

Axel Honneth at Humboldt University: A socialism that is nothing of the sort

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A meeting on “The relevance of socialism today” took place at Berlin’s Humboldt University on July 5. On the podium were two philosophy professors, Axel Honneth and Christoph Menke, and two politicians, Gesine Schwan (Social Democratic Party) and Sahra Wagenknecht (Left Party).

The event centred on the presentation of *The Idea of Socialism*, a book by Axel Honneth, published in 2015. Honneth (66) is the director of the Institute of Social Research in Frankfurt. He is, in other words, the official head of the “Frankfurt School.”

The University’s auditorium was packed, with around 800 people in attendance. But all those who had come to hear a contribution on the evening’s official subject, “the relevance of socialism today,” were to be bitterly disappointed.

The contributions were so far removed from social reality that at times they assumed comical dimensions. A playwright seeking to convey the aloofness, class prejudice and arrogance of a German professor could not have come up with a more accurate depiction.

Honneth began by insisting that his book was “a metapolitical essay.” He was trying neither to place himself or socialism in the context of today’s conflicts, nor to review the history of the socialist movement up to its present stage, thereby gaining insights into its possible future.

Instead, what followed was a discussion about “normative ideas,” which carefully avoided drawing any connection to actually existing events or developments. The current historic levels of social inequality were not mentioned. Nor were the global financial crisis, the break-up of the European Union or the growing danger of war. An uninformed observer would have concluded that socialism arises not from the class struggle within society, but from disputes over “normative ideas” in the heads of German professors.

The discussion offered Schwan and Wagenknecht the opportunity to paint their own parties’ reactionary politics in the rosiest of colors. After all, when the SPD implemented its Agenda 2010 social welfare cuts and the Left Party decimated public services in the state of Berlin, they were both putting into practice the normative idea of “democratic socialism.” Schwan, herself a philosophy professor and a member of the SPD’s basic values commission, is well acquainted with this form of doubletalk.

The metaphysical and abstract character of the discussion was not, however, simply the result of academic estrangement from the world. Whenever he attacked Marxism, Honneth became concrete. He regards anything related to the class struggle, the working class

or the abolition of capitalism as a horrifying prospect.

In his contribution, as in his book, Honneth referred to three conceptions from which socialism had to be liberated: the idea of the proletariat as the revolutionary subject; the idea that progress develops out of a law-governed process; and the idea that economy, i.e. property relations, must be changed.

Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, the founders of the Frankfurt School, had earlier rejected the class struggle and the working class. In the aftermath of the Second World War, they introduced into the Frankfurt School the ideology of corporatism, that is, institutionalised class collaboration, directed against communism and revolution. Social improvements and wage increases during that period gave to this type of politics a certain degree of plausibility.

By the time Jürgen Habermas became the Frankfurt School’s leading representative, the period of social reforms had already ended. He became a propagandist for “constitutional patriotism” and the regulation of social conflicts through “communicative action.”

But today, the democratic mechanisms that Habermas idealized are breaking down under the pressure of social contradictions. Class tensions are once again erupting to the surface. That is why the speakers were unable to base themselves on the realities of social life in the course of their pseudo-intellectual discussion. On the contrary, they were compelled to avoid any reference to the real world as they advanced their reactionary theories.

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality, which has four representatives in the student parliament at Humboldt University, explained its attitude to Honneth’s book in a leaflet (see below) that was distributed to the audience and which met with great interest. One student told the IYSSE after the meeting that the leaflet was “the only interesting thing about the evening.”

Four Theses on Axel Honneth’s *The Idea of Socialism*

1. The IYSSE student club at Humboldt University welcomes a discussion on the relevance of socialism today. The urgency of this question arises from the deep crisis of capitalism. Twenty-five years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, all of the unresolved questions of the twentieth century are re-emerging. Social inequality has swelled to an unprecedented extent since the financial crisis of 2008, the European Union is disintegrating, militarism and nationalism are on the rise everywhere, and the danger of a third world war grows as the major powers rearm. Social opposition is on the rise all over the world. Under these

conditions, the perspective of socialism as founded by Marx and Engels—an international movement of workers for an equal society and a democratically planned economy—takes on decisive significance.

Honneth's book is explicitly directed against such a perspective and provides a defence of capitalism. He mentions neither the social attacks of the last 25 years, nor the danger of war, nor the growth of nationalism. He gives no serious consideration to the idea of socialism as it historically developed, but juggles entirely abstract ideas and concepts. His book claims to be an academic study and avoids all concrete political questions. But in the final analysis it is a targeted attack on Marxism and an ideological justification for the right-wing policies of the Social Democratic Party (SPD), the Left Party and Syriza in Greece.

2. Although Honneth entitled his book "The Idea of Socialism," he ignores the history of this idea spanning over more than 200 years. He does not deal with the intense debates that pre-occupied generations of socialists and that fill entire libraries. This is not just an issue of abstract, theoretical differences; rather the different conceptions were tested out in practice with consequences for the fate of millions.

Socialism was never simply a theory, but a living movement. Generations of workers fought for their social and democratic rights under the banner of socialism. When the idea of socialism gripped the masses, it led to the greatest triumphs of human history. In 19th century Germany, the SPD developed into the first mass socialist party. In Russia, the workers gained power in the 1917 October Revolution. Conversely, attacks on the materialist foundations of socialism were bound up with catastrophic defeats of the working class.

Honneth praises Eduard Bernstein in a footnote. However, he does not even mention in passing that Bernstein's "revisionism," as it was universally called at the time, made a substantial contribution to the historic betrayal by social democracy of its own program in 1914, when it supported the First World War and sent millions of its supporters to certain death in the trenches of Verdun. If this historic betrayal is omitted, the catastrophes of German history become completely incomprehensible. The SPD betrayal paved the way for the split in the workers movement, the growth of National Socialism, the Second World War and the Holocaust.

Honneth is also silent on the epic dispute between the Stalinist bureaucracy and the Trotskyist Left Opposition in the Soviet Union, which dealt with every aspect of the "idea of socialism," culminated in the physical liquidation of tens of thousands revolutionary socialists in the Great Terror of 1937, and ultimately sealed the fate of the Soviet Union.

3. Honneth's historical blindness is no accident. These historical questions are irrelevant to the Frankfurt professor because his purpose is not to provide an appraisal of the contemporary significance of socialism, but to attack it. At the very moment when social struggles are breaking out all over the world and workers are defending themselves against war and attacks on their rights, Honneth explicitly rejects a socialism based on a movement of the working class, of the oppressed masses. He wants to separate socialism—or what he calls socialism—from any "social

actor." Rather, he claims, "institutional achievements" represent the material foundation of socialism.

Honneth even denies that socialism presupposes overturning capitalist property relations. He explicitly attacks the Marxist conception that "the lever for producing solidarity in social relations is the reform or revolutionary overthrow of the capitalist market economy." In place of the abolition of capitalism he proposes "experimental reformism" aimed at increasing "social freedom."

That is, Honneth wants a "socialism" without a social movement and without revolution, preserving capitalist property and competition. He drags up the shallow and hackneyed conceptions of social reformism, which have proven their bankruptcy and hostility to the working class time and time again. He advocates a "socialism" of the kind represented by the SPD in Germany, the Socialist Party in France and Syriza in Greece, which—in the name of "social freedom and justice"—enforces the reactionary Hartz laws, the El Khomri law and the dictates of the troika.

In his rejection—or rather his fear—of a socialist movement of the masses, Honneth proves himself the true intellectual heir of the Frankfurt School. Its founders, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, claimed in their book *Dialectic of the Enlightenment* that the supposed "authoritarian character" of workers—rather than the failure of Social Democracy and the Stalinist leaders of the workers parties—were responsible for the rise of Hitler. Honneth articulates the interests of the upper middle class, which fears a mass movement against capitalism far more than it fears capitalist reaction.

4. Honneth not only rejects an independent movement of the workers, but also opposes every form of critical analysis of society. He accuses Marxism of "determinism," which leads to "attentism"—i.e. a passive "wait-and-see attitude." This is an intentional misrepresentation. The real object of Honneth's criticism is the Marxist analysis of the law-governed character of social being.

Marxists do not hold that socialism automatically arises out of capitalism, but that the intrinsic contradictions of capitalism place before humanity the alternatives of "socialism or barbarism." This historical question of the 20th century is once again on the agenda. To pose this question is the exact opposite of passivity. The recognition that the class struggle is the result of the contradictions of capitalism once again poses the central task of fighting for socialist consciousness in the working class and building a revolutionary party, which the Frankfurt School has opposed since its outset.



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