

Marxism, History & Socialist Consciousness

Parts 20-22

David North
10 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, and parts 17-19 were posted on September 7. Below we post the conclusion of the book, parts 20-22.

20. Wilhelm Reich's conception of socialist consciousness

In the course of your defense of Geoghegan, you refer favorably to the work of Wilhelm Reich. In this case, I cannot object to the connection that you make between the former and the latter. You are correct when you state that Geoghegan's assertion that the Nazis "were far more effective in their appeals to mass psychology than the German left" essentially repeated the arguments made by Wilhelm Reich in the 1930s. In agreement with Reich, you write that "political consciousness was a battleground that the left was ignoring with disastrous consequences," and that "Socialism could only triumph by winning over the allegiance of millions of workers and for that to happen the left had to find a way of engaging the hopes, fears and dreams of those millions."

The question that arises is how the development of "political" and "socialist" consciousness was understood by Wilhelm Reich. You have surprisingly little to say on this subject in your document, noting only in passing that Reich demonstrated "in practice" how a "renewed socialist idealism" could be developed "with the fascinating work he did in the early Thirties with German working class youth in the sex-pol movement." Aside from implying that this work holds great lessons for contemporary socialists, you fail to present either a summary of Reich's views or explain their enduring relevance. However, in a document entitled "Utopia and Revolution," which you, Comrade Steiner, wrote in 2004 and sent to Comrade Steve Long of the ICFI, you provided an indication of what you believe to be the crucial insight of Wilhelm Reich. Arguing in support of positions advanced by Herbert Marcuse in his *Eros and Civilization*, you explained that Marcuse "essentially makes the same point that Wilhelm Reich did in his *Mass Psychology of Fascism*, that if the Marxist movement does not find a way to channel repressed libidinal drives in a progressive direction, then fascism will utilize those same drives to bring us into an age of barbarism." You immediately added: "I could say a great deal more on this subject but I think I have made my point."

Indeed, you did. What you understand and mean by the struggle for "political" and "socialist" consciousness has absolutely nothing to do

with Marxism. Much of what you write is based on the work of Wilhelm Reich, whose conceptions are fundamentally alien to historical materialism and the revolutionary Marxist tradition. Of course, Reich was a product of his time and culture, and there was a genuine element of tragedy in his life. He was, like so many others, a victim of the catastrophe that swept over the working class and socialist intellectuals in the 1930s and 1940s. His work and conceptions, which assumed an increasingly obsessive, disoriented and even politically right-wing character after his arrival in the United States, bore the ineradicable imprint of the massive defeat inflicted by fascism on the German and European working class during the 1930s. How can one not feel sympathy for the sad fate of this exiled European psychologist, torn from the Vienna and Berlin milieu in which his own intellectual development was rooted, whose explorations into the field of human sexuality aroused the ire of vindictive American authorities and landed him in the federal prison in Lewisburg, Pennsylvania, where he died in 1957 at the age of 60? His life deserves to be studied sympathetically and with respect. Fortunately, such an approach can be found in *Fury on Earth*, a biography written by Myron Sharaf.

But sympathy for the human and cultural tragedy of Wilhelm Reich does not extend to your efforts to dilute or replace Marxism and Trotskyism with Reichian "sex-politics." For that we have no patience whatsoever. The attempt to derive a strategy for socialism from Reich's sexual theories, particularly as they are presented in *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*, can only result in the worst forms of political disorientation. On what is certainly one of the most serious questions arising from the history of the socialist movement in the 20th century - that is, why the German working class was defeated by Hitler and the Nazis - the answers given by Reich are saturated with a morbid pessimism that is incompatible with a revolutionary perspective. His rooting of fascism in an innately and universally deranged human psychology has no basis in historical materialism. Moreover, the answers given by Reich not only lead to a false political perspective and program, they can only lead those who accept them away from revolutionary politics and socialism, a trajectory anticipated in Reich's own evolution.

In December 1933, Wilhelm Reich, having escaped to Denmark, wrote under the pseudonym of Ernst Parrell a pamphlet entitled *What Is Class Consciousness?* This relatively brief work summed up the conclusions he drew from the defeat of the German working class.

