

Things must be studied in their movement

Part three of Edward Conze's explanation of dialectical materialism.

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 THAT everything should be studied in its development and changing forms is the demand of the second rule of scientific method. This is a simple consequence of the first law. For we cannot form an adequate picture of things as they are unless we take notice of their continual change and development. We have an intimate understanding of a house or a road when we know how it is built, of a tree or plant when we understand its growth, of the weather if we know how it was yesterday and how it will be tomorrow. When we confine or narrow down our attention to the condition in which things are at present, we see no more than a thin vertical section or slice of their full and complete history.

It would be like judging a whole film story by one "still" photograph outside the door of the picture-house, if we judged a thing merely by what it is at the moment. It may be possible so to judge a film if it is a specially stupid one. But the events of nature and society are far less stereotyped than are many of our films, so that when we study something, we must not ignore, for example, its past, which contains the causes of its present condition. We must also not ignore the trends inherent in it which drive it beyond its present state and which are the springs of its future development.

Everything in this world is subject to perpetual change. Religious believers and idealistic philosophers, while admitting that many things change, cling to certain exceptions from this law. They cherish the belief in an immutable God and his unchanging revelation, in an immortal soul, in eternal moral commands, and in the alleged eternal truth of scientific ideas. The craving for something stable, unchanging and eternal seems to be inherent in the very make-up of our minds. We live to think that those things will not perish which we like, cherish and value highly. There is nothing, however, in the world round us to justify this belief. There is nothing final. Everything in the world once had a beginning; and there is no part of the universe that will not perish.

Development is more than a monotonous movement that for ever repeats the same results, like a metal stamp which invariably cuts the same patterns. Development is a historically changing movement which goes through continually different stages.

Scientific method and nature

THE habit of studying things in their development has transformed all branches of science during the last two centuries and has thrown floods of light on the most bewildering problems of nature. Scientific method demands that the world should be studied as

a complex of processes and events and not as a complex of ready-made things. All students of nature would now regard this statement as a commonplace. We are today so much accustomed to the startling results produced by this point of view that it has become difficult to realise fully the great revolution it brought about in modern science. But just because the results themselves are so familiar, it will be easy to appreciate the part which scientific method played in obtaining them.

Everything — the universe, the stars, the earth, the organisms, mind and the elements

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of matter — is regarded as in development. We all know now that the world was not always the same as it is today. The heavens, credited for so long with being eternal and immutable, have revealed some of their history to us. The stars are not changeless, as our ancestors thought. They pass through different stages. They are first gaseous nebulae, continually changing their structure and shape. They then gradually condense into detached masses. Thus the stars we see are born. Once born, they are not "fixed", but are in movement. They do not remain the same, but continually lose mass or weight, which melts away in radiation. Once, when a second star came near the sun, our solar system came into being. Astronomy has found that everything has a beginning in time, an end in time and a history in between. And yet, this idea, now a commonplace, first dawned only 150 years ago.

The same is true of the earth. The present condition of its surface is only one short stage in a long and varying history. The science of geology has explained the formation of rocks and mountain, of valleys and coal fields, by assigning to them a definite place in this history.

The evolution of animals and plants is one of the most brilliant discoveries of modern science. Until about 1800 the different species of animals and plants were supposed to be invariable, definitely patterned forever, permanent and immutable. The idea that they gradually change, merge into one another and evolve from one another revolutionised the science of living things. As a matter of course, organisms are now studied in their changing individual and generic history (embryology and palaeontology).

The problems of our mind can be under-

stood and solved only by studying our mind's development and growth, especially the experiences of early childhood, which are so decisive for our character, for our mental make-up, equipment and behaviour. We must even trace back the history of our mind beyond the beginnings of mankind, to the mind of the animals, which is fundamentally the same and from which our mind has developed. Experiments on infusoria, rats and chimpanzees and careful observations of children now begin to furnish us with some solutions to the riddles of our mind.

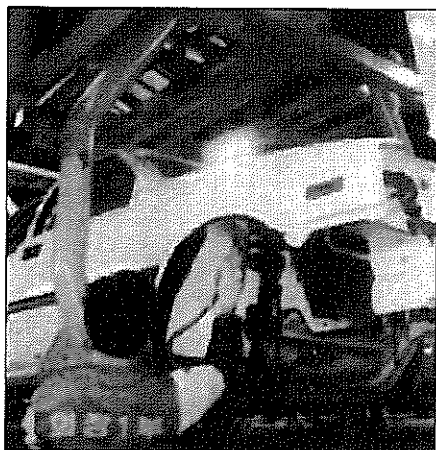
Not long ago the chemical elements were supposed to be immutable and permanent. Now we begin to obtain a first glimpse of their changing history. Of the 92 elements, at least the eight elements with the highest atomic weight are not permanent. They continually transform themselves into simpler atoms and into radiation. The best known of these are uranium and radium. Chemistry is just now on the way to transform elements.

Scientific methods and the social sciences

IN the social sciences, however, the conservative mentality of the ruling classes has retarded the application of this law of scientific method. The ruling class naturally is inclined to believe and to teach that the present condition of the political and economic system is the natural state of affairs. It is naturally disinclined to contemplate a radical change of things, by which it can only lose. By applying the second law of scientific method of economics, Marx broke the spell of conservative ideas. This has been one of his biggest contributions to the scientific foundation of socialism, the real question of socialism being: how are we to control the changes in society?

Marx realised that capitalism was only one particular and transient stage in the incessant flow of historical change. This discovery was possible because Marx had a more adequate conception of capitalism than anybody before him. The view that capitalism has always existed, as the natural and only possible form of human society, is based on a wrong conception of what capital is. For illustration I take a particularly inadequate, though not uncommon, definition of capital.

Capital, according to some capitalist economists, consists of goods which are put back for future use instead of being consumed at once. Where people save, there we have capital. From the very beginning, society was divided into persons who saved a part of their income and others who consumed their entire income at once. The first are the capitalists, the others are the workers. This division always existed, and always will exist. Always the far-seeing ants in the fable will be better off than the short-sighted crickets of the same fable. That will never change. One famous professor even went so far as to declare that there is no point in abolishing capitalism, since even our animal ancestors, the apes, enjoy a capitalist economy. For, do



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the apes immediately consume everything they have? No, they store up reserves, that is to say, capital. And our professor concludes triumphantly that no society can dispense with the reserves i.e. its capital.

Explanations of this kind tend to render the unthinking more willing to submit obediently to the capitalist system, as the necessary and inevitable arrangement of things. That is why they recur again and again in bourgeois economics, in different and, recently, less obvious and more sophisticated forms.

Marx's explanation

THINGS look somewhat different when we substitute for this superficial definition the scientific definition of capital which Marx gives. Capital, according to Marx, is wealth used to produce more wealth by the exploitation of “free” wage workers with the aim of making profits for the capitalist. The “free” wage worker who is indispensable for capitalism is defined by Marx as a person who sells his only property, his capacity to work, to an owner of the means of production. By this means the owner is able to obtain surplus value.

The nature of capitalism is seen when we apply the first and second laws of scientific thinking, viz, “think of things in their interrelations with other things,” and “think of everything in its movement and development, for everything changes.” Capitalism as it actually is, is obviously a transient stage in the history of mankind. In some countries — in Italy, France, England and Germany — it began slowly to grow about the year 1400 AD. It reached a certain maturity only about the year 1800. For a long time capitalism was confined to some few countries of Western Europe. It is easy to imagine that a system of production which, in the long history of mankind, has held sway for a mere 150 years and on only a small part of the globe, may conceivably disappear again. Further investigations have shown that trends within capitalism itself will probably one day destroy it.

At the same time capitalism, while it exists, is not always the same. As the features of human beings are altered as time goes on, so

the face of capitalism is perpetually modified. Capitalism passes through a number of different stages.

We must be alive to all the new changes which continually go on in the system and in the circumstances of capitalist production. When capitalism alters, our fight against it must be altered. The example of Lenin reveals the strategical advantage which results from being alive to the changes in the structure of capitalism. In 1916 he was the only one to give full significance to the new features which capitalism had developed by that time. He was also the only one to take advantage successfully of the temporary weakening of capitalism after the war. The socialists in their fight against fascism have repeatedly suffered from a failure to appreciate that changing capitalism has changing needs.

The most recent change

I CANNOT show here in detail how capitalism went through the different stages of mercantilism, free competitive capitalism and monopoly capitalism. Something should, however, be said about the most recent change in capitalism. Under our own eyes, capitalism is developing in such a way that to many observers it seems to be developing itself out of existence. In the years between 1890 and 1914, the big monopolies were built up, the banks grew in size and influence and industrial capital fused with banking capital into what we call “finance capital”; effective economic power was concentrated into fewer and fewer hands. In this way, it gradually became possible to place the control of the economic system more and more into the hands of one institution — the state. The big industrial countries are rapidly moving towards state-capitalism.

The drive towards state-capitalism is reinforced by the conditions under which a modern war will be conducted. Already the experience of 1914 to 1918 has demonstrated that private initiative, left alone, breaks down under the strain of a modern war. In all countries, the state interfered with industry, in order to obtain the munitions, food, coal and uniforms necessary for getting on with the war. In those countries which are now most intensely preparing for war — Italy, Germany and Japan — state control of industry and agriculture has gone farthest. In Britain, the marketing and other boards seek to do a spot of planning with the food supply of the nation. The state will take over more and more economic control, the nearer we move towards the next war.

Many workers everywhere are taken in by this new change. While building up state-capitalism the capitalist wolves put on the skin of the socialist lamb. In Germany state-capitalism passes as “German socialism,” in Japan as “state socialism”. German social democrats hailed the nationalisation of economic life and the state control of production and distribution during the war as “war socialism”. In Britain, few members even of the labour movement clearly understand the difference between nationalisation and socialisation. The workers may thus easily be deceived by the mimicry which British cap-

italism will soon adopt.

The new change in the structure of capitalism must be met by a change in our strategy. We have no longer to fight for state interference against private initiative. The main question now is not: should the state organise production or should production be left to the free play of private initiative and profit? The main question is now: whose state is to do the job, the workers' state or the capitalist state?

Human nature

SIMILARLY, human nature is frequently considered to be rigidly unchanging, and unchangeable. It is one of the main arguments against socialism that human nature has never tolerated socialism and therefore never will tolerate it. Many people who should know better are proud of reiterating that socialism can become a reality only after men have lost their nature and have become angels.

Here again it is an unscientific, a one-sided conception of human nature, which lies at the root of the anti-socialist's fallacy. He regards human nature as something very selfish, composed essentially of egoism, hatred, aggressiveness and similar inclinations. What we do, however, actually observe is not a vague “human nature” but that concrete human beings exhibit partly egoistic, and partly social inclinations. We can further observe that class society, and capitalist society in particular, does everything to foster and encourage the selfish, acquisitive and competitive instincts, so much so that they tend to overrun the social side of human nature. In spite of that, this opposite side of human nature is clearly visible in friendship, love, maternal affection, in solidarity, in the emotions of sympathy and pity and in all those sentiments which keep together the social units, like family, clan, village, tribe, nation and class. It is even exploited to the fullest by capitalist society. It makes possible that spirit of sacrifice which alone enables people to endure slums, intolerable exploitation and misery. Without the spirit of sacrifice no wars could be fought, even for a fortnight. Under socialism we shall be able to develop more fully the social side of our nature. Under the present system of society almost everybody thrives by the defeat of a competitor. The reckless, selfish, anti-social individual is favoured by the rules of the game.

Socialism, on the other hand, will alter the rules. In a socialist society life will be made very unpleasant for those who try to advance at the expense of their fellow citizens. If once social standing and success have become bound up with a display of the social virtues, if it has become expedient in his own interest for everybody to display his social inclinations, there can be no doubt that all the reserves of the more noble social instincts will be set free — reserves which have, for so long, been suppressed by class society. The plasticity of “human nature” was manifested in the bank clerk who, at a month's notice, went to the trenches. It will be easy to induce “human nature” which has tolerated the misery of capitalism to tolerate a socialist society. ■

The ABCs: 2

What are "transitional demands"?

By Jack Cleary

THE idea of transitional demands expresses the most advanced lessons of the attempts by the proletariat between 1848 and 1919 to hammer out a political practice which linked the goal of socialist revolution with the day-to-day organic struggle imposed on the working class by capitalism.

Before the international labour movement collapsed into national fragments at the feet of the warring bourgeoisies in 1914, socialists operated with a *minimum* programme and a *maximum* programme.

The *maximum* programme was the millennium, an unseen goal in the far distance and it was the theoretical property of an elite within the loose workers' parties of the time [known as "social democracy, organised together in the "Second International"]. The *minimum* programme consisted of limited practical goals and the immediate aims of the everyday struggle of the working class.

What was the link between the two? The party and the trade unions, being built in the struggles and through propaganda. (A sect like the Socialist Workers' Party today provides a minuscule historical fossil for students of the tragedy of the Second International and its methods.)

Capitalism was advancing organically; so was the labour movement. The 'right' social democrats saw this process continuing indefinitely until capitalism became transformed by its own evolution, of which the evolution of the labour movement was part. "The movement is everything, the goal nothing", said their theoretician, Eduard Bernstein. The mainstream left believed evolution involved qualitative breaks and leaps, and that the evolutionary process would have to culminate in a revolutionary proletarian seizure of power.

Both failed to link the daily class struggle with the goal of socialism. Control and hegemony was left in the hands of those whose practice corresponded accurately to the minimum/maximum model; in turn, this overweening reality of the labour movement led the 'orthodox' left to accommodate to the right. Ultimately, having won one hollow verbal victory after another in debate, they capitulated to the right in practice.

Both wings of mainstream social democracy failed to see in the creative self-controlling activity of the working class the central force for socialism. Left and right had in common a bureaucratic, elitist conception of socialism. Their operational image of the relationship of the revolutionary party to the revolutionary class was one of pedagogic teacher to passive pupil, or self-substituting bureaucratic instrument to inert mass.

The Marxist movement, reorganising itself during and immediately after World War 1, resolved to have done with the minimum/maximum division. Resolved to mobilise the working class to fight immediately for social-

ism, the Marxist movement elaborated the conception of a *transitional programme* — to link the everyday struggles of the working class with the goal of socialist revolution; to focus every struggle so as to rouse working class masses and direct those masses against the pillars of capitalist society.

The Communist Parties, founded after the Russian Revolution of 1917, attempted to bring 'socialist' propaganda down from the cloudy skies and harness it to the hard daily grind of working class struggle. The full socialist programme was broken down into a linked chain, each link of which might successfully be grasped, and the movement hauled forward, dependent on the degree of mobilisation, intensity of struggles, and relationship of forces.

Everyday demands, as on wages, were expressed not within the framework of an acceptance of a capitalism that the socialists believed to be maturing towards some optimum time of ripeness, when it would fall. They were expressed against capitalism, so as to challenge capitalist prerogatives on a day-to-day basis.

Central to the new Marxism was: mobilisation and involvement of the broadest layers of the working class in immediate conflict with capitalism; a break with elitism, propagandism, and evolutionism; the integration of the various fronts of the class struggle, ideological, political, economic, into one strategic drive.

This was part of a world view that saw the struggle for socialism as immediate. But the concept of transitional demands is useful even if the possibility of struggle for socialism is not quite immediate. The Communist International began to discuss transitional demands at about the same time as it accepted that capitalism had survived the post-World War one earthquake and reached temporary stabilisation.

Fighting against the ultra-left conceptions of many within its own ranks that because, in an epochal sense, revolution was on the agenda after 1914, a permanent revolutionary 'offensive' by the party was necessary, the International declared: "The alternative offered by the Communist International in place of the minimum programme of the reformists



After the 1917 Russian Revolution the Communist Parties developed the concept of the transitional programme

and centrists is: the struggle for the concrete needs of the proletariat, for demands which in their application undermine the power of the bourgeoisies, which organise the proletariat, and which form the transition to the proletarian dictatorship, even if certain groups of the masses have not yet grasped the meaning of such proletarian dictatorship" (3rd Congress of the Communist International 1921).

The essence of transitional demands is not that they cannot be realised under capitalism. Rather as Trotsky put it, "realisability" or "unrealisability" is in the last instance a question of the relationship of forces, which can be decided only by the struggle.

If demands from a transitional programme are conceded without the bourgeoisie being overthrown, they will either be taken back by the bourgeoisie once the moment of danger is passed, or they will be robbed of their revolutionary content and neutralised within the structure of capitalist society.

Even workers' councils can be neutralised this way. After the failure of the working class to seize power in the German Revolution of 1918, the councils (organs of workers struggle based on factories and working-class neighbourhoods set up during the first throes of the battle) were given a legal position as organs of 'codetermination' within the framework of normal factory life.

The concept of transitional demands was closely and logically linked with that of the united front. In the fight for partial demands, Marxists struggle for the involvement in united action of the broadest sections of the labour movement; and unavoidably, so long as reformist and bureaucratic leaderships survive, this will involve even those leaderships. Broader and more extensive mobilisation both corresponds to the immediate need for maximum strength in the struggle, and opens the way for more radical demands and mobilisations and thus for the verification by the workers, through their own experience, of the ideas of the Marxist programme.

In the fight for and in the united front, the Marxists prove themselves as steadfast fighters for the workers' interests. The class-collaborationism of the reformist leaders is made clear to the masses by their desertion from the united struggle — whether it comes at an earlier or a later stage — on condition that the communists have at all times maintained strict political independence in their agitation and propaganda. "March separately, strike together" is the watchword of the united front.

Essential to the concept of transitional demands and of the united front is an orientation to the logic of class struggle and the potentialities of mass direct action, as opposed to all conceptions which offer the working class no role other than to join the organisation which will see to their liberation.

In history the idea of transitional demands summed up the break with the evolutionary, bureaucratic, elitist conception of socialism. That is what it means for us. ■