since, for the first time in the history of civilized society the mass of population will rise to taking an indepen-

12 Engels, "Origin of the Family," 222: "It was not democracy that caused the downfall of Athens, as the European schoolmasters who fawn upon royalty would have us believe, but slavery, which brought the labour of free citizens into contempt."

13 The impact exerted by Engels' "Origin" on early Marxist studies of the ancient world is well testified by its reception among scholars such as Franz Mehring and Karl Kautsky. Mehring cited Engels as an undisputed authority in his pamphlet "Über den historischen Materialismus," 289–343, and Kautsky used the study in his description of class struggle in antiquity in many of his historical works. Cf. Kloft, "Karl Kautsky," 311–331.

14 I must emphasize the adverb "explicitly," since many scholars have argued that ancient Athens was an implicit model for Marx and Engels' idea of democracy. Among classicists, Marcaccini, in *Atene Sovietica*, 49, and briefly in "What Has Marxism," 353, has elaborated on this conclusion; while among experts on Marxist thought, Hunt, in *Political Ideas*, 82 (taken up by Femia, *Marxism and Democracy*, 75–76), and McCarthy, in "Praise of Classical Democracy," the latter in the context of Marx's so-called "humanism," suggest this possible source of inspiration.

15 Steenson, *Karl Kautsky*, 207–211, briefly summarizes the controversy.

dent part, not only in voting and elections, but also in the everyday administration of the State. Under socialism all will govern in turn and will soon become accustomed to no one governing.¹⁶ “Primitive democracy” is a suggestive expression, which was, in all likelihood, not about ancient democratic Athens.¹⁷ Lenin, in the same book, wrote: “Freedom in capitalist society always remains about the same as it was in the ancient Greek republics: freedom for the slave-owners,”¹⁸ demonstrating a vision of ancient democracy that is anything but positive. When talking about a “primitive democracy,” Lenin was perhaps thinking of the Russian village communities called *obshchinas*.¹⁹ More probably, he was evoking the rudimentary and naive trade union democracy criticized by Bernstein and Kautsky, but defended by Lenin as a valuable tool for the governance of a socialist society.²⁰

To recapitulate, Marx and Engels stated that direct democracy without a division of powers was the only proper form of democracy. However, until the Russian Revolution, no one explicitly referred to the Athenian democratic regime – since it was based on the slave mode of production – as a possible model for the socialist revolution.

ARTHUR ROSENBERG’S ATHENS AS A PROLETARIAN REPUBLIC

A few years later, Arthur Rosenberg (1889–1943) was the first to do so. A promising alumnus of Eduard Meyer, who later became his *Doktorvater* and principal supporter,²¹ Rosenberg studied at Berlin

16 Lenin, “State and Revolution,” 492–493.

17 Marcaccini, in *Atene Sovietica*, 109–111, seems to be leaning toward that hypothesis.

18 Lenin, “State and Revolution,” 465.

19 Even if he could not have been aware of the then-unpublished correspondence between Marx and Vera Zasulich on the potential revolutionary role of peasant village communities, he would certainly have known of Marx and Engels’ “Preface to the Russian Edition,” 426, where, in a summary of that debate, they wrote, “the present Russian common ownership of land may serve as the starting point for a communist development.”

20 This possibility is suggested by the context. The expression “primitive democracy” was coined by Beatrice and Sidney Webb in “Primitive Democracy,” 397–432, in reference to the internal organization of trade unions, and was utilized by Bernstein and Kautsky with a derogatory tone. Lenin, in “What has to be done?” 481–482, agreed with them at first.

21 Rosenberg’s problematic relationship with Meyer, who would also become his principal opponent within German academia, has been studied by Wirsching

University.²² At first, his research was devoted to Italic and Roman political institutions. Due to his expertise in Roman constitutional history, he edited several substantial entries in the Pauly-Wissowa.²³ Writing the entry *Res publica*, Rosenberg began to investigate ancient democracy as a self-government of the people, and this would go on to be the main topic of his later research. During the war, he decided, like many others in his position, to adhere to the German Fatherland Party, a conservative political organization founded by Ludendorff. As the war was ending, his thoughts on ancient history intersected with the events of contemporary history, and his life was redirected as a result. The sudden collapse of the Wilhelmine regime fostered the setting up and spread of workers' and soldiers' councils all over the country, particularly in Berlin, where he lived. Rosenberg was so impressed by the newly established governing bodies, which he thought were similar to the organs of self-governing ancient democracies, that he made a political U-turn. He decided to side with revolution, joining the rank and file of the Independent Social Democratic Party (USPD), the party most sympathetic to the idea of a workers' state based upon the power of councils.

