

Comments on the Transitional Programme

First Published: Proletarian, No. 3, n.d. [1975?]

Transcription, Editing and Markup: Paul Saba

Copyright: This work is in the Public Domain under the [Creative Commons Common Deed](#). You can freely copy, distribute and display this work; as well as make derivative and commercial works. Please credit the Encyclopedia of Anti-Revisionism On-Line as your source, include the url : <https://www.marxists.org/history/erol/uk.hightide/commentsontp.htm> to this work, and note any of the transcribers, editors & proofreaders above.

The article was written by Paul Cockshott, for security reasons the Journal did not give authors names at the time.

We do not consider that the Transitional Programme of the Fourth, or Trotskyist, International can be considered a valid model for a communist programme. This document is ruled out of court by virtue of its many confused and non-Marxist formulations.

First there is the matter of its structure. A communist programme must scientifically spell out the objective tendencies and contradictions existing in society's economic base. In the case of a party that operates within the confines of a single state, it must deal with the development and articulation of the various modes of production that exist within the territory of that state.

In the case of a global party or international, it must explain the contradictory combination of modes of production that goes to make up the world economic system. The Transitional Programme (henceforth TP) contains neither of these. It does not even contain a scientific characterisation of capitalism and its internal contradictions. Far less does it attempt to explain the inter-relationships between the various modes of production existing in the various parts of the globe: feudal, capitalist, state capitalist, socialist,

etc. Instead it makes do with a series of journalistic phrases and unsubstantiated assertions.

For example, in the first section entitled "The objective prerequisites of socialist revolution" we find such gems as:

The economic pre-requisite of the proletarian revolution has already in general achieved the highest point of fruition that can be achieved under capitalism. Mankind's productive forces stagnate. Already new inventions fail to raise the level of material wealth.

This passage bears all the marks of that superficial impressionism that we have come to expect from the Trotskyist movement. The first sentence would still be false 35 years later. It implies that capitalism was already the preponderant mode of production throughout the world. But this is, and was, preposterous. It ignored the survival in large areas of the globe: Asia, Africa, and Latin America, of small scale pre-capitalist production with its accompanying feudal and even pre-feudal relations of production. Such an 'oversight' is inexcusable for an organisation claiming to be a communist international. For the great majority of the world's population, the development of capitalist production would have constituted a great advance over the feudalism which still predominated.

In this sentence we can see a typical Trotskyist error: to mistake the existence of a world market for a world capitalist system of production. It is true that there did exist a world market in the 1930s, but only in a few industrial nations was this accompanied by a capitalist system of production. China and India, for instance, produced commodities for the world market. But commodity exports from the third world countries were based either upon feudal exploitation of small scale peasant farmers or upon the exploitation of semi-servile labour on plantations and latifundia.

Secondly, this statement would have been false even within those nations with developed capitalist industry. The potential of the capitalist system for economic development was far from exhausted as the enormous developments in technology, and improvements in living standards, in the last decades have demonstrated (to the inevitable bewilderment of all such soothsaying 'Marxists').

Quite apart from such empirical inaccuracies, the assessment of the economic situation reveals a conception of economic development that is alien to Marxist dialectics. The forces of production are presented as if they had some self-sufficient force that generated their own development. The impression given is of the forces of production developing autonomously until they meet an absolute barrier in the capitalist relations of production. But this notion of a self-sufficient motive force of history, the subject of history, derives from idealist dialectics not materialist dialectics. Idealist explanations of natural process invariably rely upon such a self-sufficient force or spirit. The terms for it vary: in idealist psychology it is the will; in idealist social theory it is the subject; in political theory the citizen/subject or alternatively 'human nature'; in bourgeois economics it is the 'economic man* whose rational decisions and preferences are held to determine all prices, etc. In history the same role is played by such notions as the 'concept of the epoch', the 'spirit of the age', or national character. There are passages in Marx that are subject to this idealist interpretation if read out of context. The most common of these is the 1857 preface to the Critique of Political Economy. In this we find the following passage:

At a certain stage of development, the material productive forces of society come into conflict with the existing relations of production or - this merely expresses the same thing in legal terms - with the property relations within the framework of which they have operated hitherto. From forms

of development of the productive forces these relations turn into their fetters. Then begins the era of social revolution.

For some Marxists the temptation has been to interpret this as a simple inversion of the Hegelian dialectic of history – Hegel on his head – in which the development of the productive forces replaces the development of the 'notion' or absolute idea. But this is too simplistic. In the Hegelian dialectic, the notion undergoes autodevelopment, that is to say, it is responsible for its own development. The notion develops as a result of its internal contradictions. The notion contains within itself the motor of historical progress, in the form of its contradictions, potential and actual. The Hegelian interpretation of Marx makes the productive forces play this same role.

