Foreword to *The Frankfurt School, Postmodernism and the Politics of the Pseudo-Left: A Marxist Critique*

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This is the foreword by David North to his new book, The Frankfurt School, Postmodernism and the Politics of the Pseudo-Left: A Marxist Critique. *The book is available for purchase at Mehring Books. A pdf file of the foreword is available here.*

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This book examines the relationship between Marxist theory and the development of the revolutionary program, perspective and practice of the Trotskyist movement. Within this context, it explains why the International Committee of the Fourth International has devoted significant time and energy to exposing the reactionary character of the anti-materialist and anti-Marxist intellectual tendencies—related to various branches of existentialist irrationalism, the Frankfurt School and postmodernism—that provide the theoretical foundations for a wide array of present-day petty-bourgeois pseudo-left and anti-socialist political movements.

The most internationally prominent example of a pseudo-left organization is the Greek party, Syriza. The role played by the Syriza government, following its election in January 2015, in disorienting, demoralizing and betraying the mass anti-austerity movement, has provided a shameful demonstration of the political catastrophe that follows when this type of petty-bourgeois organization, spouting empty populist phrases, comes to power. In the aftermath of Syriza's criminal betrayal, with all its tragic consequences for the working people and youth of Greece, this volume's analysis of the intimate connection between contemporary forms of anti-Marxist theory and the reactionary class interests promoted by the pseudo-left is especially timely.

Steiner and Brenner: A case study in the social and political pathology of petty-bourgeois pseudo-leftism

The first three documents in this volume were written in response to attacks on the theoretical foundations, perspective and practice of the Socialist Equality Party (US) and the International Committee of the Fourth International by two former members of the American Trotskyist movement, Alex Steiner and Frank Brenner. Given the fact that they both left the Workers League (predecessor of the SEP) in the late 1970s, their documents could have been ignored. Coming from individuals who had abandoned revolutionary activity more than a quarter-century earlier, the warnings of Steiner and Brenner that the SEP faced imminent ruin lacked political credibility, not to mention moral force. Their status as sympathizers—a broad and vague self-designation that carried no specific responsibilities—did not obligate the SEP to respond to their ever-expanding and increasingly vitriolic criticisms. However, two considerations persuaded the ICFI to reply.

First, as Steiner and Brenner had played a role in the early history of the Workers League, we sincerely hoped that a response to their criticisms would assist them in their own political development and, if at all possible, encourage their return to active involvement in the work of the revolutionary movement. It soon became clear that this was to be the least likely outcome of our efforts at clarification.

The second consideration concerned the theoretical content of the criticisms. Their principal documents—*On Why Utopia is Crucial to a Revival of Socialist Consciousness*, *Objectivism or Marxism* and *Marxism Without Its Head or Its Heart*—consisted of a compendium of anti-Marxist conceptions popular among broad layers of middle-class ex-radicals and academics.

While Steiner and Brenner declared that they were upholding the traditions of the International Committee, our analysis of their documents demonstrated that they drew their inspiration from figures such as Herbert Marcuse, the "Freudo-Marxists" Wilhelm Reich and Erich Fromm, and the utopian theorist Ernst Bloch.

As neither Steiner nor Brenner ever attempted to trace, critically and systematically, the theoretical and political sources of their own ideas (an obligatory element of dialectical materialist methodology), it may well be the case that they did not fully grasp the extent to which they were reproducing the arguments of several generations of anti-Marxists and opponents of historical materialism. There was nothing of an original character in their denunciations of "objectivism," "determinism," and "vulgar materialism," their denigration of Plekhanov's intellectual legacy and of Lenin's *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*, their attack on the Enlightenment and Reason, their complaints against science and technology, their blurring of the distinction between materialism and idealism, their magnification of the significance of the "unconscious" and the power of the "irrational," their focus on individual alienation as opposed to class exploitation, and their celebration of utopian mythmaking.

The first three documents are not only an answer to Steiner and Brenner. They are also directed against prevalent forms of anti-Marxism that exercise a reactionary influence on current political and cultural life, and which spare no effort in disorienting and demoralizing the working class, student youth and intellectuals.

Irrationalism and the politics of the pseudo-left

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Especially during the past decade, the connection has become much clearer between the reactionary pseudo-left politics of the middle class and the theories of Nietzsche, Brzozowski, Sorel, De Man, the Frankfurt School and the many forms of extreme philosophical subjectivism and irrationalism propagated by postmodernists (Foucault, Laclau, Badiou et al.). Pseudo-left politics—centered on race, nationality, ethnicity, gender, and sexual preference—has come to play a critical role in suppressing opposition to capitalism, by rejecting class as the essential social category and emphasizing, instead, personal "identity" and "lifestyle," and by legitimizing imperialist interventions and wars in the name of "human rights."

Theoretical conceptions do not develop in a historical, political and social vacuum. In 1911, in a review that answered an attack on historical materialism by Heinrich Rickert (1863–1936), a professor of philosophy at Freiburg University in Germany, the great Russian Marxist Georgi Plekhanov wrote:

> The fact is that Rickert and other scientists like him do not have the foggiest notion of historical materialism, not for any *personal* reason, but because their intellectual field of vision is clouded by prejudices that are peculiar *to a whole class*. It might truly be said of them that the rubbish they offer as an exposition of historical materialism is determined by "a completely unscientific political prejudice." Their aversion to historical materialism speaks most eloquently of their fear of "specifically Social-Democratic aspirations."[1]

The "rubbish" written by Steiner and Brenner is a product of the social, intellectual, and political evolution of a generation of student youth that were radicalized during the late 1960s and early 1970s. Like many of that generation, they were drawn, at a certain point, to Marxism, which provided a theoretical foundation for a critique of capitalist society. But the nature of middle-class student "anti-capitalism"—which, in the final analysis, sought nothing more than limited democratic reforms of the existing society—required Marxism only in a highly diluted form. The Frankfurt School distilled and distributed, through the medium of universities throughout Europe and the United States, an extremely low-proof product. Herbert Marcuse, whose theoretical work bore the ineradicable imprint of his training under Heidegger, achieved great popularity by infusing Marxism with a heavy dose of existentialist psychology. The issues of alienation, repression and sexuality found a deeper response among middle-class students than those related to the economic exploitation of the working class and its struggle for power.

In the case of Steiner, a graduate of the New School for Social Research in New York City, the Frankfurt School's influence undoubtedly shaped his conceptions of Marxism, and continued to exert an influence upon his thinking, even after he joined the Workers League in 1971. If such influences were less apparent in Brenner during the period of his membership in the Workers League, it was only because he showed less detectable interest in theoretical issues.

In any event, the breakdown of the student protest movement after the ending of the draft and the US withdrawal from Vietnam, which began in 1973, left both Steiner and Brenner discouraged and demoralized. Their withdrawal from the Workers League, within a few months of each other in late 1978 and early 1979, was not merely a personal retreat. It reflected the rightward evolution of the middle-class students who had formed the main constituency of the anti-war protest movement.

As a consequence of their departure from the Workers League, neither Steiner nor Brenner played any role in the struggle, initiated by the Workers League in the early 1980s, against the increasingly opportunist politics of the Workers Revolutionary Party, the British section of the ICFI, and its long-time leader Gerry Healy. They were completely unaware of the detailed critique made by the Workers League of Healy's subjective idealist falsification of dialectical materialism. As news of the split within the ICFI became publicly known in the late autumn of 1985, Steiner reestablished contact with the Workers League. Expressing agreement with the political and theoretical struggle waged by the International Committee, in which the Workers League was playing a critical role, Steiner declared himself a supporter of the party. However, not wishing (as he frankly acknowledged) to jeopardize the comfortable middle-class lifestyle he had developed during the previous years, he decided not to seek readmission.

In the late 1990s, Steiner appeared to draw closer, and, in 1999, applied for membership in the Socialist Equality Party. However, it was apparent to us that he had not carefully studied—and, certainly, had not assimilated—the theoretical and political issues that had been fought out during the split with the WRP. The SEP decided against admitting him. However, we maintained cordial relations. This volume includes a lengthy essay, "The Political and Intellectual Odyssey of Alex Steiner," which reviews the very patient efforts of the SEP to find ways of collaborating with Steiner on theoretical projects.

The Iraq war and the petty-bourgeois left

What brought these efforts to an end were sharp changes in the political situation, within the United States and internationally. The first document addressed to Steiner was written in June 2003, just three months after the US invasion of Iraq. My final reply to Steiner and Brenner was published in October 2008, just weeks after the Wall Street crash and only a few weeks before the election of Barack Obama. In the course of those five years, a profound shift took place in the political orientation of the remnants of the old middle-class protest movements that had emerged out of the mass social movements of the 1960s.

In the weeks leading up to the outbreak of the Iraq War, there were mass protest demonstrations around the world. But they ended once the war began and never resumed. The nomination and election of Obama, the first African-American president, served as political justification for the integration of the petty-bourgeois left into mainstream American politics. Substantial sections of the old protest movements—especially those whose members were part of the affluent middle-class milieu—completed the long and protracted process of their break with left political radicalism and their transformation into an anti-socialist and pro-imperialist pseudo-left.

Steiner and Brenner were caught up in this shift to the right. In March 2003, Steiner attended a public anti-war conference called by the *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Party, and spoke in support of its positions. Within less than five years, he was proclaiming the demise of the SEP and the International Committee. During those five years, the International Committee had not changed its political program. Rather, it was Steiner and Brenner who, having rediscovered each other and formed an alliance based on mutual hostility toward the International Committee, had repudiated Marxist philosophy and Trotskyist politics.

False theories do have objective consequences. All that was unresolved in their understanding of Marxist theory—above all, their attitude to the Frankfurt School theorists—rendered them intellectually vulnerable to class pressures. But more was involved in Steiner and Brenner's evolution than errors of an abstract and purely intellectual character. In the final analysis, changes in their politics determined their philosophy, more than philosophy determined their politics. The increasingly unprincipled and opportunist nature of their politics, rooted in the class interests of their

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social milieu, compelled Steiner and Brenner to break with philosophical and historical materialism. In the midst of the sharp political changes between 2003 and 2008, they were delighted to discover, in the demoralized theories of the "Freudo-Marxists," justifications for extreme political opportunism.

The fundamental source of the shift in their theoretical positions lay in their class orientation. In June 2006, I concluded my lengthy analysis of their arguments with a warning:

> The views that you, Comrades Steiner and Brenner, have presented in your various documents, record the immense theoretical and political distance you have drifted from Marxism since you both left the movement nearly three decades ago. To continue along your present trajectory can only lead to the complete repudiation of whatever remains of the political convictions you espoused many years ago.

This prognosis was to be completely confirmed. As they shifted the focus of their writings from philosophy to politics, they borrowed from the arsenal of anti-Trotskyism to denounce the International Committee and the SEP as "sectarian." This has become their favorite epithet as they attack our defense of the political independence of the working class and our refusal to support bourgeois political parties.

It is not difficult to provide an overview of Steiner and Brenner's political evolution, as the postings on their blog site are few and far between. Given the level of its on-line activity, the name chosen for this generally inert site—*Permanent-Revolution*—is the only indication that its lethargic founders possess a sense of humor. While denouncing the passive "objectivism" of the "sectarian" ICFI, which publishes the *World Socialist Web Site* six days a week and posts upwards of 5,000 articles annually, intervals between Steiner and Brenner's postings on their blog site may stretch to months. While they recently proclaimed[2] that the task of building a revolutionary movement "takes on critical urgency" and "requires a conscious leadership now more than ever," the usual response of their blog site to major political events is … silence. On the infrequent occasion when they rouse themselves from their politically demoralized stupor, it is only to denounce the International Committee and to record yet another milestone in their movement to the right.

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Ukraine

During the past year (2014–2015), Steiner and Brenner have joined the stampede of the pro-imperialist pseudo-left behind the right-wing Ukrainian government. In an article posted on May 20, 2014, Brenner declared: "Marxists should oppose the dismemberment of Ukraine." With utter cynicism he continued: "That means opposing any and all annexations, whether by Russia or by any other 'players' like Poland and its imperialist partners in NATO."[3] Brenner announced this policy three months *after* the United States and Germany orchestrated a coup d'état in Kiev, carried out by fascistic organizations that accomplished, for all intents and purposes, the annexation of Ukraine by the major imperialist powers. Brenner's opposition to annexations meant, in reality, opposition only to the decision of the population of Crimea to rejoin Russia. This de facto endorsement of the right-wing coup was further justified by Brenner as a defense of Ukraine's right to self-determination, which, he wrote, "means one thing only: the right to separate, to establish an independent state." Brenner's concept of "self-determination" means only total control by the Kiev regime over all of Ukraine. He denies the right of separation to those sections of Ukraine opposed to the Poroshenko government.

The International Committee has subjected the program of self-determination to a detailed critique, proving, on the basis of numerous examples, that it has served—particularly in the aftermath of the dissolution of the USSR—either as a mechanism for the imperialist-sponsored dismemberment of states targeted for intervention or as a means of enriching a particular faction of a national bourgeois elite. Often it is a combination of both. This demand has no progressive content independent of the unified struggle of the working class against imperialism and its local patrons, on the basis of an international revolutionary program. In the case of Ukraine, to identify, as Brenner does, national self-determination with the political hegemony of the imperialist-backed Poroshenko regime, staffed by fascists, is politically obscene.

A more peaceful imperialism

Continuing the exercise in pro-imperialist subterfuge begun by his colleague, Steiner followed, in September 2014, with an angry denunciation of the resolution, titled "The Fight Against War and the Political Tasks of the Socialist Equality Party," passed unanimously by the SEP at its Third Congress in August 2014. Steiner began his article by counting the number of times the resolution used the words "war" (97), "imperialist" (23) and "imperialism" (36). Steiner, it seems, would have his readers believe that these were words that appeared infrequently in the writings of Lenin, Luxemburg and Trotsky!

The SEP, declared Steiner, was engaged in a massive exaggeration of the danger of imperialist war. He wrote:

> The SEP sees imperialism in 2014 as a return to 1914 and are convinced that history is repeating itself complete with a tense summer of international incidents reprising the tension of the summer of 1914. *But imperialism while it continues to plague the planet is very different today than it was 100 years ago. For one thing, the use of military power to back up economic interests, while certainly still in play, is embarked upon with much greater reluctance today, as witnessed by the obvious paralysis of the Obama Administration toward the events in Syria, Iraq and now Ukraine.* [4]

It is hard to take this nonsensical combination of apathy and stupidity seriously. Steiner fails to enumerate the objective changes that have rendered imperialism so much more peaceful and risk averse than it was a century ago. He seems not to have noticed that the United States has been at war, on a virtually continuous basis, for a quarter century; that its military operations have ravaged entire countries, killed hundreds of thousands of people, and created fifty million refugees; and that it is engaged in a global deployment of military forces unprecedented in its history. Are these all manifestations of a "much greater reluctance" to use military power than was the case 100 years ago? As for the preparation of the United States for war against China and Russia, this is not a matter of speculation, but a geo-political and military fact, which is widely acknowledged and discussed in strategic journals and the international press. Steiner, however, dismisses the warnings made by the *World Socialist Web Site* as "crisis mongering."

Steiner's entire approach to world politics is characterized by

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impressionism of the most banal sort. He asserts that Obama heads "a weak administration unsure of what to do and reluctant to get involved in any long term military escapades aside from some easy pickings through the employment of drones with its minimal commitment of US military resources." There is not a trace of theoretical insight into the objective forces shaping the policies and actions of imperialism. In the *Transitional Program*, Trotsky identified the internal crises of imperialist governments as a key indicator of the approach of war. "In the historically privileged countries," he wrote, "...all of capital's traditional parties are in a state of perplexity bordering on a paralysis of will." The ruling elites were driven to war not because they subjectively desired it, but because they saw no way out of their crisis. The bourgeoisie, Trotsky stated, "toboggans with closed eyes toward an economic and military catastrophe."[5]

Incapable of working through the implications of any political argument, Steiner does not seem to recognize that his dismissal of the danger of imperialist war involves an entirely different appraisal of the epoch than that upon which the Fourth International is based. If imperialism is not objectively driven to war, and if it can manage its affairs with far greater restraint than in 1914 or 1939, then this would indicate that it has found a way of containing its fundamental contradictions—that is, between the global character of capitalist production and the nation-state system, and between the social character of the productive forces and the private ownership of the means of production. It was Kautsky who foresaw the possibility of a successfully managed global capitalism. This new form of "ultra-imperialism," he claimed, would enable the ruling classes to dispense with war. Lenin, in his celebrated work *Imperialism—The Highest Stage of Capitalism*, wrote:

> ...the only objective, *i.e.*, real, social significance Kautsky's "theory" can have, is that of a most reactionary method of consoling the masses with hopes of permanent peace being possible under capitalism, distracting their attention from the sharp antagonisms and acute problems of the present era, and directing it towards illusory prospects of an imaginary "ultra-imperialism" of the future. Deception of the masses—there is nothing but this in Kautsky's "Marxian" theory.[6]

Steiner—who prefers to ignore the lessons of the struggles waged by the Bolsheviks against opportunism—fails to tell us when, and through what process, the development of imperialism confirmed Kautsky's perspective and refuted that of Lenin and Trotsky.

The crisis in Greece

The Greek election of January 2015 marked yet another stage in Steiner and Brenner's repudiation of basic Marxist political principles. They hailed, with deep-felt enthusiasm, the victory of Syriza. This response came as no surprise as Syriza—with its postmodernist theories, amorphous and opportunist program, and upper-middle-class social constituency—epitomizes all that they, and the petty bourgeois pseudo-left as a whole, represent. Countless Steiners and Brenners are to be found in Syriza's leadership bodies and organizational periphery. Steiner and Brenner reacted bitterly to the International Committee's refusal to participate in the celebration of Syriza's victory. They denounced our analysis of its program and our warnings of its inevitable betrayal of the Greek working class. In an article posted on February 2, 2015, Brenner angrily cited the statements posted by the *World Socialist Web Site* after the election:

> The International Committee of the Fourth International rejects with contempt the political excuse offered by the petty-bourgeois pseudo-left to justify support for Syriza and its pro-capitalist agenda—*that a Tsipras government is a necessary "experience" for the working class, from which it will somehow come to understand the necessity for genuinely socialist policies*.
>
> *Such sophistries* are advanced only to oppose the emergence of a revolutionary movement of the working class, a development possible only through *a relentless political exposure of Syriza.* This task is undertaken by the *World Socialist Web Site* in order to prepare workers and young people for the decisive struggles they face in Greece and internationally.[7]

After noting that he had placed what he considered the most egregious phrases in italics, Brenner quoted a second statement posted by the *World Socialist Web Site* on January 28:

> Another of their [the pseudo-left] arguments is that one must support Syriza, *so that the working class can go through these experiences and learn from them. This is pure cynicism.* Given the enormous dangers posed by a Syriza government, *the task of a Marxist party is to expose the class interests represented by Syriza, to warn the working class against its consequences and provide it with a clear socialist orientation.*
>
> *This is how the World Socialist Web Site and the International Committee of the Fourth International participate in the "experiences" in Greece.* The numerous pseudo-left groups cling to Syriza because they represent the same class interests as this party. They speak for better-off layers of the middle class, *who fear an independent movement of the working class*, and who are concerned to ensure their own social elevation within the bourgeois order.[8]

"These quotes," wrote Brenner in response, "are both examples of what Marxists call sectarianism." He did not provide the names of his Marxist sources. Marx, Engels, Lenin and Trotsky were certainly not among them. They were the most irreconcilable opponents of all opportunist parties and tendencies that acted to politically subordinate the working class to the bourgeoisie. If it is "sectarianism" to expose and oppose a bourgeois government, which that led by Syriza certainly is, then the entire history of Marxism as a revolutionary socialist movement is a long and dreary chronicle of "sectarianism," and Lenin and Trotsky were its foremost practitioners.

Denouncing the International Committee as "sectarian" because it opposes the Syriza government is tantamount to rejecting the political principles that found expression in Lenin's fight against Menshevism and the Second International, Trotsky's struggle against Stalinist "Popular Frontism," and the International Committee's opposition to the Pabloite capitulation to Stalinist and bourgeois nationalist organizations. Based on the positions they now hold, neither Steiner nor Brenner could explain why they joined the Workers League in the early 1970s. At that time, the Pabloites continuously denounced the International Committee as "ultra-left sectarians."

Everything written by Steiner and Brenner is opposed to the principles for which Trotsky indefatigably fought. In his discussions with the American Trotskyists in 1938, on the significance of the *Transitional*

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Program, he insisted that the revolutionary party's program must take, as its point of departure, the objective crisis of capitalism, in all its acuteness, and not the subjective consciousness and confusion of the workers. At a meeting with James P. Cannon and other leaders of the American section in May 1938, Trotsky said:

> The political backwardness of the American working class is very great. This signifies that the danger of a fascist catastrophe is very great. This is the point of departure for all our activity. The program must express the objective tasks of the working class rather than the backwardness of the workers. It must reflect society as it is, and not the backwardness of the working class. It is an instrument to overcome and vanquish the backwardness.[9]

In his discussions with the American leaders, Trotsky warned against pandering to the confusion and prejudices of the masses:

> …the task is to adapt the mentality of the masses to those objective factors. … The crisis of society is given as the base of our activity. The mentality is the political arena of our activity. We must change it. We must give a scientific explanation of society, and clearly explain it to the masses. That is the difference between Marxism and reformism.
>
> The reformists have a good smell for what the audience wants—as Norman Thomas—he gives them that. But that is not serious revolutionary activity. We must have the courage to be unpopular, to say, "you are fools," "you are stupid," "they betray you," and every once in a while with a scandal launch our ideas with passion. It is necessary to shake the worker from time to time, to explain, and then shake him again—that all belongs to the art of propaganda. But it must be scientific, not bent to the mood of the masses.[10]

Trotsky warned the leaders of the American movement that if the American workers refused to accept the program of socialist revolution, the danger existed that they would be compelled to accept the program of fascism. There was no guarantee that the workers would act in time. "We cannot take responsibility for this," he said. "We can only take responsibility for ourselves."[11]

Steiner and Brenner take responsibility for nothing. In order to justify their support for a bourgeois political party and the government it leads, they invoke the "experience" of the working class as if it were an unfolding stream of purely psychic phenomena, unaffected by class forces, which one must observe passively, in respectful silence. Above all, they insist that the conscious activity of the revolutionary party—the critical element of negativity as the "moving and generating principle"[12] in the dialectic of the objective historical process—must be excluded from the unfolding social experience. Steiner and Brenner argue, in effect, that it is impermissible to intrude upon that blessed psychic state of virgin innocence with critical analysis and discordant exposures. Experience must not be "denigrated." Rather, the "experience" must be allowed to take the workers wherever it will—that is, to defeat.

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The political bankruptcy of Steiner and Brenner's opportunist theory of "experience" has been exposed by subsequent developments. Alexis Tsipras repaid their infatuation and political subservience by forming a government in alliance with the Independent Greeks, an extreme right-wing bourgeois party. Tsipras then embarked on a policy consisting of the repudiation of every promise that Syriza had made to oppose the European Union's austerity program.

Syriza's betrayal

The culmination of this betrayal was the calling of a referendum on July 5, 2015, which was intended by Tsipras to provide political cover for his government's capitulation to the European Union's demands. The International Committee denounced this maneuver, pointing out that the Syriza government, which had been placed in power just five months earlier to oppose austerity, had no legitimate reason to call a referendum on whether or not to capitulate to the EU. Alexis Tsipras was, in effect, providing European imperialism and its allies in the Greek ruling elites an opportunity to get rid of his government, thus relieving Syriza of the onus of accepting and imposing concessions.

Brenner, predictably, was outraged by the International Committee's exposure of Tsipras' maneuver and leapt to his defense. Syriza, he wrote, "has turned to the Greek people and asked them to decide: yes or no to more austerity … this is one of the rare occasions when bourgeois democracy actually lives up to its hype."[13]

The warnings made by the International Committee, to which Brenner so bitterly objected, were quickly vindicated. Tsipras was horrified by the massive "No" vote, which he had neither foreseen nor desired. An article that appeared in Britain's *Daily Telegraph* on July 8, 2015, written by international business editor Ambrose Evans-Pritchard, confirmed the analysis of the World Socialist Web Site:

> Greek Premier Alexis Tsipras never expected to win Sunday's referendum on EMU [Economic and Monetary Union] bail-out terms, let alone to preside over a blazing national revolt against foreign control.
>
> He called the snap vote with the expectation—and intention—of losing it. The plan was to put up a good fight, accept honourable defeat, and hand over the keys of the Maximos Mansion, leaving it to others to implement the June 25 "ultimatum" [from the European institutions] and suffer the opprobrium.[14]

In an interview with the *Guardian*, published on July 14, 2015, Yanis Varoufakis, Syriza's former finance minister who had been leading the negotiations with the EU, confirmed Evans-Pritchard's report. "I had assumed, and I believe so had the prime minister, that our support and the no vote would fade exponentially," Varoufakis told the *Guardian*. He also stated that Golden Dawn, the Greek fascist party, would benefit from Syriza's capitulation. "I cannot see any other possible outcome than the further strengthening of Golden Dawn."[15]

Steiner and Brenner reacted to the betrayal of the Greek working class not by denouncing Syriza and its leader, Alexis Tsipras, but by publishing new and more vitriolic attacks on the World Socialist Web Site. The crime of the WSWS was its "blanket denial that the EXPERIENCE of the Syriza government could prove crucial to raising the political consciousness of the masses and open opportunities to win large numbers to revolutionary socialism."[16] This bizarre argument leads to the conclusion that political betrayals that disorient and demoralize the working class are to be welcomed as positive contributions to the development of consciousness. The more betrayals the better! And what if the betrayals result in the victory of Golden Dawn? If we accept the political logic of Steiner and Brenner, this would provide yet another invaluable consciousness-raising experience! The task of "socialists," according to their theory of

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consciousness, is to promote illusions in the parties that are betraying the working class. One must "stand with them [the workers] in their experiences…"[17] No doubt, if reaction triumphs in Greece, Steiner, in Manhattan, and Brenner, in Toronto, will "stand with" the workers, but they will do so from a very safe distance, 5,000 miles from Athens.

In the most revealing expression of his own demoralization, Brenner blurts out: "In revolutionary politics IT ISN'T ENOUGH TO KEEP PROCLAIMING THE TRUTH."[18] Only a person who has been irremediably corrupted by cynicism and has severed all his internal intellectual and moral links to socialism could write these words. Marxism and all forms of progressive thought and culture are inspired by the conviction that there is nothing more powerful than truth. The Fourth International is distinguished from all other political movements, including those that claim some connection to socialism, in the emphasis it places on the immense political significance of the fight for truth in an age when capitalism depends for its survival upon lies. As Trotsky declared so powerfully in 1937: "Neither threats, nor persecutions, nor violations can stop us! Be it even over our bleaching bones, the truth will triumph! We will blaze the trail for it. It will conquer!"[19] The fight for truth—which means, first of all, telling the truth to the working class—is the essential foundation of Marxist politics, and is incompatible with all forms of political opportunism.

Steiner and Brenner's defense of Syriza has exposed the combination of intellectual bad faith, theoretical charlatanry and political duplicity underlying their denunciations of the International Committee. They initiated their attack in 2004 with the charge that my "objectivist" proclivities and "neglect of the dialectic"—arising from my high esteem for the work of Plekhanov—represented a departure from Marxist theory that threatened the very survival of the International Committee. By 2007 they had concluded that the International Committee, having failed to accept their criticisms of my "objectivism," was finished as a revolutionary movement. And now, a decade after they initiated their campaign, Steiner and Brenner have functioned as willing accomplices of petty-bourgeois politicians who have carried out a monstrous betrayal of the working class.

The return of Savas Michael-Matsas

Politics is rich in irony. In his initial polemic, written in 2004, when he was still proclaiming his devotion to the International Committee, Steiner claimed that he recognized the importance of its critique of Gerry Healy's "bastardization of dialectics." He acknowledged, "The break with Healy in 1985 was an important milestone in the sense that it saved the International Committee from complete destruction."[20]

But the political logic of their struggle against the International Committee and their defense of Syriza has led Steiner and Brenner to forge a political alliance with Savas Michael-Matsas, who supported Healy unconditionally in 1985 and broke with the International Committee. He was the national secretary of the Workers Internationalist League in Greece, the only section of the ICFI that supported Healy. Michael-Matsas backed Healy, not out of personal loyalty, but because the latter's opportunist policies were most closely aligned with his own efforts to form political alliances with Stalinist and left bourgeois parties in Greece. In the aftermath of his break with the International Committee, Michael-Matsas proclaimed a "New Era for the Fourth International," in which Trotskyism would be liberated from "abstract propagandism" and "the practices of the defeats and isolation of Trotskyism." In practice, this "New Era" consisted of supporting the bourgeois Pasok party in Greece, endorsing, in alliance with the Stalinists, a bourgeois candidate for the presidency of Cyprus, and hailing Mikhail Gorbachev's *Perestroika* as the beginning of the "political revolution" in the Soviet Union.

Now, thirty years after he broke with Trotskyism, Steiner and Brenner have placed their blog site at the service of Michael-Matsas, where he is afforded space to denounce the "sectarian" International Committee. While the ICFI and WSWS, he wrote on January 22, 2015, "can say some correct things about the bourgeois nature of Syriza's leadership, they also discount the significance of Syriza's victory. … The sectarian groups are blind to the opportunities because they are indifferent to the mass movement."[21] Like all political opportunists, Michael-Matsas invokes the "mass movement" without defining the class nature and political program of its leadership.

As for the evolution of Michael-Matsas' theoretical conceptions since he broke with the International Committee, his *Wikipedia* entry informs us that:

> He has been trying to offer "a reinterpretation of the revolutionary theory and marxism from the perspective of messianism and Jewish mystic, and vice versa". His position may be classified as that of a "religious atheism" or else of a "profane messianism".[22]

One will not find on the Steiner-Brenner blog site a single critical word about Michael-Matsas' "bastardization of dialectics." They are no more troubled by his efforts to incorporate into Marxism the medieval mysticism of the Kabbalah than they are by the claims of Syriza's ideologists that we live in a "post-Marxist" era. But Steiner and Brenner could not abide my "objectivist" philosophy—that is, the utilization of historical materialist analysis to disclose and advance the interests of the working class.

It is not, we repeat, philosophy that drives their politics. Rather, their subjective and eclectic philosophy arises from the requirements of the class orientation and social interests that find expression in their politics.

A definition of the pseudo-left

The betrayal of Syriza marks a significant milestone within Greece and internationally. Nothing remains of the "leftism" of the social milieu from which organizations such as Syriza arose, except deceitful phrases. Its repudiation of its anti-austerity program has exposed the unbridgeable chasm between the political representatives of the better-off sections of the middle class and the broad mass of the working population. This objective conflict of social interests will set into motion a necessary process of political realignment. The advanced sections of the working class and youth will turn against the pseudo-left and seek to make their way to the genuinely socialist and Marxist left. This objective process of social and political differentiation requires the intervention of the Trotskyist movement. Mere anger against those who have betrayed is not sufficient. Marxists must strive to impart to the workers' radicalization and the intensification of the class struggle a high level of political and historical consciousness.

As a contribution to this process, and in order to help workers identify their political enemies, we offer the following working definition of the contemporary pseudo-left:

• The pseudo-left denotes political parties, organizations and theoretical/ideological tendencies, which utilize populist slogans and democratic phrases to promote the socioeconomic interests of privileged

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and affluent strata of the middle class. Examples of such parties and tendencies include Syriza in Greece, Podemos in Spain, Die Linke in Germany, and numerous offshoots of ex-Trotskyist (i.e., Pabloite) and state capitalist organizations such as the Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste (NPA) in France, the NSSP in Sri Lanka and the International Socialist Organization in the United States. This list could include the remnants and descendants of the "Occupy " movements influenced by anarchist and post-anarchist tendencies. Given the wide variety of petty-bourgeois pseudo-left organizations throughout the world, this is by no means a comprehensive list.

• The pseudo-left is anti-Marxist. It rejects historical materialism, embracing instead various forms of subjective idealism and philosophical irrationalism associated with existentialism, the Frankfurt School and contemporary postmodernism.

• The pseudo-left is anti-socialist, opposes class struggle, and denies the central role of the working class and the necessity of revolution in the progressive transformation of society.[23] It counterposes supra-class populism to the independent political organization and mass mobilization of the working class against the capitalist system. The economic program of the pseudo-left is, in its essentials, pro-capitalist and nationalistic.

• The pseudo-left promotes "identity politics," fixating on issues related to nationality, ethnicity, race, gender and sexuality in order to acquire greater influence in corporations, the colleges and universities, the higher-paying professions, the trade unions and in government and state institutions, to effect a more favorable distribution of wealth among the richest 10 percent of the population. The pseudo-left seeks greater access to, rather than the destruction of, social privilege.

• In the imperialist centers of North America, Western Europe and Australasia, the pseudo-left is generally pro-imperialist, and utilizes the slogans of "human rights" to legitimize, and even directly support, neo-colonialist military operations.

The analysis and exposure of the class basis, retrograde theoretical conceptions and reactionary politics of the pseudo-left are especially critical tasks confronting the Trotskyist movement in its struggle to educate the working class, free it from the influence of the petty-bourgeois movements, and establish its political independence as the central progressive and revolutionary force within modern capitalist society. *The Frankfurt School, Postmodernism and the Politics of the Pseudo-Left* is intended as a contribution to the achievement of that goal.

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July 16, 2015

Footnotes:

[1] "On Mr. H. Rickert's Book," in *Selected Philosophical Works*, Volume 3 (Moscow, 1976), p. 483. In this paragraph, Plekhanov, somewhat caustically, places between quotation marks phrases used by Rickert. It is worth noting that Martin Heidegger—the existentialist philosopher and pro-Nazi sycophant, who profoundly influenced the work of Sartre, Marcuse and later irrationalists such as Foucault—began his career as Rickert's assistant.

[2] http://forum.permanent-revolution.org/2014/10/about-this-web-site.html

[3] http://forum.permanent-revolution.org/2014_05_01_archive.html

[4] http://forum.permanent-revolution.org/2014/09/a-brief-comment-on-resolution-of-sep-on.html [Emphasis added]

[5] *The Transitional Program: The Death Agony of Capitalism and the Tasks of the Fourth International* (New York: Labor Publications, 1981), p. 1.

[6] V.I. Lenin, *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism* (New York: International Publishers, 1970), p. 118.

[7] www.wsws.org/en/articles/2015/01/27/pers-j27.html [Brenner's emphasis].

8] www.wsws.org/en/articles/2015/01/28/syri-j28.html [Brenner's emphasis].

[9] *The Transitional Program for Socialist Revolution* (New York: Pathfinder, 1977), pp. 189–190.

[10] ibid., p. 219.

[11] ibid., p. 191.

[12] *Marx-Engels Collected Works , Volume 3* (New York: International Publishers, 1975), p. 332.

[13] http://forum.permanent-revolution.org/2015/06/the-working-class-in-fantasy-and-reality.html

[14] www.telegraph.co.uk/finance/economics/11724924/Europe-is-blowing-itself-apart-over-Greece-and-nobody-can-stop-it.html

[15] http://www.theguardian.com/business/2015/jul/14/golden-dawn-will-be-strengthened-by-worse-austerity-yanis-varoufakis-warns

[16] http://forum.permanent-revolution.org/2015/07/sectarianism-and-greek-working-class.html [Emphasis in the original]

[17] ibid.

[18] ibid. [Emphasis in the original]

[19] Leon Trotsky, *I Stake My Life*, (New York: Labor Publications, 1977), p. 26.

[20] http://permanent-revolution.org/polemics/dialectical_path.pdf

[21] http://forum.permanent-revolution.org/2015/01/for-revolutionary-intervention-in.html

[22] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Savas_Matsas

[23] As Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe wrote in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, "What is now in crisis is a whole conception of socialism which rests upon the ontological centrality of the working class, upon the role of Revolution, with a capital 'r', as the founding moment in the transition from one type of society to another…" (London: Verso, 2001, p. 2.)

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