In 1919 Rosenberg went a step further than Marx and Lenin concerning Athens and workers' democracy when he wrote the article "The most ancient proletarian republic in the world."²⁴ The article was published in the *Freie Welt*, an illustrated weekly magazine attached to social democratic newspapers. Its editorial location, layout, phraseology, and appealing title were all directed at educating working-class readers to perceive Athenian democracy as a helpful lesson from the past. He argued that "Athens in [the] period of the dictatorship of the proletariat had a constitution which conforms in its fundamental lines to the elements characterizing the system of councils. [...] Thus, the Athenian republic was characterized by the direct self-government of the proletarian masses." To demonstrate the existence of a proletarian republic, the historian described the Athenian social and economic organization in highly original terms compared to the well-established Marxist reading. Its main target was the importance and role of slaves

in "Politik und Zeitgeschichte."

- 22 Recent detailed biographies of Arthur Rosenberg are Riberi, *Arthur Rosenberg*, and Keßler, *Arthur Rosenberg*. Less exhaustive is Senatore, "La vita e le opere di Arthur Rosenberg," 177–232. Canfora's *Comunista senza partito* remains useful.
- 23 *Imperator* (9.1, 1139–1154); *Imperium* (9.2, 1201–1211); *Ramnes, Ravenna, Regia, Regifugium, Res publica, Rex, Rex sacrorum, Romulia, Romulus* (1 A, 1137–1139; 300–305; 465–469; 469–472; 633–674; 702–721; 721–726; 1074; 1074–1104).
- 24 Rosenberg, "Älteste proletarier-Republik."

in Athenian production, which, in Rosenberg's opinion, constituted only "a small minority of the population, perhaps one-fourth of the total population." Consequently, "the vast majority of productive work was already done by free workers." This was the premise of Rosenberg's peculiar history of Athenian democracy, which he argued had been led by a bourgeois government until Ephialtes put it in the hands of the working class. This innovative reconstruction of Athenian democratic history caused a lively debate on the pages of the cultural insert of the authoritative social democratic newspaper *Leipziger Volkszeitung*.²⁵ The reply to Rosenberg was first entrusted to Otto Jenssen, then to the Italian socialist historian Ettore Ciccotti. The response was consistent with the Second International orthodox reading of Marxism, and the controversy, therefore, took on the character of a struggle between the old and new approaches to Marx's texts.²⁶

At the end of 1920, Rosenberg joined the Communist Party (KPD). The following year, he learned from the lessons of the previous debate and further explored his ideas about the development of Athenian democracy in a textbook of ancient history for the workers' university entitled *Democracy and Class Struggle in the Ancient World*.²⁷ Here he made explicit the comparison between ancient democracy and contemporary councils:

It is possible to discover close similarities between the Athenian constitution of the period of proletarian democracy and the political organization developed by the Paris Commune in 1871: in both, there were small districts from which poor people sent their delegates; both paid civil servants a worker's salary; both had a central authority, wielding at the same time advisory and executive power, formed by delegates from small districts. In addition to this, regarding the effects that the ideas developed by the Paris Commune had on the present Councils' Republic in Russia, it is easy to find many analogies between that political system and the Athenian constitution.²⁸

Rosenberg was reading about Athenian democracy with Marx's *Civil War in France* and Lenin's *State and Revolution* lying open before

25 Jenssen, "Die 'Proletarierrepublik' Athen"; Rosenberg, "Nochmals die Proletarier-Republik"; Ciccotti, "Athen eine 'Proletarierrepublik'?"

26 The debate has been analyzed in detail by Saldutti, "Origini di *Demokratie*."

27 Rosenberg, *Demokratie und Klassenkampf*. Saldutti, in "Arthur Rosenberg," has underlined the educational framework and aims of the book.

28 Rosenberg, *Demokratie und Klassenkampf*, 37–38 (my translation).

him.²⁹ He was thus led to the conclusion that “the three constitutions [i.e., of ancient Athens, of the Paris Commune, and the Soviet Union] rested on the same fundamental principle: the aim that the poorest working population could self-govern as far as possible,” to such an extent that “in Athenian society class distinctions withered away.”³⁰ In this manner, the classicist brought his interest in ancient societies into convergence with the goal of socialist revolution, even at the cost of straying from the conventional social democratic reading of ancient societies.³¹

DEMOCRATIC ATHENS AND THE SOVIET REGIME IN ROSENBERG’S CRITIQUE

Rosenberg’s career progression within the Communist Party was swift. Elected city council member in 1921, he took part in the Congress of Jena, where he sided with the Party’s left wing, led by Ruth Fischer. In 1924 his faction obtained the majority in the Party, and he became a member of the central committee and then *MP*. His commitment took two directions. First, he was involved in the parliamentary committee of inquiry into the German defeat in World War I. This assignment significantly impacted his decision to abandon ancient history in favor of contemporary history. Even more important was his role as a German member of the executive committee of the Communist International. From this vantage point, he could see first-hand the decline of the International under Stalin. In subsequent years he maintained his critical stance until he left the Communist Party in 1927. Like many other left-wing communist leaders, he saw what was happening in Russia as a decisive deviation

