

Hundreds attend lecture by David North in Frankfurt, Germany

Our correspondents
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On Saturday, 250 workers and students crowded into lecture hall 3 at the University of Frankfurt to attend a lecture by David North, organised by the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE).

The tremendous response and the extremely positive reaction by most of the audience underlined the importance of the event. Many students were keen to hear a Marxist critique of the Frankfurt School, whose influence is still pervasive on the campus of the banking metropolis, providing the ideological basis for the right-wing politics of the Social Democratic Party (SPD), the Greens, the Left Party and the trade unions.

Opening the meeting, Christoph Vandreier, speaking in behalf of the IYSSE of Germany, introduced the main speaker. David North has played a leading role in the Trotskyist movement for more than four decades and has published a number of books on many of the central political and historical issues of the 20th and 21st centuries. He is the chairman of the international editorial board of the *World Socialist Web Site*.

In his introduction, Vandreier explained: “When North explores the conceptions of the Frankfurt School and postmodernism and the politics of the pseudo-left in his book, he does not do so from the standpoint of a mere academic debate, but rather from the standpoint of revolutionary politics.” Vandreier continued: “The book is a defense and development of classical Marxism, as elaborated by Marx, Engels, Lenin, Trotsky and Luxemburg.”

In his lecture, North emphasized again and again that for Marxists, the foundation of the struggle of revolutionaries to change the world is an understanding of the objective laws of social development. These must be understood and laid bare. This is as well the necessary standpoint for a consideration of the conceptions of the Frankfurt School and postmodernism in their historical and social context. With their subjectivism, these tendencies express the rejection of and enmity toward the working class of the upper-middle classes.

North stressed this basic point at the very beginning of his lecture. “After the utterly shameful capitulation of Syriza in Greece, and its exposure as a reactionary party representing the interests of very affluent and smugly self-satisfied sections of the Greek petty-bourgeoisie, it is impossible to deny the close connection of key elements of academic post-Marxism—however disguised with the deliberately obscure phraseology employed by the representatives of the many varieties of the Frankfurt School and postmodernism—with political agendas that are overtly hostile to the interests of the working class.”

North spoke in great detail about the central social and political developments of recent decades, which he discusses in the books *The Russian Revolution and the Unfinished Twentieth Century* and *A Quarter Century of War*. He explained that since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, all of the fundamental problems of capitalism have reemerged. Social inequality has reached unprecedented proportions, the economic crisis is continually worsening, and the danger of a Third World War is growing. This is particularly evident in the two right-wing and militarist presidential candidates in the US.

In light of these extremely menacing developments, North said, one must ask: “Why is there no international, revolutionary, anti-capitalist and socialist mass movement?”

He said that a complex interaction of objective and subjective factors was responsible, in which the betrayal carried out by Stalinism and the Stalinist bureaucracy’s physical liquidation of a whole generation of Marxists played a key role. The theories of the Frankfurt School and postmodernism attributed the responsibility for this betrayal to the workers and attacked Marxism from the right, utilizing the irrationalist idealism of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche.

“The political impetus for their theories lay in the rejection of Marxism and the perspective of socialist revolution based on the working class,” said North. Postmodernism had been developed after the events of May–June 1968 and was directed against Marxism, and especially Trotskyism. It expressed the “conservative, deeply pessimistic and demoralized outlook” of wealthy layers of the middle class.

“But what cannot be found in the writings of any of those who adhere to the many varieties of postmodernism and the remnants of the Frankfurt School is any program upon which the revolutionary struggle against capitalism and imperialism can be based.” North said. Only Marxism offered this. “The working class must understand the logic of the present crisis and adjust its practice in accordance with objective necessity. Such an understanding is possible only on the basis of Marxism.” North concluded.

The entire lecture can be found here on the *World Socialist Web Site*.

The lecture clearly had a powerful impact and the audience followed it with great attention. The speaker dealt with many issues normally avoided in academic discussions on campus. He repeatedly traced ideological currents back to their roots in political developments and explained the motives and sensitivities of the social strata that developed the theories of postmodernism and the Frankfurt School.

In the discussion that followed the presentation, Vandreier raised the question of the origins of the Frankfurt School. “Nowadays,” he said, “it is clear to almost every student what a right-wing policy, for example, Professor Axel Honneth represents with his ‘Idea of Socialism’—which amounts to a thoroughly empty socialism, i.e., without a mobilized working class and without the abolition of private property. But many ask themselves: was it any different originally? Was it not the case that the Institute for Social Research, when it was founded in 1923, had progressive elements?”

North replied that the initial founders of the Frankfurt School were not anti-socialists and anti-Marxists. He drew attention to the events of the year 1923. In Russia, a stroke prevented Lenin from having an active political life. Trotsky was increasingly isolated and excluded from power. In Germany, the revolution ended in defeat in October 1923.

“All of this contributed decisively to a reorientation of broad strata of the German intelligentsia,” North said. “They lost confidence in a revolutionary perspective based on the working class.”

In the same year, Georg Lukacs published his work *History and Class Consciousness*, which exerted great influence on the formation of Critical Theory. “The so-called ‘reification’ he develops in his book ultimately results in the inability of the working class to understand objective reality,” North explained.

Hendrik de Man, a professor in Frankfurt who was active in the Second International but later became a fascist intellectual, played a key role. North said, “His concept was that psychological factors were more important to the development of the consciousness of the working class than the consequences of objective capitalist development. This was a decisive impetus for the intellectual development of the Frankfurt School.”

In general, emphasis was placed on the role of the unconscious and the irrational in opposition to the Marxist theory of social revolution. This goes hand in hand, North said, with a deep pessimism toward the working class. Horkheimer, Adorno and Marcuse, together with broad layers of the academic milieu in Germany, had been influenced by the subjective idealism of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche; Marcuse also by Heidegger. “Emphasis is placed on subjective consciousness and psychological factors which, in their view, obstruct the objective factors that give rise to revolution.”

A typical example is Wilhelm Reich, North said. Reich sought to analyze fascism essentially in sexual terms. In his pamphlet “What is Class Consciousness?” Reich asserted that it was completely hopeless to fight fascism by winning workers on the basis of a political program “because they do not understand it and will never understand it.” Instead, one had to find access to the working class through sexual policies.

“On such a basis the struggle against fascism is impossible,” North said.

Many of the young people in attendance were impressed by the lecture. “I consider this to be a very important event,” said Aaron, a student from Cologne who had traveled to Frankfurt for the lecture. “It is a unique opportunity for me to hear a Trotskyist. It is necessary to clarify the issues of the pseudo-left and pessimism, because they have played an enormously important role.”

Aaron also pointed out the correlation between theoretical questions and the current situation, saying, “I am worried about the danger of war. One can see the danger contained in the offensive on Mosul, millions of people are affected.”

He added, “The escalation between the US and Russia is very real. Under conditions where the media sweep the danger under the table, it is important to educate people about the threat.”

In the run-up to the meeting, posters announcing the event fueled interest in Frankfurt. People who came across the posters often stood and read the quotations from Marx they featured, including: “As philosophy finds its material weapon in the proletariat, so the proletariat finds its spiritual weapon in philosophy... The head of this emancipation is philosophy, its heart the proletariat.”

The powerful response to the lecture evidently spurred two supporters of the Frankfurt School to intervene in the discussion to defend Critical Theory. One of the pair noted that even Trotsky liked to read Freud and wrote of the psychology of the czar in his *History of the Russian Revolution*. “Would not it be more dialectical,” he asked, “if we were to say that we are taking up the revolutionary impulses to be found in Adorno and Horkheimer?”

The other tried to defend Wilhelm Reich. “Just yesterday we read this text in our reading circle... Reich deals with the question why the communist program was not taken up by the masses at that time. Today, one could ask why the program of the IYSSE and the Fourth International is not taken up by the masses. These are relevant questions.”

North replied: “One must always examine issues in a concrete historical context. The question of why there is no socialist mass movement does not arise today in the same way as in Germany in 1930–1933.”

At that ~~time~~ there was a revolutionary ~~socialist~~ mass movement in the working class. Two parties existed, the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the Communist Party (KPD), which enjoyed the active support of the working class, and the KPD had set itself the task of winning the trust of social democratic workers.

“Psychology is a complex question in the workers’ movement,” said North. “Nothing could be further from the truth than the statement that Marxism has no interest in psychology. However, it is concerned with the psychology of classes and social strata—not with the psychology of individuals.”

Trotsky directed his program to this task and proposed the policy of a united front against fascism. The KPD was to say to Social Democratic workers: “Of course we have many differences, but we must fight together against Hitler and the Nazis. We are ready to form a united front in order to prevent the Nazis taking power.” This would have won the confidence of Social Democratic workers and exposed at the same time the Social Democratic leaders, who were not prepared to oppose the Nazis.

“This expressed a real knowledge of the psychology of workers,” North said. “The brochure [of Reich] that I cited contains nothing to convince me that the main problem of the German working class was its incorrect attitude to sexuality.”

The theoreticians of the Frankfurt School were generally not interested in concrete political programs and strategies. In turning to questions of psychology and the irrational, they turned their backs on the analysis of political questions. “They were outstanding intellectuals, but none of them had links to the labor movement. They had little to say about major events,” North continued.

Horkheimer, for example, remained silent about Stalin’s Moscow trials, which liquidated an entire generation of Soviet socialists, while Ernst Bloch enthusiastically welcomed the trials.

Another critical student in the audience said he was not convinced by the lecture because it dealt only with “capitalism and communism” and almost completely ignored the Third World. “Where is the majority of the world?” he asked. Most of the inhabitants of the earth are neither capitalist nor communist, but rather religious, he said. Does not the Muslim Brotherhood also represent “another possible line of political thought?”

North replied, “I do not agree.” Each country, every region of the world has particular characteristics, but the situation in the Middle East is an extreme expression of the same problems also present in the US, Europe, Latin America and large parts of Asia. “It is the problem of revolutionary leadership,” he stressed.

He went on to explain the influence of the Russian Revolution on the working classes of the Arab world and how mass communist parties had sprung up everywhere. “In every country of the Middle East, whether in Egypt, Syria or Palestine... the key question was the conflict between Trotsky and Stalin.”

In his theory of permanent revolution, Trotsky had declared that the national bourgeoisie could no longer play a progressive revolutionary role. Stalin, however, had forced the working classes in these countries to subordinate themselves to the dominant bourgeois-national movements, “with catastrophic effects.”

North turned directly to his critic, saying, “Everything you say, your whole bourgeois, Third World policy, avoids an investigation of concrete developments. The fact that religion has once again become a key factor in mass consciousness is a consequence of the betrayal of the Stalinists.”

This was tragically confirmed, he continued, in the 2011 Arab Spring in Egypt. “Why did the Egyptian revolution fail? It lacked a Marxist leadership. That is the decisive point, and that applies to every country.”

North then turned to the young students, who had followed the discussion intently. “Study these questions!” he said. “Times are changing rapidly. People will be radicalized. And the danger of a new war is very

real.”

Discussions continued in the library and in the hall long after the official end of the meeting. Many remarked that it had not been easy to understand everything, but “the analysis is undoubtedly directed and apposite,” as one participant put it.

Another student, who had come on the basis of the posters, said, “I think it’s a good thing to discuss such issues controversially. The question is: How can we overcome the alienation of academia and civil society? This seems to me to be an important point. The question is: What is committed, critical science? This is a very relevant question.”

The Frankfurt School, Postmodernism and the Politics of the Pseudo-Left is available for purchase at Mehring Books.



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