

Foreword to *The Frankfurt School, Postmodernism and the Politics of the Pseudo-Left: A Marxist Critique*

Part One

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The WSWS is beginning publication of the foreword by David North to his new book, The Frankfurt School, Postmodernism and the Politics of the Pseudo-Left: A Marxist Critique. The book is available for purchase at Mehring Books.

The foreword will be serialized in three parts. Parts two and three will be posted on Wednesday, July 22 and Thursday, July 23.

This book examines the relationship between Marxist theory and the development of the revolutionary program, perspective and practice of the Trotskyist movement. Within this context, it explains why the International Committee of the Fourth International has devoted significant time and energy to exposing the reactionary character of the anti-materialist and anti-Marxist intellectual tendencies—related to various branches of existentialist irrationalism, the Frankfurt School and postmodernism—that provide the theoretical foundations for a wide array of present-day petty-bourgeois pseudo-left and anti-socialist political movements.

The most internationally prominent example of a pseudo-left organization is the Greek party, Syriza. The role played by the Syriza government, following its election in January 2015, in disorienting, demoralizing and betraying the mass anti-austerity movement, has provided a shameful demonstration of the political catastrophe that follows when this type of petty-bourgeois organization, spouting empty populist phrases, comes to power. In the aftermath of Syriza's criminal betrayal, with all its tragic consequences for the working people and youth of Greece, this volume's analysis of the intimate connection between contemporary forms of anti-Marxist theory and the reactionary class interests promoted by the pseudo-left is especially timely.

Steiner and Brenner: A case study in the social and political pathology of petty-bourgeois pseudo-leftism

The first three documents in this volume were written in response to attacks on the theoretical foundations, perspective and practice of the Socialist Equality Party (US) and the International Committee of the Fourth International by two former members of the American Trotskyist movement, Alex Steiner and Frank Brenner. Given the fact that they both left the Workers League (predecessor of the SEP) in the late 1970s, their documents could have been ignored. Coming from individuals who had abandoned revolutionary activity more than a quarter-century earlier, the warnings of Steiner and Brenner that the SEP faced imminent ruin lacked political credibility, not to mention moral force. Their status as sympathizers—a broad and vague self-designation that carried no specific

responsibilities—did not obligate the SEP to respond to their ever-expanding and increasingly vitriolic criticisms. However, two considerations persuaded the ICFI to reply.

First, as Steiner and Brenner had played a role in the early history of the Workers League, we sincerely hoped that a response to their criticisms would assist them in their own political development and, if at all possible, encourage their return to active involvement in the work of the revolutionary movement. It soon became clear that this was to be the least likely outcome of our efforts at clarification.

The second consideration concerned the theoretical content of the criticisms. Their principal documents—*On Why Utopia is Crucial to a Revival of Socialist Consciousness, Objectivism or Marxism and Marxism Without Its Head or Its Heart*—consisted of a compendium of anti-Marxist conceptions popular among broad layers of middle-class ex-radicals and academics.

While Steiner and Brenner declared that they were upholding the traditions of the International Committee, our analysis of their documents demonstrated that they drew their inspiration from figures such as Herbert Marcuse, the “Freudo-Marxists” Wilhelm Reich and Erich Fromm, and the utopian theorist Ernst Bloch.

As neither Steiner nor Brenner ever attempted to trace, critically and systematically, the theoretical and political sources of their own ideas (an obligatory element of dialectical materialist methodology), it may well be the case that they did not fully grasp the extent to which they were reproducing the arguments of several generations of anti-Marxists and opponents of historical materialism. There was nothing of an original character in their denunciations of “objectivism,” “determinism,” and “vulgar materialism,” their denigration of Plekhanov's intellectual legacy and of Lenin's *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*, their attack on the Enlightenment and Reason, their complaints against science and technology, their blurring of the distinction between materialism and idealism, their magnification of the significance of the “unconscious” and the power of the “irrational,” their focus on individual alienation as opposed to class exploitation, and their celebration of utopian mythmaking.

The first three documents are not only an answer to Steiner and Brenner. They are also directed against prevalent forms of anti-Marxism that exercise a reactionary influence on current political and cultural life, and which spare no effort in disorienting and demoralizing the working class, student youth and intellectuals.

Irrationalism and the politics of the pseudo-left

Especially during the past decade, the connection has become much clearer between the reactionary pseudo-left politics of the middle class and the theories of Nietzsche, Brzozowski, Sorel, De Man, the Frankfurt School and the many forms of extreme philosophical subjectivism and irrationalism propagated by postmodernists (Foucault, Laclau, Badiou et al.). Pseudo-left politics—centered on race, nationality, ethnicity, gender, and sexual preference—has come to play a critical role in suppressing opposition to capitalism, by rejecting class as the essential social category and emphasizing, instead, personal “identity” and “lifestyle,” and by legitimizing imperialist interventions and wars in the name of “human rights.”

Theoretical conceptions do not develop in a historical, political and social vacuum. In 1911, in a review that answered an attack on historical materialism by Heinrich Rickert (1863–1936), a professor of philosophy at Freiburg University in Germany, the great Russian Marxist Georgi Plekhanov wrote:

The fact is that Rickert and other scientists like him do not have the foggiest notion of historical materialism, not for any *personal* reason, but because their intellectual field of vision is clouded by prejudices that are peculiar to a *whole class*. It might truly be said of them that the rubbish they offer as an exposition of historical materialism is determined by “a completely unscientific political prejudice.” Their aversion to historical materialism speaks most eloquently of their fear of “specifically Social-Democratic aspirations.”[1]

The “rubbish” written by Steiner and Brenner is a product of the social, intellectual, and political evolution of a generation of student youth that were radicalized during the late 1960s and early 1970s. Like many of that generation, they were drawn, at a certain point, to Marxism, which provided a theoretical foundation for a critique of capitalist society. But the nature of middle-class student “anti-capitalism”—which, in the final analysis, sought nothing more than limited democratic reforms of the existing society—required Marxism only in a highly diluted form. The Frankfurt School distilled and distributed, through the medium of universities throughout Europe and the United States, an extremely low-proof product. Herbert Marcuse, whose theoretical work bore the ineradicable imprint of his training under Heidegger, achieved great popularity by infusing Marxism with a heavy dose of existentialist psychology. The issues of alienation, repression and sexuality found a deeper response among middle-class students than those related to the economic exploitation of the working class and its struggle for power.

In the case of Steiner, a graduate of the New School for Social Research in New York City, the Frankfurt School’s influence undoubtedly shaped his conceptions of Marxism, and continued to exert an influence upon his thinking, even after he joined the Workers League in 1971. If such influences were less apparent in Brenner during the period of his membership in the Workers League, it was only because he showed less detectable interest in theoretical issues.

In any event, the breakdown of the student protest movement after the ending of the draft and the US withdrawal from Vietnam, which began in 1973, left both Steiner and Brenner discouraged and demoralized. Their withdrawal from the Workers League, within a few months of each other in late 1978 and early 1979, was not merely a personal retreat. It reflected the rightward evolution of the middle-class students who had formed the main constituency of the anti-war protest movement.

As a consequence of their departure from the Workers League, neither Steiner nor Brenner played any role in the struggle, initiated by the Workers League in the early 1980s, against the increasingly opportunist politics of the Workers Revolutionary Party, the British section of the

ICFI, and its long-time leader Gerry Healy. They were completely unaware of the detailed critique made by the Workers League of Healy’s subjective idealist falsification of dialectical materialism. As news of the split within the ICFI became publicly known in the late autumn of 1985, Steiner reestablished contact with the Workers League. Expressing agreement with the political and theoretical struggle waged by the International Committee, in which the Workers League was playing a critical role, Steiner declared himself a supporter of the party. However, not wishing (as he frankly acknowledged) to jeopardize the comfortable middle-class lifestyle he had developed during the previous years, he decided not to seek readmission.

In the late 1990s, Steiner appeared to draw closer, and, in 1999, applied for membership in the Socialist Equality Party. However, it was apparent to us that he had not carefully studied—and, certainly, had not assimilated—the theoretical and political issues that had been fought out during the split with the WRP. The SEP decided against admitting him. However, we maintained cordial relations. This volume includes a lengthy essay, “The Political and Intellectual Odyssey of Alex Steiner,” which reviews the very patient efforts of the SEP to find ways of collaborating with Steiner on theoretical projects.

The Iraq war and the petty-bourgeois left

What brought these efforts to an end were sharp changes in the political situation, within the United States and internationally. The first document addressed to Steiner was written in June 2003, just three months after the US invasion of Iraq. My final reply to Steiner and Brenner was published in October 2008, just weeks after the Wall Street crash and only a few weeks before the election of Barack Obama. In the course of those five years, a profound shift took place in the political orientation of the remnants of the old middle-class protest movements that had emerged out of the mass social movements of the 1960s.

In the weeks leading up to the outbreak of the Iraq War, there were mass protest demonstrations around the world. But they ended once the war began and never resumed. The nomination and election of Obama, the first African-American president, served as political justification for the integration of the petty-bourgeois left into mainstream American politics. Substantial sections of the old protest movements—especially those whose members were part of the affluent middle-class milieu—completed the long and protracted process of their break with left political radicalism and their transformation into an anti-socialist and pro-imperialist pseudo-left.

Steiner and Brenner were caught up in this shift to the right. In March 2003, Steiner attended a public anti-war conference called by the *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Party, and spoke in support of its positions. Within less than five years, he was proclaiming the demise of the SEP and the International Committee. During those five years, the International Committee had not changed its political program. Rather, it was Steiner and Brenner who, having rediscovered each other and formed an alliance based on mutual hostility toward the International Committee, had repudiated Marxist philosophy and Trotskyist politics.

False theories do have objective consequences. All that was unresolved in their understanding of Marxist theory—above all, their attitude to the Frankfurt School theorists—rendered them intellectually vulnerable to class pressures. But more was involved in Steiner and Brenner’s evolution than errors of an abstract and purely intellectual character. In the final analysis, changes in their politics determined their philosophy, more than philosophy determined their politics. The increasingly unprincipled and opportunist nature of their politics, rooted in the class interests of their social milieu, compelled Steiner and Brenner to break with philosophical and historical materialism. In the midst of the sharp political changes between 2003 and 2008, they were delighted to discover, in the demoralized theories of the “Freudo-Marxists,”

justifications for extreme political opportunism.

The fundamental source of the shift in their theoretical positions lay in their class orientation. In June 2006, I concluded my lengthy analysis of their arguments with a warning:

The views that you, Comrades Steiner and Brenner, have presented in your various documents, record the immense theoretical and political distance you have drifted from Marxism since you both left the movement nearly three decades ago. To continue along your present trajectory can only lead to the complete repudiation of whatever remains of the political convictions you espoused many years ago.

This prognosis was to be completely confirmed. As they shifted the focus of their writings from philosophy to politics, they borrowed from the arsenal of anti-Trotskyism to denounce the International Committee and the SEP as “sectarian.” This has become their favorite epithet as they attack our defense of the political independence of the working class and our refusal to support bourgeois political parties.

It is not difficult to provide an overview of Steiner and Brenner’s political evolution, as the postings on their blog site are few and far between. Given the level of its on-line activity, the name chosen for this generally inert site—*Permanent-Revolution*—is the only indication that its lethargic founders possess a sense of humor. While denouncing the passive “objectivism” of the “sectarian” ICFI, which publishes the *World Socialist Web Site* six days a week and posts upwards of 5,000 articles annually, intervals between Steiner and Brenner’s postings on their blog site may stretch to months. While they recently proclaimed[2] that the task of building a revolutionary movement “takes on critical urgency” and “requires a conscious leadership now more than ever,” the usual response of their blog site to major political events is ... silence. On the infrequent occasion when they rouse themselves from their politically demoralized stupor, it is only to denounce the International Committee and to record yet another milestone in their movement to the right.

To be continued

[1] “On Mr. H. Rickert’s Book,” in *Selected Philosophical Works*, Volume 3 (Moscow, 1976), p. 483. In this paragraph, Plekhanov, somewhat caustically, places between quotation marks phrases used by Rickert. It is worth noting that Martin Heidegger—the existentialist philosopher and pro-Nazi sycophant, who profoundly influenced the work of Sartre, Marcuse and later irrationalists such as Foucault—began his career as Rickert’s assistant.

[2]

<http://forum.permanent-revolution.org/2014/10/about-this-web-site.html>

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Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>