

Comment on the Steiner/Brenner-North Polemics of 2004-2007

I wish to thank Alex Steiner and Frank Brenner for the extraordinary amount of work they put into their document, "Marxism without Its Heart or Head: A Reply to David North." It represents a powerful critique of the politics of the ICFI, as expressed by the World Socialist Web Site.

The manner in which this affair has been handled by North and the ICFI sends up multiple warning flares -- all the more reason that comrades may want to discuss these issues amongst themselves, beyond hearing range of North and his inner circle, as they might be inclined to raise "concerns" that would result in banishment.

Returning to the origins of all this, at least as it is presented in documents made available at Permanent-Revolution.org, I believe it is worth putting those early exchanges between Comrades Steiner and North in May and June of 2003 in context:

This dispute began when North read a letter from Steiner to another comrade in which he was doing little more than passing along a few quotations (from Lenin) he'd alluded to in an earlier, presumably private, conversation.

More than a third of that letter, which runs little more than a page, comprises the Lenin material. The three paragraphs in which Steiner comments on the Lenin quotes are little more than 200 words.

From those three short paragraphs -- which are treated as if Steiner had written a comprehensive, multi-volume treatise intended to be the final word on the topic -- North leaps to the conclusion that Steiner had taken the position that Plekhanov's betrayal had *absolutely nothing* to do with the Russian Marxist's "protracted, decades-long isolation from Russia," and, by the same token, that Plekhanov's theoretical failings had *absolutely everything* to do with it.

On that single question -- the one that, as far as Steiner's alleged fall from Marxism is concerned, prompted this entire discussion -- I would say is this: Steiner's letter speaks for itself. Read it. Does he, in fact, argue what North maintains he's arguing? The answer, in my view, is an unequivocal "No." Insofar as North's subsequent, increasingly (and unnecessarily) verbose replies are concerned, the phrase "mountains from mole hills" comes to mind. So does the word "sectarian."

Most fundamentally, I am disturbed by North's attempt to marginalize comrades who clearly support and are committed to the movement. Even North's June 3, 2003 letter to Steiner indicates that "we value your collaboration and hope that it can be strengthened in the struggles ahead." Hollow words, given that his response to Steiner's subsequent polemic, which was presented in good faith, was to *completely ignore* it.

Questions abound: All of this material should have been published in the “Polemics” section of the WSWS. Why wasn’t it? One might ask: What is a “Polemics” section for, if not the exchange that is available only at Permanent-Revolution.org? My dictionary says that “polemics” is the “practice of argumentation.” I find it interesting that, even today, North’s document, “Marxism, History and Socialist Consciousness” is *not* featured in the polemics section of the WSWS. (It’s in the Philosophy section.) Why is that? Is it because fairness would oblige the WSWS to publish the other half of the argument? Why is that a problem?

If the editorial board was concerned about having the debate in public view, lest it confuse or lead astray workers who were just discovering the WSWS, then why -- after *ten years* of being on the Internet, is there not a private and secure members-only section of the WSWS for material like this? How difficult could that be? Why is there no firewall-protected bulletin board-type discussion space, available to party members via a password, so that a party-wide discussion could be taking place *constantly*? A discussion unfettered not only by members far-flung locations around the globe, but also by demands on time inflicted by work, family, and travel?

On the second page of “Objectivism or Marxism,” Steiner and Brenner recount how North claimed the documents had, as of April 2005, been discussed “within” the SEP. As someone who was “within” the SEP at that time -- I can say that neither document was discussed with me prior to the summer of 2006, when North’s response was distributed to the membership.

Why was Steiner’s application for party membership ignored for so long? He had previously been “with” the movement (not to mention “within it”) far longer than many and was having lengthy pieces published on the WSWS about difficult, complex topics. North “valued” his collaboration, and was even “looking forward” to future articles. So what was the problem?

Another troubling aspect brought out in the documents is the back story of an article submitted by Frank Brenner in May 1998, entitled “Gender and Materialism,” and the slippery manner in which North characterizes it. This is the article North refers to in the section of “Marxism, History and Socialist Consciousness” that is entitled, “The Origins of the Campaign for Utopia.”

North here claims that this article represented “the first serious indication that we [the party and Brenner] were moving along different political trajectories.” The article, he said, “seemed to us to be based on highly speculative and dubious propositions” and that Comrade David Walsh, “who had reviewed the article, brought some of his concerns to your attention.” In fact, they were not his concerns. At least, not initially. What North did not say, and which we now know is part of the record, is that Walsh’s original reaction to that particular draft of the piece was “very positive,” that the article “speaks to very important issues,” and that as far as he was concerned, “the article should be put on the site within the next few days.”

