

# The Downward Spiral of the International Committee of the Fourth International

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**By Alex Steiner**

## Chapter 1

### **Concocting a smear campaign: A dash of political blackmail and a serving of pseudo-history**

An odyssey is a tale of wanderings. Homer recounted the wanderings over many years of Odysseus returning from the Trojan war to his home in Ithaca. James Joyce wrote about Leopold Bloom's wandering around the city of Dublin over the course of one day. In his polemic, *Marxism versus the Frankfurt School: The Political and Intellectual Odyssey of Alex Steiner*, David North provides a narrative of what he claims are my wanderings in a multitude of political and intellectual realms.<sup>1</sup> The gist of North's narrative is fairly simple, a kind of *Bildungsroman* in reverse, where the protagonist – Steiner – finds his way into the Marxist movement early in his career, only to fall away in later years and return to the disorientation that characterized his youth.

According to North, my roots were in the Frankfurt School and the New Left, which he identifies with my sojourn as a graduate student at the New School. I then embarked on a voyage of discovery starting in the early 1970s that led me to break from my roots and join the Marxist movement. However, because – according to North - I was emotionally volatile, I was not able to consistently maintain the standpoint of Marxism and succumbed to middle class pressures that eventually took me out of the Marxist movement. After a long period of aimless wandering – according to North - I reestablished contact with the Marxist movement a dozen years ago and was able, under North's careful supervision, to make some positive contributions to Marxism in this period. However - again according to North - my years in the desert and my uncontrollable emotions eventually undermined all this good work inspired by North. As I came more and more under the sway of middle class radicalism and the Frankfurt School, I deliberately hid my new orientation while proclaiming my allegiance to genuine Marxism. I tried for several years to smuggle my alien ideas into the movement and only when I was unsuccessful in doing so did I openly give vent to my long-standing bitterness and hostility to the movement. My political obituary ends for North with my return to my origins in the Frankfurt School and the New Left. I have ended my career – according to North - by reestablishing old political ties to these anti-Marxist tendencies with my affiliation with an alternative left-wing educational institution.

In what follows I will show that North's self-serving narrative bears absolutely no resemblance to my actual political and intellectual itinerary. Its sole aim is to discredit me so as to insulate the

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<sup>1</sup> North's *The Frankfurt School vs. Marxism* was originally published in three parts on the World Socialist Web Site starting on Oct. 22, 2008. These can be accessed at:

<http://wsws.org/articles/2008/oct2008/fran-o22.shtml> for part I,

<http://wsws.org/articles/2008/oct2008/fran-o23.shtml> for part II,

<http://wsws.org/articles/2008/oct2008/fran-o24.shtml> for part III.

The entire series has also been published as a single PDF document and can be accessed at:

<http://wsws.org/media/FrankfurtSchool.pdf>

members and supporters of the International Committee from a serious consideration of the critique of the theory and practice of the IC that Frank Brenner I have conducted over the past seven years. But before addressing North's fabrications, it is necessary to say something about the background and methodology of North's piece.

As Frank Brenner and I have previously noted <sup>2</sup>, North's piece was intended to launch a smear campaign against me in order to distract attention from a series of devastating charges that we made – and backed up with solid evidence – that the leadership of the International Committee was increasingly veering away from Marxism. To anyone who has followed the polemic between us and North it is clear that North cannot and will not answer any of our charges - whether it be about the IC leadership's abandonment of the perspective of permanent revolution in Iraq, its abstentionist practice towards the American working class and its total indifference to revolutionary events in Mexico. Nor has North replied to our critique of his philosophical outlook. There is nothing in his latest polemic about pragmatism, positivism and the dialectical method (with the exception that he takes repeated swipes at any mention of dialectics.)

Instead North once more repeats a welter of charges he originally brought up in his earlier polemic, *Marxism, History and Socialist Consciousness* (MHSC). Every single one of North's statements were answered in *Marxism Without its Head or its Heart* (MWHH), but North proceeds as if the latter document had never been written. To cite one example, in the second paragraph of his *Odyssey* piece North provides a caricature of the position advocated by Frank Brenner and I, claiming that we insist that you cannot make a revolution until you have overcome all forms of cultural backwardness, particularly in the area of sexuality. He does not tell his readers that in MWHH, we have answered this charge. Our reply can be found in Chapter 8, p 218 and following. <sup>3</sup> Where Brenner was referring to the need for a struggle against backward culture after the revolution, (a topic that was a central concern of Trotsky's in many of the essays in his masterpiece, *Problems of Everyday Life*), North twists his words to mean that Brenner believes you cannot make a revolution until you have conquered cultural backwardness. It is not difficult to find many other examples of this type of prevarication in North's piece. <sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> See the essays, *Unable to answer our political criticisms, the WSWS resorts to a smear campaign*, [http://www.permanent-revolution.org/polemics/smear\\_campaign.pdf](http://www.permanent-revolution.org/polemics/smear_campaign.pdf) and *A brief note on the publication of "Steiner, Brenner and Neo-Marxism: The Marcusean Component"*, <http://www.permanent-revolution.org/forum/2009/01/brief-note-on-publication-of-steiner.html> and *Of sterile flowers, poisonous weeds and a political smokescreen*, [http://www.permanent-revolution.org/polemics/haig\\_smokescreen.pdf](http://www.permanent-revolution.org/polemics/haig_smokescreen.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> [http://permanent-revolution.org/polemics/mwhh\\_ch08.pdf](http://permanent-revolution.org/polemics/mwhh_ch08.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> One other example: nearing the conclusion of his retrospective glance, North once more resurrects the figure of Hendrik De Man:

The final sections of my reply examined some of the theoretical influences, acknowledged and unacknowledged, in the Steiner/Brenner document. Attention was drawn especially to the key writings of Hendrik De Man (*The Psychology of Socialism*), Wilhelm Reich (*The Mass Psychology of Fascism*), and Herbert Marcuse (*Eros and Civilization*).

North originally introduced a discussion of De Man in MHSC. There he linked De Man, who in his later years became a fascist sympathizer who celebrated the irrational, with the Frankfurt School. North considered his exegesis on De Man important enough to commission an advertising blurb on the back cover of the printed version of MHSC where his discussion of De Man is cited as a "perceptive evaluation". However, in MWHH, Frank Brenner and I

While these examples are not of paramount importance in themselves, they serve well to illustrate the nature of North's polemic. There are literally dozens of such repetitions of earlier fabrications alongside of glaring omissions in North's piece. They do not warrant any further comment.

North's summary of the falsifications and distortions that he originally lodged in MHSC does not make his account any more credible. On the contrary, his deliberate suppression of our response to his initial charge demonstrates the cynical calculation behind his ploy – he is presuming that those reading his polemic will not take the time to read our response to his earlier charges against us.<sup>5</sup> But why does he resort to such a subterfuge unless he is incapable of actually responding to what we have written? In MWHH as well as in our earlier document, *Objectivism or Marxism*, we articulated a fundamental critique of the political and theoretical basis of the work of International Committee and the SEP. North's inability to reply to our critique is the surest indication, not only of his degeneration, but that of an entire generation of leaders of the International Committee.

## **Using the Threat of Political Blackmail to Silence Opposition**

North spends the greater part of Part I of his polemic rehashing dozens of accusations he has already made in MHSC. At a certain point he notes that we have replied to MHSC in our document, MWHH, but tellingly, he never engages any of the arguments we make in that work.

To get to the real point behind North's polemic you have to wait until Section III. That is where North finally makes it clear that he has little interest in pursuing the political and theoretical issues that we have raised but is instead embarking on a smear campaign.

In order to provide a rationale for the latter, North sets out to paint me as someone against whom extraordinary measures are justified. He writes of Brenner and myself;

They present the SEP's refusal to offer them the *World Socialist Web Site* as a forum for their anti-Marxist conceptions as the act of an incipient political dictatorship.

This is a fabrication. We never asked the SEP to provide us with a forum on the WSWS. The only thing we asked of the SEP is that the leadership provide a mechanism whereby the issues we raised could be discussed. We always understood that such a discussion, were it to happen, would be within the movement, among party members and close supporters. North had at one point agreed to have that discussion with us but he never followed through on his promise. The

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called into question this "perceptive evaluation". De Man in fact had nothing to do with the Frankfurt School and we produced evidence showing that the members of the Frankfurt School always viewed De Man with suspicion if not overt hostility. Yet as far as North is concerned, we never said anything about De Man and his "perceptive evaluation" still stands. (See [http://permanent-revolution.org/polemics/mwhh\\_ch09.pdf](http://permanent-revolution.org/polemics/mwhh_ch09.pdf) p. 242.)

<sup>5</sup> Not coincidentally, North and the editors of the WSWS have deliberately made it difficult for their readers to find our response. There is only one hyperlink to our web site at the very beginning of North's polemic, and none that points the reader to any specific document on our web site.

account of North's evasion of a discussion was documented in both *Objectivism or Marxism* and MWHH.

North continues,

They have calculated that this story will win for them sympathy among those who are politically inexperienced, especially in the United States where the identification of socialism with the suppression of individual rights is, as a consequence of decades of anti-communist propaganda, embedded in popular consciousness. Of course, there is the fact, which cannot simply be ignored, that Steiner and Brenner left the movement 30 years ago. They have spent virtually all their adult lives in pursuit of their private interests. The WSWS has been under no obligation to publish their documents.

This is yet another fabrication. We made no such calculation as our polemics were addressed very specifically to members and supporters of the International Committee. Even the most casual perusal of our web site, <http://permanent-revolution.org>, shows that it is oriented to readers and supporters of the WSWS and SEP. We only placed our documents on a public web site to publicize them to those who otherwise would never have seen them. And as we explained in *Objectivism or Marxism* we only went public in the first place after three years of stonewalling by North. But the typical way a political cynic operates is as follows: "When you can't answer someone's criticism, question their motives".

