

Marxism and the pseudo-left: David North interviewed at Leipzig Book Fair

31 March 2016

On March 18, David North, chairman of the International Editorial Board of the World Socialist Web Site, presented the new German edition of The Frankfurt School, Postmodernism and the Politics of the Pseudo-Left: A Marxist Critique at the Book Fair in Leipzig, Germany. Following his presentation, a reporter from the newspaper Schattenblick interviewed North. The interview was published on March 29 and posted online on the Schattenblick web site. With the permission of Schattenblick, the interview is presented below. It has been translated from the original German.

Schattenblick: How would you explain to the average visitor to the Leipzig Book Fair, who has no real idea of left politics, the difference between real left and pseudo-left?

David North: I have provided in my book a concise definition of “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 and affluent strata of the middle class.”

What I am seeking to explain is that the pseudo-left represents affluent sections of the middle class with various forms of identity politics. Their concentration on race, nationality, sexual orientation and gender is essentially bound up with conflicts within the wealthiest 10 percent of the population. Even within this privileged layer there is an unequal distribution of wealth. There is substantial dissatisfaction that the greatest portion of wealth, even within this affluent section of society, is going to the richest 1 percent.

This has led to the promotion of identity politics, including what we call in the United States “affirmative action.” Demands are raised for quotas, the allocation of a certain percentage of positions for designated minorities, and even, in the most extreme cases, that minority and women students be taught only by professors of their own gender and race. Demands of this sort are aimed at securing a more satisfactory distribution of wealth among the most affluent layer in society. The pursuit of these demands by so-called left organizations has nothing whatsoever to do with the struggle of the working class. The role of the pseudo-left is not understood, and that is why so many were shocked after Syriza came to power in Greece and, almost immediately, began repudiating all its former demands and promises.

Yesterday, I was given an issue of *Jungen Welt* [the newspaper of the Left Party in Germany]. I was struck by the fact that this issue was dedicated largely to issues related to personal sexual orientation. This is *Jungen Welt's* focus at a time when Germany is moving rapidly toward remilitarization. As I just explained in my comments at the book launch, Germany is engaged in a new drive for world power. Isn't this the issue that a left newspaper should be concentrating on? Why are there no significant anti-war demonstrations in Germany? Why is there no organized opposition to war?

Our party in Germany has been involved in a serious political conflict over the presence of right-wing elements in the faculty of Humboldt University in Berlin. But outside of our movement, there has been hardly

any public opposition to people like Professor Jörg Baberowski. He was even defended by the Left Party. [1]

When one speaks of the pseudo-left, one is referring to allies of imperialism who legitimize and support neo-colonial military operations, using human rights as a pretext. This is a “left” that has nothing to do with left politics as that term was understood by Marx, Engels, Lenin, Trotsky, Kautsky, Luxemburg, Liebknecht, Mehring and many other important figures in revolutionary history.

SB: In Germany there are movement activists who protest, for example, against nuclear power plants and the use of coal. They organize actions like chaining themselves to trees or railroad tracks to give expression to their opposition to existing conditions. At the same time many of them reject communism. How can one reach these people, who are sensitive to societal contradictions and want to do something to overcome them?

DN: I do not doubt the sincerity of many people who engage in protests over the issues you have referred to. I am not attacking anyone on personal grounds. But we must examine political tendencies carefully and investigate their objective social content. Protests related to environmental issues, though legitimate, do not necessarily have a clearly defined class character. Particularly in Germany, there is a long tradition of different forms of what Georg Lukács quite accurately described as “romantic anti-capitalism.” [2]

Individualistic anti-capitalism, which is motivated by the manner in which the capitalist environment impinges upon personal lifestyle and concerns, is socially ungrounded. A well-known representative of this orientation was Gustav Landauer, who was an anti-Marxist anti-capitalist. [3] He specifically opposed the association of socialist politics with the mobilization of the working class as the leading and decisive revolutionary force.