The most notable aspect of Reich's pamphlet is the cursory attention given to issues of program and perspective. Virtually nothing is said about the actual policies pursued by the Social Democrats and Stalinists, which demoralized and split the working class, and cleared the way for the Nazi victory. These were not questions of particular interest to Reich. The essential cause of the defeat of the working class was to be found, not in the craven opportunism of the Social Democrats or the ultra-left "Third Period" adventurism of the Communist Party, but rather in "the lack of an effective Marxian political psychology ... This deficiency on our part was

of the greatest advantage to the class enemy, and became one of the most powerful weapons of fascism. While we were presenting the masses with grandiose historical analyses and economic arguments about the contradictions of imperialism, their innermost feelings were being kindled for Hitler.” [London, 1971, p. 18]

In presenting his conception of class consciousness, Reich betrayed an attitude to the intellectual capacities of the working class that bordered on utter contempt. He considered it nothing less than absurd to believe that masses of workers would be receptive to questions such as “knowledge about the contradictions of the capitalist economic system, the terrific possibilities of socialist planning, the necessity of social revolution in order to accommodate the forms of appropriation to the form of production, and about the progressive and reactionary forces in history.” These questions were of importance to party leaders, and formed elements of their more developed class consciousness. But class consciousness among the masses “is remote from such knowledge, and from wide perspectives; it is concerned with petty matters, banal everyday questions.” Problems of international politics were quite necessarily the concern of political leaders. But the mass working class consciousness “is completely unconcerned by the quarrels of Russia and Japan, or England and America, and in the progress of the productive forces; it is oriented solely and exclusively by the reflections, expressions and effects of this objective process in a million different little everyday questions; it is therefore made up of concern about food, clothing, family relationships, the possibilities of sexual satisfaction in the narrowest sense, sexual pleasure and amusement in a broader sense, such as the cinema, theatre, fairground entertainments and dancing, also with the difficulties of bringing up children, furnishing the house, with the length and utilization of free time, etc. etc.” [ibid. p. 22]

Therefore, the most critical task of Marxists must be to “find the connection with the petty, banal, primitive, simple everyday life and wishes of the *broadest* mass of the people in all the specificity of their situation in society.” [ibid. p. 23]

Quite apart from the issues of sexuality upon which Reich placed such overriding emphasis, his attitude toward the development of socialist consciousness reflected the weight of social influences outside the great intellectual and cultural traditions of the Marxist movement. Reich’s outlook expressed a particularly vulgar form of political opportunism that is often encountered among intellectuals whose conception of the working class is impressionistic, ahistorical and, one might add, steeped in the prejudices of their own middle-class and professional milieu. They do not perceive the proletariat as a historically rising class, the protagonist of a new and higher form of social organization. Rather, they see only an agglomeration of backward and ignorant individuals, rising hardly above the level of brute beasts, ignorant and indifferent to culture, and devoid of serious interests. What then, such intellectuals think, is the point of talking to workers about history, politics, economics and culture? It is necessary to get down to the lowest level possible, so that our ideas will be accessible to the masses. Curiously, such an attitude often goes hand in hand with a glorification of non-political trade unionism.

Why, one is compelled to ask, did the first, most powerful and politically advanced mass workers’ party in history arise in Germany? This historical phenomenon is undoubtedly linked to the astonishing development of culture associated with the *Aufklärung* (Enlightenment). The history of the German mass socialist movement, which arose on the basis of the revolution in philosophical thought that began with Kant in the latter half of the 18th century, testified to the organic link between advanced theory and a powerful class-conscious workers movement. The legacy of Kant, Lessing, Hegel, Feuerbach, Goethe, Schiller, Kleist, Mozart and Beethoven, interacting with the impact of the French Revolution, created an extraordinary cultural-intellectual environment that proved to be exceptionally favorable for the development of mass socialist

consciousness in the new proletariat, which grew rapidly with the industrialization of Germany. Indeed, it was in the towering figure of Marx that the entire antecedent intellectual development of Germany found its concentrated expression.

Marx could not have written that philosophy is the head of the emancipation of humanity and the proletariat its heart if he had conceived of the working class in the manner of Reich. Nor would Engels have stated that “The German working-class movement is the heir to German classical philosophy.” [*Marx-Engels Collected Works*, Volume 26 (Moscow, 1990), p. 398] The German Social Democracy, with its innumerable educational associations and projects, was not only a political but also a mighty cultural movement of the working class, spurred on by teachers who were imbued with a theoretically-grounded understanding of the historical mission of the working class. How could they possibly have pursued their revolutionary pedagogic work, tirelessly lecturing and writing, if they had believed that the German working class was indifferent to their efforts? One cannot possibly imagine Franz Mehring and Rosa Luxemburg writing of the proletariat in the manner of Reich. [27]

Reich’s debased conception of class consciousness reflected not only his own social prejudices, but also the desperation produced by a political catastrophe whose causes he did not understand. Political opportunism is not infrequently a by-product of desperation. One has the impression that Reich believed that he had discovered in sexual questions a means of obtaining access to mass consciousness without having to deal with complex political and theoretical issues that he considered incomprehensible to the working class. Young people, he believed, were particularly open to such an approach: “We cannot theoretically prove to the youth of all lands and continents the need for socialist revolution, but only develop it from the needs and contradictions of youth. In the center of those needs and contradictions stands the tremendous question of the sex life of young people.” [*What Is Class Consciousness*, p. 30] [28]

The blatantly opportunist and, one might add, rather naïve character of Reich’s conviction that “sex-politics” provided a master key for obtaining access to the masses is illustrated in a lengthy passage in which he purported to show how socialists, intervening covertly in fascist gatherings, could win a hearing even from dedicated Nazis by cleverly initiating a dialogue about permissible forms of sexual activity.

...If a logically thinking person had got up in a [Nazi] meeting and asked concretely where the difference lies between morality and prudishness, any Nazi official would have found himself in a very embarrassing situation. Thus, it is prudish to forbid women to go out with young men, and not the moral excellence which National Socialism demands; so going out is permitted. But what if a young man kisses a woman? Is that moral? Or if he even wishes to have sexual relations with her? That surely comes under the enjoyment of life, doesn’t it? Should the Nazi make further concessions at this point and even admit free love - which he is quite capable of doing - he would be further asked whether this, if openly permitted, would not compromise the consolidation of marriage and the family...

After continuing his imaginary dialogue along these lines, Reich asserts:

It must be admitted that tactics of this sort could bring about a lively public debate in an entirely unpolitical form which could be a hundred times more embarrassing for the Nazis than a thousand illegal leaflets, for the simple reason that the Nazis would be

unconsciously making propaganda for us. There's no such thing as class consciousness? It's present in every nook and cranny of everyday life! You can't develop it or you'll get thrown into jail? Take up these questions which concern every Nazi most closely, those which the Right can never answer, and you can forget about the question of class consciousness. The role of the avant-garde during a period of illegality? We're not interested in the problem; it's the concrete substance of proletarian democracy that concerns us, and not the slogan of proletarian democracy which means nothing to nine people out of ten. [ibid. p. 35]

Convinced that revolutionary politics can be successful only when it learns "in content and form" to "express the primitive, unsophisticated feeling of the broad mass," Reich quite naturally concluded that the emphasis the Trotskyists placed on clarifying the issues that separated political tendencies was a waste of energy. Arguing directly against Trotsky's call for the formation of the Fourth International, Reich wrote that "The masses, however, understand nothing of the fine differences between individual revolutionary tendencies, and are uninterested in them." [ibid. p. 53]

The Mass Psychology of Fascism, in which Reich presented his explanation for the victory of the Nazis, is a work which gives expression to the deepest despair. The growth of fascism as a mass movement was not the product of political conditions but of the diseased state of the human psyche. He insisted that fascism should not be seen, in essence, as a political movement. Its political structure was merely the outer form of a more deeply rooted human phenomenon. Reich wrote:

[M]y medical experiences with men and women of various classes, races, nations, religious beliefs, etc., taught me that "fascism" is only the organized political expression of the structure of the average man's character, a structure that is confined neither to certain races or nations nor to certain parties, but is general and international. Viewed with respect to man's character, "fascism" is the basic emotional attitude of the suppressed man of our authoritarian machine civilization, and its mechanistic-mystical conception of life." [*The Mass Psychology of Fascism* (New York, 1970), p. xiii]

Reich wrote that he had become convinced that "there is not a single individual who does not bear the elements of fascist feeling and thinking in his structure ... In its pure form fascism is the sum total of all the irrational reactions of the average human character." [ibid. p. xiv]

Marxist parties could not stop Hitler, Reich insisted, "because they tried to comprehend twentieth-century fascism, which was something completely new, with concepts belonging to the nineteenth century." [ibid. p. xxi] Marxism incorrectly attempted to analyze fascism within the context of the historical development of capitalism over the previous 200 years. But fascism "raised the basic question of man's character, human mysticism and craving for authority, which covered a period of some four to six thousand years. Here, too, vulgar Marxism sought to ram an elephant into a foxhole." [ibid. p. xxvi]

The state of mankind as diagnosed by Reich was all but hopeless.

