For Land and Culture

The Grassroots Council Movement of Turkmens in Iran, 1979–1980

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Human action, like all strictly political phenomena, is bound up with human plurality, which is one of the fundamental conditions of human life insofar as it rests on the fact of natality, through which the human world is constantly invaded by strangers, newcomers whose actions and reactions cannot be foreseen by those who are already there and are going to leave in a short while.

— Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future*

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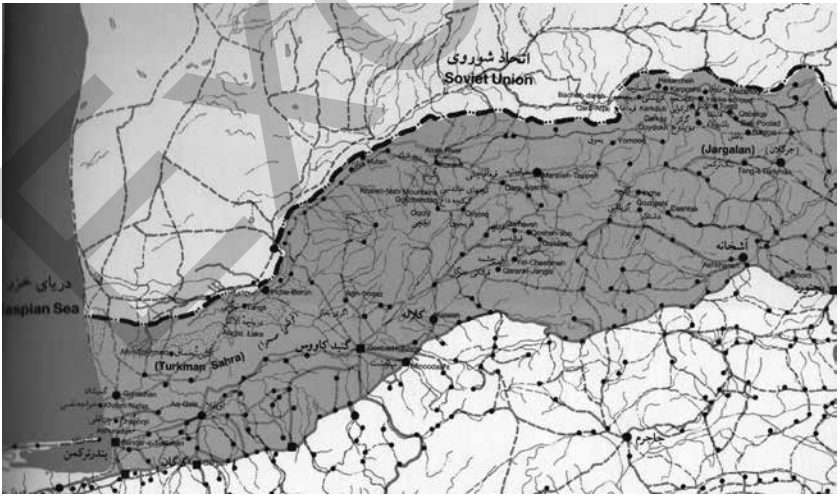

Cities and towns of the Plains of Turkmen, 1979 (image courtesy of Arne Goli)

Against Oblivion

What the Turkmen people want are the natural rights of every nation and minority. To deny our demands is to deny our very existence.

— Cultural-Political Centre of Turkmen People, 1979

AS WE CELEBRATED NAWRUZ (MARCH 20), the Persian New Year of 1979 in Tehran, the bitter news of an armed conflict in the Plains of Turkmen in the north broke out. Having participated as a very young man in the revolution that had toppled the monarchy just a month prior, I had experienced a true sense of freedom — not in the sense of controlled, legislated "freedom" under a state, but freedom as if all the invisible tentacles of power and control had been cut off, not just from my limbs but also from my mind. Since then, I have never felt free and have been longing for a unique experience: the freedom to be able to give birth to the impossible. The impossible dream of many in my generation was to build a better Iran, a country built on freedom and social justice, a truly livable Iran for all. While the retrograde Islamists were busy consolidating their power, Iranians from different walks of life were experiencing flourishing grassroots social experiments everywhere the people had congregated to forge their own communities, unions, and councils: in neighbourhoods, schools, universities, factories, farms, government offices, even barracks. The country was blooming with novelty.

The news from the Plains of Turkmen — and a similar armed conflict in Kurdistan — was disheartening, an ominous sign of what to expect in the months to come while we were still mesmerized by the fresh air of the "Spring of Freedom" (as those months were called) as it caressed our souls and imaginations. But the conflict made me a firm supporter of the movement. I remember calling friends about it. A bunch of us met in front of the University of Tehran in the city centre and joined hundreds

of others with different political proclivities who were participating in heated sidewalk debates about the causes of, and solutions to, the armed conflicts in the Plains of Turkmen and in Kurdistan. It was another expression of true freedom.

Since then, I have admired the Turkmen's novel approach to egalitarian communal life, their efforts toward collective land ownership and in cultural and linguistic revival, their resoluteness and tenacity in the face of adversarial forces that were multiple times stronger. I find myself fortunate to be able to historicize and theorize in this book what I felt with my heart more than four decades ago. This book is therefore owed to the magnificent women and men who had created the shining Turkmen peasants' council movement. They brought the impossible to this world. The Turkmen people gifted to the rest of the country an alternative, just society that Iran never became. For that I am — indeed we are — grateful.

