

**From Radical to Realistic: Hendrick de Man and The  
International Plan Conferences at Pontigny and Geneva,  
1934-1937**

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From 'Radical' to 'Realistic':

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Hendrik de Man and the

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International Plan Conferences

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1934–1937

GERD-RAINER HORN

In an award-winning 1970 article, 'Between Taylorism and Technocracy', Charles Maier set the parameters for a balanced understanding of the post-First World War surge of interest in the liberatory potential of rationalisation and economic planning. Among a host of issues he addressed, the author contended that this utopian dimension of Taylorism eventually suffered from the outbreak of the Great Depression and rapidly waned. His concluding sentence minced no words in this regard: 'Not that Roosevelt's social experimentation would not attract followers, but the supreme confidence in technology and production, in engineering as social redemption, perished with the other dreams of the twenties.'<sup>1</sup>

Many observers concur in this description of the pre-Depression decade as the high point of the widespread belief in the magical powers of new technology coupled with innovative economics. Mary Nolan, for instance, brings to bear a similar argument in her analysis, *Visions of Modernity. American Business and the Modernisation of Germany*: 'If the Depression did not destroy the belief in the necessity and inevitability of rationalisation, it did severely limit its ideological appeal. In the mid-1920s rationalisation had been an almost magical term that encapsulated the far-reaching hopes and ill-defined but ambitious expectations of

I want to thank Aldo Agosti, Emmanuel Gerard, Patrick Pasture and Giorgio Vecchio for their assistance in obtaining relevant details in the course of writing this article. This essay grew out of a presentation at a workshop on 'Non-Communist and Pre-Communist Economic Planning, 1935–1950' at Rice University in Houston, Texas, on 30 January 1999. I thank Carl Caldwell for inviting me to the campus of Rice University on that occasion.

<sup>1</sup> Charles Maier, 'Between Taylorism and Technocracy: European Ideologies and the Vision of Industrial Productivity in the 1920s', *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 5, no. 2 (1970), 27–61. All citations in my text are from the 1987 reprint in Charles Maier, *In Search of Stability: Explorations in Historical Political Economy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 22–53, here 53.

diverse classes, organisations and individuals. After 1930 it became a sober economic concept, discussed in narrowly technical terms.<sup>2</sup>

The opening lines of Charles Maier's 1984 sequel to his 1970 article leave no doubt that schemes for socio-economic engineering continued to exert a powerful pull even after 1929: 'Prescriptions for management hardly disappeared in the Depression even if Taylorism and Fordism lost their lustre. In some ways business ideologues actually became more grandiose and imperial in their implications,<sup>3</sup> but their designs now turned more distopian than ever. 'Whether deriving from once-socialist theorists or from right-wing images of crowd behaviour, the postulates of managerial ideology became far darker.'<sup>4</sup> 'In the perspective of the 1930s the engineer himself no longer appeared just as an efficiency expert, but as a more occult arranger, a potential ally of the new rulers in Germany or of, say, the proto-Vichyite groups in France.'<sup>5</sup>

As the 'Roaring Twenties' gave way to the 'Depression Thirties', another shift in managerial planning strategies can be located in a distinct move away from economists' and engineers' primary concern with micro-economic planning innovations focusing on technology and the factory floor to indeed grander schemes of overtly macro-economic dimensions, constructing blueprints for the running of entire economies. In countries as distinct as the United States, the Soviet Union and Germany, the 1930s clearly witnessed 'the invisible hand of planning' more frequently and with more flair than ever before, other than in times of war.

### **The radical socialist alternative**

The shift towards a distinctly macro-economic approach can certainly be understood as having helped prepare the terrain for those dark forces getting ready to shape a new world, justifiedly given centre-stage by Maier in his 1984 article. Yet it would have been wholly surprising if another, to some observers less distopian, vision of social planning had not also used this opportunity to stake a claim on the future of mankind: a non-communist but radical socialist variant, equidistant from proto-fascist, totalitarian communist and market capitalist answers to the Great Depression. As shall be demonstrated in this essay, it was precisely in the first half of the depression decade that such views of socioeconomic planning, not content to limit the discussion to the words of wisdom of technocrats and specialists but striving to promote the primacy of politics over the requirements of economists, not content merely to designate beneficiaries of planning ventures but striving to decentralise decision-making authorities as widely as was feasible and as quickly as possible, gained national and international notoriety. Indeed, if there ever existed a

<sup>2</sup> Mary Nolan, *Visions of Modernity: American Business and the Modernisation of Germany* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 231–2.

<sup>3</sup> Charles Maier, 'Postscript: Ideologies of Industrial Management Since the Depression', in Maier, *In Search of Stability*, 53.

<sup>4</sup> Maier, 'Postscript', 56.

<sup>5</sup> Maier, 'Postscript', 59.

moment in the history of industrial societies when belief in the concrete improvement of the human condition via economic planning was of widespread and utmost concern, such a crossroads emerged precisely in the aftermath of Black Friday and not before that fateful date.

By no means all the voices aired by advocates of planning were the voices of radical but democratic socialists. As surprising as it would have been in retrospect to have system-transforming non-communist socialism appear empty-handed in this regard throughout the 1930s, there was no automatism behind such views rising to prominence in 1933–5. The Marxist tradition, shorn of its voluntarist dimension by the reigning orthodoxy of determinist classical social democracy after the deaths of Karl Marx (1883) and Friedrich Engels (1895), had ill-prepared socialist activists and economists to draw up concrete answers to the terminal challenges posed by the Great Depression and the rise of the radical right. The choices for socialists had generally been restricted to a menu of ‘all or nothing’. Considerations of transition economics had almost never crossed their minds. As shall be demonstrated below, it was the singular contribution of the most agile mind in the ranks of interwar European social democracy, Hendrik de Man, to have conceptualised and applied in practice a coherent radical socialist critique, which left its doors wide open to, though not necessarily embracing, non-technocratic socialist solutions to the twin challenges of his day.

To indicate the general post-1929 sea change in favour of socioeconomic planning on a national and supranational scale, at first a brief mention of an all-but-forgotten episode in the history of economic thought shall be made: the 1931 Amsterdam World Social Economic Planning Conference. Next, Hendrik de Man’s brainchild, the so-called Plan de Man, shall be discussed, and on this occasion I shall clarify some remarkably enduring myths about the personal–political itinerary of its author. Then three international plan conferences, called into action by the Brussels-based brains trust around de Man will be presented and discussed, and it is here that a second major thesis shall be put forth.

### **From utopian vision to pragmatic view**

The radical planist surge of the early-to-mid-1930s had a major impact far beyond the frontiers of the Belgian state. But its lustre waned as rapidly as it had been acquired a few years earlier. Here I argue that it is crucial to place this meteoric rise and fall in the context of a major shift in orientation among the social democratic experts engaged in these debates. If, early on in the 1930s, many social engineers were social democrats in the true sense of that latter noun, aiming to empower ordinary citizens to help shape their world, towards the end of that decade most social democrats had become social engineers. And socially radical planist thought effectively gave way to the dominance of technical concerns, paralleling the earlier move from Taylorism to technocracy in the 1920s.

In the first half of the 1930s, the technocratic dimension of the planist surge played by no means the dominant role in the relevant discussion. From mid-decade

onwards, however, the socially transformative impetus behind much of this paradigm shift grew noticeably weaker. Nothing quite so much exemplifies the intellectual roller-coaster ride from seemingly utopian dream to subsequent disillusionment as a series of forgotten international plan conferences organised between 1934 and 1937 in the wake of the astounding success of an equally neglected – and, if noticed, misunderstood – episode in interwar socialist history, the adoption by the Belgian Workers' Party (BWP/POB) of the path-breaking Plan de Man.

While drawing the contours of these debates, I shall also put forth some thoughts on a sociopolitical explanation of this rapid rise and decline of the radical planist alternative. Likewise, I shall briefly hint at some faint echoes of this 'plan mystique' in the closing years and in the aftermath of the Second World War and at the relevance of planist debates for socialist politics then and now.