What you describe in your question strikes me as an anarchistic petty-bourgeois movement. We witnessed something similar in the United States with the Occupy Wall Street movement. And what did it accomplish? Nothing! Among the problems that must be overcome—which is deeply anchored in the outlook of many radical tendencies—is distance from and distrust of the working class.

One of the ideological consequences of the influence of Herbert Marcuse was that many radicals were infected with a deep hostility toward the working class. [4] Marcuse repeatedly stressed that the working class, especially in the United States, is a reactionary force and that workers are essentially fascistic. He understood absolutely nothing about the working class. But these anti-working class prejudices remain strong to this day.

I have been asked why, in the US primary elections, Donald Trump finds support among sections of white workers. This is the case, but it is not at all unusual to hear the same workers say that they will vote in November for either Donald Trump or Bernie Sanders. What this means is that they are looking for an alternative to the existing system. The petty-bourgeois pseudo-left that I have mentioned has absolutely nothing to say to the working class.

SB: Are there workers who are class-conscious?

DN: First of all, there is a working class, and it is an oppressed class. We should return to the classics of Marxism. The great representatives of the Marxist intelligentsia, beginning with Marx and Engels, sought to develop socialist consciousness in the working class. They understood that the working class constituted the main objective force for socialist revolution. However, as I said, the working class is oppressed, and it cannot spontaneously develop socialist theory. This will be developed in the course of serious struggles.

The difficulties of our time find expression in your question: Is there a working class? It is worth noting that in the United States the concept “working class” is rejected. No politician employs this concept, and this goes as well for Bernie Sanders. He talks only of the “middle class.” In other words, in no other land is the very existence of the working class so strenuously denied as in a country with one of the largest working class populations in the world!

This brings us back to the problem of the impact of the past defeats of the working class in Europe on the demoralization of the intellectuals. The views of the Frankfurt School, to which Marcuse belonged, expressed a deep political pessimism that led them to reject the working class. But the past defeats did not prove the non-revolutionary character of the working class. It was necessary to study the causes of the defeats. But Marcuse never examined the role of the Communist parties. He never developed a political critique of Stalinism.

SB: Is it not true that Marcuse worked with American intelligence agencies? [5]

DN: Yes. That was an expression of his pessimism.

SB: Here at the Leipzig Book Fair the concern is with literature. What is the role of culture in the outlook of Trotskyism?

DN: I am the editorial board chairman of the *World Socialist Web Site*. It places immense emphasis on questions relating to culture. As we see it, the political crisis is reflected in the sphere of culture—as, for example, in the very low level of contemporary cinema.

The *World Socialist Web Site* has just published a review today of Jonathan Franzen’s *Purity*. It is a very bad novel. The problems of politics and culture are interconnected. We wish to see a return of a genuine revolutionary realism, and that is not—as one must always explain—“Socialist Realism” or Stalinist realism. Rather, our conception of realism is one that deals with the problems of our times as they are reflected in society and politics. This is vital for film and every genre of art.

SB: You referred to Bernie Sanders, who is seeking the presidential nomination of the Democratic Party. The co-founder and former president of the Physicians for Social Responsibility (PSR), Helen Caldicott, who has campaigned for decades for nuclear disarmament, said that Sanders—even if he lost—has released a revolutionary potential among American youth. After the election the United States will never be as it was before. Do you share this appraisal?

DN: Sanders did not create this situation, and it was not his intention to do so. He is nothing more than an old radical, and he has many connections to left Democrats. They knew very well that there is great dissatisfaction with Hillary Clinton, to whom I have referred as “The Lady Macbeth of American politics.” Sanders admitted that he was troubled by the possibility of the emergence of an independent political movement on the left of the Democratic Party. That is why he offered his services as a political lightning rod. It was his aim to keep this dissatisfaction within acceptable channels, and he was absolutely stunned by the popular response. He did not at all expect that he would find support among workers. No one foresaw this possibility. But as a socialist I often encounter workers who say, “Yes, I am voting for your guy. I am for him.” They actually think that he is a party member.