It is true that we have spent a long time outside of the movement, although we have remained close sympathizers throughout that period. It would have been preferable if the issues we raised had instead been brought up by a conscientious dissenter within the movement. Unfortunately, no such person appeared on the scene. That is not entirely surprising given that the internal life of the movement has strongly discouraged any challenges to the leadership. We were therefore left with the choice of either raising issues that we knew would meet with hostility from the leadership and subject us to much abuse from those who are comfortable with the current abstentionist practice of the movement, or we could remain silent. We chose to defend principles in spite of the consequences.

And finally, we never claimed the SEP was under any obligation to publish our documents nor did we ever ask that our documents be published on the WSWS. North knows perfectly well that all we ever asked for was a discussion within the movement. <sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> North cannot claim to be confused about this point because I spelled out what we meant in a private correspondence with him back in 2006. I made it very clear that we were requesting a discussion within the movement. It never entered my mind to have this discussion on the pages of the WSWS and such a suggestion was never even hinted at. In my letter to North of 2006, I spelled out exactly what kind of discussion we were requesting:

Dave,

In case I did not make it clear, "full participation" means a genuine dialogue and debate about our critique of the theory and practice of the International Committee. It means the publication and full circulation of documents on both sides in advance of a face to face discussion, with our participation, based on those documents. The issues we are bringing up can only clarify the movement. If we are wrong it should not be very difficult to convince the membership. But if we are correct, if even part of our critique has some merit, then you would be remiss in your responsibilities as a leader of the movement in not allowing a full discussion to take place. The discussion we are requesting is not for our benefit. We have nothing to gain

North continues;

As a matter of fact, an account of the origins of this polemic was provided in *Marxism, History & Socialist Consciousness*. However, I am quite prepared to supplement that initial account with further details. **This will require that I review the political biography of Alex Steiner. I doubt that he will appreciate this attention.** [my emphasis: A.S] After all, he writes in another part of the Steiner/Brenner document that "Alex Steiner isn't the leader of a revolutionary movement: his activities as an individual have no relevance to this discussion." How modest, but I respectfully disagree.

Three points must be made. First, the issuing of a public political attack—which includes a direct appeal to the party membership to change its leadership—is not the action of an individual, but of a candidate for political leadership. It implies a willingness on the part of its author to assume leadership responsibilities should the occasion arise—that is, should he be called upon to carry through the political changes demanded in his documents. Second, Steiner is the principal author of those sections of the Steiner/Brenner documents in which the theoretical-philosophical line is elaborated. An examination of Steiner's intellectual and political history will contribute to an understanding of the origins and implications of his theoretical arguments. Third, there exists a

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out of it. Neither of us have any personal designs or ambitions at this late stage in our careers. Our purpose has been solely the clarification of the movement...

Furthermore, your standing on a legalism in this case is quite selective. You agreed last year, in a private discussion with me, to hold discussions with Frank and myself about the two documents that we had submitted. Although I attempted to follow up with you subsequently, you did not honor your pledge and kept Frank and myself in the dark for the next year. That is why we felt compelled to publish another document. Why did you agree to hold discussions with us last year only to turn around and repudiate that pledge? And if it was correct to hold discussions then, why are you now bringing up legalistic arguments in an attempt to evade a discussion today? If you insist on standing on such ceremony then what you have may be the outward form of democratic centralism, but certainly not its content.

Finally, if Marxism is indeed a science, then it is imperative that all sides of an issue regarding the life and death of the revolutionary movement be heard. It is crucial that the membership become acquainted with the strongest arguments in favor of a position, and not just the weakest ones. Recognizing this, it was always one of the strengths of the Bolshevik Party that they made room for the airing of disagreements within the movement. All this changed dramatically of course with the degeneration of the party with the rise of Stalinism from the mid 1920's. It was only then that the airing of disagreements with the line of the party leadership began to be looked upon as a hostile act. A healthy movement welcomes an honest critique and the possibilities for self clarification that it entails. A sick movement abhors internal dissent and looks upon any criticism as an attack by the enemy. This is a lesson that I hoped the movement had learned from the struggle with Healy.

I urge you therefore to consider carefully the course upon which you are embarking. Frank and I remain open to a discussion and are willing to do whatever is necessary to facilitate it.

Yours Fraternally,

Alex

(Letter from A.S. to D.N. May 23, 2006.)

This letter also refutes North's allegation that we were putting ourselves forward as candidates for leadership. I make it quite clear in this letter that we had no such ambitions and that was not our goal.

substantial written record, to which Steiner/Brenner fail to make any reference, in which the development of Steiner's differences with the SEP, prior to the issuing of public attacks, are documented.

What North here calls “the political biography of Alex Steiner” is a euphemism for a smear campaign against me. Otherwise, his follow-up remark, “I doubt that he will appreciate this attention”, makes no sense. This last remark is chilling: The impression North wants to create is that he has some incriminating ‘dirt’ on me. This has more in common with the gutter politics of bourgeois political life than with Marxism. . If there were any political or theoretical substance to these new “details” that North is now bringing in, why didn’t he raise them in his previous, book-length, polemic against us? (He surely wasn’t trying to spare my feelings!) No, the only reason he didn’t raise these “details” before is because they had no bearing on the political substance of the polemic. Thus North is announcing that he is done with disputing with us over political substance – hence his failure to provide even a perfunctory reply to MWHH – and is instead shifting the focus to an *ad hominem* attack, the gist of which is as follows: if you keep persisting with your political criticisms, then I will expose “details” about you that you will not “appreciate”. Moreover, this not-so-subtle threat is directed not only at me. As we’ll see in a moment, North makes it clear that anyone else who announces his or her disagreement with the party leadership can expect similar treatment.

North tries to justify his resort to an *ad hominem* attack by claiming that I made a direct appeal to the party membership to change its leadership and that I am therefore a candidate for political leadership. This is first of all not true. Neither Frank Brenner nor I ever called on the IC to change its political leadership. What North calls our “public political attack” was conducted in order to reorient the IC. We never opined as to whether such a reorientation would require a change in leadership. On the contrary, we held out the hope that if the leadership was essentially healthy, they would be capable of recognizing their mistakes as a result of a thorough discussion and begin to reorient themselves. In any case, the theoretical and political degeneration of the IC is not something that can be undone merely by a change in personnel. It will require a thorough reorientation of the movement as a whole.

Moreover, even if his charge against Brenner and I were true, that we were supposedly calling on the IC to replace him as a leader and placing ourselves as candidates for a new leadership, why would this require a smear campaign in response? Why could North not reply to our political and theoretical criticisms with arguments that seek to convince his readers through logic rather than by whipping them up with emotionally charged accusations against me? This isn’t how Lenin or Trotsky dealt with such controversies. Whenever there was a challenge to the leadership in the Bolshevik Party or in the Fourth International under Trotsky, it was fought out on the basis of a thorough discussion on the political, theoretical and organizational differences. To do otherwise is to poison the political atmosphere within the movement and render it incapable of learning from its own experiences.

The first lesson of dialectics, according to the Greek philosopher Heraclitus, is that you cannot step into the same river twice. Nothing remains static. A leadership that refuses to acknowledge

any mistakes, that refuses to look at itself critically, will not just continue making mistakes in the same old way; it will degenerate. This has happened to North and the IC leadership. His launching of a smear campaign against me represents a qualitative degeneration of the person I once knew and respected. If there is a single lesson that should have been taken from the experience of the break with Gerry Healy, it is that a leadership that is intolerant of criticism ensures the eventual degeneration of the movement. That intolerance is evident in the insidious claim that anyone who criticizes the leadership is necessarily presenting themselves as an alternative candidate for leadership. This is insidious because it is a back-handed form of political blackmail: if you raise serious criticisms, you will be treated as a faction aiming to oust the party leadership; your only other option is to keep your mouth shut. To say that this will have a chilling effect on internal discussion and debate is an understatement.

North's singling me out for this smear campaign is also worth a comment. In justifying his concentration on me, he claims that I, rather than Frank Brenner, am the principal author "of those sections of the Steiner/Brenner documents in which the theoretical-philosophical line is elaborated." In actuality, the reason North singles me out has little to do with who wrote what sections of our joint document.<sup>7</sup> Rather it is because North has had a considerable personal correspondence with me over the years, but very little with Brenner, so there are more quotes with my name on it that can be ripped out of context and used for mudslinging. Furthermore, I never denied that I had theoretical differences with North, even prior to my application for membership. North's innuendo therefore that there was something dishonest in our airing these differences after 2003 is baseless. But prior to 2003 I always considered those differences to be within the parameters of an internal party discussion. The differences that I had with the IC leadership prior to my exchange with North in *The Dialectical Path of Cognition* were ones that I hoped could be resolved through informal discussion. North is now claiming that I harbored differences back then that made me ineligible for party membership. This is a retroactive rewriting of the history of our differences. Quite the contrary, as the correspondence will prove, North considered "**the differences that we perhaps have [to] fall within the dialectical tolerance of Marxian debate.**"<sup>8</sup> Following is the full text of the letter from North in which he made this statement:

Dear Alex,

Thank you for your letter. I have read it once, and many of the points you raise are not as "heretical" as you may think. Though we have maintained regular contact since 1985, it is my impression that you underestimate the depth of the political and intellectual revolution involved in the split with Healy, Banda and Slaughter. There is hardly any area of the program and practice of the "old" ICFI that was not subjected to extensive theoretical criticism. While we defend that which was positive in the heritage of the pre-1985 ICFI, we are by no means uncritical in our attitude toward much that was done and said. I might add, personally, that my own assessment of Healy is complex and "conflicted." For all his extraordinary personal dynamism, his ascendancy within the ICFI was, in a quite tragic sense, the expression of the immense political pressure exerted upon the Trotskyist movement in a period when the workers' movement was dominated by the worst forms

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<sup>7</sup> It is true that I was the author of the bulk of the philosophical sections of our joint document. However, the document was a genuine collaboration and regardless of who wrote what part, nothing was published without a great deal of discussion and agreement between us.

<sup>8</sup> David North, letter to Alex Steiner, dated June, 25, 1999.



of opportunism. He tended to fight fire with fire, and the results -- especially within his own movement -- was (sic) very destructive.

I will reply, after I have studied your letter more carefully, to the major points you have raised. The philosophical issues that you raise are of immense importance, though the differences that we *perhaps* have fall within the dialectical tolerance of Marxian debate. By the way, I tried to sum up my views on the dynamic relationship between being and consciousness in the lecture on Bernstein that I gave at the Australian school in January 1998. It can be found at:

<http://www.wsws.org/history/1998/jan1998/reform.shtml> I would be interested in knowing your opinion of my treatment of the being-consciousness relationship.

By the way, I would like to share your views with members of the Political Committee, as I believe that the issues raised in your letter merit discussion. Your ideas will, I can assure you, be read with interest.

With best regards,

David

I might add in passing that this letter is noteworthy not only for North's characterization of our theoretical differences but also for his remarks about Healy: "He tended to fight fire with fire, and the results -- especially within his own movement -- was (sic) very destructive." What North understood a decade ago he has now chosen to 'forget': faced with serious criticisms of his own leadership, he has gone back to Healy's methods of fighting "fire with fire", and the consequences are now, as they were then, "very destructive."

In any case, to go back to North's claims for why he launched this *ad hominem* attack, none of his rationalizations hold any water. Frank Brenner and I did not launch a "public political attack" against the leadership of the IC. We corresponded privately for three years and only went public when it became clear that North was being disingenuous in his promise to hold a discussion on our documents. We did not call for a change in the leadership of the IC. We did not put ourselves up as candidates for leadership. We did not insist that the IC publish our material on the WSWs. Nor (descending to the realm of the ridiculous) did we ever demand that the International Committee adopt the theoretical work of the Frankfurt School or that it abandon the traditional programmatic and political activity of the Trotskyist movement in favor of a preoccupation with sexuality and psychotherapy. Finally, North's allegation that I harbored fundamental theoretical differences with the movement all along that I have kept secret is belied by his letter of June 1999 where he states that "the differences that we *perhaps* have fall within the dialectical tolerance of Marxian debate."

North goes on to further embellish his case:

This record includes correspondence relating to Steiner's application for membership in the SEP in 1999 (*not 1998!*). The letters written to me and the SEP clearly show that there already existed at that time significant differences on basic questions of Marxist philosophy as well as the history of the party between Steiner and the Socialist Equality Party. Virtually all the differences raised in subsequent documents written by Steiner/Brenner were anticipated in Steiner's 1999 letters. Among

the hundreds of pages of polemical material that Steiner/Brenner have published and posted on their web site, this correspondence is not included. Nor have they published other correspondence written by Steiner that presents an evaluation of my theoretical work that differs radically from their more recent and factionally motivated reappraisals. These conspicuous omissions are duplicitous and testify to an absence of political and intellectual principles.

Here North raises several issues. (1) That I applied for membership in 1999 instead of in 1998 as we had written. North considers this discrepancy significant and proof of my dishonesty, as we will shortly see. (2) The letters I wrote in 1999 show that there existed significant differences on basic question of philosophy and history. (3) All the differences raised subsequently were anticipated in these letters. (4) We have not published this correspondence presumably because we wish to hide our real evolution from the public. (5) We did not publish other correspondence from this period which differs radically from our current assessment of North. (6) We are therefore “duplicitous” in that we have tried to hide the fact that on the one hand, we had long standing differences with North, and on the other hand, we supported North theoretically, contrary to our later evaluation of him. All this points to “an absence of political and intellectual principles” on our part.

My reply to these accusations:

(1) It is true that I got the year wrong of my application for membership. But the explanation does not lie in a conspiracy to change the chronology of my history in order to contribute to a narrative based on a suppression and distortion of my political history. (This is the allegation North makes in footnote 14 in part 2 of his piece, where he writes, “*One must conclude that Steiner has changed the year of his application to fit the needs of his present political narrative.*” As we will see, this charge is particularly pernicious given that North commits several distortions and falsifications in chronology in **his account** of my history.)

The reason for my error is far more pedestrian than that suggested by North’s conspiracy theory. I had not at the time of writing MWHH, been able to locate my letter of application. I was therefore relying on my memory as to what year this event happened. I subsequently did locate this letter in my archives, but only after MWHH was published and after we contributed an appendix in April.

(2) I never denied that I had differences with North on a number of issues. In fact, I frequently brought up these differences whenever we had a chance to discuss in person. But as is clear from the letter of June 25, 1999 as well as other correspondence, both North and I considered these differences to be “**within the dialectical tolerance of Marxian debate.**”

(3) It is hardly the case that all the differences that were raised subsequently were anticipated in these letters from 1999. For one thing, North had not at that time declared his adherence to Plekhanovian objectivism and his dismissal of dialectics. Nor was I yet clear that the WSWS was heading increasingly into an abstentionist practice very removed from the working class. North’s retrospective evaluation of these differences is a good example of an anachronistic look backwards at history, or what has been called “Whig history”. It was not yet clear in 1999 that the differences between North and myself were irreconcilable. Nor was it determined at that time that they would become so.

(4) We did not publish the 1999 correspondence because it was first of all private correspondence. If North chooses to break the confidentiality of private correspondence in order to score points in a polemic, then that is his business. Which is not to say that private correspondence should never be made public, only that there ought to be some compelling reason to do so. Yet the only “compelling” reason North cites for quoting from our private correspondence is that I was a candidate for leadership of the movement and therefore my correspondence should be in the public domain!! (By that token, we can demand that North publish all his private correspondence.) Secondly, I did not feel there was any burning reason to publish this correspondence because the ideas discussed in that correspondence were only beginning to be worked out. A more fully developed version of some of those ideas was only possible much later and therefore their pedagogical worth was questionable. ***Finally, it is astonishing that North sees something sinister in our not publishing this correspondence, yet he has the effrontery to quote from this correspondence without publishing it himself!*** He will not allow the reader to judge whether the quotes that he rips out of their context are a faithful reflection of what the author was intending to say. We will not follow North's dishonest example. We are appending to this document the relevant correspondence from which North selectively quotes.

(5) The claim that we failed to publish this correspondence because it contains some positive comments about the work of North and the SEP is also nonsense and contradicts his other claim that our differences with him in 1999 were of such a fundamental character that they excluded the possibility of my becoming a party member. It also makes no sense as a narrative of my political evolution. If I was presenting myself as a candidate for party membership in 1999 then why in the world would I wish to hide my positive assessments of North and the WSWS from the same period?

(6) North's claim that we are duplicitous has two contradictory sides to it. On the one hand, we are duplicitous because we are hiding our positive assessments of North and the WSWS. On the other hand, we are duplicitous because we are hiding our negative assessments of North and the WSWS. In American legal theory, it is considered legitimate to provide contradictory arguments in trying to prove the guilt or innocence of a defendant. If even one of the arguments sticks, then the fact that it directly contradicts another argument may be ignored and the jury is instructed to avoid passing any negative judgment on the lawyer making such arguments for his client. This is North's method here. He is throwing the proverbial kitchen sink at us, hoping that something will stick despite the fact that his arguments as a whole contradict themselves. He is also hoping that the contradiction inherent in his claim of “duplicity” will simply be ignored. Only someone who counts on an uncritical reception of his material would allow himself to argue in this way. In other words, behind the bad logic lies bad faith, a contempt for his readers borne of far too many years of unchallenged authority.

In his opening statements North claims that Frank Brenner and I launched an “attack” on the IC. Anyone who has read our documents will recognize that North, in calling our critique an “attack”, is using such overloaded words to create a *cordon sanitaire* around our writing and discourage anyone from reading it. After all, why read the polemics of Steiner and Brenner if they have nothing constructive to tell us about building a revolutionary movement? North also

throws in an *ad hominem* argument there, suggesting that our work is not worth taking seriously because we are “unabashed by the many years” we “spent in political retirement.”

Far from being “unabashed”, a term that suggests that we did not recognize the importance of party membership and were indifferent to the traditions of the movement and its organizational practices, we were meticulous in asking the party for a discussion with us, in whatever format they wished, in order to address issues that we thought were crucial to the health of the movement. North’s use of term the “unabashed” reveals his mindset - he is suggesting that no one who is not a member of the SEP should dare to criticize it. This is a convenient dodge for insulating oneself from criticism, particularly if one keeps in mind that raising criticisms of the leadership within the organization are not exactly encouraged either.

This opening section of North’s document is also the only place where he acknowledges the fact that we did criticize the political activity of the IC. It is something mentioned in passing and nothing more is heard of our extensive political critique in the remainder of the document. Neither does North reply to our critique (not “denunciation”) of the organizational practices of the IC – organizational practices that discourage open discussion. We made a few modest and concrete suggestions at the end of our document that could help remedy this situation. North has nothing to say about that either. Nor does he bother to reply to our charge that the WSWS went for years without a national conference or a perspectives document.<sup>9</sup>

There is little need to look any further at the initial sections of North’s piece. All of the charges against us that North brings forward in the first part of the *Odyssey* polemic are but a rehash of earlier falsifications of our position presented in North’s, *Marxism History and Socialist Consciousness*. We replied extensively to these charges in *Marxism Without its Head or its Heart*. As North does not address a single sentence of our reply in MWHH, we can dismiss his regurgitation of these same charges without further comment.

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<sup>9</sup> North rehashes a number of other canards in his opening section but the one that I found particularly amusing is that we are opposed to the International Committee “concentrating” its work on “historical explanations, political analysis and programmatic clarification”.

We certainly never accused the International Committee of “concentrating” on “programmatic clarification”, as if we are in favor of programmatic confusion. Quite the opposite, we have maintained that the IC, as a result of its theoretical confusion, has given way to programmatic obscurity and in some cases has departed from a revolutionary working class orientation. For examples of our critique of the IC’s programmatic confusion, see our discussion of the WSWS’s adaptation to bourgeois nationalism in Iraq, in Chapter 2 of MWHH, [http://permanent-revolution.org/polemics/mwhh\\_ch02.pdf](http://permanent-revolution.org/polemics/mwhh_ch02.pdf). A discussion of their campaign in the 2008 elections can be found at, *The SEP’s 2008 Election Campaign*, [http://permanent-revolution.org/forum/labels/election\\_2008.html](http://permanent-revolution.org/forum/labels/election_2008.html). A discussion of the German PSG’s confusing analysis of the European Union elections can be found at, *The PSG and the European Union elections*, [http://permanent-revolution.org/polemics/PSG\\_elections.pdf](http://permanent-revolution.org/polemics/PSG_elections.pdf). We followed that up with another essay analyzing the logical gymnastics evident in the PSG leadership’s analysis of the German Federal elections as they try to rationalize their sectarian policies, *The deadweight of sectarianism*, [http://permanent-revolution.org/polemics/deadweight\\_sectarianism.pdf](http://permanent-revolution.org/polemics/deadweight_sectarianism.pdf). We also provided a German translations of the last two essays: *Die PSG und die Europawahl*, [http://permanent-revolution.org/polemics/PSG\\_Europawahl.pdf](http://permanent-revolution.org/polemics/PSG_Europawahl.pdf), *Der Ballast des Sektierertums*, [http://permanent-revolution.org/polemics/deadweight\\_sectarianism\\_de.pdf](http://permanent-revolution.org/polemics/deadweight_sectarianism_de.pdf).

## **The eclipse of something “resembling Marxism”**

Only after rehashing his discredited arguments does North come up with something new. He does so by introducing an historical fabrication in order to be able to subsequently fabricate a narrative of my “odyssey”. Here it is:

The Steiner/Brenner document was based largely on conceptions that have long been associated with the “critical theory” of the “Frankfurt School” and related ideological tendencies, known collectively as “Western” or “Humanist” Marxism. Associated with the work of Max Horkheimer, Theodore Adorno, Karl Korsch, Herbert Marcuse, Ernst Bloch, Erich Fromm and Wilhelm Reich, the influence of the Frankfurt School reached its apogee during the heyday of radical student protests in the late 1960s. After that wave of middle-class radicalism receded, the influence of the Frankfurt School was consolidated in universities and colleges, where so many ex-radicals found tenured positions. From within the walls of the academy, the partisans of the Frankfurt School conducted unrelenting war—not against capitalism, but, rather, against Marxism. In this struggle, they were remarkably successful. **With rare exceptions, very little resembling Marxism—even if one means by that term only the rigorous application of philosophical materialism to the study of history, society and social consciousness—has been taught for several decades in the humanities departments of colleges and universities.** [my emphasis A.S.]

North attempts to discredit our work with guilt by association. He names various intellectual trends and persons, some of which we have discussed in our polemics, and claims that we base our work on their ideas and that they share a common outlook, one that is alien to Marxism. We will comment soon enough in detail on North’s attempt to paint us as spokesmen for the Frankfurt School, but it is not as if our reaction to the Frankfurt School have been hidden from our readers- an insinuation North repeatedly makes. In MWHH we very explicitly and openly discussed our attitude toward the Frankfurt School, critical theory, as well as our assessment of individuals such as Horkheimer, Adorno, Marcuse, Korsch, Lukacs, Fromm and Reich. It is noteworthy that neither here nor anywhere else in his essay does North directly address anything we have actually written on the Frankfurt School or any of the individuals he names, but instead speculatively “infers” our position from the tea leaves of quotes taken out of context from personal correspondence and the botched “history” that follows.

Furthermore, in conflating Marcuse, Adorno and Horkheimer with the New Left, we have another small but telling example of a gross historical inaccuracy. It is true that sections of the New Left during the 1960’s cited Marcuse and some of the other figures mentioned as inspiring them. But to lump in Adorno and Horkheimer into this list is positively bizarre as Adorno and Horkheimer were reviled by the 1960’s protest generation who perceived them – correctly – as having sold out to the German state and its cold-war pro-American agenda in the postwar period.

And what follows in North’s narrative is even more bizarre. His account of radicals institutionalizing the culture of the 1960s within the halls of the academy parallels the scare stories manufactured by the neo-cons of the take over of the American University system by the champions of a “permissive” culture. Substitute North’s “war against Marxism” for the neo-con’s “war on traditional values” and you have an identical account of the rise to dominance of radical academics in the post-1960s cultural environment. The barely concealed subtext of anti-intellectualism is also common to both narratives. This aspect of North’s diatribe came

embarrassingly to the fore when his piece elicited the following response to the Letters section of the WSWS,

For too long Marxism has been at the mercy of the college professors and their incomprehensible Marxist cultural criticism, which usually boils down to rationalizations for giving up on finding a way to communicate with proletarians because of how backward and stupid they claim the working class is. I am fed up with these “professors” and their students dismissing the “proletariat,” saying the problem is that workers are lazy and like to be couch potatoes and watch TV instead of struggling.<sup>10</sup>

While it is not clear who these remarks are aimed at since neither Brenner nor I are college professors, much less given to indulging in “incomprehensible Marxist cultural criticism”, the tone of offended *ressentiment* against the academic elite is precisely the response North was hoping to elicit against any consideration of our views. There are of course college professors who have a disdain for the working class, but their influence has been greatly exaggerated, particularly by the right wing which has made the “tenured radicals”, along with gays, their favorite target in recent years. And as Thomas Frank showed in his book, *What’s the Matter with Kansas?*, this redirection of populist anger serves to insulate the ruling class from the consequences of their deeds.

The actual history of tenured radicals is far different than either North’s or the neo-con’s account. It is true that there were a number of radicals who achieved tenure in the university system in the aftermath of the Vietnam War and the 1960s protest movement. This should not be too surprising as many students and academics were radicalized during that period, providing a pool of future employment in the academy that was more left-oriented than their older colleagues. Also, to explain the seeming “radicalization” of the universities in the 1960s, one has to remember how thoroughly radicals and left wingers had been purged from the universities in the 1950s. The previous generation of college professors received tenure during the period of McCarthyite repression when any accusation of left wing sympathies pretty much disqualified you for consideration for tenure if it did not get you fired immediately. In contrast to those years, even a mild shift to liberalism would be perceived as a sharp radical turn. Therefore, while it is correct to point to a radicalization among university students and faculty in this period, the numbers and the influence of radical academics has been grossly exaggerated. For the most part they remained isolated within departments largely hostile to Marxism or any kind of left wing intellectual culture including that of critical theory.

Furthermore, while it is true that many tenured radicals, including some associated with critical theory, have attacked Marxism, their influence is dwarfed by that of their more traditional academic colleagues who have used the podium of “value-free” positive science to attack Marxism for decades. Much of North's case hangs on ignoring the latter and exaggerating the influence of the former.

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<sup>10</sup> <http://wsws.org/articles/2008/nov2008/corr-n08.shtml>. For a discussion about one particularly noxious letter on North’s series that was “disappeared” from the pages of the WSWS see: *The revealing case of a disappearing letter*, [http://www.permanent-revolution.org/polemics/smear\\_campaign2.htm](http://www.permanent-revolution.org/polemics/smear_campaign2.htm).

There is something else that North's account as well as the neo-cons account of this history of radicals in academia forgets. A significant part of the story about left wing academics and the 1960's culture is that of the purge from the university system of thousands of left wing graduate students and teachers during the highly polarized Vietnam War years. Here is an excerpt from an account of the purge of radical sociologists:

“At various universities, radical sociologists were denied tenure, fired, or sanctioned in other ways, such as by being given less desirable teaching schedules; or, if they were graduate students, were suspended or told to leave the program (Stark 1991). Radical sociologists estimated that over 200 radical faculty had been either fired or blacklisted (Dixon 1972). Entire departments or groups of radical sociologists came under attack at Simon Fraser University (“Minutes of the 1970 Council Meeting” 1971), Washington University (“More on Washington University” 1972), the University of Detroit (“Purge at the University of Detroit” 1973), and the School of Criminology at the University of California at Berkeley (Schauffler 1974). Individuals were also sanctioned at the University of New Mexico, CUNY, the University of Connecticut, the University of Chicago, San Francisco State, Elmira College, the University of Pennsylvania, McGill University, and Washington University, among other schools (“Academic Repression” 1976; Colfax 1973, 1974; “David Colfax Fired” 1972; Dixon 1975). The firings were widespread enough to prompt an article in the Chronicle of Higher Education (“More Teachers, Not Rehired, are Suing” 1972). In some cases, radical sociologists left the university of their own accord, but only after their situations had been made extremely difficult by their detractors (Ehrlich 1991, Stein 1973). At times, the sociology department sided with the radical sociologist against the university administration; more often, the department itself did the “hatchet work,” sometimes because it anticipated punishment by the administration if it did not. Various authors argued that the ostensibly nonpolitical standard of “professionalism” was used as a pretense for attacking radical sociology (Schwendinger 1974, Dixon 1976, Stark 1973).”

The source is an online dissertation: <http://www.etext.org/Politics/Progressive.Sociologists/student-archives/fullera/Radical-Sociology.1967-75>

North's caricature of academics ensconcing themselves within the safe bosom of the academy misses such “details.”

Finally, North's contention that the theories of the Frankfurt School dominated the voice of radical academics entering its hallowed halls in the post 1960's period is simply without any factual basis. While there was a section of New Left historians and sociologists who were influenced by the Frankfurt School, they were a distinct minority among the radical intellectuals, who were themselves a distinct minority within the mainstream academic community. Far more influential among radical academics than anyone associated with the Frankfurt School were theoreticians representing cultural studies, structuralism, post-structuralism and postmodernism, such as Andre Gorz, Clifford Geertz, Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan and Jacques Derrida, none of whom had any affinity to the Frankfurt School. <sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> We have made the point on several occasions, but most recently in our essay, *Of sterile flowers, poisonous weeds and a political smokescreen*, [http://permanent-revolution.org/polemics/haig\\_smokescreen.pdf](http://permanent-revolution.org/polemics/haig_smokescreen.pdf), that there has been historically a lot of tension between the Frankfurt School and the schools of thought represented by postmodernism, cultural studies, etc. North says nothing about this as it would disrupt his fake narrative that seeks to tie together the Frankfurt School with all forms of the radical academia that he despises.

But perhaps the most astonishing statement in North's narrative is his contention that after the takeover of the university system by the Frankfurt School-inspired tenured radicals, "very little resembling Marxism... has been taught for several decades in the humanities departments of colleges and universities." This implies that prior to the takeover something "resembling Marxism" was taught in the humanities departments. But what could this be? Who were the individuals teaching anything "resembling Marxism" whose careers were supplanted by the radical academics spearheaded by the Frankfurt School? As the American university system never had any significant representation of Marxists – and the same goes for Germany and other countries – it is hard to fathom who North has in mind.<sup>12</sup> Marxist intellectuals like George Novack never held a university position. Sidney Hook was one of the few who did, but by the 1940s Hook had turned into an anti-communist. Marxist economists like Harry Magdoff and Paul Sweezy could never obtain a stable university position.

North's qualification of this reference with the phrase "even if one means by that term only the rigorous application of philosophical materialism to the study of history, society and social consciousness" provides us with a hint as to who he has in mind. As it turns out, North is not referring to Marxists at all, but to the economic determinists of a previous generation. He undoubtedly is thinking of historians such as Charles Beard who pioneered the interpretation of American history in terms of its underlying economic causes. But Beard was never a Marxist though he undoubtedly borrowed insights gained from Marxists. Now it may be legitimate to maintain that works such as Beard's stand as a refreshing counterweight to the reams of material produced by cultural studies specialists who lose sight of any connection between economics and history. Even worse are the postmodernist influenced "New Historians" who deny the objectivity of history altogether. However, we are obliged to recognize that the impetus toward cultural studies was to some degree born as a reaction against the deficiencies of a purely economic determinist model of history. And yet neither of these methods for doing history or sociology can be considered Marxist, even in an academic setting. That North nostalgically contrasts the "good" "near Marxists" of yesteryear with the "bad" cultural studies academics of today is yet another indication that North has never recognized the limitations inherent in the economic determinist model of history.

Finally, North's contention that the Frankfurt School, or academics influenced by the Frankfurt School, are somehow responsible for driving out of the academy the economic determinists has no foundation in reality. Even if one grants that cultural studies and a type of "micro-history" and sociology has supplanted the older school of historicism associated with Beard, the more recent trends owe far more to structuralist and post-structuralist methodology than to anything having to do with the Frankfurt School. In any case, when it comes to sociology the traditional Weberian mode of positivist sociology as elaborated by thinkers like Talcott Parsons, still dominates despite the heavy publicity generated by the cultural studies crowd.

North's sweeping rejection of everything from the Frankfurt School to "Western Marxism" conveniently forgets that the impetus both for the emergence of Western Marxism as a distinct theoretical tendency as well as its isolation from the working class was the ostracism that Korsch

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<sup>12</sup> As a matter of historical record, the first academic institution openly devoted to Marxist scholarship to be recognized in the German University system was the Frankfurt Institute.



and Lukacs suffered within an increasingly bureaucratized Communist International, then at the beginning of its transformation into a Stalinist apparatus, when they attempted to introduce a critique of Second International objectivism into the theory and practice of the Communist movement. It is also significant that North does not mention Lukacs as one of those thinkers whom he would banish as to do so would expose the double standards he works with. He has elsewhere praised Lukacs.<sup>13</sup> Yet Lukacs's insights were not significantly different from those of Korsch. One can also add that Wilhelm Reich never had any connection to the Frankfurt School. Also missing from North's litany of suspected intellectuals is the writer Walter Benjamin who had a long association with the Frankfurt School. These are all figures that do not easily fit into North's simplistic depiction of the Frankfurt School. We had noted in MWHH that while it is certainly legitimate for Marxists to critique the Frankfurt School, demonizing their entire body of work is exactly the opposite of a reasoned critique. Furthermore, to call the contributions of North and the IC towards such a critique as being slight would be a gross overstatement.

North continues:

The document of Steiner/Brenner provided an opportunity to define the attitude of the Trotskyist movement to the Frankfurt School of anti-Marxism. Steiner/Brenner's "differences with the International Committee," I wrote, "are not over isolated programmatic points, but rather over the most fundamental questions of philosophical world outlook upon which the struggle for socialism is based." [\*Marxism, History & Socialist Consciousness\*](#) examined the significance of Steiner/Brenner's hostility to the development of political perspectives, upon which the Trotskyist movement has traditionally placed central emphasis. They opposed "the conception that [Marxist] analysis and commentary, based on the method of historical materialism, is essential or even relevant to the development of socialist consciousness," and rejected "the Marxist concept of perspective, which strives to root revolutionary practice in as correct and precise an analysis of the objective world as possible." They demanded, as I explained, that the International Committee "concern itself primarily not with politics and history, but with psychology and sex—particularly as presented in the works of Wilhelm Reich and Herbert Marcuse."

This section is dishonest on a number of levels. First of all, the Frankfurt School did not play a major role in our document. It is therefore a form of dissimulation for North to state that our document provided an opportunity to define "the attitude of the Trotskyist movement" toward it. Our main focus was on the objectivism of the IC which we traced back to their neglect of dialectics and the abandonment of any theoretical work on pragmatism. Why did North not use the opportunity of replying to our documents to "define the attitude of the Trotskyist movement to the dialectic and pragmatism"? The answer is that to do so would have quickly exposed that we were correct in our claim that the IC had neglected this theoretical work for over two decades. The detour to the discussion of the Frankfurt School was therefore an attempt to distract his readers from his failure to reply to our charge about the neglect of dialectics and pragmatism.

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<sup>13</sup> The use by North and other members of the IC of a double standard in their condemnation of "Western Marxist" intellectuals is documented in *Marxism Without its Head or its Heart*. See Chapter 9, the section, *A Catechism of Approved Authors and the Use of the Political Amalgams*, [http://permanent-revolution.org/polemics/mwhh\\_ch09.pdf](http://permanent-revolution.org/polemics/mwhh_ch09.pdf), p. 244.

## **The International Committee and the Heritage of Marxism**

In the next section of his piece, titled, *Steiner/Brenner and the Heritage of Marxism*, North finally purports to address *Marxism Without its Head or its Heart*. He does not actually address any of the dozens of specific points we have raised in the 287 pages of that document, but confines his remarks to our assertion that the International Committee has turned its back on its heritage. North's main point is that we claimed that the Frankfurt School is part of the heritage of the International Committee and are now accusing the International Committee of abandoning that heritage. He then spends several pages proving that the Frankfurt School was never part of that heritage.

But before dealing with that topic, North tosses in some remarks meant to set the stage for the smear campaign that he will shortly introduce:

Adopting an intensely subjective and embittered tone, Steiner/Brenner attack me as a "hypocrite of the first order" and excoriate my "pettiness, malice and dishonesty." This sort of language can make a favorable impression only on those who do not approach political disputes from a principled standpoint. I see no need to reply to attacks of this sort.

Here we have the introduction of what would soon be an overt depiction of me as emotional and subjective, whereas North tries to portray himself as above such pettiness. The fact of the matter is that the tone of our polemic was very restrained and in stark contrast to his practice, we never ascribed motives to North. If we called him dishonest and a hypocrite, that is a result of our judgment of his actions, not his inner feelings. North on the other hand, wasted little time in tossing all kinds of personal invectives at us, both in his original piece, MHSC, and to a much greater degree in the *Odyssey* piece. In MHSC North uses a number of intensely personal epithets to characterize us, most of which are much worse than anything we said about him. For instance, I am described as a "couch-potato", a "liar", "hostile" and "bitter" toward the movement.

After this introduction, North comes to his main point in this section:

However, Steiner/Brenner do make one charge that does deserve careful attention. "In this latest document," they write, "[North] is no longer defending the heritage of revolutionary Marxism but instead rationalizing the IC's abandonment of key parts of that heritage."

He then provides the following potted account of the history of our polemics:

For an entire decade they have been expressing steadily escalating disagreement with the theoretical foundations of Marxism. Their differences began to emerge with Brenner's 1997 declaration that Marxism lacked an adequate psychology. In 1998, he announced that Marxism required a new "theory of gender." In 1999 Steiner informed me that he did not agree with the position of Friedrich Engels (the lifelong collaborator of Karl Marx) that the relationship between materialism and idealism was the basic question of philosophy. Somewhat later, in 2002, Brenner and Steiner demanded that the International Committee recognize the importance of utopianism for

the contemporary development of socialist consciousness. In 2003 Steiner proceeded to denounce the “vulgar materialism” of G.V. Plekhanov, “the father of Russian Marxism.” This was followed in 2004 with a lengthy attack by Steiner on Lenin's *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*. Their campaign entered a new stage in 2005 with a public attack on the ICFI for its “objectivism” and its refusal to incorporate the insights of “Freudo-Marxists” like Wilhelm Reich into its theoretical and political work.

We discussed the real history of these polemics in the first chapter of MWHH and there is little point in repeating ourselves.<sup>14</sup> As to our disagreements with North on philosophical issues, these were already discussed in MWHH and my earlier document, *The Dialectical Path of Cognition and Revolutionizing Practice*.<sup>15</sup> However, as North does introduce a number of new issues into his *Odyssey* polemic I will discuss those specifically in a subsequent chapter.

What North is leading up to comes in the next sentence:

In their latest document, all these themes are developed in the course of an exercise in unrestrained rhetorical vituperation directed against the International Committee generally, and me personally. As is generally the case in politics, the insults are aimed at camouflaging the theoretical and political issues. This camouflage is required because, as they know, the Socialist Equality Party and the International Committee of the Fourth International are based on a theoretical tradition that has nothing in common with the Frankfurt School. This places Steiner/Brenner in an awkward position —promoting, while at the same time formally distancing themselves from, the theoreticians whose ideas they are attempting to foist onto the ICFI. Thus, they claim that I have fabricated a connection between their views and those of the Frankfurt School.

Here we have it – North’s main point is that we accused the IC of abandoning its heritage which to us is the heritage of the Frankfurt School, and North will set out to prove that the Frankfurt School was never part of the heritage of the IC. The only problem with North’s ‘tour de force’ here is that we never claimed that the Frankfurt School was part of the heritage of the IC. What we did say was that when it came to psychology there was an “empty place” within Marxism and that empty place was filled in with philosophical traditions alien to Marxism. Brenner made this point in his very first document on the subject. Furthermore we pointed to the work of the Freudo-Marxists and some of the work of the Frankfurt School as a possible source which, when critically reworked, could be employed to fill that empty place.<sup>16</sup>

But that leaves open what we did claim constituted the heritage of the IC that North was abandoning. And as North well knows, here we were not talking about the Frankfurt School but the training of the movement in dialectics and against pragmatism and its cousins empiricism and positivism. We emphasized this point in the opening section of our earlier document, *Objectivism or Marxism*:

Dialectics is a dead letter in the IC. The movement hasn’t produced a single article on dialectical philosophy in 20 years and no lecture was devoted to it at the summer school. Predictably enough, the abandonment of dialectics has also meant the abandonment of the struggle against pragmatism.

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<sup>14</sup> [http://permanent-revolution.org/polemics/mwhh\\_ch01.pdf](http://permanent-revolution.org/polemics/mwhh_ch01.pdf) pp. 1-10

<sup>15</sup> [http://permanent-revolution.org/polemics/dialectical\\_path.pdf](http://permanent-revolution.org/polemics/dialectical_path.pdf)

<sup>16</sup> Frank Brenner, *Psychoanalysis and the “empty place” of Psychology within Marxism*, [http://www.permanent-revolution.org/essays/marxism\\_pschoanalysis.pdf](http://www.permanent-revolution.org/essays/marxism_pschoanalysis.pdf)

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. This is astonishing given that the struggle against pragmatism was at one time considered the most important element in the training of a conscious revolutionary leadership within the International Committee. As Trotsky warned the SWP in 1940: "Dialectic training of the mind, [is] as necessary to a revolutionary fighter as finger exercises to a pianist." The mandate for the struggle against pragmatism goes back to the split in the Trotskyist movement with the Shachtman-Burnham tendency on the eve of the Second World War. It was then that Trotsky urged his American followers to give primary importance to the struggle against pragmatism. The urgency of a turn toward dialectics was especially important in the United States with its historical prejudices against theorizing. As one of the participants in that fight wrote later, "Nowhere is dialectics held in so little esteem as in the United States, the homeland of pragmatism. It shares the same unpopularity here as do the other ideas of socialism." (George Novack, *An Introduction to the Logic of Marxism*, p.8) Novack's words notwithstanding, we know that in practice the Socialist Workers Party had abandoned the struggle against pragmatism shortly after Trotsky's death, thinking it could get by simply through an adherence to orthodoxy. And whereas adherence to orthodoxy may have been sufficient to take on Pablo in 1953, it was no longer sufficient in the changed political climate of 1963. By 1963, the SWP found its way back to Pablo on the basis of a pragmatic adaptation to Castroism. In that same year, the International Committee issued its call to renew the struggle for dialectics against pragmatism and empiricism in the important document that cemented the break with Pabloism, *Opportunism and Empiricism*. The question of dialectics remained a key issue in the split between Healy and his followers within the International Committee some 20 years later. At that time North correctly defended dialectics from the distortions introduced by Healy. Yet if one looks at how matters stand within the IC today, it is as if these vital lessons from the history of the revolutionary movement have all been afflicted by a case of political amnesia. Pragmatism doesn't rate a mention either in the summer school lectures or the earlier series of lectures on the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the International Committee or the series of editorial board reports in Australia. A key document like *Opportunism and Empiricism* is all but forgotten, and with it the gist of the 1963 split. And much the same is true of *In Defense of Marxism*: for all the reverence paid to Trotsky, the philosophical content of his last great political struggle plays absolutely no role in the life of the movement today. The International Committee has abandoned the fight against pragmatism without so much as offering a word of explanation.<sup>17</sup>

We reiterated and expanded on these comments in MWHH. There we drew a clear distinction between North's pragmatic approach, which was to consider the political line as paramount, with the approach developed by Trotsky in the struggle against the Shachtman-Burnham tendency in 1939-1940. We reviewed the history of the IC which showed that the struggle for dialectics and for theoretical clarity was the defining quality of the heritage of the IC when it was still a healthy movement, prior to its degeneration under Healy from the mid 1970s.<sup>18</sup>

And summing up what we considered the heritage of the IC, we wrote,

To anyone who joined the International Committee in the Sixties and early Seventies – and that would include North and much of the present leadership of the IC – these lessons were central to our political education...And yet today it is as if these lessons were never learned. North wants the

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<sup>17</sup> [http://permanent-revolution.org/polemics/objectivism\\_marxism.pdf](http://permanent-revolution.org/polemics/objectivism_marxism.pdf) pp.4-5.

<sup>18</sup> [http://permanent-revolution.org/polemics/mwhh\\_ch01.pdf](http://permanent-revolution.org/polemics/mwhh_ch01.pdf) pp. 7-8.

criterion for determining the political health of the IC to be its line on Iraq, 9/11, globalization etc, *but not its 'line' on Marxist philosophy*, not its record on developing and imparting to its members “a clear, far-sighted, completely thought-out world outlook.” This amounts to renouncing the central lesson of *In Defense of Marxism* and of the IC’s fight against the SWP’s betrayal of Trotskyism.<sup>19</sup>

These quotes highlight the fraudulent nature of North’s assertion that we equated his rejection of the Frankfurt School with an abandonment of the heritage of the IC rather than what we actually said – that it was his rejection of the dialectic that constituted an abandonment of the heritage of the IC.

### **The accusation of our “eclecticism”**

Continuing his straw man argument against the Frankfurt School, North presents a quote from our work which in his mind indicts us for “smuggling in” insights from the Frankfurt School. This leads him to write triumphantly,

It is not I, but they, who exploit every opportunity to “drag in” Marcuse, Bloch, Reich, et al. The above-cited paragraphs obligate one to ask, “What has all of this to do with the defense of the ‘Heritage of Marxism’?” Steiner/Brenner are advocating a theoretical eclecticism that has nothing in common with the philosophical traditions upon which the Trotskyist movement is based. Moreover, the very form of their argument—“Can we not learn from...?” “Must we reject everything...?” “Is there not something interesting in...?”—epitomizes the sort of “on-the-one-hand, on-the-other-hand” sophistry that Marx invariably subjected to the harshest criticism.

North is now taking his argument a step further and stating that any attempt to rework the insights of the Frankfurt School into a unified Marxist theoretical outlook is necessarily an eclectic hodge-podge of the type Marx lampooned when discussing Proudhon. He provides a well-known quote from Marx’s *Poverty of Philosophy* to illustrate the eclectic method that he ascribes to us. Here is the quote:

For him, M. Proudhon, every economic category has two sides—one good, the other bad. He looks upon these categories as the petty bourgeois looks upon the great men of history: *Napoleon* was a great man; he did a lot of good; he also did a lot of harm.

The *good side* and the *bad side*, the *advantages* and the *drawbacks*, taken together form for M. Proudhon the *contradiction* in every economic category. The problem to be solved: to keep the good side, while eliminating the bad.

Marx wrote those lines only after a meticulous analysis of Proudhon’s work, notwithstanding that the superficial reader may mistake their epigrammatic form for a lack of deep engagement with the subject matter. As a result of this theoretical work Marx was able to identify the guiding

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<sup>19</sup> [http://permanent-revolution.org/polemics/mwhh\\_ch01.pdf](http://permanent-revolution.org/polemics/mwhh_ch01.pdf) pp.9-10.

thread in the work of Proudhon, namely a vulgar attempt to “apply” the Hegelian dialectic to economic categories whose basis he had not worked through critically. Marx’s methodological point was that Proudhon was adopting a vulgar pseudo-dialectics in creating his categories whereas his actual methodology was profoundly undialectical. Marx writes,

The production relations of every society form a whole. M. Proudhon considers economic relations as so many social phases, engendering one another, resulting one from the other like the antithesis from the thesis, and realizing in their logical sequence the impersonal reason of humanity.

The only drawback to this method is that when he comes to examine a single one of these phases, M. Proudhon cannot explain it without having recourse to all the other relations of society; which relations, however, he has not yet made his dialectic movement engender. When, after that, M. Proudhon, by means of pure reason, proceeds to give birth to these other phases, he treats them as if they were new-born babes. He forgets that they are of the same age as the first.

Thus, to arrive at the constitution of value, which for him is the basis of all economic evolutions, he could not do without division of labor, competition, etc. Yet in the *series*, in the *understanding* of M. Proudhon, in the *logical sequence*, these relations did not yet exist.

In constructing the edifice of an ideological system by means of the categories of political economy, the limbs of the social system are dislocated. The different limbs of society are converted into so many separate societies, following one upon the other. How, indeed, could the single logical formula of movement, of sequence, of time, explain the structure of society, in which all relations coexist simultaneously and support one another? <sup>20</sup>

Note that Marx first of all chastises Proudhon for neglecting the real dialectic of wholes and parts here when it comes to examining the economic categories of a society. Proudhon proceeded as if each part was separable from the whole and thus those parts that were considered “bad” could be discarded while those that were considered “good” could be maintained. But this method dislocates “the limbs of the social system.” <sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Marx-Engels, Collected Works, Volume 6, (International Publishers, 1976), pp. 166-167.

<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1847/poverty-philosophy/ch02.htm> .

<sup>21</sup> This discussion of Marx’s is a perfect rejoinder to the dismissal of the dialectic of Wholes and Parts by the Talbots in their essay, *Marxism and Science: An Addendum to “The Frankfurt School and Marxism”*, where they write,

Any one who has spent any time reading Steiner's material will know that "the Whole and the Part" is his repeated mantra. For Steiner, this is the summit of all wisdom. Aristotle's First Philosophy allows us to comprehend the whole and the part, according to Steiner, and this is where science has gone astray.

I never said that the dialectic of Wholes and Parts “is the summit of all wisdom” or that Aristotle’s First Philosophy is some kind of magic key that allows us to comprehend Wholes and Parts, but anyone who has read Marx, not to mention Hegel, and discounts the importance of the dialectic of Wholes and Parts must be counted among those who are theoretically dead although they still walk among the living. It was Marxists like the Talbots that Lenin had in mind when he said,

It is impossible completely to understand Marx's *Capital*, and especially its first chapters, without having thoroughly studied and understood the whole of Hegel's *Logic*. Consequently, half a century later none of the Marxists understood Marx.

When applying Marx's aphorism to our discussion of the Frankfurt School, North never explains why it is impossible to assimilate any of the theoretical work of the Frankfurt School – particularly from its earlier period when many of those associated with it still worked within a Marxist tradition – without falling into eclecticism.<sup>22</sup> As he does so often, North makes an assertion and fails to provide a single argument backing up his assertion. That is the opposite of what Marx was doing in the *Poverty of Philosophy*.

Is there anything remotely resembling Marx's dissection of Proudhon in North's vacuous discussion of the Frankfurt School? Merely to ask the question is to suggest the answer. Behind the emptiness of North's rhetoric we are left with little more than speculation as to what his unstated argument could be. Does he think that any attempt to develop and enrich Marxism by assimilating insights from other disciplines is ipso facto invalid and always leads to eclecticism? Such a position would be absurd and one doubts that even North would defend it, at least not openly.

### **A dishonest review of the historical genesis of the Frankfurt School**

Moving on to his next point, North writes,

Steiner/Brenner object that the work of the Frankfurt School is not “worthless.” That is not the word I used to describe their writings. However, the issue is not whether the writings of the Frankfurt School are “worthless,” but whether they represent an alternative to and development beyond Marxism.

Perhaps recognizing that he has not made his case, North tries to qualify his blanket dismissal of the Frankfurt School denying that he said it was “worthless”, but also denying that they represent an “alternative to and development beyond Marxism”. North's wording is very precise here as he means to exclude the possibility that some of the work of the Frankfurt School and the Freudo-Marxists can be seen – not as going beyond Marxism (this is another straw man as we never used that phrase) but as filling a gap in Marxist theory and in that sense complementing Marxism. It is certainly legitimate to disagree as to whether the Frankfurt School does in fact successfully fill that gap, or for that matter whether there is a gap at all, but it is dishonest in the extreme to distort our arguments by changing the terms of the discussion and substituting the claim that we think the Frankfurt School went “beyond Marxism” for what we actually said,

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<sup>22</sup> The WSWS's culture critic, David Walsh, has been busy giving stump speeches around the world lately on problems of art and revolution in which he blasts the Frankfurt School and Herbert Marcuse in particular, holding the latter responsible for many problems in contemporary art. But prior to his conversion at the gates of Damascus, Walsh wrote the following in a private letter to me:

I am also sympathetic to Freud, aspects of Marcuse and the efforts of psychiatry. That should be evident from what I write. I do believe, however, that they need to be worked over critically. (DW to AS, Aug. 4, 1998)

We can forgive Walsh these sentiments as his letter was written long before David North discovered that any attempt to “critically work over” the insights of the Frankfurt School are tantamount to an exercise in Proudhonian eclecticism.

which is that we can critically appropriate some insights developed by the Frankfurt School to develop a theory of Marxist psychology.<sup>23</sup>

Continuing in this vein, North writes,

Nowhere do Steiner/Brenner attempt a systematic exposition of the conceptions of the Frankfurt School, examine their historical, social and intellectual roots, establish the objective internal links between the works of its representative figures. Despite all their rhetorical invocations of “the dialectic,” Steiner/Brenner fail to present a historical and dialectical materialist analysis of the Frankfurt School.

Having failed to make his case, North switches gears and accuses us of failing to make ours. He claims that we have not made a “systematic exposition of the conceptions of the Frankfurt School” and failed “to establish the objective internal links between the works of its representative figures”. While it is true that we have not written a comprehensive history of the Frankfurt School - there are at least two good histories already written – the embarrassing fact is that even though there are only two of us, we have written far more extensively about the Frankfurt School and its history than anything produced by the combined journalistic talent of the WSWS. We have also critiqued the major statements (there are in fact only two) produced on the Frankfurt School by Peter Schwarz and Adam Haig.<sup>24</sup> North says nothing specific about

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<sup>23</sup> North’s insistence that the insights of Freud and psychoanalysis have no place within what he calls “classical Marxism” are eerily reminiscent of the thinking of the neo-con Allan Bloom. In his book, *The Closing of the American Mind*, one can find the following excoriation of the attempts to combine the insights of Freud with Marx:

Freud talked about interesting things not found anywhere in Marx. The whole psychology of the unconscious was completely alien to Marx, as was its inner motor, eros. None of this could be incorporated directly into Marx. But if Freud’s interpretation of the cause of neuroses and his treatment of the maladjusted could itself be interpreted as bourgeois errors that serve enslavement to the capitalist control of the means of production, then Marx would move in on the Freudian scene. What Freud said where permanent contradictions between human nature and society could be set in motion dialectically, and in a socialist society there would be no need for the repression that causes neuroses. So Freud was neatly enrolled in the Marxist legions, adding to the charm of economics that of eros, and thereby providing a solution to the problem of what men are going to do after the revolution – a problem left unsolved by Marx. This is what we find in Marcuse and many others, who simply do not talk about the difficulty posed by the contradiction between Marx’s fundamental principles and those of Freud.

Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind*, (Simon and Schuster, 1987), p. 223.

<sup>24</sup> At the time when North wrote his piece Peter Schwarz’s essay was the only discussion of any length about the Frankfurt School that one could find in the archives of the WSWS. (There had previously appeared only passing references and one review of Habermas.) After publishing his piece, North commissioned Adam Haig and David Walsh to write a few things about the Frankfurt School. Neither Haig’s nor Walsh’s writing add anything of substance to North’s discussion of the Frankfurt School. For our rejoinder to Haig, see *Of sterile flowers, poisonous weeds and a political smokescreen*, [http://www.permanent-revolution.org/polemics/haig\\_smokescreen.pdf](http://www.permanent-revolution.org/polemics/haig_smokescreen.pdf)

More recently WSWS journalist Stefan Steinberg weighed in on Theodor Adorno, stressing Adorno’s points of agreement with Martin Heidegger. (See, *A letter and reply on Theodor Adorno*, Stefan Steinberg, Nov. 9, 2009, <http://wsws.org/articles/2009/nov2009/ador-n09.shtml> ). Although this is not the place for a comprehensive review



our work on the Frankfurt School and our critique of Schwarz's piece. As to what North means by our failure to "establish the objective internal links between the works of its representative figures" it would take someone wiser than us to disentangle the meaning behind such hyperventilated phraseology. What in the world are "objective internal links" supposed to mean in the first place? Is North talking about the contractual obligations that the Frankfurt School had with its faculty? (There were indeed some nasty fights over those kind of pedestrian monetary issues.) Or is he alluding to the fact that the participants of the Frankfurt School shared a common class background? The fact that the Frankfurt School was isolated from the working class placed certain constraints on their theoretical development, but that fact in itself hardly begins to account for the broad variety of differences to be found in the ideas of its participants, or the fecundity of some of those ideas, despite the limitations that their isolation from the

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of Steinberg's comments on Adorno, it needs to be said that while it is legitimate to note that Adorno's work opens the door to certain forms of irrationalism such as found in Heidegger, it is a crude distortion to associate the two. But that is precisely what Steinberg does. To make his case Steinberg cites Rudiger Safranski's biography of Heidegger, *Martin Heidegger. Between Good and Evil*, where the author argued that Heidegger and Adorno had a common approach to the philosophical problems of our time. Safranski's use of Adorno is employed to make Heidegger more palatable to a left wing public that is likely to be sympathetic to Adorno. The author of the *Jargon of Authenticity* would undoubtedly have wretched at the thought of someone devoting an entire chapter of a book to explore his "convergence" with the thought of Heidegger. I commented on Safranski's appropriation of Adorno in the service of another white-wash of Heidegger back in 2000, in an essay on Heidegger that was published on the World Socialist Web Site:

We cannot let pass commenting on the arrogance of Safranski's juxtaposition of Heidegger with Theodore Adorno. Adorno despised Heidegger and had nothing but contempt for Heidegger's "jargon of authenticity", which he viewed as a form of philosophical charlatanry passing itself off as profound insight. This dismal book, despite its account of the facts, represents but another apology for Heidegger's involvement with Nazism. (Alex Steiner, *The Case of Martin Heidegger, Philosopher and Nazi. Part 2: The Cover-up*, April 4, 2000. <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2000/apr2000/heid-a04.shtml> )

Although North still praises my essay on Heidegger to this day, Steinberg's use of Safranski's book as an authority to lend credence to North's crude distortions of the history and ideas of the Frankfurt School demonstrate that Steinberg, as well as the WWSW editorial board, have developed a case of historical amnesia when it comes to works that can still be found on their own web site. Also telling in Steinberg's comments is his collapse of the reified forms of consciousness that the Frankfurt School (and Max Weber) called "instrumental rationality" with reason itself. Steinberg equates Max Weber's notion of "instrumental rationality" with "the attempt to scientifically understand and transform the world." This is a formulation one may expect from a positivist, but it turns the Marxist understanding of reason on its head. In MWHH Frank Brenner and I warned against such an identification that winds up throwing out the baby with the bathwater:

In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer mistakenly conflate "instrumental reason" with reason as such and in that sense open up a door to irrationalism. But this does not mean that there is no such thing as "instrumental reason". The term is but another name for the constricted and reified concept of science that derives from positivism. (We discussed this issue previously in Chapter 3.) From the standpoint of a Marxist critique of Adorno and Horkheimer, we reject the identification of "instrumental reason" with reason, but at the same time we recognize that "instrumental reason" is indeed a profound social phenomenon of our time. ([http://permanent-revolution.org/polemics/mwhh\\_ch06.pdf](http://permanent-revolution.org/polemics/mwhh_ch06.pdf) p.164)

Oddly, Steinberg winds up agreeing with the Horkheimer and Adorno of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, who in their most misanthropic moments, also identified "instrumental rationality" with reason. Only he puts a plus sign where they put a minus sign.

working class imposed on them. Those issues can only make sense when we actually examine their ideas - something that North refuses to do with any kind of integrity.

Continuing, North writes,

Steiner/Brenner simply ignore the fact that not one of the leading figures in the Frankfurt School was in political sympathy, let alone affiliated, with the Fourth International. This was hardly accidental.

Here we come to the culmination of North's argument – none of the leading figures of the Frankfurt School supported Trotsky and the Fourth International, therefore there could not have been anything worthwhile in their theoretical conceptions. The argument is just as crude and logically flawed as it sounds. While we have argued that a proper theoretical outlook is necessary to sustain a consistent revolutionary political practice, it does not follow that a correct theoretical outlook is in itself sufficient, especially if we are talking about insights into one area of social life. We have never maintained that there is a one to one correspondence between a theoretical position and a political stand. To demand such congruence is absurd and doubtless North would not make a similar claim with any other intellectual figure with whom he has some sympathy. (The absurdity of North's logic is illustrated by the fact that if he were to follow it consistently, he would have to condemn the work of Vadim Rogovin. Rogovin, a Russian historian whom North correctly sees as having made an important contribution to our understanding of Stalinism and the Left Opposition, while sympathetic with the aims of the International Committee and appreciative of its work, never agreed with many of its theoretical foundations and never joined its ranks. North also typically likes to borrow from the insights of certain liberal historians whom he favors. In this respect, recall his fondness for a previous generation of academics who taught "something resembling Marxism". )

To return to North:

The intellectual work of the Frankfurt School was grounded in a reactionary philosophical tradition — irrationalist, idealist and individualistic—antithetical to the classical Marxism upon which Trotsky's political and theoretical work was based. The writings of Marx and Engels played a far less significant role in shaping the outlook of the Frankfurt School than those of Schelling, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche and Heidegger.

It is not too difficult to demonstrate that North's etiology of the historical debts of the Frankfurt School are a series of half-truths combined with pure fantasy. There is no question that in its early years the Frankfurt School openly considered itself in the tradition of Marxism. The nature and aim of the Frankfurt School was announced at its founding in the inaugural speech of its first head, Carl Grünberg.

Up till now Marxism, as an economic and sociological system, has been to a great extent neglected at German universities, in considerable contrast with those of other countries – indeed, in practice, it has been reluctantly tolerated at best. In the new research institute, Marxism will from now on

have a home, just as the theoretical and politico-economic doctrines of liberalism, of the Historical School and of state socialism have at other universities.<sup>25</sup>

There is also no question that in its later evolution the Frankfurt School significantly departed from Marxism, but to claim that it was closer in spirit to “Schelling, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche and Heidegger” than to Marx and Engels is simply absurd. The Frankfurt School as a whole was very hostile to Heidegger and the entire tradition of anti-Enlightenment thought. The attitude toward Nietzsche is more difficult to summarize. Nietzsche is a complicated figure to assess and not only for the Frankfurt School. His work contained many insights that were combined with some extremely reactionary ideas. While not completely dismissive of insights to be garnered from Nietzsche the basic attitude of the Frankfurt School was not sympathetic to Nietzsche. A good representative view of that attitude can be found in Habermas’s work, *Modernity, An Incomplete Project*. This work was written in the 1980’s, long after Habermas had departed from the theoretical origins of the Frankfurt School in Marx, Hegel and Freud, but it tried to summarize the historical attitudes of the Frankfurt School to a number of key issues revolving around the label of “modernity” and in that sense provided an excellent summary of the thought that was characteristic of the Frankfurt School in an earlier period. Habermas’s essay traced the theoretical origins of postmodernism in the work of Nietzsche and incidentally included a critique of Adorno and Horkheimer’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Habermas maintained, with good justification, that Adorno’s and Horkheimer’s work had gone against the spirit of the emancipatory project of the Frankfurt School. He wrote,

The stance of Horkheimer and Adorno toward Nietzsche is ambivalent. On the one hand, they attest of him that he was “one of the few after Hegel who recognized the dialectic of enlightenment” (DE, P. 44)...On the other hand, they cannot overlook the fact that Hegel is also Nietzsche’s great antipode. Nietzsche gives the critique of reason such an affirmative twist that even determinate negation – which is to say, the very procedure that Horkheimer and Adorno want to retain as the sole exercise, since reason itself has become so shaky – loses its sting. Nietzsche’s critique consumes the critical impulse itself.

This ambivalent attitude towards Nietzsche is instructive. It also suggest that *Dialectic of Enlightenment* owes more to Nietzsche than just the strategy of an ideology critique turned against itself. Indeed, what is unexplained throughout is their certain lack of concern in dealing with the (to put it in the form of a slogan) achievements of Occidental rationalism. How can these two men of the Enlightenment (which they both remain) be so unappreciative of the rational content of cultural modernity that all they perceive everywhere is a binding of reason and domination, or power and validity?<sup>26</sup>

As for Schopenhauer, it is true that Horkheimer in his later years wrote positively about him, seeing in him a reflection of his own misanthropic view of life.

Adorno wrote an important critique of Heidegger, *The Jargon of Authenticity*, about which I commented in my essay on Heidegger.<sup>27</sup> The only member of the Frankfurt School who had some sympathy toward Heidegger was Marcuse, who was once a student of the German

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<sup>25</sup> Cited in *The Frankfurt School: Its History, Theories and Political Significance*, by Rolf Wiggerhaus, (MIT Press, 2007), p. 27.

<sup>26</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, Translated by Frederick G. Lawrence, (MIT Press, 1987), p. 120-121.

philosopher and for a time tried to synthesize existentialism with Marxism. But even in this case, the influence of Heidegger on the work of Marcuse in his early period has been exaggerated.<sup>28</sup> Marcuse decisively broke from Heidegger in the postwar period after trying, unsuccessfully, to get Heidegger to reconsider his role during the Nazi years. The essay on Heidegger that I wrote for the World Socialist Web Site concluded with a quote condemning the irrationalism associated with Nazism. The author of that quote was another person associated with the Frankfurt School, Walter Benjamin.

I can only hint at the complex and contradictory historical legacy of the Frankfurt School here. It is enough however to demonstrate that North distorts this history beyond recognition. His pronouncements about the Frankfurt School have no intellectual value whatsoever. Their sole function is to condemn me and Frank Brenner through guilt by association.

North draws this section to a conclusion with this statement:

As individuals, Steiner and Brenner are entitled to their views. But they fail to explain why the ICFI should suddenly adopt theoretical and political conceptions that it has consistently rejected. Steiner/Brenner are demanding changes in the theoretical and political curriculum of the International Committee that have no basis in the history of the Fourth International.

This is but another rhetorical flourish to create a straw-man. We never suggested that the IC should “suddenly adopt theoretical and political conceptions that it has consistently rejected.” What we were hoping to do is first of all generate a discussion on theoretical issues that the IC has failed to address in the past two decades with very deleterious consequences for its political practice, namely dialectics and pragmatism. And secondarily, consider our discussion of the need for a revival of socialist idealism and the insights into mass psychology that could be tapped into such a project. That North sees a request for a discussion of such issues as tantamount to our “demanding changes in the theoretical and political curriculum of the

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<sup>27</sup> Alex Steiner, *The Case of Martin Heidegger: Philosopher and Nazi*, [http://permanent-revolution.org/essays/heidegger\\_philosopher.pdf](http://permanent-revolution.org/essays/heidegger_philosopher.pdf). This essay was originally published by the World Socialist Web Site in three installments:

<http://www.wsws.org/articles/2000/apr2000/heid-a03.shtml>

<http://www.wsws.org/articles/2000/apr2000/heid-a04.shtml>

<http://www.wsws.org/articles/2000/apr2000/heid-a05.shtml>

<sup>28</sup> David Held’s intellectual history of the Frankfurt School incisively makes this very point.

For a period he [Marcuse] worked closely with Heidegger and the latter’s concerns are manifest in most of his early publications...But the extent of Heidegger’s influence has sometimes been exaggerated. There is little unqualified approval of Heidegger’s phenomenological programme even in Marcuse’s earliest writings. For instance, in an essay published in 1928, Marcuse wrote, ‘a phenomenology of human existence falls short of the necessary clarity and completeness’ as it ‘bypasses the material conditions of historical existence.’ In 1932, in a review of Hegel’s *Ontologie*, Adorno noted with approval Marcuse’s movement away from the *Meaning of Being* to an openness to being-in-the-world [*Seienden*], from fundamental ontology to philosophy of history, from historicity [*Geschichtlichkeit*] to history. David Held, *Introduction to Critical Theory: Horkheimer to Habermas*, (University of California Press, 1980), p. 224.

International Committee” says a great deal more about his style of leadership than anything about us.

To be continued.