29 Riberi, *Arthur Rosenberg*, 57–58, has emphasized Rosenberg’s debt to Lenin’s *State and Revolution*.

30 Rosenberg, *Demokratie und Klassenkampf*, 41 (my translation). Worthy of note is that Rosenberg here uses the verb “verschwinden,” the same peculiar verb used in the German translation of Lenin’s *State and Revolution* to describe the slow disappearance of the state after the conquest of power by the revolutionary movement.

31 The analogy between ancient Athens and contemporary politics was pursued in other aspects as well. In Rosenberg’s description of the split within the Athenian proletarian party after Pericles’ death and the consequent struggle between Cleon and Nicias (*Demokratie und Klassenkampf*, 52–53), it is possible to read between the lines an analogy of the clash between social democrats and communists.

from Marxism: degeneration from proletarian democracy to the dictatorship of a bureaucratic clique.³²

When his appointment as MP was over, Rosenberg decided to write books on contemporary history.³³ In 1932 Rosenberg published a *History of Bolshevism*.³⁴ Here he tried to sketch the evolution of Bolshevism as a peculiar kind of Marxism characterized by two distinctive elements. The first was the prominent role of a centralized Party in the revolutionary struggle. The second was Lenin's refusal to limit the Party's task to the emancipation of industrial workers alone. According to Rosenberg, "Lenin regarded social democracy as the great leader of the Russian nation in its struggle for freedom,"³⁵ and "the difference between Lenin and all other social democrats consist[ed] in his including in his plans, in addition to the proletariat and the middle class, the immensely powerful class lying between them."³⁶

This description of Bolshevik political theory owed much to the renewed interest of Rosenberg in Marx and Aristotle, simultaneously, in the early thirties. Several publications on the father of scientific socialism, as well as Rosenberg's final article in classical studies on the meaning of democracy and dictatorship in the *Politics* of Aristotle, date to those years.³⁷ This last article reacted to Werner Jaeger's salient study on the evolution of Aristotle's thought,³⁸ which served as a pretext for him to return to his previous interest in ancient

32 In his resignation letter, "Rosenberg begründet seine Austritt," he said that "the sharp turn made at the 14th Congress of the Bolshevik party in domestic policy must have as a logical consequence the dissolution of the Third International." The reference was to both the implementation of the "Socialism in one country" theory and the emergence of Stalin as the one and only leader of the party, ratified at the Russian party congress of 1925.

33 He began with a monograph on the birth of the German Republic: Rosenberg, *Entstehung der deutschen Republik*.

34 Rosenberg, *Geschichte des Bolschewismus*, cited in its English translation, *History of Bolshevism*.

35 *Ibid.*, 29.

36 *Ibid.*, 41.

37 On Marx, see Rosenberg, "Marx und Engels"; Rosenberg, "Karl Marx." Rosenberg was the editor of Marx, *Das Kapital*. On Aristotle, see Rosenberg, "Aristoteles über Diktatur."

38 Jaeger, *Aristoteles: Grundlegung*. The main difference between Rosenberg and Jaeger lay in their stances on Aristotle's judgment about democracy in books 3 and 4 of his *Politics*. While Jaeger thought that the Stagirite resumed Plato's harsh criticism of democratic regimes, Rosenberg believed that he had already broken with the political ideas of his master and was thus less critical of those regimes.

political philosophy.³⁹ Rosenberg once again stated explicitly that most of his theoretical ideas on contemporary politics derived from ancient history and political philosophy. Since his first attempt to understand Athenian democracy in the light of Marx's thought, he had difficulty comparing the modern proletariat with ancient social classes, which differed from industrial workers.⁴⁰ Thus, even though the political form of ancient and contemporary democracies could be compared, their social bases were, at first glance, very different. Reading Aristotle's principal political work and Marx's most influential essays, Rosenberg found a solution to this dilemma. He underlined that the philosopher from Stagira had defined the constitutions based on their class composition. Democracy was the regime of the poor, and oligarchy was the regime of the wealthy, irrespective of how numerous they were.⁴¹ Aristotle's analysis refers to a conservative and even oligarchic definition of democracy as the regime of the poor and the worst. This contrasted with democratic ideology, portraying democracy as the government of the majority and thus of the entire civic body.⁴² The Stagirite observed that the reason why democracy could appear to be the constitution of the majority was that in every city, the poor outnumbered the wealthy. He ended his reasoning with the paradox that if by coincidence, the poor people were a minority in a polis, and they led it, it must be described as a democracy. Aristotle concluded that a constitution's social and economic bases determined its political definition. According to Rosenberg, this was also true of modern, industrialized societies.⁴³

39 Canfora, *Comunista senza partito*, 66.

40 Rosenberg's terminological inaccuracy was one of Ciccotti's main criticisms. Rosenberg attempted to reply in *Demokratie und Klassenkampf*, 3, saying that "in ancient times, the proletariat was the product of poverty alone."

41 Arist., *Pol.* 3.1279b16–1280a6, 4.1290a30–b3.

42 The democratic ideology was exposed by Hdt. 3.80.6, who defines democracy as *πληθος [...] ἄρχων*, hinting at the sovereignty of the majority; and by Thuc. 2.37.1, who makes explicit the idea of a regime based on majority rule, saying that: *ὄνομα μὲν διὰ τὸ μὴ ἔς ὀλίγους ἀλλ' ἔς πλείονας οἰκεῖν δημοκρατία κέκληται*. In sharp contrast to this image, Ps.-Xen., *Ath. pol.* 1.2–9, describes Athenian democracy as follows: *οἱ μὲν γὰρ πένητες καὶ οἱ δημόται καὶ οἱ χεῖρους εὖ πράττοντες καὶ πολλοὶ οἱ τοιοῦτοι γιγνόμενοι τὴν δημοκρατίαν αὐξοσιν· ἐὰν δὲ εὖ πράττωσιν οἱ πλούσιοι καὶ οἱ χρηστοί, ἰσχυρὸν τὸ ἐναντίον σφίσις αὐτοῖς καθιστάσιν οἱ δημοτικοί*. Plato, *Resp.* 8.557a, agrees with this image of democratic government by saying that it is the regime of the poor, while oligarchy is the regime of the wealthy.

43 Rosenberg, "Aristoteles über Diktatur," 352.

Once again studying the history of Bolshevism, Rosenberg concluded that Marx had the same idea as Aristotle: "In Marx's view, true democracy in a modern industrialized state can only mean the government of the proletariat *in the sense that the working class assumes the leadership of the middle class and the peasantry*."⁴⁴ The proletariat and oppressed groups did not completely overlap, and since contemporary society is divided into two layers, the working class must be the leading group of a broader social coalition. This meant that poverty was the link between ancient and contemporary oppressed classes and the social basis for any democracy. Lenin, inheriting this conception from Marx, favored the formation of the typical democratic coalition of all the poor.

At the start of the revolution, Lenin tried to organize this heterogeneous social bloc into the political system proper to the Russian uprising, that is, the soviets. "[In] the Soviet Lenin recognized the existence in a weak and elementary form of an entirely new type of working-class government which could only be compared historically with the Paris Commune of 1871."⁴⁵ Soviets were created by the popular masses themselves, and for this reason "the Bolshevik Revolution was able to base itself upon the sole democratic and national representative body, i.e., the Soviet Congress."⁴⁶ Given its social basis and constitutional organization, Soviet Russia was initially a true democracy in the definitions of both Marx and Aristotle. However, wartime communism, the NEP, and the subsequent rise of Stalin ratified the Party's victory over the councils and resulted in the defeat of democracy. Rosenberg clarified: "As will presently be demonstrated in detail, the educated (so-called) Soviet government that has been in power from 1918 to the present day has nothing in common with this type of government."⁴⁷ He confirmed this statement in his work on Aristotle as well, where he wrote: "[Assuming Aristotle's point of view] Soviet Russia of 1917 and 1918 *would have been* a democracy, while [our] contemporary French republic would be an oligarchy."⁴⁸ Compared with ancient Athens, the democratic experience of Soviet Russia was over definitively. Drawing his conclusions on the Soviet Union of his days, Rosenberg said:

44 Rosenberg, *History of Bolshevism*, 12 (my emphasis).

45 Rosenberg, *History of Bolshevism*, 97.

46 *Ibid.*, 119.

47 *Ibid.*, 99.

48 Rosenberg, "Aristoteles über Diktatur," 355.

Socialism is inconceivable unless accompanied by the exercise of self-determination on the part of the people. For socialism is the rule of freedom under which the State disappears. An over-bureaucratized administration based on the employment of force, and which the masses must obey, is irreconcilable with the socialist organization of society and can only be regarded as a middle-class institution.⁴⁹

Rosenberg's judgment of the evolution of Russia from Lenin to Stalin was driven by the idea – developed through his research on ancient Athens – that democracy is, in the end, the people's self-government, presupposing the sovereignty of the poor. The Athenian model is, in some way, the benchmark for every attempt to establish a democratic regime, something that happened at the beginning of the Soviet regime but did not last long. Contemporary Russia was thus no longer a democracy, as the Athenian comparison showed.

