

# Letter from a Reader

Spiritually, what has sustained the socialist movement is its dream of a better world. This is the theme that ties Tony Kushner's play *A Bright Room Called Day* together. The dreams of the Left are always beautiful, and they are what separate us from conservative and liberal "end of history" cretinism. That is why the leading liberal and right wing thinkers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century had taken up such an "anti utopian" position against socialism. What united disparate thinkers like Karl Popper, Isaiah Berlin, Hannah Arendt, and Raymond Aron was their sobriety against the "infantile reveries" of Marxism.

Whether it's the fantastical visions of Fourier, the anti Benthamite ethos of Morris' *News from Nowhere*, or Lenin's *State and Revolution*, what motivates us is the possible negation of this world marked by the horrors of exploitation, war, sexism, racism, and environmental degradation. These dreams aren't without foundation, and hence they aren't "utopian" in the unscientific sense associated with that epithet. They are concrete dreams, which can only be concretized by the revolutionary agency of the working class. But if we lose our dialectical conception of dreaming, if we adopt a philistine attitude, engendered by the ideological exigencies of pragmatism, we will cease to breathe life into our movement, and our Marxism will degenerate into a fetid scholasticism, disconnected from the needs and aspirations of millions of people. To avoid this we need to reclaim the moral and spiritual aspect of our communism. This can only be done through immense theoretical efforts, through regrounding and equipping ourselves with the philosophical tools needed to combat the enervating philosophies of the three Ps: positivism, pragmatism, and postmodernism. The tools have already been fashioned by various Marxist theoreticians. But we cannot be afraid to plump the depths, afraid to assimilate the wheat from the chaff of theorists who don't always rub us the right way, i.e. Wilhelm Reich, Ernst Bloch, etc.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) desperately needs a new attitude towards Marxist philosophy. Its undervaluation of theory, in spite of lip service towards dialectics, is responsible in part for the pragmatic disconnection from the production process. The SEP today, at least from what we see in the states, has divorced itself from what James Cannon called a proletarian orientation. Its efforts of recruitment on campuses, while laudable, need to be coupled with engaging the majority of the working class outside the halls of the university. And what the SEP cites as critical engagement with striking workers is really just a journalistic existence of passive registration of facts. These criticisms ought not to be taken as denigrating the achievements of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), but they certainly point to the major deficiencies in its theory and practice.

A historical analogy with the first generation of Russian Marxists is—while imperfect—necessary to illustrate the problems afflicting the current leadership of the SEP. Socialists

like Zasulich and Plekhanov started off their Marxist careers by critiquing the voluntarism of the Narodniks. They accentuated the “objective conditions” of political reality, as the later Belinsky accentuated objective conditions in order to reject the visions of utopian socialists, arguing to reconcile with the blunt realities of capitalism. Belinsky was right to reject the fantasies of European socialism in its embryonic forms and Plekhanov was equally correct to say that the Narodniks’ dreams were impossible to realize in the historical coordinates of Russian life at the time he wrote *Our Differences*. But what Plekhanov and company failed to do was to cultivate the “revolutionary will”, or, what Trotsky called the “subjective dialectic”. Plekhanov failed to understand the dialectic between objective and subjective factors; while the historical coordinates are pre-given, it is our actions which can change those very coordinates. We do not have to acquiesce or agree to the reality of war, exploitation, chauvinism, and filth, of which Plekhanov did invoke Kant’s categorical imperative to support Tsarism during the First World War. This also led him to decry the Bolsheviks as Hebertist usurpers, for revolting against the “objective conditions” of Russian development. Plekhanov and the Mensheviks condemned Russia to an undialectical schematic and stagist plan.

North’s uncritical veneration of Plekhanov’s Second International Marxism blinds him to the “objectivism” of Plekhanov’s position, a position North more or less shares, as was brilliantly and precisely demonstrated in the course of Steiner’s and Brenner’s polemical testament. Nevertheless it is unfair to place North in the same camp as his hero Plekhanov. The great Marxist he has more in common with is Karl Kautsky. Kautsky too never officially abjured revolutionary Marxism. But his lip service to theory didn’t stop him from an essentially reformist political practice. Even as the “pope” of Marxism, Kautsky’s neglect of dialectics, and his undialectical Darwinism, (concomitant with the bureaucratic pressures of the German Labor movement), landed him in a political cul-de-sac he couldn’t extricate himself from but by drifting right. Kautsky had no real interest in philosophical matters, as he explained in a letter to Plekhanov, even going so far as to say that Kantianism was compatible with dialectical materialism. These are all lessons the leaders of the SEP are aware of, but seem not to value as much, since they are inconvenient with their current political trajectory. Kautsky’s neglect of theory is reproduced in its essentials by North’s “massive anti pragmatic” but anemic exercises against postmodernism.

In particular, I agree with Steiner’s and Brenner’s demand in the concluding section of “Marxism: Without Its Head or its Heart” for the initiation of a theoretical journal. It is an outright shame that other socialist groups boast such a journal and the SEP does not. Such a journal would devote itself to deepening our understanding of Marxism in all its dimensions (political economy, aesthetics, philosophy, tactics and strategy, etc), of combating current ideological trends, and of hosting theoretical exchanges and debates between members. But I fear that such a journal, without the inclusion of such supporters of the IC like Steiner and Brenner, is incapable of being launched.

I applaud comrades Steiner's and Brenner's latest response to comrade North. But it also demonstrates their helplessness, since they are trying to construct an authentic dialogue with the leadership of a party disinclined to take them seriously. North's response to "Objectivism or Marxism" was nothing more than a fatuous smear campaign against "pseudo neo-utopian" straw men. I commend Steiner and Brenner on trying to open up a discussion with the leaders of the SEP, and I hope they do, but this hope isn't a concrete one from what I have seen.

Even if Steiner and Brenner fail to convince the current leadership of the SEP, they have produced a very insightful and penetrating document. Chapters 3 and 4 alone signify advancements in understanding the relationship between positivism, pragmatism, and Marxism while the discussions of Bernstein, Reich and Guerin not only clarify what these men thought but are contributions towards a critique of them to boot. I have never before seen a real sympathetic critique of Guerin's analysis of fascism before I read chapter 10 of this polemic. There is a real theoretical surplus you could say in this document, and no one who reads it carefully will be left unimpressed by the width and weight of the subject matter discussed. The analyses of the WSWS articles on Iraq, on the New York Transit Strike, of North's Chomsky-like speech in Dublin, are all breaths of fresh air. "Marxism: Without its Head or its Heart" deserves to be a classic polemic in the annals of the IC.

A. R.