

The Case for Transitional Reform

by Peter Dreier

At the core of the current round of political reform movements (community organization, trade union insurgency, public interest advocacy, etc.) is a vision of reforms that leads to qualitative transformation of American society. The activities of these movements suggest that gradual quantitative progress is a precondition for qualitative change. At least two processes are involved. One is the process of creating institutions that take into consideration socialism's place within capitalist society, and thus serves as an ideological and organizational basis for change. The second process of quantitative change is that of injecting unmanageable strains into the capitalist system, strains that precipitate an economic and/or political crisis. These two processes must occur together: the first without the second produces socialist institutions perennially becalmed or encapsulated within capitalism. The second without the first (i.e., crisis without left political organization) opens the way to an authoritarian or quasi-fascist restructuring of capitalism.

The candidacies of people such as Ron Dellums, Tom Hayden, Ken Cockrel, Sam Brown, Florence McDonald, and many others have sought to use the electoral process to raise issues, win elections, build grassroots movements, and develop legislation around a wide range of complex issues. The anti-war movement of the earlier decade has broadened its scope to examine and oppose the structural causes of "militarism" itself—wasteful weapons systems, military aid to repressive regimes, a far-flung network of military bases, and skyrocketing arms sales abroad. Socialist orga-

nizations such as the New American Movement and the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee are gaining members and having some tentative successes in local organizing campaigns. Publications such as *Mother Jones*, *In These Times*, and *Seven Days* are gaining readers and renewing the tradition of socialist popular journalism.

We do not wish to be pollyannaish. Most of these efforts are marginal to the daily lives of the majority of citizens and to some extent this marginality is a result of the left's inability to develop a coherent strategy.

There is also a sense that the left has been unable to recognize its own victories. In response to the celebration of American liberalism during the postwar period, much radical scholarship focused on "revisionist" historical analysis and "power structure" research. This view argued that liberal reforms strengthened the position of the capitalist class; they ameliorated, but did not solve, the basic problems of capitalist society and knocked the wind out of socialist sails. "Corporate liberalism" centralized political power, concentrated capital, stabilized risk, and integrated the working class into the capitalist order. By granting concessions to radical movements (co-optation) during the Progressive Era, the New Deal, and the Great Society periods, the capitalist power structure was able to reshape the nature of the reforms to its own benefit (Dreier, 1977).

Although we recognize the limitations of past reforms, we believe that this interpretation can not apply to the present because it overestimates the strength of the capitalist class and underestimates the political consequences of reforms that have created the preconditions for further crisis. In the course of this essay we will look to

Andre Gorz's notion of "transitional reforms" to help us think about critical issues confronting the left in the present era.

Social observers of various perspectives agree that the current American political economy is unstable and that the origins of the present crisis—constraints on America's global hegemony—will have profound political consequences. For example, Marxist Arthur MacEwan argues that:

It was only a matter of time before the economic challenge would become serious, and the other nations would no longer allow the United States to dictate the rules and policies for the operation of international capitalism . . . The good times for U.S. business could not last, because the successful operation of the system was, from the outset, leading toward its own destruction.

Conservative Samuel Huntington seems to agree, noting that:

In the year 2000 the American world system that has been developed during the last twenty years will be in a state of disintegration and decay . . . The decline of American influence will tend to undermine and disrupt American politics. The American political system could be less likely than that of the Fourth Republic (of France, which collapsed in 1958 as a result of the war in Algeria) to adjust successfully to the loss of empire.

The current crisis of American politics is rooted, as both MacEwan and Huntington suggest, in the decline of the United States in the world system. The prosperity of the American economy in the postwar period was tied to overseas expansion and military Keynesianism. Multinational corporate profits soared as a result of new outlets

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for capital, cheap costs for resources, and the availability of markets. The ideology of anti-communism and "containment" was used to justify this policy. The domestic side of this coin—although the consensus was considerably weaker—was the expansion of liberal welfare state programs.

The decline of America's international position in the 1970s has its domestic ramifications. The Vietnam War, Watergate, and the "energy crisis" symbolize the larger structural crisis. The largest corporations and the internationalist wing of the capitalist class (represented by the Carter administration) now describe the current crisis as a "era of limits." Thus, we see a growing debate, reflected in business magazines, corporate-sponsored think tanks, and legislative bodies, over solutions to the current economic crisis. We see a growing discussion over "guns and butter," full employment, national health insurance, proposals to subsidize the energy industry, military aid to allies, and calls to make significant cuts in food stamps, education, occupational safety, labor legislation, and other programs. The Trilateral Commission even goes so far as to argue that "some of the problems of governance in the United States today stem from an excess of democracy."

Three decades of postwar corporate expansion postponed and/or obscured the contradiction between labor and capital in domestic politics. But as the position of the United States in the world system weakens, the surplus once available to finance the welfare state and a rising standard of living is diverted by efforts to create more favorable conditions for corporate investment—proposals to lower real wages, to invest in capital intensive investment, to increase productivity, and to get the state to subsidize this investment through tax policies and more centralized planning.

Business Week, in a special issue on "The Debt Economy" (October 12, 1974), eloquently outlined the justification for the state-managed acceptance of "limits":

Yet it will be a hard pill for many Americans to swallow—the idea of doing with less so that big business can have more. It will be particular-

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ly hard to swallow because it is quite obvious that if big business and big banks are the most visible victims of what ails the Debt Economy, they are also in large measure the cause of it. President Ford's anti-inflation package may make perfect economic sense, but he will find it very difficult to sell Congress on his proposal to levy the same five percent tax surcharge on the worker making \$7,500 a year and the corporation making a thousand times that much—especially when the package also contains some tax break for corporations . . . Nothing that this nation, or any other nation, has done in modern economic history compares in difficulty with the selling job that must now be done to make people accept the new reality.

As Garner (1975) has noted, a variety of measures can be seen as first steps toward state capitalism. The Humphrey-Javits bill called for "national economic planning." Articles by executives of multinational corporations, academics, think tank policy researchers, and financiers have also called for tighter state regulation and planning in the areas of capital, resources, labor, and welfare. The basic points of state capitalism are to get the state sector (financed by taxes which disproportionately burden the working class) to:

- 1) Plan and subsidize the allocation of capital, perhaps through a "capital allocation board." The federal government has already been urged to set up a new version of the Reconstruction Finance Corporation. This would "provide corporations with the wherewithal to undertake large projects needed for the viability of the capitalist state as a whole

but 'insufficiently profitable to attract private investors' such as mass transit, low-cost housing and pollution control, as well as outlays for capital goods like new machinery. (See *Monthly Review*, April 1975).

- 2) Make available to private corporations largely as yet untapped resources, like the oil shale land of the Western slope of the Rockies (almost all entirely on public land) and offshore oil. In light of the drying up of cheap sources of raw materials in the third world, energy policy now focuses on allowing private U.S. energy companies to develop domestic resources as highly profitable returns on state-subsidized investment.
- 3) Press for austerity programs vis-a-vis labor, such as long-term contracts with no-strike clauses, to lower real income, and to maintain high levels of unemployment. In a special (March 22, 1976) issue on "Unemployment," *Business Week* cites Marx's notion that advanced capitalism requires an industrial reserve army of the unemployed. *Business Week* then admits that capitalism may have exhausted its potential for solving unemployment and critically reviews various proposals by both Democrats and Republicans for reducing unemployment to politically acceptable levels. As *Business Week* notes, "Washington has dealt with joblessness mainly by extending unemployment compensation at levels that keep people from starving and rioting."
- 4) Assume or share the burdens for universal health insurance, Pentagon-sponsored manpower training for poor youth, and schemes to make government the employer of last resort (although not necessarily at prevailing wage rates), such as the CETA program.

There are, however, stumbling blocks to state capitalism. One, divisions within the capitalist class might hinder a smooth, rapid movement to

greater state management. Two, some of the reforms pushed by the capitalist class are—like most reforms—ambiguous and may in fact have unintended consequences. Reforms come in all shapes and sizes, not all of which are unambiguously directed by or in the interests of the capitalist class.

REFORMS IN AMERICA

Underlying our view is the assumption that labor as well as capital is impelled to expand its realm of control. For capital, this means capturing as much of the value produced by labor as it can. For labor, this means striving to retain as much of that value as it can. Both labor and capital turn to state action to assist them in their struggles, though with unequal probabilities of success. That the state takes on a responsibility, therefore, is not, as the liberal tradition appears to assume, a reason for socialists to cheer; but neither is it unequivocally a demonstration of labor's defeat as capital enlists the sovereign legal order to guarantee or aid capital's extraction of value.

The history of American reform really consists of three parallel stories. One is the story of planned changes intentionally designed to overcome the problems that large corporations face. These changes are in fact measures to protect monopoly capital. In so far as they are changes at all they are associated with the growth of monopoly capital and the dominance of large firms over small producers. In other words, these changes were not reforms in the sense of responses to mass demands for improvement in life conditions. Quite the contrary, the planners of these changes from the start saw them as supporting the interests of large capital, at home and abroad. Their measures were not challenges to the distribution of wealth and power either in intention or effect. These planners saw themselves as social engineers, putting their people-handling skills at the disposal of capital just as engineers made their material-handling skills available. In fact, during the early stages of the social science industry, in the Taylorist and "scientific management" periods of the early twentieth century, people-handling and engineering were still very closely

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linked. Human beings were but a slightly more troublesome factor of production than machines and raw materials. As Braverman has shown, their work had to be broken down to the point where it was as calculable and predictable as the contribution of inanimate resources.

A second kind of reform, more ambiguous and complex, are the efforts to induce the government to ameliorate the effects of capitalism. Beginning with the Progressive Era and furthered during the New Deal, they became particularly visible in the Great Society programs of the 1960s. Social scientists were advisers to agencies of the War on Poverty; research was sponsored on poverty, the sources of social unrest, the characteristics of participants in collective violence, work alienation, and so on. Social scientists found themselves on numerous commissions established to "study and report" on social problems associated with unrest. The goal of these efforts was the reduction of various "social pathologies"—juvenile delinquency, alcoholism, marital instability, judicial access, police brutality, and educational inequality.

What types of pressure generated these reforms? Big capital itself pressured the government—particularly the federal government—to underwrite some of the costs of capitalism. This cost underwriting had to take several forms. First of all, the government had to take care of those people who were too unskilled and/or lived in geographic regions which made it difficult for them to be absorbed into an economy that operated at a very high unemployment level. In other words, the government had to pay the costs of the uneven economic development that is characteristic of market economies; development was uneven by re-

gion and ethnic group. The federal government had to provide welfare of various kinds, not to genuinely even out the development, but at least to keep it from becoming too lopsided. Secondly, the government had to pay for education and training of manpower in the private sector. Thirdly, the government had to provide a variety of services that could not be profitably produced by the private sector. Fourthly, it had to take care of the human wreckage left in the wake of progress—the insane, the criminal, the alcoholic, the addict, and so on. Finally, it had to provide enough programs to reduce the urban unrest, often of a spontaneous, violent, and disorganized nature, that appeared in the 1960s. Although called for by the large capitalists, many of these measures were not directly controlled by them and thus did not always meet their needs unambiguously. (The expansion of higher education in the late 1950s and 1960s for example, created the preconditions for both the student revolt and the current surplus of educated youth).

Further, the state managers, the government itself, were the main source of funds for these reforms. State managers—members of the professional-manager sector—became, in Moynihan's words, "professional reformers" with an interest in the expansion of these programs. Many of these practitioners genuinely wanted to eliminate "pockets of poverty" to prevent the impending crisis of the central cities and to move toward racial integration. (The presence of human service practitioners also produced an emphasis on expertise in most of the ameliorative measures, sometimes to the point of mystification.) But capital sets the outer limits of reform; it could not go to the limit of nationalization (much less expropriation) of profitable enterprises without provoking an investment strike of the kind that toppled Allende or the French Popular Front government of the 1930s. In the United States, governmental reform did not even approach these limits. In fact, it failed to attain even the more modest goals of ending poverty and achieving racial integration.

Yet, even with the narrow resources

and the limits of liberal reform in the United States, there was struggle to expand these limits. A third source of reform was the attempts of social movements to radically transform American society—a radical thrust which, too, ended up as ameliorations. The modern thread of this story begins in the 1890s with the Populist Party (and the larger agrarian movement of which it was a part). The Populists, sometimes in alliance with urban socialist movements, sought reforms that would halt the growth of monopoly capital, especially public ownership of railroads and utilities. It was largely in response to these pressures that capital and the capitalist state agreed to a “compromise” of the regulation of utilities and other industries. Most of the Populist reforms were thus ameliorated, achieved in piecemeal fashion, torn from a larger context, or lost altogether.

But even after the end of Populism, the Populist tradition continued. It was primarily a tradition of attacking monopoly capital (e.g., “trust-busting”). With no overall agenda (which was, for example, provided when populist groups worked together with the socialist movement in the union drives of the 1930s and occasionally in the 1960s and 1970s), there was no larger goal against which to assess reforms. And so an ameliorative ethos dominated.

However these ameliorative actions differed from government-sponsored ones in that they produced institutional changes, rather than just lifesaver measures for individuals (like many of the human service measures). It is on these terms that we disagree slightly with the “revisionist” historians who see the reforms of the Progressive, New Deal, and Great Society eras as strengthening capitalism.

The establishment of the regulatory agencies; laws to inspect and upgrade the quality of pure foods, drugs, and meats; mass education; Social Security; the right of labor to organize; welfare increases; workman’s compensation; and other welfare state reforms placed increasing demands on the state to provide services, regulate business, and establish new “rights” of citizenship. Each new set of reforms and

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mass political demands helped to create the precondition for a new crisis. Or put differently, each new set of reforms created a minimum level of expectation (what Daniel Bell calls “the revolution of rising entitlements”) that cannot be abandoned without undermining the legitimacy of the capitalist class. By acknowledging that the state has some responsibility for the general welfare, that principle enters the political realm as a criterion for state action. This may be exploited by capital so as to legitimize the activity of a “regulated” capital to extract value from workers; but it also legitimates use value as distinct from exchange value as a criterion for judging state production of services. Proximately, the process leads to expansion of state activity and budgets, and as O’Connor argues, to fiscal crisis in the public sector. In the longer run, it may give socialist norms an opportunity for extension or at least visibility.

More recent reforms—such as the proposed Equal Rights Amendment, the Environmental Protection Act, and the Occupational Safety and Health Act—can be seen in the same light. It may be possible to halt the implementation of these reforms (as the Nixon and Ford administrations showed) but it is much more difficult to reverse them. This depends on the level of political coherence of contending classes.

In summary, the “revisionist” view is insufficiently dialectical in its analysis of state action and ultimately, of power. While the capitalist class may have hegemony, it does not have total control over state or society. And its own activities—even those which may

appear co-optive—may build contradictory expectations and norms into the political system.

TRANSITIONAL REFORMS

Gorz’s notion of “transitional reforms” helps to focus attention on the political impact of reform activity as part of a larger scenario. Gorz writes:

Socialism will not be achieved by a gradual reordering of the capitalist system, designed to rationalize its functioning and institutionalize class antagonisms. It will not emerge of its own accord out of the crises and imbalances of which capitalism can eliminate neither the causes nor the effects, but which it now knows how to prevent from becoming explosive, nor will it be born of a spontaneous uprising of traitors and revisionists. It can be brought about only by deliberately long-term action of which the beginning may be a scaled series of reform, but which, as it unfolds, must grow into a series of trials of strength . . . some won and others lost, but of which the outcome will be to mold and organize the socialist resolve and consciousness of the working class.

Gorz’s view of transitional reforms is rooted not in a “power elite” perspective, but in a view of capitalism as a system with inherent weaknesses, of the state as a relatively autonomous institution that is not always the “instrument” of a monolithic capitalist class, and of the working class as a potentially conscious and unified class that can take advantage of systemic crisis.

The basis of a capitalist society—and of its instability—is the inherent conflict between capital and labor over the surplus produced by labor. Capital seeks to use the state to stabilize and protect the class order. But since the state seeks to stabilize the class order in the name of both labor and capital (the “national interest”), it must also seek to maintain its own legitimacy among labor as well. Therefore the state reflects, and seeks to contain, the conflict between labor and capital. The functions of the state are thus contradictory. But the state is only capital’s first line of defense in protecting the

class order. Ideological institutions serve as an additional line of defense of the class structure. In capitalist societies, these institutions—mass media and advertising, schools and universities, sports, and other “mass culture” institutions—tend to be relatively autonomous and are often the source of criticism of the existing order.

The state is the “executive committee” for the bourgeoisie only in a rather distant and abstract way. While the extent to which the state is a direct instrument of class rule is subject to considerable debate, it is fairly clear that the state only indirectly and spasmodically controls the news media, sports, or cultural institutions. The level of voluntary associations is not coordinated by the state. It is relatively independent and uncoordinated—both a strength and weakness of capitalism. Breaching or capturing one level still leaves the others independently functioning, like the many-headed Hydra. (In contrast, in pre-revolutionary Russia the state was the only line of defense for the class structure, as Gramsci pointed out.)

Exactly how independent and strong these levels of advanced capitalist society are we do not know. It does seem reasonable to assume that there are limits to their strength and independence and that certain types of changes in one level (or set of institutions) can set off certain types of changes—eventually in an uncontrollable chain reaction. A transfer of state power from capital to labor occurs when this chain reaction eventually reaches the state—the stabilizing mechanisms of last resort (with the means of violence)—and it can no longer protect the class order on behalf of capital.

Our view of society thus includes three dimensions of analysis—the class structure, ideology and the ideological institutions, and social organizations and associations. The state sits astride each level, but has a degree of autonomy from each. The contradiction between capital and labor creates tensions within each level. While each level may function to protect the class order, their ability to do so is never complete. The ability of labor to weaken the stabilizing mechanisms of each level—to transform the labor process,

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ideology, and social organization—to serve the interests of the working class is the central concern of this paper. What are the conditions under which a set of reforms weaken the stabilizing mechanisms of capitalism and contribute to the working class’ ability to take power?

As long as the capitalist state exists, it protects capitalism; a state that moves against the economically dominant class finds itself stripped of its resources and facing a situation of economic instability often triggered by an investment strike of capitalists. In this sense—of outer limits or boundaries of action, not of day-to-day decisions—the state remains committed to the dominant class and must therefore also be a target of revolution.

Class struggle has to be seen as a process that includes certain types of reforms as well as more overt or violent struggles. The reforms can alter the terrain in which subsequent conflicts are fought out. As we have noted, in advanced capitalism, the state is relatively autonomous; it cannot attack capitalist institutions but it can carry out some reforms. This ability is itself not only a structurally determined feature but also a product of past working class struggles, especially those for universal suffrage and the right to organize politically. In turn, its relative autonomy facilitates future struggles for qualitative changes which must, by definition therefore, include altered class institutions and altered political, ideological, and social institutions.

Transitional reforms are the terrain of struggle within institutions that shift the ground on which future struggles are fought out. In a strict sense, of course they can be recognized as transitional only after the subsequent conflicts have occurred; they are identified

as transitional only by the test of history, not in terms of any static set of their own characteristics. But sometimes certain characteristics are clues to their later importance.

Class Structure. Transitional reforms must be structural—they alter the relations of power between groups in the society as well as attain substantive ends; specifically, they alter the class relationship (relations of production) which are at the core of the social system. Unlike petty bourgeois populist movement demands, transitional reforms are progressive; they recognize the non-reversible nature of historical change and do not seek to restore a past condition. Transitional reforms sweep away archaic modes of control and archaic relationships like those of caste (Jim Crow laws, sex discrimination), thus taking care of the “unfinished business” of the bourgeois revolution. (Therborn)*

A transitional reform thus “heightens the contradictions” within capitalism, that demand that the state do things it cannot do under capitalism without seriously undermining capital accumulation and profits. Contradictions are those strains that threaten core institutions (class relations) and cannot be remedied by the state or other stabilizing aspects of the social system. Transitional reforms increase these strains. For example, rigorously enforced health and safety laws (and the right to strike over unsafe conditions—with the burden of proof on management) cut down production and heighten the contradiction between the search for profits and the human desire for decent work conditions. The demand for widespread quality education would heighten the contradiction between the degraded nature of white collar as well as blue collar work under capitalism, on the one hand, and the ability and desire of people to do creative work, on the other hand.

* This is not to say that racial or sexual oppression may not be more psychologically acute or unbearable than class exploitation. Furthermore, racism and class oppression frequently overlap; finally, racism and sexism may function as stabilizing mechanisms to keep a class from developing class consciousness.

The dimension of ideology. The capitalist class (and the state) seeks to both provide conditions favorable for capital accumulation and maintain the legitimacy of the existing order. Transitional reforms, by undermining the ability to accumulate capital, also increase people's awareness of the contradiction between human need and capital accumulation. Thus, transitional reforms lead toward greater class consciousness.

Transitional reforms help people see their personal troubles as social problems and to view social problems as collective problems; collective problems are seen as class issues, solvable in class terms. Transitional reforms delegitimize existing authority and "expertise," challenging the official world view of those in power.

They decrease cynicism, giving people a sense that they can change their lives (they can "fight city hall") through collective action. Transitional reforms have a motivational impact, whetting the people's appetite for further change and building self confidence in their ability to achieve it. As such, they heighten consciousness about what people want and what the system can deliver. They see transitional reforms as a first step.**

In general, a transitional reform increases the understanding of the structure of society, exposing the system to scrutiny and questioning, and stripping it of its appearance of taken-for-grantedness or inevitability.

The dimension of organizational behavior. As we noted earlier, within capitalist society are a variety of associational forms that fragment and obscure class relationships. Transitional reforms break down the fragmented roles inherent in voluntary associations and other social institutions. They weaken the divisions within the working class—sex, race, income, authority, geography.

** Transitional reforms universalize class demands. They involve the translation of the aspirations of a historically strategic class into terms applicable to humanity as a whole. For instance, bourgeois aspirations were universalized into the Rights of Man in the late 18th century. In this way other strata and classes follow the lead of the revolutionary class as they would not if it only pursued its narrow economic interests.

Transitional reforms are based on collective action, not individual victories but attainments by a group of people working together. Transitional reforms build indigenous leadership in a class or other group; they are not carried out on behalf of a group (e.g., advocacy planning) but by a group. In addition, transitional reforms do not buy leaders off; they cannot be realized in such a way that a small elite is split off from the reforms, given well-paying jobs or other privileges and rewards to drain off leadership from a movement. (As Helfgot has shown, this was the case with the War on Poverty.)

Transitional reforms build new types of social relationships among those working for them that are distinctly different from the exploitive authoritarian and/or commodity relations characteristic of the social system. In the building of new interpersonal relations, transitional reforms move toward building an organizational vehicle for attaining future, collective ends. In other words, they not only alter power relations between the powerful and the powerless, but they also establish new types of relationships among the powerless and establish an ongoing organization or movement, widening a social base within the working class that can outlast the attainment of reforms (e.g., single-issue organizations become multi-issue organizations; electoral campaigns that mobilize people continue to do so after the election).

HISTORIC REFORMS

It is useful to review some historically significant reforms which meet some—if not all—of our "transitional" criteria.

Caste oppression. The first important reform is the sweeping away of caste oppression. It began with the end of slavery and the extension of suffrage to women. The 1954 desegregation decision, the 1964 Civil Rights Act, the 1965 Voting Rights Act, and the proposed Equal Rights Amendment are the more recent legal embodiments of the movements to sweep away the racial and sexual inequalities left over from pre-capitalist and archaic capitalist times. Only in so far as

these reforms are largely complete can a class movement take hold. The attack on caste privilege takes care of "unfinished business," both structurally and psychologically. Classes begin to emerge politically when all the working class is forced from racial and sexual pigeonholes, when all of it is "free" to sell its labor power in an impersonal market.

The emergence of socialist-feminist groups and the turning away of many young people from exclusively nationalist ethnic movements all suggest that as caste barriers diminish, class movements can begin to appear. In short the attack on caste oppression is important in its own right—as a step towards freeing the potential of women and minorities—and as a necessary step toward class organization.

Workplace reforms. A series of reforms generated by the American labor movement qualify as transitional reforms. For all the valid criticisms of labor unions, it is obvious that the achievement of a shorter workday, the establishment and raising of minimum wages, the abolition of child labor, the improvement of working conditions, the fact of collective bargaining (the Wagner Act of 1935) were the victories of working class solidarity against a ruling class. Here, too, the state was forced to act against the interest of the economically dominant class to preserve its own legitimacy. It was only through World War II and imperialism that the "fiscal crisis of the state" was postponed—that is, that the demands of an increasingly unionized workforce could be met by "mortgaging" the domestic future to maintain American corporate expansion abroad.

The importance of the Wagner Act is shown by the fact that the ruling class could not live with it and felt compelled to impose the Taft-Hartley Act a decade later to weaken increasingly militant (and left-led) sectors of organized labor. Ethnic, religious, and national antagonisms were subordinated—in particular during the formation of the CIO—for the sake of class unity. An organizational vehicle was formed to help preserve the victories. Repression and internal fragmentation of the labor movement failed to sustain the momentum of the CIO, however. Two

kinds of demands—for more “worker control” over working conditions and for “more pay, shorter hours”—reveal the contradiction between the forces and relations of production.

Recent insurgent rank-and-file activity against “business union” leadership within the steelworkers, mineworkers, and other unions, have built grassroots counter-organizations across racial, ethnic, and sexual boundaries. Recent organizing efforts of professional, semi-professional, clerical, and service (e.g., police) workers—including doctors’ strikes—suggest that further demands are being made which, given the present international position of American capitalism, will not be easily met within the existing structure. Organizing among women clerical workers, such as Nine-to-Five in Boston and Women Employed in Chicago, have created similar vehicles, raised consciousness, and challenged the accumulation of profit in insurance and other sectors which employ large numbers of women. Similarly, “wages for housework” demands meet our criteria of transitional reforms if made by a coherent organization (not in isolation) and directed at the state rather than within the family.

Perhaps more importantly, demands for full employment at existing union wage rates is something that U.S. capitalism cannot meet. Raising and organizing for that demand, therefore, serves to increase our critical understanding of the incompatibility of full employment and the profit system.

Political rights. A third important historical reform in capitalism comprises the extension of suffrage, the growth of mass parties, and the expansion of civil liberties—in short, the entry of the masses of people into the political process of the capitalist state.

Obviously, this process has an ambiguous potential. As Lenin pointed out, the bourgeois parliamentary democracy is in many ways the perfect state for the protection and preservation of capitalism. Elections, small reforms, mass political parties—all serve to legitimate the status quo. The government appears to serve a “public interest” and at the same time to be an expression of limited conflict between

a multiplicity of interest groups; in both cases its class nature is obscured. At the same time political reforms such as the extension of suffrage in all Western parliamentary democracies, the rise of mass parties, the Populist Era package of political reforms in the United States, and so on have altered the terrain of class conflict. Organization is easier and not all victories have to be violently achieved under conditions of political democracy. The conclusion Lenin drew has to be tempered with the lesson of the 1930s; the left is better off in a parliamentary democracy than in a fascist police state (an alternative form of the capitalist state). Furthermore, “bourgeois” political freedoms, imperfect as they may be, carry the potential for genuine political participation.

Thus it is important to fight for extended political rights even if they are not of immediate utility to the left. Similarly, it is important not to allow popular decision-making to be replaced by the appointment of “experts.” And it is important to fight for that “excess of democracy,” now under attack by critics of the welfare state.

So far we have discussed three areas of reforms—the end of caste oppression, worker organization, and the extension of political rights. Although they are not free of ambiguity, on balance they seem to be necessary transitional steps to socialism. They substantially alter the terrain of class struggle and in some cases they make possible struggles that were impossible before.

Much more problematic though promising, are the following examples of reform developments. First, many of them are of more recent vintage than our preceding three examples. Their power to “alter the terrain,” to facilitate subsequent class movements, has not yet stood the test of time. Second, some of them may turn into the achievements of special interest groups detached from the working class and the society as a whole. Thus they may have only limited structural effects, they may be quite co-optable, and/or they may fail to universalize class demands into a new hegemonic consciousness.

Community Organizing

Radicals have often criticized community organizing, as practiced by the late Saul Alinsky and his followers, as too narrowly focused to achieve any long-range reform. Alinsky’s first success—the Back-of-the-Yards organization in Chicago—helped defend that working-class neighborhood against the intentions of city planners, but also provided the cohesion to keep Blacks from moving in later on.

The 1970s have witnessed a dramatic renewal of community organization efforts. These efforts have met with mixed results and thus call for a brief assessment of their strengths and weaknesses.

Basically, the strength of the Alinsky model is its ability to use confrontation tactics to generate publicity, create enthusiasm among members, target recognizable “enemies,” and win short-range victories. But the very nature of these activities creates an extremely fragile organization. Once an issue is exposed and an enemy targeted, who will follow the mundane process of making sure the changes are implemented? After an exciting “action,” how will the enthusiasm and commitment of members be sustained? Will a “victory,” even a symbolic one, knock the wind out of a group’s organizational sails? If an organization’s strength depends on a few generous foundations, a local parish, or a wealthy individual, what happens when these resources are no longer available?

The success of the recent round of “new populist” and “citizen action” groups—Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN), Massachusetts Fair Share, California Action League, New Jersey Tenants Organization, among the most prominent—rests on their ability to work on several levels simultaneously so that all their organizational eggs are not in one basket. They seek to move beyond the parochialism of earlier organizers patterned after Alinsky by utilizing the same tactics but broadening the issues and the organizational base.

Community organizing, as we know it, is made possible by the various degrees of local autonomy and politi-

cal fragmentation characteristic of the American state. It is possible to pressure various neighborhood representatives (e.g., city council members, state legislators, precinct captains), local school boards, housing courts, and other bodies for fairly narrow concerns. Thus community organizations begin at the level of the tenants union, block club, or neighborhood association and work on narrow but winning issues that protect local "turf"—street repair, installing a traffic light, stopping institutional expansion, clearing an abandoned building, getting a landlord to maintain an apartment, increasing the number of street lights or expanding foot patrol in an area.

But most problems, as we know, are not solvable at this level. The tactical problem for community organizations is to sustain the enthusiasm generated by local "turf" fights for wider, somewhat more remote battles and to build alliances and coalitions among neighborhood groups. Unless these organizations can widen both their focus and their base, they are destined to have limited success and/or a short lifespan. Success, therefore, means moving from single-issue to multi-issue campaigns; from neighborhood or building-based to citywide, statewide, or even regional coalitions. It may also mean a shift from voluntary staff to paid full-time staff and adequate fundraising apparatus; from dramatic direct action to more sustained campaigns: exposés based on in-depth research that can fuel an extended media campaign, monitoring the promises and programs of elected officials, ongoing lobbying of political bodies, and boycotts of selected institutions.

The underlying principles of these organizations merit attention. They move community organizing beyond purely neighborhood concerns (but continue to operate at the neighborhood level). They develop indigenous leadership from local voluntary associations (block clubs, churches). They deal with issues that unite rather than divide ethnic (white, Black, Latin) working- and middle-class groups. They raise consciousness by connecting issues and examining how corporate institutions (banks, insurance companies, and developers) and busi-

ness-backed government institutions operate. They create an ongoing vehicle and a winning strategy for further social change.

But the very nature of these organizations is extremely fragile. Citizens concerned about garbage pick up may not care about citywide cutbacks in day care facilities. Homeowners upset with rising property taxes may not care about (or may be opposed to) rent control that protects tenants. Senior citizens concerned with Medicare practices or drug prices may not be upset over "redlining" in Black neighborhoods. (Indeed, racism is often an incentive for white citizens to "protect" their neighborhood against redlining, as organizers for Chicago's Citizens Action Program discovered).

The first and initially the most successful of the "new populist" multi-issue, citywide organizations was Chicago's Citizen Action Program, which collapsed in part because of struggles over turf and style with other Alinsky-style groups in the city.

Leaders of these groups are aware of these problems. They have developed networks to share experiences and resources in order to overcome these shortcomings. Several organizer training schools—the Midwest Academy and the Industrial Areas Foundation in Chicago, the New England Training Center for Community Organizers, and several others—publish newsletters, train organizers, and hold conferences as part of a nationwide support network. These networks provide the potential basis of a nationwide coalition to deal with federal policy and issues that cannot be solved at local or regional levels.

In addition, some of these grassroots organizations have started to address themselves to the relationship between urban neighborhood deterioration and the flow of capital between urban centers and regions, and across national boundaries. The loss of jobs, the flow of investment, the shift of federal allocations from the older industrial cities in the "snowbelt" to the growing areas of the "sunbelt" and overseas cannot be remedied at the neighborhood or city level.

Some citizen action groups have developed ties to labor unions, church

groups, and elected officials when their interests have converged. Massachusetts Fair Share, for example, joined a coalition of unions, the statewide mayor's association, and the Catholic church's social action arm to pass a property tax classification amendment last November. But many citizens' groups are reluctant to enter coalitions for fear of losing identity and support. Many are also reluctant to enter the electoral arena, especially to support political candidates, and thus hitch their fate to particular individuals; they will often "work with," but not formally "endorse," friendly elected officials. Radicals running for public office, therefore, usually have to build their own campaign apparatus. The experiences, skills, and staff of community organizations are often helpful in such campaigns, however, and they often share issues and approaches. Local efforts (Ken Cockrell in Detroit, Ruth Messinger in New York City, Paul Soglin in Madison, and Florence MacDonald in Berkeley) and statewide campaigns (Tom Hayden's Senate race in California, Sam Brown's election as Colorado's treasurer) have sought new ways to use the electoral process to raise issues and promote legislative innovations in such areas as health care, tax reform, public pensions, landlord-tenant laws, and other issues. Many see themselves as emerging from and building a "movement" rather than simply running for office as individuals. For example, recall the close association between the Campaign for Economic Democracy and Tom Hayden's campaign for political office. Yet the link between building a movement and running for electoral office is still unclear.

Counter Institutions

Co-ops and counter institutions present interesting and somewhat problematic examples of transitional reforms. During the last few years a large number of such groups have sprung up—food co-ops, health collectives, free schools, and tenant-owned buildings restored through "sweat equity." On the one hand these institutions provide a small scale model of socialist relations of production. (Taylor, Rothschild-Whitt) By

creating an alternative to capitalist production they show up the inhumanity of profit-oriented enterprises. On the other hand, they fail to substantially cut into capitalism in two ways. First, in many cases the services they provide most effectively are relatively peripheral to capitalist production; for instance, health and education are not well provided by capitalism—the co-ops and counter institutions simply help the state to cope with this burden. Second, where the institution is central to capitalist production—like food or housing—it is often difficult to provide the alternative service efficiently. The service demands an input of labor and time that most working people cannot realistically contribute. Thus, counter institutions have tended to involve somewhat privileged groups in society rather than the bulk of the working class and have failed to transform class relations in a large-scale way.

Counter institutions are most politically effective if they are part of an ongoing movement, one of whose tasks is the provision of “services.” Establishing a food co-op, a legal services center, or a health clinic is often an opening wedge to create interest and gain credibility. In theory, such institutions serve as gathering points from which to “feed” individuals into more explicitly “political” activities. Rarely, however, does this scenario develop as planned. The counter institutions usually wind up as ends in themselves. Somewhat more successful are the attempts of community organizations (and labor unions) to move into various “community development” activities, usually with government subsidies. The “model cities” program of the War on Poverty was often a haven for radical community organizers, but it is unclear whether they were “taking over” the program or being “co-opted” into it (Helfgot). More recent efforts—neighborhood credit unions, urban gardening projects, housing rehabilitation schemes, and others—can create jobs and provide direct services. But they tend to become isolated from the movement to reshape the larger institutions; they become beholden to private and public sources of financial sup-

Transitional reforms are based on collective action, not individual victories, the attainments of a group of people working together.

port, and they at times adopt a small business “entrepreneurial” attitude rather than raising “anti-corporate” consciousness.

It is premature, however, to write off counter-institutions. They may turn out to be an important area of transitional reform, perhaps more so if their operation is informed by more careful planning, adaptation to the needs of mass participation, and infused with a “social movement” perspective.

Environmental and Consumer Reforms

A third important but problematical set of reforms are those associated with the environmental and consumer movements. These movements began in the late 1960s and early 1970s as “consciousness raising” and “advocacy” activities. Ralph Nader single-handedly exposed the dangers of the Corvair in his book *Unsafe at Any Speed* and, from the money generated by an out-of-court settlement with General Motors, began a network of “public interest” organizations around a wide range of issues. Groups such as the Sierra Club promoted the interests of conservationists through lobbying. “Earth Day,” in 1970, sought to use dramatic “guerilla theater” actions to publicize the dangers of environmental neglect. The Consumer Federation of America and Consumers Union have focused on “consumer education” by testing products and advising consumers to make wise choices. All of these activities, to different degrees, have put the burden of consumer and environmental change on the individual.

More recently, however, these movements have shifted ground.

Spokespersons such as Nader, Barry Commoner, Francis Moore Lappe, and others have popularized an analysis of these problems that puts the blame squarely on the corporate institutions. Direct action groups such as the Clamshell Alliance have emerged, while the Environmental Defense Fund has created a nationwide network of activists and a “dirty dozen” campaign to defeat conservative Congresspeople. Many of the groups discussed earlier as community organizations have raised consumer and environmental issues. The “meat boycott” organized a short-lived campaign, but since then local, regional, and national issues found land, food quality and price, and the corporate take-over of local school food programs as reasons to mobilize. The Center for Science in the Public Interest, among other groups, has created a network of activists around these issues.

These movements are moving toward a cluster of reforms. Best known are the anti-pollution and anti-nuclear movements. They have some potential as transitional reforms but so far have been split from the unions (chiefly because of the “jobs” issue) and/or have been exploited by the private firms which have used the “energy crisis” to lower living standards and gain state subsidies for new energy technologies.

The public ownership of electrical utilities (as well as other utilities and perhaps eventually energy companies) represents one promising but problematical arena for transitional reforms. The struggle to wrest these basic resources from private ownership has several long-term benefits—ideologically they underline that human needs and not profit should be the criterion of production; organizationally they can effectively unite a broad based constituency. They can prove to people in very concrete ways that public ownership of the means of production is feasible and has tangible payoffs (lower rates).

In so far as some cities already have municipal utilities, they show that these reforms are not utopian dreams—they have a reality about them that is very attractive (Brom and Kirshner). The drawbacks are the fol-

lowing: the broad coalitions that develop around public ownership or utilities diffuse the class issues. Whether class interests, rather than some diffuse "public interest," are furthered by reforms of municipalization depends a great deal on the exact nature of the local action (the groups involved in it, the ensuing rate structure of the services, and so on). Universalizing vs. "diffusing" public ownership of utilities may turn out to be an area in which capitalism in crisis transfers a burden to the state, in turn, deepening the fiscal crisis of the state.

Another important set of demands deals with new forms of energy. Some of these demands are mainly actions to bring about a moratorium on the careless use of nuclear power. Others also call for innovations in social institutions. Will nuclear energy and solar energy be squeezed into the straitjackets of corporate ownership? So far, in the United States, the capitalist state has supported private ownership of energy resources of all kinds. Movements to attack this situation are only beginning; they will clearly play a very important role in deciding how the productive forces evolve in the next few decades.

Military Conversion

In recent years, calls for conversion from military to social spending have been heard from the peace movement and progressive politicians such as George McGovern and Les Aspin. Much of this thinking is muddled, based on the assumption that the problem of shifting production, research, and development in the defense industry toward production, research, and development for social programs is merely a technical problem which can be achieved without major dislocations. This view overlooks the notion that militarism is now an integral part of the capitalist economy supported by multinational corporations, defense contractors, "pork barrelling" Congresspeople, the armed forces and veterans groups, and the scientific establishment that relies on DOD, NASA, and ERDA spending for two-thirds of its research funds. Magdoff estimates that the "multiplier effect" of defense spending is such that unemployment

would reach 24.3 percent in the absence of a military budget.

At the same time, however, Melman has forcefully argued in several books that the permanent war economy depletes the nation of valuable resources and that "wasteful" defense spending could be put to better use in social programs. Recent studies show, for example, that dollar for dollar social spending provides more jobs than defense spending (Anderson). One billion dollars spent for defense creates about 55,000 jobs, whereas one billion dollars spent for public housing creates 76,000 jobs, and for education creates 90,000 jobs for teachers.

In light of these findings, a political demand for economic conversion would raise a variety of important issues: the role of the military in protecting U. S. imperialism; the allocation of half of the federal budget on militarism; the potential of the society to meet social needs in the absence of a high level of defense spending; and the need for co-ordinated national planning to transform the economy to meet social needs. Ultimately, this demand pressures liberals, pacifists, and others opposed to military spending to ask "Conversion to what?" Thus, they are forced to confront the capitalist origins of military spending in the United States and to present alternative uses of capitalism's productive capacity.

A POLITICAL STRATEGY

As we noted above, transitional reforms are those that exacerbate capitalism's contradictions, force the pace of class struggle, and produce political conflicts that the state cannot contain. Our formulation so far suffers from a serious limitation. Transitional reforms make sense as a socialist strategy only if there is a party, a movement, or similar vehicle—that is, an organized left—that plans the nature and timing of the reforms, provides co-ordination between them, interprets the results to the working class and popular forces, and has some sense of building toward state power through a sequence of actions. This is what Gorz means by the necessity of "deliberate, long-term action" that leads to a "series of trials of strength."

Emerging in the United States is a

wide variety of reform activities—without co-ordination or overall structure—that betrays the news media's portrait of political quiescence in the 1970s. Much of this activity is an outgrowth of the more dramatic and confrontational period of 1960s protest. The grassroots activism of the 1970s is considerably broader-based. In response to the "politics of lowered expectations" and the assault on the welfare state, these activities can be seen as both defensive and offensive "anti-corporate" politics. By this term we refer to the environmental and consumer movements; the women's and minority movements; the community-based citizen's groups (e.g., ACORN, Massachusetts Fair Share); rank-and-file movements for union democracy; the electoral campaigns of Hayden, Dellums, Brown, Soglin, Messinger, and others who stress "economic democracy" and popular control; and the campaigns against military spending and specific budget items (B-1 bomber, foreign aid to repressive governments, covert CIA involvement in foreign governments).

What these activities have in common is a general "anti-corporate" thrust. What they lack is any overall unity or co-ordination. As a result, reforms they achieve may appear random. They may create conflicts within the working class. And they will not add up to any coherent political strategy. Here are several examples of the dilemmas of this form:

The Citizens Actions Program in Chicago in 1970 mobilized mass pressure to force the Illinois Commerce Commission to act against Commonwealth Edison, the area's electric utility, by forcing Commonwealth Edison to burn low-sulphur coal in its generating plants in order to reduce the environmental pollution in Chicago's working-class neighborhoods. CAP saw this as a victory. However, it overlooked the consequences of this policy—that Commonwealth Edison would seek low-sulphur coal by strip-mining in other part of the nation, and thus injure other sectors of the working class (Rose and Rothstein).

Liberal Democrats have put forth the Humphrey-Hawkins Full Employment Bill to manage the problem of

unemployment. In and of itself, using the state to guarantee full employment appears to be a transitional reform which would exacerbate the fiscal crisis of the welfare-warfare state. As currently proposed, however, the Humphrey-Hawkins bill could mean full employment at less than prevailing wage rates, and thus provide a pool of cheap labor while taking large numbers of unemployed off welfare (Bluestone and England; Currie).

In addition, socialization of failing private enterprises—local utilities, energy corporations, the railroad system, the airlines—can shift the burden of capital accumulation to the working class through the state. What is to guarantee that these state-run enterprises will be responsible to public needs? Only public ownership with some mechanism of public control—and a movement that can hold public officials accountable—assures some way out of this dilemma.

Those who advocate cutbacks in defense spending (or specific weapons systems such as the B-1 bomber) or the development of nuclear power plants often fail to consider the jobs that are lost in the short term. It is fine to say that social spending or alternative energy sources provide more jobs on a dollar-for-dollar basis. But specific cutbacks usually do not include specific plans for job creation that would meet the skills of the workers laid off. Planning for job retraining, industrial retooling, and income maintenance are necessary counterparts to cutbacks in defense spending or plant construction.

These examples illustrate the necessity of co-ordinating reforms as part of nationwide political strategy. Only a co-ordinated program of reforms—rather than isolated reforms among isolated groups—can resolve these dilemmas. America has not lacked for reforms—reforms with many of the characteristics we have listed. Many such reforms are currently on the political agenda (Shearer). But America has lacked a left that could survive not only its failures but also its successes. The concept of transitional reforms will perhaps help to save the energy of activists on the left who do not need to throw themselves into every fray.

Some battles lead nowhere. Battles that "go somewhere," however, require co-ordination, unity and a self-conscious long-term vision of a more just society—namely a political strategy. ■

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