Of course, he is nothing of the sort. But I believe that people will be more and more interested in finding out what real socialism is. American

workers are not frightened by the idea of revolution. The middle class is frightened of it. But workers will want what we call in the United States, “The real thing.” Of course, there is a danger that if this does not emerge, a charlatan like Trump could come to power. But neither he nor any other candidates, including Sanders, have really addressed themselves to the working class.

I am convinced that people are beginning to think seriously about politics. And you can believe me that fascism will not come to power so easily in the United States. It won’t be so simple for an American Hitler to take power.

Eight years ago, it was argued by many that all American workers are racists. But millions of white workers were prepared to vote for an African American if he would stand up for their interests, and they voted for Barack Obama. However, they have been completely disappointed by him. Obama has done nothing for them. He has moved ever further to the right. He has escalated drone warfare. He has undermined their medical care. But the pseudo-left supports Obama.

SB: Could you imagine an alliance between the Black protest movement, which has emerged as a result of police killings, with left forces? Perhaps something similar to the Black Panther movement?

DN: Of course there is racism, but that is, fundamentally, a class issue. There are many white youths who are murdered by the police. When it is proclaimed that “Black Lives Matter,” and one responds that “All lives matter,” then the accusation is made that one is a racist. But that is not true. Police brutality is a class issue. We do not deny that racism exists, but what are the objective foundations of racism? It serves to split the working class. That has always been the purpose of racism. What was the purpose of anti-Semitism in Germany? It was a weapon against socialism. In one of the first biographies of Hitler, the German writer Konrad Heiden explained that Hitler hated the Jews not because of Rothschild the banker, but because of Karl Marx the socialist. Anti-Semitism was a class issue.

SB: Many refugees are seeking entry into Europe. What should the European Union do?

DN: This is a problem that the working class must solve. The EU will do nothing for the refugees. It is creating Fortress Europe. The first thing that must be done is to end the wars, for which the EU and the United States are responsible. They destroyed Iraq, then Libya, and now it is Syria. They started all these wars. Why are there hundreds of thousands of refugees from Syria? Because there is a war that was started for the purpose of regime change. It was not a revolution.

When I give lectures on the subject of World War II, I often ask the students: What was the first item in the indictment of Nazi criminals at the Nürnnberg Trial? Most people reply that they were placed on trial because the Nazis murdered the Jews. This is not quite accurate. The first charge against the Nazis were that they had committed “crimes against peace.” That is, they used war as a means of achieving political aims. Bush did that. Clinton did that. And so has Obama. They are all war criminals, and they are responsible for the refugee crisis.

As I said, the first thing is to stop the wars. Moreover, everyone should have the right to live where they wish. Care should be provided to all refugees, and they should be guaranteed decent living conditions. And placing an 80 percent surcharge tax on all private fortunes greater than \$10 million should provide funding for this and other social problems.

SB: Mr. North, thank you for this discussion.

Endnotes:

[1] Jörg Baberowski, the chairman of the Department of East European studies at Berlin’s Humboldt University, is the most prominent defender of Ernst Nolte, the most notorious academic apologist for Adolf Hitler and the Nazi regime. Baberowski, in a February 2014 interview published in Germany’s mass circulation newsmagazine, *Der Spiegel*, stated, “Hitler was not cruel. He did not want people to speak about the extermination of the Jews at his table.”

[2] Georg Lukács (1885-1971) was a Hungarian socialist and philosopher.

[3] Gustav Landauer (1871-1919) broke with the German Socialist Democratic Party in the 1890s and emerged as a major figure in the anarchist movement.

[4] Herbert Marcuse (1898-1979) was a leading representative of the Frankfurt School. After fleeing the Nazis, Marcuse came to the United States, where he became a university professor and wrote several books, including *One Dimensional Man*, that influenced the 1960s student movement.

[5] Marcuse, as is well known, worked for the OSS, predecessor of the CIA, during World War II.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact