

Anton Pannekoek and Concrete Utopia

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The purpose of this article is to discuss the relationship between the concept of concrete utopia and the thought of Anton Pannekoek. There is a predominance of a conception that refers to utopia as a project, a dream, unrealizable. This term, however, has contributed to the adjectivization and disqualification of conceptions that point to the possibility of a new society, which can be realized in the future to replace the one that currently exists. As a result, social transformation, social self-management, etc., have come to be considered utopian, in other words, an illusion, a dream that will never be realized. In this sense, it is necessary to return to approaches that demonstrate the opposite of this conception and find in utopia the concrete possibility of its realization. To do this, we need to understand what concrete utopia is. After understanding this question, we will try to discuss how it manifests itself in the conception of a particular author. We will do this starting with Anton Pannekoek's conception of his criticism of the trade union and his affirmation of the need for the working class to self-organize in order to achieve concrete utopia.

The question of utopia has already been addressed by various authors and from various perspectives. Here, however, we will use the dialectical method to understand what utopia is. Ernst Bloch (2005) helps us to understand this concept in its real and concrete aspect. For him, utopia is related to hope, an expression of the dream that points forward, which does not emerge as a mere autonomous emotion, as if it were detached from reality. It then takes on a "conscious-aware aspect as a utopian function" (BLOCH, 2005, p. 144).

The author notes that the content of this utopia is first offered by representations, especially those of fantasy. According to him, the representations of fantasy not only make up what already exists, in a random way (petrified sea, golden mountain and the like), but also what gives continuity, in an anticipatory way, to what exists in the future possibilities of its being-different, of its being-better (BLOCH, 2005, p. 144).

It can be seen that this form of utopia is a mechanism for anticipating what still exists, as he puts it, which "psychically anticipates a possible reality".

The point, however, is that the author notes that there are those who remain at the level of mere fantasy, which denotes a lack of interest in explaining the world, an issue that is present in bourgeois values and interests that not only reject but despise everything that is anticipatory. This conception is then called abstract utopia, which is the opposite manifestation of dreams that we seek to realize. Bloch (2005) observes that:

“The point of contact between dream and life, without which the dream produces only abstract utopia and life, for its part, only triviality, presents itself in the utopian capacity placed on one's own feet, which is associated with the possible-real. A capacity that, guided by tendency, overcomes what already exists not only in our nature but also in the external world in process as a whole. This would give rise to the concept of the utopian-abstract, only apparently paradoxical, that is, an anticipatory that is not confused with the utopian-abstract dreaming, nor is it directed by the immaturity of a merely abstract-utopian socialism.” (BLOCH, 2005, p. 145).

As mentioned earlier, Bloch observes that the bourgeoisie shows no interest in utopia that points forward, to the new. Its interest is manifested in reality by reproducing it as it is, while still seeking to abolish from it the dreams and desires that seek to transform it. It is in this sense that the author observes that concrete utopia finds its real expression in Marxism. For him,

“What characterizes the power and truth of Marxism is precisely the fact that it has dispelled the cloud that enveloped dreams for the future without having extinguished the columns of fire that burned in them, giving them, on the contrary, strength and concreteness.” (BLOCH, 2005, p. 145).

Since Marxism is a reference point for overcoming the abstract utopia, we need to look at how it conceives of this transformation. To do this, we will discuss Anton Pannekoek's conception, his criticism of the trade union and his defence of workers' self-organization. With this discussion we aim, as has been said, to observe the manifestation of concrete utopia.

Paul Mattick (1960), his main biographer, said that “Anton Pannekoek's life coincides almost entirely with the history of the workers' movement”. Others have observed that he was one of the main revolutionary theoreticians of the

20th century. Agreeing with these concepts that point to the importance of Pannekoek's reflections and thinking for the workers' movement, we will try to understand the question of concrete utopia in his conception, based on the significance that he points to trade unions for the struggle of the proletariat, since the idea that this organization really does represent the interests of the exploited classes and can contribute to the realization of their project for society, the dream that points forward, as Bloch (2005) says, persists to this day.

For Pannekoek, the trade union emerged as a consequence of the struggle of the proletarian class, created to be its instrument of struggle against the capitalists, who as a class are the ones who maintain the state of affairs and the exploitation that exists in capitalism. The demand for better wages, shorter working hours and better working conditions led the workers' movement to advance on capital and demand that it put its demands into effect. The strike was the immediate and spontaneous response to this demand and, fundamentally, the means finally found by the workers to unite, to weaken capital and to put an end to this society created in the image and likeness of the bourgeoisie, capitalism.

Pannekoek says

“From the strike comes solidarity, the feeling of brotherhood between comrades-in-arms, the feeling of unity with the whole class: it is the first dawn of what will one day be the sun of the new society. Mutual aid, first appearing in the form of spontaneous and benevolent collections, soon takes the durable form of a trade union.” (PANNEKOEK, 2007, p. 115).

Marx (1981, p. 09) had already expressed a similar conception when he said that “workers unite in order to put themselves on equal terms with the capitalist in the contract for the sale of their labor. This is the reason (the logical basis) for trade unions”. As we mentioned earlier, Pannekoek sees trade unions as instruments of the working class' struggle against their exploiters. In this sense, “revolutionary unions are the product of the historical period of small capital, where oligopolies had not yet formed, where the state had not yet regulated union organization, etc.” (PANNEKOEK, apud, MAIA, 2010, p. 31).

The 19th century marked its onslaught on capital and trade unionism emerged as a response to exploitation. According to Pannekoek,

“Most of the time, workers had to fight for themselves, so that the conditions for the development of trade unionism could be guaranteed.

In England, it was the revolutionary campaign of Chartism; in Germany, half a century later, the struggle of social democracy, which, by imposing the recognition of workers' social rights, laid the foundations for the development of trade unions. [...] workers are no longer powerless individuals, forced by hunger to sell their labor power for whatever price. They are now protected by the strength of their own solidarity and cooperation, because each union member not only gives part of his salary to his comrades, but is also ready to risk his own job in defence of the union organization and community." (PANNEKOEK, 2007, p. 115).

But Pannekoek realizes that trade unionism cannot put an end to capitalist exploitation, to capitalist society. It abolishes the worst abuses of exploitation and establishes a normalization of capitalism, in other words, it creates norms for exploitation which force the working class to accept their exploited state and the maintenance and reproduction of capitalism. Thus, it establishes a norm for wages, demanding that the capitalists pay the minimum necessary to maintain the workers' vital needs to prevent them from being pushed into starvation, into despair of trying to solve the problems that afflict them by themselves and with their own hands. It establishes a standard for the working day, preventing workers from being exploited to such an extent that they exhaust their strength and still reserve the energy to continue working. Pannekoek also notes that the state bureaucracy, with its cleverness in creating strategies for the reproduction of capital, creates regulations (labour laws, union legislation, etc.) that domesticate union organization, turning them into yet another organ for controlling the working class.

In this sense, he expresses that

"Some less clever bosses don't understand this, but their political bosses, who are more savvy, know very well that trade unions are an essential element of capitalism, and that without this regulatory force that are the workers' unions, capitalist power would not be complete." (PANNEKOEK, 2007, p. 117).

Thus, from being an instrument of the proletariat's struggle against capitalism, the unions were transformed into organs of capitalism for the exploitation and control of workers. From then on, the capitalists themselves began to organize themselves into employers' unions. Pannekoek points out that the money the workers' unions spend on strikes is no match for the gigantic power of the bosses' unions. The labor unions begin to fear the fight

against the capitalists, and in order to prevent them from passing on the money that sustains them, they make concessions and succumb to their power. Pannekoek (2007) points out that “in negotiations, the delegates often have to accept a deterioration in living conditions in order to avoid a fight”.

The proletariat, for its part, insists on the struggle, knowing that only through it will it be able to achieve freedom, its concrete utopia, its project for society that can only be realized with the end of the exploitation suffered under capitalism, where its workforce is ripped off, from which all the power of capital emerges. This leads to a disagreement and conflict between the exploited class and the union leaders. The latter start putting the brakes on the former, fearing the capitalist reaction, in order to maintain their privileges. The former perceive the union leadership no longer as an organ for expressing their struggle, but as a capitalist organ, the union bureaucracy, an enemy that must be destroyed in order to achieve their liberation.

Pannekoek says,

“These union bureaucrats, specialists, prepare and organize all the activities; they take care of the finances and dispose of the money at all times; they publish the union press, thanks to which they can spread and impose their own ideas and personal points of view on the rest of the members.” (PANNEKOEK, 2007, p. 118).

The author also notes that trade unions are increasingly becoming gigantic organizations, whose internal structure expresses the same internal organization as the state, with a bureaucratic body set up in hierarchical divisions, headed by those who decide and speak for their subordinates. They no longer make decisions taking into account the concerns and problems inherent in the exploited classes, but decide for them based on their personal interests, respecting the capitalist logic and taking care not to contradict the boss or even the state, because if they do, they risk losing their privileges and being seen as enemies. In this sense, it prefers friendship with the capitalist, with the state, and enmity with the exploited classes.

Trade unionism, therefore,

“is not a proletarian force and the unions are not workers' organizations, but bureaucratic ones. In this sense, they are neither the means nor the support for social transformation, and much less are they the institutions

of the future communist society, as anarcho-syndicalists and revolutionary syndicalists preach. They are bourgeois institutions that bring together another fraction of the bureaucratic social class, the trade union bureaucracy.” (VIANA, 2008, p. 64).

This essential transformation in trade union organization became clear in periods when the working class advanced against capital, in moments of fierce and open struggle; periods when the proletariat put its instruments of struggle, its weapons, to use; when it also discovered new forms and means of struggle and, at the same time, realized which of the instruments already created were still fit for use and which should be thrown away. It was at this moment that he realized that the unions were no longer part of his struggle and that they should be despised as a weapon of the working class, since they had become a weapon of the bourgeoisie. For Pannekoek:

“With the outbreak of the revolution, as soon as the proletariat, from being a member of capitalist society becomes its destroyer, the trade union comes into conflict with the proletariat. The trade union becomes legalistic, a declared supporter of the state and recognized by it, or it goes ahead with the slogan of ‘rebuilding the economy before the revolution’, which means maintaining capitalism.” (PANNEKOEK, 2010a, p. 01).

The abstract utopia proclaimed by the bureaucracy that the unions manifest the interests of the working class insists on continuing to dominate the field of class struggle, but in the practical, day-to-day struggle it is giving way to concrete utopia. The approximation between trade unions and the state is becoming so close that, from a certain point in their history, it is no longer possible to perceive differences between trade union organizations and the state. Their internal form appears to be equivalent. Both are united in the quest to maintain the class struggle and the reproduction of capital. The party bureaucracy becomes present in trade union organizations and at times they become confused with the party itself. Many union leaders join political parties, and their objectives become the struggle for state power. This becomes clear when, during strikes, union leaders ally themselves with the party bureaucracy and in many cases appear publicly holding hands on platforms and even behind the scenes of negotiations between strikers and their employers or between strikers and the bureaucracy.

As a result, all those demands made by the union at its inception - pay rises, shorter working hours and improvements at work - are turned upside down; the

union's position in society has changed sides and its demands are made in the interests of the side it now represents, the side of the bourgeoisie. According to Pannekoek:

“The heads of the [trade union] organizations, by force and lies impose piecework and longer working hours on the workers: cunningly refined in England, where this trade union bureaucracy - in the same way as the government - gives the impression of letting itself be taken against its will by the workers, while in reality it sabotages their demands.” (PANNEKOEK, 2010a, p. 02).

Pannekoek also notes that it is not by changing the staff and leaders of the unions that their counter-revolutionary force can be weakened and destroyed. This means that their bureaucratic essence, that of representing capital, will not cease to exist. The false closeness of union leaders to strike movements is for one simple reason: they need to secure the support of certain fractions of the working class in order to continue to mediate their struggle, and consequently, to continue to have the primacy of holding back the advance of the workers and preventing them from unleashing an open and direct struggle with the bosses and the state.

“The unions become instruments of mediation between the capitalists and the workers; they make agreements with the bosses who intend to impose them on the workers who resist. The bosses aspire to become a recognized part of the power apparatus of capital and the state that dominate the working class; the unions become instruments of monopoly capital, through which they dictate their conditions to the workers.” (PANNEKOEK, 2010b, p. 4).

In this sense, therefore, without the support of a fraction of the working class (the most conservative and limited in terms of their perception of the union's position), the assemblies and negotiations held by the union at times of heightened struggle are discredited and lose their effectiveness; its position becomes clear before the eyes of the workers, who are forced into blindness by the ideologues of the bourgeoisie. As long as it receives this support, it has a certain guarantee that it will continue to mediate the relationship between the capitalists and the working class, because if it didn't, it would easily be sidelined in a strike.

In the process of struggle, the revolutionary proletariat has come to realize this conservative side of the unions and it is clear that at a moment of open struggle, in a revolutionary period, they will have to fight and defeat the union itself. Pannekoek clarifies this issue when he states that:

“The revolution can only win by destroying such an organization, by radically transforming the form of the organization, so to speak, in order to build something radically new: the system of Councils. Its establishment is capable of extirpating and eliminating not only the state bureaucracy, but also that of the trade unions. [...] It must therefore be replaced by another form that is revolutionary in that it allows workers to actively decide for themselves on everything.” (PANNEKOEK, 2010a, p. 02).

It is at this moment that there is the definitive possibility of overcoming the abstract utopia. The proletariat has therefore become aware that liberation from capitalist shackles can only be the fruit of its own struggle, taking the decisions and the way forward into its own hands, keeping the direction of its own struggle in its own hands.

“What do you mean by ‘keeping the direction of their own struggle entirely in their own hands’ (or, if you prefer, running their own affairs)? It must be understood that all the initiative and decisions come from the workers themselves” (PANNEKOEK, 2007, p. 122).

For Pannekoek, the proletariat discovered through its struggles other organizations that surpassed and actually expressed its interests, and these were only discovered because of the need for an effective instrument of struggle at a time when the enemy was standing in front of it preventing it from advancing; a time when it could not retreat in the struggle and continue fighting and advancing with the aim of overcoming the exploitation and control it is subjected to by the capitalists.

Therefore, any form of organization that does not allow workers to:

“To dominate and direct their own course is harmful and counter-revolutionary; for this reason it must be replaced by another form of organization that is revolutionary, by allowing the workers themselves to actively decide on all problems” (PANNEKOEK, cited in Gorter, 1981, p. 31).

Therefore, strike committees, factory councils, neighbourhood councils, militias and other forms of organization emerged, through which the workers' councils emerged, an organ developed by the proletariat that expressed, in addition to its organizational and creative capacity, that the unions were able to create. creative capacity, that the unions have been overcome and are no longer the instruments that enable them to fight capitalism.

In short, Pannekoek offers a wide-ranging, profound and clear reflection that enables us to see how Marxism manifests and anticipates the process of overcoming abstract utopia and effectively overcoming concrete utopia. In the topic we propose to discuss here, it does so by revealing the hidden face of trade unions today. From his conception, we can see the existence of a trade union ideology, through which he reproduces the idea that trade unions continue to be the most effective expression of the workers' struggle and that workers must respect and act in accordance with his proposals and determinations. Pannekoek also offers elements that make it possible for the workers' movement to move forward and implement its project for society, its concrete utopia, when he makes it clear that at a time of radicalization of the struggle, workers will have to move forward and break with the trade union organizations if they really want to achieve their goals, and not let their struggle be controlled and directed by the trade union leaders, since they represent the interests of capital.

Pannekoek is therefore an important thinker who represents a conception that, by integrating the history of the proletarian struggle, has in fact shown that it is theoretically expressing the interests of the exploited classes; he developed the theory of workers' councils and made theoretical progress possible by clarifying the conservative and counter-revolutionary face of the unions. With Pannekoek, Marxism deepens in its real expression, offering humanity an important work that makes it possible to observe in reality the presuppositions for the realization of effective freedom. His thought expresses concrete utopia by anticipating the glimpse of a society that does not yet exist, but which already exists as a project and is about to be realized.

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