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3 Anton Pannekoek: A ‘Principled Theorist’

Gerrit Voerman

Abstract

Anton Pannekoek was not only an astronomer, but also a Marxist theorist. He developed a form of anti-authoritarian socialism in which the workers had to liberate themselves rather than follow their political parties and the trade unions. His anti-authoritarian opinions and his emphasis on spontaneous actions of the masses went too far for many leaders of the labour movement: Pannekoek came into conflict with Troelstra, the leader of the Dutch Social Democratic Workers’ Party, with Kautsky, the leading theorist of the Social Democratic Party of Germany and the Second International, and with Lenin, the revolutionary Russian leader. These clashes of Pannekoek with the establishment of the labour movement were not solely the result of his radical theoretical views, but also of his rigorous personality.

Keywords: Anton Pannekoek, P.J. Troelstra, Karl Kautsky, Lenin, council communism

When Anton Pannekoek (1873-1960) told his father in the summer of 1899 that he had joined the *Sociaal-Democratische Arbeiderspartij* (Social Democratic Workers’ Party, SDAP), his father replied: ‘If you had joined the Freemasons I would have been pleased, but this!’ Pannekoek senior, manager of a small iron foundry, did not think much of socialism and preferred not to see his son going down that path. This was not only for political reasons, but also because he was afraid that this political choice would damage Anton’s career. In those days, it was ‘not done’ to be a socialist, especially for someone from a middle-class milieu.

¹ Pannekoek 1982, 73.

Was Pannekoek senior's fear justified? Did his son's career suffer because he chose to follow the path of socialism? The answer to this question is somewhat ambiguous: it depends on what you understand by Pannekoek's career. Surprisingly, his academic career did not suffer in the end, as in 1925 he became full professor of astronomy in Amsterdam and member of the Royal Academy of Arts and Sciences of the Netherlands, and in 1936 Harvard University bestowed on him an honorary doctorate for his astronomical research. Paradoxically, however, Pannekoek became increasingly marginalized within the socialist movement. This contribution tries to explain this eventual marginalization by analysing the development of Pannekoek's role and position within the international working-class movement.

Pannekoek senior's disappointed reaction was partly due to the fact that his son had been doing so well in society. Anton had graduated from Leiden University with a degree in Astronomy. A few years later, he became observer at the Leiden Observatory. After he was appointed, Pannekoek joined the local Liberal electoral association, mainly because he thought this was expected of him, given his social status. He followed in the footsteps of his father, who was a staunch Liberal. After a personal struggle, however, Pannekoek converted to socialism. During a public Liberal meeting he put forward the standpoint of the SDAP. Later he wrote in his memoirs: 'Now all acquaintances, notables, and academic colleagues knew where I stood.'² There is little reason to doubt this account, given the principled stance he was to take later in life. Pannekoek did not shy away from the consequences of the sometimes sharp political choices he made, even though they occasionally cost him the sympathy of the people around him or resulted in major conflicts, ending in complete breaks with former kindred spirits – like Pieter Jelles Troelstra, the leader of the SDAP; Karl Kautsky, the most prominent theorist of the *Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands* (Social Democratic Party of Germany, SPD); and Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, the leader of the Russian Bolsheviks.

Troelstra

After Pannekoek had joined the SDAP, he was actively involved in the foundation of the local party branch in Leiden, which he also chaired. He regarded himself not so much as an organizer or a propagandist, but foremost as a

2 Pannekoek 1982, 73.

theorist. He thus contributed regularly to the social democratic journal *De Nieuwe Tijd* ('The New Era').

Pannekoek's fellow party members soon became familiar with his principled attitude. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the SDAP, as social democratic parties in other countries, was embroiled in an internal struggle between revolutionary Marxists and so-called 'revisionists'. Following the German theorist Eduard Bernstein, the revisionists preferred a practical path, geared to steady but gradual social reforms, over a socialist revolution. They argued that the working class in the Netherlands was weak, since it made up only a minority of the population and was not well organized. Therefore, the SDAP's main goal should be to broaden its electoral base through ideological adaptations. This way, the party's political power could be increased through electoral victories. Indeed, the SDAP soon oriented itself not only on factory workers, but also on small farmers, tenants, and Christian workers. In addition, given the Dutch electoral majority system, the party did not a priori want to exclude making deals with bourgeois parties in order to gain more legislative seats.

The most prominent exponent of this moderate and pragmatic line was Pieter Jelles Troelstra (1860-1930), who had been a charismatic leader of the party since its foundation in 1894. He was much esteemed within the international labour movement and was part of the inner circle of the Second International, the organization of socialist parties and trade unions founded in Paris in 1889. He firmly believed in the parliamentary road to socialism, although he did not give up on the revolution altogether. The orthodox leftist minority strongly opposed Troelstra's position. In agreement with the German orthodox Marxist theorist Karl Kautsky, its view was that socialism would not be achieved gradually and peacefully, but could only be the outcome of a revolution. The inevitable concentration of capital in the hands of a few and the *Verelendung* (pauperization) of the large majority of the masses resulting from this, would lead to a sharpening of the class struggle. Capitalism would thus collapse due to the inevitable intensification of these internal contradictions and make way to socialism.

Pannekoek became one of the main voices of the Marxist opposition in the SDAP, along with the poets Herman Gorter (1864-1927) and Henriette Roland Holst (1869-1952), who both became his close friends. All three were editors of the critical journal *De Nieuwe Tijd*, which considered itself the guardian of revolutionary Marxist politics. They enjoyed a warm and friendly relation with their intellectual guide Kautsky, with whom they frequently corresponded. Partly under his influence, Pannekoek, Gorter, and Roland Holst became committed to a rather principled kind of Marxism. They made

Troelstra their scapegoat for what they perceived as the political degeneration of the SDAP into a moderate non-revolutionary party. Pannekoek wrote in 1944 in his autobiography that when he met the SDAP-leader for the first time, he noticed something 'demagogic' in the party leader's demeanour; he experienced 'the lawyer, the politician, which made me suspicious'.³ Pannekoek's image of Troelstra may have grown more negative as the years advanced, but it is clear that in the internal party struggle, Pannekoek was at the forefront criticizing Troelstra's opportunist and reformist positions. At the same time, Pannekoek championed theoretical purity on party congresses and in articles in *De Nieuwe Tijd*. Sometimes, his fellow opponents thought Pannekoek was going too far; Gorter once called him a 'hyper-Marxist', and Roland Holst, in a letter to Kautsky, would criticize him for being a 'Hitzkopf' (hothead).⁴

According to the Marxist opposition, too much emphasis on parliamentary and trade union work would only 'weaken the principled revolutionary character of the party'.⁵ In their view, political action – directed against the bourgeoisie and the state – was too often confused with parliamentary action, which was only part of it. According to Pannekoek, parliament had to be the arena where social democracy criticized capitalism continuously, defended the interests of the working class, forged proletarian unity and raised the level of insight of the workers into the workings of capitalism.⁶ Because the SDAP-politicians did not act in a 'purely proletarian' fashion, the more class-conscious workers had become frustrated and consequently remained at a distance from the party.⁷ In Pannekoek's opinion, striving for social reforms as goals in themselves would 'obscure the fundamental difference between our party and all bourgeois parties'. This, then, undermined class-consciousness.⁸ The focus should be on class struggle and raising the proletarian awareness of the workers; the evolution of capitalism, as revealed by Marx, would naturally lead to the victory of the working class.

Pannekoek clashed with Troelstra for the first time in the wake of the railway strike of 1903 and the subsequent unsuccessful political strike against the introduction of legislation banning further strike action of railway workers by the ruling conservative cabinet. The SDAP-leader had initially spoken out in favour of a political strike, but then abruptly and obstinately called it off.

3 Pannekoek 1982, 77.

4 Buiting 1989, 249-250.

5 Pannekoek and Gorter 1906, 24.

6 Buiting 2003, 225.

7 Pannekoek 1903.

8 Buiting 2003, 260.

Pannekoek, who now began to believe that the masses were more important than the party in accomplishing social transformation, pointed out the demoralizing effect of Troelstra's sudden change of heart.⁹ He accused Troelstra of 'little less than betrayal' – not in a moral sense, but as an 'objective lack of insight'.¹⁰ This nuance understandably got lost in the heat of the battle, which became increasingly ferocious and personal. Pannekoek accused Troelstra of conspiring and stirring up fellow party members against him and the party's left wing, while Troelstra attacked Pannekoek for not only offending him as party leader, but also for consequently diminishing the standing of the party, thus effectively giving ammunition to political enemies of the labour movement.¹¹ Troelstra criticized Pannekoek's 'hunt for heretics' and publicly ridiculed his opponent.¹² 'It is possible for someone to be an excellent philosopher, a competent observer of celestial things, and yet still behave like a perfect lout in political and parliamentary matters,' he stated.¹³ Troelstra blamed Pannekoek, whom he saw as dogmatic, for being the main instigator of inner party strife.

The conflict would ultimately end in a schism. In 1909, the majority of the Marxist opposition, including Pannekoek, left the SDAP and founded the *Sociaal-Democratische Partij* (Social Democratic Party, SDP). Initially, Pannekoek regarded the schism as a 'disaster', but soon he spoke of a 'liberation', bringing 'so much new and free thinking and action'.¹⁴ Eventually, however, Pannekoek clashed with the new party leadership – as did Gorter and, a little later, Roland Holst.

After the schism of 1909, Pannekoek, Gorter, and Roland Holst became even more critical of the parliamentary orientation of the SDAP. According to them, it was the growing bureaucracy of the SDAP and the trade unions that made them afraid of conflict and instead geared both organizations towards policies of compromise and practical reforms. As countermeasures, the three started 'to emphasize the political mass strike, radical democratic organization and the encouragement of the revolutionary-creative potential of the masses'.¹⁵ These priorities made Pannekoek, Gorter, and Roland Holst not only stand out as radically left of the SDAP, but also of the SDP. Their emphasis on the spontaneous, creative self-action of the masses was inspired by the epistemology of the German philosopher Joseph Dietzgen,

9 Gerber 1989, 38.

10 Buiting 1989, 168-169; Sijes 1982, 24-25.

11 Troelstra 1906, 93.

12 Quoted in Buiting 1989, 254.

13 Quoted in Pannekoek 1982, 312 n. 173.

14 Buiting 1989, 580.

15 Buiting 1989, 607; see also Gerber 1989, 38.

which they regarded as a necessary addition to Marxism.¹⁶ As a result, they became known as the ‘Dutch Marxist School’, which emphasized ideological purity, ‘self-action’ by the masses, and a voluntarist interpretation of classical Marxism, thus challenging the mechanistic and determinist character the latter had taken.¹⁷ In the words of Pannekoek’s biographer Gerber, ‘they firmly rejected theoretical revisionism and practical reformism, maintained a deep mistrust of parliamentarianism and advocated an active strategy of confrontation with the state and capital’.¹⁸ In the first two decades of the twentieth century, Pannekoek, Gorter, and Roland Holst were influential thinkers in the European labour movement.¹⁹

Kautsky

At the same time as the conflicts within the SDAP escalated, Pannekoek had come to dislike his work at the Observatory. In November 1906, after receiving an official invitation by Kautsky and the leadership of the SPD, he left for Berlin to teach at their party school. Karl Kautsky (1854-1938) had been the guiding light of the Dutch revolutionary Marxists in their struggle against Troelstra. He was known as the ‘Pope of Marxism’ and was respected and admired by many, including Pannekoek, who regarded himself a ‘pupil’ of him.²⁰ The two were close political allies as well as close friends. They had met in 1900, when Kautsky gave political lectures in Amsterdam and Delft, after which they started to correspond.²¹ Kautsky asked Pannekoek to contribute to *Die Neue Zeit* (‘The New Era’), the theoretical journal of the SPD, of which he was the founder and chief editor. Kautsky soon acknowledged how theoretically gifted the Dutch astronomer was. Their relationship was amicable and Pannekoek was very respectful. In due course, however, personal frictions surfaced. Pannekoek did not mince words and complained, for instance, that Kautsky had deleted a critical remark from one of his book reviews. He also expressed his frustration when, in 1909, the prominent German ideologist ‘abandoned’ the Marxist opposition in the Dutch SDAP

16 Bock 1992; Buiting 2003, 165-175.

17 Bock 1992; van der Steen 2006; Gerber 1989, 22.

18 Gerber 1989, 42.

19 Gerber 1989, 32.

20 Pannekoek to Kautsky, n.d., KK, D XVIII, 368.

21 Gerber 1989, 43.

by not publicly supporting them when Troelstra was trying to have them thrown out of the party.²²

Back in 1906, however, Pannekoek was excited to be invited by Kautsky and to work for the SPD. When he arrived in Berlin, Kautsky took care of him. He made sure that his Dutch confidant received a decent salary, and initially Pannekoek stayed with the Kautsky family. Later, Pannekoek and his wife frequently paid social visits to the Kautsky's and return visits were made as well. Kautsky also introduced his friend to the German party leadership. At his home, for instance, Pannekoek met Rosa Luxemburg (1871-1919), a revolutionary socialist of Polish-Jewish origin. In 1907, when the Prussian government prohibited Pannekoek from working as an instructor at the SPD's party school, Kautsky helped him to find an alternative source of income. Pannekoek started to write a weekly column (*'Zeitungskorrespondenz'*), which was published in various socialist papers. This development further increased his influence in the German labour movement. In 1910, Pannekoek and his family moved to Bremen, outside the Prussian state, where he worked for the local SPD branch, delivering courses and giving lectures. In Berlin, he had missed the daily life of the party; 'we only saw the big shots, but not the workers themselves'. He later claimed that he felt that he had lived in a 'special world, not in the real world', by being confined only to higher party circles, among only officials.²³ In Bremen, this was different: here he was a part of the ordinary party life.

In the bitter conflict between revisionists and reformists on the one hand and the orthodox Marxists on the other, Kautsky and Pannekoek had been on the same side. Despite their political like-mindedness and mutual affection, however, Pannekoek and his German friend hit upon a fundamental difference of opinion about the importance of mass actions in 1911. Pannekoek followed Luxemburg, who held that the masses should develop their own forms of struggle, beyond the stifling control of the party and its leadership. Both Luxemburg and Pannekoek stated that mass actions were the expression of the will of the proletariat.²⁴ Kautsky, on the other hand, saw this weapon as a last resort of the proletariat, only to be used under dire circumstances and under the direction of the party. He mistrusted unorganized and spontaneous masses, which he felt were unpredictable and therefore uncontrollable. Instead, he emphasized strong organization, discipline, and parliamentary action, thereby reasserting the primacy of the

22 Pannekoek to Kautsky, 4 February 1909, KK, D XVIII, 408.

23 Pannekoek 1982, 138.

24 Pannekoek 1982, 140; Pannekoek to Kautsky, n.d., KK, D XVIII, 372.

party and the trade unions. For Kautsky, organization was indispensable in order to channel the undirected energy of the masses and to strategically plan which struggles ought to be waged by the masses. Moreover, Kautsky feared the repercussions of a frontal attack on the powerful Prussian state for the social democratic organizations.²⁵

As a result of this debate, a divide grew within the orthodox-Marxist camp, with Pannekoek, preceded by Luxemburg, emerging as a figurehead of the 'neo-radical' faction.²⁶ Pannekoek had been impressed by the Russian revolution of 1905, with its barricade struggles and mass strikes, and the Prussian suffrage demonstrations of a few years later. Like Luxemburg, he saw mass action as the ultimate means to revolutionize the masses and destroy the capitalist state. Unlike Kautsky, Pannekoek came to expect less and less from parliamentary and trade union tactics that aimed at strengthening labour organizations step by step into a strong political power. He had seen with his own eyes in both the Netherlands and Germany how small-time local officials, as well as the big wigs of the labour movement bureaucracy – the 'labour aristocracy' –, opted for caution and moderation out of self-interest. According to Pannekoek, parliamentary tactics had their benefits for as long as the working class was weak, but it was not a way to prepare for revolution.²⁷ For that, the workers had to take the initiative in their own hands and propel the party and the trade union organizations forwards by means of mass action. Mass protests, rallies, and strikes would advance their knowledge, insight, and political experience, and thus raise their social and political consciousness. The revolutionary potential of the masses would lead to new forms of organization of the working class, based on democratic self-government. This would render the leaders of existing organizations superfluous – even if only partly. At this time, Pannekoek still believed that mass actions would be most productive if the party and trade unions were involved, not in a leading but in a supporting role, encouraged and driven by the revolutionary energy of the masses.²⁸

Pannekoek's views, in which not the leaders but the masses had to take the initiative, were of course strongly opposed by the establishment of the SPD and the trade unions. Kautsky, who in this period started to identify his own positions as 'centrist' (being opposed to revisionism as well as the 'new

25 Buiting 2003, 399-400; Salvadori 1979, 154.

26 Salvadori 1979, 143.

27 Salvadori 1979, 156.

28 Sijes 1982, 28-37; Buiting 1989, 607; Gerber 1989, 98-99.

radicalism'), also turned against him.²⁹ They clashed in lengthy articles in *Die Neue Zeit*.³⁰ Their polemic addressed several issues, such as the proper role of the state in the process of social transformation. While Kautsky was bent on conquering and taking over the state by achieving a parliamentary majority, Pannekoek claimed that the state had to be destroyed.³¹ Yet, the central theme of their discussion was the role of mass action.

When Kautsky started the discussion with his 1911 article 'Die Aktion der Masse', Pannekoek's initial response was quite mild. In a letter to Kautsky he proposed an 'objective discussion', which would be in the interest of the party.³² Later, Pannekoek announced a 'sharp presentation' of their differences, because he was convinced that in order to come together, it was necessary to know exactly and clearly the differences between each other's point of view.³³ In his reply to Kautsky ('Massenaktion und Revolution'), Pannekoek was indeed sharp and critical. He not only pointed out their differences in all their facets, as he already had announced he would; he also reproached Kautsky for not using the Marxist analytical method properly. In Pannekoek's eyes, Kautsky was more or less approaching revisionism; a very harsh critique.³⁴ At one point Pannekoek even wrote 'that one could hardly believe that these sentences have flowed from Kautsky's pen'.³⁵

To be castigated by his former pupil in his own journal proved to be too much for Kautsky. The internationally distinguished theorist seemed personally hurt – something Pannekoek later also sensed, when he wrote Kautsky that it appeared to him that the latter felt personally wronged.³⁶ Kautsky's public response was venomous and sarcastic: 'Aye, does comrade Pannekoek really believe, that I have forgotten the ABC of Marxism, ideas to whose gaining acceptance I have spent the best part of my life? [...] Fortunately we have comrade Pannekoek, who exposes my "bourgeois misunderstanding"'. Kautsky found Pannekoek simplistic ('a one-size-fits-all blueprint'), obscure ('all this is abundantly unclear and mysterious, reminds one more of the

29 Salvadori 1979, 149.

30 See Kautsky 1911-1912a; 1911-1912b; 1912-1913; Pannekoek 1911-1912; 1912-1913a; 1912-1913b.

31 Buiting 2003, 399-400.

32 Pannekoek to Kautsky, 6 November 1911, KK, D XVIII, 413.

33 Pannekoek to Kautsky, 8 May 1912, KK, D XVIII, 417.

34 Pannekoek 1911-1912, 589, 592.

35 Pannekoek 1911-1912, 611.

36 Pannekoek to Kautsky, 30 December 1912, KK, D XVIII, 423.

Delphic oracle and Sybilline books than the substantiation of a new tactic'), and engaged in nitpicking ('Talmudic hair-splitting').³⁷

Even though Pannekoek must have been upset by Kautsky's article, he seemingly remained calm. 'I certainly have never believed that it would be possible that you would distort my views in such a way', he wrote to Kautsky in a personal letter. Pannekoek further wrote that he found Kautsky's article 'so bourgeois [*bürgerlich*] and un-Marxist, that I more than anything else regret to find this under your name' – which is difficult to interpret in any other way than that Kautsky had fallen from his pedestal in the eyes of Pannekoek. Kautsky's criticisms hardly made an impression on Pannekoek, on the contrary, the validity of his opinions were only confirmed.³⁸

Early in 1913, the two once befriended opponents ended their polemic. In Pannekoek's final remarks and Kautsky's very short reply, there were hardly any signs of mutual appreciation or affection.³⁹ Their political collision also meant the end of their friendship. Later, Pannekoek would write in his autobiography that their relationship had cooled, 'not so much personally but rather from a theoretical perspective'; an obvious understatement.⁴⁰ In April of 1912, Pannekoek already had let Kautsky know that it was 'painful' for him to see them drifting away from each other.⁴¹ Pannekoek felt that Kautsky had made no effort to understand him, but instead had simply dismissed him as a 'half-syndicalist or anarchist antiparliamentarian'.⁴² After their clash in *Die Neue Zeit*, Pannekoek's letters to Kautsky stopped. Pannekoek's last letter to be found in Kautsky's archive is dated 5 February 1913. After that, Pannekoek no longer published in *Die Neue Zeit*.⁴³ Shortly after, after the outbreak of World War I, the SPD voted in the German parliament in favour of extending war credits to the government, a move that was incomprehensible for Pannekoek, and he publicly scolded Kautsky for supporting it.⁴⁴ In his autobiography, Pannekoek recollected that he had had 'the greatest pleasure' in 'finishing off' his former teacher in an article.⁴⁵

37 Kautsky 1911-1912b. The English quotations are taken from the English translation at <https://libcom.org/library/new-tactic-karl-kautsky> (accessed 25 May 2016).

38 Pannekoek to Kautsky, 18 August 1912, KK, D XVIII, 419.

39 Pannekoek 1912-1913b, with a footnote by Kautsky.

40 Pannekoek 1982, 165.

41 Pannekoek to Kautsky, 14 April 1912, KK, D XVIII, 416.

42 Pannekoek to Kautsky, 17 October 1912, KK, D XVIII, 421.

43 Welcker 1986, 91.

44 Salvadori 1979, 181.

45 Pannekoek 1982, 183.

Pannekoek declared the Second International dead, after other social democratic parties in Europe had decided to support the war too. He announced the formation of a new one, 'more Socialist than the one that perished'.⁴⁶ Russian Bolshevik leader Lenin was delighted: 'The only one who has told the workers the truth – although not loudly enough, and sometimes not quite skilfully – is Pannekoek.'⁴⁷

After the outbreak of World War I, Pannekoek and his family returned to the Netherlands. Pannekoek tried to earn a living, first as a journalist, and then as a secondary school teacher. He did not want to upset his pupils' parents, so he refrained from lecturing at SDP-meetings. He continued writing for publications such as *De Nieuwe Tijd*, because this did not attract much attention, as he saw it. After Pannekoek had become a full-time lecturer in mathematics and astronomy at the University of Amsterdam in 1919, he started to write under the pseudonym of Karl Horner, in order not to harm his academic career.

Lenin

After Troelstra and Kautsky, the third prominent leftist leader with whom Pannekoek clashed was Vladimir Ilyich Lenin (1870-1924), leader of the Russian Bolsheviks and the October Revolution of 1917, and the founder of the Soviet Union. Other than with Troelstra and Kautsky, Pannekoek never met Lenin. He did, however, maintain relatively close contacts with Lenin and other Russian Bolsheviks around the time of World War I, just like some other Dutch orthodox Marxists.⁴⁸ The Bolsheviks were rather isolated within the international Socialist movement and were glad to welcome kindred spirits. Lenin himself was greatly interested in the publications of Pannekoek and Gorter. With the help of a German-Dutch dictionary he could 'understand about 30-40%' and initially he had a high opinion of both.⁴⁹ He welcomed their publications and sided with Pannekoek in his polemic with Kautsky.⁵⁰

Lenin could use the support of his Dutch comrades. In his struggle against the 'social chauvinists' – his label for social democrats who supported the war efforts of their national governments – he tried to forge closer links

46 Pannekoek 1914, 688.

47 Quoted in Gerber 1989, 109.

48 Bauman 1988; Voerman 2001; 2007.

49 Quoted in de Liagre Böhl 1996, 361.

50 de Liagre Böhl 1996, 362; Lenin [1917] 1964, 488-496.

between the Bolsheviks and other leftist internationalist groups. In the summer of 1915, Lenin proposed to SDP-leader David Wijnkoop to draft a joint declaration aimed against the 'imperialist' war, which was to be presented in September at the Conference of Zimmerwald, where delegates of leftist anti-war groupings would gather. This plan came to nothing, as Wijnkoop and his fellow party leaders had no confidence in the political outcomes of the conference. Despite Lenin's insistence, they decided not to participate. Pannekoek had been strongly in favour of attending the conference, but was not able to go himself. However, he also did not think highly of the common declaration Lenin wanted to draft. 'I do not have high expectations of him', Pannekoek wrote to Wijnkoop. 'The intellectual guidance has to come from the SDP.'⁵¹

In this period, Pannekoek was involved, along with Roland Holst, in founding a left-wing Marxist theoretical journal called *Der Vorbote* (The Herald), which was meant to combat Kautsky and other moderates. They collaborated with Lenin, who supported Pannekoek as a 'trusted representative' of the Bolsheviks.⁵² The journal was supportive of the revolutionary socialist wing of the Zimmerwald conference, and aimed for the foundation of a third, radical International, as the successor of the 'bankrupt' Second International.

Only two issues of *Der Vorbote* were published, partly as a result of frictions between Pannekoek and Lenin. Politically, they were quite close: both could be found at the left wing of the international labour movement, and opposed the 'imperialist' war as well as the revisionist 'deviations' in the labour movement. Furthermore, both were in favour of a new, radical international. However, signs of an impending rift were also soon visible. In his book *State and Revolution*, which was published in 1917, Lenin welcomed Pannekoek's earlier attack against Kautsky, but disapproved of the Dutchman's preoccupation with mass action. Lenin believed that the term obscured the concept of 'revolution'.⁵³ Pannekoek, on the other hand, admired Lenin's dedication, but did not think of him as a 'high-flyer'. In 1915, in a letter to SDP-leader Wijnkoop, he described the Russian revolutionary leader in theoretical respect as 'a curious chap who, moreover, sees Western Europe too much from a Russian perspective'.⁵⁴ One year later, he wrote to Wijnkoop 'that Lenin is still, to a large extent, an old revolutionary conspirator, and he has

51 Pannekoek to Wijnkoop, 22 July 1915, CA, 581/1/35.

52 Pannekoek to Van Ravesteyn, 22 (quote) and 24 October 1915, WvR, 15.

53 Bauman 1988, 166.

54 Pannekoek to Wijnkoop, 12 July 1915, CA, 581/1/35.

no clear understanding of imperialism'.⁵⁵ There was a huge theoretical and strategic difference between the two, which would later become all too visible. While Pannekoek had great confidence in the creative potential and the revolutionary energy of the masses, Lenin – just as Kautsky – believed that one could not rely on the spontaneity of the masses. He saw it as the task of the disciplined communist vanguard to raise the proletarian consciousness of the masses. Clearly, such a fundamental difference of opinion could only lead to a clash between Pannekoek and Lenin.

Pannekoek welcomed the Russian October Revolution of 1917 with great enthusiasm. A new period had started, he stated, not only for Russia, but also for the European proletariat. Pannekoek embraced the Bolsheviks, led by Lenin and Trotsky, as 'those who courageously go before us on the road to socialism'.⁵⁶ He saw the 'Soviets', the workers' and soldiers' councils, as 'the new institution of power of the proletarian masses', being far more democratic than the parliamentary system.⁵⁷ Again, Pannekoek emphasized the importance of the self-mobilization of the masses, who should act independently and liberate themselves, instead of working as the extension of other actors.⁵⁸ Nevertheless, Pannekoek was also amongst those who warned early on about the difficulties that the Bolsheviks might encounter due to the agrarian character of Russia. Lenin and Trotsky invited Pannekoek and Gorter to come to Moscow in 1918, because they believed that their theoretical and practical work could contribute to the revolutionaries' cause. Nothing came of the invitations, however, because the situation in Europe was too dangerous to travel.⁵⁹

The engineer Sebald Rutgers (1879-1961), a Dutch communist, who had attended the founding congress of the Communist International (Comintern) in Moscow in March of 1919, was then instructed by Lenin to set up an outpost in the Netherlands to facilitate communication between Moscow and the Western European communist groups. Upon his arrival, Rutgers stated that Lenin expected much of the Dutch orthodox Marxists, 'especially of Gorter and Pannekoek'.⁶⁰ The Executive Committee of the Comintern (ECCI) appointed Rutgers, Roland Holst, Pannekoek, Gorter, and the SDP-leaders Wijnkoop and Willem van Ravesteyn to head the Comintern Bureau in Amsterdam, and placed twenty million rubles at its disposal. Rutgers received the bulk of the amount in the form of precious stones. Moscow

55 Pannekoek to Wijnkoop, 4 January 1916, CA, 581/1/35.

56 Pannekoek 1917, 560.

57 Buiting 2003, 585.

58 Sijes 1982, 45-46.

59 Voerman 2001, 50.

60 Rutgers 1935, 397.

had reserved additional funds for Pannekoek and Gorter, for the purpose of appointing them in the service of the Comintern. According to Pannekoek himself, Rutgers had asked him to go to Moscow, 'to assist in theoretical work, as adviser, etc.'. He declined a second time, because he had had poor experiences with being on the payroll of the labour movement during his German years. If he were to be employed by the party or the government and differences of opinion would arise, 'I would either have to resign, penniless, to be able to stand firm, or, out of fear for such a situation, to bend, and work and speak contrary to my belief. I do not want to have to make that choice'.⁶¹

Rutgers arrived in the Netherlands in November of 1919. Activities organized by the Bureau included an international conference to discuss political strategy and the best approach to revolutionary agitation. The meeting was held in February of 1920, with delegates mainly from the United States, England, Germany, and Belgium. The conference ended in a complete failure, as the police managed to monitor the deliberations and to arrest several participants. The Dutch communists had no conspiratorial experience at all: in his memoirs, Pannekoek recalled that during lunchtime conference attendants would enjoy the hospitality of a nearby beer garden, where discussions were loudly continued in various languages.⁶²

The Amsterdam Bureau soon found itself in a complicated political situation. Pannekoek had drafted a resolution about parliamentarism for its Amsterdam conference, while another on trade unions was written by the Dutch communist Henk Sneevliet, who one year later would be involved in the foundation of the Chinese Communist Party.⁶³ At its founding congress in March 1919, the Comintern had been dismissive of participation in elections, but later that year it softened its stance. Comintern-president Gregory Zinoviev declared that although under the dictatorship of the proletariat, parliament would have to make way for the Soviets, under capitalism it might be desirable to utilize popular representation to further the revolution. Whether one would participate in an election, depended on the circumstances.⁶⁴ Pannekoek's resolution on parliamentarism was largely based on Zinoviev's opinions, although the former emphasized more strongly the possibility of an election boycott at times of revolutionary turmoil and to concentrate in that case all forces on direct mass action. This resolution could not be discussed at the conference, due to the police

61 Pannekoek 1982, 196.

62 Pannekoek 1982, 198.

63 Communist International 1920; Buiting 2003, 615.

64 Degras 1971, 69.

intervention, but the parliamentary issue was also addressed in Sneevliet's resolution on trade unions. The delegates declared unanimously that the aim of the revolutionary proletariat was to seize state power.

Neither parliaments nor trade unions are suited means to that end, but mass action and workers' councils are; mass action should bring together all workers, organized and non-organized, and unite them in an open and direct struggle for power. The councils should be the organs of the revolutionary workers' state – of the proletarian dictatorship.⁶⁵

The conference went further than Zinoviev and Pannekoek in its categorical rejection of parliamentary politics, but the latter would certainly have agreed to it. The Amsterdam conference also adopted a radical stance on trade unions. Its resolution expressed a deep suspicion of traditional unions. It suggested that the reformist trade union movement had become subservient to capitalism and was no longer in a position to take decisive action against it. Therefore, the existing trade unions had to be either 'revolutionized' from within, or replaced by completely new, powerful, anti-capitalist and anti-bureaucratic factory organizations.

Unfortunately for the Amsterdam Bureau, it was out of tune with Moscow right from its inception. Lenin had hoped for a revolution in Europe, which would have helped the Bolsheviks in consolidating their power in Russia. There were some efforts, as in Germany and Hungary, but ultimately, a revolution did not take place in Europe. As a result, Lenin decided on a new strategy: the communists should 'go where the masses are' and try to connect to them, by taking part in parliamentary elections and working within the 'reactionary' trade unions in order to take them over. The resolutions of the Amsterdam conference were clearly contrary to Moscow's new strategy. In February of 1920, the ECCI roundly criticized the policies of the Amsterdam Bureau.⁶⁶ A few months later, it revoked its mandate due to its presumed 'sectarian politics': its views on parliamentarianism and trade unions were now in direct opposition to Moscow.⁶⁷ The announcement of the Amsterdam Bureau's closure came like a bolt out of the blue. Rutgers was stunned; Roland Holst resigned, but was also a little relieved. Pannekoek responded rather laconically, as he had already seen the writing on the wall. He realized that

65 *De Tribune* 1920.

66 Minutes ECCI session, 2 February 1920, CA, 495/1/2.

67 ECCI decision dated 25 April 1920, sent to Trotter [S.J. Rutgers] by Fritz [F. Ström], 12 May 1920, CA, 497/1/9.

the decision to dissolve the Bureau reflected a strategic change of heart in Moscow, which implied that the ideas of the Amsterdam Bureau – which were also his ideas – were now behind the times.⁶⁸

In addition to being condemned by the ECCI, the Amsterdam Bureau was also ridiculed by Lenin, whose pamphlet *'Left-Wing' Communism: An Infantile Disorder* appeared shortly before the second Comintern congress in July of 1920. Lenin publicly condemned the 'left-wing communists', whom he labelled sectarians because they were supposedly turning their backs on the masses. According to Lenin, the Dutch 'leftists' argued 'like doctrinaires of the revolution, who have never taken part in a real revolution'.⁶⁹ Lenin also sharply criticized their leftist aversion to a disciplined vanguard party led from above.

Certain members of the Communist Party of Holland, who were unlucky enough to be born in a small country with traditions and conditions of highly privileged and highly stable legality, and who had never seen a transition from legality and illegality, probably fell into confusion, lost their heads, and helped create these absurd inventions.⁷⁰

Lenin appears to have had a personal hand in reversing the decision – in part his own – to set up the Amsterdam Bureau. He insisted that the ECCI and the forthcoming world congress of the Comintern would roundly condemn leftist deviations and 'in particular, the line of conduct of some members of the Communist Party of Holland, who – whether directly or indirectly, overtly or covertly, wholly or partly, it does not matter – have supported this erroneous policy'.⁷¹ His attack on 'Karl Horner' was particularly vicious. According to Lenin, he produced 'incredible nonsense in a most ridiculous manner', and failed 'to understand the ABC of Marxism'.⁷² As pointed out before, Horner really was Pannekoek, as Lenin most probably did not know. Even though a few years earlier Pannekoek had been one of Lenin's favourites, now he had fallen from grace.

Pannekoek was 'stunned' by Lenin's sudden change of tactics. 'The acknowledged leader of the world revolution here chose the side of opportunism', he later wrote in his memoirs.⁷³ Pannekoek was not impressed

68 Pannekoek to Rutgers, 31 January 1920, CA, 495/172/5.

69 Lenin [1920] 1970, 59.

70 Lenin [1920] 1970, 34.

71 Lenin [1920] 1970, 51.

72 Lenin [1920] 1970, 36.

73 Pannekoek 1982, 200.

by Lenin's pamphlet, which he found 'very weak'.⁷⁴ He outlined his own views in the run-up to the second Comintern congress, with the intention of weighing in on the discussions in Moscow. Pannekoek's resulting text *Weltrevolution und kommunistische Taktik* was indeed circulated among the congress delegates, but according to Zinoviev only as an example of how not to approach the revolution. Pannekoek sharply criticized Lenin. He argued that Lenin was trying to win over the hesitating and half-hearted Western European masses with his new 'opportunistic' tactic, due to the absence of a European revolution. He pointed out that the situation in Western Europe was very different from the Russian circumstances. The Comintern should thus be fully independent from Moscow and tactics in Western Europe had to be entirely different: not a Leninist vanguard party, but the masses themselves should carry out the revolution.⁷⁵

The outcomes of the second Comintern congress made Pannekoek pessimistic. Initially, Pannekoek had supported Lenin's 'New Economic Policy', which to a certain extent allowed free trade in the new communist state. But soon, he got even more disappointed, especially when Moscow tried to move closer to the West in order to economically reconstruct Soviet Russia.⁷⁶ By doing so, Moscow became a stakeholder in the economic development of capitalist countries and an interested party to avoid revolutionary stirrings there. After the third congress of the Comintern in the summer of 1921, Pannekoek had enough: Bolshevik dominance, growing centralization and disciplining, suppression of dissent, the strategic 'shift to the right', and the concessions to the capitalist West were too much for him.⁷⁷ Furthermore, after the congress the Comintern expelled the leftist *Kommunistische Arbeiterpartei Deutschlands* (Communist Workers' Party of Germany, KAPD), which in April 1920 had broken away from the *Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands* (Communist Party of Germany, KPD), which was founded in December 1918. Pannekoek strongly identified with the KAPD: both were in favour of workers' councils and opposed to parliamentary politics, and both also wanted to replace trade unions by revolutionary company organizations (*Arbeiter Unionen*).

In September of 1921, Pannekoek broke with Lenin and the *Communistische Partij in Nederland* (Communist Party in the Netherlands, CPN), as the SDP was now called. He no longer saw Moscow as the leading light and forerunner

74 Pannekoek to Rutgers, 25 August 1920, CA, 495/172/5; see also 'Anhang' in Pannekoek 1920.

75 Pannekoek 1920.

76 Buiting 2003, 585.

77 Pannekoek 1921b; Buiting 1989, 648.

of world revolution.⁷⁸ With Gorter, he was the first communist theorist who denied Lenin's claim that the Bolshevik Revolution had universal validity, an argument that legitimized Moscow's hegemony of the international communist movement. They also rejected the principal identification of the interests of the world revolution with the general interests of Soviet Russia.⁷⁹ By challenging these fundamental premises of the communist regime, both dissidents constituted an ideological threat to the new Russian authorities. At the third congress of the Comintern, Pannekoek and Gorter were excommunicated, when Karl Radek, a confidant of Lenin, ridiculed them: 'One of them is astronomer, gazing only at the stars, and never at a living worker, while the other is a philosopher, and what is more, a poet. (*Laughter*)'.⁸⁰

Pannekoek subsequently became the most important theorist of council communism, but would no longer align himself with any particular party. The proletarian 'party' as a militant organization disappeared completely from his thinking about the self-mobilization of the masses: 'work groups', emerging from within the working class, had to clarify and educate the masses through propaganda and debate. Through such means, the workers themselves should find the proper road to liberation.⁸¹ In 1938, Pannekoek published *Lenin as Philosopher*, in which he argued that 'Lenin never knew real Marxism'.⁸² Leninism as an ideology served only to legitimize the Soviet Union's economic system of 'state capitalism', a system in which the workers were again exploited.

Conclusion

Pannekoek never held a prominent organizational position in the labour movement, but he also never aspired to hold one. He likely did not want a professional career in politics. He did not clash with leaders of the Dutch, German, and Russian labour movements out of a desire for personal advancement of any kind. Instead, he described himself as a 'principled theorist'.⁸³ Pannekoek believed that he could only function properly if he was completely autonomous, both materially and mentally. 'I want to have

78 Pannekoek 1921a.

79 Voerman 2001, 440-441; Gerber 1989, 146.

80 Riddell 2015, 268; emphasis in the original.

81 Sijes 1982, 65-66.

82 Quoted in Gerber 1989, 190.

83 Pannekoek to Rutgers, 14 January and 27 April 1920, CA, 495/172/5.

a completely open mind when forming and developing my views', he wrote in his memoirs.⁸⁴ After his experiences in Germany, Pannekoek no longer wanted a salaried position in the labour movement, because this would make him dependent on others. He thus declined Lenin's invitation to go to Moscow as an adviser.

Pannekoek was a man of principles, and in his view it was hardly acceptable to depart from these in practice. Such ideological purity by itself was enough to bring him into conflict with party leaders like Troelstra, Kautsky, and Lenin, who needed to compromise or change course in day-to-day politics. That Pannekoek increasingly called into question the traditional labour movement organizations with their extensive apparatuses, made his potential for conflict even greater. In his thinking about the 'self-mobilization of the masses', the role of traditional political parties and trade unions became increasingly smaller, to completely disappear by 1920.⁸⁵ Pannekoek's growing criticism of the bureaucratization and oligarchization of parties and unions, and of their self-serving leadership did not win him any friends among the labour movement's establishment – neither social democratic, nor Bolshevik.

But how is it possible that Pannekoek eventually always clashed, even with his close friend Kautsky, while others described him as 'serene', a 'modest and mild-mannered' astronomer, and 'an extraordinary modest man without the slightest trace of self-conceit'?⁸⁶ Indeed, Pannekoek wrote to both Troelstra and Kautsky in more or less the same words that he was not 'a great fighter by nature', only to subsequently seriously clash with them.⁸⁷ Perhaps, Pannekoek was not such a mild-mannered gentleman after all, when he acted as a custodian of socialist purity and principle. Even more so, in this role, he could be unpleasant, nasty, and even rude. Troelstra called him bold and arrogant, but he was of course a political opponent of Pannekoek. Close friends, however, would sometimes express criticism. Roland Holst once called him a hothead, as already mentioned, and at another occasion wrote that the letter she had received from him suggested 'a berating, hostile, and ill-mannered spirit'.⁸⁸ In his publications Pannekoek was usually not unhinged or personal (except perhaps with

84 Pannekoek 1982, 196.

85 Gerber 1989, 182-183.

86 Respectively, Gerber 1989, 30; van Berkel 2001, 387; Henk Canne Meijer, quoted in Gerber 1989, 169.

87 Pannekoek to Troelstra, 10 December 1901, PJT, 65/1 ('doordat ik zo weinig vechtnatuur heb'); Pannekoek to Kautsky, n.d. KK, D XVIII, 374 ('bin ich nicht allererst Kampfnatur').

88 Buiting 1989, 580.

Troelstra), but he certainly was not always the mild-mannered astronomer in his correspondence with comrades: 'he does not mince words, writing point-blank... There he lets himself go..., there one reads how he conspires, insinuations do not lack – although they remain scarce –, there one finds contempt of his political adversaries'.⁸⁹ In his autobiography too, Pannekoek frequently, sharply, and at times harshly condemned opponents such as Friedrich Ebert, who was prominent in the SPD, or at that time allies such as Radek and Van Ravesteyn.⁹⁰ He was convinced that 'opportunism in politics always leads to inferiority in personal actions'. Such a bold maxim is not easy to observe without ending up in a lot of conflict.⁹¹

That Pannekoek did not avoid conflicts might have to do with his approach to socialism. Instead of a politician in search of majorities and expansion of his power and sphere of influence, he was a theorist, a 'principled theorist', who was not primarily interested in what was feasible, but in what was true. Furthermore, he considered himself more a schoolmaster than a diplomat, as he confided to Kautsky.⁹² According to his one-time party colleague Van Ravesteyn, he had a 'rigorous and mathematical mind [...] reasoning mainly in a logical way'.⁹³ Pannekoek studied the development of society and its consequences for the revolutionary process from an orthodox Marxist and, in his view, scientific perspective.⁹⁴ There are similarities between his 'scientific methodology and his socialist straightforwardness'.⁹⁵ Pannekoek had no sympathy for someone who diverted from the proper ideology. When the, in his view, 'objective outcomes' of his analyses were not accepted and led to a conflict, this could prove frustrating or disappointing – but it was ultimately inevitable, and Pannekoek was willing to accept the personal consequences. Such a stance, for instance, clearly manifested itself in his assessment of his friend Roland Holst. Pannekoek sided with the opposition in the SDAP and thus joined the new SDP in 1909, directly after its founding. In the same manner, Pannekoek broke with Lenin and the CPN in 1921. Roland Holst, on the other hand, was only

89 Sijes 1982, 14.

90 Pannekoek 1982, 162-163, 166, 189.

91 Pannekoek 1982, 200.

92 Pannekoek to Kautsky, n.d., KK, D XVIII, 374.

93 van Ravesteyn 1948, 27, 136.

94 Sijes 1982, 16-17. See also Tai and van Dongen 2016; and Klaas van Berkel, 'Utopianism in Anton Pannekoek's Socialism and Astronomy', in this volume, 75-86; Annemarie Rullens, 'From Science to Science', in this volume, 151-172; and Bart van der Steen, "A New Scientific Conception of the Human World", in this volume, 137-155.

95 van Berkel 1984, 466.

able to take these steps after years of hesitation and doubt. 'Her sense of duty and loyalty was much stronger than rational insight would demand', Pannekoek wrote in his memoirs.⁹⁶

The above reveals a great deal about Pannekoek: the rational imperative should come before the heart. He expressed a similar attitude in his assessment of Luxemburg: 'She does not dare to stand alone, does not want to be an individual, a loner, always wants to be surrounded by a crowd, a group, the party, so criticism is always within the party framework.'⁹⁷ Pannekoek himself was not burdened by such sentiments; in contrast to Luxemburg, he accepted isolation. In a letter to Rutgers from January 1920, he characterized his own role in the labour movement: 'I am no good as a representative person: I always side with the minority, who has been marginalized, and I only attach importance to people's proper understanding, which can be taught by theoretical clarification.'⁹⁸

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- KK Karl Kautsky Papers. International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam.
- PJT Archief Pieter Jelles Troelstra, International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam.
- WvR Archief Willem van Ravesteyn, International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam.

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⁹⁶ Pannekoek 1982, 206; see also 1982, 189.

⁹⁷ Pannekoek 1982, 182.

⁹⁸ Pannekoek to Rutgers, 14 January 1920, CA, 495/172/5.

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