

The Frankfurt School vs. Marxism:

The Political and Intellectual Odyssey of Alex Steiner

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The following is the first part of a three-part essay. The second part was posted on October 23, and Part 3 concluded the essay on October 24. Click here to download the complete essay in PDF.

I. Introduction

In May-June 2006, I wrote *Marxism, History & Socialist Consciousness*, a reply to an attack on the International Committee of the Fourth International by Alex Steiner and Frank Brenner, two former members of the Workers League (predecessor of the Socialist Equality Party) who had left the revolutionary socialist movement in the late 1970s. Unabashed by the many years that they had spent in political retirement, Steiner and Brenner, in a document entitled *Objectivism or Marxism*, denounced the theoretical work, political activity, and organizational practices of the SEP and ICFI. Steiner/Brenner claimed that the International Committee was opposed to dialectics and failed to conduct a struggle against pragmatism.

The consequences of the ICFI's alleged neglect of the dialectic found expression in its (1) failure to recognize the urgent need for a revival of utopianism as a means of rekindling socialist consciousness, and (2) indifference to the problems of psychology and sexuality. For Steiner/Brenner, the latter play a decisive role in shaping political motivations and orientation that, they maintain, are essentially irrational. By concentrating on historical explanations, political analysis and programmatic clarification, the International Committee failed to confront, according to Steiner/Brenner, the psychological barriers to socialism that resided in "the repressed feelings of the unconscious" which persist in a human being's "congealed, unexamined past." [1]

The Steiner/Brenner document was based largely on conceptions that have long been associated with the "critical theory" of the "Frankfurt School" and related ideological tendencies, known collectively as "Western" or "Humanist" Marxism. Associated with the work of Max Horkheimer, Theodore Adorno, Karl Korsch, Herbert Marcuse, Ernst Bloch, Erich Fromm and Wilhelm Reich, the influence of the Frankfurt School reached its apogee during the heyday of radical student protests in the late 1960s. After that wave of middle-class radicalism receded, the influence of the Frankfurt School was consolidated in universities and colleges, where so many ex-radicals found tenured positions. From within the walls of the academy, the partisans of the Frankfurt School conducted unrelenting war—not against capitalism, but, rather, against Marxism. In this struggle, they were remarkably successful. With rare exceptions, very little resembling Marxism—even if one means by that term only the

rigorous application of philosophical materialism to the study of history, society and social consciousness—has been taught for several decades in the humanities departments of colleges and universities.

Three interrelated historical factors underlay the persistent influence of this intellectual trend: first, the defeats of the working class during the first half of the 20th century and the annihilation (by fascism and Stalinism) of a substantial section of the socialist intelligentsia and working class who were the bearers of the theoretical traditions of classical Marxism; second, the post-World War II restabilization of international capitalism; and, third, the protracted domination of the Stalinist, social-democratic and reformist labor and trade union bureaucracies over the working class during much of the latter period. The complex combination of objective and subjective historical factors that obstructed the revolutionary resurgence of the working class created a pessimistic and demoralized intellectual environment hostile to Marxism.

To the extent that Marxism was barred by unfavorable historical conditions from serving as the theoretical spearhead of mass revolutionary class struggle, the path was cleared for its corruption and falsification in the interests of social forces isolated and alienated from, and even hostile to, the working class. The Frankfurt School played a central role in this process. It sought to convert Marxism from a theoretical and political weapon of proletarian class struggle, which Horkheimer, Adorno and Marcuse rejected, into a socially amorphous form of cultural criticism, in which the political pessimism, social alienation, and personal and psychological frustrations of sections of the middle class found expression.

The document of Steiner/Brenner provided an opportunity to define the attitude of the Trotskyist movement to the Frankfurt School of anti-Marxism. Steiner/Brenner's "differences with the International Committee," I wrote, "are not over isolated programmatic points, but rather over the most fundamental questions of philosophical world outlook upon which the struggle for socialism is based." [2] *Marxism, History & Socialist Consciousness* examined the significance of Steiner/Brenner's hostility to the development of political perspectives, upon which the Trotskyist movement has traditionally placed central emphasis. They opposed "the conception that [Marxist] analysis and commentary, based on the method of historical materialism, is essential or even relevant to the development of socialist consciousness," [3] and rejected "the Marxist concept of perspective, which strives to root revolutionary practice in as correct and precise an analysis of the objective world as possible." They demanded, as I explained, that the International Committee "concern itself primarily not with politics and history, but with psychology and sex—particularly as presented in the works of Wilhelm Reich and Herbert Marcuse." [4]

Steiner/Brenner's subjective idealist standpoint was incompatible with

the materialist foundation of the work conducted by the ICFI, which rejected their attempt “to infiltrate the disoriented anti-Marxist pseudo-utopianism of Wilhelm Reich, Ernst Bloch and Herbert Marcuse into the Fourth International—that is, to fundamentally change the theoretical and programmatic foundations and class orientation of the Trotskyist movement.”[5]

The document warned that Steiner/Brenner’s denunciation of the ICFI’s alleged “objectivism” sought to legitimize philosophical irrationalism and subjectivism. They misused the term “objectivism” as “an epithet directed against those who study the socio-economic processes that constitute the basis of revolutionary practice,” and who insist upon “a scientific understanding of the laws governing the world capitalist system, the international class struggle, and the forms of their reflection in mass consciousness.”[6]

Opposing Steiner/Brenner’s appeal for a revival of utopian mythmaking—which has become fashionable in petty-bourgeois radical circles—I wrote that “the contradictions of capitalism provide the principal and decisive impulse for the development of revolutionary consciousness.” The task of the Marxist movement was not to spur the workers on with the mirage of an illusory utopia, but, rather

to develop, within the advanced sections of the working class, a scientific understanding of history as a law-governed process, a knowledge of the capitalist mode of production and the social relations to which it gives rise, and an insight into the real nature of the present crisis and its world-historical implications. It is a matter of transforming an unconscious historical process into a conscious political movement, of anticipating and preparing for the consequences of the intensification of the world capitalist crisis, of laying bare the logic of events, and formulating, strategically and tactically, the appropriate political response.[7]

This conception is opposed by those “who see no basis for socialism in the objective conditions created by capitalism itself, who have been demoralized by the experience of defeats and setbacks, and who neither understand the nature of the capitalist crisis nor perceive the revolutionary potential of the working class...” For such individuals, “the problem of transforming consciousness is posed in essentially ideal and even psychological terms. Insofar as there does not exist a real basis for socialist consciousness, the possibility for its development must be sought elsewhere.” Herein lay the source of Steiner/Brenner’s belief that “utopia is crucial to a revival of socialist culture.”[8]

The final sections of my reply examined some of the theoretical influences, acknowledged and unacknowledged, in the Steiner/Brenner document. Attention was drawn especially to the key writings of Hendrik De Man (*The Psychology of Socialism*), Wilhelm Reich (*The Mass Psychology of Fascism*), and Herbert Marcuse (*Eros and Civilization*). In conclusion, answering Steiner/Brenner’s claim that “the real problems of fighting for socialist consciousness” exist beyond “the horizon of ‘objective conditions,’” I stated: “We live and fight in the world of ‘objective conditions,’ which is both the source of our present-day problems as well as their ultimate solution.”[9]

In September 2007 Steiner/Brenner began serializing their reply to *Marxism, History and Socialist Consciousness* in installments that were published over a period of three months. The title of this document is *Marxism Without Its Head or Heart: A Reply to David North* [hereafter referred to as MWHH].

II. Steiner/Brenner and the Heritage of Marxism

Steiner/Brenner began their document with a denunciation of *Marxism,*

History & Socialist Consciousness. It is, they assert, “a dreadful piece of work,” “rife with misrepresentations and evasions,” written in a “bombastic style” which cannot conceal its “meager substance.” The document “is, above all else, a demonstration of how theoretically impoverished the IC leadership has become. What North calls ‘Marxism’ is missing its head and heart—i.e., dialectics and the proletariat, which is to say, the very things that make Marxism a revolutionary doctrine.”[10]

Adopting an intensely subjective and embittered tone, Steiner/Brenner attack me as a “hypocrite of the first order” and excoriate my “pettiness, malice and dishonesty.”[11] This sort of language can make a favorable impression only on those who do not approach political disputes from a principled standpoint. I see no need to reply to attacks of this sort. However, Steiner/Brenner do make one charge that does deserve careful attention. “In this latest document,” they write, “[North] is no longer defending the heritage of revolutionary Marxism but instead rationalizing the IC’s abandonment of key parts of that heritage.”[12]