But a closer examination of the relevant texts by Marx (in particular the section of Capital devoted to the production of relative surplus value) shows that the Marxist idea of the development of the productive forces is more complex. In the Marxist case, the productive forces are not an autodeveloping motor of history; instead their development has itself to be explained. Marx showed that under the capitalist mode of production the development of the productive forces was an effect of the relations of production; specifically, the forces of production develop as a result of the attempts by the owners of capital to maximise their rate of surplus value and thus their rate of capital accumulation. The tendency of capital to accumulate gives rise to the development of technology, not vice-versa. The relations of production do not play a merely permissive role with respect to the development of technology – they don't just allow the development of technology, they force it to develop. It follows that a capitalist crisis is not the result of technology meeting some external and insuperable obstacle in the form of capitalist production relations. Technology does not develop as

a rising tendency to reach a stagnant plateau when it reaches the limits permissible within capitalism. But this is the perspective on capitalist development presented in the TP - technology can develop thus far and no further under capitalism. Its second sentence says: "The economic pre-requisite for the proletarian revolution has already in general reached the highest point of fruition that can be achieved under capitalism."

For the Trotskyists, therefore, capitalism was in its death agony and the only question that remained was how it would end. They presented only two alternatives: either socialism or a catastrophe that would threaten the "whole culture of mankind". A formulation that verges upon the idiotic alternative of socialism or barbarism proposed by certain left communists. The foolishness of this alternative becomes evident as soon as we look behind this stirring phrase to see just what it implies.

For Marxism barbarism is not just some slogan or catchword but as used by Engels and Morgan it designates a scientific concept. It is a stage in the evolution of society in which horticulture, but not field agriculture, has developed and in which society is still organised upon a gentile or tribal basis. Under barbarism there is no division of society into classes and no territorial states exist, since these require the existence both of field agriculture (implying the possibility of private ownership of land) and a sizeable surplus product, which both permits and necessitates the growth of a state apparatus. Barbarism would only be possible now if all the developments of technology that have occurred over the past two or three millenia were to vanish without trace, which could not happen even in the event of an atomic war. The whole notion of a catastrophe wiping out the whole culture of mankind and causing the collapse of civilization is based upon a facile analogy with the collapse of ancient civilization. Rome fell before the barbarian

invaders, and centuries passed before society in Western Europe regained the level of economic and cultural development that it had achieved in the first century AD. But this was possible because the slave economies of antiquity not only failed to advance the productive forces, but actually destroyed them, causing depopulation and soil exhaustion etc. The collapse of ancient civilisation took place when its already narrow technical advantage over barbarism had been eroded by centuries of slavery.

Unlike those of antiquity, modern capitalist civilisation is based upon the constant revolutionisation of the mode of material production. The capitalist relations of production constantly prove themselves incapable of sustaining the new technologies that they themselves have engendered. But this does not result in technical advance coming to a halt to await in suspended animation the advent of socialism or a descent into barbarism. The two possible exits from the crisis are not socialism or barbarism, but socialism or reformed capitalism. Either the proletariat is sufficiently organised politically, militarily and ideologically to seize power and abolish capitalism, or, in the absence of proletarian initiative, history does not stand still: capitalism reforms itself.

The description of the economic situation in the TP was not based upon objective investigation and analysis, but upon subjective and impressionistic assessment. This cannot be allowed in a communist programme.

Further on this same section of the programme characterises the New Deal merely as a 'special form of political perplexity' which it is said will open no exit from the 'economic blind alley'. But once again the cause of this 'blind alley' is not identified. One is forced to conclude that the leadership of the 4th International had little more of an understanding of the economic crisis than had the majority of capitalist statesmen. But without the necessary understanding

of the situation it was entirely reckless to say that there was no way out under capitalism from the economic blind alley. In fact the work of Keynes and the Polish Luxemburgist economist Kalecki had by then shown that it was possible for capitalism to escape from the slump. The success of Keynesianism was soon proved in practice with the post-war boom, and indeed its potential had already been hinted at in the fascist economies.

The use of Marxist theory to examine the situation would have shown that the crisis was not so much a crisis of the capitalist system of production, as a crisis of the ideological, fiscal and monetary superstructure that monopoly capital had inherited from the period of liberal capitalism. The adoption of the appropriate fiscal and monetary policies by the state could, and eventually did, regenerate economic growth. Before this could occur, ideological obstacles would have to be surmounted as would the political resistance of sections of the bourgeoisie (especially bank capital). Marx had already provided a basis for the analysis of the form of the crisis that developed during the 30s with his writings on the British banking legislation.

