The Frankfurt School vs. Marxism:

The Political and Intellectual Odyssey of Alex Steiner—Part 2

David North
23 October 2008

The following is the second part of a three-part essay. The first part *was posted on October 22, and* Part 3 *concluded the essay on October 24. Click* here *to download the complete essay in PDF.*

IV. Alex Steiner and the Socialist Equality Party

In the autumn of 1978, as the Workers League was in the final stages of moving its political headquarters from New York to Detroit, Alex Steiner left the party without any explanation. Steiner had previously resigned from the movement in 1973, during a political crisis in the Workers League that culminated in the resignation of its national secretary, Tim Wohlforth. Steiner rejoined the party in the summer of 1974. But his second departure in 1978 brought his career in the revolutionary movement to an end. In his last discussion with me prior to his departure, Steiner said, "Life is very grim." I often recalled these words, because they articulated not simply the personal dejection of an individual, but also the pessimism and demoralization of the broader milieu of petty-bourgeois radical intellectuals. Nevertheless, I regretted Steiner's departure from the Workers League. Particularly after he rejoined the Workers League in 1974, we had collaborated on several theoretical projects. However, Steiner's intellectual abilities were undermined by his extreme emotional volatility, susceptibility to discouragement when confronted with problems, and pessimistic view of life.

In 1985, in the midst of the public crisis in the International Committee provoked by the political explosion in the British Workers Revolutionary Party, Steiner and other former members of the Workers League were invited to a meeting in New York City in which I reviewed the political and theoretical issues involved in the controversy. Steiner expressed agreement with the stand taken by the Workers League, but made it clear that he had no desire to rejoin the party. He had developed a professional career and comfortable lifestyle that he did not wish to disrupt. Still, he expressed a desire to maintain somewhat more regular contact with the party.

It was not until the late 1990s that Steiner indicated that he was considering a reentry into political life. Steiner frequently asked to meet with me during my trips to New York, and expressed, verbally and occasionally in writing, his agreement with the theoretical work of the party—especially its fight against the influence of postmodernism. For example, I received on June 10, 1997 the following letter from Steiner:

Dear Dave,

I enjoyed reading your recent talk about the Holocaust [*Anti-Semitism, Fascism and the Holocaust: A Critical Review of Daniel Goldhagen's Hitler's Willing Executioners*]. It is especially topical because so much of the opposition to any conception of lawfulness in history uses the Holocaust as a prime example. This is especially true of those writers identifying themselves as post-modernists. Here we see continental post-structuralists (Derrida, Lyotard) making common cause with American pragmatists (Rorty) all in the name of "liberating" thought from the "meta-narratives." As pointed out by Habermas and others, their attack on Reason is in a direct line of descent from Nietzsche to Heidegger—their target, the overthrowing of Hegel and Marx.

The collaboration between the latter day Nihilists and the more traditional pragmatists and empiricists is something that I find quite fascinating. I can tell you from personal experience that the spirit of the post-modernists resonates with large sections of middle-class intellectuals. I recently took a class on this stuff and I was the only one trying to show that the post-modernist emperors have no clothes. [1]

Steiner added a postscript at the end of his letter, praising another lecture that I had given. "I distributed your article on the Enlightenment [*Equality, the Rights of Man and the Birth of Socialism*] in my Hegel class—as an example of a contemporary defense of the Enlightenment. [2]

Several months later, in October 1997, Steiner attended a public meeting called by the SEP which commemorated the 20th anniversary of the 1977 assassination of a young leader of the Workers League, Tom Henehan. Steiner, who had known and admired Henehan, was clearly affected—though perhaps more emotionally than politically—by the meeting. At its conclusion Steiner indicated to me that he was interested in collaborating more systematically with the SEP on writing projects related to Marxist theory. In February 1998 the International Committee launched the *World Socialist Web Site*. During the months that followed Steiner and I held a number of discussions that explored the possibility of developing a WSWS philosophy section. There was no indication on Steiner's part that he considered the establishment of the WSWS to be a retreat on the part of the ICFI to "mere" journalism. Quite the opposite: he was enthusiastic over the possibilities it created for expanding the audience for Marxist theory and politics.

There were indications, however, that the many years that Steiner had spent outside the movement had left an imprint on his theoretical conceptions. An essay that he submitted to me in the autumn of 1998, entitled *Alienation and Revolution*, dealt with the young Marx's treatment of alienation in the 1844 *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* in a manner similar to that found in the writings of Frankfurt School and Western Marxist theoreticians. The essay produced by Steiner significantly underestimated the extent to which Marx's subsequent writings—especially *The Holy Family, The German Ideology* and *The Poverty of Philosophy*—represented a development and deepening of the materialist and scientific character of Marxist theory. Even after several

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redrafts of the document, I was not satisfied with Steiner's essay and chose not to post it on the web site.[3] Our discussions remained friendly, and, at least on the surface, Steiner seemed enthusiastic about the work of the WSWS. On February 16, 1999 he wrote that "Some of the recent work of the WSWS has been outstanding."

During this period Steiner was also working on a draft of a statement that was to serve as an introduction to a new philosophy section of the WSWS. Several drafts were produced, but none of them were suitable for publication. They lacked a forcefully stated theoretical perspective that established the Marxist and dialectical materialist standpoint of the new philosophy section. The underlying source of the problem emerged in the last version of the statement, which I received in May 1999. The draft began by asserting that it would be the aim of the new philosophy section

to encourage a discussion on the fundamental philosophical issues that require clarification if mankind is to survive and flourish in the new millennium.

What are these issues?

Here it may be proper to take a step back into the very beginnings of speculative thought, to the world of ancient Greece, In Plato's Republic the question posed by Socrates is "What is justice?" Aristotle, in the Nicomachean Ethics asks the question "What is the good life?" Underlying these questions in the case of both philosophers is the question of Being, of what exists. Without a notion of what is, and its relation to us, we cannot begin to answer the question of how we should live. Consideration of this question leads to the further question, "What is knowledge?" Are all claims to knowledge mere opinions or are there some kind of universally valid principles? All these questions are interrelated. The constellation of such questions and the ongoing effort to find answers to them is the task of philosophy.

There was an element of intellectual pretentiousness in this opening, a self-conscious attempt on the part of the author to call attention to his erudition. But this was a matter of style. The more serious problem was that Steiner's "step back into the very beginnings of speculative thought" suggested a retreat from a Marxist conception of the history of philosophy, which has placed central emphasis on the relationship between matter and consciousness. The discussion of this question has necessarily assumed the form of a struggle between the two irreconcilably opposed philosophical camps—that of the materialists, who have insisted upon the primacy of matter over consciousness, and that of the idealists, who, in one form or another, have upheld the primacy of consciousness. As Steiner had chosen to invoke the heritage of Greek philosophy, it would have been appropriate to point out that the conflict between materialism and idealism can be traced back to that classical age. [4] Marxists have traditionally viewed the establishment of a philosophical journal as a means of defending and advancing the materialist viewpoint. I could not help but wonder why Steiner had chosen a different and theoretically ambiguous approach. The word "materialism" did not appear anywhere in the draft.

I met with Steiner in June 1999 during a visit to New York. He told me that he had been impressed by the stand taken by the SEP on the recently concluded US-led war against Serbia, and especially praised the statement that I had written (posted on the WSWS under the title, "After the Slaughter: Political Lessons of Balkan War"). [5] The ICFI, he told me, was the only socialist tendency that had been capable of developing what he referred to as a Marxist "theory of the war." The recent events, Steiner said, had led him to consider seriously applying for membership in the SEP. But, he informed me, there were issues of both a practical and theoretical character that needed to be clarified. Among these was Engels' insistence that the relationship of matter and consciousness was the fundamental question of philosophy. We both had limited time, and it was immediately apparent to me that the differences being raised by Steiner had been anticipated in his essay on alienation and in the draft introduction. They were not likely to be resolved in a brief discussion. I asked Steiner to write a letter explaining his position. Steiner replied that he would consider my proposal.

V. Steiner's Letter of June 25, 1999

On June 25, 1999 I received Steiner's letter. It began:

Dear Dave,

This is a private communication between us. Please do not show this letter to anyone else. [6]

Much was touched on of [sic], but there was little time to probe the issues discussed. I would like to begin to do that now. I am writing these notes as a very general summary of some of my thoughts. There is no attempt to chase down quotes, etc.

1. Materialism/Idealism

Without doubt this is a fundamental issue in the history of philosophy. And there is no question that Marxism represented a form of materialism (a point that is often obscured by some Western neo-Marxists).

That being said, I am not convinced that this is THE question that divides different philosophical systems.

This statement could not be read as anything other than a declaration by Steiner of a major objection to the theoretical foundations of Marxism. By beginning his letter with this statement, Steiner was acknowledging its far-reaching implications. How could he do otherwise? Steiner was calling into question Marxism's conception of the history of philosophy and the coherence of its materialist logic, epistemology and theory of knowledge. [7] Back in 1975, when he was still a member of the Workers League, playing a central role in the theoretical struggle against the pragmatic outlook of the Socialist Workers Party, Steiner specifically attacked George Novack, the SWP's principal theoretician, on this issue. Novack, he wrote, "panders to the prevailing myth that the question of the priority of matter or idea is ‘meaningless' and that some third position is possible." [8] One year later, in an examination of the theoretical conceptions of Tim Wohlforth, Steiner denounced him for attempting "to dismiss and take for granted the fundamental question of philosophy, materialism or idealism." Steiner went on to describe Wohlforth's position as "idealist rubbish." [9]

Steiner's letter of June 1999 went on to elaborate areas of potential theoretical conflict:

2. The priority of Being to Consciousness. The materialism of Marx does indeed posit Being as prior to consciousness both historically and logically. It is possible to have Being without consciousness (though of course we would not be there to think about it) but it is impossible to have consciousness without Being. That being said, it is also the case that consciousness when animated in the form of social practice, can transform Being, and at times become a decisive influence.

The reciprocal relationship between Being and consciousness is just as important to Marxism as the logical priority of Being. There are furthermore many levels of Being, each having its own specific categories and laws of motion. The complex interrelationships between and within each hierarchical level of Being is a continuing subject for investigation.

Anyone who thinks that repeating the phrase that Being is prior to consciousness settles anything is simply being intellectually lazy and fooling themselves. (Of course I am not saying you are doing this—but many ostensible Marxists do just that and think they have ‘analyzed' something.)

Steiner, it appeared to me, had drifted into the gravitational field of theoretical tendencies hostile to Marxism. These paragraphs were reminiscent of passages found in the writings of assorted "praxis"

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philosophers, affiliates of the Frankfurt School and other philosophically-eclectic tendencies that comprise what is known as "Western Marxism." The intellectual thread that binds these diverse tendencies together is dissatisfaction and disagreement with philosophical materialism. Steiner's assertion that "The reciprocal relationship between Being and consciousness *is just as important* to Marxism as the *logical* priority of Being" (emphasis added) was a major concession to philosophical idealism. An understanding of the interaction between Being and consciousness can only be established on the basis of a recognition of the primacy of matter over consciousness. Moreover, Marxism, as a world scientific outlook, views humankind, the mind and consciousness as a product of the dialectical evolution of nature. From the standpoint of science, though not of idealist-tinged philosophy, the primacy of Being is a *material* and *historical*, and not merely a *logical*, priority. [10]

The paragraphs that followed presented a familiar litany of objections to classical Marxism. There was the suggestion that Engels, though not entirely lacking in talent, had in some way contributed to a vulgarization of Marxism: "Engels was not Marx ... Marx was fundamentally the theorist and Engels the popularizer." This review of Engels' supposedly ambiguous legacy was followed by an all-too-familiar critique of Lenin's *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*: "...the version of materialism Lenin expounds in this work has much more in common with 18th century mechanical materialism than with Marx's materialist dialectic." Steiner's arguments—counterposing the "vulgar" materialist Lenin of *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* to the Hegelianized "dialectical" Lenin of the *Philosophical Notebooks*—were ones that I had come across many times in the past, in the writings of idealist opponents of Marxism.

There was one hopeful note. Notwithstanding his sharp criticism of what he knew to be essential elements of the philosophical heritage of the Trotskyist movement, Steiner offered a favorable assessment of the political development of the International Committee.

Events in the last 2 decades have created more favorable conditions for the renewal of Marxism. Notable was the 1985 split and clarification in the International Committee, the collapse of Stalinism in the late 1980's and early 1990's and the development of globalized communications and technology. The impact of the *World Socialist Web Site* over the past year, and particularly in the past few months with its valuable commentary on the Clinton impeachment drive and the war against Yugoslavia have shown the enormous possibilities for reaching a mass audience throughout the world. [11]

Turning his attention to the relationship between "Philosophy and the party," Steiner acknowledged that "The Marxist movement, organized as an international political party, can and has played an important role in the development of Marxist philosophy." This was a puzzling statement, for *where else* and by *whom else* has Marxism been developed? Steiner offered no specific example of Marxist philosophy being developed by individual theoreticians working *outside of and unconnected to* the Marxist movement. He noted that "developments that are of significance for philosophy come from very unexpected quarters, such as for instance chaos theory." However, Steiner continued: "I believe of course that the full integration and comprehension of these developments is only possible within the framework of Marxism, but that does not mean that 1—there is some kind of privileged position that only Marxists have that enables them to grasp these developments, without mastering the subject at hand; 2—that non-Marxists have nothing of importance to say on these developments."

As I read these lines, somewhat belligerent in tone, it seemed to me that Steiner was setting up a series of rhetorical straw men, in the service of an agenda that was not entirely clear. The issue is not one of a "privileged position"—whatever that may mean—but of the essential role of Marxism, i.e., the most advanced and consistent form of materialist philosophy, in the development of a scientific understanding of nature, society and consciousness. Which "Marxists" have denied that developments such as the formulation of chaos theory, necessarily emerging outside the sphere of revolutionary politics, require the most serious attention? The theoretical traditions of classical Marxism, dating back to the pioneering work of Engels, have always assigned to natural science a critical role in the development of materialism. But the advances made by scientists hardly lessen the crucial role played by Marxists in promoting the conscious application of the dialectical method and a consistently materialist world outlook in all spheres of scientific research and, above all, in striving to develop a political and intellectual milieu favorable for the progressive development of culture as a whole. The critical nature of such work can hardly be exaggerated at a time when anti-intellectualism and social backwardness finds support at the highest levels of the capitalist state.

Steiner ended this section of his letter with yet another enigmatic remark: "Furthermore," he wrote, "such developments should be seen as avenues for enriching our theoretical comprehension, and not simply as another example illustrating the correctness of our (ossified) perspective."

Again, except for the vague reference to chaos theory, he offered no concrete example of the "developments" to which he was referring. But even more troubling was his description of the Marxist perspective as "ossified." Placing the word diplomatically within parentheses did not lessen its jarring impact. Taken as a whole, the arguments advanced by Steiner in this section of his letter, however ambiguous his formulations, seemed directed against the defense of Marxist conceptions in opposition to other philosophical viewpoints.

The disturbing implications of his comments emerged all too clearly in the final section of his letter, in which Steiner turned to the question of party membership. He stated:

> ...I will not be able to function effectively in [a] party that has a dogmatic attitude toward philosophy. I do not believe that the SEP and the International Committee today does have a dogmatic attitude. I have seen a very open and refreshing attitude expressed in the WSWS. Some of the views I have expressed may seem ‘unorthodox' to some comrades. I do not insist that anyone necessarily agree with these views. I do expect however that they be given a forum and looked at with an open attitude.

Why, in a letter discussing philosophy and membership in the SEP, was Steiner raising the specter of dogmatism, with all its pejorative connotations? A dogmatic attitude is characterized by a blind and inflexible set of beliefs, akin to a religion, impervious to arguments based on facts and reason. The accusation of dogmatism has been raised all too frequently by opponents of Marxism, as a means of discrediting its defense of materialism. [12] Steiner should have remembered that the International Committee had been attacked in similar terms, back in the early 1970s, when George Novack branded its opposition to idealist schools of philosophy as "sectarianism." Steiner's 1975 article, "Marxism, Pragmatism and Revisionism," from which I have already quoted, was one of a number of statements replying to Novack's attack. [13] In the context of Steiner's objections to Marxist formulations on the relation between being and consciousness, his glib identification of a defense of basic materialist conceptions with intellectual laziness, and his reference to "ossified" perspectives, his raising of "a dogmatic attitude toward philosophy" had the character of a warning shot being fired by Steiner across the bow of the party.

Finally, Steiner's letter ended on a distinctly ambivalent note:

> Nevertheless, I would not be honest if I did not admit that I still have some doubts. I am just not sure how well I would be able to fit into the organization. I am also not sure if the level of commitment I am willing to make, in terms of my time and my financial support, is sufficient for party membership. On the other hand, I don't think I have any way to determine the answer to these questions without trying the role of party membership.

If after reading all my caveats you still think I should join the party, then I will do so. To me however, it will seem like a trial membership.

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And so, with this highly conditional declaration of his personal political commitment, Steiner brought his letter to a conclusion. Steiner was clearly moving along a theoretical trajectory different from that of the SEP and International Committee. If he were to join the SEP, it would be on his terms. His interest in becoming a member was primarily to obtain a public forum, via the WSWS, to advance a theoretical platform alien to the philosophical standpoint of the Fourth International. And in return for providing Steiner with a world audience to criticize Marxism, the SEP would receive whatever small portion of his free time and spare change that he felt willing to part with.

VI. Steiner's Application to the SEP

Several weeks later, in August 1999, the Political Committee of the SEP received from Steiner a formal application for membership. [14] This was a very different document from the letter that he had sent me in June. His application did not mention the differences on philosophical questions that Steiner had raised in June. Nor did the letter indicate that Steiner was critical of the political orientation and practice of the SEP. There were no references to "objectivism" and "abstentionism," or, for that matter, "degeneration"—which, if the Steiner/Brenner of MWHH are to be believed, had been underway since 1993, six years before Steiner decided that he wanted to become a member! Steiner did not criticize the SEP for failing to fight pragmatism, or chastise the party for holding an uncritical view of the Enlightenment.

The document that Steiner sent to the Political Committee was a lengthy and remarkably candid autobiographical statement. I will cite only from those sections of the document that are related to the political issues raised by Steiner/Brenner's attack on the ICFI.

Steiner began his essay with a review of his intellectual background. He described the process of his gradual radicalization. "When the political quiescence of the post-war period finally ended in the late 60's I naturally gravitated toward the new student movement. I shared the political sensibilities of most of my generation and considered myself a New Leftist." Steiner recalled that he studied philosophy at the New School for Social Research in New York, an institute that was related intellectually to Horkheimer's Institute of Social Research (the Frankfurt School). Though he referred to his areas of philosophical interest, Steiner did not review the major theoretical influences that he encountered at the New School—though one of its major figures at the time was Hannah Arendt, the former pupil (like Marcuse) of Martin Heidegger. As for his politics, Steiner acknowledged that

...I accepted somewhat uncritically the half-baked myths and legends that circulated among the New Left. Typical of the wild impressionism that passed for ‘analysis' in these circles was the ‘theory,' popularized by the Black Panther Party, that America was a fascist country. [15]

Steiner joined the Workers League in 1970. He discussed the immense impact of its historically-grounded perspective on his own development:

...For the first time that I could recall, I was confronted with a reasoned explanation of current social and political reality to which I had previously responded on an emotional level. ...

My education as a Marxist began. After several weeks of reading, attending lectures and many, many hours of discussion I became convinced that Marxism was indeed a living movement that was relevant to the problems we in the United States were then facing. My study of the history of the Marxist movement convinced me that Trotskyism represented the only genuine continuity of Marxism in our time. ...

I read all the classics of Marxism: Marx, Engels, Lenin, Trotsky as well as Plekhanov, Mehring, Kautsky, Luxemburg. [16]

Steiner's letter then turned to the events of 1973-74, when "the Workers League, and I with it, experienced a profound crisis brought on by the impressionistic perspective of the National Secretary, Tim Wohlforth." The letter described the impact of Wohlforth's actions on the Workers League and on himself. But here his narrative assumed an extremely subjective tone, and betrayed his own serious political weakness. Steiner recalled Wohlforth's personal attacks on him, and of being burdened "with a never-ending stream of meaningless busy work. This was meant to isolate and demoralize me, encouraging me to leave. Within a few months he succeeded and I left the movement." Wohlforth's behavior was, indeed, atrocious. But Steiner failed to examine why he succumbed politically to Wohlforth's provocations. There were others who resisted and opposed Wohlforth. Nor did Steiner attempt to explain the deeper political reasons for the development of the crisis in the Workers League. Aside from a fleeting reference to the Watergate scandal, Steiner's letter hardly touched on the major political and economic changes that were taking place in the United States and internationally. His letter failed to examine the connection between shifts in the objective situation, their impact on the development of the class struggle, and their reflection, politically and theoretically, within the party.

Rejoining the Workers League in 1974, following Wohlforth's removal from the position of national secretary, Steiner recalled that "The period from 1974-77 was for me one of intense theoretical work." However, new problems were arising in the International Committee. In his discussion of the developing crisis in the Workers Revolutionary Party, Steiner acknowledged his own limitations:

...With more than two decades of hindsight, it is easy for me to see now that Healy's "practice of cognition" was the antithesis of materialist dialectics. It became a vehicle for introducing various forms of mystification into the movement that could provide a philosophical cover for the WRP's increasingly opportunist maneuvers. Unfortunately, although I was troubled by Healy's subjective interpretation of the theory of knowledge of Marxism, I attributed whatever qualms I felt to my own inadequacies.

It was not long before Steiner was again politically adrift. "My own personal crisis," he wrote, "came to a head in the period 1977-78." According to Steiner's letter, the fault for his difficulties lay more or less entirely with the Workers League:

...To begin with, the day to day work of the Workers League seemed to be increasingly dominated by an anti-theoretical activism. This was the direct consequence of the false perspective that had been introduced into the sections of the International Committee by the leadership of the WRP. Increasingly, we were working with the sense that a civil war was imminent. It therefore became urgent to build our ranks as rapidly as possibly [sic]. The idea of educational work and training came to be viewed as a wasteful luxury reflecting the previous propagandist stage of the movement. Comrades were being asked to do impossible chores, and this began to take its toll. Once again, as in the period of Wohlforth's wrecking operation, the personal lives of the party members were put under incredible stress. In some ways the situation we now encountered was worse than the one from the 1973-74 period. The frenetic activism launched by Wohlforth, while pushing the party to the breaking point, did result at least initially, in the recruitment of some working class youth. This was above all a product of the different conditions prevailing in the working class at that time. The period 1973-74 coincided with a period of militancy and radicalization of many layers of the working class. Three years later, the wave of strikes and youth radicalization was definitely on the wane. Despite our heroic efforts, few if any new forces were recruited in this period.

Holding the party responsible for his own crisis, Steiner's subjective account distorted, to the point of falsification, the history of the Workers League during the mid- and late-1970s. It would not be difficult, on the

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basis of a review of party documents from that period, and of an examination of what was published in the *Bulletin* (the semi-weekly newspaper of the Workers League), to show that the period between 1974 and 1978 was exceptionally productive. Within the broader context of the historical development of the Workers League as a genuinely Marxist party of the working class, the departure of Wohlforth marked the beginning of a definite break by the Workers League with the political residue of American middle-class radicalism that Wohlforth personified. In the aftermath of his resignation, the Workers League set out to place all aspects of its work in alignment with the Trotskyist heritage of the Fourth International. Steiner, obsessed with his individual pinpricks, seemed to have completely forgotten this central achievement. In this respect, it was especially noteworthy that Steiner's letter made no reference to intensive work on political perspective that characterized this period or to the historical investigation spearheaded by the Workers League [whose findings were published under the title *Security and the Fourth International*] into the circumstances surrounding the assassination of Leon Trotsky, the first ever to be carried out by the Fourth International. [17]

The deepening crisis in the British Workers Revolutionary Party created difficulties for the Workers League. But the political and theoretical lessons drawn by the Workers League out of the struggle against Wohlforth's political betrayal, and the subsequent renewal within our party of the struggle against all forms of opportunism, prepared the party for the fight against the WRP's abandonment of Trotskyism.

Steiner was blind to these developments. By the time he wrote his letter, more than 20 years after leaving the Workers League, he seemed to remember nothing but his personal difficulties. "My love of life had disappeared," he wrote in his letter, "and with it any enthusiasm I still had for party work." He then recalled the circumstances of his departure from the Workers League:

> ... For me undoubtedly the low point came in October of 1978. I was awakened one morning with a phone call from our National Secretary, Dave North, asking me to come into the party office immediately. I remember arriving at the office and wondering what all the fuss was about. It was then that I was told the shocking news that comrade Tom Henehan had been killed at a youth dance the night before. Nothing could have prepared me for such news. ...
>
> ... For the next few weeks and months, I drifted politically. One day, I don't even remember exactly when, I left the movement.

There is no reason to doubt that Steiner was shaken by Tom Henehan's death. But there was one major factual error his account. Henehan was killed not in October 1978, but exactly one year earlier—in October 1977. The discrepancy is significant, for it resulted in an account of Steiner's departure from the Workers League in which the actual circumstances of his abandonment of revolutionary politics were misrepresented. [18] In fact, it was not the death of Henehan that directly precipitated Steiner's desertion. Rather, it was the decision taken by the Workers League, several months after Henehan's death, to relocate the party's political center to Detroit. The purpose of this relocation, which went altogether unmentioned in Steiner's letter, was to strengthen the party's identification with and involvement in the struggles of the working class in the important industrial centers of the Midwest. The preparations for this relocation, which began in the spring of 1978, were accompanied by intensive work on the drafting of a new perspectives resolution.

Steiner was unsettled by the personal implications of the relocation of the party to the Midwest and the reorganization of its work.He was attached to the radical middle-class milieu of New York City, and recognized that the establishment of a new party center in Detroit would lead to a change in the social complexion of the party and a far more intense day to day involvement in the struggles of the working class. The prospect of a change in his lifestyle was not one that he relished. And though Steiner was not under an obligation to leave New York, his distress over the impending relocation and his estrangement from the party's perspective became all too evident. In the autumn of 1978, as the first stages of the relocation were completed Steiner left the movement. [19]

The fact that Steiner's abandonment of revolutionary politics was, in the final analysis, an expression of a fundamentally middle-class social orientation was substantiated in Steiner's account of his reaction to the struggle that erupted in the ICFI in 1985. He wrote that

> These events animated me as nothing else had in the previous eight years. To say that I followed the developments in the IC with interest would be a gross understatement. I devoured every bit of information I could come by. I became an active supporter of the newly organized International Committee.

Steiner's letter noted that the struggle within the ICFI "had been waged not only on the immediate disagreements over political perspectives, but on the broader questions of Marxist theory." However, he made no reference whatever to the content of the theoretical disagreements—a significant omission given Steiner's history in the movement. It struck members of the Political Committee as particularly odd that he had nothing to say about the International Committee's extensive critique of Healy's distortion of materialist dialectics. One cannot avoid the retrospective suspicion that Steiner chose to avoid the issue because he did not agree—at the time of the writing of this letter in 1999—with the central thrust of the critique, i.e. that Healy's "practice of cognition" was developed on the basis of an idealist revision of Marxism.

Though Steiner stated that he "was tempted to throw in my lot with the movement once more," he eventually chose to remain outside the party despite his agreement with the struggle conducted by the International Committee. The explanation that he offered in his letter to the SEP Political Committee was surprisingly candid:

> In the end, I decided to remain a supporter instead of a member. My reasons for doing so were complex and not easy to articulate. In fact, I have probably never tried to consciously analyze them until this very minute. I believe what motivated me was a combination of circumstances. First, I was still nurturing my wounds from my previous experience in the movement. In my mind, the political disorientation that I had previously experienced was completely intertwined with my personal trauma from the 1977-78 period. Added to that was the new station in which I found myself. I had by the mid 80's established myself in a new professional career in which I was quite successful. I had entered the ranks of the comfortable middle class, and despite all my attempts at self-evasion, I knew that I did not want to rock the boat.
>
> Although I was politically in solidarity with the movement, my day to day life was far removed from the concerns of revolutionary socialism. I was part of a middle class New York culture.

There is little that needs to be added to Steiner's acknowledgment of his own complacent and basically conservative petty-bourgeois outlook. It speaks for itself. However, one could not help but be somewhat startled by his admission that he had never, until actually writing the August 1999 letter to the SEP, attempted to analyze his own reasons for remaining outside the party. By that point, 14 years had passed since the 1985 split in the ICFI. What, one must ask, was he doing with his brain during that long period? [20]

The final section of Steiner's letter was filled with high praise for the work of the party. Contrasting its milieu to the "fetid atmosphere" of the prevailing political and social environment, he described the public meetings he attended as "a breath of fresh air." He recalled his meetings with Nadezhda Joffe and Vadim Rogovin, and remarked that the "very existence of such people is a nagging embarrassment to those who have bought into the culture of self-aggrandizement." These meetings, which had so profound an impact on Steiner, took place in 1995—which,

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according to Steiner's latest version of events, was roughly mid-point in the political degeneration of the party.

Steiner went so far as to state that his attendance at party functions

inspired me to renew my interest in philosophy. Sometime in 1996 I embarked on an extensive study of Hegel, Marx and the entire tradition of Western philosophy. It was also probably not completely accidental that this period of my recent biography coincided with the development of the *World Socialist Web Site* and the transformation of the Workers League into the Socialist Equality Party. However one explains this conjunction, I began to appreciate the potential that could be harnessed through the new global communications media.

As he approached the end of his letter, Steiner stressed the immense impact of the party meeting that commemorated the 20th anniversary of the assassination of Tom Henehan. "It was then," he wrote "that I committed myself to raise the level of my contribution to the work of the movement. I had in mind some sort of journalistic contributions, the exact content of which remained vaguely defined."

In conclusion Steiner declared:

I have now come to the realization that the role I wish to play is that of a participant in the struggle for socialism. Nothing less will offer me the satisfaction of implementing theory into practice. That is the real essence of freedom.

Steiner's letter raised many questions among members of the SEP Political Committee. There was sharp disagreement with his assessment of the history of the Workers League in the 1970s. His approach to the objective experiences of the party betrayed an extreme and disorienting subjectivism. What he seemed to remember most about the events he referred to were their impact upon ... Alex Steiner! Moreover, his appraisal of the conflict within the Workers Revolutionary Party—notwithstanding his praise for the role of the International Committee—was superficial. The Political Committee was far from convinced that Steiner had worked through carefully and systematically the political and theoretical issues that were at the heart of the differences with Wohlforth in the 1970s and with the WRP leadership in the 1980s. While the Political Committee did not want to discourage Steiner, it was felt that it would be premature to readmit him into the SEP. Further discussion would be necessary.

VII. The February 2000 Aggregate Meeting of the SEP and Steiner's Articles on Heidegger

I preferred to speak to Steiner directly about the decision of the Political Committee, as I did not want him to draw the conclusion that the door was being closed on the possibility that his application might be accepted at some future date. Due to the pressure of work, it was not possible for me to arrange a meeting with Steiner for several months. However, in order to provide the best possible environment for a discussion and to demonstrate the SEP's genuine interest in developing a principled basis for future collaboration, I extended to Steiner an invitation to attend, as a guest, a national membership meeting in Detroit. He accepted my offer, and participated in the meeting on February 12, 2000.

Though my remarks were not prepared for Steiner's benefit, they addressed issues that were highly relevant to the theoretical differences that Steiner had raised in his letter of the previous June. In the opening section of my report, I stated:

The 20th century has just about come to an end—but we will not so quickly escape its legacy. The essential component of our political preparation for the upheavals of the new century will consist of a painstaking review and assimilation of the history of the 1900s. This assimilation will consist not only of the gathering of facts, but also—and even more profoundly—in the defense and reassertion of the great intellectual conquests that constitute the theoretical foundations of the international socialist movement.

Among the most critical of these is the Marxist, i.e., historical materialist, conception of the law-governed character of human socioeconomic development. By this, I do not intend to resurrect—in the manner of the formalistic theoreticians of the Second International—a mechanistic conception of history unfolding in a predictable sequence. This sort of formalistic presentation of historical materialism reflected within the intellectual milieu of the Second International a theoretical retreat, under the pressures of an environment dominated by political gradualism, from the far more profound, dialectical, conceptions of Marx and Engels. [21] The historical determinism of Marxism does not consist in the crude assertion of the "inevitability" of any given event. Rather, it insists that Social Being is a category of objective science.

In explaining why it was necessary to restate the fundamentals of Marxist theory, I said:

The philosophical core of the contemporary attack on Marxism is the denial of the concept of historical necessity. It is asserted that the October Revolution's claim of historical legitimacy was without foundation. Denouncing the Bolshevik claim that the social revolution arose of necessity from the logic of socioeconomic processes, the opponents of Marxism insist that it was, rather, an aberrant event—an accident that was merely the product of the interplay of malevolent intentions and peculiar circumstances. ...

What are the theoretical foundations of this attack on necessity, which presently pervades historical writing, most significantly in the work of the post-modernists? It articulates a major tendency in bourgeois thought that extends all the way back to the 19th century, i.e. in the right-wing reaction against the revolutionary historical and social implications of Hegel's and then Marx's thought—from Kierkegaard, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche to Heidegger.

I stressed that Marxist materialism is anathema to the main trends of bourgeois thought in the 20th century. "In opposition to the concept of a law-governed historical process," I noted, "bourgeois philosophy posits an essentially irrational world, in which atomized Beings grapple in despair to discover and assert their unique identity." I then called attention to the writings of Martin Heidegger, among the most important exponent of philosophical irrationalism in the 20th century.

In bringing my opening remarks to a conclusion, I stated that "all critical questions of political and social perspective can be worked out only on the basis of an understanding of history—of course, most directly, the history of the 20th century, but beyond that, of the whole law-governed character of the historical evolution of Social Being from its origins in nature itself." And then I quoted from Trotsky, who wrote in 1922 that

The materialist world outlook not only opens a wide window on the whole universe, but it also strengthens the will. It is also the only thing that makes contemporary man a man. He still depends, it is true, on difficult material conditions, but he already knows how to overcome them, and takes part consciously in the construction of the new society, based at once on the highest technical skill and the highest solidarity (*Problems of Everyday Life*, p. 272).

Steiner gave no indication that he disagreed with my remarks. Quite the opposite. When invited to speak, Steiner expressed strong agreement with the approach I had taken. [22] Arising from the philosophical issues that were raised at the SEP meeting, I proposed to Steiner that he write a series of articles addressing the controversy surrounding the life of Martin Heidegger, particularly the relationship between his irrationalist philosophy and his support for the Nazis after their accession to power. While Steiner/Brenner have referred several times to these articles, they have failed to mention how they came into being. I must confess that I

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had, in proposing this assignment to Steiner, something of an ulterior motive. I hoped that an engagement with Heidegger's subjective idealism would be of assistance in helping Steiner overcome the philosophical ambivalence toward materialism that he had expressed in his draft statement on a WSWS philosophy section and in his June 1999 letter. Steiner's articles were posted in early April 2000.

These articles, which clearly reflected the influence of the report at the national membership meeting and subsequent discussions, represented the high tide of Steiner's collaboration with the SEP. It is worth quoting from the concluding section of the final article:

One of the most curious philosophical trends in the postwar period has been the embrace of Heidegger by many left-leaning intellectuals. This is an extraordinarily complex subject to which we can hardly do justice in the scope of this presentation. We wish simply to sketch the epistemological kinship, despite the historical differences, between Heidegger and his contemporary sympathizers.

What has characterized the postwar intelligentsia in the West has been the wholesale abandonment of any identification with Marxism, humanism or any vestige of Enlightenment rationality. The hopes of a generation of radical intellectuals were trampled underneath the weight of the failed revolutionary movements of the late 1960s and early 1970s. It would be hard to underestimate the impact on the French intelligentsia in particular of the failure of the revolutionary upsurge of May-June 1968. Legions of former left intellectuals began a wholesale retreat from the Enlightenment vision of an emancipator rationality. ...

Holding the attempt to encompass in thought the terrible recent history of our time a failure, it was not a very big step for the postmodernists to appropriate the irrationalist tradition that turned its back on the Enlightenment. This is where the Heideggerians, postmodernists, deconstructionists and neo-pragmatists find a common ground. All these trends reject what they call the traditional conceptual thinking, "Philosophy" or "Science" with capital letters.

This was very well said by Steiner. And yet it would not be long before he would embrace the very positions that he had denounced in these articles. [23]

VIII. The Death of Jeff Goldstein

As the publication of the Heidegger articles demonstrated, the WSWS was willing to post articles by Steiner that advanced the struggle for dialectical materialism. Despite the existence of differences on political and theoretical questions, the record demonstrates that a serious and sustained effort was made to find ways of working together. However, these efforts were complicated by Steiner's social orientation. His interest in Marxism was largely of an abstract character. In his practice and outlook, he remained what he had been before he had joined the Workers League in the early 1970s—a left petty-bourgeois radical intellectual. Even in periods of generally cordial collaboration, there existed an undercurrent of tension between Steiner and the SEP rooted in basic issues of class and political orientation.

In June 2000, a former member of the Workers League, Jeff Goldstein, died in Las Vegas at the age of 58. He had participated in the founding of the Workers League in 1966. He used the pen name, Jeff Sebastian, and wrote numerous articles on economic matters for the *Bulletin*. He also made a significant contribution to the organization of the party's work on the West Coast in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Like Steiner, Goldstein left the Workers League during the Wohlforth crisis in 1973 and returned after the latter's resignation. In the autumn of 1974 Sebastian assumed the post of *Bulletin* editor. However, in March 1977 he left the movement. Sometime later, he moved to Las Vegas where he combined his skill in mathematics with his lifelong, and generally unhealthy, fascination with gambling to become a professional handicapper. He published a racing journal that acquired a small but devoted following. After Steiner left the Workers League, he and Jeff Goldstein reestablished their friendship.

Goldstein-Sebastian retained generally friendly though extremely limited relations with the SEP. We were, of course, saddened to learn of the death of our former comrade. Steiner went to Las Vegas to speak at the funeral of his close friend. Not long after, he sent me a copy of the obituary that he had written to memorialize the life of Sebastian.

Of course, a eulogy delivered at a graveside has standards of its own, which allow a more forgiving approach to the rules of objectivity. And yet, as I read Steiner's remarks, it seemed to me that he had pressed well beyond the appropriate limits. He sought to portray Goldstein's work as a handicapper as a masterful application of materialist dialectics, based on the achievements of Hegel and Marx.

Jeff's approach to handicapping was supremely philosophical, though I would guess that many of his readers were not aware of this. Jeff was a serious student of philosophy, though I doubt that he would have described himself in these terms. For Jeff was above all practical. For him the truth was always concrete. Theory is alive in its practical application. Thus Jeff found issues of jockeys, trainers and tracks not only fun, aesthetically pleasing, intellectually challenging, but also providing insights into profound philosophical truths, and I know it is these insights that he took most delight in.

When I initially received the text of Steiner's remarks, I sent him a brief note to express my condolences. For reasons of diplomacy, which I thought appropriate under the circumstances, I avoided any direct criticism of Steiner's remarks. But I did observe that "The dialectical method is a powerful instrument for the cognition of objective truth in all spheres of nature and society, but there are better uses to which it can be put than in the publication of a racing journal." I noted, in sorrow, that "Jeff had the potential to do so much more with his life."

I thought this would bring this unhappy matter to a close, but then Steiner submitted an expanded political obituary of Sebastian for publication on the *World Socialist Web Site*. This submission was rejected. I then learned from comrades in New York that Steiner was aggrieved by this decision. On August 13, 2000, I replied in a letter to his complaint:

Dear Alex:

Please excuse the delay in responding to your obituary of Jeff Goldstein. I have been told that you are disturbed by our failure to post the obituary on the *World Socialist Web Site* or to explain our reasons for not doing so. For the latter omission I apologize. We should have provided an explanation sooner—though, if you recall my earlier letter in which I commented on your remarks at Jeff's funeral, I had already indicated my differences with your assessment of the life of our old friend and former comrade.

Everyone who knew and worked with Jeff was saddened to hear of his premature death. None of us is entirely free of sentimentality, which inclines us upon receiving such news to recall the best and most appealing characteristics of the deceased. But as you are demanding an explanation of our reasons for not publishing your obituary, then I am obliged to write with complete frankness. I would like to think that this is what Jeff would have wanted.

There is no point making of Jeff something that he was not. He aspired to become a revolutionary Marxist, but he was unable to transcend the milieu and outlook of petty-bourgeois radical politics that he absorbed during his intellectually formative years. It is to his credit that he embraced Trotskyism in the mid-1960s and joined the International Committee of the Fourth International. He made a contribution to the early development of the Workers League. However, Jeff, along with a

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significant section of the generation of radicals to which he belonged, entered into political crisis as the civil rights and anti-war protest movement disintegrated. The restabilization of capitalism, abetted by the betrayals of the Stalinists, social democrats and Pabloites, demanded of Marxists a long-term perspective and the ability to fight for it. In this situation, Jeff's serious weaknesses—especially his inclination toward skepticism, even cynicism—rather than his strengths, came to the fore.

I do not agree with your statement, "Jeff was one of many senior members who were forced out by Wohlforth." It is no doubt true that Wohlforth's reprehensible conduct exacerbated the crisis in the Workers League. But to lay all the blame for the events of 1973-74 on Wohlforth is to exaggerate the latter's political significance. The question that must be asked is why no one in the senior leadership, including Jeff, was prepared to conduct any struggle against Wohlforth. In retrospect, it is clear that those who left the movement in that period were manifesting, though in less malignant form, elements of the same political crisis that overtook the national secretary of the Workers League.

In the aftermath of Wohlforth's removal, Jeff—along with several others, including Lucy St. John, who had left the movement in 1973-74—rejoined the Workers League. But virtually all these people, and finally Jeff himself, left the party within less than three years. Whatever the unique circumstances that attended the departure of this or that individual from the Workers League, Jeff's own resignation was part of a broader political phenomenon in the United States—the demoralization and collapse of the mass protest movement of the 1960s and early 1970s.

The remaining 23 years of Jeff's life must be seen as a terrible waste of time and talent. I could not help but cringe with embarrassment as I read in your obituary of Jeff's relocation to Las Vegas in the mid-1980s, where "he was able to pursue a life-long dream—to become a professional horseracing handicapper. This was certainly an unlikely occupation for someone with his political history..." I should say so!

It is not a matter of condemning Jeff for his fascination with horseracing and gambling. But regardless of one's estimation of handicapping as a career choice, it represented, in the context of Jeff's political history, a terrible degeneration. At an earlier point in your obituary you refer to his "mastery" of Marxian economics. But then, writing of his attraction to the "romance of gambling," you inform the reader that Jeff "was not immune to the illusions generated by the capitalist system—above all the illusion that it is possible to beat the system through one's individual talents." In other words, Jeff's life in Las Vegas was not unrelated to the erosion of his former revolutionary outlook.

It would not be inappropriate for the WSWS to note the passing of a founding member of the Workers League. We are certainly willing to do so. But whatever our personal feelings about Jeff, it would be wrong to either exaggerate the achievements of his political career or downplay the depth of his subsequent political degeneration. Jeff played a secondary role in the early history—in some respects, the pre-history—of the Workers League. The greater portion of his adult life belongs to the years after he left the party.

I regret having to write to you in terms that you may consider harsh. But the fondness that others and I felt for this former comrade does not relieve us of the responsibility to deal objectively with the history of our movement.

With warmest regards

David

Steiner did not reply to this letter. But I am sure that he understood that much of what I had written about Jeff Goldstein could have served as an assessment of himself.

To be continued

See Marxism, History & Socialist Consciousness

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Notes:

1. Steiner's 1997 letter presents an assessment of theoretical issues diametrically opposed to the position now being argued in the Steiner/Brenner documents. In the letter cited above Steiner values my lecture as "especially topical" because it challenges the prevailing and influential positions of the postmodernists. And yet, in *Objectivism or Marxism*, written in 2006, Steiner/Brenner present an entirely different assessment. There, postmodernism is dismissed as "a fad on the wane," barely deserving the attention of Marxists. "Twenty years ago," Steiner/Brenner declaim, "it would have mattered to mount an attack on postmodernism; today it is an exercise in flogging, if not a dead horse, at least a very puny one" (Cited in *Marxism, History & Socialist Consciousness*, p. 19).

What is also particularly noteworthy about the 1997 letter is the connection Steiner makes, in his reference to Richard Rorty, between pragmatism and postmodernism. Yet, in both *Objectivism or Marxism* and most recently in MWHH, Steiner/Brenner denounce me for stressing the relationship between these two forms of subjective-idealist and irrationalist philosophy!

Steiner/Brenner write: "When North says that ‘postmodernism is itself a major tendency within contemporary pragmatic philosophy' *he is in effect saying that by attacking postmodernism he has therefore disposed of pragmatism and we no longer need be concerned with it*. [MWHH, p. 88, emphasis in the original] Here Steiner/Brenner misrepresent what I wrote in order to belittle the link, upon which Steiner himself had insisted in 1997, between pragmatism and postmodernism. What I actually wrote in *Marxism, History & Socialist Consciousness* is:

"...First of all, I have nowhere stated or even implied that postmodernism has *replaced* pragmatism. It is, rather, a variety of pragmatic thought—indeed, one that takes the subjective idealist, voluntarist and even irrational elements that are present in classical pragmatic thought—dating all the way back to James—to their most extreme and reactionary conclusion. To suggest, as your comment does, that postmodernism represents a fundamentally different species of theoretical thought is to make a major concession to pragmatism, to shield pragmatism from the intellectual embarrassment that it suffers on account of the gross excesses of its postmodernist progeny." (*Marxism, History & Socialist Consciousness*, p. 19) [return]

2. Steiner's endorsement of my lecture on the Enlightenment is totally contradicted by Steiner/Brenner's condemnation of my defense of the Enlightenment in their most recent documents. [return]

3. Upon reviewing *Alienation and Revolution* more recently in the context of Steiner's subsequent evolution, it became evident that his present conceptions found embryonic expression in this essay. The theoretical framework of Steiner's essay developed out of Marcuse's existential and ahistorical conception of "man's essential nature," which Steiner adopts uncritically. Thus, we encounter in Steiner's document the claim that "Man's essential nature is defined by the reciprocal interaction between man's needs and his capacities." Later, he asserts that "Marx's conception of man's essential nature has unfortunately remained an incomprehensible black box to all but a few commentators." In this context, Steiner refers specifically to the work of Horkheimer, Theodore Adorno "and most significantly, Marcuse." Steiner's presentation, like that of Marcuse, rips Marx's 1844 Manuscripts out of its historical and intellectual context. Steiner's essay goes so far as to interpret Marxism as an exposition of the teleological unfolding of "man's essential nature." This has nothing whatsoever to do with Marxism, which emphatically rejects teleology. As Marx deepened his critique of Hegelian idealism and the anthropologism of Feuerbach, he ceased to speak of a "human essence" or "essential nature" existing above and outside the historical development of man's social relations of production. Thus, in his *Theses on Feuerbach*, written in 1845, Marx states that "the human essence is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality it is the

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ensemble of the social relations" (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1973, p. 64). In subsequent writings, on the basis of the newly-elaborated materialist conception of history, Marx and Engels subjected to withering criticism attempts to dissolve the real, existing, historically-specific man, conditioned intellectually and practically by definite social relations of production, into a philosophically-conceived abstract man. In this regard, their critique of Max Stirner ("Saint Sancho") is especially apposite. Stirner

presents any object or relation whatsoever as that which is alien to the ego, as the alienation of the ego; on the other hand, Saint Sancho can, as we shall see, also present any object or relation as something created by the ego *and belonging to it*. Apart, first of all from the arbitrary way in which he presents, or does not present, any relation as a relation of alienation (for everything can be made to fit in the above equations), we see already here that his only concern is to present all actual relations, [and also] actual individuals, [as alienated] (to retain this philosophical [expression] for the time being), to [transform] them into the wholly [abstract] phrase of alienation (*The German Ideology*, *Collected Works*, Volume 5 (New York, International Publishers, 1976), p. 281, brackets in the original text).

Marx's historical materialist critique and reworking of the concept of alienation is most richly developed in his *Grundrisse*, written in 1857-58,in which he insists that the individuality of man and his alienation is the outcome of an historically-determined social process. As Marx explains:

...Universally developed individuals, whose social relations, as their own communal [*gemeinschaftlich*] relations, are hence also subordinated to their own communal control, are no product of nature, but of history. The degree and the universality of the development of wealth where *this* individuality becomes possible presupposes production on the basis of exchange values as a prior condition, whose universality produces not only the alienation of the individual from himself and from others, but also the universality and the comprehensiveness of his relations and capacities (*Grundrisse: Introduction to the Critique of Political Economy*, tr. Martin Nicolaus (Middlesex, England, 1973) p. 162).

Alienation and Revolution is posted on the Steiner/Brenner web site. It is dated May 1997, but the version presented on the web site is the substantially redrafted document that was completed in early 1999. [return]

4. The opposition of idealism to materialism found expression in the writings of Plato. According to Diogenes Laertius, Plato expressed the desire to burn all the writings of Democritus, whose atomistic theory laid the foundations for a materialist understanding of the nature. [return]

5. http://www.wsws.org/articles/1999/jun1999/balk-j14.shtml [return]

6. The obvious changes in Steiner's political relations with the International Committee and his misrepresentation of his earlier relations with the SEP require that I place this and other correspondence in the public domain. [return]

7. The centrality of this question and its philosophical implications was initially elaborated by Friedrich Engels in his immensely influential essay, *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical Germany Philosophy*. He wrote:

The great basic question of all philosophy, especially of more recent philosophy, is that concerning the relation of thinking and being. ...

... The question of the position of thinking in relation to being, a question which, by the way, had played a great part also in the scholasticism of the Middle Ages, the question: which is primary, spirit or nature—that question, in relation to the church, was sharpened into this: Did God create the world or has the world been in existence eternally?

The answers which the philosophers gave to this question split them into two great camps. Those who asserted the primacy of spirit to nature and, therefore, in the last instance, assumed world creation in some form or other ... comprised the camp of idealism. The others, who regarded nature as primary, belonged to the various schools of materialism" (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1973, p. 23). [return]

8. "Marxism, Pragmatism and Revisionism," *Fourth International*, Autumn 1975, p. 109. [return]

9. *Trotskyism Versus Revisionism, Volume Seven: The Fourth International and the Renegade Wohlforth* (New York: Labor Publications, 1984), p. 93. [return]

10. As Trotsky wrote in his essay introducing the first issue of the *Under the Banner of Marxism*, the Soviet theoretical journal founded in 1922:

"...Human society itself, both by its historical roots and by its contemporary economy, extends into the world of natural history. We must see contemporary man as a link in the whole development that starts from the first tiny organic cell, which came in its turn from the laboratory of nature, where the physical and chemical properties of matter act" (*Problems of Everyday Life* [New York: Monad Press, 1979], p. 272). [return]

11. Let us compare this assessment, written in June 1999, to Steiner/Brenner's present claim, which we have already cited, that "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." The reader will also notice the glaring contrast between Steiner's highly favorable estimate of the *World Socialist Web Site* and its revolutionary potential in 1999 and the contemptuous dismissal of the WSWS in the most recent documents of Steiner/Brenner. [return]

12. James Burnham, it should be recalled, sought to discredit Marxism in precisely this way. Justifying his unwillingness to engage in a debate with Trotsky over matters relating to dialectical materialism, he declared, "I stopped arguing about religion long ago." To which Trotsky replied, "As I understand this, your words imply that the dialectic of Marx, Engels and Lenin belongs to the sphere of religion" (*In Defense of Marxism* [London: New Park Publications, 1971], p. 91). [return]

13. The most detailed answer to Novack's denunciation of philosophical sectarianism appeared in a 1973 statement by the International Committee of the Fourth International:

But what does Novack mean by sectarianism *in philosophy?* In this field, Marxism certainly does *not* make compromises. In the sphere of philosophy, every difference must be analyzed and fought through to the end. Here the basic foundations of the movement are involved ...

It is only on the firm basis of dialectical materialism that flexibility in tactics is possible, and that periodic shifts in strategy can be undertaken. There is no question of *tactics* in philosophy. The position of dialectical materialism, that theory is united with practice in and through the struggle to change the world, is a culmination of and at the same time a break with all philosophy before Marx (a negation in the Hegelian sense). All philosophy since Hegel is either part of the developing theory of Marxism or is bourgeois apologetics developed in struggle *against* dialectical materialism.

The question of ‘sectarianism' can be raised here only by those who propose to blur the line between dialectical materialism and bourgeois philosophy (*Trotskyism Versus Revisionism*, Volume Six (London: New Park, 1975], p. 191). [return]

14. In both *Marxism or Objectivism* and MWHH, Steiner incorrectly gives 1998 as the year of his application for membership in the SEP. This error is repeated in an addendum to MWHH, dated April 5, 2008,which Steiner/Brenner have posted on their web site. It is not entirely clear why Steiner repeatedly misstates the date by one year, as one must assume that he has copies of his correspondence to the SEP and me. However, it should be noted that Steiner repeatedly asserts—most recently in the April 2008 addendum—that his application was submitted before there had emerged any differences over philosophical issues. The record shows, however, that Steiner applied for membership after significant differences

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had been revealed in his letter of June 25, 1999. One must conclude that Steiner has changed the year of his application to fit the needs of his present political narrative. [return]

15. It is true that the Black Panthers described "Amerika" as a fascist state. But far more important in giving this disoriented "theory" intellectual credibility were the writings and speeches of Herbert Marcuse. He delivered a lecture at the New School, while Steiner was a student, in which he claimed that among the American "people at large, a configuration of political and psychological conditions point to the existence of a proto-fascist syndrome" (*Counter-Revolution and Revolt* [Boston: Beacon Press, 1972], p. 25). [return]

16. These words, in which he fondly recalled the impact on his own development of "reading, attending lectures and many, many hours of discussion," should be compared to Steiner's present contemptuous dismissal of the efforts of the SEP to educate workers: "How is a worker to gain an understanding of the historical role of the unions?" he asks sarcastically. "Presumably this will come from reading the WSWS or attending a party lecture. ... This sterile propagandism is completely alien to the traditions of Trotskyism" (MWHH, p. 119). In other words, lectures and reading and discussion are for intellectuals only. [return]

17. Steiner's account of the practical work conducted during this work was a travesty of the actual record of the party's work and achievements. It was precisely during the period that the Workers League established a significant presence among the most militant sections of the working class—especially the coal miners of West Virginia and Kentucky, among whom the party won a wide following during two major national coal strikes. The second strike, in 1977-78, lasted more than 100 days and culminated in the successful defiance of the anti-labor Taft-Hartley Act invoked by President Carter. Factions of the party's industrial arm, the Trade Union Alliance for a Labor Party, were active throughout the country. In New York, Ed Winn, a militant transit worker and member of the Workers League, was elected in December 1977 to a seat on the union's executive board. His campaign was based on an explicitly socialist program. And among the youth, the campaign launched by the Young Socialists in May 1976 for the freedom of Gary Tyler, a victim of a frame-up in Louisiana, won substantial support among young people all over the country. It is no doubt the case that the demands placed upon party members were substantial. But let us keep in mind that the Workers League was a revolutionary socialist organization. [return]

18. Aside from Steiner's confusion as to the year of Tom Henehan's death, one is also astonished by his declaration that "Nothing could have prepared me for such news." As a matter of fact, the party's investigation into the assassination of Leon Trotsky, and its exposure of the massive penetration of government agents into the Socialist Workers Party, had led to a steady escalation of threats of violence against the Workers League. In the months prior to the killing of Henehan, there had been frequent discussions, in which Steiner participated, of the need for greater attention to security by party members. After Henehan's death on October 16, 1977, the Workers League publicly rejected claims in the New York media that the shooting had been merely a "senseless killing." It denounced the shooting as a politically motivated assassination and campaigned widely in the labor movement for an investigation of the crime. Organizations representing several million workers in the United States, Canada and in other countries endorsed this demand. For three years the New York City Police Department sheltered the killers. But this campaign led to the arrest in 1980, and subsequent convictions, of the two men who had shot Henehan at a public event. [return]

19. Three months later, in January 1979, after spending less than one week in Detroit, Frank Brenner left the party without any explanation. [return]

20. There is another point that must be made. In explaining his decision not to rejoin the party, Steiner, quite correctly, placed central emphasis on the impact of the social milieu upon his general outlook: "I had entered the ranks of the comfortable middle class, and ... I knew that I did not want to rock the boat." So when it comes to dealing with his own political evolution, Steiner stressed the social environment and class pressures. But compare this approach to that which he takes, in *Marxism or Objectivism* and MWHH, when dealing with the collapse of the Second International and the fate of individuals such as Plekhanov. In that case, Steiner insists that the fundamental cause of their political failures lay in their inadequate understanding of the dialectical method. My position—based on the writings of Lenin and Trotsky—that the essential cause of the collapse of the Second International and the lamentable role played by so many of its leaders was to be found in the socio-economic and political contradictions of their epoch (which, to a great extent, determined the specific character of their theoretical work) has been denounced by Steiner as "objectivism." [return]

21. Thus, in Steiner's presence, I linked the theoretical degeneration of the Second International to objective social and political conditions. He made no objection at the time. [return]

22. In neither *Marxism or Objectivism* nor MWHH do Steiner/Brenner refer to the February 2000 meeting, let alone acknowledge Steiner's personal participation. [return]

23. Apropos Steiner's later claims that reactionary political positions held by representatives of the Frankfurt School should not impinge on our appreciation of their theoretical work, it is worth reviewing his reply in the WSWS essay to similar apologies made on behalf of Heidegger:

> ...Yet even if one concedes that there are cases—particularly in technical areas removed from political and sociological concern—where theoretical work can be pursued unrelated to a person's biography or social status, it does not follow that such a dichotomy is present in the work of any particular theorist. It would be particularly surprising to find a discordance between the political activity of a man such as Heidegger and his theorizing, knowing that his theorizing was itself intimately concerned with personal and political activity.

These words apply no less to the representatives of the Frankfurt School—especially given the fact that they were politically engaged theorists. [return]

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