PANNEKOEK ON COUNCIL DEMOCRACY AND STALINIST RUSSIA

The use of Athenian democracy as a touchstone for the degeneration of the Soviet Union under Stalin was even more explicit in Anton Pannekoek's final works. As we have seen, Anton Pannekoek (1873–1960) was already a recognized leader of the leftist and revolutionary tendencies of European social democracy before the Great War.⁵⁰ Since the foundation of the Dutch Social Democratic Party, he had been a fierce opponent of reformist and revisionist attempts. He came into contact with German social democracy in 1906 when he was chosen to be a teacher at the central Party school in Berlin.

In 1912 he defended, against his former friend Kautsky, the need for a violent revolution to overthrow capitalism. His controversy with Kautsky became a fundamental point in the ensuing struggle between the left and center of the Party, even if he had no well-defined idea regarding the new political system to be established after capitalist power had been broken. The Russian and German revolutions suggested to him the missing piece of his reasoning. Like Rosenberg, Pannekoek was impressed by the spread of soviet councils in Russia

49 Rosenberg, *History of Bolshevism*, 262.

50 The most exhaustive biographies of Pannekoek are Malandrino, *Scienza e Socialismo*, and Gerber, *Anton Pannekoek*. The works contained in *Anton Pannekoek* are devoted to investigating his background in academic astronomy and the impact this had on his political theories.

and their work as revolution engines. This impression was confirmed by the November Revolution in Germany and led him to become a passionate advocate of council democracy as the only way to win the revolution and establish a workers' regime.

Later on, he became increasingly critical of the Soviet regime in Russia and the strategy of the Communist International, to the point that Lenin's criticism of left-wing communism was directed mainly at him. Pannekoek's organization, the Rätekommunisten (Communist Councils), disapproved of the international tactics and the Party's dominant role in the Russian Revolution in the establishment of the socialist State. Pannekoek became a point of reference for all communist critics of the Bolshevik hegemony in the international workers' movement. It is unknown whether Pannekoek ever met Rosenberg, but he certainly knew his works and his ideas since they both spent much of their life in Germany in the same political field.⁵¹

During World War II, he took stock of his political experience and, in 1946, published his definitive work, *Workers' Councils*.⁵² The task of the book was to fight back against both bourgeois democracy and Soviet communism and to defend the meaning of council socialism. Against parliamentary and representative democracy, he stated:

Council organization, in this respect, is quite the opposite of parliamentarism. Here the natural groups, the collaborating workers, and the personnel of the factories act as unities and designate their delegates. Because they have common interests and belong together in the praxis of daily life, they can send some of them as real representatives and spokesmen. Complete democracy is realized here by

51 Riberi, in *Arthur Rosenberg*, 92, postulates the existence of political connections between the left wing of the KPD, Rosenberg in particular, and the Dutch ultra-left, led by Pannekoek. During the twenties and thirties, both shared an interest in the work of the Marxist philosopher Karl Korsch (a close friend of Rosenberg until his death), who inspired many observations in Rosenberg's *History of Bolshevism* and Pannekoek's *Workers' Council*, as noted by Riberi in *Arthur Rosenberg*, 381–402, Keßler, in *Arthur Rosenberg*, 122–125, 232–233, and Gerber, in *Anton Pannekoek*, 192.

52 The first Dutch edition, *De arbeidersraden*, was published under the false name Aartz. The English translation was published, with a new chapter and major revisions, in 1950 as Pannekoek, *Workers' Councils*. The complex history of this book's publication has been summarized with archive references in Gerber, *Anton Pannekoek*, 195, with notes. I cite from the first Dutch edition with my own translation.

the equal rights of everyone who takes part in the work [...] This labor democracy is entirely different from the political democracy of the former social system.⁵³

Council organization is a real democracy, as Marx stated about the Paris Commune and Rosenberg wrote during the German Revolution. Pannekoek also shared with both of them the idea that the distinction between legislative and executive power would disappear in a council society.

Many chapters of his book analyze what happened in Russia during and after the revolution. He defined the economic system of the Soviet Union as state capitalism and criticized the political decline of the Bolshevik Party after 1919, saying that:

The soviets were gradually eliminated as organs of self-rule, and reduced to subordinate organs of the government apparatus. [...] The Russian Revolution initially gave a mighty impulse to the fight of the working class. For the first time in history, the working class could overthrow a corrupt government, which was shaken by huge strikes. On the basis of strike committees, which already existed, the Russian Revolution built up the councils, that is, self-governing political bodies [...]. But Russia was an underdeveloped country, and its working class was too weak and small to realize true workers' control over production [...]. The councils were soon left powerless, subjugated to the already dominant bureaucracy.⁵⁴

According to Pannekoek, however, beyond capitalism and state capitalism, there remained the possibility of establishing a society of councils and a genuinely democratic one.