That fact that this was ignored in the TP in favour of 'revolutionary' phrasemongering about the total inability of capitalism to escape from the economic crisis, is evidence of the low priority that the Trotskyists assigned to a scientific analysis of the base (this does not imply that the Comintern had a better analysis).

In its understanding of economic events the 4th International proved itself inferior to the social democratic advocates of Keynesianism. The 4th International said that this was the final crisis of capitalism, that socialism was the only way out, etc., etc. Following the war the Social Democrats introduced Keynesian reforms under the guise of socialism. These restore economic prosperity, improve living standards, etc. Conclusion: both on the

arguments of the Trotskyists and on those of the Social Democrats, workers would have been justified in thinking that the introduction of socialism was indeed what the SD's were up to. Admittedly, since the Trotskyists had very little influence within the proletariat, whatever they said would have very little effect, but they claimed to be organising the most conscious vanguard elements in the proletariat. Such inaccurate forecasts by those who claimed to be the representatives of communism could only discredit communism in the eyes of these elements.

What follows in the first section of the TP is more overblown and imprecise rhetoric in the same style. From inaccurate interpretation of the economic situation there follows in the next section: 'The Proletariat and its Leadership', an extremely over-optimistic assessment of the political situation. The entire world is seen as being in a pre-revolutionary state, and the only thing preventing world revolution is said to be the opportunist leadership provided by the Comintern and Social Democracy.

According to Freud, dreams provide a means of wish fulfilment for the subconscious mind. For isolated political sects as the 4th International then was, (and largely remains), programmatic documents sometimes seem to act as dream substitutes. The Trotskyists' desire to become the leaders of a revolutionary workers' movement, led them to claim that the working class was everywhere 'instinctively' striving for revolution. It was only held back by its opportunist leaders, so the new leaders had but to present themselves to be acclaimed. But of course, besides being over-sanguine, this interpretation verges upon idealism. For instance it says:

The unprecedented wave of sit-down strikes and the amazingly rapid growth of industrial unionism in the United States (the CIO) is the most indisputable evidence of the instinctive striving of

the American workers to raise themselves to the level of the tasks imposed upon them by history.

To seek to explain historical developments in terms of instincts has nothing in common with Marxism. Examination of the period shows that it is not necessary to have recourse to instincts to explain the American developments in the economic class struggle. Far from being instinctive, these developments were a response to material conditions. The new technical conditions of production (assembly-line mass-production) brought together large numbers of semi-skilled workers in new industries - primarily those associated with automobile production. The outdated craft unionism of the AFL was unwilling and unable to organise these workers, thus making it possible for auto-workers, etc., to organise themselves into new industrial unions. The sit-down strike was not adopted as a result of instinctive strivings towards proletarian revolution, but because it was a good tactic in these new forms of industry. The Trotskyists committed the old economist error of pretending that spontaneous syndical struggles were incipient socialist revolution. The subsequent development of the CIO has proved how wrong they were.

THE PROGRAMME OF "TRANSITIONAL DEMANDS".

According to Trotskyism, it was a fault of classical social democracy that it divided its programme into two parts: a minimum programme of reforms within bourgeois society, and the maximum or socialist programme. According to Trotsky, whilst this was possible during the period of progressive capitalism, it was now impossible as capitalism was in decay and there could be no discussion of systematic social reforms and the raising of living standards, as "every serious demand of the proletariat and even every serious demand of the petty bourgeoisie inevitably reaches beyond the limits of capitalist property relations and of the bourgeois state." Because of this new situation, the day to day work of the party could

now be carried on indissolubly from the actual task of revolution. This enabled the minimal and maximal programmes to be merged into the Transitional Programme, whose demands, stemming from 'today's conditions and today's consciousness of wide layers of the working class and unalterably leading to one final conclusion: the conquest of power by the proletariat', were incorporated in the programme of the 4th International.

This is heady rhetoric, but anti-Marxist. It constitutes a reversion to the tailist politics criticised by Lenin in "What Is To Be Done?".

First, the claim that every serious petty bourgeois demand reaches beyond capitalist property forms and the capitalist state is so grotesque that it is scarcely credible that anybody with Marxist pretensions could make it. The whole burden of the attacks on petty bourgeois socialism that had occupied much of the attention of Marx, was that the supposedly socialist demands of the petty bourgeoisie were no more than a plea for the enforcement of capitalist property relations in an idealised form. The specific demands of the petty bourgeoisie are for the establishment of an idealised commodity-producing society, where the "universal justice" of the exchange of "strict equivalents" will prevail. But in his economic writings, Marx went out of his way to make clear that it is precisely the full and fair enforcement of the law of equivalent exchange, i.e., the exchange of equal values, that results in capitalist production. It is the law of value, i.e., bourgeois property in motion, that allows capital accumulation and the proletarianisation of the petty bourgeois. The demands of the latter are progressive only with respect to feudalism, against which they constitute the main force in all democratic revolutions. With respect to capitalism, the specific demands of the petty bourgeois are reactionary. They seek to turn back the clock to the 'golden age' of free competition. Insofar as they come into conflict with

capitalism it is because capitalism is too advanced for their liking, not because it is backward. They thus provide material for all sorts of reactionary populist movements. The National Socialists in Germany were able to win mass support by playing upon this petty bourgeois opposition to monopoly capital and finance capital. Further, through their claim that the spontaneous demands of the petty bourgeois were now objectively revolutionary, the 4th Internationalists anticipated the creative 'Marxism' of the modern revisionists with their populist strategies of anti-monopoly alliances.

Second, the idea of transitional demands is only tenable within a catastrophist outlook, which sees even the most minimal progress as being impossible whilst capitalism continues. But to the extent that the mode of production remains capable of further development, the whole notion of transitional demands falls. As we have said, the capitalist relations of production still held considerable potential for development. Moreover, this was possible because capitalism did carry out a number of serious social reforms. Keynes advocated reforms, which were carried through almost in their entirety (at least in the Anglo-Saxon countries) and which, far from being incompatible with capitalism, were the precondition both for further capitalist development, and for the amelioration of the conditions of the working class under capitalism. They were reforms in the way that the state operated: specifically, reforms in the way taxation, government spending, and the banks were utilised. They in no way changed the basis of the mode of production itself, which remained capitalist commodity production; but they were reforms all the same, as the developments of the productive forces and in popular living standards showed.

Economic crises arise when the social relations are incapable of sustaining a development of the forces of production. To understand a crisis one must know

precisely in what way the social relations are preventing development; and further, know what changes aggravate the crisis and just what changes would clear the block upon the development of production. One must find out what are the minimal measures for the removal of the block. For it is these minimal measures, the minimum necessary reforms, that the ruling class will eventually institute, provided of course that they are compatible with the fundamentals of the existing relations of production. Unless this is done, one is not able to say if the crisis is terminal.

If, on the contrary, reforms are still possible within the framework of the existing order, then the whole justification for transitional demands vanishes. If it is not true that every serious demand of the proletariat reaches beyond the limits of capitalist property, then such demands, far from being transitional, far from leading to the inevitable abolition of private property, are a mere dressed up version of the old minimum programme of social democracy. But whereas a minimum programme was not incompatible with revolutionary social democracy, for instance the 1917 Bolshevik Programme contained a minimum programme; revolutionary social democracy did not claim that a minimum programme could of itself enable a transition to socialism, nor did it claim that these would lead unalterably to the conquest of power by the proletariat.

The minimum programme was advanced on the grounds that it was compatible with the continued existence of capitalism, and thus could be effected before the seizure of state power by social democracy. But the measures of the minimum programme would, if enacted, allow the further material and organisational development of the working class. For instance, the shortening of the working day (an element of the 1917 Bolshevik programme) aided the development of a strong labour movement. It would

leave more time free for political/organisational activity. The transitional programme is presented as something more than a struggle for improved conditions under capitalism. But insofar as many of the transitional demands are no more than this, it constitutes an opportunist attempt to dress-up reformism as revolutionary struggle.

If on the other hand the TP does contain demands that cannot possibly be realised under capitalism, the format is still opportunist. If it contains demands for measures that would entail the abolition of capitalism, then a precondition for these demands being met would be proletarian state power. But in that case, the whole notion of advancing 'demands' is absurdly reformist. If you demand something then you acknowledge, as Marx put it, that you are not the master of the situation. A 'demand' is made by those who lack the power to achieve what they desire.

It is a contradiction in terms for the proletariat to demand measures that entail the abolition of capitalism. This can only be achieved by the working class relying upon its own efforts; it can only be achieved by the working class organising itself as ruling class. As the masters of society the workers will have no need of demands - instead of demanding, they will act. Here we can see the opportunist essence of the Trotskyist programme: the belief that the reformist practice of advancing demands can, by the simple escalation of these, be transformed into revolutionary practice. The duty of communists is not to demand impossible reforms, but to show the working class that a revolutionary solution to its problems is both necessary and possible.

An examination of just a few of the specific transitional demands bears out the validity of our general criticism of the transitional programme.

The sliding scale of wages. This demand is in no way revolutionary, the struggle for a sliding scale of wages

being a specific syndical tactic. It is no more than the adaptation of normal trades unionism to inflation. Workers organise in unions to prevent the employing class reducing the price of the only commodity that they have to sell - labour power - below its value. As the value of labour power is always expressed in terms of money, a fall in the value of money requires a rise in money wages to stop the price of labour power falling below its value. A sliding scale of wages is just the best way of preventing wages falling below the value of labour power. As such it is essentially defensive, not offensive, not revolutionary. In going for a sliding scale of wages the unions are just doing the same as every other seller of commodities in conditions of inflation. They do the same as capitalists who raise the price of their commodities when the value of money falls. As sellers of a commodity in a commodity-producing society, the working class must be as ruthless as any other seller in its application of the laws of the market, but a struggle over commodity prices can never per-se be revolutionary.

In the transitional programme this tactic is combined with another: the demand for a sliding scale of hours to combat unemployment, i.e., work-sharing. It proposes that whilst working hours are to be reduced, wages are not. Despite the reduction in the working week, the weekly wage is to stay the same. Here we have the other side of the transitional coin. The sliding scale of wages is a feasible tactic, but is just standard trades unionism: in combination with a sliding scale of hours it is transformed into an impossible Utopia. During a slump, capitalists lay off workers because sales are falling, and consequently they are unable to meet their wages' bill. A cut back in production and wages becomes their only means of avoiding bankruptcy. If workers in fact succeeded in cutting the length of the working week whilst maintaining real wages constant, this would still not be enough to prevent unemployment. Instead, it would lead to the more rapid bankruptcy of the firm for which they

worked, thus producing in the end yet higher unemployment.

As Marx showed in Chapter III of *Capital*, the possibility of an imbalance between total supply and total demand, leading to an interruption in commodity circulation, is built into the very nature of commodity production. As the working class under capitalism are, sellers of a commodity in a commodity-producing system, they cannot hope to escape its logic so long as the system itself remains unaltered. Trades union struggle can never prevent the anarchy of commodity production. Recessions arise from an interruption of the circulation of commodities and thus of capital: from the inability of value in commodity form to complete its meta-morphosis into money. Their remedy requires an increase in the monetary circulation, which only the state can do. It requires centralised intervention in the economy. When it came to fighting unemployment, the Keynesian programme of the reformists proved more effective than the Trotskyist transitional one.

Business Secrets and Workers' Control. The first theses in this section deny the possibility of economic planning under capitalism, especially under monopoly capital. "In their cowardly experiments in 'regulation', democratic governments run head on into the invincible sabotage of big capital." The assertion that the state as the collective representative of capital is unable to carry out any regulation of private industry does not accord with the facts. In Britain, state regulation of capitalist enterprise dates back to the Ten Hours Act of 1847. Such regulation forced through under proletarian pressure, was opposed initially by the industrial capitalists, but, as Marx has shown, this regulation was in the long term interests of the bourgeoisie themselves. Since then the scope of state regulation has been greatly expanded. War provided an extra-strong impulse to this. During WWII the British state took over almost complete control of

production in the "national interest". This was directed at producing maximum military production. Since then, non-military application of capitalist planning has proved its potency in the more progressive bourgeois states like France and Japan. In their attempt to introduce indicative planning, the French government did not meet the "invincible opposition" of big capital; on the contrary, the latter welcomed it, as big capital realised that planning brought the prospect of greater stability and higher profits.

Capital is not averse to planning as such, so long as it remains a means towards the accumulation of capital. In fact, the evolution towards a greater degree of state control and planning is an inevitable stage in the centralisation of capital, e.g. nationalised industries.

