

Marxism, History & Socialist Consciousness

Parts 17-19

David North
7 September 2007

Foreword | Pts 1-3 | Pts 4-7 | Pts 8-10 | Pts 11-13 | Pts 14-16 | Pts 17-19 | Pts 20-22

Mehring Books has published a new book by David North, Marxism, History & Socialist Consciousness, which is now available for purchase online. It was written in reply to a critique of the work of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), entitled "Objectivism or Marxism," by Alex Steiner and Frank Brenner, two former members of the Workers League (predecessor of the Socialist Equality Party).

The WSWS has begun publishing the text of the new book. The Foreword was posted on August 17, Parts 1-3 were posted on August 24, Parts 4-7 were posted on August 27, Parts 8-10 were posted on August 29, parts 11-13 were posted on August 31, and Parts 14-16 were posted on September 5. Below we post Parts 17-19.

17. Bernstein, science and utopianism

In both your document, Comrade Brenner, and your joint letter, you repeatedly claim that the opposition to utopianism in the era of the Second International was largely a product of the growth of opportunism. "'Science' in the prewar Second International," you write, "was not just a disinterested development of theory (as North seems to believe); it was increasingly an *alibi* for absconding from revolutionary responsibilities, which 'objective conditions' would supposedly take care of. Hence the need to turn utopianism into a virtual taboo, because it threatened, not science but rather this objectivism. In the actual development of Marxism, however, scientific socialism was a dialectical 'aufheben' of its utopian predecessors, and utopia and science were not a rigid dichotomy but a *unity of opposites*, which is readily apparent in such canonical works as *Critique of the Gotha Program* or *State and Revolution*, to say nothing of a little gem like Paul Lafargue's *The Right to be Lazy*."

This account of the origins of anti-utopianism, buttressed by pseudo-dialectical bilingual phrasemongering, [23] is essentially false. Bernstein was not an enemy of utopianism. Bernstein argued against the conception that the socialist movement needed to legitimize its existence on the basis of science. He wrote: "There is no doubt that, although socialism as a practical proletarian movement has piled success upon success in many countries, formulating its position in ever clearer fashion, it experienced major setbacks as a scientific theory, losing its conceptual coherence and security in the cacophonous doubts and confusions of its representatives. Thus the legitimate question arises as to whether there exists an internal connection between socialism and science. To this concern regarding the possibility of a scientific socialism, I would like to add the question of whether a scientific socialism is needed at all." ["How is Scientific Socialism Possible," in *Selected Writings of Eduard Bernstein, 1900-1921* (New Jersey, 1996), p. 94]

Bernstein did not believe that it was necessary, or even desirable, that Marxism deny its links to utopianism, which he believed were necessarily present in a socialist movement. "However, whether one defines it as a condition, a theory, or a movement," he wrote, "socialism is always pervaded by an *idealistic* element that represents either the ideal itself or

the movement toward such an ideal. Thus socialism is a piece of the *beyond* - obviously not beyond the planet we live on but beyond that of which we have a positive experience." [Ibid. p. 95]

Your claim that "It is Bernstein who pushes the counterposing of utopianism to science to its logical conclusion" is simply a misrepresentation of what the founder of modern revisionism wrote. He explained with great care that he did not employ the term utopian "as a euphemism for unrealistic dreams and fantasies." Such a use of the term, he protested, "would be a great injustice to those three great nineteenth-century utopian dreamers and forerunners of modern socialism" [Ibid. p. 96] Far from presenting utopianism and Marxism as opposites, Bernstein argued that "If we investigate and compare the theories of these three utopians [Owen, Saint-Simon and Fourier] with Marx's theory, we shall find that Marx developed and emphasized the scientific element to a higher degree. But neither in the utopian writings nor in Marx's teachings is science *everything*. Of course, Marx draws narrower boundaries around the realm of will, imagination and inclination. But he does not fully erase it." [Ibid. p. 97]

Bernstein accused Engels of having exaggerated the chasm between the work of Marx and his utopian predecessors. "On the one hand he casts the utopians in an unfavorable light by overemphasizing the role of imagination in their writings, although they actually stressed discovery over invention. On the other hand he proclaims modern socialism freed from any form of invention. In my opinion socialism has never been, nor can it ever be, 'free of inventions and imaginings.'" [ibid. p. 97]

As these passages make clear, Bernstein recognized that the main challenge to his revisionist project stemmed not from utopianism but from the identification of socialism with science. In attacking the "objectivism" and "abstentionism" of the ICFI, it is you who are echoing the positions of Bernstein. Moreover, your repeated call for the revival of "socialist idealism" as the programmatic basis of a new socialist culture places you entirely within the camp of the revisionists on a key philosophical issue. Underlying the entire "Back to Kant" movement, which began in the late 1860s and ultimately played a major role in shaping the theoretical outlook of Bernstein and his supporters, was the conception that the struggle for socialism did not require scientific substantiation. The invocation of moral ideals - such as that which finds expression in Kant's second formulation of the categorical imperative ("Act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means, but always at the same time as an end.") - could serve the struggle for socialism just as well as the Marxian conception of historical determinism. Indeed, a section of left academics in late 19th century Germany such as Karl Vorländer argued that the socialist movement ought to trace its philosophical lineage to Kant. In your own ill-informed haste to overthrow basic historical conceptions of Marxism, you have little concern for the theoretical roots and implications of your own arguments.

18. Neo-utopianism and the demoralization of the petty-bourgeois

left

Your document claims that my reference to neo-utopianism “is simply a straw man” that I have conjured up. You assert that I quoted from only one work, Vincent Geoghegan’s *Utopianism and Marxism*, to substantiate my claim that this tendency exists, and that it represents a form of contemporary political pessimism. Actually, I also cited the *Socialist Register* for the year 2000, which is entitled *Necessary and Unnecessary Utopias*. However, I should have been more generous in my citations of this latter work, a defect that is easily remedied. Permit me to quote from the preface:

The theme of this volume of the *Socialist Register* was first conceived in 1995 with the following general question in mind: as we approach the end of the millennium, what is to succeed the first great socialist project that was conceived in Western Europe in the nineteenth century, and variously implemented in the twentieth? We had no illusion that an answer to this question would be found by cudgeling the brains of however large a number of left-wing intellectuals. But we did think that the time had come to renew the left’s vision and spirit and that the *Register* could hope to contribute something useful for this purpose. We wanted to break with the legacy of a certain kind of Marxist thinking which rejected utopian thought as “unscientific” just because it was utopian, ignoring the fact that sustained political struggle is impossible without the hope of a better society that we can, in principle and in outline, imagine. And we particularly felt that, in the face of the collapse of communism, as well as the rejection by ‘third way’ social democracy of any identification with the socialist project, there was now, especially in the context of the growing crisis of the neo-liberal restoration, an opening as well as a need for imaginative thought.” (Suffolk, 1999), p. vii

The clear connection between neo-utopianism and the demoralization prevailing among a layer of intellectuals, socialists and ex-radicals is established in the first contribution to this volume, which is entitled, “Transcending Pessimism: Rekindling Socialist Imagination.” Written by Leo Panitch and Sam Gindin, many of the themes present in Brenner’s essay are anticipated in this chapter - including the invocation of the work of Ernst Bloch, from whom you, Comrade Brenner obtained the title of your tract on utopianism (*To Know A Thing Is To Know Its End*) [24] Your own work is clearly influenced by this chapter. Therefore, it is somewhat odd that you should deny that contemporary utopianism is a response to pessimism, because, as Panitch and Gindin point out, Bloch’s own original work was motivated precisely by the effort to counter the pessimism generated by the catastrophes of the 1930s. As they note, “Bloch’s response was to try to revive the idea of utopia. He insisted that even in a world where socialist politics are marginalized, we can still discover, if only in daydreams, the indestructible human desire for happiness and harmony, a yearning which consistently runs up against economic competition, private property and the bureaucratic state.” [ibid. p. 2]

Panitch and Gindin make no secret of their own belief that Marxism is based on an unrealistic and exaggerated estimate of the revolutionary potential of the working class, writing that “it must be said that the historical optimism in Marx that inspired generations of socialists came with an underestimation of the scale and scope of the utopian dream and the capitalism-created agency honoured - or saddled - with carrying it out: the working class. Between Marx’s broad historically-inspired vision of revolution/transformation and his detailed critique of political economy, there was an analytical and strategic gap - unbridgeable without

addressing the problematic of working-class capacities - which later Marxists sometimes addressed, but never overcame. ~ Every progressive social movement must, sooner or later, confront the inescapable fact that capitalism cripples our capacities, stunts our dreams, and incorporates our politics.” [ibid. p. 5]

Comrades Steiner and Brenner: it is your right to oppose and criticize the International Committee, but don’t take us for fools. We are quite familiar with the literature that is circulating in petty-bourgeois political and academic circles, and are able to identify the sources with which you are working. So please don’t argue that neo-utopianism - and the pessimism from which it is derived - is a “straw man” that we created to counter your brilliant original ideas. You are not deceiving us. Rather, you are deceiving yourselves.

You go on to complain of references in my first lecture to Geoghegan’s *Utopianism and Marxism*, which you claim “is a hatchet-job with quotes ripped out of context for the purpose of proving that Geoghegan (and hence ‘neo-Utopianism’) advocate a left-version of Nazi-style mythmaking. But this again is nonsense,” you continue, “as is apparent to anyone who reads the book. The point that Geoghegan was making in the quote cited by North was that the Nazis were far more effective in their appeals to mass psychology than the German left.” [25]

The quotes are not ripped out of context. On the contrary, more extensive citations from Geoghegan would have reinforced my assessment of his book as a work that attacks Marxism for having underestimated the force and significance of the irrational in the motivation of human behavior. In my reference to Geoghegan, I stated that he “criticizes Marx and Engels for ‘having failed to develop a psychology. They left a very poor legacy on the complexities of human motivation and most of their immediate successors felt little need to overcome this deficiency.’”

Let us place the quote in context by citing the entire paragraph from which it was “ripped.” Geoghegan writes:

There has always been what one might term a rationalistic current in Marxism. It works with an Enlightenment model of the individual and its principal distinction is between knowledge and ignorance. This is its key to the central paradox of capitalism: that people put up with conditions not in their own interests. The ignorance which is false consciousness and alienation manifests itself in a variety of irrational beliefs and behaviors. However, once people break through this cocoon of illusion they will cease to behave in such a bizarre fashion. This is the spirit of Pottier’s ‘Internationale’: “Arise! ye starvelings from your slumbers/ Arise ye criminals of want/ For reason in revolt now thunders/ And at last ends the age of cant.” Such a view tends to privilege the bearers of knowledge: those who have emerged from the shadowy world of Plato’s cave and have seen the light of truth. There was a strong dose of this type of rationalism in much of the Marxism of the Second International and it helped fuel the obsession with science. Part of the reason, which itself was part of the problem, was that Marx and Engels *failed to develop a psychology. They left a very poor legacy on the complexities of human motivation and most of their immediate successors felt little need to overcome this deficiency.* A simple concept of the individual coexisted with simplistic social strategies.” [London and New York, 1987, pp. 67-68. Italicized words indicate those directly quoted in my lecture last August.]

The entire paragraph in no way contradicts my summary of Geoghegan’s argument. Rather than complaining that I have misquoted the author, you should explain why, and by what process, you have come

to agree with his views. I have already noted your ambivalent attitude to the Enlightenment. The passage cited above reveals not only the parentage of your earlier objection to my “uncritical defense of the Enlightenment”; it also makes clear that your embrace of neo-utopianism has placed you in extremely unhealthy ideological and political company. [26]

19. What did Daniel Guerin really write?

You assert repeatedly that the International Committee fails to understand the importance of and ignores “human factors” that are critical to the struggle for socialism. We are making the same error, you suggest, as that made by the Stalinists and Social Democrats prior to Hitler’s victory in 1933, who “in the name of a spurious ‘materialism’ were contemptuous of the role of political idealism in mobilizing mass support.” In support of this argument, you refer to *Fascism and Big Business*, the well-known work of Daniel Guerin, a Trotskyist in the 1930s. You quote precisely one passage from this 318-page book: “The degenerated Marxists believe it is very ‘Marxist’ and ‘materialist’ to disdain the human factors. They accumulate figures, statistics and percentages; they study with great accuracy the profound causes of social phenomena. But by failing to study with the same care the way in which the causes *are reflected in the consciousness of men*, and failing to penetrate the soul of man, they miss the *living reality* of these phenomena.”