Back to the Watershed

In February 1979, the seeds of a unique social and cultural movement in Iran were sown by the Turkmen peasants and activists who have been the ancestral inhabitants of the fertile plateaus, known as the Plains of Turkmen (in Persian: Turkman Sahra; note different spelling of Turkmen/Turkman) — a region stretching from the southeastern coast of the Caspian Sea to the northeast. This self-governing, council movement, primarily and mainly of Turkmen peasants but also of different social groups and non-Turkmens of urban dwellers, workers, fishermen, high school students, and professional sectors was launched at a historic moment: the dawn of a brief but life-altering "Spring of Freedom" in 1979–1980 when Iranians were gradually grasping the enthralling, if challenging and precarious, reality of a post-monarchical era, on that shone with incredible possibilities for a better Iran, before the Islamists consolidated the state power that equipped the rising ruling oligarchy with the necessary apparatuses to brutally suppress social movements and spread their clerical black robe all over a diverse, colourful nation. For the duration that this historic moment lasted, however, "Iran" was the floating signifier of unrivalled, creative, and imaginative social experiments — namely, experiments in participatory self-governance and semi-autonomous social organization (as opposed to hierarchical, colonial, and dominating power structures). In the transitional period

when one dictatorship had collapsed and the next had not yet harnessed its imminent heavy hand, workers, teachers, university students, state employees, peasants, and national minorities reverted to the most authentic form of grassroots self-governance: the councils.

This book offers a counter-history: the tremendous experiment of Iran's Turkmens has been relegated to historical oblivion in the past four decades. By funding and promoting garden variety "research" works that regurgitate state propaganda, the Iranian regime derides the movement as an insignificant ethnic disturbance instigated by sly Marxists (Khajehnejad 2020; Naderi 2011; PSRI nd), often calling this popular experiment using derogatory terms like "intrigue" or "sedition" (*gha`eleh* or *fetneh*; PSRI nd). As in any ideological historiography, the starting point of all sources sanctioned by the security apparatus of the Islamic Republic is the self-righteousness of the Islamists and their Islamic state, thus rendering all efforts to build social justice–oriented social imaginaries, democratic alternatives, and legitimate resistances against exploitation and autocratic rule to the alleged, self-defeating defects of these movements and foreign conspiracy. This historiography simultaneously justifies and minimizes the state's murderous measures taken against the post-Revolutionary movements.

On the other hand, the Iranian left has not afforded to the Turkmen council movement the attention and analysis this tremendous experiment deserves. There have been only a few, albeit important, memoirs of the Fadai cadres and Turkmen activists involved in the region at that time, and even then, they mainly focus on the two episodes of armed conflict, allowing these episodes to overshadow the entire year-long movement (Fatapour 2023; Hamidian 2004; A. Hashemi 2016, 2021; Mahfuzi 1984). Some of these accounts narrate history backwards, as their accounts of the past are tainted by their present-day values and stances (Hamidian 2004; Mahfuzi 1984). This is an example of memory erasing itself in the interest of current-day political correctness or values. These memoirs are also coloured by the fact that the movement was vanquished: no one wants to be the bearer of the legacy of a defeat.

A welcome and refreshing exception to this trend is the recent two-volume set of documents pertaining to the movement, edited by tireless Turkmen researcher Arne (Amin) Goli and published in exile by the Turkmen Research Centre (DCM1, DCM2). True embodiments of a labour of love, these volumes (and others on Turkmens edited by Goli)

must be regarded, by any party involved, as original sources that contain the documents, reportages, interviews, and press releases pertaining to the Turkmen council movement. Turkmen organizations, newspapers, government press releases, and analyses of leftist and Islamist groups should all see these volumes as invaluable. Like this study, these volumes position themselves as resisting oblivion, as a bulwark against the discounting of the movement of a marginalized people within mainstream historiography of modern Iran. These volumes allow me and other researchers to gain a valuable view from the inside of the movement and its contributions to, as well as how it was received in, public and state-run media at the time. However, there are very few sources in any shape or form about the inner challenges of, and disagreements within, the movement, or about the movement's assimilation by the Islamic Republic. As such, any study of this kind potentially runs the risk of reconstructing this movement in rather monolithic ways, which I have tried to avoid to the best of my ability and in as much as my sources allowed, by cross-referencing and triangulating the various accounts. In the end, I too construct a narrative about the movement, based on my research, but I emphatically note that no one can ever say the last word in history. History is open to interpretations, and as such it lives on, inspiring future generations to partake in the unfinished projects of past generations. I hope this book will do the same for the younger activists in Iran.

The transformative months following the 1979 Revolution provided the Turkmen minority in Iran with a rare historical opportunity to realize its long-held dream of national self-assertion as a people, a movement aimed at cultural self-expression and linguistic revival as well as a particular mode of self-governance that was based on both Turkmen tradition and modern values that promoted participation, inclusion, negotiation, and above all, a better, collective life. As such, it turned out to be a movement simultaneously for cultural revival and for social justice, with land at its heart. The Turkmen council movement represented everything that the Islamic Republic was not and could have never been. This movement stands out in recent Iranian history due to, first, its sheer size and reach, and second, the radical, sophisticated, all-embracing vision.

Both features render the neglect of this movement by scholars all the more astonishing. In fact, scholars of modern Iran have evidently played their part in relegating this movement to oblivion. In some of the most widely read general histories of modern Iran, references to the Turkmen

council movement do not exceed quick notes in passing (Amanat 2017, 773, 780, 817; Keddie 1981, 258, 261), if not nil (Abrahamian 2008; Ansari 2019), although one these historians clearly advocates minority rights (Amanat 2017). More interestingly, in a book dedicated to the history of the Iranian left, only a paragraph-long quick overview of this movement is offered (Behrooz 2000, 108). The only exception to this trend is an article published during the movement's activity in *New Left Review* (Azad 1980). It is fair to say that the continued scholarly empirical neglect and disregard imposes silences on this and other movements that did not register with the (often orientalist) epistemic frames of mainstream historiography.

This omission has clear pedagogical consequences. I wonder how such silences will tint the views of students of Iranian history as well as their understanding of the dynamics of change in a country known — to this day and under a brutally repressive regime — for its people's tireless defiance of authority. Modern Iran is the land of undying, albeit changing, social movements for social justice and democracy. Such omissions are partly because historians of Iranian politics have largely dwelled in a particular epistemological gaze that directs scholarly focus toward formal and institutional sources of political power as represented by the modern state. These studies have been fascinated by, and focused on, the state as the privileged agent of change. Hence, the generative power of social movements has always been subsumed by the study of formal institutions. Of course, the works of Asef Bayat (1987; 1997; 2017) provide refreshing exceptions to this trend. This book resists the dominant and long-rooted lure of concentrating on formal institutions as privileged sites of power and invites the readers to focus on the original makers of politics — social movement activists — and their initiatives.

An important note is in order: the present-day Iranian nation-state contains several nationalities that have lived alongside each other, at times peacefully and at times not, on the Iranian plateau for centuries and millenniums. By all accounts, therefore, the country named Iran — whose current international borders are fixed by imperial and colonial legacies of powerful states (such as Russian and British Empires) — is an irreducibly multinational and multicultural country, though it has never been "colonized" in the classical sense of the term. In the twentieth-century political lexis of Iran, the word *melli* (national) often refers to both the Iranian nation and the minorities that regard themselves as nations.

In English, the terms "ethnicity" or "ethno-national" are used to distinguish culturally distinct peoples from the nation within a nation-state. As I have argued elsewhere, Iran has no "ethnics" (Vahabzadeh 2022a), only national-cultural groups. As such, in this study and depending on the context and on par with the original sources of this study, I use the term *nationwide* (*sarasari* but also, depending on context, *melli*) mostly to refer to the Iranians within the nation-state and the term "national" (*melli*) to refer to national-cultural claims of peoples within the nation-state. The word "people" or *khalq* is also used to refer to national-cultural groups. Likewise, I have decided that "self-governance" is the most context-sensitive translation for the polysemic Persian word, *khod-mokhtari*, which can also be translated as "autonomy." The latter term implies secession, which was not the case in the political imagination of post-Revolutionary movements in Kurdistan and the Plains of Turkmen.