The attitude of communists towards such capitalist state planning and control of industry should be the same as towards any other progressive development within the capitalist mode of production. If the advance is objectively required by the development of the forces of production, and if, as in the case of capitalist planning, it modifies at least to a certain extent the system of 'pure' commodity production, then communists should welcome it. They should not on the other hand commit the working class, or attempt to commit it, to an alliance with that section of the bourgeoisie that seeks to introduce the reform. The reform should only be actively supported and fought for, if the struggle for it will aid the development of the working class as an autonomous political class capable of acting in its own right. Such advances should nevertheless be welcomed, since they show the extent to which modern technology is incompatible with the principles of commodity exchange upon which capitalism is based. As such they are yet another practical argument for socialism. The reforms that the bourgeoisie make under force of economic circumstances are the best evidence of the

historical inevitability of socialism. For they often go against every precept of classical capitalist ideology, and as a result, it cannot be claimed that the measures have been artificially imposed upon society as a result of some utopian scheme. Such reforms produce ideological effects not only within theoretical debate but also within the popular consciousness. Keynes not only forced capitalist economic theorists to admit that a capitalist economy was not self-regulating - not automatically capable of maintaining full employment - the practical effect of his policies also registered upon the consciousness of the masses. Their attitude to unemployment has changed as a result. What was once seen by the mass of workers (as opposed to the vanguard with a socialist education) as some sort of 'natural' catastrophe, now is instead a crime. To allow unemployment is now considered to be little less than a criminal negligence on the part of government. As a result, the immediate demand of the unemployed is not for "full maintenance" but for the state to intervene to guarantee the "right to work". The historical developments and transformations of capitalist production, tend to produce an ideological climate which is increasingly favourable to the communists' propaganda.

But in addition to these aspects of capitalist reforms which in the long run benefit the proletarians, there are other short term effects, which produce immediate political gains to the bourgeois.

We have argued that the 4th International programme was wrong to take a catastrophist attitude towards capitalism in the 1930s, that it was incorrect to see capitalism as incapable of further reform. However, it is the case that when it does prove necessary for the capitalists to reform their system, this is only done after a struggle. The reforms that are recognised by the more progressive among the bourgeoisie to be a regrettable but inevitable necessity, are seen by the less far-sighted members of that class as 'creeping

socialism', etc. Since, in order to survive, capitalism must increasingly mimic socialism, such accusations may appear to have some substance. The New Deal, a very mild version of what was later to become the capitalist orthodoxy, was greeted with hysterical opposition from conservative circles of the ruling class who believed that it was some kind of socialist plot. The struggle within bourgeois politics could not but have an effect upon the proletariat. The opposition to reform by the more backward sections of the bourgeoisie would add credibility to the idea that the reforms were really fundamental, leading to the masses putting their faith in populist political leaders, and coming to believe that some kind of socialism was being introduced. For this reason it is foolish, to deny that capitalism has any capacity to reform itself. Communists, whilst admitting the possibility of capitalist reform, should rather point out the limited extent of such reforms and how they differ qualitatively from socialism.

Looking again at the 4th International programme, we can see that it completely misread the situation by presenting the bourgeoisie as being utterly opposed to any form of state intervention in the economy. It claimed that this opposition was put into effect by the capitalist firms denying the government access to their "business secrets". To these secrets it attached a quite inflated importance claiming that: "The business secrets of the present epoch are part of a persistent plot of monopoly capitalism against the interests of society."

These notions have more in common with the demagogy of US Anti-Trust Law campaigners than with Marxism. It contains that standard stock in trade of the demagogue; the conspiracy against, the interest of "society". Marxism lends no credence to the conspiracy theory of history, nor does it recognise any such thing as the interests of society. Except under communism the interest of society is a myth, what

really exists are the conflicting interests of different classes. In general the 'interests of society' are just the interests of the ruling class in disguise.

Predating the emergence of science, all primitive societies develop a system of magic enabling them to come to terms with the forces of nature, of which they can have no real comprehension, and over which they have no real control. Having no conception of nature as an objective material process, primitive peoples are constrained to explain the 'otherness' and power of Nature by anthropomorphic devices, i.e., ascribing to it 'human' properties on a greater, 'super-human', transcendental scale.

Likewise, those lacking comprehension of scientific socialism -failing to see history as the unfolding of objective process fuelled by the internal contradictions of class struggle - must resort to magic for their worldview. They too, in their turn, are forced back upon Anthropomorphism; in this case the ascription of historical change to 'great individuals'. This approach spans the 'Caesar-Napoleon' complex of bourgeois individualism to the 'Cult of Personality' of Revisionism/Trotskyism, through the permanent swamp of petit-bourgeois demagogy.

Hence if individuals, more or less great, more or less arbitrarily 'make history', then of course a few such individuals 'conspiring together' can drastically alter its course. Thus in the system of Populist/Nationalist demagogy taken to its ultimate logic - Nazi Germany - it comes as no surprise to find that the vital interests of the German People (Volk) are being undermined by an 'internationalist, Communist, Jewish conspiracy': truly the antitheses of populist nationalism. The whole 'Anti-Monopoly Alliance' fetish of Revisionism/Trotskyism is but the 'Left' inversion of such hysterical petit-bourgeois demagogy. Not for them Marx's view that the 'Monopolists' are but the agents of the forces inherent in capital; rather the 'monopolists' bestride history like Colossi, and for

them capital is a mere plaything of the rich, in the view of history so mercilessly ridiculed by Marx:

“Victor Hugo confines himself to bitter and witty invective against the responsible publisher of the coup d’etat. The event itself appears in his work like a bolt from the blue. He sees in it only the violent act of a single individual. He does not notice that he makes this individual great instead of little by ascribing to him a personal power of initiative such as would be without parallel in world history.”

“As ever, weakness had taken refuge in a belief in miracles, fancied the enemy overcome when he was only conjured away in imagination, and it lost all understanding of the present in a passive glorification of the future that was in store for it and of the deeds it had in petto but which it merely did not want to carry out as yet.”

This is Marx commenting on the flopped French Revolutions of 1848-52, in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*.

Business secrets are not in fact part of a secret conspiracy against society, arising as they do out of the exigencies of capitalist competition. It is quite incorrect for the Programme to claim that: “In reality the trusts keep no secrets from each other.” Quite the opposite, as the number of firms operating in an industry falls the importance of commercial secrecy rises, and the growth throughout this century of industrial espionage underlines this fact.

If 100 firms compete to produce a commodity the financial strength of any one of these 100 is of little interest to the remaining 99. To them it makes no difference whether the 100th firm remains within the industry or leaves it. When on the other hand a few giant firms dominate the market, the strength and intentions of any one of them is of vital concern to all of the others. The motivation for business secrecy increases with the centralisation of capital.

“Workers no less than capitalists have the right to know the secrets of the factory, of the trust, of the whole branch of industry, of the national economy as a whole. First and foremost, banks, heavy industry, and centralised transport should be placed under an observation glass.”

“The immediate tasks of workers’ control should be to explain the debits and credits of society, beginning with individual business undertakings; to determine the actual share of national income appropriated by individual capitalists and by the exploiters as a whole; to expose the behind-the-scenes deals and swindles of the banks and trusts; finally, to reveal to all members of society that unconscionable squandering of human labour which is the result of capitalist anarchy and the naked pursuit of profits.”

“The working out of even the most elementary economic plan - from the point of view of the exploited and not the exploiters - is impossible without workers’ control, that is without the penetration of the workers’ eyes into all open and concealed springs of capitalist economy. Committees representing individual business enterprises should meet at a conference to choose corresponding committees of trusts, whole branches of industry, economic regions and finally of national industry as a whole. Thus, workers’ control becomes a school for planned economy. On the basis of the experience of control, the proletariat will prepare itself for direct management of nationalised industry when the hour of that eventuality strikes.”

These quotes, from the same section, contain proposals that would be excellent if carried out as presented. Unfortunately, as set out the proposals are voluntarist and one-sided. They describe what ‘should’ be the ‘tasks’ of workers’ control. The development of workers’ control is presented as the unfolding of some prearranged plan, rather than as an objective process that revolutionaries might seek to influence.

This is typical of the Trotskyist tendency to adopt a teleological view of events, that we saw in their estimation of industrial unionism in the USA. From the teleological viewpoint, present events are not seen as the result of past and present causes. Instead one views occurrences in terms of some purpose or design that they are claimed to serve. For instance, US industrial unions were presented not as the result of their real cause - conditions of contemporary US class struggle and technical development - but as the expression of an ulterior purpose: "The instinctive striving of American workers to raise themselves to the level of the tasks imposed on them by history."

The treatment of workers' control is teleological because it speaks of tasks workers' control should carry out. In other words it presents workers' control as a purposeful and orderly process that works towards the achievement of some definite goal. This, of course, is a very convenient, satisfying approach to history. It saves you the trouble of trying to understand the dialectics of the evolutionary development and revolutionary transformation of society. With this approach it is unnecessary to look in detail at what workers' control would be in a capitalist society, and how it would in fact function. Instead, you just decide upon some desirable future outcome - in this case the building of a planned economy - you then say that the 'task' of future historical events is to achieve this outcome.

This approach is, of course, idealist. Unfortunately for its proponents, the historic task⁶ and objectives exist only in their minds as hopes and aspirations. But hopes and aspirations will not change history if they go against the force of material events. Instead of this idealist procedure, the Marxist world outlook of dialectical and historical materialism abolishes all teleological notions of final causes or historical purposes, and examines the objective contradictions governing developments. These contradictions give

rise to opposed developmental tendencies. Communists must identify these and struggle to reinforce those which are in the long term interests of the proletariat.

Thus, to take the concrete example of workers' control, communists cannot proceed by the abstract method of declaiming what should be the tasks of workers' control. The programme should explain what is meant by workers' control, what social relations and property relations it entails. On the basis of this it should identify the contrary tendencies existing in a system of workers' control, those tendencies acting to preserve capitalist production relations which must be fought (The Yugoslav example shows these can be very powerful), and those developing towards socialism, which must be reinforced. This approach to workers' control is lacking in the Transitional Programme.

The central problem in communist strategy is that of the transition to the workers' dictatorship. A correct strategy towards workers' control is in its turn vital to a transition to the proletarian dictatorship in advanced capitalist countries. Because of its undialectical approach to workers' control, the 4th International programme does not as it stands provide a basis for a communist programme on workers' control.

“The socialist programme of expropriation, i.e., of political overthrow of the bourgeoisie and the liquidation of its economic domination, should in no case during the transitional period hinder us from advancing, when the occasion warrants, the demand for the expropriation of several key branches of industry vital for national existence or of the most parasitic group of the bourgeoisie.”

The above quote (from section 8 of the TP) reveals that the Trotskyists, for all their scorn of the minimum programme, have adopted in disguised form the old reformist policy of nationalisation. The 4th

International apparently demands the expropriation of the corporations holding monopolies of war industries, railroads, the most important sources of raw materials, etc. The 4th International has of course the right to demand whatever it likes, but these demands have no political significance unless it is in a position to enforce them. Towards whom are these demands directed?

In the context the only answer to that must be the capitalist state. In that case, are these realistic demands to expect the state to fulfill?

That state will at times take into its hands bankrupt companies or industries, if and when the state ownership of these is helpful to the continuation of capitalist production as a whole; i.e., when it is "vital for national existence". In the specific case of bankrupt firms, it is perfectly legitimate even in bourgeois juridical terms not to indemnify the shareholders. The state will also take over branches of industry which, if not bankrupt, are of low profitability, and as a result are unable to attract sufficient capital to modernise. These will be nationalised if their stagnant condition threatens overall economic development; the British Steel Corporation being a clear example. In these cases indemnification will occur. The property of foreign nationals, however, is fair game for confiscation, since the nation state exists by, and for, its own national bourgeoisie exclusively. The state will definitely not, on the other hand, nationalise without compensation profitable, key branches of industry belonging to its own nationals.

The demand that the bourgeois state do precisely this is Utopian. It thus comes as no surprise to discover that this section of the transitional programme reflects the practical impossibility of its proposals by being internally grossly inconsistent. At the beginning the demand for the expropriation of separate groups of capitalists is presented as a pre-revolutionary

measure, a measure to be carried out prior to the political overthrow of the bourgeoisie. In practice, however, only in the limited cases mentioned above could it be carried through before the seizure of state power.

Effectively recognising this, the programme goes on to say:

“(3) we call upon the masses to rely upon their own revolutionary strength; (4) we link up the question of expropriation with that of the seizure of power by the workers and farmers.”

To call on the masses to rely upon their own revolutionary strength to carry out expropriations is tantamount to admitting that these measures are impossible short of the proletarian dictatorship. But this will expropriate not only the most “parasitic group of the bourgeoisie”, rather the whole of it. What then was the point of demanding the expropriation of only a portion of the capitalists, other than to confuse the masses as to the nature of state power.

We have here presented criticisms of only a few aspects of the Transitional Programme. We have dealt only with those aspects which have either a general significance, or else, are of particular importance in advanced bourgeois states like the UK. Other sections of the programme have been neglected since, either they were acceptable in any communist programme, or they were relevant only to the specific historical situation existing in the 1930s; or finally, they were dependent for their validity upon an acceptance of the Trotskyist analysis of the USSR, which forms part of quite another debate. On these last sections we are unable to comment, without falling into subjectivism. Until a proper Marxist-Leninist history of the USSR has been prepared there is no scientific basis for a critique of the Trotskyist analysis.

We have devoted attention to the Transitional Programme here, because it has had a considerable

influence upon the thinking of the British Left. The Marxist-Leninist groupescules, whilst loud in their criticisms of Trotskyism, have been noticeably reticent in their criticism of its programmatic basis. Hopefully, this can provide the starting point for a polemic that will differentiate Trotskyism from Marxism-Leninism.