

Origins of the crisis in the SWP - part two

Third-period Blairism and the necessity of demystifying Bolshevism

Unlike most disciples of Trotskyism, Tony Cliff and the Socialist Workers Party must be distinguished by their rejection of a revolutionary programme of any kind. Short-term advantage rules. As a result the SWP is unable to present its own membership and the working class as a whole with its principles, methods of struggle and strategy for achieving the aim of socialism (and communism) in the form of a testable and democratically sanctioned set of logically unfolding statements.

Socialist Worker's thumbnail 'Where we stand' column is all very well for introductory purposes. But its skeletal abstractions bear little or no relationship to daily practice or any discernible vision of how the working class is to make itself into a ruling class. That, when it comes to the SWP, is a mystery.

For comrade Cliff, the fact that the SWP has no programme was a positive advantage (rumour has it that Chris Harman produced a draft programme sometime in the 1970s, yet it was never allowed to see the light of day). Absence of programme was perceived to serve the interests of 'party'-building. That was everything. Unencumbered by either an elaborated long-term strategic road map or democratically binding principles, Cliff and the SWP leadership could perform the most sudden about-turns. In the main, 'party'-building for the SWP has therefore been about swimming with what was evaluated as the most powerful tide. Cliff's famed intuition took the place of debate and a democratic vote. The same went for John Rees, Martin Smith and Charlie Kimber. Hunch, the search for the big time, stunts, talking up every passing fad is what passes for leadership.

Yet without a programme and a democratic

internal life the rank and file cannot judge or control what has become a self-perpetuating leadership. Nor can the leadership apparatus, as the only permitted permanent faction, be effectively challenged politically or replaced by a different set of people. Incidentally, because one begins as one means to carry on, here we have in miniature an elitist socialism - a socialism from above, not below. Anyway, since the SWP came into existence as a trend, its history has been one of adaptations - whether it be adopting a neutral stance during the Korean War, giving fulsome backing to the National Liberation Front in Vietnam, or allying the regime of Slobodan Milošević over Kosovo; turning to 'electoralism' after decades of automatically leaving parliament to Labour; mocking the fight for a general strike in the 1984-85 miners' Great Strike, while demanding that a craven TUC 'get off its knees' and call one in 1992. Virtually any line can be adopted, as long as it goes to build the 'party' - usually measured arithmetically in terms of paper membership figures.

Needless to say, such an approach is contrary to the spirit and example of the Bolsheviks, which Cliff claimed as his model for the SWP - at least since the turn from 'Luxemburgism' in the late 1960s. Lenin's party, it should be emphasised, united around and fought on the basis of a minimum-maximum programme, first presented to the 2nd Congress back in 1903 (the minimum revolutionary programme sets out the aims and demands to be fought for under existing socio-economic conditions and provides a bridge towards the maximum programme, which concerns socialism and the transition to the higher stage of communism).

It is surely no exaggeration to say that without the revolutionary programme there

would have been no revolutionary party or successful revolutionary movement in Russia. Tactical flexibility is, of course, essential for any serious working class party or organisation. The Bolsheviks undeniably showed a commendable ability to manoeuvre. Underground committee work gave way to mass agitation, street combat to a semi-legal press and parliamentary activity, etc. Even when it comes to programmatic strategy and principles, there must be room to question and change in light of new opportunities. This the Bolsheviks did - for example over the land question in 1917, when they 'stole' the agrarian programme of the Socialist Revolutionaries. There was also modification of the programme due to new circumstances: eg, the fall of tsarism and dual power in 1917. But such changes only came about after serious, often exhaustive, debate and a democratic vote.

The programme was considered of cardinal importance by the Bolsheviks. That is why attempts to compromise or water it down met with the fiercest hostility. Around the programme the Bolsheviks were able to organise the workers - not merely in defence of their own economic terms and conditions, but as the hegemon or vanguard of the democratic revolution. The tiny working class was empowered by the scientific rigour of the programme - it summed up the Marxist analysis of Russia, the attitude of the workers to the state and the various classes, and put Russia's revolution in the context of the world revolution and the practice that flowed from it. So equipped, the working class came to master, and take a lead in, all political questions - national self-determination, anti-Semitism, war and peace, women's equality, etc - and crucially was able to put itself at the head of the

broad peasant masses in the fight to overthrow tsarism.

The SWP's now long forgotten 'Action programme' is worth examining in passing because it seemed to represent a break with the past. After it was first published in September 1998 not only was it reproduced as a glossy brochure, but there was an effort to get labour movement bodies to adopt it as their own and finance propaganda around it. However, as can easily be shown, the 'Action programme' was based on a fundamentally incorrect grasp of the period and, for all the revolutionary verbiage designed to sell it, the contents amounted to little more than a refurbishing of economism. Instead of a *fully rounded and comprehensive alternative* to New Labour's package of Thatcherism with constitutional reforms - ie, a revolutionary minimum, or immediate, programme - the SWP leadership concentrated entirely on minimal *economic* questions. Eg, stopping closures and the nationalisation of failed concerns; a 35-hour week with no loss of pay; a £4.61 minimum wage; ending privatisation; repealing the anti-trade union laws; state control over international trade in order to curb speculation; an increase in welfare spending and slashing the arms bill; full employment so as to boost demand. In short, workers were left as a class of wage-slaves, not elevated to a political class of self-activating revolutionaries.

When it did make an appearance, politics was confined entirely within the narrow horizons of militant trade unionism. All very well and good, but completely inadequate. How our rulers rule through commodity fetishism, judicial dictatorship and the UK's constitutional monarchy system was entirely absent. No mention then of crucial political

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questions like abolishing the monarchy and the second chamber, or an annual parliament and recallability of MPs, or the fight for self-determination for Ireland, Wales and Scotland. That is, no struggle for a “more generous democracy” under capitalism, which would facilitate the organisation of the workers as a class. The SWP leadership effectively left matters such as democracy to Tony Blair.

In other words the SWP remained programmeless (or more accurately it has a minimalist programme of convenience - another name for which is opportunism).

Lenin's programme

The SWP's erroneous anti-programmism has, I believe, two main sources. The first lies in Cliff's unconventional, but relatively perceptive, reading of Trotsky's *Transitional programme* in light of developments following World War II. Whereas orthodox Trotskyites such as Ernest Mandel (comrade E Germain) dogmatically refused to acknowledge an unprecedented economic boom and awaited expectantly for the predicted imminent slump, Cliff bravely made the attempt to come to terms with reality.¹ The other source of Cliff's anti-programmism is his conventional, but misplaced, Trotskyite rejection of pre-1917 Bolshevism and its minimum-maximum programme. Let me expand on this, beginning logically, not least in terms of chronology, with Cliff on the Bolsheviks and the Russian Revolution. We find his ideas on this subject most fully articulated in the first two volumes of his four-volume study of Lenin.

Here Cliff correctly characterises the attitude of the Menshevik wing of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party as tailist. According to their evolutionist schema, the overthrow of tsarism had to be followed by the class rule of the bourgeoisie and a western-style parliamentary government. Tsarism was viewed as an antiquated and semi-feudal obstruction on the linear ladder of progress. Russia was certainly not ripe for socialism - socialism being the first stage of communism. Before socialism and working class power could arrive on the historical stage the bourgeoisie would have to carry through its preordained task.

That historically determined task was to develop capitalist production under conditions of bourgeois democracy - the bourgeoisie and democracy were wrongly seen as inseparable. Alongside capitalist relations of production and reproduction a mass working class inexorably rises. Eventually this class would eclipse and finally replace the peasantry in population terms. Only then was socialism feasible. If the forthcoming revolution against tsarism was bourgeois, reasoned the Mensheviks in a conference resolution of April-May 1905, then the working class and its party “must not aim at seizing or sharing power in the provisional government, but must remain the party of the extreme revolutionary opposition”.²

So for mainstream Menshevik thinking the role of the working class was at most to push the bourgeois parties forward towards their destiny. Taking power, or participating as coalition partners in a revolutionary government, had to be avoided. Why? Because if the working class party seized power it would be unable to satisfy the needs of the masses; immediately establishing a ‘socialism’ was an illusion entertained only by non-Marxists such as the Socialist Revolutionaries. Like Pol Pot, what they called socialism was to be peasant-based. Moreover, if the working class aggressively pursued its own short-term interests, or succumbed to the temptation of power, it would lead the bourgeoisie to “recoil from the revolution and diminish its sweep”.³

Lenin held to an evolutionary schema similar to that which informed the Mensheviks. However, being a thorough-going revolutionary, Lenin never let a bad theory get in the way of making a good revolution. His thought was rich and dialectical and therefore soars above the parched categories insisted upon by the Menshevik wing of the party. Russia might not be ready for socialism - if by that one means leaving behind commodity production and what Marx called “bourgeois right” - ie, equal pay for equal work, as opposed to the higher communist principle of ‘each according to their ability, each according to their need’. The existing social and economic material conditions of a developing capitalism therefore explain why Lenin and the Bolsheviks described the coming revolution against tsarism as bourgeois.



Tony Cliff: leaving democracy to Tony Blair and New Labour

But against the Mensheviks, Lenin insisted that to make such a revolution one had to aim to take power. To fulfil the party's minimum programme - overthrowing the tsarist monarchy and a democratic republic, arming the people, separating church and state, and achieving full democratic liberty, decisive economic reforms such as land reform and an eight-hour day - it was necessary to establish a *provisional* revolutionary government which embodied the interests of the mass of the population. Lenin summed this up in the following famous algebraic formulation: the democratic dictatorship (ie, in Marxist terms, rule) of the proletariat and peasantry.

Such a regime would not bring full liberation for the working class. Economically Russia would continue to progress as a capitalist country - albeit one under the armed rule of the working class and peasant masses. Indeed the Bolsheviks envisaged a protracted period of controlled development of capitalist production and economic relations. Shades of the NEP of the 1920s. Without that the working class could not grow in numbers, organisation and consciousness. Lenin argued that this last-named subjective factor was, in the final analysis, bound up with objective conditions.

The Bolsheviks knew that the class balance of a revolutionary government of the proletariat and peasantry could not be determined in advance. The struggle itself decides such matters. Needless to say, the Bolsheviks planned in their minimum programme and fought tenaciously in practice for working class leadership. In other words, a workers' state supported by the peasant majority. Something that relied not primarily on forces internal to Russia, but sparking the socialist revolution in the west. Without that a working class-led regime in Russia was bound to be short-lived.

The bourgeoisie was both cowardly and counterrevolutionary. The bourgeois parties wanted a compromise deal with tsarism, not its overthrow through a people's revolution. Russia had no Cromwell or Milton, no Washington or Jefferson, no Marat or Robespierre. The only force capable of gaining a *decisive* victory over tsarism, overcoming bourgeois counterrevolution and ensuring that the revolution went as far as possible was the proletariat in alliance with the peasant mass. Russia, it hardly needs saying, was overwhelmingly rural. Naturally, therefore, the party laid great stress on its agrarian programme. Landlord power would be smashed, land nationalised and democratically distributed to the peasants without any payments in compensation. This was not a socialist measure for Lenin. It would though help clear away the Asiatic features of traditional Russian society and allow capitalist relations to develop along an “American path”.

How long was this stage of working class rule combined with controlled capitalist

development to last? According to Cliff, up to 1917 Lenin “anticipated that a whole period would elapse between the coming bourgeois revolution and the proletarian socialist revolution”.⁴ Here in Cliff we either have a devious formulation or plain ignorance. Firstly, as we have seen, Lenin's bourgeois revolution was to be led by the proletariat in alliance with the peasant majority. Once this popular revolution had carried out the *full* minimum programme it is true that Lenin envisaged elections - elections which could perhaps result in the workers' party becoming once more a party of opposition. Hence the *provisional* revolutionary government might *only* last six or seven years (obviously this is a guess on my part). But it is also true that Lenin wrote about the revolution being *uninterrupted*.

Cliff noticeably leaves unanswered what he means by ‘socialism’ and whether or not the October revolution of 1917 actually ushered in not a working class-led state, but socialist relations of production and exchange. I have certainly argued that the post-October 1917 regime was a proletarian-peasant alliance of the kind that Lenin “anticipated” - though, come the civil war and imperialist invasion, a regime characterised by growing bureaucratic deformations and a Communist Party substituting for the active leadership role of proletariat - that is, till the 1928 counterrevolution within the revolution. Of course, counterrevolutions rarely announce themselves as such. Famously, in the mid-1930s Stalin declared that the Soviet Union had successfully completed the transition to socialism.

Cliff sets Lenin up as an advocate of the “theory of stages” - by definition a cardinal sin for any spluttering leftist. First stage: the anti-tsarist revolution. Though it could not be led by the bourgeoisie, neither could it go beyond bourgeois economic norms. A democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry would for a “whole period” witness and encourage capitalist development, albeit under democratic conditions. Only after such a “whole period” could the working class think about putting forward its own distinctive social agenda.

Actually, as we have already illustrated, such a theory of *artificial* stages was advocated by the Mensheviks. Their analysis was very superficial but the long and the short of it was that in the event that a popular revolution proved successful, the bourgeoisie must be helped into power. Obeying the ‘laws of history’, the “party of extreme opposition” then waits in the wings till capitalism has fully developed and the conditions created for socialism. For Mensheviks then, there would have to be two revolutions. One bourgeois with a bourgeois state. The other, coming a long time after, was socialist, with a socialist state. The two are separated by a definite historical stage, or a

“whole period”, and crucially by distinct and opposed regimes.

Yet, as we have seen, Lenin explicitly rejected this theory. Lenin considered that the workers would have to take the initiative in overthrowing tsarism at the “head of the whole people, and particularly the peasantry”. The main political slogans of the Bolsheviks were ‘Abolish the monarchy’ and ‘For the democratic republic’. If their popular uprising proved successful - and remained under proletarian hegemony - the revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry would not meekly make way for the bourgeoisie. Yes, capitalism would be “strengthened”: ie, allowed to develop. But there would be strict limitations. Not only an eight-hour day, full trade union rights and complete political liberty, but an “armed proletariat” in possession of state power. And, of course, the revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry would wage a “relentless struggle against all counterrevolutionary attempts”, not least from the bourgeoisie.

Such a hybrid regime could not survive long in isolation. It would, and must, act to “rouse” the European socialist revolution. The proletariat of advanced Europe would in turn help Russia move to socialism. Inevitably there would, with the course of economic progress, be a differentiation between the proletariat and the peasantry. But *not* necessarily a specifically socialist revolution: ie, the overthrow of the state.

Put another way, there would not be a democratic stage and then a socialist stage at the level of regime. Democratic and socialist tasks are distinct and premised on different material, social and political conditions. But particular elements could interweave. As we have said, the revolution could, given the right internal and external conditions, proceed *uninterruptedly* from democratic to socialist tasks through the proletariat fighting not only from below, but from above: ie, from a salient of state power. The revolutionary democratic dictatorship of the proletariat thereby *peacefully grows over* into the dictatorship of the proletariat, assuming internal proletarian hegemony and external proletarian aid from a socialist Europe. In other words, Lenin and the Bolsheviks had a programme of permanent revolution. An approach elaborated by Lenin in 1905 pamphlet *Two tactics of social democracy in the democratic revolution*.⁵

So why does Cliff mischievously present Lenin's theory as no more than a variation on a Menshevik schema? Along with the usual run of orthodox Trotskyites, he wants us to believe that Trotsky had an altogether superior theory. Trotsky is approvingly quoted, by implication against Lenin, as stating that in his view “power must pass into the hands of the workers” through a revolution “before the politicians of bourgeois liberalism get the chance to display

to the full their talent for governing".⁶

The peasants are for Trotsky "absolutely incapable of taking an independent political role". Yet the proletariat, on the road to taking political power, can temporarily align the peasantry to itself. Furthermore, he reasoned, proletarian political domination is incompatible with "its economic enslavement". Therefore, concluded Trotsky, the workers are "obliged to take the path of socialist policy" even if they could not take the peasantry with them at that point.⁷ Thankfully, at least according to the myth, in April 1917 Lenin saved himself by undergoing a Trotskyite conversion. In the words of Cliff, Lenin's 'Letters from afar' and the documents now widely known as the *April theses* "marked a complete break" with the old notion of a democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry.⁸ Conditions of dual power which followed the fall of Nicholas II exposed the "bankruptcy" of the 'old Bolshevik' formula.⁹ Predictably, Cliff writes that before 1917 Trotsky "differed fundamentally from Lenin in his view of the nature of the coming Russian Revolution".¹⁰

Cliff has to admit that Trotsky badly misjudged the Bolsheviks. He did not realise that Bolshevism would have to break through the "bourgeois democratic crust" of their programme - because they based themselves on the dynamic of the struggle.¹¹ Of course, on this subject we need not rely only on Cliff *vis-à-vis* Lenin and Trotsky. We can use Trotsky's own words concerning the course of Russian history, which embraced periods of defeat and reaction and three revolutions - 1905, February and October 1917. In essence Trotsky took a centrist, "conciliationist" position from 1903 until May 1917, however, after returning from exile in the USA he placed himself "at the disposal of the Bolshevik Party".

Trotsky later maintained that until then his "revolutionary ideas or proposals amounted to nothing but 'phrases'". Lenin, on the other hand, carried out "the only truly revolutionary work". That was, a contrite Trotsky argues, "work that helped the party take shape and grow stronger".¹² Was Trotsky right in this assessment? In my opinion there can be no doubt about it.

Lenin v Trotsky debate

Let us examine more closely the supposed "fundamental" difference between Trotsky and Lenin. Cliff supplies us with extensive quotes from Trotsky's *Results and prospects*, a text published in 1906. Trotsky outlines his application of the theory of permanent revolution to Russia. Like Lenin he dismissed any revolutionary potential of the bourgeoisie. The working class had to form a revolutionary government "as the leading force". It would do this in "alliance with the peasantry". But, given the circumstances of Russia, the fact of proletarian state power would destroy the "borderline between the minimum and maximum programme; that is to say, it places collectivism on the order of the day".

One should not interpret such a formulation to mean Trotsky imagined a backward and isolated Russia being ripe for socialism. No Marxist could believe in any such thing. And, needless to say, Trotsky, to his everlasting credit, remained implacably hostile to "national socialism" till his untimely death in 1940.¹³ On the contrary he understood that the revolution would have to be permanent, or uninterrupted, if the working class in Russia was not to be "crushed". European revolution was vital.

All in all, to any objective observer, the differences with Lenin's theory are therefore evidently those of nuance. True, in *Results and prospects* and in Lenin's so-called replies there was a fierce polemic between the two men. Factional interests often produced more heat than light in both cases. Eg, Trotsky dismissed out of hand any suggestion of a "special form of the proletarian dictatorship in the bourgeois revolution". He was intent on rubbishing and equating both the Mensheviks and Bolsheviks. On the other hand, Lenin attacked Trotsky for "underestimating" the importance of the peasantry by raising the slogan, 'Not a tsar's government, but a workers' government'.

On the basis of the evidence of this slogan Trotsky is no doubt right when he concludes that Lenin had "never read my basic work". The above slogan was proclaimed not by Trotsky, but his friend and collaborator, Parvus. "Never did Lenin anywhere analyse or quote," says Trotsky, "even in passing, *Results and prospects*".¹⁴ Moreover, and it is surely significant, he goes on to cite the

"solidarity" that existed between himself and the Bolsheviks during and immediately after the 1905 revolution. And for those who demonise the term 'stage' and belittle Lenin, Trotsky's boast that he "formulated the tasks of the successive stages of the revolution in exactly the same manner as Lenin" should provide food for thought.¹⁵ The same can be said for Trotsky's proud affirmation about how "Lenin's formula" closely "approximated" to his own "formula of permanent revolution".¹⁶ Cliff can claim that Trotsky's theory was far superior to Lenin's democratic dictatorship. But that only shows Cliff had an agenda which owes very little if anything to analysing the substance of the matter.

What of Lenin carrying through a "complete break" with his theory of the democratic dictatorship in order to lead the October revolution in 1917, as claimed by Cliff? Here, it seems, is a myth, this time, at least in part, hatched and then given flight by Trotsky himself after Lenin's death in 1924. No doubt he was desperate to counter the campaign against 'Trotskyism' launched by the triumvirate of Stalin, Kamenev and Zinoviev. By pretending that Lenin had become a Trotskyite in April 1917, Trotsky could enhance his own standing and at the same time highlight the secondary or negative role played by his opponents during 1917: to their eternal shame Kamenev and Zinoviev 'scabbed' on Lenin's call for 'All power to the soviets' and a second revolution.

In February 1917 tsarism collapsed in the midst of a huge popular upsurge. A provisional government was formed, headed first by prince Lvov and, following his departure from the scene in July, by the Trudovik and ally of the Socialist Revolutionary Party, Alexander Kerensky. The provisional government was, however, revolutionary in words only. Russia's involvement in the imperialist slaughter continued, demands for land redistribution met with prevarication and elections to the constituent assembly were constantly delayed. In short, the proletariat and peasantry had "placed power in the hands of the bourgeoisie". Nevertheless, Russia was the freest of the belligerent countries and alongside, and in parallel to, the provisional government there stood the soviets, or councils, of workers, soldiers and peasants. Dual power.

What was Lenin's programme during this "first stage of the revolution"? Did he junk his old theory? On his return from Switzerland in April 1917 he certainly issued the call for the Bolshevik Party to amend "our out-of-date minimum programme".¹⁷ Obviously the demand to overthrow the tsar was now completely redundant.

The key, for Lenin, was to combat 'honest' popular illusions in the provisional government and raise sights. The Bolsheviks had been a mass organisation with deep social roots since 1905. But in the spring of 1917 they formed a minority in the soviets. Their task, therefore, was to become the majority by agitating for the confiscation of the landlords' estates and the nationalisation and redistribution of land, the abolition of the police, the army and the bureaucracy, and other such measures. This would prepare the conditions for the "second stage of the revolution" and the transfer of all power into "the hands of the proletariat and the poorest sections of the peasants". The "only possible form of revolutionary government" was a "republic of soviets of workers", agricultural labourers' and peasants' deputies".¹⁸ Lenin made no claims that the party's "immediate task" was to "introduce" socialism. Only that production and distribution had to be put under workers' control to prevent the impending meltdown of the economy.

Do these 'stagist' programmatic formulations and the perspective of a workers' and peasants' republic indicate an abandonment or a development of Lenin's theory in light of new and unexpected circumstances? I make no excuse for again turning to Lenin himself for an answer. In the article, 'The dual power', he writes the following:

The highly remarkable feature of our revolution is that it has brought about a *dual power*. This fact must be grasped first and foremost: unless it is understood, we cannot advance. We must know how to supplement and amend old 'formulas' - for example, those of Bolshevism - for, while they have been found to be correct on the whole, their concrete realisation *has turned out to be* different. *Nobody* previously thought, or

could have thought, of a dual power.¹⁹

Lenin got into a very heated dispute with the 'old Bolsheviks'. Many of those leaders - all of whom had first-hand experience of the actual situation in Russia - thought that Lenin was getting things wrong after his much *delayed* return from exile. Lev Kamenev put it like this in *Pravda*: "As for comrade Lenin's general scheme, it appears unacceptable, inasmuch as it proceeds from the assumption that the bourgeois democratic revolution is *completed*, and builds on the immediate transformation of this revolution into a socialist revolution." Kamenev was not urging support for the provisional government, as is often alleged. No, he was stressing the necessity of winning the support of the peasantry and thus readying the conditions for making revolution. The peasant movement could not be "skipped". The idea of playing at the seizure of power by the workers' party without the support of the peasantry was not Marxism, but Blanquism. Power had to be exercised by the majority. And Lenin, in some of his writings, seemed to be implying that the peasantry had gone over to social chauvinism and defence of the fatherland. Therefore, perhaps he feared that the peasantry might have become lost to the revolution. Lenin swore that he was saying no such thing. Nor, he insisted, was he immediately demanding socialism.²⁰

Obviously there were misunderstanding on both sides ... but unity was quickly re cemented. In the case of the peasantry Kamenev was clearly right and Lenin wrong. Subsequently, Lenin talks of the differences between himself and Kamenev being "not very great". He also joins with Kamenev in opposing the leftist slogan of 'Down with the provisional government', as raised by the Petrograd committee of the party. Things were not ready for its overthrow in April-May 1917. Instead, together with Kamenev, he insisted that the "correct slogan" was "Long live the soviet of workers' and soldiers' deputies".²¹

Circumstances were exceedingly complex though. Firstly, though state power had been transferred, that did not fully meet the immediate programmatic aims of the Bolsheviks. The Romanov order had been overthrown. To that extent the programme had been fulfilled. But the 'revolutionary democratic dictatorship of the workers and peasants' in the form of the soviets had voluntarily ceded power to the bourgeoisie.

Events had "clothed" the old slogan, the 'democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry', with flesh. The soviets were real. The Bolsheviks, or those whom Lenin was now calling the communists, had to deal with that unexpected actuality. Instead of coming to power, this 'revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry' existed side by side with, and subordinate to, a weak government of the bourgeoisie (ie, the provisional government). Only once the Bolsheviks won a majority could they finish with dual power and complete the revolution.

Yes, the dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry had become interwoven with the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie. The Russian Revolution had gone further than the classical bourgeois revolutions of England 1645 or France 1789, but in Lenin's words "has not yet reached a 'pure' dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry".²² There can be dual power but, of course, no dual-power state (whether it be a monarchy, a theocracy or a democratic republic). One of the dictatorships must die. Either the revolution was going to be completed under the hegemony of the proletariat, or popular power would be killed off by counterrevolution.

Again then, given all that, we have ask why Cliff was so determined to belittle Lenin and the Bolsheviks by painting them as Mensheviks. The answer, as we have already seen, is the fact that Cliff, along with most varieties of orthodox Trotskyites, was mired in economism.

Economism

To all intents and purposes the role of revolutionaries in a country like ours was seen by Cliff and the entire 'IS tradition' as twofold. In the here and now support and give a leftwing coloration to bread-and-butter issues like the minimum wage and trade union rights. That is practical politics, which, in spite of the grand phrases about the transitional method and the logic of the struggle, remain firmly within the narrow horizon of the present economic system and constitutional order. Then, in the indefinite future, lies the socialist millennium. As there is

no revolutionary situation in Britain, that must exist in the realm of vacuous propaganda.

The minimum, or immediate, programmatic demand for a federal republic and a "more generous democracy" advanced by the Provisional Central Committee of the CPGB never had a place in comrade Cliff's world view. The only republic Cliff was willing to countenance was the republic of never-never land. In the meantime his SWP happily provided a left gloss, or alibi, for Tony Blair's constitutional programme.

On May 1 1997 the SWP enthusiastically voted Labour. After two decades, the slogan, 'Tories out', was realised. But not in the way the SWP hoped. Tony Blair and his shadow cabinet, it should be stressed, had done everything to steer Labour to the right and lower popular expectations to the barest minimum. Those who turned out for Labour did so in the main because they thought it would be no worse than the Tories. Despite that, not least in order to excuse themselves, the SWP - along with the whole auto-Labourite left - did their utmost to talk things up. In the months following Blair's parliamentary landslide the SWP press carried a slew of daft articles all insisting that a crisis of expectations had arrived. To state the obvious, there was no crisis and no explosion.

Cliff left the SWP he did so much to build facing a crisis of perspectives.²³ Blair's deLabourisation of Labour undermined auto-Labourism. At the same time the absence of any serious mass movement from below forced the programmeless SWP leaders to make the most absurd and hyperbolic claims to bolster Cliff's last about-turn. It thereby came more and more to resemble the old Workers Revolutionary Party under the raving and ranting Gerry Healy.* Yet, combined with that, the SWP called for a 'yes' vote in the Scottish and Welsh referendums; a 'yes' vote over the Good Friday deal for Northern Ireland; and a 'yes' vote for the 'presidential' Greater London mayor. Weirdly the SWP therefore espoused a kind of 'third-period Blairism'. Calls for the indefinite general strike were combined with tailing New Labour's constitutional reforms.

Transitional programme

Justifying the 1998 'Action programme', the rudderless SWP leadership referenced Comintern's 'Theses on tactics', agreed at its 3rd Congress in June 1921, and Trotsky's 1934 'A programme of action for France'.²⁴ But the boldest claim was that it was premised on essentially the same conditions which prompted Trotsky's 1938 *Transitional programme*. This came from Tony Cliff himself.²⁵

As I have already remarked, Cliff distinguished himself from orthodox Trotskyism in that in the immediate aftermath of World War II he was able to recognise the palpable reality of capitalist boom and the inappropriateness of Trotsky's *Transitional programme*. In my view Trotsky was badly mistaken even in 1938. He believed that capitalism was in terminal crisis. It was in its "death agony".²⁶ It could no longer develop the productive forces or grant meaningful reforms. The introduction of new machines and technology provided no answer to chronic stagnation. Nor in general can there be in the epoch of a "decaying capitalism" systematic social reforms or the raising of the masses' living standards. Therefore, Trotsky concluded, defence of existing economic gains through demanding a "sliding scale of wages" and hours would virtually spontaneously trigger a final and apocalyptic collision with capitalism.²⁷ The question of democracy was likewise reduced to merely defence of the existing "rights and social conquests of workers".²⁸

In outlining his programme of transitional demands, Trotsky takes to task the minimum-maximum programmes of "classical" social democracy. Doctrinaires interpret this as a final judgement handed down from on high, damning the minimum-maximum programme *per se* and therefore the pre-1917 history of Bolshevism. That explains why in *International Socialism* No81, Alex Callinicos can quote Comintern's 'Theses on tactics' and simultaneously claim it

* Take Lindsey German - then one of the top leaders of the SWP and now of Counterfire. In early 1999 she excitedly insisted that Blairism was between the proverbial hammer and the anvil "in every major area of government policy". Therefore, comrade German held out the prospect of Britain being pushed to the brink of revolution through purely economic struggles: "It is increasingly obvious that even one major national strike or an all-out strike in one city would lead to a rapid crisis of Blairism and Labourism, as society polarised along class lines" (*International Socialism* No82, spring 1999, p35). Obviously nothing of the kind happened, but the SWP refused to undertake the serious rethink reality demanded.

SUPPLEMENT

as a repudiation of the minimum programme and as a pretext for the SWP's 'Action programme', which was in actual fact nothing more than a minimalist programme of the *right* centrist type - it could easily be met within capitalism, and within the existing constitutional order to boot. The crucial question of state power is entirely absent. Let us quote Callinicos's quote:

The communist parties do not put forward minimum programmes which could serve to strengthen and improve the tottering foundations of capitalism. The communists' main aim is to destroy the capitalist system. But in order to achieve their aim the communist parties must put forward demands expressing the immediate needs of the working class. The communists must organise mass campaigns to fight for these demands regardless of whether they are compatible with the continuation of the capitalist system. The communist parties should be concerned not with the viability and competitive capacity of capitalist industry or the stability of the capitalist economy, but with proletarian poverty, which cannot and must not be endured any longer ... In place of the minimum programme of centrism and reformists, the Communist International offers a struggle for the concrete demands of the proletariat which, in their totality, challenge the power of the bourgeoisie, organise the proletariat and mark out the different stages of the struggle for its dictatorship.²⁹

Clearly the target of Comintern is not the minimum programme as such. Rather it is the minimum programme of "socialisation or nationalisation" put forward by the centrists and reformists - which was to be achieved peacefully in an attempt to ameliorate the conditions of the workers, boost demand and thereby stabilise society.³⁰ As the resolution explicitly states, the understanding that capitalism cannot bring about the "long-term improvement of the proletariat" does not imply that the workers have to "renounce the fight for immediate practical demands until after it has established its dictatorship".³¹ Quite the reverse.

Equally, the intended target of Trotsky's 1938 attack on the minimum programme was not Leninism, but pre-World War I social democracy, epitomised by the German party of Kautsky, Bernstein, Noske, David and Scheidemann. Like the Bolsheviks, it arranged its programme - written mainly by Kautsky - in two sections. The minimum programme "limited itself to reforms within the framework of bourgeois society" - furthermore, it must be emphasised, these reforms were within the framework of kaiserdom. As Engels, and in her turn Luxemburg, bitterly complained, the timorous minimum programme of German social democracy shied away from even raising the demand for the abolition of the monarchy and the imperial constitution. Incidentally, Engels argued that the working class "can only come to power under the form of the democratic republic".³² True, the maximum programme of German social democracy "promised" socialism. But between the minimum and maximum programme there was, said Trotsky, no bridge. Indeed, as Trotsky explains, the right and centrist leaders had "no need for such a bridge", since the word "socialism" is only used for "holiday speechifying".³³

Trotsky warned his tiny band of followers, organised under the umbrella of the so-called Fourth International, that it would be a terrible mistake to "discard" the programme of old "minimal" demands "to the degree to which these have preserved at least part of their vital forcefulness".³⁴ Nonetheless, simply because capitalism was considered to be in terminal crisis, every serious economic demand of the workers "inevitably reaches beyond the limits of capitalist property relations and the bourgeois state".³⁵ In effect Trotsky was reduced by extreme organisational weakness into advocacy of an extreme version of left economism: ie, the workers would through strikes and other such elementary struggles find their "bridge" to revolutionary demands and revolutionary consciousness. Spontaneity combined with millenarianism. This is what the much vaunted *Transitional programme* amounts to.

No matter how we excuse Trotsky in terms of how things appeared on the eve of World War II, there is no escaping that he was wrong in

method and periodisation. Suffice to say, after World War II capitalism experienced its highest and longest boom. Cliff readily admits how "excruciatingly painful" it was to face up to the reality that Trotsky's prognosis had not come true.³⁶ His was one of the few voices of sanity. While 'official communism' derived solace from the Stalinist mantra that capitalism's general crisis was getting ever deeper, orthodox Trotskyism mindlessly repeated Trotsky's 1938 formulations to the same effect. Hence Ernest Mandel pig-headedly denied the new-found dynamism of the system with the certainty of a self-appointed Moses. Meanwhile, Gerry Healy demanded obeisance to the crisis of leadership and imminent collapse of capitalism throughout his horrid life. In contrast, Cliff tried to come to terms with the world as it was. Arriving from Palestine in 1946, he was struck by the relatively high living standards of the working class and the existence of full employment in Britain. That had to be explained, not explained away.

Essentially, Cliff held an underconsumptionist theory of capitalist crisis. Slumps, for him, have their origin in the inability of the masses to buy the goods which have been produced: certainly it is quite obvious that the profit system, by its very nature, must rest on a demand exterior to that of the working class. But underconsumptionism was with Cliff turned on its head. His explanation of the post-World War II boom lay in the theory of the permanent arms economy. The huge military budgets post-World War II served to temporarily stabilise the system by staving off overproduction through expanding a third department of production - arms - which relied solely on governmental demand; manufacturing the means of destruction served to boost aggregate demand and thereby, through the multiplier effect, increase investment in the production of the means of production and in turn the production of the means of consumption: ie, it stimulated both departments one and two.

The virtues and problems with that theory aside, Cliff's verdict on Trotsky's *Transitional programme* was that it was disproved "by life" and that reformism was enjoying a second spring.³⁷ In conditions of rapidly rising real wages, demands for a sliding scale of wages in line with the cost of living were at best "meaningless" and at worse "reactionary". The same went for a sliding scale of hours under conditions of full employment.

Unfortunately, an *incorrect* reading of Bolshevik history plus a *correct* recognition that Trotsky's *Transitional programme* did not correspond to post-World War II conditions or needs produced in Cliff an utter disdain for the revolutionary programme as such. SWP leaders, Cliff included, routinely *bragged* about their freedom from programmatic constraints and considerations. They might just as well boast of being at sea without a compass. In practice, for the SWP the absence of programme meant hugging the familiar shores of everyday trade union politics and making lifeless propaganda about the unknown continent of socialism. Prolonged lulls and unexpected violent storms could only but produce impressionistic rightist adaptationism and occasional spasms of wild leftism.

Of course, it is not merely a case of cause and effect. In the midst of the miners' Great Strike of 1984-85 - a strategic clash of class against class - the SWP peddled a criminal pessimism. The year-long strike, with its hit squads, mass pickets, nationwide support groups, women against pit closure movement, etc, was, declared Duncan Hallas, an "extreme example" of what the SWP called the "downturn". Cliff had decreed that the whole period throughout the 1980s was one of retreat. Hence, as the miners gallantly battled with the Tory government and the semi-militarised police outside power stations and in the streets of countless pit villages, the SWP proclaimed that this was more like 1927 than 1925: ie, agitation to generalise the miners' strike by fusing it with the dockers, the railways, the Liverpool council and many other such disputes - both possible and vital - was completely misplaced. We had already lost.

Such dreadful defeatism, along with a deep seated anti-programmism, led Cliff to write that Trotsky's *Transitional programme* was only relevant when there was "a situation of general crisis, of capitalism in deep slump", and that many of the programme's proposals - eg, workers' defence squads - "did not fit a non-revolutionary situation".³⁸ As if the miners' hit squads were not embryonic workers' defence

squads in all but name.

Then, all of a sudden, everything began to change. In late 1992, when the National Union of Mineworkers was forlornly looking towards Tory MPs and the shire county set to save Britain's remaining deep coal mining industry from Michael Heseltine's final decimation, the SWP stole the WRP's semi-anarchist slogan: 'TUC, off your knees - call the general strike'. The general strike being only a prelude to social revolution, which in the WRP's deranged schema had been days away since at least the early 1970s. That is why for serious Marxists, as opposed to charlatans and windbags, the call for a general strike is accompanied by agitation - ie, a dialogue with the masses - about the necessity of forming workers' defence squads. In 1992, of course, the SWP did no such thing. Though Cliff did blusteringly suggest in an interview that if the SWP had 20,000 or 30,000 members the mass demonstration in London in support of the miners would have been re-routed and parliament stormed. Shades of Sergei Eisenstein and *October*, or more likely the slaughter on the Odessa steps in *Battleship Potemkin*.

The years that followed saw Cliff undertake an almost comical return to Trotsky's 1938 version of programme (not Lenin's). Despite working class confidence and self-activity being at an all-time low ebb and revolutionary consciousness almost non-existent, Cliff decided that pursuit of even the most minimal demands was all that was needed to fell the mortal enemy.

Cliff insisted that we live not in a period of reaction (of a special type), but, one must presume, of imminent revolution. "Capitalism in the advanced countries," he wrote, "is no longer expanding and so the words of the 1938 *Transitional programme* that 'there can be no discussion of systematic social reforms and raising the masses' living standards' fits reality again".³⁹ As Cliff once said about the periodisation of Trotsky's epigones - pure fantasy.

Revolution

Naturally, SWP leaders indignantly rebuff the charge that their outlook is wholly economic. They do, after all, state every week in *Socialist Worker* that the "present system cannot be reformed, as the established Labour and trade union leaders say", and that the working class can only achieve its objectives through a workers' state based on "councils of workers and a workers' militia".⁴⁰ But one should not reduce economism to strikism alone. There are other forms of economism - in this instance it is revolutionary economism again (Lenin called it 'imperialist economism' in his day). No, as we have said many times before, economism entails downplaying the *centrality* of democracy for the working class. That is its *main* characteristic.

Thus the SWP totally ignores or wants to put off key democratic demands until after the revolution: eg, Scottish and Welsh self-determination, a single legislative chamber, annual parliaments, recallability of MPs, proportional representation, MPs' salaries limited to that of a skilled worker, abolition of the monarchy, etc. Democracy as a central question is absent before the revolution. Whatever the SWP's intentions, the working class thereby remains a class of slaves. That is the unintended upshot of economism of whatever kind.

In this context, Trotsky's response to what was an emerging revolutionary situation in France is highly instructive. In the mid-1930s he had to move beyond his usually dismissive pronouncements on democracy under capitalism. He presented a programme for a "more generous" democracy, which would facilitate the struggle of the workers. 'A programme of action for France' was published in June 1934 and contains the following passage:

We are ... firm partisans of a workers' and peasants' state, which will take the power from the exploiters. To win the majority of our working class allies to this programme is our primary aim.

Meanwhile, as long as the majority of the working class continues on the basis of bourgeois democracy, we are ready to defend it with all our forces against violent attacks from the Bonapartist and fascist bourgeoisie.

However, we demand from our class brothers who adhere to 'democratic'

socialism that they are faithful to their ideas, that they draw inspiration from the ideas and methods not of the Third Republic, but the Convention of 1793.

Down with the Senate, which is elected by limited suffrage and which renders the powers of universal suffrage a mere illusion!

Down with the presidency of the republic, which serves as a hidden point of concentration for the forces of militarism and reaction!

A single assembly must combine the legislative and executive powers.

Members would be elected for two years, by universal suffrage at 18 years of age, with no discrimination of sex or nationality. Deputies would be elected on the basis of local assemblies, constantly revocable by their constituents, and would receive the salary of a skilled worker. A more generous democracy would facilitate the struggle for workers' power.⁴¹

Every Marxist knows that democracy under capitalism is limited, partial and subverted. Yet democracy and the struggle to extend it brings to the fore the class contradiction between labour and capital. That is the crux of the matter. Far from being a diversion, democratic demands are crucial. Without training the workers in the spirit of such a "more generous" democracy there can be no revolutionary working class unity, and the socialist revolution will thereby remain an empty abstraction.

To achieve socialism requires revolution. Not just any revolution though. The revolution will have to be democratic, in the sense that it is an act of self-liberation by the majority and aims to take the democratic state to its limits as a semi-state that is already dying. Democracy and socialism should never be counterposed. The two are inexorably linked. Without socialism democracy is always formal and stops short of ending exploitation. Without democracy socialism is only post-capitalism; it is not proletarian socialism. The task of the working class is to champion democracy, not leave it to the bourgeoisie. Existing democratic forms must be utilised, new forms developed - eg, soviets or workers' councils - and given a definite social or class content. The purpose is to extend democracy and control from below both before and after the qualitative break represented by the proletarian revolution.

Jack Conrad

Notes

1. Eg, see the September 1947 essay, 'All that glitters is not gold', in T Cliff *Neither Washington nor Moscow* London 1982, pp24-39.
2. Quoted in T Cliff *Lenin* Vol 1, London 1975, p197.
3. Quoted in *ibid*.
4. *Ibid* p200.
5. See VI Lenin *CW* Vol 9, Moscow 1977, pp15-130.
6. Quoted in T Cliff *Lenin* Vol 1, London 1975, p202.
7. Quoted in *ibid* p202.
8. T Cliff *Lenin* Vol 2, London 1976, p124.
9. *Ibid* p128.
10. T Cliff *Lenin* Vol 1, London 1975, p201.
11. *Ibid* p205.
12. L Trotsky *The challenge of the Left Opposition 1923-25*, New York 1980, pp265, 267.
13. L Trotsky *The permanent revolution* New York 1978, p159.
14. L Trotsky *The permanent revolution* New York 1978, p166.
15. *Ibid* p168.
16. *Ibid* p198.
17. VI Lenin *CW* Vol 24, Moscow 1977, p24.
18. *Ibid* p23.
19. VI Lenin *CW* Vol 24, Moscow 1977, p38.
20. *Ibid* p48.
21. VI Lenin *CW* Vol 24, Moscow 1977, p244-45.
22. *Ibid* p61.
23. The financial crisis which so excited Cliff in 1999 was, of course, a prelude of what was to come, but at the time remained stubbornly confined to the far east and Russia.
24. See A Callinicos *International Socialism* No81, winter 1998; and J Rees *Socialist Review* January 1999.
25. See T Cliff *Trotskyism after Trotsky* London 1999, p82.
26. L Trotsky *The transitional programme* New York 1997, p111.
27. *Ibid* p115.
28. *Ibid*.
29. A Alder (ed) *Theses, resolutions and manifestos of the first four congresses of the Third International* London 1980, pp285-86.
30. *Ibid* p285.
31. *Ibid* p285.
32. F Engels *MECW* Vol 27, London 1990, p228.
33. L Trotsky *The transitional programme* New York 1997, p114.
34. *Ibid* pp114-15.
35. *Ibid* p114.
36. T Cliff *Trotskyism after Trotsky* London 1999, p14.
37. T Cliff *Neither Washington nor Moscow* London 1982, p117.
38. T Cliff Trotsky: *The darker the night, the brighter the star* London 1993, p300.
39. T Cliff *Trotskyism after Trotsky* London 1999, pp81-82.
40. Socialist Workers Party, 'Where we stand'.
41. L Trotsky *Writings of Leon Trotsky 1934-35* New York 1974, p31.