

BOURRINET, PHILIPPE. *The Dutch and German Communist Left (1900–68). ‘Neither Lenin nor Trotsky nor Stalin!’ ‘All Workers Must Think for Themselves!’*. [Historical Materialist Book Series, 125.] Brill, Leiden 2017 lxii, 639 pp. ill. €210.00; \$252.00.

According to its author, this history of the German–Dutch left intends “to fill an important gap in the history of the revolutionary workers’ movement in Europe” (p. 517). In fact, Bourrinet’s book contains very little about workers or their movements, mentioning them only as background to his real interest: political organizations, their leaders, and their political and theoretical writings. The book is thus an old-fashioned political history, with an emphasis on the ideas of “great men”. This is despite his apparent approval of Herman Gorter’s opinion that “[t]he existence of ‘great men’ in a movement, its personalization, [...] appears as a sign of weakness [...]” (p. 213).

In this case, it must be said that the men – and a few women – featured in the book were, as thinkers and as activists, quite great indeed. But then, the movement within which they worked proved to be quite weak. Any attempt to comprehend the disaster for humanity represented by the failure of the revolutionary hopes embodied in the vast social and political upheavals that followed World War I will need to draw on the understandings worked out *in medias res* by Rosa Luxemburg, Gorter, Anton Pannekoek, Otto Rühle, and the others who struggled to understand the nature and difficulties of communist revolution. Their relative neglect by historically minded socialists, particularly in English-speaking countries, gives Bourrinet’s volume a certain value, simply for the effort put into collecting and summarizing the ideas of these brilliant participants in a vanished left.

The title is somewhat misleading: Bourrinet’s main focus is on the contribution of Dutch militants (Luxemburg is the only German – and she was actually Polish – allowed to share the limelight). But, of course, Germany was the main scene of the radical movements unleashed by the war and stimulated by the fall of the Russian autocracy. The German left was the central preoccupation of Gorter’s and Pannekoek’s political work, as it defined the larger context in which workers’ organizations and movements in Holland operated. For that reason, Bourrinet’s neglect of significant elements of the German scene is striking, especially in contrast with his careful exploration of the history of extremely small Dutch political groups. The *revolutionäre Obleute* (Revolutionary Shop Stewards) are mentioned, but not seriously discussed, despite their importance in the process of the German revolutionary movement and the theoretical contributions of their leader, Richard Müller.

Again, while the existence of the “unions” (Allgemeine Arbeiter–Union Deutschlands, General Workers’ Union of Germany, AAUD), factory organizations allied with the Kommunistische Arbeiter Partei Deutschlands (German Communist Workers’ Party, KAPD), crops up from time to time in Bourrinet’s narrative, we learn little about them, and even less about the non-party “union” that organized itself under the name of the Allgemeine Arbeiter Union–Einheitsorganisation (AAU–E). This seems to be partly the result of Bourrinet’s apparent strong disapproval of Otto Rühle, the leading theoretician of this idea, condemned as “an individualist” for his abandonment of the AAU–E after 1924 in favor of work in the field of worker education, (p. 239) as well as for his “irresponsibility” (p. 249) in refusing to participate in the Second Congress of the Comintern after seeing for himself the incipient party dictatorship in the USSR. All of this seems to Bourrinet characteristic of “the impatience and distrust towards organization characteristic of the individualistic psychology” of intellectuals (p. 523). Bourrinet is entitled to disagree with Rühle’s famous

declaration that “the revolution is not a party matter”; the problem is that he dismisses this view instead of discussing it.

This instance seems to reflect a general discomfort with theoretical openness. Thus, Bourrinet criticizes the publication by the Dutch Groep Internationale Communisten (Group of International Communists, GIC) of articles reflecting views not shared by the group: “in affirming that everyone had the right to their opinion, in a spirit of pure democracy, it made room for ambiguities that were exploited by its political adversaries” (p. 390; see also p. 422). In general, “ambiguity” seems to him to indicate not evolving ideas but political weakness; similarly, he criticizes the GIC for its “lack of rigour” in attending a conference with people espousing different political perspectives (p. 424).

The equation of rigor with resistance to grappling with alternative ideas is a feature of the book as a whole. Thus, Bourrinet shares the enmity towards anarchism characteristic of the Second International Marxists (and, of course, those of the Third International as well). But he neither explains the basis of this attitude, nor his agreement with it. Leaving “anarchism” and “Marxism” as unexamined ahistorical ideal entities in conflict with each other leaves him unable to understand the later change in attitude towards anarchists on the part of someone like Pannekoek, or at any rate unwilling to explore it.