This raises a crucial question: Precisely what do Steiner/Brenner consider to be the “heritage of revolutionary Marxism”? For an entire decade they have been expressing steadily escalating disagreement with the theoretical foundations of Marxism. Their differences began to emerge with Brenner’s 1997 declaration that Marxism lacked an adequate psychology. In 1998, he announced that Marxism required a new “theory of gender.” In 1999 Steiner informed me that he did not agree with the position of Friedrich Engels (the lifelong collaborator of Karl Marx) that the relationship between materialism and idealism was the basic question of philosophy. Somewhat later, in 2002, Brenner and Steiner demanded that the International Committee recognize the importance of utopianism for the contemporary development of socialist consciousness. In 2003 Steiner proceeded to denounce the “vulgar materialism” of G.V. Plekhanov, “the father of Russian Marxism.” This was followed in 2004 with a lengthy attack by Steiner on Lenin’s *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*. Their campaign entered a new stage in 2005 with a public attack on the ICFI for its “objectivism” and its refusal to incorporate the insights of “Freudo-Marxists” like Wilhelm Reich into its theoretical and political work.

In their latest document, all these themes are developed in the course of an exercise in unrestrained rhetorical vituperation directed against the International Committee generally, and me personally. As is generally the case in politics, the insults are aimed at camouflaging the theoretical and political issues. This camouflage is required because, as they know, the Socialist Equality Party and the International Committee of the Fourth International are based on a theoretical tradition that has nothing in common with the Frankfurt School. This places Steiner/Brenner in an awkward position—promoting, while at the same time formally distancing themselves from, the theoreticians whose ideas they are attempting to foist onto the ICFI. Thus, they claim that I have fabricated a connection between their views and those of the Frankfurt School. Steiner/Brenner declare:

No conspiracy theory is complete without some name-dropping, and so North drags in Reich, Marcuse and Bloch. ... North is concerned with one thing at this point, which is to establish guilt by association: it is as if the simple invocation of these men’s names constitutes prima facie evidence of our abandonment of Marxism. That this is being done under the banner of defending Marxist science only adds a bitter irony to the whole exercise.[13]

They then proceed to refute my “conspiracy theory” by repeatedly insisting that the International Committee is committing a fatal error by failing to learn from the work of Reich, Marcuse, Bloch and Adorno:

One doesn’t have to be an apologist for Bloch or overlook his many serious failings, above all his support for Stalinism, to recognize that his work might still contain something of value.[14]

We have never been followers of Reich, and there is nothing in what we

have written to suggest otherwise. While we recognize that the Freudo-Marxists made some important contributions, their legacy is a contradictory one, like so much else about the intellectual life of the 20th century. As noted in the previous chapter, when faced with such work, Marxists critically evaluate it and make use of whatever is still living in it. That is our attitude to Reich.[15]

All that being said, however, there is still considerable political value to Reich's insights.[16]

Again one has to pick one's way carefully through Reich's ideas (for instance, his views on treating the police as workers or debating with the Nazis were completely misguided) and much about everyday life has changed since his time. But some of his ideas about youth have enduring relevance, and in that regard he gave a good example of what "thinking inside other people's heads" means politically.[17]

The attempt to dismiss the work of Adorno and Marcuse, as well as Ernst Bloch on the grounds that they were politically reprehensible is nothing less than an appeal to intellectual and cultural backwardness. ... Steiner was saying that these figures may have had some valuable insights that we ignore at our peril. This is not to imply that their work is beyond criticism or that there is nothing in their work that can impinge on their politics and vice-versa. But the task for Marxists when confronted with such a heterogeneous oeuvre is to sift through the body of work and critically assimilate it. It is pointedly not to ignore or dismiss it as worthless before even reading it on the grounds that the author was politically reprehensible.[18]

So much for my "conspiracy theory"! It is not I, but they, who exploit every opportunity to "drag in" Marcuse, Bloch, Reich, et al. The above-cited paragraphs obligate one to ask, "What has all of this to do with the defense of the 'Heritage of Marxism'?" Steiner/Brenner are advocating a theoretical eclecticism that has nothing in common with the philosophical traditions upon which the Trotskyist movement is based. Moreover, the very form of their argument—"Can we not learn from...?" "Must we reject everything...?" "Is there not something interesting in...?"—epitomizes the sort of "on-the-one-hand, on-the-other-hand" sophistry that Marx invariably subjected to the harshest criticism.[19]

Steiner/Brenner object that the work of the Frankfurt School is not "worthless." That is not the word I used to describe their writings. However, the issue is not whether the writings of the Frankfurt School are "worthless," but whether they represent an alternative to and development beyond Marxism. Nowhere do Steiner/Brenner attempt a systematic exposition of the conceptions of the Frankfurt School, examine their historical, social and intellectual roots, establish the objective internal links between the works of its representative figures. Despite all their rhetorical invocations of "the dialectic," Steiner/Brenner fail to present a historical and dialectical materialist analysis of the Frankfurt School. This would have required an examination of the latter's origins, development, contradictions and, also, the class tendencies of which it is an ideological expression. Instead the reader is informed that Reich or Marcuse may have written stupid things; but they also wrote some good things. Yes, Reich may have ended up an anti-communist; but that last chapter of his life had nothing to do with other chapters.

Steiner/Brenner simply ignore the fact that not one of the leading figures in the Frankfurt School was in political sympathy, let alone affiliated, with the Fourth International. This was hardly accidental. The intellectual work of the Frankfurt School was grounded in a reactionary philosophical tradition—irrationalist, idealist and individualistic—antithetical to the classical Marxism upon which Trotsky's political and theoretical work was based. The writings of Marx and Engels played a far less significant role in shaping the outlook of the Frankfurt School than those of Schelling, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche and Heidegger. And as for the political outlook that prevailed within the Frankfurt School, its rejection of the revolutionary role of the working class, its historical and cultural

pessimism, and its impressionistic response to political events had nothing in common with the perspective, based on a dialectical and historical materialist analysis, that animated the work of the Fourth International.

The leading representatives of the Frankfurt School lived most of their adult lives in a state of political prostration. The maestros of "critical theory" and the "negative dialectic" were, when it came to political analysis, incompetent and perennially disoriented. The rise of fascism and defeats of the working class in the 1930s shattered whatever confidence they may at some time have had in the possibility of socialist revolution. *Dialectic of Enlightenment* by Horkheimer and Adorno—published in 1947 and generally considered the founding philosophical statement of the Frankfurt School—pronounced the downfall of all prospects for human progress.

During the 1950s and 1960s, the politically reactionary implications of the outlook of the Frankfurt School became all too clear. Under the tutelage of its longtime director, Max Horkheimer, who returned to Germany from his American exile, the Frankfurt School played a central role in developing the new intellectual foundations of the post-Nazi West German bourgeois state. During the same period, the ideas of Wilhelm Reich and Herbert Marcuse—who had rejected the working class as a revolutionary force in modern capitalist society—found an audience among the milieu of the petty-bourgeois radical New Left. Thus, the "heritage" that Steiner/Brenner accuses us of abandoning is one with which the International Committee of the Fourth International was never, and could never be, associated.

In light of the real historical and theoretical roots of their criticisms, there is an element of self-delusion, not to mention outright political dishonesty, in Steiner/Brenner's invocation of the "heritage of Marxism" to justify their denunciation of the International Committee. As individuals, Steiner and Brenner are entitled to their views. But they fail to explain why the ICFI should suddenly adopt theoretical and political conceptions that it has consistently rejected. Steiner/Brenner are demanding changes in the theoretical and political curriculum of the International Committee that have no basis in the history of the Fourth International.

III. On the Origins of the Steiner/Brenner Polemic

Steiner and Brenner have constructed a political narrative that casts them as the victims of a bureaucratic party apparatus, subservient to my will, that ruthlessly suppressed their criticisms of the movement's alleged abandonment of Marxism. They present the SEP's refusal to offer them the *World Socialist Web Site* as a forum for their anti-Marxist conceptions as the act of an incipient political dictatorship. They have calculated that this story will win for them sympathy among those who are politically inexperienced, especially in the United States where the identification of socialism with the suppression of individual rights is, as a consequence of decades of anti-communist propaganda, embedded in popular consciousness. Of course, there is the fact, which cannot simply be ignored, that Steiner and Brenner left the movement 30 years ago. They have spent virtually all their adult lives in pursuit of their private interests. The WSWS has been under no obligation to publish their documents. They attempt to get around this problem by asserting:

We have no desire to belittle the significance of party membership, but in this regard North ignores an embarrassing fact which we raised in *Objectivism or Marxism*: Steiner applied to rejoin the party in 1998, but the party leadership—and that would mean primarily North—never acted on his application and never explained why. This application was made years before any political differences emerged and at a time when Steiner was

contributing material to the WSWS. In short, it is North who kept Steiner out of the party and now he is blaming Steiner for not being a party member.

Nor does North provide anything resembling a credible account of the circumstances that gave rise to this polemic.[20]

As a matter of fact, an account of the origins of this polemic was provided in *Marxism, History & Socialist Consciousness*. [21] However, I am quite prepared to supplement that initial account with further details. This will require that I review the political biography of Alex Steiner. I doubt that he will appreciate this attention. After all, he writes in another part of the Steiner/Brenner document that “Alex Steiner isn’t the leader of a revolutionary movement: his activities as an individual have no relevance to this discussion.” [22] How modest, but I respectfully disagree.

Three points must be made. First, the issuing of a public political attack—which includes a direct appeal to the party membership to change its leadership—is not the action of an individual, but of a candidate for political leadership. It implies a willingness on the part of its author to assume leadership responsibilities should the occasion arise—that is, should he be called upon to carry through the political changes demanded in his documents. Second, Steiner is the principal author of those sections of the Steiner/Brenner documents in which the theoretical-philosophical line is elaborated. An examination of Steiner’s intellectual and political history will contribute to an understanding of the origins and implications of his theoretical arguments. Third, there exists a substantial written record, to which Steiner/Brenner fail to make any reference, in which the development of Steiner’s differences with the SEP, prior to the issuing of public attacks, are documented.

This record includes correspondence relating to Steiner’s application for membership in the SEP in 1999 (*not 1998!*). The letters written to me and the SEP clearly show that there already existed at that time significant differences on basic questions of Marxist philosophy as well as the history of the party between Steiner and the Socialist Equality Party. Virtually all the differences raised in subsequent documents written by Steiner/Brenner were anticipated in Steiner’s 1999 letters. Among the hundreds of pages of polemical material that Steiner/Brenner have published and posted on their web site, this correspondence is not included. Nor have they published other correspondence written by Steiner that presents an evaluation of my theoretical work that differs radically from their more recent and factionally motivated reappraisals. These conspicuous omissions are duplicitous and testify to an absence of political and intellectual principles.

Before we proceed to examine this written record, let us draw the reader’s attention to a glaring contradiction in the Steiner/Brenner narrative. In presenting their theory of the alleged theoretical and political degeneration of the SEP, Steiner/Brenner assert that the movement succumbed to the blandishments of the capitalist environment during the years of the dot.com boom. They write: “What happened in the years between 1993 and 1998 was a caving in by the IC leadership to the immense class pressures of bourgeois society.” [23]

If this is indeed the case, how does Steiner now explain his 1999 application for membership? If Steiner’s appraisal of the downfall of the ICFI is correct, it would suggest that he somehow found the stench of political degeneration attractive, that he was drawn to it, and wanted to be part of it. But this, of course, is not the explanation. As we shall see, the appraisal of the SEP made by Steiner when he applied for membership in 1999—not to mention the record of the correspondence that he maintained with me between 1997 and 2003—completely contradicts what he now writes in MWHH.

To be continued

To order Marxism, History & Socialist Consciousness click here.

Notes:

1. Cited in *Marxism, History & Socialist Consciousness* (Oak Park, MI: Mehring Books, 2007), p. 102. [return]
2. Ibid, p. 62. [return]
3. Ibid, p. 14. [return]
4. Ibid, p. 16. [return]
5. Ibid, pp. 7-8. [return]
6. Ibid, p. 35. [return]
7. Ibid, p. 95. [return]
8. Ibid, p. 96. [return]
9. Ibid, p. 145. [return]
10. *Marxism Without Its Head or Heart*, pp. 2-3. The page numbering is based on a PDF printout of the entire document, combining individual chapters that are posted separately on the Steiner/Brenner web site. The site can be accessed at <http://www.permanent-revolution.org>. [return]
11. Ibid, p. 252. [return]
12. Ibid, p. 2. [return]
13. Ibid, p. 17. [return]
14. Ibid, p. 241. [return]
15. Ibid, p. 267. [return]
16. Ibid, p. 275. [return]
17. Ibid, p. 278. [return]
18. Ibid, p. 247. [return]
19. As, for example, in *The Poverty of Philosophy*:
For him, M. Proudhon, every economic category has two sides—one good, the other bad. He looks upon these categories as the petty bourgeois looks upon the great men of history: *Napoleon* was a great man; he did a lot of good; he also did a lot of harm.
The *good side* and the *bad side*, the *advantages* and the *drawbacks*, taken together form for M. Proudhon the *contradiction* in every economic category.
The problem to be solved: to keep the good side, while eliminating the bad. [*Marx-Engels Collected Works*, Volume 6 (New York: International Publishers, 1976), p. 167. [return]
20. Ibid, p. 4. [return]
21. See *Marxism, History & Socialist Consciousness* pp. 69-76. [return]
22. Ibid, p. 127. [return]
23. Ibid, p. 144. [return]



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