

The Political and Intellectual Odyssey of Alex Steiner—Part 3

David North
24 October 2008

The following is the final part of a three-part essay. The first part was posted October 22 and the second part was posted October 23. Click here to download the complete essay in PDF.

IX. Steiner and Science

Steiner did not raise again the question of membership in the SEP. Nevertheless our relations remained cordial. On November 13, 2000, I received an e-mail message in which he offered his congratulations “on your excellent coverage of the election crisis.” He concluded his note with a request that we find time to meet when I came to New York. In fact, we had a friendly discussion when I met with Steiner during a trip to New York in May 2001.

It was during the following year, in 2002, that it became evident that Steiner was in the midst of a decisive shift in his theoretical orientation. During a private trip to Germany, Steiner invited himself to give a lecture on philosophy to members of the Partei für Soziale Gleichheit (PSG) in Berlin. The German comrades, not wishing to be inhospitable, provided him with an audience. The subject of his lecture was “Dialectics and the Crisis of Science.”[1] In the course of a wide-ranging and chaotic survey of the history of science, Steiner seemed intent on minimizing, if not entirely dismissing, the role of empirical research in the development of scientific knowledge. He asserted that the place of experimental procedure in the birth of modern science, like the role of ancient atomists, has taken on a mythic status. To properly appreciate the role of experimentation in the scientific revolution, it is necessary to disentangle fact from myth.

The first thing to be said here is that experimentation and observation are always performed within a historical context, one in which we are informed by theories and concepts of what we are looking for. In this sense we can say that all experimentation and observation is “theory-laden” to begin with. This was an insight that the late MIT professor Thomas Kuhn developed and he was absolutely correct to point this out against the prevailing orthodoxy that saw experiment and observation as some kind of prior state of innocence from which we build generalizations.

The myth of “pure” experimentation, or “pure” observation as the bedrock of modern science is one that survives to the present day. It is one of the tenets of modern empiricist philosophy that I shall describe presently. We have noted that the creators of the new science, men such as Bruno, Galileo, Newton, did not think of themselves as experimenters who then derived generalizations based on their experiments. They thought of themselves as Platonists who sought to discover the mathematical laws that governed nature. Certainly experiment and observation play a role in the work of Galileo for instance. For Galileo, however, experiments such as the dropping of weights from a high tower

were meant to validate his theory. It was not the basis for his discovery of his theory. Furthermore it has been pointed out by some historians that Galileo did not have the technical ability to measure the elapsed time of falling bodies with sufficient precision to prove his case. In fact, throughout the history of science it seems that great discoveries rarely if ever follow the supposed path prescribed by the “experimentalist” school of empirical philosophy.

Offering another example to diminish the significance of observation and experimentation in the development of science, Steiner invoked the example of Einstein, who was said to be wholly unimpressed when told that an experiment had provided the first empirical confirmation of his Special Theory of Relativity. Showing not the slightest bit of excitement he said, “But I knew that the theory is correct.”

When the written essay that formed the basis of the lecture was circulated by Steiner among ICFI members, it encountered strong objections—especially from party members with advanced degrees in various fields of science. They recognized that Steiner was pontificating on matters far beyond his level of competence. He lacked the training and knowledge to substantiate his sweeping judgments on the history of science. Chris Talbot, a university mathematician and long-time member of the International Committee in Britain, wrote a memo to Steiner. In friendly and rather gentle terms, Talbot called to Steiner’s attention significant errors in his arguments. Talbot, for example, cautioned Steiner:

... I don’t think your suggestion (following I presume the approach of [Alexandre] Koyré) that Bruno, Galileo, Newton and the other creators of the new science saw themselves as Platonists will stand up to serious study. I’m not saying that Platonist ideas (in many forms) did not play a role, but in the last few decades literally hundreds of books and thousands of papers have been written on Galileo as well as all the other giant figures of the Scientific Revolution that do not substantiate Koyré’s approach. (I found a useful guide to the vast literature in *The Scientific Revolution and the Origins of Modern Science*, by John Henry, Macmillan, 1997).

One does not have to be an empiricist, arguing that scientific ideas always follow on from experiments, to point out the key role that observation and experiment played in that period. The view that Galileo could not have carried out some of his experiments, though fashionable for a while, has been refuted by the work of Stillman Drake and by experimenters who have carefully reproduced the experiments (see for example the revised edition of *The Birth of a New Physics* by I. Bernard Cohen, especially the supplements).

Also although obviously I am opposed to “vulgar Marxism of the Stalinist camp,” I cannot accept your downplaying the influence of Democritus and Epicurus. For example, Pierre Gassendi, one of the most influential figures of the 17th century, based his work on Epicurus. Even Koyré admitted in his later writing that he had underestimated their importance.

Talbot then made a prescient warning:

In wanting to deal a blow at the “experimentalist,” empiricist school of thought I think you’re in danger of ignoring approaches to the development of science that are completely opposed to Marxism. I mean the various postmodern perspectives and widespread anti-scientific moods that you attack very well in your article on Heidegger.

I’ve mentioned the idea that Galileo didn’t really do his experiments. Another is the use of the Einstein quote: “But I knew the theory was correct.” (The quote is taken from Ilse Rosenthal-Schneider, a student of Einstein’s in 1919, from her reminiscences. It refers to Einstein’s response in hearing that Eddington’s eclipse expedition that measured the bending of light-rays by the sun confirmed the General Theory of Relativity.) It is a favorite reference for those who want to prove that scientific knowledge is entirely relative, that it is just one more “narrative,” and that its verification by observation and experiment are an empiricist myth opposed by the great scientist Einstein. ...

The same issue arises with your favorable reference to Thomas Kuhn. That all experimentation and observation is “theory laden” to begin with can easily be interpreted as support for complete relativism. While Kuhn did some serious work on the history of science (such as his study “Black Body Radiation and the Quantum Discontinuity”) his more philosophical writings—particularly his theme in “The Structure of Scientific Revolutions” that one scientific theory replaces another in a “revolution” such that the two theories are “incommensurable”—have become central to postmodern attacks on science (see for example Alan Sokal’s “Intellectual Impostures”).

Steiner’s reply assumed the form of extensive critical notations that he appended to Talbot’s letter. While conceding several factual points, the notes clearly indicated a further distancing of his views from a materialist world outlook. This found the most striking expression in his claim that Talbot had failed to appreciate the substantial contribution of religion, mysticism and magic to the development of science.

...There is however another influence—one that was little known until recent scholarship—I mean the influence of the Hermetic tradition and magical ideas. The story of the birth of 17th century science is incomplete without a discussion of the mystical sources that animated the great pioneers. In the case of Bruno, an excellent book that discusses the influence of the Hermetic tradition on the new science are [sic] “Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition” by Frances Yates.

Steiner’s attraction to the work of Yates was significant, as she had been in the forefront of efforts to discredit interpretations of the scientific revolution that emphasized the incompatibility of scientific and religious world views. Frances Yates (1899-1981) devoted decades of scholarship to demonstrating that religion and the belief in occult forces provided a major impulse for the emergence of scientific thought. Intent on muting the materialist tone of Bruno’s work, Yates’ thesis argued that his interest in the scientific discoveries of his own time was contingent upon the magical philosophy of an earlier era. His allegiance to Copernicus, she maintained, was religious rather than scientific in its origins. Bruno’s execution, therefore, was to be understood not as the response of the Inquisition to a philosophical and scientific challenge, but rather to a form of religious heresy connected to Bruno’s involvement with hermeticism.[2] Yates wrote in a compelling style, and significantly influenced, especially in the United States and Britain, Bruno scholarship. But her work has been subjected to trenchant criticism.[3]

Steiner also embraced an interpretation of the work of Isaac Newton that placed central emphasis on his interest in alchemy.

Bruno’s interest in magic and alchemy has been known for centuries, although historians downplayed them. In the case of Newton, little of his interest in the occult, magic and other works were known until fairly recently. Betty Jo Dobbs,[4] in *The Janus Faces of Genius* and other works has done much to transform our understanding of Newton. It turns out that Newton spent more time on alchemical experiments than on

physics and his physical science was conceived by him as an expression of his mystical religious beliefs. Dobbs and the historian you [Talbot] mentioned, I. Bernard Cohen, have had an ongoing dispute as to whether Newton’s alchemical interest was relevant to his scientific endeavors. It seems to me that a dispute such as this can only be adjudicated on the basis of the historical evidence and not on some a priori notion of how Newtonian science must have developed. While I do not presume to pass judgment on this ongoing dispute, I think that Dobbs theory is intriguing and should not be dismissed out of hand.

Again, as with his previous fascination with Yates, one could not but wonder why Steiner would find Dobbs’ theory so “intriguing.” One reviewer, by no means hostile to her work, stated that “The overall result of Dobbs’ endeavor is that she now presents a religious interpretation of Newton’s alchemy embedded in a religious interpretation of his science at large.”[5] Why did this reinterpretation strike a chord with Steiner? In the dispute between Dobbs and I. Bernard Cohen, there is really no question as to where Steiner’s sympathies lie. For a man who is so utterly contemptuous of any dependence of theory upon empirical verification, it is curious that Steiner should inform Talbot that the question of the role of alchemy in the development of Newtonian physics “can only be adjudicated on the basis of the historical evidence and not on some a priori notion of how Newtonian science must have developed.” As a matter of fact, Steiner ignores the historical evidence. But beyond that, the problem of the relation of religion to science is precisely the sort of question that requires a philosophically informed insight into the underlying issues. The anti-rationalist implications of the efforts (anticipated by Yates) to relativize the relation between pre-Enlightenment magical traditions and science have been well understood by commentators on the debate over hermetics and alchemy.[6]

Moreover, in considering the question of the relation of alchemy to science, the details of Newton’s personal interest in alchemy, not to mention his ardent belief in God, are of decidedly secondary importance. Newton was a man of his time, as Bruno was of his. They, as individuals, could not simply step outside the world in which they lived. Concepts and modes of thought inherited from the past exerted a residual influence upon even the greatest minds of their ages. But in the final analysis, as the development of chemistry required its liberation from alchemy, the elaboration of science and its appropriate methodology demanded a break with a religious worldview. Notwithstanding the contradictions in the intellectual development of one or another scientist, the fundamental and irreconcilable antagonism between science and religion asserted itself—often partially and ambiguously in individuals, but completely and irreconcilably in the historical process as a whole.[7]

It may seem odd that the role of hermeticism in the Inquisition’s execution of Bruno and that of alchemy in the physics of Newton should emerge as significant issues. But the attention being given here to Steiner’s approach to the history of science is justified to the extent that it sheds significant light on the evolution of his own theoretical and political outlook. In tracing the progression, or retrogression, of his intellectual conceptions, we are doing what Steiner should have done himself before lashing out wildly against the International Committee. Steiner’s attraction to the arguments of Dobbs and Yates—which endowed religion and mysticism with a progressive role and legitimized a reading of history that assigned to the irrational a significant place in the history of science—indicated that he was rapidly shedding whatever remained of his previous commitment to a materialist understanding of the development of history and consciousness. There was clearly a connection between his newfound regard for the contribution of hermeticism and alchemy to the development of science and his emerging susceptibility to the argument that utopian myths can play a decisive role in the development of socialist consciousness. In both cases, there is a retreat from science, from objectivity, from rationality, from materialism and from Marxism.[8]

In this context, it is especially notable that Steiner, in his discussion of the origins of modern science, ignored Engels' insistence that the decisive factor in the development of science in the 16th and 17th centuries was not the free development of thought—to say nothing of its more mystical and occult forms—but rather the growth of the forces of production.[9] The productive and economic foundation of the emergence of science was explicitly rejected by Yates, who presented a frankly idealist explanation of this process.[10]

Steiner's neglect of Engels' essential text was not a mere oversight. His attraction to Yates' idealist thesis reflected the further distancing of his own conceptions from the materialist outlook upheld by Engels. In a later section of his reply to Talbot, Steiner repeated the criticism of Engels that he had made in 1999.

I have always thought that Engels' high level summaries should be used with caution. As a summary at a very high level for a popular presentation, Engels' formulation may prove useful. The problem however has been that Engels' statements, through no fault of his, have been misused, particularly by the Stalinists, to paint a picture of the history of philosophy that is completely false. The entire history of philosophy is examined as if the sole question at issue has been that of idealism vs. materialism. This first of all ignores the fact that there have been many other critical questions in dispute in the history of philosophy and they are not reducible to the materialism vs. idealism paradigm.

This is a distortion of the Marxist conception of the development of philosophy. No Marxist has claimed that the relationship between materialism and idealism is the “sole question at issue” in the history of philosophy. That would obviously be a false statement. Engels maintained that it was the *basic* question, which is a very different matter. This conclusion was arrived at on the basis of a study of the history of philosophy. Over the past 2500 years philosophers have dealt with a wide range of questions, including, as Steiner pointed out, the relation of the “one and the many” and that of free will versus determinism. Let us consider another issue from a more contemporary period. In his *Myth of Sisyphus*, the existential philosopher Albert Camus claimed that the only philosophical problem that deserves the attention of modern man is that of suicide, that is, whether life is worth living. For existentialism, this problem transcended the issue of the relationship of being and consciousness. However, the examination of this and other critical issues, including those relating to morality and ethics, leads inexorably, at the most fundamental level of analysis, to answers of either a materialist or idealist character.

Defending his rejection of Engels' definition of the basic question of philosophy, Steiner argued that Marxism is a “qualitatively heterogeneous” philosophy, combining within itself both materialist and idealist tendencies.

...Ultimately, the development of philosophy, allied with the sciences, does lead to a fundamentally materialist outlook, but one that contains all the richness, of all previous philosophy, both idealist and materialist and various shades in between. If, as Hegel said, Truth is the Whole, then we can draw no other conclusion.

This assessment of the history of philosophy is essentially anti-Marxist. It is one thing to explain, with scrupulous attention to the historical context, the contribution made by certain forms of idealist philosophy—in particular the school of classical German idealism—to the development of Marxism, as Engels did in his *Ludwig Feuerbach*. It is quite another to suggest, as Steiner does here, that Marxism is a heterogeneous world outlook, combining in some indistinct manner idealism and materialism. The phrase he employs—“contains all the richness, of all previous philosophy, both idealist and materialist and various shades in between”—[Skepticism? Agnosticism?—] is fatuous jargon which muddies, if not obliterates, the distinction between materialism and idealism.[11]

Steiner then proceeded to shift away substantially from the emphasis he

had placed in earlier documents on the struggle against postmodernism. Replying to Talbot's criticism that he [Steiner] was adapting to postmodernism, Steiner declared:

If you are maintaining that postmodernism today represents a bigger threat than empiricism and positivism, then I think you are wrong both factually and historically.

Ironically, for all his ritualistic denunciations of empiricism, Steiner's belittling of the intellectual problem posed by postmodernism was based on the most crudely empirical and pragmatic considerations. Relying on his own rough and ready calculations, Steiner argued that empiricists outnumbered postmodernists.

A survey of the situation on the universities today may help us get a handle on current intellectual trends. Particularly in North America and Britain, the stranglehold of analytic philosophy and positivism on philosophy departments remains firmly in place. It is true that the postmodernists have taken over some literature departments along with a proliferation of ethnic studies, cultural studies and other disciplines rooted in cultural relativism. And postmodernists do make a token presence in some philosophy and sociology departments. But the bulk of the humanities studies are firmly in the camp of positivism and empiricism.

The importance of philosophical trends cannot be correctly assessed on the basis of this sort of scorekeeping. Whether empiricists or postmodernists occupy more university chairs is not the decisive question. Far more significant is the objective content of postmodern thought—that is, the response it gives to essential philosophical problems—and its relationship to critical issues of the contemporary epoch. Eclectically drawing upon various retrograde trends in bourgeois thought, including pragmatism, postmodernism has arisen largely as an attempt to destroy Marxism by striking at its most essential propositions—above all, the objectivity of cognition and the concept of objective truth. Postmodernism goes beyond traditional skepticism in that it not only questions and denies the possibility of attaining truth; postmodernist thought denounces and subjects to ridicule all intellectual projects that aspire to objective truth. On this basis it has sought with some success to inculcate within the intellectual environment an outlook of boundless cynicism and demoralization.[12] The involvement of so many ex-radicals (including Stalinists and former Trotskyists) in this reactionary intellectual enterprise has contributed to its destructive impact, as postmodernism is broadly identified as a variety of left and even neo-Marxist thought.

IX. Steiner's Return to the Frankfurt School and the “New Left”

It is clear that by this point, in 2002, Steiner had more or less formulated in his own mind the conceptions upon which he would launch his attack on the International Committee. The shift that he had made in his philosophical positions was accompanied by the development of a new political agenda—or, to be somewhat more precise, the readoption of the old one that he had rejected upon joining the Trotskyist movement in 1970. Having decisively “liberated” himself intellectually from whatever had previously remained of his commitment to the theoretical heritage of Marxism, Steiner began retracing the steps of his own intellectual biography. The logic of this movement backwards found expression in his embrace of utopianism, his rediscovery of Marcuse and other denizens of the Frankfurt school, and the beginning of his political partnership with Frank Brenner.[13]

In *Marxism, History & Socialist Consciousness* I have dealt at length with the treatment of utopianism in the writings of Steiner/Brenner.[14] However, in order to complete this review of Steiner's political evolution, it is necessary to examine his opening intervention in the discussion of

this issue. In 2002, there had been an exchange of correspondence between Nick Beams, the national secretary of the Socialist Equality Party in Australia, and Brenner on the question of utopianism. Steiner wrote to Steve Long, a leading member of the Partei für Soziale Gleichheit (PSG) in Germany, in support of Brenner's espousal of utopianism. Long replied to Steiner on December 30, 2002, defending Beams' distinction, rooted in the theoretical traditions of Marxism, between utopianism and scientific socialism.

Steiner attended the national conference organized by the Socialist Equality Party on March 30, 2003 in opposition to the war in Iraq and Afghanistan. At that meeting, he spoke in support of the perspective that I had presented in my opening report and gave no indication that he disagreed with the policies and activities of the SEP.[15] Two months later, on May 28, 2003, Steiner sent a lengthy letter to Long, which made it all too clear that the former was no longer working within anything remotely identifiable with a Marxist theoretical and intellectual tradition.

The central theme of Steiner's argument was that the emergence of Marxism represented a continuation of, rather than a break with, utopian socialism. In a manner quite similar to his previous effort to stress the continuity between mystical speculation and science, Steiner now presented Marxism as the culmination and continuation of utopian thinking. Steiner's narrative arbitrarily combined distinct and opposed social movements, political tendencies and theoretical conceptions.

...Thus from 1830 till 1848 you get a period of tremendous intellectual and political turmoil without which neither the rise of Chartism in England, Utopian communities in the U.S., the left Hegelians in Germany and the radical working class movement in France would have been possible. *All this comes to a head with the 1848 revolution and the Communist Manifesto which can be understood as the Aufhebung of the previous Utopian movements and much else...* [emphasis added]

Marxism is ultimately the heir to this history of revolutionary struggle in which what has been called utopian thought played an absolutely critical role. From this history alone it should become apparent that utopianism cannot be discarded as a thing of the past which no longer has any relevance for us. *If Marxism is the realization and development of utopianism then it is clear that what is living in utopianism is of the highest relevance to the Marxist movement.* [emphasis added]

This altogether false presentation of history consists of little more than rhetorical flourishes that lack any genuine factual, let alone theoretical, substance. In what was becoming Steiner's favorite literary device, the Hegelian term "Aufheben" was invoked to bestow upon his arguments a sham philosophical sophistication. As long as no one is paying too close attention, almost anything can be presented as the "Aufheben" of anything else. And then, there is the assertion that "If Marxism is the realization and development of utopianism then it is clear that..." But the problem with this argument is that the premise is false: Marxism is not "the realization and development of utopianism," but, rather, its theoretical, historical and political negation.[16]

For Steiner, the espousal of utopianism provided a path for his re-entry—more than three decades after leaving the New School—into the intellectual milieu of the Frankfurt School. Steve Long, in his December 2002 letter, had noted that Russell Jacoby—a follower of the Frankfurt School whose book, *The End of Utopia*, had been highly praised by Steiner—was promoting a rebirth of utopianism in the interest of liberalism. Steiner replied, "Does this mean that we as Marxists are therefore obliged to ignore everything he writes beyond page 8 where he announces his intention of reviving a form of radical liberalism?"

Long had also pointed out that Jacoby's utopian project had drawn heavily on Herbert Marcuse's *Eros and Civilization*. Steiner waved this and other criticism of Marcuse and the Frankfurt School aside:

... Is positive reference to *Eros and Civilization* proof of some ideological crime? You [Steve Long] then provide a sketchy history of the

Frankfurt School seeking to prove that its adherents were political opportunists who were guilty of disorienting the student movements of the 1960s. Your history is however an eclectic combination of some historical truths combined with a series of oversimplifications. It is a jumble that confuses more than it illuminates. Yes, both Adorno and Marcuse were political opportunists who went along with the Moscow trials in the name of a "united front" against fascism in the 1930s. Does this mean that they had nothing relevant to say to us afterwards?

Steiner went on to praise *Eros and Civilization* as

a work infused with the utopian spirit. It is an attempt to complement Marxism with a radical critique of civilization derived from Freud that at the same time rejects the conservative conclusions drawn by its author. It was precisely the optimistic conclusions about the possibility for a radical transformation of society that made the book so popular. It became something of a founding document for the New Left movement in the 1960s. I don't propose a[n] analysis of this book now, but it is clearly not a work that should be dismissed out of hand.

As for Marcuse himself, Steiner offered an apologetic defense of his output. He chided Long:

In talking about the work of Marcuse, it is particularly important to distinguish which period of his work you a[re] referencing. There is a difference between Marcuse in *Reason and Revolution* with Marcuse in *Eros and Civilization* with Marcuse in *One Dimensional Man*. By the time he wrote *One Dimensional Man*, Marcuse had completely gone over to the perspective that the culture industry had precluded all normal attempts at oppositional political practice and that the objective basis for revolutionary transformation were all but irrelevant given the new mechanisms of cooptation developed in advanced consumer society. This assessment was used to justify a turn away from the working class—now hopelessly co-opted—and with it toward a politics of cultural subversion carried out by students and marginalized minorities. This political turn by Marcuse provided theoretical fodder for the New Left and has been justifiably criticized as sowing the seeds for the eventual disillusionment with Left-Wing politics on the part of an entire generation.

The Marcuse of *Eros and Civilization* is not however the same as the Marcuse of *One Dimensional Man*. To be sure, there are certain seeds or anticipations of Marcuse's position in *One Dimensional Man* in this earlier work (written in the mid 1950's in McCarthyite America). Marcuse himself points to these anticipations in a Preface that he wrote for a new edition of the book in the 1960s. But by the time he wrote the Preface Marcuse had completely gone over to the politics he espoused in *One Dimensional Man*. There is however a positive side to *Eros and Civilization*. There is in that work an exploration of a long neglected subject—the relationship of modes of sexual repression in its social form to the ability of the ruling class to maintain its hegemony. There is nothing in the main argument of *Eros and Civilization* that requires that we abandon the notion of the working class as an agent of revolutionary transformation. Nor are we required to abandon the political struggle in favor of a vaguely defined cultural practice. Marcuse does insist however that a political struggle that does not address fundamental cultural and psychological issues is ultimately sterile. He essentially makes the same point that Wilhelm Reich made in his *Mass Psychology of Fascism*, that if the Marxist movement does not find a way to channel repressed libidinal drives in a progressive direction, then fascism will utilize those same drives to bring us into an age of barbarism. I could say a great deal more on this subject but I think I have made my point. In discussing a complex thinker such as Marcuse, it is not very helpful to truncate his thought in the manner that you have.

I have allowed Steiner to speak for himself at length. Notwithstanding Steiner's claim to the contrary, the rejection of the revolutionary role of the working class is embedded in the theoretical conceptions espoused by Marcuse over many decades. Steiner's apology for Marcuse could only

have been written by a person who no longer considered himself to be working within the theoretical and political traditions of the Fourth International.

X. Steiner's New Political Relations

At about the same time, Steiner was entering into new political relations of which he has made no mention in any of his attacks on the ICFI. It obviously has been his intention to conceal his present political associations from those who are reading his documents. Steiner became a lecturer on philosophy at The New School for Pluralistic Anti-Capitalist Education, also known as The New SPACE. In its literature, the New SPACE describes itself as "Resolutely anti-authoritarian and non-sectarian," bringing together "anarchists, humanist Marxists, and others." It is, to be more precise, a conglomeration of middle-class radical tendencies that are hostile to Trotskyism. Among its "Teachers, Speakers and Organizers" are individuals closely associated with the Frankfurt School, such as Kevin Anderson (whose writing is highly praised by Steiner), Stanley Aronowitz, Eric Bronner and Bertell Ollman. The faculty also includes individuals active in the Green Party and other brands of petty-bourgeois protest politics.

In his own curriculum vitae, posted on the web site of New SPACE, Steiner makes no reference to his past associations with the Trotskyist movement. The only political involvement that he mentions in a brief biography is his participation in a 1970 student takeover of the New School. Though he cites "The Case of Martin Heidegger" as one of his published works, Steiner does not state that it appeared in the *World Socialist Web Site*. How is this to be explained? There is no issue of personal or political security involved. Rather, association with Trotskyism and orthodox Marxism is not politically and intellectually respectable in these circles. Steiner acknowledged in his 1999 application letter that he "was part of a middle class New York culture." He remains part of that cynical and self-absorbed culture to this day, and it is this fact, above all, that imparts to his attack on the International Committee such a hypocritical and duplicitous character.[17]

This account has reviewed in detail the different stages of Steiner's evolution. It is not the International Committee, but, rather, Alex Steiner, who has radically shifted his position. In bringing this analysis of Steiner's intellectual biography to a close, it is necessary to consider the objective context within which he evolved into an open and embittered enemy of the International Committee and, as is evident, of me personally.

Steiner's entire political career has been marked by a high degree of subjective volatility and instability—a characteristic not uncommon among radical intellectuals. Sudden shifts in the political situation tend to exacerbate his subjective weaknesses, as he adapts himself to the outlook of the New York petty-bourgeois milieu within which he has lived his entire adult life. It is not unreasonable to suspect that the events of 9/11 and their aftermath played a major role in shattering Steiner's political equilibrium. In the maelstrom of political confusion generated by the destruction of the World Trade Center, and exploited for reactionary purposes by the government and media, Steiner's susceptibility to personal and political demoralization—which we had witnessed in the 1970s—came into play once again.

This is a social, and not an individual phenomenon. In the aftermath of 9/11 broad sections of the academic community lost their political and intellectual equilibrium. Their disorientation was concisely expressed by Tom Rockmore, an academic who specializes in the field of German idealist philosophy. He wrote:

All of our ready conceptual assurances are confounded by 9/11. The assumption that we have captured the world in our theories has been stalemated by the world itself. The world has changed in ways no one could have foreseen. We cannot diagnose the events of 9/11 by any simple application of the usual tools. They defy our sense of legible order, and we cannot say that our categories will adjust again.[18]

Trotsky was all too familiar with this sort of prostration among radical intellectuals. "When thrown against great events," he wrote in 1939, "they are easily lost and relapse again into petty-bourgeois ways of thinking." [19] This is the fate that has befallen Alex Steiner.

Concluded

See *Marxism, History & Socialist Consciousness*

To order a copy from Mehring Books [click here](#)

Notes:

1. This essay has not been posted on the Steiner/Brenner web site.[return]

2. Yates argued:

...Bruno's philosophy cannot be separated from his religion. It was his religion, the "religion of the world", which he saw in this expanded form of the infinite universe and the innumerable worlds as an expanded gnosis, a new revelation of the divinity from the "vestiges". Copernicanism was a symbol of the new revelation, which was to mean a return to the natural religion of the Egyptians, and its magic, within a framework which he so strangely supposed could be a Catholic framework.

Thus, the legend that Bruno was persecuted as a philosophical thinker, was burned for his daring views on innumerable worlds or on the movement of the earth, can no longer stand. ... Completely involved as he was in Hermeticism, Bruno could not conceive of a philosophy of nature, of number, of geometry, of a diagram, without infusing into these divine meaning. He is thus really the last person in the world to take as a representative of a philosophy divorced from divinity (*Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* [London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1964], pp. 355-56).[return]

3. Yates' explanation of the reasons for Bruno's execution has been refuted by Professor Maurice A. Finocchiaro, who, based on a careful analysis of Bruno's trial, states flatly that "Yates's interpretation is not correct..." Placing his account of Bruno's trial in "the context of a larger issue," Finocchiaro writes: "If the trial of Galileo epitomizes the conflict between science and religion, then the trial of Bruno may be said to epitomize the clash between philosophy and religion" ("Philosophy versus Religion and Science versus Religion," by Maurice A. Finocchiaro, in *Giordano Bruno*, edited by Hillary Gatti (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2002), p. 54)].

A devastating appraisal of Yates' scholarship is to be found in "Frances Yates and the Writing of History," by Brian Vickers, in *The Journal of Modern History* (vol. 51, no. 2, June 1979, pp. 287-316). Vickers, a noted historian of science, focuses on Yates' study of *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment*, which—along the lines of her earlier work on Bruno—glorifies Renaissance occultism as a vast intellectual movement that inspired Bacon, Descartes, Kepler and Newton. Vickers notes that

...the reader who approaches her [Yates'] book as a serious historical study will be bothered by the sheer amount of speculation in it, by the uncritical ways in which the Rosicrucian movement is defined, and by the indiscriminate claims for its influence. In many places argument disappears altogether. Some of the recurrent words are 'if,' 'may,' 'perhaps,' 'would have,' 'surely,' 'must have,' a sequence which often culminates in the positive form 'was.' [pp. 301-02]

Vickers points out that there are many passages in which Yates leaves readers with the impression that she herself accepts the claims and finding of the Renaissance occultists of whom she writes:

It does seem, indeed, that Yates has suppressed her critical faculties. Admittedly she is dealing with the occult, and not every aspect of that activity is susceptible to rational explanation. But even after making such allowances there are passages in which the entire absence of any skepticism about the occult's methods and aims must raise the reader's concern that on this level, too, normal processes of evaluating evidence have been temporarily suspended

After a detailed debunking of Yates' study of *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment*—and especially her claim that Bacon's *New Atlantis* is a Rosicrucian work—Professor Vickers offered an extraordinarily harsh evaluation of her intellectual legacy:

The final large issue, on which I can only report here, is Yates's wish to rewrite the history of science in this period. In *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (London, 1964), she claimed that the so-called magus of the Renaissance 'Hermetic-Cabalist tradition,' with his essentially 'religious attitudes' actually 'operated' on the world, thus creating a wholly new 'turning towards the world,' which fundamentally affected science. Her arguments had been severely questioned by Charles Trinkaus and Mary Hesse before her latest book appeared, and Yates must know of both scholars, who are among the most distinguished in their fields. Now, however, she writes that her 'belief' is 'indeed now largely accepted by historians of thought...' (p. 226) She reverts to this thesis throughout the present book with increased polemical energy. She speaks slightly of the 'so-called scientific revolution' (pp. xi, 220) and suggests that the new science emerged out of magic, of which Rosicrucianism is a peculiarly important case—indeed a crucial phase, one of 'the vital steps by which the European mind moved out of the Renaissance into the seventeenth century' (p. 117); she subsequently discovers 'a chain of tradition leading from the Rosicrucian movement to the antecedents of the Royal Society' (p. 83).

There would seem to be little, if any, basis for such claims. Yates proposed rewriting of Renaissance history is an edifice built not on rock nor on sand but on air. [pp. 315-16]

In conclusion, Vickers warned that "if the methodology of [*The Rosicrucian Enlightenment*] came to be accepted or used as models for imitation the results could be disastrous (p. 316).

Unfortunately, Vickers worst fears have been realized. Though Yates' scholarship preceded the era of postmodernism, the anti-materialist orientation of her theses and the "excitement" generated by her rediscovery of previously neglected "communities" and "nonprivileged discourses" (occultism, magic) resonated with academics working in the 1980s and 1990s, who viewed the traditional conception of "scientific method" as the product of a specific cultural environment and lacking any universal validity. Postmodernist scholarship entailed a drastic revision of supposedly false claims to objectivity. As a result of the new approach, according to one of its practitioners

The historiography of English science during the past twenty years has been heavily influenced by the need to explicate discourses. First seen as speech-acts, scientific texts were related to the contexts of their formulators, as well as to other discourses, religious, political, even magical. With this contextualization of science came the historicizing of the scientist, the discovery of interests, values, and ideology at work in minds once presumed to be devoid of such impulses. The next move, perhaps, inevitably, saw historians and sociologists of science taking the posture of philosophical relativists. *The issue of whether or not the science may have been correct was bracketed*; the focus shifted to the free play of discourses with power and interests, that is, social reality, seen as determining the success of competing scientific paradigms. ("Constructing, Deconstructing, and Reconstructing the History of

Science," by Margaret C. Jacob, *The Journal of British Studies*, vol. 36, no. 4 [Oct. 1997], p. 459). [emphasis added]

The author of the above-cited passage, Margaret C. Jacobs, is a disciple of Yates, praising her depiction of Bruno as a "somewhat crazed disciple of a new Copernican religiosity..." Jacobs credits Yates with having demonstrated the essential inspirational role of religion in the development of scientific thought. "Beginning in the 1960s with the work of Frances Yates," she writes, "historians of early modern Europe have rescued many of its leading natural philosophers from the rationalist account of their motives and interests" ("Thinking Unfashionable Thoughts, Asking Unfashionable Questions," *The American Historical Review*, vol. 195, no. 2 [April 2000], p. 497).[return]

4. The late Betty Jo Dobbs coauthored *Newton and the Culture of Newtonianism* with Margaret C. Jacobs, cited in footnote 39.[return]

5. Review by William Newman, *Isis*, vol. 84, no. 3, (Sept., 1993), p. 578.[return]

6. In a review of this debate, Professor H. Floris Cohen takes note of concerns that the Yates thesis had led to a view of science "as just one among a variety of possible belief systems, each with its own standards of rationality or lack thereof" (*The Scientific Revolution: A Historiographical Inquiry* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994], p. 180).[return]

7. Newton's major contributions to science were in the fields of mechanics, optics and mathematics, not chemistry, which, even as compared to physics, was still in a primitive state at the time. Chemistry was still in the process of being distinguished from alchemy, which, whatever its mystical foundations, had accumulated various empirical facts about chemical processes. It would be more relevant to examine to what extent Newton's religious views contributed to his failure to make any significant contribution to the development of chemistry as a science. His religious outlook did color aspects of his work on physics—the best-known example being his postulation of God as the prime mover of the universe. All that demonstrates, however, is that Newton was a man of his times. The further development of physics eliminated all of these religious embellishments.[return]

8. Significantly, an important aspect of Yates' interpretation of the Scientific Revolution was that it meant "not only an immense increase in man's knowledge and powers but that something has got lost in the process as well. And this 'something' has got to do with an insight into the soul of man; into its intricate layers on both the conscious and the subconscious levels; into its capacities for good and evil; into the secret of its creative powers revealed, but at the same time obscured or downright ignored, by the advent of early modern science itself" (Ibid, p. 181). This critique of science bears a definite resemblance to arguments advanced by Horkheimer and Adorno in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, which traces the crisis of modern society back to the science-based conception of nature as an object to be dominated. As we shall later see, Steiner's views are based entirely on the Horkheimer/Adorno critique.[return]

9. On this subject, Engels wrote:

If, after the dark night of the Middle Ages was over, the sciences suddenly arose anew with undreamt-of force, developing at a miraculous rate, once again we owe this miracle to production. In the first place, following the crusades, industry developed enormously and brought to light a quantity of new mechanical (weaving, clockmaking, milling), chemical (dyeing, metallurgy, alcohol) and physical (spectacles) facts, and this not only gave enormous material for observation, but also itself provided quite another means for experimenting than previously existed, and allowed the construction of new instruments; it can be said that really systematic experimental science now became possible for the first time. Second, the whole of West and Middle Europe, including Poland, now developed in a connected fashion, even though Italy was still at the head owing to its old-inherited civilization. Thirdly, geographical

discoveries—made purely for the sake of grain and, therefore, in the last resort, of production—opened up an infinite and hitherto inaccessible amount of material of a meteorological, zoological, botanical, and physiological (human) bearing. Fourthly, there was the *printing press* (*Marx Engels Collected Works*, Volume 25 [New York: International Publishers, 1987], p. 466).[return]

10. Yates wrote:

...It is a movement of the will which really originates an intellectual movement. A new centre of interest arises, surrounded by an emotional excitement; the mind turns with the will has directed it, and new attitudes, new discoveries follow. Behind the emergence of modern science there was a direction of the will towards the world, its marvels, and mysterious workings, a new longing and determination to understand those workings and to operate with them. [*Giordano Bruno*, p. 448]

Nothing that is presented in the above paragraph contributes to an understanding of the real historical, socioeconomic processes that prepared the ground for the revolution in science.[return]

11. Lenin's *Philosophical Notebooks* abounds with scathing commentaries on this sort of imprecision, as for example in his "Notes on Shulyatkov's Book." Lenin is merciless in his response to Shulyatkov's confused formulations, especially in passages dealing with the relationship of materialism and idealism. "A cheap explanation with no analysis of the substance!" is a characteristic comment. [*Collected Works*, vol. 38 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1972), p. 500] And "Go ahead, lump everything together! Idealism as well as skepticism, everything 'corresponds' to manufacture! Comrade Shulyatkov is simple, very simple." [*Ibid*, p. 494.] Other negative comments include "phrase-mongering" and, most frequently, "what nonsense!"[return]

12. Hegel observed that philosophies that belittle the concept of truth generally arise in periods of intellectual decadence and corruption.[return]

13. Brenner was a member of the Workers League between 1972 and 1979. After Goldstein's departure from the party in March 1977, Brenner became editor of the *Bulletin*. In January 1979, he was asked to relocate to Detroit. He spent approximately one week in the city, and then left abruptly. He offered no explanation for his abandonment of the party as he severed all relations with the Workers League. I did not see Brenner again for nearly 20 years. In 1996 we met very briefly in Toronto. That was my last and only discussion with him. He did not express any interest in applying for membership in the Socialist Equality Party. He contributed several articles to the *World Socialist Web Site*. [return]

14. See pages 69-114.[return]

15. However, in MWHH, Steiner/Brenner denounce in the most vitriolic terms the policies and activities of the SEP and ICFI in relation to the war.[return]

16. The *Communist Manifesto*, to which Steiner so casually referred, stressed the distinction between the socialism it espoused and utopianism:

The significance of Critical-Utopian Socialism and Communism bears an inverse relation to historical development. In proportion as the modern class struggle develops and takes definite shape, this fantastic standing apart from the contest, these fantastic attacks on it, lose all practical value and all theoretical justification. Therefore, although the originators of these systems were, in many respects, revolutionary, their disciples have, in every case, formed mere reactionary sects. They hold fast by the original views of their masters, in opposition to the progressive historical development of the proletariat. They, therefore, endeavor, and that consistently, to deaden the class struggle and to reconcile the class antagonisms. They still dream of experimental realization of their social Utopias, of founding isolated "phalansteres", of establishing "Home Colonies", or setting up a "Little Icaria" duodecimo editions of the New Jerusalem — and to realize all these castles in the air, they are compelled to appeal to the feelings and purses of the bourgeois. By degrees, they sink into the category of the reactionary [or] conservative Socialists depicted

above, differing from these only by more systematic pedantry, and by their fanatical and superstitious belief in the miraculous effects of their social science (*Marx-Engels Collected Works*, Volume 6 [New York: International Publishers, 1976], p. 516).[return]

17. It is not possible in this space to undertake an analysis of various lecture series that Steiner has given at The New SPACE. He has given courses on Hegel's *Logic*, "Reason in History," and Hegel's *Phenomenology of Mind*. Steiner's lectures are posted on the Internet. They are, in my view, very poor. Steiner's analysis of Hegel and, for that matter, Marx has nothing in common with a Marxist exposition. The most striking feature of the lectures is that no one listening to them would suspect Steiner of being a materialist. He emphatically disassociates himself from the well-known Marxist critique of Hegel's idealism. In a lecture on "Reason in History," Steiner tells his students: "In order to get whatever we can get from this course, it would be beneficial to forget everything you know about Hegel, as well as what you know about Marx. The understanding of Hegel, and to a great degree Marx as well, has been mitigated through various interpretations which have little to do with what Hegel's project or Marx's project was about." The interpretation that he is criticizing is that which asserts that Marx's reworking of the Hegelian dialectic required a break from idealism. He tells his students: "I don't want to hear that Marx set Hegel on his head, or on his feet." Later, in the same lecture series, Steiner states: "I think the notions of idealism and materialism have to be rethought, after Marx." In Steiner's first lecture on Hegel's *Logic*, he presents his most explicit disavowal of the Marxist approach to the study of Hegel. He states:

Within the Marxist tradition we have an interpretation that goes something like this: "Well, Hegel was a conservative thinker, but we can save something of what he did, namely, his method, whatever that means. I am not teaching Hegel that way." By the way, I think that's a very bad interpretation. It wasn't Marx's either.

This deliberate and extreme vulgarization of the Marxist critique of Hegelianism could serve only to prejudice his students against materialism.[return]

18. Rockmore, it should be noted, holds positions on the history of Marxism that are very similar to Steiner's, especially on the problem of the "basic question." He insists that Marx was an idealist, and that materialist Marxism was largely an invention of Engels. In May 2003, I subjected Professor Rockmore's views to severe criticism. (See <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2006/may2006/rock-m02.shtml>). Steiner comes to Rockmore's defense in MWHH.[return]

19. *In Defense of Marxism* (London: New Park, 1971, p. 59).[return]



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact