

The Politics of Gorter **Anton Pannekoek**

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In an article in *Revolution Proletarienne* No 50 (May 1951, page 171) in which S. Tas speaks of Herman Gorter, he is described as having "a rather bad politics". It seems necessary to compensate for this article with some remarks on the positive character of Gorter's politics.

Gorter became a member of the socialist party where he discovered and studied marxism. From this he drew the conviction that the proletariat can only gain the management of society through class struggle against the bourgeoisie, and that this is how it will destroy capitalism. He was then of the opinion, like the whole of the radical wing of the party, that good parliamentary politics could be an effective means to organize the working masses, to awaken their class consciousness and, by this means, increase their power in respect of the dominant bourgeoisie. For him the socialists in Parliament ought to have vigorously opposed the bourgeois politicians, the representatives of the dominant class. It would be a misunderstanding to say that this politics sought to transform the world through a single blow. The goal of this politics was to increase the strength of the proletariat so that through a series of engagements it became capable of obtaining power. It was in the politics of the German socialist party that one saw the most clear incarnation of this radical position.

This attitude was opposed by reformism, which sought to achieve reforms that would make capitalism bearable, through compromises with the other parties. In the western countries, because of the much longer and slower development of capitalism, class divisions were marked in a much less acute way than they were in Germany, due to the feverish rise of its industrial capitalism. Thus reformism generally dominated the practical activity of the socialist parties. The struggle of the Dutch Marxists, in which Gorter distinguished himself, was directed against this practise because they were of the opinion that reforms could not be obtained through the cunning of politicians, but only through the power of the working class. Only once were they successful. However they were finally expelled. In other Western countries, this was not even necessary; the reformism of the members of parliament, « good politics », reigned in absolute mastery. If we now consider the results of this politics, we see that after a half-century of reformism, capitalism is more powerful than ever and society is threatened with annihilation, while the workers must continue to fight for their crumbs of bread.

In Germany, reformism continued to gain influence in practise, although theoretically this was not recognised in the face of the intensity of the class struggle. It was here that the conviction was born, within the marxists and the most progressive circles of the proletariat, that one could not achieve power by purely parliamentary means. For that one needed the action of the masses, of the workers themselves. The Party passed resolutions on the general strike and we started demonstrations for the right to vote. The extent and strength of these frightened the party chiefs even more than it did the dominant class; they put an end to it for fear of the consequences and all forces were channelled into the elections and parliamentary politics. Only, a minority, « the extreme left », continued propaganda in favour of mass action. The German bourgeoisie, its power unshaken, could prepare to conquer world power without meeting any obstacles. Naturally, Gorter was at the side of the extreme left, whose politics were as his own

After this the danger of war became ever more menacing. The socialists and pacifists of France and Germany organised a Peace congress at Basle in 1912. Beautiful and solemn speeches were made against the war. Gorter himself went there to provoke a discussion about the practical means of fighting against war. Mandated by a certain number of elements of the left, he had proposed a resolution according to which, in all countries, workers had to discuss the danger of war and consider the possibility of mass action against it. But he was not allowed to speak. The leadership of the

congress refused any discussion about means or methods. It acted, supposedly, so as not to destroy the impression of our imposing unity. Actually it feared the consequences of such mass struggles. The governments, not misled by appearances, now knew that they had no serious resistance awaiting them in the socialist parties. Gorters &quo; bad politics &quo; which wanted to prevent war by all means, had been repulsed, the &quo; good politics &quo; of the party politicians remained dominant, it imposed itself on the proletariat and soon led Europe into the first world war.

In this war the socialist politicians were revealed as being what they always had been fundamentally : nationalist politicians, or in other words bourgeois politicians. In every country they supported their own government, helped it to contain the workers and to stifle any resistance to the war. All this was the good politics of skilful politicians. The &quo; bad politics &quo; of Gorter consisted of attempting in his pamphlets on imperialism and on the world revolution, to inform the workers of the reasons for the war and the need for a revolution after the war.

In 1918 when the war ended, revolution erupted in Germany. Or, to be more exact, on November 6th it erupted in Kiel, and three days later the counter-revolution erupted in Berlin; Ebert, the leader of the socialist party, came into government to repress the action of the revolutionary workers, in association with the generals. Naturally Gorter was at the side of Karl Liebknecht, Rosa Luxemburg and the spartakists... The workers action was cut down by the military, Liebknecht and Rosa were assassinated. Ebert, the model of a socialist politician was victorious; through good politics he brought the bourgeoisie back to power in Germany and was its first president.

In 1917, the Russian Revolution destroyed tsarism and brought the Bolcheviks into power. In every country the workers were stirred up and communist groups were formed. Naturally Gorter was immediately at their side with all his heart. He saw this as the beginning of the world revolution, and in Lenin, its supreme leader; in the strike movements in Russia he saw the beginnings of a new form of independent action by workers, and in the soviets the beginning of a new form of organisation of the revolutionary proletariat. But divergences soon appeared. When the defeat of the spartakists in Germany prevented a world revolution, Lenin sought to return to the tactics of parliamentarism to win over the left wing of the socialist parties. The majority of German communists vigorously opposed this. They were expelled, and it was against them that Lenin wrote his pamphlet on the &quo; infantile disorder &quo;. Lenin's action meant the end of the Russian revolution as a positive factor in the world proletarian revolution. Gorter, as spokesman of the opposition, replied with his &quo; Open letter to Lenin &quo; [\[1\]](#). Two fundamentally different conceptions were opposed in these two works. Lenin was a great politician, much greater than his socialist contemporaries, because he had greater tasks and objectives. His historical task, as leader of the bolchevik party, was to raise Russia up from its primitive and agrarian form of production into industrialization, by means of a social and political dictatorship which led to State socialism. And because he only knew capitalism from the outside and not from the inside, he believed it was possible to free the workers of the world by making some the disciplined troops of the &quo; Communist party &quo;. From then on they only had to follow the Russian example. Gorter replied that in Russia the revolution had only been able to conquer thanks to the aid of the peasant masses, and that, precisely this aid was missing in the West, where the peasants themselves were property owners. In Russia it was only necessary to get rid of a crumbling Asiatic despotism. In the West the workers were opposed by the formidable power of capitalism. They would only free themselves from it if they themselves raised the levels of revolutionary strength, of class unity, of independence and of intelligence. Thereafter Lenin's politics have logically ended in Stalinism in Russia, they have divided the proletariat in the West and been rendered impotent by the fanatic and boastful quasi-revolutionism of the communist party. In the years after 1920, Gorter in contact with the small groups of the extreme left, worked to clarify the idea of the organisation of workers councils and thus collaborated in the future renewal of the class struggle of the proletariat. During this time the socialist politicians of the second international, as members of parliament and ministers, were occupied in bailing out a bankrupt capitalism for the bourgeoisie, but nonetheless without

halting the crisis or being able to blur class divisions. In this way they prepared the ground for the accession of Hitler and the second world war.

If we take in at a glance the whole of the political history of the last century, we constantly see the opposition of two political methods, which are themselves an expression of the class struggle. Why is one called good and the other bad politics? Politics is the art of dominating men. Skilful politicians endeavour to reform, in other words patch up the old system of antiquated and shaky domination, or, when its fall is inevitable, erect a new system of domination. This is what is called good politics. Others endeavour to help the exploited masses acquire the strength to deliver themselves from exploitation and domination. It is this which in parliamentary terms is called bad politics.

Ant Pannekoek.

Notes

[1] It is an error of fact when Tas designates Lenin's pamphlet as 'a formidable response' to that of Gorter. The order of succession was precisely the reverse.