

The Personal Act - Pannekoek



Anton Pannekoek writes on the burning of the Reichstag by council communist Marinus Van Der Lubbe (and other possible accomplices) - and discusses what value there is in the tactic of destroying products of bourgeois culture.

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The Personal Act

(Anton Pannekoek - 1933)

The burning of the Reichstag by Van Der Lubbe, reveals the most divergent positions. In the organs of the communist left such as (Spartacus, De Radencommunist), the burning is approved as an act of a communist revolutionary. To approve and applaud such an act means advocating its repetition. Hence it is necessary good to fully appreciate its usefulness.

Perhaps the fire's meaning could only be to affect or to weaken the dominant class;: the bourgeoisie. Here, there can be no question. The bourgeoisie is not in the least affected by the burning of the Reichstag; its domination is in no manner weakened. On the contrary, for the government, it was the occasion to considerably reinforce its terror against the worker's movement. The indirect consequences must still be emphasized.

But even if such an act affects and weakens the bourgeoisie, the only consequence is to develop for the workers the conviction that only such individual acts can liberate them. The full truth that they must acquire is that only mass action by the working class as a whole can defeat the bourgeoisie. This basic truth of revolutionary communism will, in such a case, be hidden from them. Their independent action as a class will be lost. Instead of concentrating all their forces on propaganda among the working masses, the revolutionary minorities will squander their forces in personal acts which, even when such acts are carried out by a dedicated group with many members, are not capable making the domination of the ruling class falter. With their considerable forces of repression, the bourgeoisie could easily come after such a group. Rarely has there been a revolutionary minority group carrying out actions with more devotion, sacrifice and energy than the Russian nihilists a half-century ago. At certain moments, it even appeared that by a series of well organized attendats, the nihilists

would overthrow Tsarism. But a French detective, engaged to take over the anti-terrorist struggle in Place of the incompetent Russian police, succeeded by his personal energy and His entirely western organization in destroying nihilism in only a few years. It was only afterwards that a mass movement developed and finally overthrew Tsarism.

Can such personal acts nevertheless have value as a protest against the abject electoralism, that turns aside the workers from their true fight?

A protest only has value if it arises from conviction, leaves a forceful impression, or develops consciousness. But who believes that a worker defending his interests by voting social democrat or communist, will express doubts about electoralism because someone has burned the Reichstag? This is a completely derisory argument, similar to what the bourgeoisie itself does to rid the workers of their illusions, making the Reichstag completely powerless, deciding to dissolve it, setting aside the decision process. German comrades said that this can only be positive since the confidence of the workers in parliamentarianism will receive a first-rate blow. Without doubt, but doesn't this depict matters in a far too simplistic way? In such a case, democratic illusions will be shed by another route. Then, where there is no right to a generalized vote or where Parliament is weak, the conquest of true democracy is advanced and workers can only themselves that they can only imagine themselves arriving there by their collective action.. In fact, systematic propaganda seeking to explain from the start of each event an understanding of the real significance of parliament and class struggle, always remains the main point.

Can the personal act be a signal, giving the final push that sets In motion, by radical example, this immense struggle?

There is a certain current running in history where individual actions, in moments of tension, are like sparks on a powder keg. But the proletarian revolution is nothing like the explosion of a powder keg. Even if the Communist Party strives to convince itself and convince the world that the revolution can break out at any moment, we know that the proletariat must still form itself in a new manner to fight as a mass. A certain bourgeois romanticism can still be perceived in these visions. In past bourgeois revolutions, the bourgeoisie rose up with the people Behind them and found themselves in confrontation against the sovereigns and Their arbitrary oppression. An attentat on the person of a king or a minister could be the signal to revolt. The vision today in which a personal act could set the masses in motion reveals itself to be a bourgeois conception of a chief; not the leader of an elected party, but a chief who designates himself and, who by his actions leads the passive masses. The proletarian revolution finds nothing in this outdated romanticism of the leader; a class, impelled by massive social forces, must be the source of all initiative.

But the mass, after all, is composed of individuals, and the actions of the mass contain a certain number of personal actions. Certainly, it is here that we touch on the true value of the personal act. Separated from mass action, the act of an individual who thinks he can realize alone something great is useless. But as part of a mass movement, the personal act Has the highest importance. Workers in struggle are not a regiment of marionettes identical in courage but composed of forces of different natures concentrated toward the same goal, their movement irresistible. In this body, the audacity of the bravest finds the time and place to express itself in personal acts of courage, when the clear comprehension of others leads them towards a suitable goal in order not to lose the gains. Likewise, in a rising movement, this interaction of forces and acts is of great value when it is guided by a clear comprehension that animates, at this moment, the workers which is necessary to develop their combativity. But in this case, so much tenacity, audacity and courage will be called for that it will not be necessary to burn a Parliament.