Casting his net further back, Pannekoek found that this future society had models beyond the Paris Commune and the first two years of Soviet Russia. In a chapter devoted to analyzing the evolution of the idea of democracy in history, Pannekoek uses ancient Athens as his central positive paradigm: "Like in ancient Greek towns [...] democracy was the usual organizational form of the community [...]. Democracy was the form of collaboration and self-rule of free

53 Pannekoek, *De arbeidersraden*, 39–40. In the English translation, the phrase continues: "The so-called political democracy under capitalism was a mock democracy, an artful system conceived to mask the real domination of the people by a ruling minority."

54 *Ibid.*, 74–76.

and equal producers, each master of his own means of production, his soil or his shop and his tools. *In ancient Athens, which produced this kind of democracy in its most perfect form, it was the regular citizens, gathering every month and every week, that decided on public affairs.*⁵⁵ He goes on to address the problem of the modern distinction between legislative and executive power, saying that: “The administrative functions, which were already developed, were not performed by professional, governmental employees, but by the citizens themselves, who held those functions for short periods only, which were circulated by lot.”⁵⁶ Of course, in this kind of primitive democracy, there were various problems, particularly slavery, along with the imperialist attitude of Athens, but this was not the point. Much more interesting, in Pannekoek’s view, was the role of ancient democracy as a trailblazer for every subsequent democratic form of government in history, in particular that of the workers’ councils. This becomes even more evident some pages later. Defending the word ‘democracy’ from both bourgeois and Stalinist appropriation, he continues:

Workers must be strongly persuaded that council organization is the most perfect and superior form of juridical equality. Adhering, then, to the emotional value attached since ancient times to the word “democracy,” we may say that council organization represents the higher form of democracy, the true democracy of labor. Someone may ask whether the word “democracy” really meant this, since the word *-kratia* means supremacy, government, power. In the word itself there is the idea of control from above, from the side of the government, which is above the people themselves, even if it has been elected by the people. In a council organization, this problem will not exist [...] since the government will be the people itself, *comparable to some extent with the ancient democracy of Athens.*⁵⁷

Thus, ancient Athens was, in Pannekoek’s eyes, a forerunner of council democracy, and council democracy was the only way for the workers to escape the double trap of capitalism on one side and Stalinism on the other.

55 Pannekoek, *De arbeidersraden*, 133 (my emphasis).

56 *Ibid.*, 133.

57 *Ibid.*, 140–141 (my emphasis).

CONCLUSION

Stigmatized as a slave society in the theoretical elaboration of the Second International, Athens became a political model in the years that followed the Russian and German revolutions. Thanks to Rosenberg, the organization of Athenian democracy was seen among the ultra-left of the Communist International as the forerunner of contemporary council democracy, a true democracy compared with the bourgeois false one. This idea was used once again in subsequent years when the dream of a socialist republic in Russia faded away. The NEP and the adoption of the “socialism in one country” theory were perceived by the leftist and council communists as a betrayal. The Athenian model was thus used to stress the distance between genuine democracy and the bureaucratic regime established in the Soviet Union, which was seen as a parody of the previous council system.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Aartz, P. (Anton Pannekoek). *De arbeidersraden*. Amsterdam: Uitgeverij De Vlam, 1946.
- Canfora, Luciano. *Il comunista senza partito*. Palermo: Sellerio, 1984.
- Ciccotti, Ettore. "Athen eine 'Proletarierrepublik'?" *Leipziger Volkszeitung* no. 87/1920, May 20, 8; no. 88/1920, May 21, 8; no. 90/1920, May 25, 8.
- Doveton, Daniel. "Marx and Engels on Democracy." *History of Political Thought* 15 (1994): 555–591.
- Engels, Friedrich. "Anti-Dühring." In *Collected Works* 25, 5–312. New York: International Publishers, 1987.
- . "The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State in the Light of the Researches by Lewis H. Morgan." In *Collected Works* 26, 129–291. New York: International Publishers, 1990.
- Femia, Joseph V. *Marxism and Democracy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993.
- Gerber, John. *Anton Pannekoek and the Socialism of Workers' Self-Emanicipation 1873–1960*. Amsterdam: Kluwer, 1989.
- Hudis, Peter. "Marx's Concept of Socialism." In *The Oxford Handbook of Karl Marx*, edited by Matt Vidal, Tony Smith, Tomás Rotta, Paul Prew, 757–772. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019.
- Hunt, Richard N. *The Political Ideas of Marx and Engels: Marxism and Totalitarian Democracy, 1818–1850*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1974.
- Jaeger, Werner. *Aristoteles: Grundlegung einer Geschichte seiner Entwicklung*. Berlin: Weidmannsche Buchhandlung, 1923.
- Jenssen, Otto. "Die 'Proletarierrepublik' Athen, eine Geschichtslegende." *Leipziger Volkszeitung* no. 272/1919, December 3, 7.
- Keßler, Mario. *Arthur Rosenberg: Ein Historiker im Zeitalter der Katastrophen (1889–1943)*. Cologne: Böhlau, 2003.
- Kloft, Hans. "Karl Kautsky und die Antike." In *Studien zur Wirtschafts-, Sozial und Rezeptionsgeschichte der Antike*, 311–331. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020.
- Krader, Lawrence. *The Ethnological Notebooks of Karl Marx*. 2nd edition. Assen: Van Gorcum & Co., 1974.
- Lenin, Vladimir Ilyich. "What Has to Be Done? Burning Question of our Movement." In *Collected Works*, 347–530. Moscow: Progress, 1977.
- . "The State and Revolution: The Marxist Theory of the State and the Tasks of the Proletariat in the Revolution." In *Collected Works* 25, 385–498. Moscow: Progress, 1974.
- Malandrino, Corrado. *Scienza e Socialismo: Anton Pannekoek (1873–1960)*. Milan: Franco Angeli, 1987.
- Marcaccini, Carlo. *Atene Sovietica*. Pisa: Della Porta, 2012.