While regional, the Turkmen council movement was closely associated with Iran's most popular Marxist political party, Organization of Iranian People's Fadai Guerrillas (henceforth, OIPFG, or Fadaiyan, the plural of Fadai; see Chapter 1) even though the exact relations between the two is a subject of unending disagreements and debates, which this book will critically probe. Undoubtedly a left-leaning movement, what distinguished the Turkmen council movement from many other post-Revolutionary alternative movements, while associating it with the workers' (and other) council movements in revolutionary Iran, was its vast grassroots mobilization, sophisticated organization, and cultural-linguistic aspect.

Never studied prior to this book, the Turkmen council movement lasted for a year before it was crushed by the new, hostile regime that had been actively seeking to destroy this movement right from the start. The process of eradicating this experiment by the state entailed two imposed armed conflicts, continued hostile encroachment in the region, and then a long process of forced assimilation.

Modern Iranians are no strangers to councils and other organizational forms of self-assertion and self-governance. Most studies of councils are actually in Persian and written by activists and scholars of the left. Although it has a history that spans more than a century, *showra* (Persian/Arabic for "council"; also spelled as *shura*) as a form of grassroots and direct democratic participation in Iran has appeared in the English-language scholarship, but only few works have attended to it

(Afary 1996; Bayat 1987, 100–141; Bayat 2017, 49–67; Jafari 2021; Rahnema 1992). In the period that led to the foundation of the modern Iranian state as an agent of authoritarian modernization (Atabaki 2018) and "repressive development" (Vahabzadeh 2010), as well as in the periods of relaxed state repression and control, we witness the (re)surfacing of *showras*, these expressions of alternative, participatory, and democratic modernization.

The last point brings us to yet another oversight caused by epistemological blind spots. With the aforementioned analytical focus on institutional politics and the state in mind, one notices that the amount of literature dedicated to this aspect of Iranian modernity — that is, centralized, institutionalized politics and programmes — overshadows and pushes to obscurity the extent of council experiences and experiments in contemporary Iran. Therefore, a conceptual neglect has been afforded to the forms of power from below, the power of "acting in concert," à la Hannah Arendt, as the source of political life in social movements. By and large, social movements have been investigated mostly in relation to the state and its policies, and thus in a secondary fashion, not in their own rights. They have been studied from the top down, not from the bottom up. The study of *showras* was also generally affected by such epistemic tendency, which also explains the above-mentioned erasure of the Turkmen council movement from mainstream historiography.

But there is further complication: the Pahlavi dynasty founded the modern state by identifying Iran and the Iranian state with Persians and the Persian language, interestingly through a self-orientalizing gaze (via the Germans) that revitalized ancient Persia as the foundation of the postcolonial Pahlavi state (Dabashi 2015, 8). This has affected the aforementioned epistemic gazes — in a dual fashion, in the case of the Turkmens, as a *movement* of a *minority* — such that the movements of national minorities have been treated only in relation to the larger contexts of Iranian politics and history. The movements by national minorities — Kurds, Azerbaijani Turks, Baluchis, Turkmens, Arabs, and others — have been and are, of course, situated within the general context of the nation but still deserving particular attention. Fortunately, this trend seems to be changing with emerging scholarship (see, for example, Jahani Asl 2017).

These preliminary remarks shed light on the approach of this book and my acute epistemic awareness of and resistance to, the lures of

generalizations, subsumptions, orientalizations, and omissions. On par with my previous books (Vahabzadeh 2010, 2015, 2019a, 2022b), this book offers a bottom-up view of the Turkmen council movement and situates it within a transnational context. Simultaneously, the book represents a work of scholarly advocacy of movements for a better life. This particular research tries to showcase the contexts, struggles, visions, challenges, successes, and failures of the Turkmen council movement, but also and with emphasis, its contributions to present and future movements in Iran and in the world. It tries to register how a particular novel, grassroots experiment of the Turkmen national and cultural minority in Iran can be regarded as a potentially universal watershed moment for an alternative social self-organization based on principles of social justice. To that end, what I particularly wish to communicate in this book is a nuanced reading of the Turkmen council movement: one that incorporates facts and existing interpretations but intends to go beyond. As with my previous studies, I achieve a nuanced reading by projecting a phenomenological gaze on it. In a phenomenological manner, this research tries to bring out the concealed from that which has been revealed already. This can be done primarily by going back and (to use phenomenological terms) "reactivating" the "sedimented" origins of the movement.

One last but important note: my lack of knowledge of the Turkmen language imposes a limitation in terms of an inability to access publications in Turkmen, just as I might have misspelled some Turkmen proper nouns. This should have an impact on the cultural aspect of the research. Fortunately, though, the majority of documents pertaining to the Turkmen council movement — the original sources of this study — were published in Persian.

A Movement of Our Global Future

This research has been like a puzzle: it needed to weave together events with ideas within a particular context and through contested narratives with incredible detail. I aim to show the originality of the Turkmen council movement's initiatives — a pathway not specific to Iran but shared by many land-based movements around the world, especially in this age of simultaneous global-capitalist domination and decolonizing movements across the world and the recognition of the rights of indigenous peoples.

To those who did not actually live through the movement, like me (but possibly even those!), the unenviable task of unearthing the movement appears to be a demanding one. As mentioned earlier, at the time the Turkmen council movement was unfolding, I was a young supporter of Fadaiyan in Tehran who followed the events in the Plains of Turkmen with great enthusiasm and supported the movement morally and politically. Aside from the movement itself, my interest was also boosted by what we erroneously called — and unfortunately continue to call — its "ethnic" (*qowmi*) element — a term that has emanated from the colonial mindset at the time of the formation of nation-states and still lingers in our conceptualizations.

I was born in Tehran to Persian and Azerbaijani parents. My mother tongue is Persian, and my father spoke Azeri Turkish to his many siblings, but never to his children. Instead, he taught his children English and French. I ended up publishing my first English to Persian translation (an article from *The Reader's Digest*) at the age of 14. I was already a transnational teenager! My father was a dissident intellectual, vocally critical of the Shah and a supporter of militant resistance to monarchy, but he still had a "modernist" mindset, like most of his contemporaries, that privileged "international" (implicitly, colonial) languages to the national ones. I picked up my paternal language, though, by listening to my father's conversations with others and by listening to Turkish songs, but I could not master it. In my teen years, I had intuitively learned the power of assimilation into Persian. But, thinking back, it really did not have to be this way. In this context, when decades later I entered academia in Canada, I realized that while Persian was my ancestral language and the country's largest lingua franca, it was also a means of state power to forge its ideal citizens. That said, I feel content to have been born into the Persian language, and I soon developed great passion for Persian classics, poetry in particular, which I read voraciously from a very young age to this day; I have read all major poetry divans as well as the complete works of key modern poets. My world is indeed a Persian world. However, in my teenage years I realized, without being able to utter the experience, that assimilation deprived me of parallel worlds of other languages native to my homeland. During high school, I had Kurdish, Turkmen, and Armenian friends and became aware, again intuitively, of how they would feel at home in their own mother tongues. Iran speaks in many languages. So, reflecting back, my interest in the Turkmens' movement was also in

part cultural, an unconscious attempt perhaps for recovering what I had lost: being multilingual in my homeland. I remember attending the folk music festivals of Fadaiyan, where the music from Azerbaijan, the Plains of Turkmen, Mazandaran, and other regions felt like breeze in my soul. I purchased cassettes of these concerts and enjoyed listening to them until the repressive machinery of the Islamic Republic finally reached my home and I had to destroy my entire library and collections to survive, a trauma that pierces my heart to this day.

I have been an uninvited guest, living on the ancestral lands of the Indigenous Peoples of the West Coast of Canada for more than three decades. My home and the University of Victoria, where I work, are located on the unceded territories of lək̓ʷəŋən peoples, the traditional lands of the Songhees, Esquimalt, and W̱SÁNEĆ peoples on the southern tip of the so-called Vancouver Island (a colonial name). A complex struggle for decolonization has been going on around me, and in my courses, I try to contribute, in a small way, to this ongoing struggle. This island is a mysterious and charming place that allows those who are still able to *feel* the meta-humans — trees, animals, birds, boulders, rivers, and the ocean — a spiritual connection to this place. I was thrown here as a refugee and an exile and miraculously found myself a humble denizen of this land.

Given where I stand, the story of the Turkmen council movement that I tell, in historical and analytical ways, is indeed coloured by my experiences. I am not (cannot be, nor do I want to be) the detached scholar who aims to produce impartial accounts for academic consumption in an extractive way. Thus, this book offers an advocate-scholar's account whose interpretive foundation is the movement itself and the literature it left behind. I show that the Turkmen council movement was a movement of ancestral inhabitants of the region for land and culture, and unbeknownst to the activists and participants, it had an organic affinity with the struggles of 350 million indigenous peoples across the world. I show certain organic, worldview affinities of the Turkmen council movement of four decades ago with today's autonomous movements such as the Zapatistas in Chiapas, Mexico, and Rojava (Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria) in Syria. I register that the Turkmens wanted the fundamental right to live as a people on their ancestral lands, and that is essentially what links this movement of yesteryear to today's growing movements of peoples for self-governance in a world that is rapidly disintegrating ecologically, economically,

politically, and socially. I hope to show that a movement of the past contains lessons, and that it offers a model of participatory, democratic self-governance for land-based movements of today. Theoretically, I suggest a concept, in addition to indigeneity, in relation to the existing land- and culture-based movements of the world today: *ancestrality*.

The Road from Here

Chapter 1 offers the theoretical foundations and historical accounts that are necessary for this study. It briefly refers to the history of modern councils, before offering a reading of Hannah Arendt's concept of councils as grassroots, egalitarian, and participatory political formation of a people. The chapter then offers a short history of councils in modern Iran and a quick history of Fadaiyan because the group played an important role alongside the Turkmen council movement. Registering the historical complexities of landownership and the peasant conditions in Persia, Chapter 2 discusses the process of dispossession and appropriation of land in the course of Iranian modernization and state formation in the twentieth century and under the Pahlavi dynasty. It offers an analysis of capitalist encroachment through the 1960s land reform that aimed at the proletarianization of Iranian peasantry. Chapter 3 provides a history of Turkmen people in the region and how throughout the twentieth century they were adversely affected by Pahlavi transformation of landownership. State-sanctioned cultural assimilation also affected Turkmens as a national and linguistic minority. Chapter 4 attends to the formation of the Turkmen peasant council movement and goes through its activities in the face of the oppressive Islamic state. By registering sufficient detail, this chapter speaks of the March 1979 armed conflict and traces the subsequent activities of the movements from the Revolution's victory until the Summer of 1979. Chapter 5 narrates in due detail the movement's expansion and its politics until the second armed conflict in February 1980 and the movement's repression. This chapter also speaks of how the councils were gradually dismantled. The conclusion discusses the concept of ancestrality and offers a multilayered reading of the achievements of the Turkmen council movement and the lessons of this movement for today.

Chapter 1

Historical and Conceptual Preparations for the Study

In the birth of each [hu]man this initial beginning is reaffirmed, because in each instance something new comes into an already existing world which will continue to exist after each individual's death. Because [s/]he is a beginning, [a hu]man can begin; to be human and to be free are one and the same.

— Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future*

IN ORDER TO SITUATE THE THEORETICAL and historical significance of the Turkmen council movement within the study of social movements, council movements, and the myriad of transnational struggles of peoples for social justice and freedom past and present, I engage in this chapter with several relevant literatures that help us braid history and theory together and contextualize the movement at the heart of this study.

The Turkmen council movement was the brainchild of leftist activists associated with post-Revolutionary Iran's most popular leftist organization, the Organization of Iranian People's Fadai Guerrillas (OIPFG). I begin with a brief overview of the formation of workers' councils in the modern European history of rapid, colonial-capitalist industrialization. It is well-known that prior to (globalized) capitalist modernization, collective decision-making was present in many cultures across the world. But modern workplace councils have their roots mostly in Europe, which is a reaction of disenfranchised classes against capitalist exploitation. While councils had undeniable affinities with socialist and workers' movements, the very idea of council as a democratic and participatory political body exceeds the leftist tradition. Therefore, it is necessary to probe the foundational essence of councils, and thus, I offer a glimpse of the theoretical propositions of Hannah Arendt who regards the councils as the most authentic form of human

political life and exercise of freedom. This section is followed by some debates around the "social question" and the working-class action. Then, I situate the emergence of councils with the advent of postcolonial, political modernity in Iran, beginning with the Constitutional Revolution. Next, I attend to Iranian workers' and others' councils and the push for unionization during 1979–1981 and offer conceptual clarifications. Lastly, a brief history of the Fadai Guerrillas is offered to foreshadow the complex relationship between this group and the Turkmen council movement, before some concluding observations are added.

A Glance at the Grassroots Councils in Europe

The struggle of the emerging and expanding working class during the period of rapid industrialization in Europe (and elsewhere) was concomitant, in due time, with the drive toward creating grassroots, collective bodies of workers' self-assertion. The advent of labour unions and workers' councils in the early twentieth century attests to struggles for social rights that were and are still systemically excluded from the formal constitutional rights within modern European nation-states as the institutional ancillary to ruling capitalist classes in the liberal democracies.

It is difficult to speak about the councils in Europe and not fall within ideological debates or theoretical expectations. However, keeping my topic in mind and avoiding Eurocentric views, instead of providing a survey of, or rationale for, council experiences in Europe, I want to highlight their importance at certain historic junctures as grassroots, activists' self-organizations that challenge the modern, capitalist-state institutional edifice.

As is known, there was a wave of European (and non-European) workers' councils in the early twentieth century that connects these experiences conceptually if not historically to that of the Paris Commune and the 1905 Russian revolution (Gluckstein 2018, 35; Muldoon 2018b, 3). Although lasting only for just over two months (March 18 to May 28, 1871) and defeated brutally by the military, the Paris Commune of 1871 was a pioneer in council-based autonomous self-governance. It took place in the context of the Franco-Prussian war (1870–1871) and the collapse of the Second Empire in France (1852–1870). Having been placed under siege, the commune's socialist, feminist, and anarchist activists, residents, and workers managed to set up a participatory municipal democracy that held up principles of social and economic justice. Karl

Marx analyzed this experience in *The Civil War in France* (1871). For Marx, the Paris Commune represented the emancipatory, working-class self-government that created a federal authority through local districts in which council delegates were under permanent recall. He believed that as a new form of government this system could be implemented at the national level. The council system represented simultaneously the executive and legislative powers, just as it was a working-class government (Popp-Madsen and Kets 2021, 165). It was indicative of the fact that a genuine workers' government bore no resemblance to the hierarchical system of modern state or representative government, and that the bottom-up form of participatory, popular control was indeed possible.

The 1905 Russian revolution took place in the context of the Russo-Japanese war (1904–1905) and Russia's humiliating defeat. Protests pressured the government for measurable reforms, and workers and soldiers set up soviets as bodies of democratic self-organization that, notably, directed strikes or mutinies. The revolution eventually led to a new constitution and parliament, but of course, failed to deliver the social democratic expectations or radical change. Nonetheless, it showed the possibility that under the conditions where the crushing force of the state is slackened, people are capable of setting up instruments of self-governance. Remarkably, an earliest influence of the first Russian council experience appeared in Iran's 1906 constitutional movement.

I wish to point out that both the Parisian and Russian experiences took place in the context of wars and weakened state control. Consequently, councils "arose in countries as far apart as Russia, Germany, Britain, Hungary, Ireland, Austria, Indonesia and Italy" (Gluckstein 2018, 33). Particularly in Europe, the failure of the socialist parties and labour unions against the imperialist war contributed to the emergence of grassroots councils (Gluckstein 2018, 36–37). These movements' emergence was *overdetermined* by complex elements:

> If we turn our attention to another period of radical mobilizations by workers — that of the workers' council movements in Italy and Germany at the end of the First World War — we see that they too have at their base an overdetermined set of circumstances: the collapse of the social order following the war, the militarization of the factories, the beginnings of Taylorization, the transformation of the role of skilled workers in production. (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 157)

The level of workers' specialization is an important factor that should not be missed: in a majority of cases, metalworkers were council pioneers because, in the age of rapid industrialization, they produced diverse ranges of products for all economic sectors. Thus, according to Donny Gluckstein (2018, 37) "Although council structures spread right across Russia, Germany, Austria, Britain, Hungary and Italy, they almost always began in centres of metalworking. These included Petrograd, Berlin, Glasgow, Vienna, Budapest and Turin."

In the Russian revolution of 1917 these conditions were present, just as they variably were in the German and Italian cases. Here, the workers' and soldiers' councils took shape quickly following the February revolution. Their role in the revolutionary process was undeniable, contrary to official Soviet historiography, as the "soviets arose and assumed de facto power alongside the Provisional Government in March 1917 during a period of dual power before the October Revolution" (Muldoon 2108b, 3). After the February revolution, the impending assault of bourgeois counter-revolution motivated workers to mobilize and set up (in the summer of 1917) their soviets (Mandel 2018, 155). At this time, the soviets were democratically elected and expanded to town and neighbourhood councils. Of particular significance were the Saint Petersburg (Petrograd) workers' councils in 1917–1918 (Mandel 2018). The Bolsheviks did not regard the soviets in the same way the council participants did. During the revolutionary months of 1917 the Bolsheviks propagated the motto, "all power to the soviets" because within the councils dwelled their own party's constituency's power, but after the consolidation of their power, they tried to centralize the soviets and bring them under state control (Rees 1987, 12–13, 19), a move contrary to the grassroots Soviet's raison d'être. The rest is history: factory councils became extensions of the Bolshevik Party and their democratic structure was transformed into a top-down bureaucratic one.

In Germany, too, workers' and soldiers' councils (*Arbeiter- und Soldatenräte*) flourished in November 1918, "following a sailors' mutiny at Kiel, which led to the abdication of the Kaiser and a political struggle over the future form of the German state," which included, inter alia, the introduction of the eight-hour workday and women's suffrage (Muldoon 2108b, 3). This council movement led to a national revolutionary period. The workers' and soldiers' councils held a congress in Berlin in December attended by local *Räte* delegates from across the

country, the vast majority of whom were supporters of the German Social Democratic Party. According to Brian Peterson (1975, 113) "This *Räte* congress also approved of democratic elections in January 1919 for a National Assembly which would write a new constitution and take over as the sovereign law-making body."

However, the problem was that the socialists did not view the councils as alternative to a bourgeois parliamentary system. Ben Fowkes (2014, 43) shows that "Most of them viewed the councils as a temporary and regrettable phenomenon, considering that they would cease to have any function at all once a properly constituted parliament-based government had taken over, which happened in February 1919." Yet the movement, in part, translated into the formation of the Communist Party of Germany (1918), and its radical splinter, the Communist Workers Party of Germany (1920). These events marked the advent of council communism, a position rejected by Lenin and the Bolsheviks. The revolutionary period in Germany (1918–1919) was marked by the government's move to push back against the councils and the revolutionaries trying to oust social democrats from local *Räte* leaderships. The "response of the national government was to send in *Freikorps* (bands of proto-fascist soldiers organized by the [Friedrich] Ebert [Social Democratic] government) and army formations to crush the local *Räte* and turn local power over to a municipal government elected by all classes" (Peterson 1975, 114).

Just like their counterparts in Russia, Hungary, and Germany, following the crises unravelled through the First World War (Amadori and Brunetti 2020), Italy (northern, industrial Italy to be exact) woke to its two Red Years or Biennio Rosso (see Bertrand 1982). Massimo Amadori and Giuliano Brunetti (2020) show that "A vast and militant mass movement which began in the spring of 1919 lasted until September 1920 only after several of the large factories in Northern Italy had been occupied." The "factory councils" took off in Turin in 1919, expanding to a national movement. Workers occupied the FIAT factory, the pinnacle of Italian industry. Militant workers and the Marxists within the Italian Socialist Party (like Antonio Gramsci) who founded the Italian Communist Party in 1921 played crucial roles during the Red Years (Gluckstein 2018, 42). Also important was the formation of fascism within the Socialist Party by Benito Mussolini and Alceste De Abris (National Fascist Party was founded in 1921). Already in 1917, inspired by the Bolshevik revolution, insurrectionary land occupations in northern and southern regions had