That is quite a different scenario than the one North describes!

Look carefully at how North spins it: Brenner submitted an article indicating (to North) that “we were moving along different political trajectories,” and Walsh’s response (that it was a first response, or his only response, is clearly implied) was to raise *his* concerns! In other words: Unanimity from the outset! It was clear to everyone, at the same time, that Brenner had gone off the deep end. That is a profoundly dishonest way of characterizing the event. One need not be a seasoned polemicist to see that.

That raises another question: If North really believed that Brenner’s piece was tangible evidence that “we were moving along different political trajectories,” then -- assuming he had knowledge of Walsh’s “very positive” reaction to the piece -- was the chairman of the WSWS editorial board not also worried that Walsh was apparently moving along a similarly misguided path, in lockstep with Brenner? What else could he assume, if Walsh had a “very positive” reaction and was apparently prepared to publish it? Why does Walsh get a pass, but Brenner is shown the door? Perhaps there are good answers to these questions, but if there were, North is not willing to deal with them in an honest manner. That is troubling not only by itself, but it clearly raises even graver questions.

Regarding dialectics

I regard as the crux of the entire debate the charge by Steiner and Brenner that the ICFI has abandoned dialectics, that it is, in fact, “a dead letter.” This, it seems to me, is the foundation on which they base most of their arguments -- including the valuable, not to mention damning, analysis of the WSWS line on Iraq.

On this charge, I would argue that they’re correct, at least in the following sense: Even if we grant North the benefit of the doubt when he claims in Section 5 of his polemic that “[p]resumably, we must have been working with some method,” it does not necessarily follow from that statement -- and certainly not from anything North says subsequently -- that the ICFI has made any serious effort to *teach* new comrades how to *use* that method. To use an analogy offered by a physical science, a chemistry instructor’s encyclopedic knowledge of the Table of Periodic Elements would be, essentially irrelevant if he never bothered to instruct students on its history and workings.

If one considers the extraordinary volume of material that has been published by the World Socialist Web Site in the last decade, one finds that the space dedicated to actually *explaining* dialectics -- a topic about which dozens of thick volumes have been written -- consumes little more than a few pages of text. An almost miniscule fraction. It is not enough to claim that dialectics have been employed in the preparation of articles and lectures that appear on the WSWS. Dialectics *itself* -- the method, its origins, history and its applications -- must be taught! Taught, methodically and systematically, to working people and students, a large number of whom may have never taken a class in philosophy, or even in political economy or history. Is the SEP up to that task? Not that I can see.

North deals with the “dead letter” accusation in the fourth and fifth sections of “Marxism, History and Socialist Consciousness. It is worth reviewing the final few paragraphs, where he refers to the lectures and theoretical work of two events: the 2005 Summer School in Ann Arbor, and the 2006 meeting in Australia of the International Editorial Board.

“Both events could succinctly be described in theoretical terms as massive anti-pragmatic exercises,” he writes. Then: “If the International Committee of the Fourth International had only the lectures and reports delivered at these two events to point to, that still would be sufficient to refute your provocative claim that dialectics is a ‘dead letter’ in our movement and that the fight against pragmatism had been abandoned.” [Emphasis added.]

I disagree with that. It would not, in my view, be “sufficient.” Two events held a year apart, one in Ann Arbor and the other in Australia, in the last decade? Each a week long? No. I don’t think that cuts it.

Neither event cited by North as evidence that the ICFI has not abandoned dialectics raises the topic of dialectics itself and deals with it directly and substantively for more than a few fleeting moments. If we examine the text of the fourteen lectures delivered during the meeting of the Editorial Board in Australia, we find exactly *two* mentions of dialectics.

In fairness, the first (which one finds at the end of North’s first lecture) is probably the single most substantive explanation of the topic that appears anywhere. Concluding his remarks and setting the stage for six days of intensive lectures, North states:

“Lenin wrote in 1914 that “The splitting of a single whole and the cognition of its contradictory parts . . . is the *essence* (one of the ‘essentials,’ one of the principal, if not the principal, characteristics or features) of dialectics.” In accordance with this theoretical approach, the reports that we will hear will examine from various sides and aspects the development of global crisis.”

Is this the SEP line on how comrades ought to work “in accordance” with dialectics? That, as socialists, it is sufficient to simply examine issues “from various sides”? If that’s all there is to it, then perhaps the WSWS ought to steal some of Rupert Murdoch’s thunder and claim beneath the masthead, that the ICFI, too, is fair and balanced!

We do not see the word “dialectic” appearing again for several days, when Comrade Walsh delivered a report on artistic and cultural questions. At one point, he refers to several critics (Foucault, Derrida, and several others) as representing “the cream of late twentieth century hostility to dialectical materialism.”

Insofar as the January 2006 lectures are concerned, that concluded the Editorial Board’s work on instructing the working class on the dynamics and method of dialectics. If one subscribes to the prescriptions Pierre Bayard lays out in his recent book, “How to Talk About Books You Haven’t Read,” then that would suffice as a summary of the massive

volume of theoretical writings by Hegel, Marx, Lenin, Trotsky, et al. For a revolutionary political party, it doesn't even come close.

At the 2005 Summer School, "dialectics" comes up a whopping 18 times. However, an examination of each reference and the context in which it is used reveals that virtually all appear in the same vein that Walsh employed the word in his January 2006 lecture: in passing reference. Parenthetically.

So, what is happening here?

I would submit that a hint to the answer to that question is provided by North himself in the "Dialectics, pragmatism and the theoretical work of the ICFI" section of his polemic, the fourth section.

Briefly, the context: After stating that "Dialectics is a dead letter in the ICFI," Steiner and Brenner go on to say:

"Predictably enough, the abandonment of dialectics has also meant the abandonment of the struggle against pragmatism. The latter didn't rate so much as a single mention in any of the lectures. A telling instance of how invisible pragmatism has become in the IC's outlook is the fact that while Richard Rorty is discussed in one lecture as a representative postmodernist, his role as a prominent philosophical pragmatist is completely ignored."

North responds:

"You offer as proof of the death of dialectics in the ICFI and the abandonment of the fight against pragmatism our focus on Richard Rorty as a leading postmodernist, rather than on his role as a pragmatist. What is the point of such nonsense? Do you seriously believe that no one in the audience knew that Richard Rorty, America's most celebrated philosopher, is a pragmatist? Or that they were unaware that postmodernism is itself a major tendency within contemporary pragmatic philosophy."

Believe it, Comrade North. Not only did I not know, prior to that lecture, that Rorty was a pragmatist, I didn't even know he was a philosopher. In fact, *I had never heard of him before!* How would I have? I've never taken a philosophy course. And Rorty did not produce books that -- unlike those written by the likes of Lou Dobbs and Michael Moore -- end up greeting visitors at the front entrance and in window displays of their local bookstore.

More crucially, of the more than 18,000 articles that had been published on the WSWS in the preceding years, Rorty had been cited in *four* (and one letter) prior to North's August 2005 lecture. The most recent of those had appeared on the WSWS in November of 2000 -- nearly *five years* prior to the lecture in which North obviously (and wrongly) assumed that everyone in the audience knew who he was talking about.

Such an admission speaks to the chasm between the SEP leadership and the working class. Refusing to speak down to an audience is one thing, but North's question – "Do you seriously believe ...?" -- begs another that goes directly to the SEP's work: What, exactly, are the parameters of the body of philosophical and historical knowledge the SEP leadership presumes that the average, faithful reader of the WSWS has assimilated and worked through? Or, at the very least, those who were in the audience that day? Insofar as the dialectic method is concerned, as with Rorty, North clearly presumes that everyone knows what he is talking about.

For workers and students who are drawn to the WSWS, where is the "Introducing Dialectics" section? Where is the reading list? Where is, to use the vernacular of the Internet, the FAQ? Is a worker who has just discovered the WSWS supposed to find, on his own, the dictionary at Marxists.org and figure it out for himself? Or rely on a "Very Short Introduction" book published by Oxford University Press?

Where are the lectures -- I should say, where is *any* lecture -- on the WSWS that introduces the working class, in plain language, to Hegel, a summary of his ideas, and how his contribution to German philosophy provided the foundation for Marxism? To working people who *may never have even heard of him* before?

The answer, an honest answer, is that there is none -- and that is as shameful a failure for a political party claiming to be Marxist as I can think of.

Lest I be misunderstood, I am not suggesting that the SEP provide its working class readership with a "shortcut" to Marxist philosophy. Indeed, to say "shortcut" implies that there's a longer, more established road to cut *around*. What I am saying is that the WSWS doesn't even go so far as to provide the road. Or, for that matter, a map. That, from my perspective, is what Brenner and Steiner are saying when they argue that dialectics is a "dead letter" in the ICFI. On this point I am entirely in agreement with them.

While we're on the subject of important material that readers of the WSWS cannot find on the web site, here are a few others to consider:

-- I'd be curious to know why the self-described "member Number 1 of the Michigan Branch of the G.V Plekhanov fan club" never published the series of articles commemorating the 85th anniversary of G.V. Plekhanov's death, as he told Steiner would be done four *years* ago.

-- Why hasn't "How the Workers Revolutionary Party Betrayed Trotskyism, 1973-1985" been published by the WSWS? Comrades were informed in November 2005 that this material would be posted on the web site soon and that "the completed documents will be crucial in educating our readership and our membership in this absolutely critical period in the history of our party." On that point, I agree. So where is it? Whose hard drive is it languishing on?

-- In "Marxism, History and Socialist Consciousness," North cites three documents in his effort to refute the claim by Steiner and Brenner that "dialectics is a dead letter in the ICFI." They include: A "Draft Resolution on the Perspectives and Tasks of the Workers' League," issued Nov. 7, 1978; North's own "Leon Trotsky and the Development of Marxism," from 1985; and finally, an obituary published in 1991, again written by North: "Gerry Healy and His Place In the History of the Fourth International." *None of these documents are available on the World Socialist Web Site* – or if they are, they certainly aren't highlighted. Only one of them, Healy's obituary, is made available from Mehring Books.

I'd add one more observation: "In "Marxism, History and Socialist Consciousness," when North introduces the 1978 document, he characterizes it as an "important theoretical development that our movement was beginning to take." We'll have to take his word for it. Not only is the text of this "important" document unavailable on the WSWS, but a Google search indicates that the only time the document has even been *cited* by name was in August 2007 -- when North helpfully explained, in "Marxism, History and Socialist Consciousness," how important it was!

-- In November 2003, two chapters of North's book, "The Heritage We Defend," were published on the WSWS. At the end of the article announcing this fact, the writer stated: "The WSWS will soon be republishing all 35 chapters of *The Heritage We Defend*, along with other critical material from the archives of the ICFI." In 2008, comrades still wait for those remaining chapters to appear online.

-- Finally: Where is the point-by-point positions document that North told those on the final day of the 2005 Summer School would be published on the WSWS within a few months? North told those in attendance that new readers who wished to know the party's position on a broad range of topics would soon find the answers they needed in a simple, easy-to-use FAQ-style format, and that it would be online, if my memory serves, by January or February of 2006. Comrades should recall that Steiner and Brenner, in their articles, have taken the WSWS to task for not doing something along these lines, and have been roundly condemned (unjustly, in my opinion) for suggesting that the Socialist Equality Party offer "prescriptions" or "shortcuts."

To date, the "prescriptions" North triumphantly promised comrades in August 2005 were on the way appear nowhere on the WSWS.

If the absence of theoretical material published online by the World Socialist Web Site for the purpose of educating workers were limited to just one or two of the documents identified above, that perhaps could be explained by extenuating circumstances. That the list is so lengthy – and, given the wealth of material available in the socialist movement, it also can hardly be considered an exhaustive one -- speaks to a definite perspective. One that, as Brenner and Steiner show, represents a turn away from the theoretical foundations of Marxism.

Conclusion

These are just a few questions and issues that come to mind.

I hope “Marxism without its head or its Heart” generates a lot of discussion, and by that I mean *genuine* discussion -- not a final-word, game-over polemic handed down by the WSWS editorial board and that is vetted by North for comrades to “study” (agree with) or boilerplate “reports” stoically delivered to comrades who are expected to sit obediently and nod approvingly when it’s over. Discussion in which comrades feel *absolutely* free to speak their mind without fear that North or one of his administrators will suggest, ominously, that they have “concerns” about them. If you recently joined the Socialist Equality Party, ask yourself: Do you feel that you have that freedom today? If you find yourself in agreement with anything Steiner and Brenner have written, have you said so? If an honest answer to the second question is “no,” then you also answered the first one.

This should have been a party-wide discussion from the start. Because it concerns the *party*. That it wasn’t raises deeply troubling questions about how the Socialist Equality Party conducts its work and relates to comrades who are acting in good faith. It frankly also says something -- and this is really the most important thing -- about the level of respect that is shown to those who ought to be central to all of this: the working people the party ostensibly wants to, and must attract.

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