As bitter as it may be, the fact remains: It is the irresponsibility of masses of people that lies at the basis of fascism of all countries, nations, and races, etc. Fascism is the result of man's distortion over thousands of years. ... That this situation was brought about

by a social development which goes back thousands of years does not alter the fact itself. It is man himself who is responsible and not "historical developments." It was this shifting of the responsibility from living man to "historical developments" that caused the downfall of the socialist freedom movement. [ibid. p. 320]

For all the exotic and original elements of Reich's psychosexual account of mankind's descent into fascism, in essence his arguments were fundamentally in agreement with the view, widely held in demoralized left circles, that Hitler's victory was irrefutable proof of the organic incapacity of the working class to carry out a social revolution. As you might vaguely recall from your earlier studies, Comrades Steiner and Brenner, there existed numerous left groupings in the 1930s who expressed dissatisfaction with Trotsky's attribution of responsibility for the defeats of the working class to the false and treacherous policies of their political leaders in the Stalinist and Social Democratic parties. That explanation, Trotsky's left-centrist critics responded, was altogether inadequate. Yes, perhaps the leaders made mistakes and even consciously betrayed their followers. But why did the masses "allow" themselves to be betrayed? Did they not bear responsibility for what happened? Could they not have opposed their leaders? Is it not necessary to examine critically the masses themselves and identify those organic elements of their being, whether lodged in immutable characteristics of their social existence or in their psyche, which condition them to follow wrong leaders and accept their own defeat?

In answering such questions, which reflected an apologetic attitude toward the parties that presided over the political disasters suffered by the masses, Trotsky explained the relationship between the working class and its leadership. It is not true, Trotsky wrote, that people get the government - or that workers get the leaders - they deserve. Both governments and leaders emerge as the product of a complex process involving both the struggle between classes and internal conflicts among the heterogeneous elements of which the classes themselves are composed. The formation of the leadership of the working class is an immensely difficult and protracted historical process, reflected in the struggle of tendencies that may stretch over many decades. The emergence out of this process of an authoritative leadership, whose prestige among the masses has been acquired through long and difficult struggle, is a historical achievement. However, there remains the danger that the leadership, having acquired authority among the masses, may, over time, come under the pressure exerted by other classes and undergo an internal degeneration. Neither the fact of degeneration, let alone its degree, may be immediately apparent to the masses, who continue to retain their confidence in their traditional leaders. Especially under conditions of relative social tranquility - that is, precisely during those periods when placid daily routines foster tendencies toward opportunist adaptation - the natural tendency to extend trust beyond the point when it is merited politically is especially pronounced. The gap between the policies pursued by the old parties, and the changing requirements arising out of a rapidly shifting political situation goes unnoticed - until the crisis prepared by unseen socio-economic contradictions emerges in the form of a great historical shock. Trotsky explained:

...The mightiest historical shocks are wars and revolutions. Precisely for this reason the working class is often caught unawares by war and revolution. But even in cases where the old leadership has revealed its internal corruption, the class cannot immediately improvise a new leadership, especially if it has not inherited from the previous period strong revolutionary cadres

capable of utilizing the collapse of the old leading party. ["The Class, the Party, and the Leadership," in *The Spanish Revolution (1931-39)* (New York, 1973), p. 358]

Trotsky denounced all forms of political apologetics that seek to place on the working class responsibility for the mistakes and crimes of its leaders, fail to examine the role played in the political struggle by "such concrete factors as programs, parties, and personalities that were the organizers of defeat," and present the victory of fascism in Germany, Spain or Italy "as a necessary link in the chain of cosmic developments..." [ibid. p. 364] The only essential difference between Reich's explanation of the defeat of the German working class and that of the centrist tendencies criticized by Trotsky was that the "cosmic developments" that preordained fascism's triumph were, for Reich, of a sexual rather than a sociological-political character.

But let us now turn to the question of mass psychology, which cannot be ignored by revolutionaries. One can learn far more about the social psychology out of which German fascism emerged by reading Trotsky than by poring over the works of Reich. When was the last time, Comrades Steiner and Brenner, that you read Trotsky's brilliant essay, "What Is National Socialism"? Here, Trotsky depicted the social, economic and political conditions of post-World War I Germany that created the psychological conditions in which Hitler's barbaric movement could win millions of adherents from the middle classes:

The postwar chaos hit the artisans, the peddlers, and the civil employees no less cruelly than the workers. The economic crisis in agriculture was ruining the peasantry. The decay in the middle strata did not mean that they were made into proletarians, inasmuch as the proletariat itself was casting out a gigantic army of chronically unemployed. The pauperization of the petty bourgeoisie, barely covered by ties and socks of artificial silk, eroded all official creeds and first of all the doctrine of democratic parliamentarism.

The multiplicity of parties, the icy fever of elections, the interminable changes in ministries aggravated the social crisis by creating a kaleidoscope of barren political combinations. In the atmosphere brought to white heat by war, defeat, reparations, inflation, occupation of the Ruhr, crisis, need, and despair, the petty bourgeoisie rose up against all the old parties that had bamboozled it. The sharp grievances of small proprietors never out of bankruptcy, of their university sons without posts and clients, of their daughters without dowries and suitors, demanded order and an iron hand.

The banner of National Socialism was raised by upstarts from the lower and middle commanding ranks of the old army. Decorated with medals for distinguished service, commissioned and noncommissioned officers could not believe that their heroism and sufferings for the Fatherland had not only come to naught, but also gave them no special claims to gratitude. Hence their hatred of the revolution and the proletariat. At the same time, they did not want to reconcile themselves to being sent by the bankers, industrialists, and ministers back to the modest posts of bookkeepers, engineers, postal clerks, and schoolteachers. Hence their "socialism." At the Yser and under Verdun they had learned to risk themselves and others, and to speak the language of command, which powerfully overawed the petty bourgeois behind the lines. Thus these people became leaders.

At the start of his political career, Hitler stood out only because of his big temperament, a voice much louder than others, and an

intellectual mediocrity much more self-assured. He did not bring into the movement any ready-made program, if one disregards the insulted soldier's thirst for vengeance. Hitler began with grievances and complaints about the Versailles terms, the high cost of living, the lack of respect for a meritorious noncommissioned officer, and the plots of bankers and journalists of the Mosaic persuasion. There were in the country plenty of ruined and drowning people with scars and fresh bruises. They all wanted to thump with their fists on the table. This Hitler could do better than others. True, he knew not how to cure the evil. But his harangues resounded, now like commands and now like prayers addressed to inexorable fate. Doomed classes, like those fatally ill, never tire of making variations on their complaints nor of listening to consolations. Hitler's speeches were all attuned to this pitch. Sentimental formlessness, absence of disciplined thought, ignorance along with gaudy erudition - all these minuses turned into pluses. They supplied him with the possibility of uniting all types of dissatisfaction into the beggar's bowl of National Socialism, and of leading the mass in the direction it pushed him. In the mind of the agitator was preserved, from among his early improvisations, whatever had met with approbation. His political thoughts were the fruits of oratorical acoustics. That is how the selection of slogans went on. That is how the program was consolidated. That is how the "leader" took shape out of the raw material. ...

The immense poverty of National Socialist philosophy did not, of course, hinder the academic sciences from entering Hitler's wake with all sails unfurled, once his victory was sufficiently plain. For the majority of the professorial rabble, the years of the Weimar regime were periods of riot and alarm. Historians, economists, jurists, and philosophers were lost in guesswork as to which of the contending criteria of truth was right, that is, which of the camps would turn out in the end the master of the situation. The fascist dictatorship eliminates the doubts of the Fausts and the vacillations of the Hamlets of the university rostrums. Coming out of the twilight of parliamentary relativity, knowledge once again enters into the kingdom of absolutes. Einstein has been obliged to pitch his tent outside the boundaries of Germany. [Leon Trotsky, *The Struggle Against Fascism in Germany* (New York, 1971), pp. 462-67]

In these few paragraphs, Trotsky explained, with incomparable brilliance, the social and political origins of the madness of German fascism, the relationship between objective socio-economic processes and the bizarre forms of their reflections in the psyche of the German middle class. It is true that Trotsky was a politician and writer of genius. But his genius was nourished by Marxism, and he demonstrated what can be achieved on the basis of historical materialist analysis. The insight that he provides is not merely of literary and historical interest, but retains enduring relevance as an analysis of the political instability of petty bourgeois layers in society and the underlying objective causes of their susceptibility to fascistic propaganda. Trotsky demystifies the fascist phenomenon. And, by making fascism comprehensible, he indicates the political means by which it can be combated and defeated.

Can the same be said of the analysis of Wilhelm Reich, who informed us that

...The man whose genitals are weakened, whose sexual structure is full of contradictions must continually remind himself to control his sexuality, to preserve his sexual dignity, to be brave in the face of temptations, etc. The struggle to resist the temptation to

masturbate is a struggle that is experienced by every adolescent and every child, without exception. All the elements of the reactionary man's structure are developed in this struggle. It is in the lower middle classes that this structure is reinforced and embedded most deeply. [*The Mass Psychology of Fascism*, p. 55]

What perspective flows from this analysis? What policies and concrete political initiatives must be implemented? The conclusion that you have drawn, as you informed Comrade Steve Long, is that the Marxist movement must "find a way to channel repressed libidinal drives in a progressive direction..." [29]

No one is stopping either of you from devoting your time and energy to this mission. But the International Committee has no interest whatever in participating in this dubious and disoriented project.

21. Eros and Death

Perhaps you imagine that you are engaged in something that is terribly daring and original: that you are somehow opening up new vistas of radical thought with your demand that the International Committee adopt a utopian agenda, that we spend more time speculating about the future world and less on accounts of the past and analyses of the present; that we shift our attention from politics to sex, and that we pay less attention to the objective processes of world economy and more to the subjective urges of the individual. In fact, Comrades Brenner and Steiner, there is nothing very original about your proposals. Marxists have heard it all before, and many times.

In an article "On Eros and Death," written by Trotsky in 1908, he recounts a conversation in a Parisian café with a young Russian intellectual, a supporter of the Decadent movement in art, who expressed dismay with the tendency of Marxists to pay too little attention to the subjective feelings of human beings, to their sexual needs and their fear of death. Why did they not pay more homage to the two moments of existence that comprised the exclusive preoccupation of the Decadents: "the ecstasy of the union of two bodies, and the parting of the soul from the body?" These concerns were poorly and too infrequently addressed by Marxists, the intellectual complained. "At best, historical materialism seeks to explain the origin of this or that social mood (eroticism, mysticism) by the struggle between different forces in society. Whether it does this well or badly, I don't care. But I, to whom you offer your dubious explanations, shall die nevertheless, and as for all the perspectives your historical materialism spreads before me, even if I believe in them for the sake of my spiritual life, I still set them in the perspective of my inevitable death." For these existential problems, the intellectual protested, Marxism had no satisfactory answers. "But what do *you* offer me?" he asked Trotsky. "Objective analysis? Arguments about necessity? Immanent development? The negation of the negation? But all these things are so terribly inadequate, not for my intelligence, but for my will." [*Culture and Revolution in the Thought of Leon Trotsky* (London, 1999), pp. 54-55]

Trotsky, who had just given a lecture attacking the Decadents and their "anarchy of the flesh," began his reply by protesting: "I find it essentially impossible to accept battle on the ground you have chosen. If you please - you are asking me to create, just in passing, a religious doctrine such as would help a member of the intelligentsia to transcend the shell of his individuality and overcome the terror of death and pretentious skepticism, a doctrine capable of linking mystically his 'subconscious,' the soul of his soul, to the great epoch in which we live. But, please excuse me, this would make a mockery of my viewpoint. It would be as if I listened to a scientific lecture on the historical origins of the Bible, and then expected the speaker to tell me on the basis of the Apocalypse the date of the Second Coming. *Mais ce n'est pas mon métier, messieurs*, I could say to you, this is not my job, and that's that." [ibid. p. 57]

As I read your document, Trotsky's conversation with the Decadents comes to mind. You want us to advance proposals for the family of the future, uncover means by which repressed libidinal drives may be released, work out new forms of gender identity, and campaign against the tyranny of genital-centered sexuality. To which the most appropriate reply is, *Mais ce n'est pas mon métier, messieurs!* All this is simply not part of the mission statement of the International Committee of the Fourth International.

22. Objective conditions, science and history

You decry our "search for salvation in Objective Conditions, in Science or History." Permit me to remind you that the word "salvation" is not part of our political vocabulary. The social program does not include salvation; and those who are seeking it should be referred to clergymen of all faiths, who are the specialists in that field.

No doubt, you will protest that your reference to "salvation" is intended ironically, as a polemical thrust against our "objectivism." I understand that very well, but that doesn't alter the fact that your comment reeks of political despair and cynicism. You ought to retrace the process by which, since leaving the Trotskyist movement, you came under the influence of anti-Marxist conceptions so fundamentally opposed to those that first brought you into the Workers League and International Committee in the early 1970s.

Today you sneer at our preoccupation with history. [30] But you were once part of a generation of student youth who joined the Workers League and the International Committee precisely because it was the only movement whose work was based on the lessons of the tragic historical experiences of the 20th century. Amidst the plethora of radical tendencies that were politically active in the era of our political awakening, the International Committee stood out as the only movement that was able to present an analysis of the Vietnam War, the eruptions in American cities, the expanding wave of working class and anti-imperialist struggles, within the context of a broad historical perspective. On what did we base our opposition to Stalinism, Maoism, Social Democracy, and Pabloite revisionism, if not the lessons of history?

The writings of Leon Trotsky armed those of us who joined the Workers League in the early 1970s with an understanding of the fate of the 1917 October Revolution, Bolshevism and the international struggle for socialism. We immersed ourselves in the study of all the great strategic lessons drawn by Trotsky from the Russian Revolution and its aftermath. The study of the protracted crisis of the German workers' movement from the defeat of the *Spartakus* uprising in 1919, to the victory of the fascists in 1933, the British General Strike of 1926, the revolutionary events in China between 1925 and 1927, the struggle of the Left Opposition in the Soviet Union between 1923 and 1933, the disastrous consequences of popular frontism in France and Spain in the 1930s, and the Moscow Trials - all these immense historical experiences were incorporated into the training of the cadre of the Workers League and the International Committee. Putting aside for a moment all the irreconcilable programmatic differences, what immediately distinguished the cadre of the ICFI from that of all other movements was its preoccupation with history, its intense belief that the past was not dead, but that, to use the words of Faulkner, "It's not even past!" We believed that history lived in the concrete form of the political conditions and contradictions inherited from the past, and within whose framework the present struggles developed, as well as in the forms of political and social consciousness among the masses.

But now you write as if you find our continued preoccupation with history a cause for bemusement! While you tell us that postmodernism is a mere fad that is on the wane, your own dismissive attitude toward history bears the mark of this reactionary school of bourgeois philosophy.

As for your dismissive reference to science, we see this as an expression of your capitulation to the irrationalist, anti-science and anti-technology

moods that are to be found among broad sections of the ex-radical petty-bourgeoisie. We have already dealt with the philosophical roots and implications of this outlook. Let us now consider its practical connotations. In this context, it should be noted that Geoghegan's book included a chapter devoted to the "utopianism" of the late Rudolf Bahro, the East German dissident who eventually emigrated to the German Federal Republic and became active in the newly formed Green Party. Perhaps out of embarrassment, you chose to avoid reference to Geoghegan's sympathetic review of the work of Bahro, who explicitly rejected both Marxism and the central historical role of the working class. He explains that Bahro "rejects the technological/industrial idea of progress which is dominant in the modern world. It is a selfish and destructive concept which helps perpetuate all the other types of oppression in society. A break has to be made with such ways - future society will have to be 'simpler' or it will not be able to exist at all..." [*Marxism and Utopia*, op. cit., p. 118]

These views are, in fact, very close to those presented by you, Comrade Brenner, in your neo- (or pseudo-) utopian manifesto, *To Know a Thing is to Know its End*. Criticizing Comrade Beams for emphasizing the progressive potential of technology in a socialized economy, which will allow an immense expansion in the productivity of labor and the realization of human potential, you asserted that "A socialist vision, as opposed to a utilitarian one, subordinates productivity to human development, and that means support for ideas that often run directly counter to the maximization of economic growth, ideas like 'the right to be lazy.'"

You were not talking simply about the misuse of technology and human productivity in an economic system dominated by private ownership of the means of production, whose aim is the attainment of maximum profits and the accumulation of massive personal wealth for members of the ruling elite. You state that "there is no reason why ... freedom requires endless economic growth," and then add: "The point is rather that, for the first generations after a revolution - whose priorities at any rate will be the elimination of global hunger, poverty and disease - the emphasis will not be so much on technological change as on consolidation, on sorting out what best meets human needs and what works best ecologically."

It boggles the mind to work through the social implications of a freeze, spanning several generations, on economic growth and the *forced* inhibition of technological change [for restraints on the development of technology would require nothing less than police-state measures]. This is a recipe for social catastrophe, inklings of which can be found in the horrifying consequences of the reactionary experiments of various Maoist-influenced movements that were able to come to power. Such views and policies are hostile to Marxism, which, as Trotsky explained in *Revolution Betrayed*, "sets out from the development of technique as the fundamental spring of progress, and constructs the communist program upon the dynamic of the productive forces." [Detroit, 1991, p. 39]

Your effort to separate human freedom from the growth of technique and productivity betrays an ignorance of theory and history. If you were correct, the socialist revolution would represent the first occasion in history when society overthrew its existing forms of economic organization in order to restrain the development of technology and the productivity of labor. But as Trotsky wrote, "Reduced to its primary basis, history is nothing but a struggle for an economy of working time. Socialism could not be justified by the abolition of exploitation alone: it must guarantee society a higher economy of time than is guaranteed by capitalism. Without the realization of this condition, the mere removal of exploitation would be but a dramatic moment without a future." [ibid. p. 68]

As has now become clear, your cynical reference to our confidence in the potential of science betrays a social perspective that is backward, if not outright reactionary. [31]

Finally, we come to your contemptuous reference to our conviction that "objective conditions" will provide the foundations for the solution of all political tasks. May we ask, where else are they to be found? In a sentence that you have intended to be a criticism of the International Committee, but which unintentionally exposes your own descent into subjective idealism and irrationalism, you write: "The more the real problems of fighting for socialist consciousness recede over the horizon of 'objective conditions,' the more remote the working class becomes from the activity and concerns of the movement." This is mysticism, not Marxism. Those who propose to wage their fight for consciousness "over the horizon of 'objective conditions'" are, in fact, seeking to flee reality.

We live and fight in the world of "objective conditions," which is both the source of our present-day troubles as well as their ultimate solution. Whatever shall emerge in the future shall be the product of conditions that exist today. As Marx and Engels explained:

...in reality and for the *practical* materialist, i.e., the communist, it is a question of revolutionizing the existing world, of practically coming to grips with and changing the things found in existence ...

Communism is not for us a *state of affairs* which is to be established, an *ideal* to which reality [will] have to adjust itself. We call communism the *real* movement which abolishes the present state of things. The conditions of this movement result from the now existing premise. [*Marx-Engels Collected Works*, Volume 5 (New York, 1976), pp. 38-49, emphasis in the original]

The understanding that this world, in which we live today, contains within it the real potential for a social revolution that will cleanse the world of all violence and inhumanity is a source of a genuine optimism that has no need for supplementary pseudo-utopian anti-depressants.

* * *

The views that you, Comrades Steiner and Brenner, have presented in your various documents record the immense theoretical and political distance that you have drifted from Marxism since you both left the movement nearly three decades ago. To continue along your present trajectory can lead only to the complete repudiation of whatever remains of the political convictions that you espoused many years ago. We hope this will not happen. The International Committee urges both of you to study this document carefully and to reconsider the positions you now hold.

Yours fraternally,

David North

Chairman, International Editorial Board

World Socialist Web Site

Detroit, June 28, 2006

Notes:

[27] Permit me to point out that Comrade David Walsh addressed the issue of the cultural work of the socialist movement, not only in Germany but throughout Europe, in the very important lecture that he delivered at last summer's school ("Marxism, Art, and the Soviet Debate over 'Proletarian Culture'"). Unfortunately, your document makes no reference whatever to this lecture. [return]

[28] For all his frankness in addressing questions of sexuality, he was not above the prejudices of his time: "The more distinctly the natural heterosexual tendencies attain development, the more accessible the young person is to revolutionary ideas; the more strongly the homosexual need asserts itself in his psychic structure and the more restricted his consciousness of sexuality in general, the easier he is drawn to the right." [p. 28] [return]

[29] Comrade Brenner, you have a somewhat different programmatic

agenda, as you inform us in your Utopia document that: “Leaving aside the feasibility (or desirability) of guaranteeing orgasm, there remains a vital point here: ending the tyranny of the genitals is as essential as ending the tyranny of economics if a genuinely human existence is to be possible.” To comment on this passage would serve only to diminish its comic effect. [return]

[30] In what amounts to a complete misreading of Marx and Engels, you begin your document by quoting a well-known passage from *The Holy Family*, in which the founders of Marxism state that “‘History’ does nothing. It possesses no colossal riches...” You apparently believe that this passage should be read as a rebuke to the emphasis placed by the International Committee on the study of history. Of course, it is no such thing. Marx and Engels were criticizing the idealistic conceptions of the Left Hegelians, who transformed history into a self-motivating abstract concept, generating out of itself, in the manner of Hegel’s Absolute Idea, events that were mere manifestations of the concept’s own logically-driven self-negation. For Marx and Engels, the concept of history had to be abstracted from the study of the development of human society. The outcome of the critique of Hegelian idealism by Marx and Engels was the materialist conception of history. [return]

[31] There is another aspect of this question that deserves to be considered. The fight for socialist consciousness, above all in the United States, demands an unrelenting defense of scientific thought against all forms of backwardness. This issue was addressed at a lecture that I delivered in New York, in April 2005, on the subject of Terry Schiavo:

An essential component of efforts to organize workers politically as a class is the struggle to raise their intellectual and cultural level, to champion the cause of scientific thought against all forms of religious superstition and backwardness—that is, to champion a materialist Marxist understanding of not only the socioeconomic relations of society, but also the foundations and structure of human consciousness. As in the past, the socialist movement must recognize the vast scope of its theoretical and pedagogical responsibilities to the working class.

We can draw great encouragement from the fact that science is providing the socialist movement with a vast new array of intellectual weapons. It is ironic that the field of science at the very center of the Terri Schiavo controversy—neurobiology—is the scene today of the most spectacular theoretical breakthroughs. Astonishing advances are being made in the understanding of the physiology of the brain, the most complex of all material structures. And these, in turn, substantiate the materialist understanding of consciousness and cognition championed by Marxism. It is no wonder that the ruling elite should so fear the work of the finest scientists, whose discoveries in the field of neurobiology and related areas of research are systematically demolishing the last redoubts of religious mysticism.

The working class cannot advance without the aid of science. But science itself requires the advance of the working class. Today, the growth of political reaction in the United States places the scientific researcher under siege. But the isolated scientist cannot defend him- or herself any more successfully than the individual worker. In the final analysis, the progress of science as a whole, not to mention the physical safety of individual researchers, depends on the resurgence of a new revolutionary movement of the working class. In the most profound historical sense, the socialist movement unites under its banner both the pursuit of scientific truth in all its forms and the struggle for human equality. [return]



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact