

Hundreds attend meetings in Leipzig, Germany on the danger of war and the politics of the pseudo-left

Our correspondents
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Nearly 500 participants attended two meetings held by Mehring Verlag last Friday at the Leipzig Book Fair. Two books were presented at the meetings that address issues closely linked to the current political situation in Germany. In the afternoon, David North presented the German-language edition of his book *The Frankfurt School, Postmodernism and the Politics of the Pseudo-Left: A Marxist Critique* in the Non-fiction Book Forum. In the evening, the book *Wissenschaft oder Kriegspropaganda (Scholarship or War Propaganda?)* was discussed at a meeting at Leipzig University.

The Frankfurt School, Postmodernism and the Politics of the Pseudo-Left

Peter Schwarz, at the first meeting in the forum, placed North's new book in the context of the Marxist tradition of theoretical and political polemics. "The content of these polemics was always more important than the particular individuals they addressed," said Schwarz. "Few people remember Eugen Dühring. But Engels' *Anti-Dühring*, answering the now unknown academic's attacks on Marxism, played an immense role in the education of the socialist movement."

The Frankfurt School, Postmodernism and the Politics of the Pseudo-Left, Schwarz said, "deals with the pessimistic, deeply subjective and irrational conceptions that have dominated the radical, petty-bourgeois left in the post-war period—and which have often been falsely presented as Marxism." The book shows how the various pseudo-left organisations—such as the Left Party in Germany, Syriza in Greece and Podemos in Spain—disorient and betray the working class.

In his own remarks, North spoke first about the rise of Donald Trump as the leading candidate for the Republican Party in the US elections. Trump "represents everything that is backward in America," North said, pointing to the parallels with the growth of the Alternative for Germany (AfD).

North said that the ability of Trump and other right-wing forces to exploit social anger had exposed the political and intellectual bankruptcy of the pseudo-left parties and organisations of the affluent middle class.

The great Marxists had always been concerned with questions of perspective, North said. They analyzed objective social developments from the standpoint of the working class struggle for power.

This has nothing to do with what passes as "left" today, said North. There were both political but also theoretical reasons for this. The origins of many pseudo-left tendencies can be traced back to the period of the protests against the Vietnam War. The protest movements that emerged in the 1960s were dominated by radicalised sections of the petty bourgeoisie,

not the working class. "They were influenced," North explained, "by Herbert Marcuse, Wilhelm Reich, Theodor Adorno, and Max Horkheimer, to cite the best known representatives of the Frankfurt School."

Following Hitler's victory in 1933, Horkheimer and Marcuse had drawn deeply pessimistic conclusions. "They were influenced by the philosophy of German irrationalism. Marcuse attempted to fuse Heidegger's existentialist phenomenology onto Marxism. The resulting distortion of Marxist philosophy provided a theoretical foundation for the politics of sections of the middle class."

North ended with a direct appeal to the audience: "We are entering into very serious times in world history. These are times where masses of people are again going to be confronted with life and death questions. I do not have to tell an audience in Germany what it would mean if a fascist became president of the United States. I think serious times bring forward serious thinkers."

He added, "There are democratic issues relating to the many different forms of discrimination in capitalist society. But these issues can only be resolved in the framework of the struggle of the working class for socialism. The great task today is the rebuilding of a genuine revolutionary movement of the working class."

North said he hoped that his book "will encourage the younger generation that will be politically activated by life and death questions to concern themselves with historical materialism, with the great philosophical foundations of Marxism and to break intellectually with the many different forms of petty-bourgeois radical theory."

He continued: "The issues which we confront in the United States are world issues. We are witnessing the revival of very dangerous forms of nationalism. In opposition to all the different forms of nationalist politics, we advance the conception of the international unity of the working class, of the great mass of humanity—regardless of race, regardless of nationality, regardless of ethnic identity."

Scholarship or War Propaganda?

Some 400 participants attended the book presentation at Leipzig University. As well as the book *Scholarship or War Propaganda?*, the meeting also discussed *The Frankfurt School, Postmodernism and the Politics of the Pseudo-Left*, about which the author himself spoke.

Opening the meeting, Schwarz, the editor of *Scholarship or War Propaganda?*, spoke about the political background to the book.

Seventy years after World War II, Schwarz said, no one could deny the danger of a Third World War, which would likely mean the destruction of

humanity. The growing danger of war was a direct result of the crisis of capitalism, especially since the financial crash of 2008.

“The ruling elite and its representatives in the establishment parties, the media and the universities are reacting to the crisis of capitalism, to which they have no rational answers, as they did in the 1930s, with a sharp turn to the right,” said Schwarz. “They are reacting by arming the state, with authoritarian forms of rule and with war.”

As in the 1920s and 1930s, the universities play a central role in this development, Schwarz stressed. War was being prepared ideologically at the university. The fight against war was therefore not just a political but also a theoretical question. *Scholarship or War Propaganda?* documents the struggle mounted by the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) at Berlin’s Humboldt University against the return of German militarism.

Political scientist Herfried Münkler downplays German responsibility for the First World War and demands that Germany once again become Europe’s hegemon and taskmaster. His historical revisionism coincided with the government’s announcement in January 2014 that “German military restraint” was ending. “In Ukraine, the new foreign policy was put into practice,” said Schwarz.

The head of the school for Eastern European History, Jörg Baberowski, relativises the crimes of the Nazis. In January 2014, Baberowski told the newsweekly *Der Spiegel*, “Hitler was no psychopath, and he wasn’t vicious. He didn’t want people to talk about the extermination of the Jews at his table.” Unlike the 1980s, when similar positions advanced by historian Ernst Nolte were subjected to intense criticism by academics, there has been no opposition to Baberowski’s statements apart from that of the IYSSE.

“The significance of this book goes far beyond Humboldt University,” Schwarz summarised. “It shows the intellectual pathology of this experience. Germany not only stands in a political crisis but also an intellectual one.”

In his contribution, Christoph Vandreier went into Baberowski’s work and his irrationalist theories of history. He showed how the Humboldt professor falsified the history of the Russian Revolution and relativises the crimes of the Nazis. “His statements in *Der Spiegel* were no *faux pas*, but followed an extremely reactionary logic that runs throughout Baberowski’s works,” said Vandreier.

For example, Baberowski falsified the October Revolution as an outburst of barbaric violence that inevitably led to Stalinism. In this way, he suggests that Germany’s war against the Soviet Union had a preventative character. Baberowski presents the Nazis’ war of annihilation as being the result of the violence on the Eastern Front, which was created by the Soviet Union. “Stalin and his generals forced the *Wehrmacht* [German Army] into a new type of war, which no longer protected the civilian population,” Vandreier cited Baberowski.

Such a falsification of history is only possible on the basis of an irrationalist theory of knowledge, said Vandreier. “In order to relativise the crimes of German imperialism, Baberowski has to deny any historical causality, any objective truth in history. To this end, he utilises the postmodernist theories of Michel Foucault and the irrationalist philosophy of Martin Heidegger, pushing their views to the limit.”

On this basis, Baberowski has developed a reactionary worldview that defends social inequality and justifies violence against the exploited and oppressed. His latest diatribe against refugees is part of this reactionary line.

Baberowski is not an isolated case. Right-wing intellectuals like Rüdiger Safranski, Peter Sloterdijk or the Leipzig jurist Thomas Rauscher have also expressed extreme right-wing positions. “Like Baberowski, their positions are bound up with an ultra-conservative world outlook that holds that the world, or humanity, are neither comprehensible nor mutable. They are linked directly with the arch-conservative and anti-democratic authors

of the Weimar Republic who opened the way ideologically for the Nazis,” said Vandreier.

This right-wing intellectual offensive can only be understood in relation to the fundamental tendency toward militarism and war. Amidst deepening inequality and the eruption of imperialist violence, former left-wing or liberal academics have moved to the right. It was worth noting that in its struggle against Baberowski, Vandreier said, the IYSSE found enormous support from students and workers, but not a single professor had opposed their right-wing colleague. In particular, members of the Left Party had supported Baberowski.

“At the universities, figures such as Baberowski can only extend their influence because so-called left-wing academics have abandoned anything to do with social questions or historical truth,” Vandreier summarised. “They are laying the foundations for the right with relativist and irrationalist theories. Baberowski is the best example of this.”

Audience members responded enthusiastically to the contributions from the platform. There were many questions about the political situation in the US, the rise of Trump and the candidacy of Bernie Sanders. Many questioners also drew a parallel between Trump and the electoral success of the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD).

North stressed that Trump’s rise must be understood by workers as a preventive measure by the ruling class against the social resistance of the working class. “Trump is an expression of the will to power of the oligarchy,” he said.

In his introduction, Schwarz had spoken about the rise of the AfD in Germany and had drawn parallels to the Trump phenomenon. “The AfD is not, as is continually claimed, the result of a rightward movement among broad social layers, but is an initiative from above,” he said.

Some audience members attempted to defend the Left Party and said that the psyche of workers, or a “social unconsciousness,” is responsible for the rise of the right wing. Vandreier responded by saying that the IYSSE campaign at Humboldt University and at Leipzig University, and the large audience at the meeting itself, showed that there was a strong opposition to war and social reaction.

Theories such as those of the Frankfurt School that make the working class responsible for right-wing sentiments distract from the political questions that must be clarified in the development of an independent movement of the working class. In Germany today, this meant above all understanding the role of the Left Party.

Dozens of workers and students left their contact details and participated in discussions that continued long after the event.



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