

# Letters on “Hegel, Marx, Engels and the Origins of Marxism”

9 May 2006

*The following is a selection of letters sent to the World Socialist Web Site on “Hegel, Marx, Engels, and the origins of Marxism”, a review of Tom Rockmore’s book Marx after Marxism: The Philosophy of Karl Marx.*

Thanks for writing this enlightening review, which I read with considerable interest. The academic establishment and their eclectic brand of sophistry has been given a free reign for too long! Their abstract mental constructions may appear concrete to them in their symposia, dinner parties and other gatherings of like minded “intellectuals.” Indeed, in such surroundings Rockmore’s idealist brand of Marxism must fit the sensibilities of his milieu like a glove! And how can it not be so, given that the ivory towers that they inhabit shield their material being for the harsh concrete realities of the real world?

The strength of Marxism therefore does not only find its expression in demolishing their sand castles in the sky, but also in reclaiming science from these charlatans who have turned it into a toy for them and the decaying bourgeoisie. In the words of Lasalle: “Only when science and the workers, these opposite poles of society, become one, will they crush in their arms of steel all obstacles to culture.”

Thanks once again for your good work and for being a beacon.

JR

6 May 2006

Mr. David North,

I read with great interest your review and your philosophical critique of the author’s thesis. While not pretending to be a scholar of philosophy in general nor a serious student of the works of Hegel, Marx or Engels in particular (a fact I am working to rectify), I nevertheless found your exposé of the basic intellectual dishonesty of Professor Rockmore’s arguments and conclusions to be very disturbing, both in of itself and as a general trend in academia, at least in this context of academic analysis of the works and legacy of Marx and Engels. While fully admitting my own lack of scholarly knowledge on the subject, it seems that you have exposed an “anything goes” attitude; that it is ok if poorly and/or selectively researched writings reach inaccurate conclusions, as long as it occurs on the basis of repudiating an unpopular (at least within the circles of the ruling elite and their servile accomplices in academia) economic and political theory. As you stated in your review, repudiation of the writings and conclusions of Marx and Engels is hardly a new development, but the lack of academic rigor, laxness of research and sheer obvious and willful error of recent works on the subject is a disturbing trend.

It is, however, the statements concerning the events in this country on September 11, 2001 by Professors Rockmore and Joseph Margolis, as quoted in your epilogue, that I find most discomfiting: “One wonders whether we are prepared to address 9/11 in accord with the familiar terms and categories of our tradition, or whether they are even adequate to the task,” they write. “We are no longer certain of our analytic instruments.... Political philosophy as we have known it now seems outdated, seems unable to help us in our hour of need.... The world has changed in ways no

one could have foreseen.”

Your analysis of this, in my view, bizarre and irrational confession on the part of the authors of the volume in which this passage appears, is succinct and brutally honest. I fail to understand how it is that the events of September 11, 2001 represent some mystical divide between ‘before’ 9/11 and ‘after’ 9/11. The horrors visited on the victims of that tragedy hardly signify some philosophical ‘sea change’ in Western thought. Rather, it seems to me that the attacks on that day (I won’t even touch on the possible complicity of our own government in the attacks—WSWS has done a thorough enough job of that already) were a cruel and gruesome, though hardly surprising result of the hatred and contempt that Western imperialism, driven by capitalism, has produced from the oppressed masses of the world, in particular, Arab and Muslim peoples.

The only analysis that the media in this country can offer concerning the events of 9-11 is to parrot the asinine phrase from our un-elected president that the attackers ‘hate our freedom.’ I propose that it is that dishonest statement, totally devoid of critical thought or analysis, that more truly represents an impending doom for Western thought or rationalist philosophy.

When I think of the number of people murdered on that day and the understandable outrage that their deaths unleashed, I feel it is important to maintain a ‘score keeping’ exercise in perspective. Thanks to our lack of a serious public transportation system in this country and the resulting capitalist-fueled dependence on privately owned automobiles to meet the basic transportation needs of society, between 43,000 and 45,000 people lose their lives in vehicle crashes every year. Where is the outrage over these needless deaths and a system that glorifies the primacy of the individual and abhors anything which smacks of promoting the ‘common good’? I submit that the death toll on 9/11 pales in comparison to the number of people who die each day on this planet as a result of capitalist policies, whether killed as a result of wars of imperialist aggression, criminal murder due to brutal competition for resources or by death through inability to meet basic human needs for survival on an increasingly degraded globe.

TA

North Little Rock, Arkansas, US

5 May 2006

Dear Mr. North,

Your occasional discussions of academic trends have helped clarify a great deal for me as a graduate student. Thank you for taking the time to expose Rockmore’s fraud! I hope this article finds a wide audience at universities and colleges, where, no doubt, his work has been naively accepted as good coin. As you point out, this could happen only under conditions in which ignorance and hostility toward Marxism prevail. Academia manifests both characteristics in abundance!

To update Trotsky’s incisive rejoinder against an earlier academic opponent of Marxism: Rockmore doesn’t recognize historical materialism, but historical materialism recognizes him! As you have

suggested in a previous essay, at its very heart the *raison d'être* of university-funded social sciences and humanities has been to combat Marxism, from the times of Durkheim and Weber to Dewey and to the Frankfurt school. But what is starkly obvious about such previous forms of anti-Marxism in comparison with what passes for academic intellectual life today is the vast superiority of the earlier work. When the working class was perceived as a force to be reckoned with, the bourgeoisie called forward through their universities thinkers of indubitable quality, and in some cases outright genius, either as open antagonists of Marxism or as “friends” seeking to reform it to death.

And today? The *mélange* of popular academic trends—postmodernism, identity politics-infused racial and feminist studies, Rockmore’s dishonest “post-marxism,” etc.—are united in their opposition to Marxism, historical materialism, and very often even to the bare notion that history can be studied as a guide to the present and the future. Hacks such as Rockmore are able to pawn off their third-rate “theories” because they operate in a world where the working class has been, for some time, relatively silent, and because they sense no opposition from Marxism.

In the US, we have seen over the past two decades a vast proletarianization of intellectuals at colleges and universities, with graduate students, part-time instructors, non-tenure track faculty, and so on, increasingly dominating the work of instruction and research. Their jobs are insecure and low-paid, and they, together with a growing pool of unemployed PhDs, face diminishing chances of ever finding tenure track jobs as full professors. It is a relative handful of tenured professors congregated at the elite private and public institutions who are the real progenitors of the intellectual twaddle that dries so much ink at the nation’s university printing presses. Meanwhile, the thousands upon thousands of graduate students and non-tenure track professors-workers feel compelled to align themselves with the prevailing winds in order to secure funding and jobs. How many are aware that the ideas they parrot are, in essence, opposed to their own social interests? Marxism—real Marxism—must be taken up again.

One more point must be added: As you well know, a second function of the university has been to socialize the cost of technological and scientific research and the training of specialists for the benefit of the capitalist class as a whole. In an earlier period, this held true in the social sciences and humanities as well. Professors often oriented their research toward producing policy recommendations or “advice” for the state, for business, the trade unions, and so on, all with an eye toward defusing social tensions. Their teaching likewise aimed to matriculate the next generation of well-rounded, far-sighted capitalist leadership. The universities, in short, have long been centers of reformist thinking—a characteristic, by the way, which the far right has never forgiven.

The decline of American capitalism and the resulting collapse of reformism have eroded this function. This explains why, even though the typical tenured university professor is financially quite comfortable, he or she despises the Bush administration. How far the academy’s star has fallen since the days of FDR and JFK, when the professors’ learned treatises found their hearings in the antechambers of power! Now the president proudly declares that he doesn’t even read the newspaper, let alone the efforts of the major university presses.

The elite professors have been cut loose, so to speak. As a species, they tend to be smugly self-contented with their social position in the ivory tower, but at the same time deeply disillusioned with the world outside its walls. Their rejection of Marxism has left them with no way forward, intellectually naked, isolated, and fearful before the historical crises provoked by American imperialism which ominously begin to threaten their comfort. But rather than analyzing their own “intellectual archaeology,” to borrow a postmodernist term, the real focus of their disgust is “the people,” who so many erstwhile campus liberals and ex-New Leftists hold responsible for the election of Bush and all other

manner of social ills.

There is no economic basis for reform; there is no political constituency among the political elite for reformism. It follows that reformist-oriented academic work is of an abysmal quality. It has little to say and only a few who are forced to listen. One day Rockmore’s work will be remembered as but a crude example of this period’s intellectual degeneration, perhaps recalled only for the polemic it suffered at the hands of the *World Socialist Web Site*.

TM

3 May 2006

I shudder at the idea that I might have read Tom Rockmore’s book without the guidance provided by North’s articles. With the dearth of my knowledge of either Marx or Hegel, and under the professorial spell of Rockmore, I might have fallen victim of Rockmore’s persuasion. But I don’t think I would have swallowed the idea that 9/11 changed the cognitive nature of the human person. Thank you, David.

MEM

Princeton, New Jersey, US

3 May 2006

Rockmore’s book is apparently essential reading at the universities, and knowing some students personally who study philosophy at Duquesne University, I have now directed them to this two-part book review. I asked that they might print it out and drop it in Rockmore’s inbox! Having to suffer the book and its confusion, naturally your article has brought relief to some students of his.

With the state of the world as it is, it was inevitable that Marx, Hegel, and significantly Spinoza have arisen especially within American academia, but certainly around the world. I have always found Marx and Engels to be consistent with one another, life-long supporters and comrades of each other, and certainly I suspect they both proofread and edited each others work.

There is no idealist Marx, and of the two in any case as far as my preference goes, Engels was more the philosopher of the two, but Marx was always in the background if not staring over Engels shoulder. There is no ‘idealist’ Marx that needs to be saved from a ‘materialist’ (and apparently therefore philosophically impoverished by implication?) Engels.

I have to wonder at the real motivation behind the effort. I suspect this pitiful theorem to be a desperate grab for status or research funding. Surely it is important to obscure Marxism right at this time now that a revival of interest is taking place. I might disagree entirely with Marxism, but making up utterly false phantasies should not be tolerated or forced down students throats just as they are seeking truth and transparency.

DH

Brisbane, Australia

4 May 2006



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