For Bourrinet, the high point of his history is the existence of the KAPD, the majority faction of the German Communist Party, expelled by the minority in obedience to Moscow in 1919. The “left-communist current” epitomized by the KAPD, in his eyes, represented the continuation of the pre-war struggle of the Marxist left against revisionism and opportunism in Europe’s socialist parties. It combined belief in “the role of the communist party as a catalyst of class-consciousness” with an emphasis on “the primacy of mass action over trade union and parliamentary action” to elaborate “a new strategy and tactic for the workers’ movement in the [...] new epoch, that of the ‘decadence of capitalism’ [...]” (pp. 519–520).

In contrast, despite his fondness for its partisans, to whom he dedicates his book, Bourrinet condemns the proponents of workers’ councils as the historically discovered form of revolutionary action (the GIC and similar groups in other countries) for their “rejection of the Russian Revolution” and “the necessity of the party” (pp. 331–332), without seriously considering their reasons for these conclusions. He insists that “the council-communists rejected any real analysis of the events of 1917 and the policies of Bolshevism before Kronstadt” (p. 333) although the only “councilist” essay on this theme he examines in any detail, Helmut Wagner’s 1933 “Theses on Bolshevism”, certainly attempts to do just that, even if Bourrinet indignantly rejects its analysis. Again, in discussing Pannekoek’s *Lenin as Philosopher* (1938), he condemns the Dutch theoretician for concluding “in line with the councilist theses on Bolshevism” that the Bolsheviks had never been Marxists “just from reading one book by Lenin” – as though Pannekoek had not been familiar with Lenin personally and his writings for much of the Russian leader’s political life.

Bourrinet puts his finger on the key element that can make the thinking of the “councilists” still relevant at a time when the historical left has almost completely disappeared: their recognition that the left had been not so much an opponent as an aspect of the development of capitalist society in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, a development whose continuation had rendered the old ideas and forms of organization meaningless. For Bourrinet, this idea of “the bankruptcy of all past organizations, including revolutionary organizations” was not only mistaken, but itself rendered the formation of new revolutionary organizations – including “councilist” ones – difficult (p. 340). And, indeed, it is true

that rejection of the party form and of the idea of the historical centrality of revolutionary theorists (“great men”) makes it difficult to pursue radical politics in anything that resembles its earlier styles. Bourrinet cleaves in contrast to the Leninist conviction that, not the actual historical experiences of workers, but “the political and theoretical positions of revolutionary organizations are what really count”, for good or for ill (p. 518). This is why the main method of this book is the detailed examination and confrontation of programmatic texts. It suggests to this reader nothing less than the work of a Catholic theologian, who has for some reason fallen in love with the Albigensians, though he is ultimately forced to condemn their doctrine as heretical.

Paul Mattick

Field Notes Editor, *Brooklyn Rail*
275 Conover Street, Apt 4D, Brooklyn NY 11231 USA
pmattick@gmail.com
doi:10.1017/S002085901800010X

CHEN, SHUANG. *State-Sponsored Inequality. The Banner System and Social Stratification in Northeast China*. Stanford University Press, Stanford (CA) 2017. xviii, 342 pp. Maps. \$65.00.

This inspired and brilliant book analyses a very specific subject – the creation of an immigrant society and the social engineering implemented by the Qing court during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Shuangcheng (located in the alluvial plain of the Songhua River, in present-day southern Heilongjiang province), an area along the northeastern Manchurian frontier previously almost uninhabited. After selecting the site because of the abundance of high-quality uncultivated land, the state relocated thousands of households from the capital Beijing and other zones in Manchuria. During this settlement, the central authorities categorized the new inhabitants of Shuangcheng into four groups, according to their identity and provenance, and gave them plots of land of different size and quality. In this newborn agrarian society, differentiated land allocation was a fundamental means by which the state forged social classes and established boundaries between them, or, in the author’s words, by which the state sponsored inequality between different social nuclei. The state-established social hierarchy and the struggle of social categories to survive and accumulate wealth are the main focus of this volume.

Among the migrant groups, the “metropolitan bannermen”, who before the transfer were registered in the Eight Banners of the capital, were a privileged elite. As the “descendants of the warriors who had helped the Manchu rulers of the Qing conquer China proper” (p. 1), they were granted the largest plots, and before their arrival other categories were ordered to clear land for them. Back in Beijing, these bannermen served the state as soldiers and received stipends, but, by the beginning of the nineteenth century, providing for their livelihood had become a great burden for the state. In fact, the main goal of the Shuangcheng relocation policy was to commute the metropolitan bannermen’s stipend through a one-time allocation of land by means of which they were thereafter supposed to support themselves. In the 150 years before moving to Manchuria, metropolitan bannermen had grown accustomed to urban life and were not trained in farming land. Therefore, despite