- . “What Has Marxism Got to Do with Ancient Athens? Marx and Marxist Historiography on Ancient Democracy.” In *Brill’s Companion to the Reception of Athenian Democracy: From the Late Middle Ages to the Contemporary Era*, edited by Dino Piovani and Giovanni Giorgini, 332–367. Leiden: Brill, 2021.
- Marx, Karl. “Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Law.” In *Collected Works* 3, 3–130. New York: International Publishers, 1975.
- . “Economic Manuscripts of 1857–58.” In *Collected Works* 28. New York: International Publishers, 1986.
- . “The Civil War in France: Address of the General Council of the International Working Men’s Association.” In *Marx Engels Gesamtausgabe* 1.22, 119–162. Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1978.
- . *Das Kapital: Kritik der politischen Ökonomie*, edited by Arthur Rosenberg. Wrocław: Ferdinand Hirt, 1932.
- , and Friedrich Engels. “Preface to the 1872 German Edition of the Manifesto of the Communist Party.” In *Collected Works* 23, 174–175. New York: International Publishers, 1988.
- , and Friedrich Engels. “Preface to the Second Russian Edition of the Manifesto of the Communist Party.” In *Collected Works* 24, 425–426. New York: International Publishers, 1989.
- McCarthy, George E. “In Praise of Classical Democracy: The Funeral Orations of Pericles and Marx.” *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* 27 (2006): 205–227.
- Mehring, Franz. “Über den historischen Materialismus.” In *Gesammelte Schriften* 13, edited by Thomas Höhle, Hans Koch, and Josef Schleifstein, 289–343. Berlin: Dietz, 1977.
- Nippel, Wilfried. *Ancient and Modern Democracy: Two Concepts of Liberty?* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016.
- Pannekoek, Anton. *Workers’ Councils*. Melbourne: Southern Advocate for Workers’ Councils, 1950.
- Riberi, Lorenzo. *Arthur Rosenberg: Democrazia e socialismo tra storia e politica*. Milan: Franco Angeli, 2001.
- Rosenberg, Arthur. “Die älteste proletarier-Republik der Welt.” *Freie Welt* no. 26, October 29, 1919, 4–5.
- . “Nochmals die Proletarier-Republik Athen.” *Leipziger Volkszeitung* no. 12, January 16, 1920, 8.
- . *Demokratie und Klassenkampf im Altertum*. Bielefeld: Velhagen & Klasing, 1921.
- . *Die Entstehung der deutschen Republik 1871–1918*. Berlin: Rowohlt, 1928.
- . *Geschichte des Bolschewismus: Von Marx bis zur Gegenwart*. Berlin: Rowohlt, 1932.

- . *A History of Bolshevism: From Marx to the First Five Years' Plan*. New York: Anchor Books, 1967.
- . “Marx and Engels.” *Leipziger Volkszeitung* no. 223/1930, September 24, October 13.
- . “Karl Marx.” In *Menschen, die Geschichte machten: Viertausend Jahre Weltgeschichte in Zeit- und Lebensbildern* 3, edited by Peter Richard Rohden and Georg Ostrogorski, 227–232. Vienna: Seidel, 1931.
- . “Aristoteles über Diktatur und Demokratie (Politik Buch 3).” *Rheinisches Museum für Philologie* 82 (1933): 339–361.
- “Rosenberg begründet seine Austritt: Völliger Zusammenbruch der Politik der Komintern.” *Vorwärts* no. 198, April 28, 1927, 1.
- Saldutti, Vittorio. “Alle origini di *Demokratie und Klassenkampf im Altertum*: Il dibattito tra Arthur Rosenberg, Otto Jenssen ed Ettore Ciccotti sulla democrazia ateniese.” *History of Classical Scholarship* 2 (2020): 69–104.
- . “Arthur Rosenberg: Ancient History and People’s Education in the German Revolution.” In *Class and Classics: Subalterns and the Production of Classical Culture*, edited by Michele Bellomo, Anna Maria Cimino, Vittorio Saldutti, and Emilio Zucchetti. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2022.
- Senatore, Felice. “La vita e le opere di Arthur Rosenberg.” In *Arthur Rosenberg: Lo Stato degli antichi Italici; Ricerche sulla costituzione originaria di Latini, Oschi ed Etruschi*, edited by Loredana Cappelletti, and Felice Senatore, 177–232. Rome: Scienze e Lettere, 2011.
- Stenson, Gary P. *Karl Kautsky 1854–1938: Marxism in the Classical Years*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh, 1978.
- Tai, Chaokang, Bart van der Steen, and Jeroen van Dongen, eds. *Anton Pannekoek: Ways of Viewing Science and Society*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2019.
- Webb, Beatrice, and Sidney Webb. “Primitive Democracy in British Trade Unionism.” *Political Science Quarterly* 11 (1896): 397–432.
- Wirsching, Andreas. “Politik und Zeitgeschichte: Arthur Rosenberg und die Berliner Philosophische Fakultät 1914–1933.” *Historische Zeitschrift* 269 (1999): 561–602.

ABSTRACT

“The political form at last discovered under which to work out the economic emancipation of labor.” With these words, Marx described the Paris Commune of 1871. It “was formed of the municipal councillors, chosen by universal suffrage in the various wards of the town, responsible and revocable at short term [...] a working, not a parliamentary body, executive and legislative at the same time.” The political tradition of the Commune was inherited by the Russian soviets and inspired Lenin, who explained the role of those governing bodies as a “reversion to primitive democracy.” Arthur Rosenberg, professor of Ancient History at Berlin University, tried in his book *Democracy and Class Struggle in the Ancient World* to offer historical ground for the ideas developed by Lenin in *State and Revolution* and compared ancient Athenian democracy to the contemporary German and Russian councils. During the 1920s, as a communist leader and МР, Rosenberg, recalling his ideas on Athenian democracy, criticized the political degeneration of the Russian workers’ State. He stressed how Soviet Russia, in limiting the power of the councils, had suppressed the governing body of socialist direct democracy. In his work *Workers’ Councils*, Dutch revolutionary Anton Pannekoek renewed Rosenberg’s criticism at the end of World War II, returning to the image of ancient democratic Athens as a forerunner of the socialist councils.

KEYWORDS: Arthur Rosenberg, Anton Pannekoek, democracy, Athens, workers councils

Antična atenska demokracija, delavski sveti in levičarska kritika stalinistične Rusije

IZVLEČEK

»Naposled odkrita politična oblika, pod katero je mogoče uresničiti ekonomsko emancipacijo dela.« S temi besedami je Marx leta 1871 opisal Pariško komunio. Sestavljali so jo »občinski svetniki, izvoljeni s splošnimi volitvami v različnih mestnih okrožjih, odgovorni, ki jih je mogoče hitro odpoklicati [...] delovno in ne parlamentarno telo, izvršilno in zakonodajno hkrati«. Politično tradicijo komune so podedovali ruski sovjeti in navdihnila je Lenina, ki je vlogo teh upravnih organov pojasnil kot »vrnitev k prvotni demokraciji«. Arthur Rosenberg, profesor antične zgodovine na berlinski univerzi, je v svoji knjigi *Demokracija in razredni boj v antičnem svetu* poskušal ponuditi zgodovinsko podlago za ideje, ki jih je Lenin razvil v knjigi *Država in revolucija*, in primerjal antično atensko demokracijo s sodasnimi nemškimi in ruskimi sveti. V dvajsetih letih 20. stoletja je Rosenberg kot komunistični voditelj in poslanec s sklicevanjem na svoje ideje o atenski demokraciji kritiziral politično degeneracijo ruske delavske države. Poudarjal je, da je sovjetska Rusija z omejevanjem moči svetov zatrla vodilni organ socialistične neposredne demokracije. Nizozemski revolucionar Anton Pannekoek je ob koncu druge svetovne vojne v svojem delu *Delavski sveti* obnovil Rosenbergovo kritiko in se vrnil k podobi antičnih demokratičnih Aten kot predhodnice socialističnih svetov.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: Rosenberg, Anton Pannekoek, demokracija, Atene, delavski sveti