### The 1931 Amsterdam Congress

The 1931 Amsterdam World Social Economic Planning Congress constitutes perhaps the most remarkable global gathering in this short decade of depression-era hopes for a rational and humane ordering of society. Its remarkable admixture of participants hailing from a wide variety of occupational backgrounds and ideological traditions stands out the more prominently because of the near-total neglect of this event in the secondary literature to date.<sup>6</sup> Leading industrialists and trade union officials, social democrats and communists (a highly unusual combination in 1931!), the director of the Geneva International Labour Bureau and various economists all converged on Amsterdam's Koloniaal Instituut to assess what all of them regarded as a paradigm shift in the modern world. A left Catholic German industrial sociologist, Goetz Briefs, stated most clearly perhaps what most of them felt:

Let us imagine that we were living one hundred years ago, when this assembly hall would have been filled with people whose task it was, three generations ago, to discuss the economic problems of their times. I am sure that there we would all say: 'We must put an end to this economy bound by limits imposed by the state and by the guilds, and we must move forward to free enterprise!' We would have spoken in favour of absolutely free competition with similarly convincing arguments as they are put forward today in defence of planning. And we would have asserted that free enterprise would bring about economic harmony. Three generations were convinced that free enterprise would lead to welfare and social harmony. But now, at this congress, we have heard very few voices who consistently defend the idea of laissez-faire capitalism.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> For the conference proceedings, see M. L. Fledderus, ed., *World Social Economic Planning* (The Hague: International Industrial Relations Institute, [1932]). The few authors to have drawn attention to this gathering include Alfredo Salsano, 'Gli ingegneri e il socialismo: Taylorismo e planismo di fronte alla grande crisi', in Enzo Collotti, ed., *L'Internazionale Operaia e Socialista tra le due guerre* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1985), 1186–216; Guy Alchon, 'Mary Van Kleeck and Social-Economic Planning,' *Journal of Policy History*, Vol. 3, no. 2 (1991), 11–13; and John M. Jordan, *Machine-Age Ideology: Social Engineering and American Liberalism 1911–1939* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 196–7.

<sup>7</sup> Goetz Briefs, 'Diskussion', in *World Planning*, 252–3.

The managing director of the American Frederick Taylor Society put it in more positive terms:

‘We have come to the conclusion that individualistic enterprise has indeed constructed a magnificent and efficient economic machine, but that it has finally reached a stage of evolution in which individualistic industry is unable to keep it in order and operate it properly. We have come to the conclusion that a regulating mechanism must be added to it – *social economic planning* . . .!’<sup>8</sup>

But the vast majority of the Amsterdam participants professed little if any interest in the radical political project potentially associated with planist thought or, for that matter, participatory economic democracy, other than as possible abstract and therefore safely distant goals.

### Hendrik de Man

The voluminous conference proceedings of this historic gathering in the Amsterdam Koloniaal Instituut served as the bases for some reflections on the nature of economic planning of a very different kind: Hendrik de Man’s very first published contribution to the literature on economic planning in the 1930s, *Réflexions sur l’économie dirigée*.<sup>9</sup> Who was this individual who had first made waves in the international socialist community in 1926 with his incisive critique of the stultifying legacy of Second International determinism, *The Psychology of Socialism*?<sup>10</sup>

Having joined the Belgian socialist youth on May Day 1902, after a brief bout with Proudhonian anarchism, de Man remained an orthodox Second International Marxist until his decision to volunteer for the Belgian army in 1914. The trench warfare experience in his native Flanders shook up his belief system, and he began to embark on a course leading him in a variety of novel directions, clearly distinguishing him from most other interwar social democrats. The last months of the First World War de Man spent in the United States, as part of a Belgian government team investigating the impact of Taylorism on industrial relations. A post at the Frankfurt Academy of Labour saw de Man take up residence in Germany in 1922. He eventually took up what was probably the first continental European lectureship in social psychology at the University of Frankfurt, where he taught until the Nazi accession to power forced his return to Belgium.<sup>11</sup>

As mentioned before, *The Psychology of Socialism* first established de Man’s

<sup>8</sup> H. S. Person, ‘Scientific Management as a Philosophy and Technique of Progressive Industrial Stabilisation’, in *World Planning*, 153, emphasis in the original.

<sup>9</sup> Hendrik de Man, *Réflexions sur l’économie dirigée* (Paris: L’Églantine, 1932).

<sup>10</sup> For the original English-language translation of his German-language book, see Henry de Man, *The Psychology of Socialism* (New York: Henry Holt, [1927]).

<sup>11</sup> Data on de Man’s personal–political itinerary is taken from Gerd-Rainer Horn, *European Socialists Respond to Fascism: Ideology, Activism and Contingency in the 1930s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 75–7. For more extensive background information, see Peter Dodge, *Beyond Marxism: The Faith and Works of Hendrik de Man* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1966); Mieke Claeys–Van Haegendoren, *Hendrik de Man* (Antwerp: De Nederlandsche Boekhandel, 1972); and Michel Brélaz, *Henri de Man* (Geneva: Antipodes, 1985).

reputation as a first-rate innovative thinker who respected few taboos. This volume is also responsible for the general assessment of de Man as a revisionist socialist. Though far more a historico-philosophical treatise than a contribution to a political debate, inasmuch as the author took sides in that ongoing debate, he indeed appeared to be more comfortable on the revisionist side than in the orthodox camp. From 1933 to 1940 he devoted his energies to Belgian politics, obtaining top-level government posts after 1935. By 1940 he was engaged in prominent efforts at co-operation with the Nazi occupation forces.

Subsequent generations of historians, with painfully few exceptions, have thus felt justified to depict, and continue to do so to the present day, Hendrik de Man as a revisionist social democrat who slid along a steady path to the right, landing him eventually in well-deserved, self-imposed exile in the French Alps for the last years of the Second World War, and ostracising him as a scholar and intellectual far beyond his premature death in a traffic accident in Switzerland in 1953. In this highly charged historico-political context, it is symptomatic that Charles Maier, in his reference to ‘once-socialist theorists’ who helped shape ‘the postulates of managerial ideology’ descending on to the slippery slope of ‘non-rational behaviour’ and ‘murky mass instincts’, mentions but one name and but one piece of writing: Hendrik de Man’s *The Psychology of Socialism*.<sup>12</sup>

As by 1934 Hendrik de Man became intimately associated with planist ideology in the ranks of Europe’s embattled left, planism as such likewise got caught up in a whirlpool of accusations that sometimes fall on either side of a fine line separating simple misinformation from political slander. Thus, Germany’s leading publisher of scholarly historical works gave its imprint to a recent biography of Marcel Déat, who indeed began his journey from socialism to the radical right when still interested in planist ideas, including such gross caricatures of reality as the author’s dictum ‘that planism is to be regarded as a determinant in the political itinerary of future collaborators’,<sup>13</sup> an absurd blanket statement which could be shown to be just as true (or false) of any other major interwar ideology.

Not all assessments of de Man and what I shall call radical planism are equally fraught with meaning, though remarkably few observations are reasonably well informed. Even Donald Sassoon, in his magisterial opus, labels de Man’s planist ideas ‘a variant of the compromise between labour and capital attempted with so little success in Weimar Germany’.<sup>14</sup> What then were the key plan ideas of this controversial figure, whose contributions of the early-to-mid-1930s remain some of the most misunderstood action plans to revitalise socialist ideology and practice in the twentieth century?

<sup>12</sup> See Maier, ‘Postscript’, 56.

<sup>13</sup> Reinhold Brender, *Kollaboration in Frankreich im Zweiten Weltkrieg: Marcel Déat und das Rassemblement national populaire* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1992), 51.

<sup>14</sup> Donald Sassoon, *One Hundred Years of Socialism: The West European Left in the Twentieth Century* (New York: New Press, 1996), 68.

### The Plan de Man

Far from constituting a mere signpost on the open road from revisionism to the radical right, de Man's planist ideas must be understood as part and parcel of that wide-ranging radicalisation of continental European social democracy faced with a twin mortal danger: economic depression and the rise of fascism. This distinct radicalisation towards the left began to affect many continental European social democrats soon after the appointment of Hitler as German chancellor. In the course of 1934, it engendered two social democrat-inspired and -led military insurrections against the spread of the dictatorial right, the February 1934 Austrian *Schutzbund* revolt and the October 1934 Asturian Commune in northern Spain. It brought about a profound strategic reorientation of much of European social democracy, suddenly favouring tactical flexibilities, including most notably the widespread adoption of working-class united fronts.<sup>15</sup>

United fronts of all workers' organisations were suddenly regarded as the only effective bulwark against the encroaching powers of the radical right, but their popularity was also based on another powerful ingredient. The anti-fascism of the united front was not meant to be of the defensive kind but was envisioned as part and parcel of a comprehensive offensive strategy situating anti-fascist engagement at the heart of a more general and ongoing concrete working-class struggle for socialist goals. Radical planism, the brainchild of de Man, constituted a quasi-organic product of this period of ebullience and experimentation in European socialist circles far and wide.

Superficially, some formulations by de Man could be fitted with a revisionist label, such as his contention 'that the socialism of the coming generation will be, under pain of total failure, as different from the socialism of our fathers as their socialism differed from the Communist Manifesto.'<sup>16</sup> But how precisely was the new socialism of the 1930s to be constituted? Crucially, de Man repeated again and again: 'If the working classes want a larger piece of the pie, they must bake another pie, for the existing capitalist pie is continuously shrinking.' Socialists must abandon their defensive for an offensive mode. Contemporary socialists should prepare 'for the transition from a war of position to a war of manœuvre'. 'Given the revolutionary situation of today, nothing is more inopportune than that which was called opportune up to now; now, the only things that are possible and practical are what appeared yesterday as impossible and impractical.'<sup>17</sup> Having witnessed the rise of Nazism firsthand, de Man had abandoned his non-conformist revisionism of 1925 for the language and the policy goals of the socialist left. Most commentators of de Man's career are missing precisely this left socialist phase which lasted up to 1935, coinciding in time precisely with the more generalised radicalisation of continental European social democracy referred to above.

De Man argued that only a dynamic and radical plan of economic and political

<sup>15</sup> On this paradigm shift within European social democracy in 1933/34, see Horn, *European Socialists*, passim.

<sup>16</sup> Henri de Man, *Pour un plan d'action* (Brussels: L'Églantine, 1933), 5.

<sup>17</sup> Hendrik de Man, *Wende des Sozialismus* (Zurich: VPOD, 1934), 21.

action offering concrete means of survival and improvement not just for the industrial working classes but also for the frightened middle classes – yet (and this was critical!) based on an unabashedly anti-capitalist perspective – could provide the needed remedy. Both content and form would make this plan qualitatively different from other hitherto available socialist programmes. It was specifically designed to avoid the traditional division into minimum and maximum programme, stressing instead the need to see these categories as an organic continuum linked by so-called transitional demands that were meant to highlight the system-transforming nature of even the most limited demands when placed in an overall strategy for revolutionary change. But the idea was not just to convince but also to spellbind the population targeted by such a plan, to instil a sense that something was at stake which was different from mere politicians' empty electoral rhetoric, to convince the target audience that this new quality could not only become reality but would be worth fighting for. Or, to put it in strategic terms, the Plan de Man was designed as a transitional programme for the alleviation of concrete social ills and the advent of a new social order based on solidarity and co-operation.

Hendrik de Man drew up this blueprint in the closing months of the Weimar Republic, counting on the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) as the logical and powerful terrain for this experiment. In early 1933 this hope had to be abandoned, and he then devoted all his energies to capturing the BWP/POB with his ideas. Favoured by dramatic national and international circumstances, Belgian socialists adopted his proposal at their 1933 Christmas congress. Detailed statistical observations were now carried out by think-tanks and the socialist press. Intricate concrete proposals of how to turn around the economic malaise by means of social-economic planning were published and distributed in scholarly and popular editions. Study courses and retreats were methods used to spread the word among a core of activists. Mass meetings were held for a more general audience. Apart from the print media, radio programmes, theatre productions, 'plan cabarets', mass meetings with songs and the then-popular 'speaking choirs', even a film, were developed to create a powerful image of impending success and a dynamic towards the embrace of planist ideology on the part of the majority of the Belgian population. Playing on insights gained from the study of mass psychology and propaganda techniques, planist activists set out to instil an intellectual and emotional identification with planist goals in those portions of Belgian society previously untouched by socialist appeals. It is only in this context that efforts to hold an international plan conference, inspired by the Plan de Man, can be explained.<sup>18</sup>

### **Conference planning**

The international reverberation of the POB's adoption of the Plan de Man at its 1933 Christmas congress cannot be overestimated. The publication of articles and

<sup>18</sup> Data on the conceptualisation and popularisation of the Plan is taken from Horn, *European Socialists*, 78–84.

brochures explaining the meaning and the message of the Plan of Labour, the official name of the BWP/POB's action programme, found a most positive echo among a whole host of personalities within the European left, ranging, to give but two examples emanating from Russian intellectuals, from the former member of the Bolshevik Party's Workers' Opposition and then-ambassador to Sweden, Alexandra Kollontai, to the ill-fated Alexander Kerenski.<sup>19</sup> The radiance of the Plan de Man can also be gauged by a personal communication from the renowned French publisher Gaston Gallimard encouraging de Man to submit a manuscript drawing the lessons of the Belgian Plan for a larger number of European countries.<sup>20</sup> In many cases directly inspired by the Belgian Plan de Man, radical activists and economists in a number of European states set out to draw up their own plan designs. France in particular saw a plethora of plans, some of them hedged prior to 1933 in small study circles, but then catapulted into prominence by the wide-ranging interest in the Belgian Plan.<sup>21</sup> Small wonder that a number of social democratic and non-social democratic intellectuals soon began to promote the idea of an international plan congress, designed to gather as wide a spectrum as possible of individuals interested in the Belgian and international significance of the Plan de Man.

Already prior to the pathbreaking Christmas congress of the BWP/POB, efforts were under way to prepare some sort of 'study days', to take place sometime after Christmas. Initially designed to gather a brains trust of six Belgian socialists, de Man soon opted to expand the number of participants to nine, and in a communication to the host of the planned event, the French philosopher Paul Desjardins, Hendrik de Man made the following remark: 'I want to add that this gathering of individuals will constitute a truly representative small group which could, in the course of two or three days, complete the work of a veritable general staff, for it includes . . . the elite of the Belgian young intellectuals and socialist activists guiding the implementation of the Plan of Labour.' De Man cautioned Desjardins not yet to include any French participants 'who, it seems to me, could become more useful once the contours of the problem as it is presently posed in the Belgian context have become more clearly defined.'<sup>22</sup> Desjardins concurred with this assessment, referring to the circumstance that 'at this moment our French socialists are too preoccupied with their split.'<sup>23</sup>

Yet de Man soon withdrew his plan for such a conference in the rural surroundings of the Abbaye de Pontigny south-east of Paris. He decided that a

<sup>19</sup> See letter from Alexandra Kollontai to Hendrik de Man, 29.11.1934 – Archief en Museum van de Socialistische Arbeidersbeweging (AMSAB), (Gent), Hendrik de Man, 1/5; and letter from Alexander Kerenski to Hendrik de Man, 23.03.1934 – AMSAB, Hendrik de Man, 2/4.

<sup>20</sup> See letter from Gaston Gallimard to Hendrik de Man, 18.03.1934 – AMSAB, Hendrik de Man, 2/4.

<sup>21</sup> For echoes of the Plan de Man in Germany, Austria, France and Spain, see Horn, *European Socialists*, 84–88, and on the French experience in more detail, Julian Jackson, *The Politics of Depression in France 1932–1936*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 137–66.

<sup>22</sup> Hendrik de Man to Paul Desjardins, 6.12.1933 – AMSAB, Hendrik de Man, 2/4.

<sup>23</sup> Paul Desjardins to Hendrik de Man, 8.12.1933 – AMSAB, Hendrik de Man, 2/4.

forum on Belgium would in effect transform such a gathering into a ‘war council of Belgian Workers’ Party leaders’, and for that the distance from Brussels to Pontigny (400 km) would engender a whole host of logistical and other problems. ‘I console myself with the thought that, within due time, one could reconsider a gathering more in conformity with our initial intentions, in a less numerically restricted circle and less restrained in terms of political allegiances and nationality. Such a conference could, in sum, constitute the second stage of what you envisaged, with the first stage occurring here [in Belgium]. I hope that this suspension will not discourage you from offering us the hospitality of your retreat centre when the time comes.’<sup>24</sup>

The idea of precisely such a planist conference not limited to active social democrats was repeated in late December 1933 by Marcel Déat, then still a French socialist member of parliament and an avid student of the Belgian Plan, in a private communication to de Man. He suggested Paris as the location and Easter 1934 as the date.

‘I think that one could devote one entire day to the Russian experience, one to the German and Austrian experience, one to Italy, one to Spain, one to the English, French and, if possible, American experience, and then draw conclusions after extensive discussion. The proceedings should be published. I am convinced that this could constitute the point of departure for a vast international regroupment and renewal of socialist thought in Europe.’<sup>25</sup>

Déat soon approached Paul Desjardins with the suggestion of hosting this ‘international study week’ at the Abbaye de Pontigny, an idea seconded by Desjardins who hoped thus ‘to spawn other Pontignys in various countries.’<sup>26</sup>

In the end, the political itinerary of Marcel Déat and his neo-socialist comrades soon closed the window of opportunity for this particular enterprise. For the schism within French socialism, referred to earlier by Desjardins, led to an organisational separation of the neo-socialists from the social democratic French Socialist Party (SFIO).<sup>27</sup> In late February 1934 de Man wrote to Desjardins: ‘Since the entry of Marquet [another leading neo-socialists] into [a non-socialist coalition] government, it has become practically impossible for us to associate ourselves with no matter which project where the neo-socialist play a dominant role.’ An alternative suggestion to organise an international study week under the auspices of Léon Jouhaux, the head of the French General Confederation of Labour (CGT), found only lukewarm support in de Man, who feared insufficient interest on the part of the targeted socialist intellectuals for an event sponsored by the pragmatic Jouhaux.<sup>28</sup>

When the head of the Swiss Public Employees’ Union, Hans Oprecht, finally opened the first international plan conference in mid-September 1934, various earlier designs to meet in Switzerland or Belgium had finally been shelved in favour

<sup>24</sup> Hendrik de Man to Paul Desjardins, 11.12.1933 – AMSAB, Hendrik de Man, 2/4.

<sup>25</sup> Marcel Déat to Hendrik de Man, 28.12.1933 – AMSAB, Hendrik de Man, 2/4.

<sup>26</sup> Paul Desjardins to Hendrik de Man, 10.01.1933 – AMSAB, Hendrik de Man, 2/4.

<sup>27</sup> On the neosocialist break with the SFIO, see, for instance, Brender, *Kollaboration in Frankreich*, 23–55.

<sup>28</sup> Hendrik de Man to Paul Desjardins, 27.02.1934 – AMSAB, Hendrik de Man, 2/4.

of a meeting at the Abbaye de Pontigny.<sup>29</sup> The Swiss Public Employees' Union and the brains trust of the Plan de Man, the Brussels Bureau d'Études Socialistes, were the official hosts of the gathering, with Hendrik de Man and Hans Oprecht the key organisers. The list of participants included a representative cross-section of the non-communist socialist elite of interwar Europe.

### **Conference participants**

Nineteen of the fifty-six discussants hailed from Belgium, and they included not only the closest collaborators of Hendrik de Man but also members of the older generation. The most famous of the old guard representatives was Edouard Anseele, one of the co-founders of the Flemish Socialist Party in 1877. Most members of de Man's inner circle of plan advocates were far less well known and much younger, but quite a number of them eventually became prominent within Belgium and Europe as a whole. Max Buset headed the Belgian Socialist Party from 1945 to 1959. Léo Collard became Buset's successor in that post from 1959 to 1971. Paul-Henri Spaak eventually assumed the post of Prime Minister of Belgium, played a decisive role in the movement towards the eventual European Union, and from 1957 to 1961 he was the Secretary-General of NATO.

Sixteen delegates were listed as French delegates, although not all of them were French. Count Mihaly Karolyi had been a leading social reformer in Hungary and the guiding spirit behind the Hungarian Revolution of October 1918. The erstwhile Austrian Communist and Comintern functionary Lucien Laurat [= Otto Maschl] was more solidly implanted in French political life than the unlucky Hungarian count. By 1934 Laurat headed one of the most intellectually challenging factions within the SFIO. Georges Gurvitch, a one-time activist in the October Revolution, in subsequent years rose to become one of France's leading sociologists.

Of the native French in attendance at Pontigny, André Philip soon emerged as one of France's most prominent socialist politicians, was expelled from the SFIO in 1958, and then turned into a well-known non-conformist intellectual. Bertrand de Jouvenel was a classic twentieth-century French intellectual, commenting on politics and philosophy while sympathising with both the political left and right. French trade unionists were likewise present in full force. The head of the CGT for most of the interwar period, Léon Jouhaux, had expressed his keen interest in planist ideas for quite some time. In 1948, when communists assumed control of the CGT, Jouhaux was elected first president of the post-Second World War non-communist Force Ouvrière. Another delegate to Pontigny, Robert Bothereau, was general secretary of Force Ouvrière from 1948 to 1963. René Belin, Jouhaux's number two in the CGT, eventually became Minister of Industrial Production and Labour in the 1940 collaborationist government headed by Pierre Laval. Another top-level CGT official present at Pontigny, Robert Lacoste, chose the resistance

<sup>29</sup> On the organisational prehistory of the September 1934 conference, see the correspondence in the first folder in AMSAB, Hendrik de Man, 1/6.

track and emerged as Minister of Industrial Production in the first provisional postwar de Gaulle cabinet.

Among the eight Swiss present were Ernst Reinhard, head of the Swiss Socialist Party (SPS) from 1919 to 1936. Hans Oprecht, the chief secretary of the Union of Civil Service Employees, took over Reinhard's post from 1936 to 1953. Listed as one of six German participants, the native Russian Wladimir Woytinsky had been editor of the Petrograd soviet's newspaper, *Izvestia*, prior to the Bolshevik Revolution. In the early 1930s he had held the post of chief statistician for the major German trade union federation (ADGB) when he masterminded the main intellectual precursor of the Plan de Man, the WTB-Plan, whose fate was sealed, however, when the SPD refused to follow the ADGB and rejected Woytinsky's ideas. Soon exiled from his second home, Woytinsky eventually moved on to the United States, where he worked for the Central Statistical Board and the Social Security Administration. The survey of the assembled delegates must also mention three Italian exiles, one of them being Carlo Rosselli, leading representative of a peculiarly Italian brand of activist liberal socialism and head of the anti-fascist party *Giustizia e libertà*. Angelo Tasca, another Italian at Pontigny, had risen to prominence as a founding member of the Italian Communist Party and briefly worked in the Comintern's Moscow secretariat before joining the Communist Opposition. He finished his political career as a key propaganda officer of Vichy France.

### The radiance of the Plan de Man

Hendrik de Man set the tone for the entire proceedings in his opening address by repeating his trademark statement that 'reformism, which for all practical purposes has dominated the workers' movement until today, has become impossible. Reforms of redistribution can no longer be realised unless they are accompanied by sufficiently radical structural reforms' to limit the influence of regressive capitalism.<sup>30</sup> No longer should economic crises be regarded as 'recurring accidents' followed by recovery. Hitherto 'the objective of the labour movement' had been to work towards the return of a boom period. 'This time the ongoing crisis differs from all preceding ones'; now the workers' movement must set out to conquer crises once and for all.<sup>31</sup> De Man also steadfastly defended his refusal to sanction BWP/POB participation in any government whose goals fell short of total implementation of all aspects of the Plan, a central building block of the plan mystique. Yet, characteristically, de Man refused to conceive of his idea as a frontal assault on 'capitalism in its entirety'; instead he always took great care to proclaim 'monopolistic capitalism and above all finance capital' as the prime adversary of the workers' movement and its allies. When pressed he also firmly adhered to the constitutional path towards radical change: 'In democratic states, the actions to be taken should remain

<sup>30</sup> *Konferenz zur Besprechung der Probleme der Planwirtschaft: 14. bis 16. September 1934 Abbaye de Pontigny (Frankreich)* (Zurich: VPOD, 1934), 5.

<sup>31</sup> *Konferenz*, 7.

exclusively based on legal and constitutional means for the conquest of a majority based on persuasion.<sup>32</sup>

Thus, at Pontigny, Hendrik de Man continued to walk the tightrope between total rejection of the capitalist mode of production and the equally exclusive adherence to legally sanctioned social and political change which had characterised his thought ever since he had become interested in the renewal of European socialism under the impact of the Great Depression and the rise of the radical right. And it was this creative tension which spawned the fruitful exchange of ideas between avowed ‘radicals’ and convinced ‘reformists’ in the service of this larger cause, a situation that had characterised the Belgian crucible in 1933 and which now drew larger circles in Europe as a whole. For, at times, de Man had left open the option of an extra-legal road to planist power in cases of frontal attacks on democracy by ‘the capitalist class’.<sup>33</sup> This ‘revolutionary mystique’ endeared him to the radical left inside and beyond the ranks of Belgian and European social democracy. The repeated stress on the desirability of a gradual and legal road to power, on the other hand, made the Plan de Man equally palatable to open-minded moderates.

Hendrik de Man in 1933–35 exhibited a similar ambivalence regarding the role of industrial democracy and workers’ control in a hypothetical future plan government. Not an economist or technocrat himself, he always had an open ear for the advocates of the necessity of elements of self-management. Yet his own designs for the workings of the Plan conformed in most crucial details more closely to the thinly veiled technocratic designs of many of his specialist colleagues. De Man thus performed a crucial role as a person able to integrate and conciliate seeming opposites, thus bridging the entire spectrum from advocates of workers’ control to ivory tower economists, enabling this most unusual coalition to persist for several important years. The essential ambivalence regarding the system-transforming dimension of the Belgian’s plan ideas aided in the rapid diffusion of planist thought across the continent.

Crucially, the Belgian Plan du Travail remained at centre-stage during the September meeting in central France. A Czech participant averred: ‘The Belgian plan is of great moral significance, because it has been adopted by the party [the BWP/POB]. Perhaps it has achieved an even greater significance in countries other than Belgium.’<sup>34</sup> Lucien Laurat likewise underscored the significance of a major social democratic party’s support for radical planism in neighbouring France. Until the BWP/POB’s adoption of the Plan,

<sup>32</sup> *Konferenz*, 6.

<sup>33</sup> See, for instance, this statement in his keynote speech to the December 1933 BWP/POB Congress: ‘If, because of some contingencies, the action of the capitalist class, by means of the abandonment of legality, takes away our legal means of propaganda, which we need in order to conquer the majority, then we must defend ourselves by any means necessary, even if, in order to do so, we ourselves must abandon legal ways of action.’ *Compte rendu sténographique du XXXXVIII Congrès* (Brussels: L’Églantine, 1934), 33.

<sup>34</sup> Jaromir Necas, in *Konferenz*, 23.

We were able to organise only some study groups but, from the moment when a party such as the BWP/POB had proclaimed itself in favour of the theses which we defended, our influence noticeably grew. The Belgian Plan was of great assistance within the French Socialist Party, and it has even elicited expressions of interest in questions of socialisation by the most advanced fraction of the [bourgeois] Parti Radical.<sup>35</sup>

### **Radical planism**

In September 1934 advocates of planism viewing the Plan primarily as a technocratic means to conquer crises were equalled in number by supporters viewing planism above all as a means for the self-emancipation of the blue collar working class and allied forces. The debates about the role of workers' control in the running of the economy may exemplify this simmering conflict.