Commenting on this passage, you state that “This was exactly what Reich and Fromm were saying in the Thirties and what Geoghegan was reprising in the remarks North found so outrageous.” Thus, the conclusion that you want the reader to draw is that Guerin believed that too great an emphasis on science and a materialist explanation of objective conditions, and the absence among Marxists of a sufficient understanding of psychology, contributed significantly to the Nazi victory. As Guerin was a well-known Trotskyist in the 1930s, you would have your readers believe that this was also the view of Leon Trotsky.

But, once again, your presentation of a quotation is misleading and dishonest. Three sentences are cited in support of *your* arguments, which are, as we shall see, very different from those of Guerin. Who are the “degenerated Marxists” of whom he is writing? What is the “spurious materialism” that Guerin condemns?

Let us repeat a procedure that we have employed several times in this document. We will go back to the author’s actual text and place your citation in the appropriate context. The chapter from which you have obtained the citation is entitled “Fascist Mysticism,” which offers a valuable account of the propaganda and agitation techniques employed by the fascists to delude and deceive the masses. Guerin points out that the appeals made by the fascists to the emotions and blind faith of potential followers are determined by the class interests they serve. “A party supported by the subsidies of the propertied classes, with the secret aim of defending the privileges of property owners, is not interested in appealing to the intelligence of its recruits; or rather, it considers it prudent not to appeal to their understanding until they have been thoroughly bewitched.” [*Fascism and Big Business* (New York, 1973), p. 63]

Guerin goes on to explain that the appeal to blind faith is facilitated by the fact that fascism “is fortunate enough to address its appeal to the miserable and discontented.” He observes that “It is a psychological phenomenon, as old as the world, that suffering predisposes to mysticism. When man suffers, he renounces reason, ceases to demand logical remedies for his ills, and no longer has the courage to try to save himself. He expects a miracle and he calls for a savior, whom he is ready to follow, for whom he is ready to sacrifice himself.

“Finally, fascism has the advantage - if we may say so - over socialism in that it despises the masses. It does not hesitate to conquer them through their weaknesses.” [ibid. pp. 63-64]

One has only to read this passage to recognize immediately how fundamentally incompatible Guerin’s views are with those of Geoghegan,

whose work you so warmly endorse. Guerin sees in the irrationalism of the fascist appeal an expression of its reactionary objectives, not a psychological model to be learned from, let alone emulated.

Several pages later, after completing his analysis of fascist propaganda and mass mobilization techniques, Guerin poses the critical question: “*What has the labor movement done to combat fascist ‘mysticism?’*” The reasons that Guerin gives for the labor movement’s failure to develop effective methods bear no resemblance to the position advanced by Geoghegan. First of all, Guerin makes clear that certain problems that socialists confront in the area of mass agitation flow from the “very nature” of socialism. He explains that “Socialism is less a religion than a scientific conception. Therefore it appeals more to intelligence and reason than to the senses and imagination. Socialism does not impose a faith to be accepted without discussion; it presents a rational criticism of the capitalist system and requires of everybody, before his adherence, a personal effort of reason and judgment. It appeals more to the brain than to the eye or the nerves; it seeks to convince the reader or listener calmly, not to seize him, move him, and hypnotize him.” [ibid. p. 73]

Guerin allows that socialism’s propaganda techniques need “to be rejuvenated and modernized,” in order to “place itself more within the reach of the masses, and to speak to them in clear and direct language that they will understand.” However, Guerin immediately qualifies this suggestion with the warning that socialism “cannot, *on pain of self-betrayal*, appeal like fascism to the lower instincts of crowds. Unlike fascism, *it does not despise the masses*, but respects them. It wants them to be better than they are, to be the image of the conscious proletariat from which socialism emanates. It strives, not to lower, but to raise their intellectual and moral level.” [ibid. pp. 73-74, emphasis in the original]

Comrades Steiner and Brenner, to your own shame you did not quote these very wonderful and beautiful words because you understand very well that they speak in defense of the Marxist confidence in the power of reason, and uphold the view that the victory of socialism requires the raising of political consciousness, not the psychological manipulation of the unconscious. Nowhere in Guerin’s book - whose central purpose, let us not forget, was to expose the objective economic and political links between fascism and the ruling elite (that is, to provide a scientific insight into the political phenomenon of fascism) - is there any suggestion that the problem with Marxism is its “obsession with science.”

Why, then, was socialism unable to counter effectively the agitation of the fascists? In what way did the socialist movement “degenerate?” Guerin’s answer is that the socialist movement became politically opportunist. “It came to believe,” he writes, “that immediate advantages, as well as the ‘paradise on earth,’ could be achieved without struggle and sacrifice, by the vulgar practice of ‘class collaboration.’” [ibid. p. 74] Guerin writes with scorn of the labor bureaucrats, describing them memorably as “conservative and routine-minded, implanted in the existing order, well fed and complacent high priests, who ruled in buildings paid for by workers’ pennies and called ‘people’s houses.’ To win a legislative seat or find a soft berth in a union office had become the rule of life for the leaders of this degenerate socialism. They no longer believed, they enjoyed. And they wanted troops in their own image, troops without ideals, attracted only by material advantages.” [ibid. p. 75]

The degeneration of which Guerin writes was rooted not in the failure and inadequacies of Marxism, but in the opportunism of the labor bureaucracy. Then, in the paragraph that immediately precedes the passage you cite, Guerin explains the manner in which opportunism undermined the Marxist method.

At the same time, in the field of doctrine, socialism distorted one of its essential conceptions, “historical materialism.” The first Marxian socialists were *materialists* in the sense that, according to

them, “the means of production in economic life condition in general the processes of social, political and intellectual life.” Unlike the “idealists,” for whom the profoundest motive force in history is an already existing *idea* of justice and right which humanity bears in itself and which it achieves gradually through centuries, those early socialists thought that the relations of production, the economic relations of men with each other, play a preponderant role in history. But if they stressed the economic base, too often neglected before them, they in no way disdained the juridical, political, religious, artistic, and philosophical ‘superstructure.’ That was conditioned, they believed, by the base, but the superstructure had its own value none the less, and was an integral part of history. [ibid. p. 75, emphasis in the original]

Finally, but in its proper context, following a defense and restatement of the Marxist materialist conception of history, we come to the passage that you cited and which we will quote again in the interest of clarity:

The degenerated Marxists believe it is very “Marxist” and “materialist” to disdain the human factors. They accumulate figures, statistics and percentages; they study with great accuracy the profound causes of social phenomena. But by failing to study with the same care the way in which the causes are *reflected in the consciousness of men*, and failing to penetrate the soul of man, they miss the *living reality* of these phenomena.

Now we can properly understand the point that Guerin is making. True to its own opportunism, the degenerate bureaucracy practiced a vulgar and mechanical caricature of Marxism - incapable of understanding the myriad forms through which the increasingly desperate situation confronting capitalist society found conscious expression in politics and mass consciousness. Tied to the fleshpots of the Weimar democracy, the corrupted socialist movement could not find a way to appeal to the masses. The problem lay not in Marxism, in historical materialism, but in the opportunist repudiation of Marxism’s revolutionary perspective and commitment to struggle.

Guérin concludes his analysis by warning that “Thousands and thousands of men, women, and adolescents who are burning to give themselves, will never be attracted to a socialism reduced to the most opportunistic parliamentarism and vulgar trade unionism. Socialism can regain its attractive force only by saying to the masses that to win the ‘paradise on earth,’ its supreme goal requires great struggles and sacrifices.”

In bringing our review of Guérin’s book to a conclusion, it should be noted that in his preface to the 1965 French edition, the author acknowledged that “the writings of Leon Trotsky on Germany and France served as a guide. They helped me understand the complex problem of the middle classes, who wavered between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, and who were propelled by the economic crisis on the one hand, and the default of the working class on the other, towards the gangsters of the ultraright.” [ibid. p. 17]

To be continued

Notes:

[23] The manner in which you employ Hegelian phraseology is sophistry of the purest water. In place of a real explanation of the relationship between utopianism and Marxism, you resort to terms such as *aufheben* and “unity of opposites.” This is simply a means of saying nothing, and making it appear profound. An example of the misuse to which pseudo-dialectical phraseology lends itself is shown in your invocation of Marx’s

Critique of the Gotha Program and Lenin’s *State and Revolution*. These works, you say, demonstrate that utopianism and Marxism are a “unity of opposites.” What precisely does this mean? There is nothing utopian about either of these works (or even, except for certain stylistic devices that draw upon the literary tradition of Fourier and Proudhon, about Lafargue’s *The Right to be Lazy*, which is, at any rate, a rather minor work).

Marx’s *Critique* was written for the express purpose of demarcating his own scientific conceptions from all traces of the type of petty-bourgeois eclecticism and utopianism that characterized the conceptions of the Lassalleans. For example, Marx subjected the Lassallean’s pledge of a “fair distribution” of the “proceeds of labor” to a withering criticism, insisting, in opposition to all utopian illusions, that “Right can never be higher than the economic structure of society and its cultural development which this determines.” In justifying his severe attitude to various imprecise and/or incorrect formulations, Marx wrote that this stance was necessary “to show what a crime it is to attempt, on the one hand, to force on our Party again, as dogmas, ideas which in a certain period had some meaning but have now become obsolete verbal rubbish, while again perverting, on the other, the realistic outlook, which it cost so much effort to instill into the Party but which has now taken root in it, by means of ideological, legal and other trash so common among the Democrats and French Socialists.” [*Marx Engels Collected Works*, Volume 24 (London, 1989), p. 87]

Lenin’s *State and Revolution* elaborates a theory of the state on the basis of a comprehensive review of the writings of Marx and Engels on the subject. As in all the great “canonical works” (your phrase, Comrades Steiner and Brenner, not mine), Lenin counterposes explicitly and directly the scientific attitude of Marx to utopianism. As Lenin explains in one important and oft-quoted passage:

There is no trace of utopianism in Marx, in the sense that he made up or invented a “new” society. No, he studied the *birth* of a new society *out of* the old, and the forms of the transition from the latter to the former. ~

We are not utopians. We do not “dream” of dispensing *at once* with all administrations, with all subordination. These anarchist dreams, based upon incomprehension of the tasks of the proletarian dictatorship, are totally alien to Marxism, and, as a matter of fact, serve only to postpone the socialist revolution until people are different. *No, we want the socialist revolution with people as they are now* [emphasis added], with people who cannot dispense with subordination, control and “foremen and accountants.” [*Collected Works*, Volume 25 (Moscow, 1977), p. 430, emphasis in the original]

This latter passage is particularly apposite as a response to your claim that a socialist revolution requires the psychological reconditioning of the population.[return]

[24] In his *The Principle of Hope*, Bloch wrote:

“The true genesis is not at the beginning, but at the end.” It is simply not possible, within the framework of this document, to deal in depth with the neo-utopian theories of Ernst Bloch (1885-1977). According to his biographer, Wayne Hudson, important influences in the development of Bloch’s thought included Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Dostoevsky, Brentano, Meinong, Vaihinger, Hermann Cohen, Rudolf Steiner, Georges Sorel, and Max Weber. The eclectic amalgamation of

these diverse and generally reactionary influences, to which he added heavy doses of Jewish cabbalistic mysticism, constituted the “Marxism” of Ernst Bloch. Not surprisingly, Bloch was critical of the emphasis placed by Marx and Engels on economics, and of “their neglect of the secret transcendental elements in socialism.” [The Marxist Philosophy of Ernst Bloch (New York, 1972), p. 33.] Hudson writes that Bloch believed that “Marxism, as Marx and Engels left it, was one-sided and lacked many of the elements necessary for the implementation of its project. Morality and love had not been given their proper place in the revolutionary struggle ~ the Marxist conception of a heaven on earth was inadequate. Instead, it was necessary to take account of man’s primal religious desire and to formulate a concept adequate to its intention. There had been too great a progress from utopia to science in Marxism, Bloch implied.” [ibid., p. 33] Advocating a reconciliation with religion, Bloch argued (according to Hudson) that Marxism “needed to speak to people about their situation in language they could understand: to develop a propaganda which related to the ideology in their heads, instead of superstitiously relying on correct theoretical analysis to win a path for truth in the world.” [ibid., p. 45]

Bloch remained throughout the 1930s a passionate supporter of Stalin, whom he regarded highly as a theoretician. Bloch enthusiastically supported the death sentences handed down at the Moscow trials. “Indeed,” writes Hudson, “he prided himself on his ability to accept a degree of moral evil and the ‘unmistakable smell of blood’ as evidence of his political maturity ~ He idealized the reality of Stalinist murder, and avoided the moral dilemma by accepting violence and ‘red terror’ in a context in which the fundamental good intentions of the revolutionary forces and their commitment to moral values as teleological ends could not be doubted.” [ibid., p. 46] Later, in 1953, while living in the Stalinist German Democratic Republic, he issued no protest against the brutal suppression of the working class rebellion against the hated regime of Walter Ulbricht.

This is the man, Comrade Brenner, from whom you believe the International Committee has much to learn, and whose theoretical example you invoked in the title of your document on utopia! [return]

[25] By this point, it should be fairly obvious to all objective readers that you were well aware that my lectures last summer provided a reply to your earlier documents. And, I might add, that your present document is an attempt to answer the critique of your views that were presented in the course of those lectures. [return]

[26] It is unfortunate that you have failed to investigate the various sources from which Geoghegan has drawn inspiration. All the ideas advanced in this one paragraph that you vehemently defend against my criticisms - that Marxism is excessively rationalistic, that it is mistaken in its conviction that workers will embrace socialism if they acquire knowledge of their objective class interests, that it lacks an adequate knowledge of human psychology, and that it is based on a false theory of historical motivation - were anticipated and developed in considerable detail some 80 years ago by Hendrik de Man, in a book entitled *The Psychology of Socialism*. De Man, a Belgian socialist who taught in the 1920s at the University of Frankfurt, broke from Marxism in the aftermath of the First World War. The mass slaughter of 1914-1918, which he witnessed as a soldier, led de Man to move “from the outlook of economic determinism, which forms the basis of Marxist socialism, to the standpoint of a philosophy wherein the main significance is allotted to the individual human being as a subject to psychological reactions.” [Originally published in 1926 as *Zur Psychologie des Sozialismus*. English edition cited here was published by Henry Holt and Company, New York, 1972.

This passage appears on page 13.]

De Man asserted that the basic flaw of Marxism was its belief that human behavior was subject to rational explanation, and that socialism arose as a response within the working class to its class interests. Marxism, he wrote, “obstinately” ignores the “multiplicity of socialist motivation, refuses to see the complicated nature of the issues. Otherwise the Marxists would lose their faith in the necessary connexion between class interests and ways of thinking.” [ibid., p. 28]

The Psychology of Socialism was immensely influential within German academic circles in the 1920s, especially in the city where the Frankfurt School was taking shape under the leadership of Friedrich Pollack and Max Horkheimer. Though de Man’s thoroughgoing repudiation of Marxism was not acceptable to the founders of the Frankfurt School, his attempt to supplant historical materialism with psychology anticipated trends that were to become increasingly pronounced among Horkheimer’s colleagues. As for de Man, he achieved considerable fame in the 1930s when he wrote, under the “inspiration” of the ephemeral economic successes of Hitler’s regime, his *Plan du Travail*. De Man envisaged an alliance of the working class and middle class on the basis of a national economic program of state-regulated capitalism. After the Nazis invaded Belgium, where he had been a “socialist” government minister, de Man became a fascist collaborator. At the end of the war, de Man fled Belgium, which then tried him for treason *in absentia*. He died in Switzerland in 1953. His life is an extreme but by no means unique example of the erratic biographical trajectory of those who have sought to separate socialism from historical materialism. It is a reactionary project with politically dangerous consequences. [return]



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)