

1982: Marxism, the revolutionary party, and the critique of Healy's *Studies in Dialectics*

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When one reads Healy's *Studies*, they seem abstruse at first glance, given the eclectic formulations, incoherent presentation and arbitrary transitions. In the midst of massive political upheavals, Gerry Healy focuses on individual cognitive processes, which he mystifies with Hegelian phrases and completely detaches from the analysis of objective developments.

Yet therein lies the very essence of his writings and speeches on dialectics. In his attempt to justify the opportunistic practice of the WRP (Workers Revolutionary Party), Healy was more and more drawing on all the idealist ideologies floating around the universities. Answering these concepts was essential to defending Marxism against these positions and grounding our movement in the historical experiences of the Trotskyist movement.

David North's critique, however, was also significant precisely because Healy was attempting to misuse a great legacy of the Marxist movement: the defense of the Marxist method, dialectical materialism, to elaborate the independent line of the working class in historical development.

The question of philosophy and the attention the WRP gave to this was not initially of a negative character. It was itself based on a really critical tradition. David North discusses this at length in *Leon Trotsky and the Development of Marxism*,^[1] which was written parallel to the critique of Healy's *Studies* and lays out the basis of historical and dialectical materialism in a positive form. These two documents are very closely interlinked and must be read in their common context.

The fundamental changes in the epoch of imperialism as a whole and especially in the phase after the October Revolution posed great challenges to Marxists in understanding the changes and directing revolutionary work towards them. Therefore, already for Lenin the examination of the Marxist method and philosophy was essential. In his work, *Materialism and Empirio-criticism* ^[2] and in his *Philosophical Notebooks*,^[3] Lenin discussed in detail the questions of dialectical materialism, as well as historical materialism.

Trotsky, too, based his struggle against the Stalinist bureaucracy on an accurate, dialectical understanding of world development and the first workers state, showing the close connection between the rejection of dialectics and an opportunist political line. He addressed himself to dialectics in a whole series of essays on science in the 1920s and he mastered the dialectical method in all his writings. In *Leon Trotsky and the Development of Marxism*, North writes:

In this objective exposition of the real historical development, Trotsky demonstrated the bankruptcy of the metaphysical mode of

thinking, which, proceeding from formal logic, rigidly counterposed the democratic revolution to the socialist revolution...

Proceeding from a concrete analysis of the nature of the epoch, the relation of class forces on a world scale and the specific features of Chinese society and the development of its revolution, Trotsky demonstrated how, in accordance with objective social laws, the "opposites" of the democratic-national revolution and social revolution became "identical" and were "transformed into one another".^[4]

Trotsky's dialectical method can be studied in all of his writings. In his *Critique of the Draft Program of the Communist International*, Trotsky wrote:

The international program must proceed directly from an analysis of the conditions and tendencies of the world economy and of the world political system taken as a whole in all its connections and contradictions, that is, with the mutually antagonistic interdependence of its separate parts. In the present epoch, to a much greater extent than in the past, the national orientation of the proletariat must and can flow only from a world orientation and not vice versa.^[5]

In *Germany: What Next?* Trotsky wrote:

The gist of this Stalinist philosophy is quite plain: from the Marxist denial of the absolute contradiction [between fascism and Social Democracy] it deduces the general negation of the contradiction, even of the relative contradiction. This error is typical of vulgar radicalism. For if there is no contradiction whatsoever between democracy and fascism—even in the sphere of the form of the rule of the bourgeoisie—then these two regimes obviously enough must be equivalent. Whence the conclusion: Social Democracy equals fascism.^[6]

This is dialectical materialism in action!

In his disputes with Sidney Hook and Max Eastman, and later with Burnham and Shachtman, Trotsky deliberately fought for the defense and development of the Marxist method against any pragmatic, empiricist or agnostic position. He understood very well the close connection between the repudiation of revolutionary politics and the abandonment of dialectical materialism.

As Johannes and Clara, and also Joe, already discussed in more detail, Burnham and Shachtman maintained that the Soviet Union was no longer a workers state and that the bureaucracy had emerged as the new ruling class in what they referred to as “state capitalism.” Trotsky understood that this position expressed the skepticism of petty-bourgeois strata toward the working class, and already in “The USSR in War” sharpened the question very clearly.

Behind the dispute over the sociological determination of the Soviet Union lay a completely different class axis, hostile to Marxism. Shachtman’s agnostic position toward dialectical materialism resulted from his rejection of the working class as a revolutionary force, which was deeply grounded in petty-bourgeois thought in the United States. In “A Petty-Bourgeois Opposition in the Socialist Workers Party,” Trotsky stated:

It was absolutely necessary to explain why the American “radical” intellectuals accept Marxism without the dialectic (a clock without a spring). The secret is simple. In no other country has there been such rejection of the class struggle as in the land of “unlimited opportunity.” The denial of social contradictions as the moving force of development led to the denial of the dialectic as the logic of contradictions in the domain of theoretical thought. Just as in the sphere of politics it was thought possible everybody could be convinced of the correctness of a “just” program by means of clever syllogisms and society could be reconstructed through “rational” measures. So in the sphere of theory it was accepted as proved that Aristotelian logic, lowered to the level of “common sense,” was sufficient for the solution of all questions.^[7]

In his struggle against the petty-bourgeois opposition in the SWP, Trotsky therefore devoted considerable attention to defending the Marxist method as the theoretical basis for the independent perspective of the working class. “The ABC of Materialist Dialectics” remains one of the clearest explanations of dialectical materialism, and therefore it is a very good basis to discuss the further development of these questions and the retreat of the WRP from these traditions. Trotsky explained:

We call our dialectic materialist, since its roots are neither in heaven nor in the depths of our “free will,” but in objective reality, in nature. Consciousness grew out of the unconscious, psychology out of physiology, the organic world out of the inorganic, the solar system out of nebulae. On all the rungs of this ladder of development, the quantitative changes were transformed into qualitative. Our thought, including dialectical thought, is only one of the forms of the expression of changing matter. There is place within this system for neither God, nor Devil, nor immortal soul, nor eternal norms of laws and morals. The dialectic of thinking, having grown out of the dialectic of nature, possesses consequently a thoroughly materialist character.^[8]

This is, of course, the very foundation of Marxism, and most attacks on Marxism are aimed precisely at its materialist foundation, introducing in one way or another idealist concepts that give primacy to thought over being. As with Healy, this often works through the mystification of dialectics, which is why a clear understanding of materialist dialectics is significant for our discussion. Trotsky writes in this regard:

Dialectical thinking is related to vulgar thinking in the same way that a motion picture is related to a still photograph. The motion picture does not outlaw the still photograph, but combines a series of them according to the laws of motion. Dialectics does not deny the syllogism, but teaches us to combine syllogisms in such a way as to bring our understanding closer to the eternally changing reality. Hegel in his *Logic* established a series of laws: change of quantity into quality, development through contradictions, conflict of content and form, interruption of continuity, change of possibility into inevitability, etc., which are just as important for theoretical thought as is the simple syllogism for more elementary tasks.^[9]

Trotsky elaborates this and explains some of these laws without the slightest mysticism. Dialectical thinking is necessary to understand things in their constant development from the lower to the higher. This is especially true of human society and its historical development through the class struggle. This is precisely why the rejection of the working class as a revolutionary force goes hand in hand with the rejection of dialectics and historical materialism.

As discussed by Tomas, in 1962, the issues of 1939/40 reemerged in the conflict between the SWP and the SLL on the characterization of Cuba. Again, the political opportunism of the SWP was connected with an abandonment of dialectical materialism in the name of “the facts.” The SLL extended the struggle against Pabloite revisionism to the level of its underlying idealist methodology, and by doing so defended and developed the Marxist method, as David North explains in *The Heritage We Defend*.

In fact, the SLL’s contribution to this struggle was considerable. As with Trotsky and Lenin, it was directly linked to the struggle against the opportunism of the SWP. In *Opportunism and Empiricism*, written mainly by Slaughter, it was said:

When we attack empiricism we attack that method of approach which says all statements, to be meaningful, must refer to observable or measurable data in their immediately given form. This method insists that any “abstract” concepts, reflecting the general and historical implications of these “facts,” are meaningless. It neglects entirely that our general concepts reflect the laws of development and interconnection of the process which these “facts” help to constitute.

Indeed, the so-called hard facts of concrete experience are themselves abstractions from this process. They are the result of the first approximation of our brains to the essential interrelations, laws of motion, contradictions of the eternally changing and complex world of matter ... of which they form part. Only higher abstractions, in advanced theory, can guide us to the meaning of these facts. What Lenin called “the concrete analysis of concrete conditions” is the opposite of a descent into empiricism.^[10]

If one restricts oneself to mere facts as they present themselves in the given moment, one actually tears them out of their real context, as if one takes a photo out of the video, as Trotsky describes. In fact, in the interpretation of these immediate facts, categories themselves come into play, which are not conscious. But the development of correct categories is itself part of knowledge and part of scientific work. And the central category of Marxism is class struggle. Slaughter explained this very well, and by this outlined the close connection between dialectical and historical materialism, that is, between epistemology and social theory.

In order to be concrete, the analysis must begin with a class evaluation of every event, every phenomenon. The empiricist, who pretends to restrict himself to the bedrock of the “facts” alone, in fact imposes on the “facts” an unstated series of connections whose foundations are unstated. With Hansen and the Pabloites, their new reality is actually a list of abstractions like “the colonial revolution,” “the process of de-Stalinization,” “irreversible trends,” “leftward-moving forces,” “mass pressure,” etc. Like all statements about social phenomena, these are meaningless unless they are demonstrated to have specific class content, for the class struggle and exploitation are the content of all social phenomena. This discovery of Marx is the theoretical cornerstone which Hansen has lost, with all his talk about “the facts.”^[11]

Another important SLL work was Slaughter’s Introduction to Lenin’s *Philosophical Notebooks*. The *Notebooks* had first been published in English in 1961 and had provoked much debate. Lenin’s intense preoccupation with Hegel was interpreted as a turning away from materialism, and the new volume was contrasted with Lenin’s earlier writing on Empirio-criticism.

Slaughter responded to these slurs and pointed out that Lenin always distinguished between the idealism of Hegel, which Lenin furiously rejected, and the actual advances made by Hegel in his critique of Kant and development of dialectical logic. He showed that the “rigid demarcation which is now so often made between the ‘pre-Hegelian’ and ‘post-Hegelian’ phases of his political life” are quite wrong, and that “rather, there is a really dialectical development in Lenin’s own work.” Slaughter also underscored that Lenin’s notebooks have to be studied in direct connection with his major works at this time, such as *Imperialism*, *The Collapse of the Second International* and *Socialism and War*, in which he applied the method of dialectical and historical materialism against the revisionists.

As David North put it:

Slaughter’s work, published originally in 1962, was a major contribution to the struggle for dialectical materialism within the Trotskyist movement, and it remains, to this day, perhaps the best exposition of the general features of the dialectical method. There is not any attempt to obscure the role of dialectics through recourse to pretentious and mystical language. The central points are clear: Man thinks with the aid of concepts, but these concepts are not fixed, but reflect constantly changing reality.

The development of our revolutionary concepts is a reflection of the changes in the material world, the essence of which is penetrated by the Party in the course of its struggle to prepare and lead the socialist revolution. At each stage of its revolutionary activity within a capitalist world that is constantly changing, the Marxist party seeks to discover the inner laws of the world crisis. The dialectical movement has to be extracted from the world itself and expressed in concepts that are arrived at only as a result of protracted scientific work.^[12]

Slaughter directed this materialist concept directly against the empiricism of the SWP. He wrote:

The essence of the history of the proletarian revolutionary movement is the conscious effort to develop scientific theory and a strategy conforming to that science. All talk about “natural”

developments toward Marxism are an attack on the necessity to carry on this process. The empiricist believes that he can study the various parts of the social process as they present themselves from day to day. Adding these together will then give a “realistic” or “objective” total picture and international perspective.

To assume that “the dialectical method” is a short cut which makes all this hard work [of economic, social and political analysis] unnecessary is the mistake of those who talk glibly about “applying” dialectics.^[13]

These quotes could be read as a direct answer to Healy’s *Studies in Dialectics*. Slaughter’s text was actually an important basis for the development of North’s critique, as he outlines in the political biography of Slaughter.

As we discussed at this school, the American Committee for the Fourth International (ACFI) and the Workers League were founded on the basis of the struggle against the SWP and based themselves very much on the writings of the Socialist Labour League (SLL). After the split with Wohlforth, they worked again carefully through this heritage. When Wohlforth rejoined the Pabloites, he also joined them in their attack on dialectical materialism.

As Evan discussed yesterday, even given certain weaknesses, the chapter on philosophy in *The Fourth International and the Renegade Wohlforth* explained the pragmatist outlook of Wohlforth very well and showed the significance of the struggle against pragmatism and for dialectical materialism in the building of the revolutionary movement. But really, the document as a whole is a powerful statement against pragmatism.

Based on the appropriation of the historical heritage of the Trotskyist movement, the Workers League developed a clear understanding of the dialectical method that is unique. In the perspectives document of the WL from 1978, this is expressed in all clarity and sharpness. Even though it was already quoted by Tom, I will quote it again, since it is absolutely crucial for this discussion:

There can be no real turn to the working class outside of the conscious struggle to preserve the lines of historical continuity between the present struggles of the working class and the revolutionary party as a unity of opposites and the whole content of the objective historical experiences of the class and the development of Bolshevism. It is only from the standpoint of the struggle to base the whole work of the Party on the historical gains of the struggle against revisionism and the immense political and theoretical capital that is the heritage left behind by Trotsky to the Fourth International that the fight against pragmatism within the ranks of the Party and, therefore, in the working class itself can be seriously mounted.

As soon as the struggle against pragmatism is detached from the fight to maintain the direct historical connections between the daily practice of the cadres and the whole body of historical experiences through which the Trotskyist movement has passed, it degenerates into the most impotent forms of verbal jousting. Or, to put it even more accurately, it becomes simply another variety of pragmatism itself.^[14]

This extremely powerful conception of the Marxist method and the building of the party is directed against the objectivism and empiricism of the SWP, against the reconstruction theory of the Organisation Communiste Internationaliste (OCI)—that is, the diminishing of the

significance of the history of Trotskyism—and, of course, against the growing opportunist tendency within the WRP.

The WRP moved in exactly the opposite direction. To the extent that it abandoned the struggle against Pabloism and developed an increasingly opportunistic practice, which we will discuss in more detail in further lectures, it detached the philosophical questions precisely from this concrete historical context. The issue of dialectics and emphasis on philosophical questions acquired a completely different character. The invocation of dialectics in and of itself, unrelated to its verification in the clarification of program and political analysis, turned the question of dialectics in another direction.

Even in its split with the OCI, the SLL avoided the central political questions and instead centered on the Marxist method in and of itself. In a statement of the ICFI on the split with the OCI, which comrade North already quoted in the discussion, Slaughter stated:

The split is not the result of organizational questions or misunderstandings. And it is not about tactical aspects of how to build the Fourth International. It is a political split, going to the foundations of the Fourth International—Marxist theory.

Delegates from the SLL showed from the experience of building the revolutionary party in Britain that a thoroughgoing and difficult struggle against idealist ways of thinking was necessary which went much deeper than questions of agreement on programme and policy.^[15]

This is powerfully answered in *How the WRP Betrayed Trotskyism*, which states that “the issue of dialectical materialism neither exhausted nor superseded the fundamental political and programmatic questions that remained to be addressed.” Peter previously presented the full quote and discussed it.

These questions became even clearer in the split with Alan Thornett. The WRP now very deliberately bypassed the political questions, because these would inevitably have led to a discussion of its own fragile basis in the campaign against the Heath government. Instead, it focused almost exclusively on the philosophical questions, increasingly detaching them from the assimilation of the history of the Trotskyist movement. In *Whither Thornett?*, Michael Banda even attacks Thornett for making a fetish of the program. The party does not have to start from the program, but from the present economic and social crisis and posit this on the program. The decisive question is not agreement on the program, but “the nature and methods of the party itself,” Banda states. “The program is subordinate to the conflict of the party’s practice and its theory.”^[16]

“The character of the WRP program, he seemed to be admitting, would ultimately be decided by the outcome of the deepening conflict between the party’s opportunist practice and its formal adherence to revolutionary theory!”^[17] David North wrote, answering Banda, in *Gerry Healy and his Place in the History of the Fourth International*.

The mystification of dialectics and its separation from the struggle for the program of the revolutionary party took on more and more overt forms as the WRP’s class axis shifted and its maneuvers became more opportunistic. University professors Cliff Slaughter, Geoff Pilling, Tom Kemp and Cyril Smith played an increasingly important role in the party’s orientation. North wrote:

Indeed, the more the theoretical work of the party became separated from and then directed against the struggle for Trotskyism, the more it became the special province of a middle class “think tank” composed of the four professors and Healy. The

status of these men in the party, based on their academic training, was out of all proportion to their actual involvement in political work.^[18]

In September 1975, the College of Marxist Education was founded in Derbyshire, which was to become the center of the attack on Marxism. “Education” was increasingly directed toward learning “unconscious dialectics,” while Trotsky and the history of the Trotskyist movement no longer played a role. David North vividly summarizes Healy’s approach:

Healy’s method of lecturing consisted of extended introductory remarks, which generally dealt with problems which had arisen in the work of the WRP. Up to this point, the audience followed Healy with lively interest. Then, he invariably turned to the blackboard and began drawing diagrams which supposedly represented stages in the cognitive process as manifested in the categories of the Hegelian dialectic. It was not long before the entire audience was utterly bewildered, having lost track of where “semblance” ended and “appearance” began, or at what stage “finite” became “infinite” and “something” turned into its “other.” Matters were not made any easier by the fact that Healy never drew the same diagram twice and it could never be predicted with certainty whether “actuality” would show up before “existence” or the other way around. Indeed, attempts by students to memorize Healy’s dialectic through all its adventures inevitably failed; because it never followed the same path on successive days.^[19]

In June 1980, under the cover of introducing a new and eccentric branch agenda, Healy sought to establish a constitutional foundation for pragmatic impressionism in the day-to-day political work of the WRP. This was clearly outlined in a letter to all branch secretaries, written on June 14, 1980, by Healy. The purpose of this letter was, according to Healy, “to train comrades in what is best described as the unconscious use of the dialectical method, just as one performs many skills and activities without necessarily being conscious that one is doing so.”

“Consciousness of theoretical abstractions comes later when we begin to think and analyze what we have been doing,” he wrote.

In *How the WRP Betrayed Trotskyism*, this is answered in the following way:

In other words, Healy had discovered that one could act as a Marxist without being conscious of it—some 20 years after the great American pragmatist Joseph Hansen had proclaimed this discovery to the world. ... How would this discovery assist a Party member obliged to analyze a complex development in the political situation—such as the declaration of self-determination by Turks on the island of Cyprus, the permissibility or impermissibility of providing critical support to bourgeois nationalists, or, to provide an example from contemporary events, the signing of the Anglo-Irish deal.

For such developments, do we need “consciousness of theoretical abstractions” before or after we complete our analysis and decide what we should do? The answer to this question was given by Engels long ago when he wrote that “the art of working with concepts is not inborn and also is not given with ordinary everyday consciousness, but requires real thought, and that this thought similarly has a long empirical history.” (*Anti-Dühring*)^[20]

Healy no longer wrote about political developments or the revolutionary perspective. He concentrated solely on “dialectics.” One article, “Hegel – Marx – Lenin,” is a good example. He completely left out Lenin’s political fight, his analysis of the state, of imperialism, and turned dialectical materialism into a tool for individual cognition. Again and again he repeated his mantra that the greatest crime would be to impose abstract thoughts upon the external world:

Great care has to be taken not to impose any abstract thought interpretations upon the external world. Its independent properties must be allowed to build up in the mind and not have some premature abstract thought imposed on these, as yet, concealed and unknown properties. ... Training and using our senses properly means to avoid imposing thought images upon the external world...^[21]

This was totally directed against the connection of the party’s practice with the heritage of the Trotskyist movement. North answered this method in his biography of Healy:

These “abstract thought interpretations” and “thought images” against which Healy inveighed were, in fact, the theoretical and political conceptions of Leon Trotsky. At lectures given by Healy, students who cited the works of Trotsky and other great Marxists and sought to relate their teachings to contemporary events were generally denounced for using “empty word forms” and imposing “dead abstractions” upon “living reality.” Party members who spoke of “applying” the dialectical method to the study of objective reality could expect to be sharply rebuked. Marxism could not be “applied,” Healy insisted; it could only be “abstracted” from nature.^[22]

David North describes the political line of all this sophistry very well:

All attempts to analyze political events, or, still worse, to foresee their probable lines of development were angrily dismissed as “idealist speculation” and “propagandist image-making.” It was, Healy insisted, an unpardonable error to “predetermine” the movement of the “external world.” Such outbursts were intended to justify the WRP’s blossoming alliances with all sorts of political scoundrels. The new friends of the WRP like Ken Livingstone, Ted Knight, Bill Sirs, Arthur Scargill and others were no longer to be exposed as the representatives of definite political tendencies who served clearly definable class interests. Instead, their political evasions and outright betrayals were to be rationalized as “moments” of a contradictory development or as manifestations of the conflict of the old form (opportunist treachery) with the emerging content (“revolutionary movement of the working class as it reflects itself inside the trade union and Labour Party leadership”). No conclusions were to be drawn as to the objective logic of their politics. Rather, they were to be seen “dialectically” as individuals whose “concealed and unknown properties” might evolve in a manner which could not be theoretically anticipated. Healy’s supply of cynical sophistries to excuse the opportunism of the WRP was inexhaustible!^[23]

How this was concretely used to suppress any discussion and attack revolutionary principles is shown in the famous Slaughter quote from a letter to David North of December 1983:

Your own heavy emphasis on the “political independence of the working class,” backed by a quotation from *In Defence of Marxism*, will become a weapon in the hands of all those who retain the mark of pragmatism, because it will be treasured by them as something more “concrete” than the explicit struggle to develop and comprehend the categories of dialectics as the method for that life-and-death matter of grasping the rapid and all-sided developments thrown up by the world crisis. We must be absolutely explicit and firm against all enemies, about where we stand on Trotsky’s conclusion about the struggle and the American party.^[24]

Compare this to Slaughter’s earlier writings! Now, the “Marxist method” is put into opposition to the political independence of the working class and is no longer the tool to actually establish the independence of the working class! The political line of this method couldn’t be put more clearly.

The *Studies in Dialectical Materialism* were the culmination of Healy’s theoretical efforts. After David North’s devastating critique, Healy published virtually nothing more. But, of course, the *Studies* and their concepts continued to be the lubricating oil for the WRP’s opportunism and covert factional struggles. In *How the WRP Betrayed Trotskyism*, the *Studies* are characterized as follows:

In reality, Healy’s method was a gross distortion of scientific dialectics which betrayed a complete lack of understanding of either the philosophical work of Hegel or Marx. The actual content of Healy’s “theory of knowledge”—which claimed to trace the dialectical transition from individual sense perception to abstract thought and practice—amounted to nothing more than a glorification of the individual process through which he translated his own pragmatic intuition into various party activities. An auto-didact in the worst sense of the word, Healy came to believe that the memorization of a few Hegelian categories in proper sequence provided a master-key to universal knowledge. A serious study of Trotskyism, political economy, the history of the workers’ movement and, last but not least, the historical origin and development of philosophical concepts could be replaced with a few “juggled phrases.”^[25]

The foregoing has shown how important it was to answer Healy’s *Studies*. They were a central mechanism for suppressing the political questions and justifying opportunist practice. At the same time, they represented a complete distortion and defilement of the rich theoretical heritage of the Trotskyist movement, which needed to be defended against this attack.

As we have shown, already with Lenin the struggle against revisionism was linked to the struggle for dialectical and historical materialism. Likewise with Trotsky and with the early SLL. This struggle was now continued and developed by the Workers League and David North, and it had to be directed against the idealist conceptions elaborated by Healy.

North’s critique was not simply about Healy, but about defending Marxism against all the conceptions of the Frankfurt School, existentialism and postmodernism that dominated the universities and

which Healy unconsciously used. As David North noted:

While the mystical presentation often rendered Healy's lectures unintelligible, it would be wrong to assert that his lectures were simply nonsensical. Rather, Healy's theoretical conceptions were an eclectic mixture of various trends in bourgeois subjective-idealist philosophy of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As Healy departed from Marxism and its study of the development of social consciousness as a historical process, his fixation with an individual's cognitive activity came to resemble different trends in contemporary bourgeois "phenomenology." This resemblance was that of a caricature: in the course of his lectures unintegrated elements of the conceptions of bourgeois thinkers as varied as William James, Edmund Husserl, Alexis Mienong, and even Maurice Merleau-Ponty would unexpectedly announce themselves. Healy was, it goes without saying, entirely unaware of this. Those who are in the process of descending into revisionism are rarely conscious of the bourgeois intellectual trends which are the agents of their theoretical degeneration.^[26]

North's critique was based on a deep understanding of Marxism developed in the Workers League through the assimilation of the central struggles of our movement. It was based on a thorough working through of most of the texts we have discussed so far, especially Trotsky's *In Defense of Marxism* and Slaughter's articles on Lenin's *Philosophical Notebooks* (Volume 38 of his *Collected Works*). At the same time, the detailed critique of Healy's *Studies* formed the basis for a tremendous development of the theoretical work of the ICFL.

At the heart of North's critique is Healy's attempt to justify his idealistic conceptions by drawing on Hegel and ignoring Marx's development of materialist dialectics. David North writes:

10. Cde. Healy's *Studies in Dialectical Materialism* suffer from one decisive defect: they essentially ignore the achievements of both Marx and Lenin in the materialist reworking of the Hegelian dialectic. Thus, Hegel is approached uncritically, essentially in the manner of the Left Hegelians against whom Marx struggled.

11. In approaching Hegel in this manner, the distinction between materialism and idealism is not only effaced; Comrade Healy explicitly passes over to idealism in expounding Hegel as a Left Hegelian.^[27]

North has undertaken an intensive analysis of the *Studies* which demonstrates this point of view in detail by means of dozens of passages. Some examples are:

- Hegel is put on the same historical line as Marx, Engels and Lenin—as a founder of Marxism in whose spirit revolutionary cadres are trained.
- The principle of objectivity is proclaimed to be the "basic difference between materialism and abstract idealism," rather than the primacy of matter over thought.
- The thinking body is substituted for social man.
- "The theoretical Notion" is presented as "the external world itself."

In all these examples, the core issue is that Healy detaches cognition from the social, historically developing practice of human beings and thus adopts an idealist position. But this was precisely the great achievement of Marx and Engels and is the whole basis of Marxism.

Hegel's philosophy was unquestionably an enormous advance. Compared to Kant, he understood that man can cognize the objective

world and that this cognition takes place in a continuous development from the lower to the higher. He provided a monumental historical analysis of this development and set forth the very dialectical laws through which it takes place.

But Hegel remained an idealist. For him the objective world and historical development were only the manifestations of the world spirit, which is then again realized by the knowledge of men. The only practice he knew was the practice of cognition. Therefore, the connections he drew were those of abstract logic. As North writes:

18. In Marx's *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law*, he explained the fundamental weakness of his idealist dialectics: in every area of concrete study to which Hegel turns his attention, we always have before us the Logic. Thus, the movement always proceeded from thought and therefore the connections are those of the abstract logic. As he explained in relation to Hegel's treatment of the State:

"The transition is thus derived, not from the **particular** nature of the family, etc., and from the particular nature of the state, but from the general relationship of **necessity** and **freedom**. It is exactly the same transition as is effected in logic from the sphere of essence to the sphere of the concept. The same transition is made in the philosophy of nature from inorganic nature to life. It is always the same categories which provide the soul, now for this, now for that sphere. **It is only a matter of spotting for the separate concrete attributes the corresponding abstract attributes.**" (*Marx-Engels*, Vol. 3, p. 10, emphasis added)^[28]

Marx and Engels overcame this mysticism and peeled the rational core out of Hegel's logic. The objective world was not a manifestation of the world spirit, but the spirit, or social consciousness, was the product of man's social practice, which itself moved from the lower to the higher. The laws of this movement could not be deduced from abstract logic, but only from the historical analysis of these objective processes themselves. With the development of dialectical materialism, Marx and Engels did not simply change Hegel's idealistic sign into a materialistic one, but carried on an intensive scientific work which is most closely connected with the development of historical materialism, the social theory of Marxism.

Healy systematically downplayed this enormous work because, in returning to Hegel, he threw overboard the very historical development of the class struggle and the legacy of the Trotskyist movement.

How deliberately Healy turned away from the materialistic understanding of the world is shown in his treatment of one of the best summaries of the Marxist method written by Lenin. Lenin writes in *Materialism and Empiriocriticism*:

The most important thing is that ... the *objective* logic of these changes and of their historical development has in its chief and basic features been disclosed—objective, not in the sense that a society of conscious beings, of people, could exist and develop independently of the existence of conscious beings (and it is only such trifles that Bogdanov stresses by his "theory"), but in the sense that social being is *independent* of the *social consciousness* of people. The fact that you live and conduct your business, beget children, produce products and exchange them, gives rise to an objectively necessary chain of events, a chain of development, which is independent of your social consciousness, and is never grasped by the latter completely. The highest task of humanity is to comprehend this objective logic of economic evolution (the

evolution of social life) in its general and fundamental features, so that it may be possible to adapt *to it* one's social consciousness and the consciousness of the advanced classes of all capitalist countries in as definite, clear and critical a fashion as possible.^[29]

This is an excellent summary of Marxist method and the tasks of the party. Healy, however, erases from this section what is essential. Rather than the objective logic of economic evolution, we have—the objective logic. This objective logic is defined by Healy as “its relations as a stage of knowledge in relation to other categories.” North comments on this:

It is clear from these passages and the selective quotation that Cde. Healy views the logical categories and their inter-relations as the essential content into which historical movement is distilled. Once the logical thought content of each material event or fact has been discovered, we can then reveal their essence “as a stage of knowledge in relation to other categories such as necessity, probability, possibility.”

Here we have the entire logical mysticism of Hegel uncritically reproduced, and this, in fact, is the essence of Cde. Healy's entire approach to dialectics in these most recent articles. Everything becomes a matter of following the sequence of the categories of Hegel's *Logic*. The material content is to be developed out of the *Logic*, rather than, as Marx insisted, the logic out of the content.^[30]

On the basis of this concrete analysis of all the idealistic conceptions Healy is developing in his *Studies*, North presents a very clear understanding of Healy's main theoretical conceptions, which are repeating the greatest errors of the Young Hegelians:

19. It is this very idealist procedure which Cde. Healy employs in effecting the transition from sensation to consciousness. **Being, Not Being, Becoming, Cause, Effect, and inner movement of negation in general** are employed to explain the transition from sensation to conscious thought (as well as the movement of the value form). After “Absolute essence (Negative Semblance) confronts our ‘theory of knowledge’ which becomes Positive Semblance as they face each other in antithesis,” Cde. Healy declares: “we have ended the sensuous stage of the Cognitive process.” All this has been accomplished simply through reference to categories of the Hegelian *Logic*; in other words, we have a mystical process presented as the real process.^[31]

Thus Healy not only turns against Marx, but also falls behind Hegel. For one of Hegel's great achievements was precisely to emphasize the connection between historical development and knowledge. Only he did it in a twisted way, by understanding the historical process as an expression of the idea, and thus mystifying it in an idealistic way. But Healy's recourse to Hegel just eliminates everything that was progressive about Hegel and actually goes directly to subjective idealism.

In *The Heritage We Defend* North sums up Healy's position very well:

According to Healy, logical categories are the distilled essence of all material phenomena, including historical processes. Therefore, in the analysis of contemporary events, a great deal of time can be saved if, rather than tediously examining the historical

processes and social forces out of which they developed, one simply dismisses these events as a secondary manifestation of the essential categories. In other words, rather than examine the specific import of a particular concrete development of the class struggle, one simply pronounces it to be the manifestation of movement of “quantity” into “quality,” or one asserts, with a knowing air, that it is the mere “appearance” of an “essence,” or the outer “form” of a more fundamental “content.”^[32]

Healy's rejection of historical materialism, which comes out of this approach, is quite explicit. He writes:

Historical Materialism is a method for the building of the Revolutionary Party, based upon the Cognition of its object, which is society consisting of conscious human beings with the will to go on changing the world independently of each other as individuals.^[33]

North shows how in this one sentence all historical materialism is thrown overboard. He answers:

The philosophical foundation of historical materialism is that social being exists independently of social consciousness. The reference to “conscious human beings” muddles everything, and is directly opposed to the very conceptions advanced by Lenin in Volume 14, which Cde. Healy praises but does not understand. Lenin wrote: “In all social formations of any complexity—and in the capitalist social formation in particular—people in their intercourse are not conscious of what kinds of social relations are being formed, in accordance with what law, they develop.” (Vol. 14, p. 323)

The reference to “will” is also a complete departure from historical materialism; history cannot be explained from either the “will” or intentions of men. The historical “will” of social men can only be understood as arising out of definite material conditions.

As for “changing the world independently of each other as individuals,” it would appear that Cde. G. has just abolished social man. Instead of history developing through the collective social practice of man independent of consciousness, we have a history arising out of willful and conscious human beings who change the world independently of each other as individuals!^[34]

This sums up Healy's perspective. He attacks historical materialism and dissolves dialectics into pure logic in order to detach the practice of the WRP from the legacy of the Trotskyist movement and to justify his daily opportunism. David North, in *Leon Trotsky and the Development of Marxism*, counters this with the actual relationship between dialectical and historical materialism:

This method is the opposite of Marxism, which studies the historical evolution of all categories and concepts, not as products of the brain nor as emanations of an “absolute spirit,” but as the reflections in the minds of social men of objective properties and relations existing within nature and society. These reflections arise not in the course of passive contemplation, but, as Marx proved, as

a result of objective social practice, in the historically-determined interaction of man and nature. By placing social practice at the center of its theory of knowledge, having extracted the rational core of the Hegelian dialectic from its idealist form, Marx was able, for the first time in the history of philosophy, to establish scientifically the relation between matter and thought, object and subject, and practice and theory.

Man cognizes the world in the social process of changing it. The forms of his thinking are produced and conditioned by the growth of the productive forces and the social relations which arise therefrom. Man's cognition of the laws of nature and society, understood scientifically, as an historically developing social process, cannot be reduced to the one-sided (from object to subject), passive, and mirror-like reflection of nature in human thought. Cognition and practice constitute a unity of opposites, each influencing and shaping the other, in accordance with the dialectical laws governing the social process of production, which gives rise to the whole vast superstructure of ideology and politics.^[35]

This basic understanding of Marxism is opposed to both subjective idealism and mechanical materialism, which did not take into account social practice in the knowledge of the world. Or as North put it, it shows the "essential relation between cognition and revolutionary practice, without which scientific knowledge of the objective world of the class struggle is impossible." And this revolutionary practice is the history of the Trotskyist movement, which is why it is impossible to separate the fight for dialectical materialism from the fight for the assimilation of the whole history of the Trotskyist movement.

Therefore, Healy's efforts to replace Marxism with pseudo-Hegelian phrases to justify his opportunist practice were absolutely incompatible with a study of Trotsky's writings. By 1978 at the latest, they had completely disappeared from the curricula of the College of Marxist Education. In his *Studies*, Healy already quite deliberately devalued the role of Trotsky. He wrote:

When it came to the dialectical materialist method and reading "Hegel materialistically," Trotsky was a staunch Leninist. He walked in the footsteps not only of Lenin but of Marx and Engels as well.^[36]

This is, as North points out, a distortion of the relationship between Trotsky and Lenin that diminishes Trotsky. Trotsky was a dialectical materialist before he became a member of the Bolshevik Party. He didn't walk in the footsteps of Lenin, but made his own independent contribution to the development of Marxism, above all, the theory of Permanent Revolution.

North answers this diminishing of Trotsky in *Leon Trotsky and the Development of Marxism*:

The speeches and articles prepared by Leon Trotsky during the first four Comintern congresses are masterpieces of the political literature of Marxism. As examples of the historical materialist method in action, they rank with Marx's own historical address of May 1871 on the Civil War in France. Such works are evergreen. But it must be emphasized that Trotsky is of our epoch; and his writings remain irreplaceable and indispensable, not only as the theoretical and political foundation of a Marxist strategy for the

World Socialist Revolution; but even for an intelligent understanding of the daily events of modern political life.^[37]

North ends his critique with its political significance and points out how the idealist conceptions were being used to justify the more and more opportunist practice of the WRP. He makes clear that the *Studies* brought into the open a crisis that had been developing for years within the IC and marked a turn away from the struggle for Marxism.

North then pointed to the different opportunist maneuvers of the WRP in the Middle East and other regions, which we will discuss in detail in the upcoming lectures. I would like to conclude the presentation of the critique of Healy's *Studies* by referring once again to *Leon Trotsky and the Development of Marxism*, because in it North presents the perspective that positively results from the critique with unique clarity:

The history of Trotskyism cannot be comprehended as a series of disconnected episodes. Its theoretical development has been abstracted by its cadre from the continuous unfolding of the world capitalist crisis and the struggles of the international proletariat. Its unbroken continuity of political analyses of all the fundamental experiences of the class struggle, over an entire historical epoch, constitutes the enormous richness of Trotskyism as the sole development of Marxism after the death of Lenin in 1924.

A leadership which does not strive collectively to assimilate the whole of this history cannot adequately fulfill its revolutionary responsibilities to the working class. Without a real knowledge of the historical development of the Trotskyist movement, references to dialectical materialism are not merely hollow; such empty references pave the way for a real distortion of the dialectical method. The source of theory lies not in thought but in the objective world. Thus the development of Trotskyism proceeds from the fresh experiences of the class struggle, which are posited on the entire historically-derived knowledge of our movement.

"Thus cognition rolls forward from content to content ... it raises to each next stage of determination the whole mass of its antecedent content, and by its dialectical progress not only loses nothing and leaves nothing behind, but carries with it all that it has acquired, enriching and concentrating itself upon itself..."

Quoting this passage from Hegel's *Science of Logic*, Lenin, in his *Philosophical Notebooks*, wrote: "This extract is not at all bad as a kind of summing up of dialectics." (*Collected Works*, Vol. 38, p.230) Nor is this extract bad "as a kind of summing up of" the constant dialectical development of Trotskyist theory.^[38]

This is a powerful outline of the basic concept of dialectical materialism as it was developed in the Workers League against Healy's falsification of Marxism. It is also very much the basis of our school.

This basic conception of Marxist method, developed in the Workers League and supported by the rich heritage of the Trotskyist movement, laid the foundation for a tremendous development of the International Committee in the years since the split. As David North notes in "Plekhanov and the Tragedy of the Second International":

The dialectical materialist theory of knowledge holds that the concepts through which man cognizes the objective world are, themselves, subject to change, in accordance with the underlying movement of objective reality. Thus, the categories and concepts of historical materialism must not be treated as finished formulae,

but must be critically adapted to, and enriched by, the changing content of human society *and* the development of natural science as it discovers new properties of matter....

During the past eighteen years, the International Committee has produced an extraordinary range of political and theoretical work. We have subjected to analysis the most difficult political issues—among them, the breakup of the Soviet Union, the decay of the trade unions, and the contemporary significance of bourgeois nationalism. In each case we have not simply reasserted “orthodox” positions, but creatively developed and adapted the Marxist program to the new historical conditions. Moreover, each day the theoretical vitality, programmatic clarity, and political astuteness of the International Committee is attested to by the publication of the *World Socialist Web Site*.^[39]

We have discussed these developments at length in the 2019 Summer School; they are themselves an expression of the enormous theoretical strength of the International Committee. And one could add many more questions: our defense of historical truth against the post-Soviet falsification of history, the attacks on the American revolutions, and the rehabilitation of Hitler in Germany. We could only understand the significance of these questions and answer them in this sharp way because we understand the importance of an understanding of history to the emancipation of the working class. David North sums this up in “Postmodernism’s Twentieth Century: Political Demoralization and the Flight from Historical Truth”:

The burden of decades of historical falsification could not be overcome in time for the Soviet working class to orient itself politically, uphold its independent social interests, and oppose the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the restoration of capitalism.

There is a lesson in this historical tragedy. Without a thorough knowledge of the historical experiences through which it has passed, the working class cannot defend even its most elementary social interests, let alone conduct a politically conscious struggle against the capitalist system.^[40]

The International Committee has therefore also constantly defended and developed the methodological bases themselves. Just a few examples:

- The discussion of objectivism, empiricism and the role of the subjective factor in *Reform and Revolution in the Epoch of Imperialism*.
- The elaboration of the dialectical understanding of social form and content in *Why are Trade Unions Hostile to Socialism?*
- The discussion of the unity of opposites of the class and the party in *The Origins of Bolshevism and What Is To Be Done?*
- The problem of abstract identity in *The Myth of “Ordinary Germans”*: A Review of Daniel Goldhagen’s *Hitler’s Willing Executioners*

North’s polemic against Alex Steiner and Frank Brenner is undoubtedly particularly important. North, in his engagement with Steiner and Brenner, developed further the very conception we discussed during the last hour. The book is a Marxist attack on all the various schools of subjective idealism such as postmodernism, the Frankfurt School, and existentialism. It is a powerful defense of materialism. As David North writes:

The real issue is that you do not agree with the International Committee’s insistence that the fight for socialism requires the development, within the working class, of both a profound knowledge of history—particularly that of the socialist movement

itself—and the most precise and concrete understanding possible (by means of ever more exact conceptual approximations) of the objective movement of the world capitalist system in all its complex, contradictory and interconnected forms. What you refer to falsely as “objectivism,” is the Marxist striving to accurately reflect in subjective thought the law-governed movement of the objective world, of which social man is a part, and to make this knowledge and understanding the basis of revolutionary practice. For all your talk about “dialectics” and the “fight against pragmatism,” everything you write demonstrates indifference to the requirements of developing a working class movement whose practice is informed by Marxist theory.^[41]

It is remarkable how in Steiner and Brenner the conceptions of Healy, their theoretical mentor, merge with all the anti-Marxist theories floating around in the universities. This itself underlines once again the importance of the struggle against Healy’s conceptions and shows how important it was to continue this struggle.

Their rejection of the Enlightenment and therefore of reason, their insistence on utopia and a breaking up of the family, etc., are all animated by the same spirit: to detach Marxism from science, from the close study of the class struggle and its history, and to transform it into a beautiful idea that fits the life of petty-bourgeois existence. Marxism is not supposed to solve the crisis of revolutionary leadership, but the sexual problems of Frank Brenner.

That this is not about individuals but about fundamental tendencies of bourgeois ideology was also made clear by David North in his essay “It Was All Engels’ Fault: A Review of Tom Rockmore’s *Marx After Marxism*.” After the collapse of the Soviet Union, dozens, if not hundreds, of professors and academics “rediscovered” Hegel, turned him against Marx, and developed political theories based on him—an endeavor that North correctly diagnosed as a “major step backward, theoretically and intellectually,” which “can only serve reactionary political ends.”

With regard to Rockmore, North proved beyond doubt that his interpretation of Marx as an idealist, who had been materialistically twisted by Engels, had no scientific substance at all and served clear political ends:

What Rockmore advocates—a Marx without historical materialism, without Engels, without Marxism—proves, in the end, to be a Marx without socialist revolution, a “Marx” that is not simply stood on his head, but also handcuffed and gagged.^[42]

The International Committee, on the contrary, has developed Marxism as the science of socialist revolution. In the Fifth Phase of the development of the Trotskyist movement, in which a new revolutionary upsurge of the international working class is intersecting with the political activity of the International Committee, this theoretical foundation becomes absolutely crucial. It requires “the conscious struggle to preserve the lines of historical continuity between the present struggles of the working class and the revolutionary party as a unity of opposites and the whole content of the objective historical experiences of the class and the development of Bolshevism.” This is the essence of the discussion on dialectics and this is the essence of this school, which must be just the starting point of an intensive study of this rich history.

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