Georges Gurvitch, for instance, took exception to de Man's relative neglect of this important aspect in his conference communication, and Gurvitch drew attention to earlier pronouncements of de Man in favour of a system of 'plan commissars' with seemingly plenipotentiary powers. Gurvitch judged the provision of certain parliamentary checks on the powers of these 'commissars' insufficient: 'Democracy is control by the interested parties; this control must be exercised by the individuals directly affected' by certain measures. 'Only the institutions of industrial democracy . . . are capable of exercising this indispensable control.'<sup>36</sup> 'The problem of a planned economy in the socialist sense of that term and the problem of industrial democracy are one and the same; they are identical.' 'Industrial democracy without a planned economy is but a shadow of itself; a planned economy without industrial democracy is nothing but a reinforcement of the oppression of the working class.'<sup>37</sup> 'By relegating the problem of industrial democracy into the background, one loses the distinction between a planned economy as an intermediary phase on the road to socialism and the planned economy as one of several forms of organised capitalism.'<sup>38</sup>

Criticism of the perceived danger of an excessive moderation in the conception and execution of the Plan de Man constituted a strong current leaving a distinct imprint on the proceedings of the 1934 Pontigny conference. Thus the French politician and intellectual Pierre Viénot pointed out early on in the debates that 'it seems to me that the measures advocated [in the Plan] belong rather in the category of reforms of redistribution, and in my view the link between the idea of structural reforms and the struggle against the [economic] crisis therefore remains obscure'.<sup>39</sup> If Viénot's critique was posed in terms of a relatively mild query, Kurt Mandelbaum pulled out all the stops. Mandelbaum warned of the danger of pretending that a plan would automatically and peacefully lead to a non-capitalist society. For Mandelbaum, 'the notion of a harmonious transition towards a planned economy merely

<sup>35</sup> Lucien Laurat, in *Konferenz*, 38.

<sup>36</sup> *Konferenz*, 50.

<sup>37</sup> Georges Gurvitch, in *Konferenz*, 51.

<sup>38</sup> Georges Gurvitch, in *Konferenz*, 52.

<sup>39</sup> *Konferenz*, 15.

reinforces the kind of reformism which is supposed to be superseded by the Plan'. Such a vision might then very well result in a repetition of the situation characterizing Germany in 1918, when a few limited reforms in the end 'merely saved the skin of capitalism' rather than paving the way for socialism.<sup>40</sup>

Perhaps the most incisive critique of the belief in the plan as panacea came from an Austrian participant, 'K. William', who drew attention to an Austrian precursor of the Plan de Man, an economic programme 'which one could have justifiably called a Plan of Labour, judging from its content, if such a terminology would have been in use back then.'<sup>41</sup> Identifying himself as a representative of a workers' movement which, in September 1934, was reduced to operating in exile and underground, the discussant added: 'We had to go through the learning process . . . that a Plan of Labour, which is certainly good and valuable, or an economic programme, despite comprehensive favourable propaganda, constitutes no magic solution against fascism.'<sup>42</sup> The Austrian then highlighted the 'mostly unspoken assumption' of most plan advocates that propaganda favouring such plans 'could be propagated on democratic soil' with few restrictions until the day of victory. 'I do not know which otherworldly institution can offer a guarantee that this democratic terrain of contest will remain available in all these countries for however long it may take us to institute this plan-idea.'<sup>43</sup> In this context 'K. William' raised the question of political power: 'It is not only possible to win a majority and thus to exercise power; under certain conditions one may also first of all gain power and then obtain a majority . . . In this day and age of such incredibly quick and thorough-going social changes, political power constitutes an argument [in and of itself]. I merely want to mention this here and to encourage you to reflect upon it.'<sup>44</sup>

At Pontigny, in September 1934, utterances perceived to be as merely reform-oriented or excessively preoccupied with technique at the expense of the political dimension of the plan-idea never went unchallenged. Angelo Tasca, for instance, expressed the sentiment of a significant portion of the audience when he reacted to a discussion of some technicalities with specific suggestions but then added: 'One must oppose an excessively economic interpretation of the plan; one must affirm the primacy of politics. One must not lower the plan to the level of interest of economists; one must raise the economists to the level of the plan.'<sup>45</sup> The Italian

<sup>40</sup> *Konferenz*, 59. In 1945 Kurt Mandelbaum, the author of an earlier study, *Leninism and Social Democracy*, published an influential work, *The Industrialisation of Backward Areas*.

<sup>41</sup> 'K. William', in *Konferenz*, 40. 'K. William' is almost certainly a pseudonym. A tentative list of conference participants circulated in advance of the conference, dated 4 September 1934, includes as the sole Austrian scheduled to attend a 'Dr A. Lauterbach, Wien.' In the first three decades following the Second World War, the economist Albert Lauterbach published half a dozen English-language volumes on various macro-economic issues and concerns. The 'Liste der Teilnehmer an der Internationalen Konferenz vom 14./16. September 1934 in Pontigny (Frankreich)' can be consulted in AMSAB, Hendrik de Man, 1/6.

<sup>42</sup> *Konferenz*, 43.

<sup>43</sup> *Konferenz*, 42.

<sup>44</sup> *Konferenz*, 43.

<sup>45</sup> *Konferenz*, 56. In the same vein, see also Kurt Mandelbaum's assertion: 'I am not so much interested in the technical as in the political side of the problem' (58).

dissident communist likewise uttered a prescient warning. He expressed his worry that the fate of the Plan de Man could repeat the political itinerary of de Man's irreverent 1925 study, *The Psychology of Socialism*. De Man's earlier work 'is a violent reaction against reformism, but it almost became the Bible of the reformists. Could not the Plan suffer a similar fate?'<sup>46</sup>

Appropriately, a lengthy summary and assessment of the debates by none other than Hendrik de Man himself closed the free and open discussion at Pontigny. He identified with Gurvitch's position regarding the centrality of industrial democracy for the execution of the Plan. He agreed with 'William' on the possibility of achieving power prior to the persuasion of a majority of the people. He reaffirmed the necessity to abstain from any coalition government whose goal fell short of the implementation of the entire Plan. But he also pointed to the limited understanding of the system-transforming dimension of the Plan de Man on the part of most BWP/POB members. He responded to 'William' that, as far as the implementation of the Plan was concerned, the conquest of power could only be brought about by constitutional means. And, in a portent of things to come, he drew attention to the serious lack of specialists with sufficient know-how in the running of a national economy, in his estimation a crucial factor pushing for moderation within the movement towards a planned economy.<sup>47</sup>

De Man's final remarks eloquently reflected the state of flux in this particular conjuncture in the history of socialist debates. This highly unusual moment of opportunity and crisis characterising the international economic and political state of affairs in the early-to-mid-1930s enabled ardent supporters of the Rooseveltian New Deal, such as Wladimir Woytinsky,<sup>48</sup> to engage in constructive debates with advocates of economic planning à la Soviet Union.<sup>49</sup> Therefore, when the discussants left the bucolic setting at Pontigny, the fate of such debates remained profoundly uncertain. When they reconvened, in April 1936, the dice had been cast in favour of moderation and technocratic reforms.

### From United to Popular Fronts

Superficially, April 1936 would seem like an unlikely historical moment for the victory of a moderate tendency within European socialism. As the convenor of the Geneva conference, André Oltramare, a member of the Geneva International Labour Office, stated in his opening remarks: 'More than ever before, we are certain that only socialist measures may solve the crisis.'<sup>50</sup> At that particular moment the hopes of European socialists remained fixed on politics in France and Spain. The

<sup>46</sup> *Konferenz*, 53.

<sup>47</sup> 'H. de Man clôturant les débats', in *Konferenz*, 67–74.

<sup>48</sup> 'The sole serious attempt at a planned economy in today's world is the Rooseveltian experience', Wladimir Woytinsky, in *Konferenz*, 46.

<sup>49</sup> For pro-Soviet planning views, see, e.g., the intervention by N. Kelen, *Konferenz*, 26, where he classifies the Soviet economy as a 'fabulous example'.

<sup>50</sup> *Conférence Internationale des Plans du Travail – I. La Nationalisation du Crédit* (Paris: Centre Confédérale d'Éducation Ouvrière, [1936]), 5.

conference took place three months after the announcement of the French and Spanish popular fronts, two months after the victory of the Spanish electoral alliance, and less than ten days prior to the first round of elections leading to the victory of the French Popular Front. Yet, though unquestioningly inspiring the explosion of vast social movements, seen in a mid-range perspective and on a continental scale, popular fronts emerged out of a series of defeats for Europe's embattled political left, and they served programmatically as a moderate break. Popular fronts were electoral alliances between working-class and middle-class organisations based on a programmatic platform acceptable to the bourgeois left. The most appropriate definition of a popular front would be its designation as an alliance strategy *for* the middle classes rather than as a proletarian strategy for close co-operation *with* the middle classes. Compared with the earlier era of pro-socialist, exclusively working-class, united fronts in 1934–35, the era of popular fronts (1935–38) was a different kind indeed. Nothing symbolises the difference between united fronts and popular fronts as well as the juxtaposition of two key years symbolising these two different eras. In 1936, social democrats shared political power with bourgeois moderates in Spain and France. In 1934, by contrast, as mentioned above, social democrats had master-minded two armed rebellions, in Austria and Asturias.<sup>51</sup>

Radical planism must be regarded as an organic product of this earlier, system-transforming moment within the history of the European left. Within the welter of new proposals emerging in this era of united fronts, however, the Plan de Man held pride of place. No strategic project made quite the same programmatic offer to the forces of the middle-class left to join up with working-class organisations in a common effort to transform the destitute social system, that is, 'to bake another pie', as the Belgian Plan. Given the dire need of European socialists to broaden their influence beyond the blue-collar proletariat proper, the Plan de Man appeared to many as the magic wand to effect this link between working-class and middle-class forces on the basis of a socialist political platform.

Thus, when in March 1935 the BWP/POB suddenly joined the government in a coalition with Christian Democrats, disappointment was widespread though guarded, primarily but not exclusively aired among the Belgian socialist left. The promise of a radical alternative appeared betrayed, symbolised by the participation of the two key Plan advocates in the van Zeeland cabinet, Hendrik de Man and the young firebrand activist Paul-Henri Spaak. Yet, from a more distant perspective, this abrupt move merely paralleled the then-emerging groundswell of opinion favouring the moderate popular front strategy, with the spring and summer months of 1935 the crucial period of change.<sup>52</sup>

By April 1936 at least two other changes in the 'global environment' of planist experiments also served to dampen idealism and to push Europe's left in the direction of moderation and the jettisoning of seemingly utopian goals. The

<sup>51</sup> For a placement of popular and united fronts within the context of the politics of the 1930s in Europe as a whole, see Horn, *European Socialists*, Chs. 3, 4 and 6.

<sup>52</sup> On the vagaries of Belgian and international radical planism as well as the subsequent rise of popular fronts as panacea for the European left, see Chs. 5 and 6 in Horn, *European Socialists*.

innovative, 'hot' phase of the Rooseveltian New Deal had given way to more sober expectations. At the same time, the wave of show trials after 1935 erased the Soviet mystique for the rest of the decade for all but a hardcore communist few. It is quite telling in this regard that, whereas a number of participants in September 1934 made glowing references to either the American New Deal or Soviet economic planning, the subsequent gatherings saw no similar outbursts of enthusiasm for either one of these two experiments.

Thus, when Oltramare, on 17 April 1936, in his opening remarks in Geneva proclaimed that the heightened heat 'of the battle between the reactionary coalition and the Popular Front increasingly obliges the middle classes to take a stand',<sup>53</sup> such a statement no longer automatically implied a middle-class choice for socialism for most listeners. By then, for most politicians and intellectuals, popular front strategy had become identified with an exclusive commitment to parliamentary democracy and a pragmatic accommodation to the economic and social system now merely to be reformed and no longer to be superseded. Certainly, the choice of topics for this second international conference indicated a turn away from radical planism as a social movement aiming for qualitative sociopolitical change towards a decidedly more limited and technocratic approach to plan-related matters. That the geopolitical atmosphere had turned from utopian hope to widespread desperation can be gauged from another brief opening comment by André Oltamare: 'Our meeting convenes at a tragic moment for the workers' movement.'<sup>54</sup>

### **The 1936 Geneva conference**

The archives visited in the course of research for this study render no information on the organisation of this conference. The list of participants, however, permits a few insights into the changing composition of the discussants. There were fewer Belgians in attendance at the 1936 Geneva conference, but this decline was more than compensated for by the larger number of Swiss. The French remained the second-largest contingent. One noticeable difference was the sudden interest by the British. In September 1934 only one solitary resident of the British Isles had been in attendance.<sup>55</sup> In April 1936, eight British had travelled to Geneva, among them John Cripps, the son of Stafford Cripps, Hugh Gaitskell and G. D. H. Cole. As was the case in all three conferences, only Europeans were in attendance. Officially, the three-day conference was hosted by the Foyer Socialiste International, an educational association of Swiss and foreign socialists residing in Geneva. But, clearly, it stood in a direct line of continuity with the first international plan conference in

<sup>53</sup> *Nationalisation du Crédit*, 5–6.

<sup>54</sup> André Oltamare, in *Nationalisation du Crédit*, 5.

<sup>55</sup> The official roster of the 1934 conference only lists an anonymous 'Dr X.' residing in London. The preliminary list of participants mentioned in note 41 above, circulated a few weeks prior to the event, mentions two prospective participants living in England, two German-speaking émigrés, Adolf Loewe, living in Manchester, and Walter Pahl in London. As 'Dr X.' spoke in German at Pontigny, it can be presumed that he was Walter Pahl.

Pontigny, and plans for what became the Third International (Second Pontigny) Conference were laid at the closing session in Geneva.

Symptomatic of the changed and changing international circumstances were some prearranged limits on the discussion. Prepared papers on set topics set the tone for the debates, and the proceedings of the three-day conference thus almost exclusively refer to debates on the details of financial and agricultural policy for a future, hypothetical plan government.<sup>56</sup> In his opening statement, Oltramare expressed his regret over the absence of Max Buset, a key Belgian plan advocate, who was supposed to have delivered a report on ‘Workers’ Democracy and the Plan’. ‘In his place we will listen to an exposé by de Man, but the other subject will not be forgotten, and we hope that [Hans] Oprecht will address us on this particular issue.’<sup>57</sup> But the published proceedings include no such discussion led by Hans Oprecht or anyone else, and indeed, while listing de Man as a participant, the minutes show not a single intervention by the creator of the Plan de Man throughout the entire three-day conference.<sup>58</sup> Indeed, the system-transforming dimension of radical planism appears to have vanished with nary a trace. The most radical proposition in a resolution published in the annex to the proceedings, focusing on ‘The Preparation of the International Organisation of Production’, was a call ‘to hasten the introduction of the forty-hour workweek on an international scale by means of a probing study’,<sup>59</sup> a laudable concern indeed, but a far cry from the earlier need to bake an entirely different non-capitalist pie.

The tendency towards technocratic solutions rather than system-transforming structural reforms was perhaps best symbolised by a brief anecdote concerning the creation of a permanent administrative committee of plan advocates (what came to be the International Plan Commission), charged with distributing information in between international conferences. A British representative suggested on this occasion that it would be useful to precede future conferences with a gathering of a smaller number of ‘experts’ debating specialised subjects. ‘Thus one could prepare more thorough and more detailed conference contributions’, enhancing the efficiency of the subsequent larger gathering and thus presumably minimising distractions by ‘peripheral’ political debates.<sup>60</sup>

<sup>56</sup> The proceedings were published in two parts. For the bibliographical reference to Part I, dealing with finance policy, see note 49 above. Part II of the proceedings of the *Conférence Internationale des Plans du Travail* was entitled *Les Problèmes de l'Économie Agricole*.

<sup>57</sup> *Nationalisation du Crédit*, 7.

<sup>58</sup> Although I have found the page proofs of a lengthy speech by Hendrik de Man to the April 1936 Geneva Conference in the Archief en Museum van het Vlaamse Cultuurleven, Antwerp, Hendrik de Man, F109. There is no evidence that this manuscript, which numbered more than 100 pages, was in the end ever published. Portions of this speech can be regarded as de Man’s personal funeral oration for the Plan, as he details the subjective reasons handicapping planist agitation in Belgium from the start. The existence of this manuscript, of course, suggests that other segments of the conference proceedings may also have been omitted from the two-volume set of minutes published in Paris.

<sup>59</sup> *Économie Agricole*, 32. Despite its inclusion in Part II of the conference volume, this resolution was geared towards industrial production above all else.

<sup>60</sup> G. R. Mitchison, in *Économie Agricole*, 30.

### **The Second Pontigny Conference**

The third and final international plan conference convened on 23–4 October 1937. Conference participants hailed almost exclusively from Belgium and France. Without explanation, no British representatives were in attendance except for Lewis Clive. Thus the range of participants was in some respects similar to that of September 1934. But, inexplicably yet perhaps symbolically, Hendrik de Man was no longer present, and the German and Italian exile community had already been absent in April 1936. At least one other leading spokesperson for the political dimension of the Plan, George Gurvitch, was also missing after 1934, but, in October 1937, one could argue that the latter's absence was made up for by other advocates of the primacy of politics and the necessity and utility of industrial democracy. And the Austrian 'K. William', forcefully present in September 1934 and then absent in Geneva, was back on stage at Pontigny in October 1937. Therefore the composition of the gathering itself, and not just the tenor of the remarks made there, permit interesting insights into the evolution of socialist thought on economic planning between 1934 and 1937.

Lewis Clive, the alternate British member of the International Plan Commission, early on highlighted the ever-more ominous international political conjuncture and pointed to the raging Spanish Civil War: 'If the Republican government falls in that country, and if fascism can spread its influence by taking over all of Spain, conditions for the maintenance of peace will be considerably diminished and the success of our future plans will be compromised.'<sup>61</sup> By October 1937, even the appeal of the comparatively moderate popular front had appeared to have vanished into thin air. Nevertheless, in comparison with the April 1936 Geneva gathering, the emancipatory dimension of radical planism was less occluded. In all likelihood due to the less narrowly focused nature of the topics under discussion at Pontigny, advocates of a non-technocratic path towards social change were once again heard from and left an imprint on the proceedings. Even the most prominent socialist in Republican Spain and a leading spokesperson for a non-totalitarian, left socialist pathway to power, Francisco Largo Caballero, though ultimately unable to make it to Geneva, had originally planned to attend.<sup>62</sup> Yet, in the end, Largo Caballero's inability to exchange, even if for a few days only, the Spanish battlegrounds for the French monastery grounds of the Abbaye de Pontigny may have been all to the good; for the democratic socialist opponents of technocratic rule at Pontigny turned out to have been just as much engaged in a rearguard defensive move, doomed to isolation and ultimate defeat, as were their co-thinkers in their efforts to win the Spanish Revolution or at least the Civil War.

It is symptomatic that the first major report to the conference dealt with rather mild, reform-oriented subject matter, 'The Increase in Consumer Purchasing Power'. A member of de Man's brains trust, Albert Halasi, used this opportunity to

<sup>61</sup> III. *Conférence Internationale des Plans du Travail* (Brussels: Éditions Labor, n.d.), 7.

<sup>62</sup> III. *Conférence*, 4.

showcase his penchant for moderation and the evolutionary path towards social change, thereby setting the tone for the entire conference: 'I am convinced that socialism will solely be realised by evolutionary means, more specifically by means of a slow evolution [sic], for it concerns a profound transformation of the human mentality.'<sup>63</sup> He likewise affirmed the primacy of technocratic concern in his own conception of the Plan de Man: 'The kind of economic and social planism we speak about today is nothing but the socialist technique in the economic and social domain.' And Halasi's guarded defence of the Rooseveltian New Deal as a model of planist practice alleviated any lingering doubts about the moderate orientation of leading plan advocates in 1937: 'Concerning the United States, there we have a case of planism against which big business put up resistance, but we have no right to think that certain episodes, certain setbacks are ineluctable, that they already signify the defeat of planist politics.'<sup>64</sup>

Much of the conference was taken up by reports on planist theory and practice in a number of individual states. Understandably, the first and most important report concerned Belgium. Symptomatically, another member of the planist Brussels general staff, Max Buset, further developed Halasi's penchant for technocratic determinism behind contemporary planist thought: 'Planism has given us an economic and social technique in the service of socialism, and we have the assurance that, for many years to come, we will refer to the [Belgian] plan directives each time that we are called upon to resolve a given problem.'<sup>65</sup> Buset's conception of 'socialism', however, turned out to be virtually identical with the classical post-First World War social democratic orientation towards coalitions with bourgeois partners to their right. His lengthy report was above all an eloquent defence of the BWP/POB's March 1935 near-unanimous decision to join the van Zeeland cabinet. Buset's defence of moderate coalition politics at the expense of radical planism's original goals warrants closer scrutiny.

In his opening statements, Buset left it up to his listeners whether the politics of the van Zeeland cabinet 'may be called planist, or whether one is in the presence of a more general policy within which one can detect a more or less important planist infiltration'.<sup>66</sup> He soon began to answer his own question when stating that 'the structural reform which we put forth in our plan was converted into practice on a more reduced scale compared to the [already adulterated] governmental programme'.<sup>67</sup> Later on, Buset minced no words: 'The Belgian experience constitutes therefore, strictly speaking, not a planist experience, but an experience which I would qualify, for lack of a better term, as a variation on the theme of the politics of public rescue within which we obtained the maximum possible infiltration of planist ideas.'<sup>68</sup>

<sup>63</sup> *III. Conférence*, 13.

<sup>64</sup> *III. Conférence*, 12.

<sup>65</sup> *III. Conférence*, 45.

<sup>66</sup> *III. Conférence*, 15.

<sup>67</sup> *III. Conférence*, 22.

<sup>68</sup> *III. Conférence*, 40.

To left-wing critics of the BWP/POB's portentous move from planist fundamental opposition to the assumption of junior partner responsibilities in a cabinet headed by a Christian Democratic banker, Buset asserted that neither the revolutionary nor the constitutional pathway to political power appeared to be an option in early 1935. 'We did not detect within our own troops the necessary energies in order to make a revolution and to have it crowned by success.' 'As to the conquest of power by democratic means, by propaganda, that is a seductive idea as long as one moves in the realm of contemplation and speculation. But we had insufficient time to make the propaganda effort which would have enabled us to obtain a majority.'<sup>69</sup> Given the severity of the crisis in March 1935 'which gravely threatened the entire country and the entire economy',<sup>70</sup> the BWP/POB decided to shift its orientation once again. 'This explains to you the conditions under which we were led to move away from the very theses openly aired at this location [Pontigny] in 1934.'<sup>71</sup>

Buset's frank apology and justification for abandoning radical planist ideology included this interesting admission by one of the closest collaborators of de Man:

I will probably surprise you by saying this, but it is my duty to inform you of a key train of thought openly espoused by our friend de Man: if in 1935 all the elements necessary for the implementation of the Plan had been present, he nevertheless would not have done so, for he had been unable to find the indispensable technical support, and because he [then] would not have had the lucid and certain vision of the things to be accomplished upon embarking on this path.<sup>72</sup>

### **The end of a mystique**

The postulated central role for technical experts in the running of a national economy emerged in 1937 as a commonplace among the visitors to Pontigny. The report on 'The Right to Information of Workplace Employees (Workers' Control)' was subtitled 'The Problem of Technicians in a Planned Economy', and indeed the report was more concerned with the latter than the former topic for debate. The presenter, Georges Lefranc, proposed a tripartite model for the administration of a planned economy, to include representatives from the state, employees and consumers. To be sure, although drawing attention to the crucial role of technicians, Lefranc also added the important proviso that 'it seems to me extremely dangerous to confer too many powers on the technical workforce and to ignore the need for a democratic recruitment of these technicians'.<sup>73</sup> And a discussant close to the upper echelons of the French Popular Front government likewise pointed out the difficulties of structural reforms in this domain. The French government often placed in command of enterprises individuals who turned out to be 'the most

<sup>69</sup> III. *Conférence*, 39.

<sup>70</sup> III. *Conférence*, 38.

<sup>71</sup> III. *Conférence*, 40.

<sup>72</sup> III. *Conférence*, 42.

<sup>73</sup> III. *Conférence*, 35.

decisive adversaries of the Front Populaire. That is a dangerous move. But one must underscore that, if we were forced to proceed in this manner, it was because of a lack of human resources. Before declaring that one should nationalise everything, it would be wise to have a supply of specialists whom we currently lack'.<sup>74</sup>

When push came to shove, meaningful and democratic workforce participation in the running of a planned economy remained a distant concern at Pontigny in late October 1937. In Max Buset's words: 'Our experience lately has led us to be most concerned, in the final analysis, with the individuals making executive decisions and not with those who get together once every three months or every week to listen to reports.'<sup>75</sup> Buset here referred to enterprise councils, frequently including workforce representatives, located below the top decision-making levels in the hierarchy of their respective firms.

For quite some time now we have [in several national financial institutions] delegates chosen from among their unionised comrades. In one of those institutions we have two brave comrades of whom one has never opened his mouth except to express interest in the wages of the cleaning personnel, with the other one – in my opinion the more intelligent of the two – never opening his mouth even once. Alas, such workforce participation appears to us a farce and henceforth ceases to interest us.<sup>76</sup>

Georges Lefranc brought Buset's concern to a succinct point: 'Concerning the issue of technicians, we realise only too well that it constitutes the most urgent problem, for workers' control will only be able to deliver results thirty or forty years hence.'<sup>77</sup>

Given the overarching atmosphere of disillusionment and gloom, those select few who continued to remind the conference participants of the self-emancipatory dimension of radical planism, ideally encompassing far broader circles than the technical and administrative intelligentsia supposedly operating for the greater good, must have felt increasingly ill-at-ease. Nevertheless, a leading activist in the ranks of the influential left-wing tendency within the French Socialist Party, Gauche Révolutionnaire, Colette Audry, reminded her listeners:

The working class is still completely unprepared to exercise workers' control. It is very well aware of this itself. However, I would like to remind you of an objective frequently put forth during the debate on the pros and cons of universal suffrage. We were then told that people are not yet ready to know what their duties are. But remember that practice makes perfect.

Audry agreed with the practicality of a tripartite model, but with some notable exceptions: 'Concerning working conditions and questions of staffing levels, I see little usefulness for the tripartite model. It appears that the workers themselves are uniquely interested in this question. This would be the occasion for them to familiarise themselves with the meaning of the formula: "the factory to the workers"',<sup>78</sup> a slogan conspicuously absent at Pontigny. All told, in October 1937

<sup>74</sup> Gaston Cusin, in *III. Conférence*, 67.

<sup>75</sup> *III. Conférence*, 42.

<sup>76</sup> *III. Conférence*, 43.

<sup>77</sup> *III. Conférence*, 78 + 44.

<sup>78</sup> *III. Conférence*, 80.

there was little left of the earlier plan enthusiasm noticeable to everyone at Pontigny in September 1934.

Jean Duret was a Polish Marxist economist residing in France who from 1924 to 1928 had held a chair in history at the University of Moscow and who, after his expulsion from the Communist Party in 1932, taught at the adult education school of the French CGT. He had already left a mark on the April 1936 Geneva conference. When, in October 1937, he exclaimed that 'it is absolutely indispensable to develop and to maintain among the rank-and-file a plan mystique or at least the mystique of profound social transformation', the double meaning of the term 'mystique' in all likelihood was reversed for his listeners from similar formulations by other participants thirty-seven months earlier. Once meant above all to denote the necessity to help generate the necessary energy, will power and motivation for plan activists to create a powerful social movement, now the expression 'mystique' in all probability called forth increasingly distant memories of hopes that had once seemed within reach but that had since slipped back into the realm of utopian dreams.

The sobering of expectations leading back to moderation and reform-orientation emerged perhaps most symbolically in a conversation with the former head of the Hungarian state, Count Mihaly Karolyi, recounted by Albert Halasi. In the course of the October gathering, it had become evident that 'nationalisations that had once been regarded as a point of departure will probably become the final goal'.<sup>79</sup> Back in September 1934, Karolyi counted among those demanding a more central place for the discussion of these indispensable cornerstones of any plan action. By October 1937, together with most others converging on Pontigny, Karolyi had retreated from this stance: 'Today he expressed himself in an entirely charming manner,' said Halasi: "'In three years", he told me, "situations may change, and in my opinion they have changed."' Halasi then added a fitting postscript to the third and last international plan conference inspired by the Plan de Man: 'In effect we are finding ourselves in a different situation compared with the one three years ago. The momentary political circumstances are such that, while maintaining our confession of faith [*affirmation de foi*], we must develop a realistic planism [*un planisme réaliste*].'<sup>80</sup>

### Conclusion

The Second Pontigny (Third International) Plan Conference stood in a direct line of continuity with the inaugural event three years earlier. But the absence of de Man himself and some other personnel changes certainly make it difficult to give equal significance to those present in 1934 and the discussants of 1937. In that sense, any major conclusions drawn from the shift in tenor of the deliberations must be carefully assessed. That the tone dominating the proceedings switched from optimism and exuberance towards pessimism and reflection need not be stressed. In

<sup>79</sup> This formulation is Max Buset's, in *III. Conférence*, 44.

<sup>80</sup> Albert Halasi, in *III. Conférence*, 87.

1934 the primacy of politics and the role of industrial democracy were important issues of concern. By 1937 precisely such topics had been relegated to the margins of the conference. Was this slide from revolutionary optimism to economic pragmatism perhaps just a serendipitous outcome of the vagaries of conference attendance?

Short of solid information on the precise guidelines for invitations one cannot answer this query with anything approaching precision. But, given what we know about these conferences and taking into account the political atmosphere of the mid-to-late 1930s, it is, in my view, unnecessary and indeed ahistorical to search for a (non-existent) perfect overlap in conference personnel. Issues change and people change, and this holds true in particular of such turbulent times as the 1930s. This observation is especially pertinent when trying to reconstruct the political itinerary of such agile thinkers as those present at these gatherings of socialist intellectuals. In a loose association of conferees hailing from half a dozen countries and many more nationalities on a continent increasingly plagued by fascism and war, it would have been wholly surprising had the individuals remained the same – and this in the double meaning of that expression – for thirty-seven consecutive months.

Indeed, Hendrik de Man is the perfect example of this high degree of flexibility characterising this milieu. Indisputably the key organiser of the first Pontigny conference in September 1934, he rapidly lost interest in the Plan de Man when he opted for coalition politics in March 1935. Already at the April 1936 Geneva conference, he played a decidedly background role, delivering what must in hindsight be regarded as his farewell speech to his planist colleagues. By October 1937 he was most noted for his absence from Pontigny. Could this not constitute the answer to the question posed above? If the ‘inventor’ of the Plan de Man became aloof from the conference series he had spawned, does this not speak volumes about the changing intellectual climate of these times?

The three international plan conferences at Pontigny and Geneva were by far the most representative gatherings of the non-communist socialist elite of interwar Europe dedicated to discuss economic alternatives. Given the wide ideological spectrum of those present, it only stands to reason that attendance was possible and welcome for anyone who could afford to come. Those who came were serious about their work. Only those who were serious did come. The likelihood is therefore high that the changing tenor of the conference debates more or less precisely mirrors the changing orientation of those members of the socialist elite who were keenly interested in economic debates on planning at any given point in time.

In other words, the open nature of this discussion circle simultaneously facilitated a certain turnover in personnel and thus constituted an adequate barometer of changing trends. In September 1934 socialist economists were imbued with the optimistic spirit generated by the sudden wave of united fronts dominating the political landscape and image of European social democracy shaken up and strangely revitalised by Hitler’s legal coup. By October 1937 their hopes and expectations had vanished on the battlefields of the Spanish Civil War, if not long before then. Small

wonder that their technical designs were increasingly divested of political prerogatives or socialist dreams. It signalled the defeat of an entire generation.

When, in the course of the Second World War and in the aftermath of liberation, plans for the economic revival of war-torn Europe were drawn up, many of the names mentioned in the foregoing pages reappeared in prominent places. G. D. H. Cole and G. R. Mitchison became the leading figures in the abortive 1941–3 Nuffield Social Reconstruction Survey. Together with G. D. H. Cole, Hugh Gaitskell had played a major role in the 1930s New Fabian Research Bureau. From 1939 onwards, Gaitskell took on key roles in the Ministry of Economic Warfare, and in the immediate postwar years he became Minister of Fuel and Power and then Chancellor of the Exchequer. But his ongoing interest in economic policy had only the faintest of parallels with the planist project ten years earlier. Indeed, in 1951 Hugh Gaitskell left a mark on British politics by pushing through mandatory fee payments for National Health Service prescriptions to pay for rearmament, thus putting an abrupt end to the principle of free health coverage for all Britons and thus providing the catalyst for several resignations of cabinet members from the Labour Left.

But the British had only appeared on the scene at Geneva when the system-transforming dimension of radical planism had already been under assault. The French and Belgians represented the core constituency of the Plan de Man and its offshoots. What was their legacy for economic policy ten years hence? In France, above all André Philip and Robert Lacoste left major imprints on economic policy decisions already in the underground and exile years. Eventually, as mentioned before, Lacoste became Minister of Industrial Production. André Philip at one point held the joint post of Minister of Finance and Minister of National Economy, and this at a time when France developed its policy of indicative economic planning, coupled with some nationalisations of basic industries and services. Yet, here again, just as in the British case, elements of economic planning and even nationalisations were not designed as transitional measures leading France in the direction of a post-capitalist economy and society, but were measures passed to shore up market capitalist economies then at their all-time low in terms of public acceptance in the wake of Nazi terror and total war.

Belgium provided the sorriest state for the continued survival of planist ideas. De Man himself of course had manoeuvred himself into total isolation from the mainstream of his native land. But the ideas of planism also no longer found acceptance in the public eye. The postwar years up to 1959/60 saw no movement in the direction of even the mildest forms of indicative planning by any Belgian government. In the meantime, as elsewhere, erstwhile plan advocates found careers in government, public institutions or private enterprise.

Of course, on a more abstract level of analysis, it is possible to make a case that the legacy of the Plan de Man must be sought in the wider context of what Karl Polanyi in 1944 referred to as the Great Transformation. The Great Depression is indeed a major watershed in the economic history of modern Europe and the world, inasmuch as it validated and indeed necessitated government involvement in

economic affairs on a level unseen other than in the First World War. Yet here I believe that the specific vision of de Man in 1933–5 has little in common with post-1944/5 pro-capitalist indicative planning and countercyclical measures. It would be just as misleading to give equal significance to European socialism in 1934 and post-1944/5 developments in this more openly political sphere, which are perhaps best summarised in Alain Touraine's bitter caricature of social democratic leadership in 1985: 'If you hear an inflated tribute to profits, enterprise, competition, you can be sure you are listening to a socialist minister.'<sup>81</sup>

<sup>81</sup> Cited in Sassoon, *One Hundred Years*, 559–60.