

## Chapter 2

### Concocting a smear campaign: Falsifying my history

#### My correspondence and interaction with David North

North launches into the smear campaign against me in earnest in Part II of his *Odyssey* series.<sup>1</sup> I will not reply in kind to North's dishonest exhumation of my personal life. I have no interest in the petty details of North's personal life. Suffice it to say that both North and I came from a middle class background into the Trotskyist movement at roughly the same time and under similar circumstances. We were both students inspired by the anti-war movement. Whereas I was initially influenced by the radicalism of the New Left, North came from a liberal student milieu. I should add that North's family background was far above mine in the economic scale of bourgeois society. Although in the common lexicon we were both labeled "middle class" a term invented by bourgeois sociology to eliminate differences under a homogenized rubric, my family was in reality skirting the edge of poverty whereas North's was quite comfortable. I don't think this background in itself has any particular significance. What matters is how we each developed from our different starting points.

I have decided to reply directly to North's distorted account of my personal life and history in the movement solely in order to set the record straight and remove the barriers to theoretical clarification that North has thrown up with this smear campaign. I am also responding to the damage that North has tried to inflict on my personal, professional and political life. I am well aware that no matter how thoroughly I expose the lies that North and his operatives have spread all over the Internet, some vestige of their charges against me will linger. That is the nature of a political smear campaign. It does lasting damage long after false accusations have been refuted. There are well-meaning people who to this day still believe some of the lies spread by the Stalinists against Trotsky. All I can do is tell the truth with the firm conviction that reason does indeed govern the historical process and in the end anything false will be exposed.

In reviewing a career of politically conscious activity that spans nearly forty years, I don't doubt that I have made a number of mistakes. Unlike North, who has never acknowledged a single mistake in his career, I make no claim to infallibility. And if one were to be honest, who among the leaders of the International Committee has not been guilty of making bad decisions at one time or another, whether in personal or political matters? One of the most insidious aspects of a smear campaign is that it employs the mistakes made in the past – both real and fabricated – in order to drown out questions of substance that are being raised in the present. These techniques have become routine in bourgeois politics, the "Swift Boat" campaign against John Kerry in the 2004 Presidential

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<sup>1</sup> <http://wsws.org/articles/2008/oct2008/fran-o23.shtml>

election or the “Birther” movement against Obama being just two recent examples. And there is a long history of the use of smears against political opponents in the socialist movement, including those against Marx himself. Marx interrupted his theoretical work to pen a lengthy reply to one such smear campaign in his work, *Herr Vogt*. Lenin was the target of numerous smear campaigns, the most well-known being that he was an agent of Germany when he returned to Russia in a sealed train across German territory. And Trotsky of course was the target of the biggest smear campaign in history. That North should use the good name of Trotskyism to launch a smear campaign against me is the most sickening aspect of this sorry episode. It is an unmistakable sign of his degeneration as a revolutionary leader. In replying to the smears, I will quote some crucial sections from Part II and follow with my comments.

North:

In the autumn of 1978, as the Workers League was in the final stages of moving its political headquarters from New York to Detroit, Alex Steiner left the party without any explanation.

Actually I did provide North with an explanation at the time of my departure, but either he does not remember it or chooses not to disclose it. My reasons for leaving were a combination of personal and political. My personal life was at a low point at that time and this coincided with a deep political disorientation within the International Committee, a disorientation that affected me as well as many other members of the movement. I will discuss this in more detail when I reply to North’s discussion of my application to join the movement in 1999, but North’s claim that the movement in 1978 was essentially healthy and I was simply exhibiting the “pessimism and demoralization of the broader milieu of petty-bourgeois radical intellectuals” has no basis in fact.

North:

Steiner had previously resigned from the movement in 1973, during a political crisis in the Workers League that culminated in the resignation of its national secretary, Tim Wohlforth. Steiner rejoined the party in the summer of 1974. But his second departure in 1978 brought his career in the revolutionary movement to an end. In his last discussion with me prior to his departure, Steiner said, “Life is very grim.” I often recalled these words, because they articulated not simply the personal dejection of an individual, but also the pessimism and demoralization of the broader milieu of petty-bourgeois radical intellectuals.

It bears repeating that the reason I am not today a member of the Socialist Equality Party is that North rejected my application for membership in 1999 and never offered an explanation. Furthermore, despite North’s desire to see me retired from revolutionary politics, my exclusion from party membership does not mark the end of my contributions to Marxism.

As to North’s obsession with my parting words of 30 years ago, this requires some historical context. Aside from my personal circumstances at the time, New York in the

late 1970's was indeed a rather grim place. It bore little resemblance to the tourist Mecca that it has become today. New York was at that time essentially bankrupt and its finances were overseen by an unelected Financial Control Board dominated by Wall Street insiders who insisted that social services and even basic infrastructure had to be cut to the bone so that New York City's books may be balanced. This Control Board essentially ran New York while its elected officials were little more than their water carriers. They ripped up existing agreements with the City's unions and imposed wage cuts, layoffs and gutted the pension system. They imposed massive budget cuts on the City's services that had a devastating effect on health delivery, education, housing, mass transit and the city's cultural life. In addition the economy as a whole was in a deep state of recession causing massive unemployment, particularly among young people. This had a direct bearing on the huge increase in crime statistics and homelessness that was endemic to New York in the late 1970s. This was also the period of the massive burning of working class and middle class housing stock as a result of neglect and arson that gave parts of New York the reputation of being a new "Fort Apache". (Detroit, where the party was planning to relocate its printing plant and central headquarters, was if anything in even worse shape than New York.) In addition, the wave of labor militancy that New York workers had exhibited in the earlier part of that decade had been systematically strangled by the trade union bureaucracy to such an extent that there was barely any protest by organized labor at the depredations visited upon New York by the Financial Control Board.

Added to this general background, the situation in the internal life of the movement was at that time not very good. The political disorientation that was gripping the International Committee, and which North himself has documented in *Trotskyism Betrayed*, did not leave the American movement unscarred. (We will see later, when I discuss my application to join the movement in 1999, that North refuses to acknowledge that the Workers League was affected by this disorientation.)

Given this context, it is therefore somewhat odd that out of all the conversations I had with North over the years, my statement that "Life is grim" is the one he chooses to remember most vividly after 30 years. Indeed, one wonders what world North was living in that he should find such a statement striking. One doesn't have to be a "petty-bourgeois radical intellectual" to experience feelings of dejection given such circumstances. One wonders what North would have made of Trotsky's close collaborator, Adolph Joffe, who suffered from depression and committed suicide after Trotsky was exiled from the Soviet Union. Of course no one is holding up Joffe as an example to follow, but one can only shudder at the prospect of someone like North self-righteously accusing Joffe of caving in to the "demoralization of the broader milieu of petty-bourgeois radical intellectuals."

Back to North:

However, Steiner's intellectual abilities were undermined by his extreme emotional volatility, susceptibility to discouragement when confronted with problems, and pessimistic view of life.

Here is where North tries to build his case that I am “emotionally volatile” and given to “discouragement” and holding on to a “pessimistic view of life”. I readily admit that I have emotions and that I have been discouraged in periods of my life. I can only wonder what kind of people think it is a positive attribute to never admit that you have been discouraged. But I do not suffer from “extreme emotional volatility” as North claims and my propensity to become discouraged is probably considerably less than that of most people. It is interesting that the sole evidence North adduces in his outing as an amateur psychoanalyst is my statement that “Life is grim”.

In North’s universe, any admission of having emotions and occasionally feeling discouraged is considered suspect. This is rooted in a stereotyped notion that North accepts of the ideal Bolshevik. In this legendary realm it is considered a sign of weakness for a member of a revolutionary movement to admit that he or she actually has emotions. But members of a revolutionary movement are no less human than anyone else and share all the range of human frailties with their non-party neighbors and workmates. What makes the Marxist revolutionary stand out is not that they are immune to the weaknesses that plague everyone else, but that they commit themselves to the cause of the proletarian revolution guided by Marxist theory and fight to achieve that end to the best of their ability.

More might be said about this notion of the ‘ideal Bolshevik’. The emergence of this stereotype was actually a symptom of the bureaucratic degeneration of the Bolshevik party under Stalin. Before that, revolutionary toughness came out of ideological struggle to achieve political clarity. The more the bureaucracy felt threatened by that kind of struggle, the more it turned revolutionary toughness into a fetish, now devoid of any content beyond a blind loyalty to the party leadership. On a much smaller scale, a similar pattern of degeneration can be seen in the history of Trotskyism. Gerry Healy, in his better days, would sometimes make the point, in discussing the decline of the American SWP, about how Cannon had come to develop a view of party leadership in terms of ‘hard men’: the best leaders were those who were ‘hard’ in terms of their steadfastness in defending Trotskyist principles, whereas those who weren’t steadfast were somehow softer or weaker people. Healy’s point was that this was a misguided conception that was symptomatic of the extent to which the SWP leadership hadn’t taken the central lesson of *In Defense to Marxism* to heart: being a revolutionary isn’t a character trait but a function of one’s theoretical training and political experience. A superficial toughness counts as nothing compared to a grounding in Marxist philosophy and historical materialism. It isn’t surprising, then, that North, who has also turned his back on the central lesson of *In Defense of Marxism*, ends up accounting for political differences in a manner not so very different from Cannon: the underlying problem with Steiner is his “emotional volatility”, in other words he isn’t tough enough.

But there is also an obvious polemical purpose that is served by North's presentation of this threadbare “evidence” of my emotional volatility - to shift attention away from the substantive arguments Brenner and I presented in our polemics and try to marginalize us as “emotionally volatile” which is just another way of saying “unstable” without using the crude epithet “crazy”.

North:

In 1985, in the midst of the public crisis in the International Committee provoked by the political explosion in the British Workers Revolutionary Party, Steiner and other former members of the Workers League were invited to a meeting in New York City in which I reviewed the political and theoretical issues involved in the controversy. Steiner expressed agreement with the stand taken by the Workers League, but made it clear that he had no desire to rejoin the party. He had developed a professional career and comfortable lifestyle that he did not wish to disrupt. Still, he expressed a desire to maintain somewhat more regular contact with the party.

My reasons for not joining the party in the aftermath of the split with Healy were a bit more complicated than North makes out. I did not see a way at that time that I could make a useful contribution to the movement, especially in view of the fact that the party had left New York with a tiny handful of members. But while I was not then ready to take that step, I was more than willing to contribute in other ways and did not rule out the possibility of rejoining the movement in the near future. In hindsight, I now regret not rejoining the movement at that time as perhaps I could have influenced the future course of the movement in a more positive direction.

North:

It was not until the late 1990s that Steiner indicated that he was considering a reentry into political life. Steiner frequently asked to meet with me during my trips to New York, and expressed, verbally and occasionally in writing, his agreement with the theoretical work of the party—especially its fight against the influence of postmodernism.

Note the rhetorical use of the word “reentry”. The fact that I was not a member of the Workers League at the time is for North equivalent to my having no “political life” despite the fact that I remained a staunch supporter of the movement throughout this period and participated in many of its activities.

North then proceeds to quote a letter I wrote to him on June 10, 1997 in which I praised a lecture he delivered and made some comments against postmodernism. This is thrown in as part of his effort to depict me as the being duplicitous in my later criticisms of him.

It is true that in this period I expressed my agreement with North on important theoretical questions. However, North leaves out of his account the equally important fact that he expressed agreement with the theoretical direction my work was taking. And as the record of our correspondence will show, it is North who went through a philosophical about face in later years and not I. This is of course not evident from the selective quotations North serves up from our correspondence. The following excerpts from that correspondence provide a truer picture of our intellectual relationship at the time. For instance, on Dec. 4, 1997, I sent North a lengthy reflection on how I thought the movement should be approaching philosophical issues. I wrote,

I have started working on [my essay on alienation]. It is an examination of the theory of alienation in the work of Marx, primarily as it is developed in the 1844 Manuscripts. It will

be called something like "Alienation: Reform or Revolution". I will be emphasizing that Marx's theory of alienation is grounded in his philosophical/historical understanding of capitalist social relations. The overcoming of alienation is therefore a practical task posed to the working class. It is equivalent to the overcoming of private property. This revolutionary understanding of alienation is clearly delineated already in the 1844 Manuscripts...

[T]he misreading of Marx's theory of alienation has counterrevolutionary implications. What is it about the 1844 Manuscripts that has all these diverse opponents of Marxism so exercised? I think it is the fact that the 1844 Manuscripts presents the most explicit discussion of Marx's essentialist philosophy. This essentialist foundation of Marx was brilliantly expounded in Scott Meikle's book, "Essentialism in the Thought of Karl Marx". Shorn of this essentialist foundation, the theory of alienation makes no sense. There is no naturalist basis for a practice to overcome alienation - viz social revolution - unless one recognizes that what man is alienated from are the powers and capacities that define his essential nature. Alienation is thus a perversion of man's essential nature. This is expressed through specific historical forms. Capitalism brings alienation to its highest point, and also creates the possibility for its supersession.

In his reply to my letter North expressed his fundamental agreement:

*"I see little difference in our conceptions of the function, format and content of a serious theoretical journal." And "With reference to the points you raise in your latest memo, I am struck by the fact that we seem to be working on common themes." (DN to AS, Dec. 4, 1997; my emphasis A.S.)*

Elsewhere in the same letter, North specifically singles out my discussion of the 1844 Manuscripts:

The really critical question is whether there exists a law-governed element of immanence in the development of capitalism and, even more broadly, human society as a whole. As Marxists, we insist that there is. *You are very correct in your emphasis on the significance, in regard to the latter, of Marx's manuscripts of 1844.* [My emphasis A.S.]

As we will see when I discuss North's attack on my essay on alienation in a subsequent chapter, North was at that time in fundamental agreement with my approach to this question. It is a viewpoint that he will completely repudiate a few years later, attacking the very position he held at the time as "idealist". If any more proof is needed of the radical transformation in North's thinking from the late 1990's to today, take the following excerpt from a letter I sent him on Jan. 3, 1999:

I now am of the opinion that this treatment of pragmatism [the one I had previously adopted in the movement in the 1970's] was a terrible caricature. Of course, the error was not simply my own, but an outlook that was inherited by our movement... It [treated] pragmatism as deriving from the peculiar circumstance that the American bourgeoisie did not have to struggle against feudalism, etc. This thesis, if I recall, has for its justification, a single line in a letter of Engels'. Engels pithy comment was a fascinating insight, but instead of being the starting point for a serious historical-philosophical investigation, it

became, in Wohlforth's work, the authority explaining everything. But the blame does not simply lie with Wohlforth. He too was working within a historical context...

And later in the same letter, in discussing the limitations of John Dewey's form of pragmatism, I noted that,

[T]he result of [Dewey's] rejecting the [concept of a] social organism is an anti-essentialism and radical nominalism that subverts any possible scientific investigation of social phenomena.

North's reply of Jan. 6, 1999, was remarkable for its forthright agreement with my ideas and its candor about his own limitations:

My impression is that our approach to this and related theoretical questions is quite similar. I am entirely uninterested in building a legal case against pragmatism, let alone demonstrating the existence of an unbroken lineage of intellectual bankruptcy and theoretical reaction from Jonathan Edwards to Richard Rorty. The insights of Engels and Trotsky into the historical background and theoretical limitations of pragmatism are part of the heritage of our movement; but they were not then, and certainly cannot be seen today, as finished and final statements. In truth, I have no illusion about my own ability to produce such a statement: indeed, an exhaustive study of so complex a subject is the single-minded and concentrated work of a lifetime.

Later in this same letter, North stresses the centrality of theoretical work on pragmatism for the vitality of the movement – something he affirmed in words but never in deeds – and goes on to praise my work in philosophy:

Pragmatism has been far more significant as the theoretical basis of American progressive liberalism. It is this relationship that requires careful study. Of course, this does not mean that one can study pragmatism as if it were simply a political school of thought. It must be treated as a definite tendency in philosophy -- and a serious and important one at that.

One cannot ignore the problems of epistemology, ontology and logic that constitute, from a theoretical standpoint, the essential components of pragmatism. *From this standpoint, the work that you are presently engaged in on the problem of essentialism is deeply and profoundly related to the work on pragmatism that I am proposing.* [My emphasis A.S.]

North's employment of selective quotations from our correspondence presents a one-sided and distorted picture. The samples I have quoted indicate our intellectual relationship was pretty much the opposite of the one depicted by North. According to North's narrative, I was in agreement with him, or pretended to be in agreement with him at the time. But what he leaves out is that the philosophy he expressed to me in our private correspondence and conversations in the period from 1996 to 2000 was very different than the pastiche of orthodoxies he now espouses. Furthermore, while there is some truth in saying that I was in agreement with him in this correspondence, it is probably more accurate to say that he was in agreement with me, or at least pretending to be. In fact, the North of today would undoubtedly have excommunicated the North of this correspondence for the heresy of "essentialism" and the galling idea that a

pronouncement of Engels should not be viewed as the last word on a philosophical subject.

Returning to North's narrative of my history, he writes,

Several months later, in October 1997, Steiner attended a public meeting called by the SEP which commemorated the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 1977 assassination of a young leader of the Workers League, Tom Henehan. Steiner, who had known and admired Henehan, was clearly affected—though perhaps more emotionally than politically—by the meeting.

North's last jibe – “perhaps more emotionally than politically” - is notable only for the contemptuous attitude it evinces toward any sign of emotions. Of course people who are literally overcome with emotions are not likely to be very effective at revolutionary politics or much of anything else, but that does not mean that there is something suspect about being moved on a solemn occasion. I was indeed moved on this occasion. But why should that undermine, rather than reinforce a political understanding of this event? In this connection, it is appropriate to recall a statement of Hegel's in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*:

**Nothing great in the world has been accomplished without passion...**

(Lenin found this statement important enough to copy it in his notebook when he turned to a study of Hegel in the immediate aftermath of the start of World War I.)

North's interjection is meant to reinforce the picture of me as “emotionally volatile”. It also implicitly assumes a false dichotomy between politics (which, according to North, is in something purely “objective” and devoid of emotion) and emotions (which are by the same token seen to be purely subjective.)

North:

In February 1998 the International Committee launched the *World Socialist Web Site*. During the months that followed Steiner and I held a number of discussions that explored the possibility of developing a WSWS philosophy section. There was no indication on Steiner's part that he considered the establishment of the WSWS to be a retreat on the part of the ICFI to “mere” journalism. Quite the opposite: he was enthusiastic over the possibilities it created for expanding the audience for Marxist theory and politics.

I held a number of conversations with North, both before and after the launching of the WSWS on the need to develop a theoretical journal. These conversations were extremely frustrating as North frequently expressed his agreement with me about the necessity for such a project but never followed up on anything. After a while I began to understand that this was part of North's *modus operandi*, i.e. he would tell me something he thought I wanted to hear and then forget about it. Phone calls and emails attempting to follow up on our conversations went unanswered. I believe this was not just a character flaw on North's part but reflected his well thought-out position on how the party should relate to sympathizers of the movement, especially former members. The operative principle was



that you lead people on in the hopes that they will do something for you until you no longer need their services. The attitude toward this layer of sympathizers was cynical and manipulative. This unprincipled and dishonest approach was something that North undoubtedly picked up from Gerry Healy. I recall that Healy privately bragged to me once how proud he was to use the talents of all the middle class people that come around the movement and when he no longer needed them he would spit them out “like a squeezed lemon.” (I did not know at the time that this particular expression originated with Stalin, who boasted at a party meeting in Moscow in 1927 that “we would use the Chinese bourgeoisie and then throw it away like a squeezed lemon.” As things turned out, it was the Chinese bourgeoisie who used Stalin and then threw him out “like a squeezed lemon.” Perhaps Healy should have taken this lesson to heart. <sup>2</sup>)

I was indeed enthusiastic about the launching of the WSWS. I did not foresee at the time that this venture into Internet journalism – which I thought had tremendous possibilities – would become a rationale for the liquidation of party work in the working class.

North:

There were indications, however, that the many years that Steiner had spent outside the movement had left an imprint on his theoretical conceptions. An essay that he submitted to me in the autumn of 1998, entitled *Alienation and Revolution*, dealt with the young Marx's treatment of alienation in the 1844 *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* in a manner similar to that found in the writings of Frankfurt School and Western Marxist theoreticians. The essay produced by Steiner significantly underestimated the extent to which Marx's subsequent writings—especially *The Holy Family*, *The German Ideology* and *The Poverty of Philosophy*—represented a development and deepening of the materialist and scientific character of Marxist theory.

I will comment separately in a subsequent section on North's discussion of my essay on alienation. However it should be noted that North's claim that he found indications of the influence of the Frankfurt School in this essay was not his reaction when I sent him a detailed description of my approach while I was in the process of completing it. Recall his letter of Dec. 4, 1997 that I previously quoted. Replying to a detailed summary I sent him of the approach I was taking in that essay, he wrote,

With reference to the points you raise in your latest memo, I am struck by the fact that we seem to be working on common themes. (Letter from DN to AS, 12/4/97)

North specifically singled out the discussion I presented of man's essential nature and the importance of the 1844 Manuscripts:

You are very correct in your emphasis on the significance, in regard to the latter, of Marx's manuscripts of 1844. The vital passage which is both a tribute to Hegel and the starting point for Marx's critique is “Hegel's standpoint is that of modern political economy. He grasps *labour* as the *essence* of man -- as man's essence which stands the test.”

Marx analysis of the essential element of man as a social being reveals the real, as opposed

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<sup>2</sup> The story of the “squeezed lemon” speech is related by Isaac Deutscher in his biography of Trotsky, *The Prophet Unarmed*, (Verso, 2003), p. 280.

to the abstractly conceived, basis of historical necessity. (Letter from DN to AS, Dec 4, 1997)

Back to North today:

Even after several redrafts of the document, I was not satisfied with Steiner's essay and chose not to post it on the web site. Our discussions remained friendly, and, at least on the surface, Steiner seemed enthusiastic about the work of the WSWS. On February 16, 1999 he wrote that "Some of the recent work of the WSWS has been outstanding."

North engages here in some sleight of hand. Though he never ran my alienation essay, he also never explained to me why he didn't run it. If he had the kind of serious differences with that essay that he now claims, then the principled thing would have been to spell those differences out. Instead he moves on to say that "our discussions remained friendly." Friendliness, to be sure, is a good thing, but when it becomes a way of avoiding an honest assessment of theoretical disagreements, it isn't much more than hypocrisy. One might add that North's behavior in this instance fits a broader pattern that we discussed in MWHH: he has an essentially pragmatic attitude when it comes to disputes over theoretical questions. Clearly it served no practical purpose for him to spell out why he disagreed with my essay, so he simply dropped the matter.

In any case, while our discussion did indeed remain friendly, on my part they were also frustrating. I have already mentioned the fact that North's numerous suggestions that he was prepared to launch a theoretical journal all led to nothing. I was indeed enthusiastic about the work of the WSWS, but I was also critical of some aspects of that work. North dishonestly quotes a fragment from a letter I sent him in which I stated my opinion that "Some of the recent work of the WSWS has been outstanding." But North neglects to inform the reader that I expressed some criticisms of that work in the same letter. Here are the relevant excerpts from that same letter:

I was also pleased to see the article on the dangers of genetic engineering. I think that at times in the past, there has been a bit too much uncritical boosterism of technological advances without consideration of the dangers, social and environmental, that technological advances can pose when confined within the framework of the profit system.

I will write something in the way of a response to the review of the Daniel Dennett book. I consider Dennett to be a reductionist, mechanical materialist. But it will have to wait until I have completed the introduction which must take precedence." (AS to DN, Feb 16, 1999)

The purpose of North's selective use of quotes is to paint a picture of me as being in complete agreement with the line of the WSWS at the time and claiming that I hypocritically criticized that same line years later. But as the record shows, that was not the case. I had been critical of certain aspects of the work of the SEP/WSWS all along and I made no bones about it in my correspondence and conversations with North.

In North's discussion of a proposed introduction to the philosophy section of the WSWS that I had written he makes a number of statements denigrating a draft I submitted, but perhaps the most revealing is the following:

Marxists have traditionally viewed the establishment of a philosophical journal as a means of defending and advancing the materialist viewpoint. I could not help but wonder why Steiner had chosen a different and theoretically ambiguous approach. The word "materialism" did not appear anywhere in the draft.

Contrary to North's assertion, a theoretical journal has "traditionally" done much more than assert the primacy of matter over consciousness – i.e. what North calls "advancing the materialist viewpoint". A review of some of the topics of *Labour Review*, a journal that North elsewhere praised (and which he said should be the model for the WSWS) shows that a very wide range of topics were discussed.<sup>3</sup> Merely confining myself to philosophical topics and discounting the many essays on history, economics and politics, one cannot help but be impressed at the diverse topics that were discussed, making a mockery of North's narrow conception of a theoretical journal.

For instance, the issue from July-August 1957 (Volume 2, No. 4) of *Labour Review* included a "Debate on Dialectics" by Cliff Slaughter and an unnamed person.

In the September-October 1957 issue (Volume 2 No 5) we find an article by Peter Fryer, "Lenin as Philosopher."

In the Jan-February 1958 issue (Volume 3, No 1) we find an article titled, "Empiricist Philosophy and Empiricist Habits of Thinking", by John Marshall.

In the March-April, 1958 issue (Volume 3, No 2) we find yet another article by John Marshall, "British Empiricism and Natural Science".

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<sup>3</sup> In a letter he wrote to me on Dec. 4, 1997, North presented his conception of a Marxist theoretical journal:

I have not replied to your last memo because of pressures of time. In brief, I see little difference in our conceptions of the function, format and content of a serious theoretical journal. There is a great deal that must still be discussed as we develop this project, but it is our intention to establish this journal as the principal international forum for the rebirth and development of revolutionary Marxist theory, politics and culture. Our model will not be the work of the WRP, whose "Labour Review" was a caricature of the earlier and credible efforts of the SLL (between 1959 and 1966). Our journal will not be "for show." We must work to reestablish the critical links to the genuine intellectual traditions of Marxism—in all spheres of human creativity—that have been severed by the terrible crimes and betrayals of the past.

This ambitious vision of a theoretical journal is very different that the thin gruel North would present years later as his model. Was he writing this for my benefit or did he take his own words seriously? In either case no such journal was ever produced, even one on the level of the "caricature" of a theoretical journal published by the WRP in the late 1970's and 1980's.

The April-May, 1959 issue (Volume 4, No 1) includes another article by Cliff Slaughter, "Revolution and Class Consciousness."

The February-March, 1960 issue (Volume 5, No 1) includes an article by Alisdair MacIntyre, "Freedom and Revolution".<sup>4</sup>

The June-July, 1960 issue (Volume 5, No 2) featured the highly philosophical article, "Alienation and the Working Class", by Frank Girling.

The significance of this list of representative essays from this Marxist journal is not that *Labour Review* shirked its responsibility of "defending the materialist viewpoint". It did that very ably, but it did it not through a narrow scope of essays that reiterated the superiority of materialism against idealism, but by introducing new topics to readers that expanded the discussion and generated real debate. (*Labour Review* always published readers' comments, and not just the puff piece variety of letters from readers that are typically published in the WSWs.) Above all it emphasized the role of dialectics in the training of revolutionary leadership and took on the habits and modes of thinking characteristic of British empiricism. Although it was not clear to either of us at the time - and these differences had not yet crystallized to the point where we could easily define them - the basic difference between my conception of a theoretical journal and North's was that I wanted to see something along the lines of the early years of *Labour Review* whereas North was uncomfortable with anything that explored issues too far from the standard philosophical fare served up by Plekhanov and the theoreticians of the Second International.

As to my essay that North found so offensive, whereas the word "materialism" does not appear, it did include a very spirited defense of the materialist conception of history (it used the phrase "materialist conception of history") and defended the thesis that our ideas have a material basis. Here is an excerpt from that essay,

One can only imagine the shock felt by most of his contemporaries when Marx first publicly formulated his materialist conception of history. The first words of the main historical section of the Communist Manifesto announce that,

"The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggle".

After these lines were written, one could no longer speak with the same spirit of complacency about the independent role of philosophy. Not that everyone agreed with Marx. But it was no longer possible to ignore the material basis of ideas. Marx explained that philosophy and with it the other purely theoretical enterprises were not the self-contained activities posited by Aristotle. Theoretical activity is a product of social forces just as much as practical activity. Furthermore, the end product of theoretical activity, a particular theory or system of thought, is defined by social forces just like any other form of social practice. It is an illusion to think that philosophy is its own end, although it

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<sup>4</sup> Alisdair MacIntyre was later to become one of the most influential philosophers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Though he has long since departed from his Marxist beginnings, he remains an important figure for his critique of utilitarian ethics. His book, *After Virtue*, is considered a masterpiece of 20<sup>th</sup> century philosophy and cultural criticism.

necessarily appears that way to the individual philosopher. All philosophy either strengthens the ideological cement that justifies existing class relations or challenges those relations.

## **The Letter of June 25, 1999**

North's narrative continues with a discussion of my decision to apply for party membership in 1999. After attending a number of party events in the period between 1997-1999 I was moving toward rejoining the party. My steps in this direction were understandably tentative. I had left the party when I was still a relatively young man of 32 and was now contemplating returning to the movement well into middle age and living in very different circumstances. Also, the party itself had changed considerably in the two decades since I had left. I left a movement that was in a profound crisis in the late 1970s, though I did not know at the time that the crisis would get much worse before any kind of resolution would be reached. I was contemplating returning to a very different movement, one that had acquitted itself well in the split with Healy and the WRP in 1985 but whose daily life and expectations were largely unknown to me. Prior to my leaving, my party activity was focused on the educational and theoretical work of the Workers League and the International Committee. From what I could gather there was little in the way of educational or theoretical work taking place in the 1990s and I was not sure exactly how I would fit into the organization. Nevertheless, despite my misgivings, I was moving in the direction of becoming active in the movement.

My efforts to rejoin the party were blocked by North. North is now engaged in an attempt to justify his actions retrospectively by claiming that my application was insincere, that I had a hidden agenda all along, and that my real positions, which I mostly kept to myself, were far removed from Marxism. There is however one fact about this entire affair that North cannot explain away. ***I never received so much as a word of explanation from North as to why my application for party membership was rejected.*** North provides the lame excuse that he was "too busy" to speak to me about my application for party membership over a period of many months. That is the kind of explanation one would expect from a bureaucrat, not the leader of a revolutionary movement. Had North behaved in a principled manner, then he would have told me exactly why my application was rejected. But North did no such thing. In fact, he never even deigned to inform me that my application was in fact rejected (or "deferred" as he states elsewhere). I deduced the fact after months of silence and stonewalling whenever I made any inquiries as to the status of my application.

North comments extensively on a letter I sent him in June 1999 solely in order to demonstrate that I had theoretical differences with the movement. My differences were real enough, but North never indicated at the time that he thought they were serious enough to warrant my exclusion from party membership. I did after all support the political line of the movement and was willing to work under its discipline. It was in fact North himself who had encouraged me up to that point to rejoin the movement.

I don't doubt that North was uneasy with my theoretical differences on questions of philosophy. But according to his own logic this should not have been a barrier to my readmission into the party. After all, according to North's own line of reasoning, theoretical differences are not the determining factor in a person's political life. North would instead call attention to the objective conditions. Clearly, by joining the party and integrating my work with its activities I would be brought into a more favorable set of objective conditions. North is therefore being inconsistent when he states that my theoretical differences were what kept me out of the party.

Let me now turn to North's comments on my letter of June 25, 1999 wherein I first broached my interest in rejoining the party.

### **The Question of Materialism versus Idealism in the History of Philosophy**

Undoubtedly thinking he has discovered the Rosetta stone that explains everything else about my philosophical outlook, North quotes a statement I made in which I expressed my reservations about a famous formulation of Engels. Here is the statement:

#### 1. Materialism/Idealism

Without doubt this is a fundamental issue in the history of philosophy. And there is no question that Marxism represented a form of materialism (a point that is often obscured by some Western neo-Marxists).

That being said, I am not convinced that this is THE question that divides different philosophical systems.

And here is North's reaction to this statement:

This statement could not be read as anything other than a declaration by Steiner of a major objection to the theoretical foundations of Marxism. By beginning his letter with this statement, Steiner was acknowledging its far-reaching implications. How could he do otherwise? Steiner was calling into question Marxism's conception of the history of philosophy and the coherence of its materialist logic, epistemology and theory of knowledge. Back in 1975, when he was still a member of the Workers League, playing a central role in the theoretical struggle against the pragmatic outlook of the Socialist Workers Party, Steiner specifically attacked George Novack, the SWP's principal theoretician, on this issue. Novack, he wrote, "panders to the prevailing myth that the question of the priority of matter or idea is 'meaningless' and that some third position is possible." One year later, in an examination of the theoretical conceptions of Tim Wohlforth, Steiner denounced him for attempting "to dismiss and take for granted the

fundamental question of philosophy, materialism or idealism.” Steiner went on to describe Wohlforth's position as “idealist rubbish.”

The first thing that should be noted is the absurdity of North's claim that I was trying to “camouflage” my theoretical differences. How is North able to reconcile that statement with the fact that I sent him a letter 10 years ago in which I made clear my differences not only with a traditional philosophical approach within the movement, but of an iconic statement of one of the founders of Marxism?

But what about the statement itself? Does the fact that I brought up a difference I had with Engels' characterization of the history of philosophy signify that I am beyond the pale, that I have crossed over into the camp of anti-Marxism? As far as North is concerned, the case is closed and no appeal is possible.

North's condemnation of my philosophical approach in 2008 is however very different than his reaction to my letter at the time. In 2008 North writes,

Steiner, it appeared to me, had drifted into the gravitational field of theoretical tendencies hostile to Marxism.

Yet North's reaction in 1999 was the polar opposite of what he now says. Immediately after receiving my Jun 25, 1999 letter, North sent me a reply that included the following statement,

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.

And elsewhere in his letter he writes,

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.

How does a position that in 1999 falls “within the dialectical tolerance of Marxian debate” become in the year 2008 “a declaration...of a major objection to the theoretical foundations of Marxism”? Furthermore, why is North quoting my letter from 1999 yet suppressing his reply to that letter written on the same day? I don't think any further proof is needed of North's dishonest approach to this polemic.

But what about examining the statement itself and its implications? Can my statement be justified on philosophical grounds? And does that statement signify a lack of respect for the traditions of Marxism?

North of course never asks such questions. The attitude he projects today (which is very different from his attitude in 1999 when he discussed these issues) is one of veneration for the letter of Marxism while abandoning its spirit. He exemplifies one of two possible approaches toward the history of philosophy. One is dogmatic and the other is dialectical and historical. If we are to be historical, then we need to subject the history of Marxist

historiography on the history of philosophy itself to a historical critique. When Engels summarized the history of philosophy in his pithy statement, the dogmatic attitude did not yet exist. He was providing a very high level summary of different strands in that history and associating Marxism as a unified world outlook with one of those strands. As a pedagogical device for a popular presentation, Engels did a masterful job. But the exigencies of the class struggle demand more from us today than simply repeating Engels's popular presentation. Not only that, but the focus of the philosophical battle has definitely shifted since Engels's time. In his day, it was of paramount importance to establish a materialist philosophical outlook against the different forms of idealism from which pre-Marxian socialism emerged. That still remains an important issue today. However, it is no longer the primary issue. For since that time the Marxist movement has seen the erosion from within by vulgar materialism and positivism. Therefore today it is at least as important to establish the centrality of dialectics as it is to insist on the materialism of Marxism. Indeed this was already evident to Lenin a century ago. That is why Lenin wrote in his Hegel Notebooks that,

“...intelligent idealism is closer to intelligent materialism than stupid materialism” (Lenin. C.W. Volume 38, p. 276)

I discussed this issue in great detail in my essay *The Dialectical Path of Cognition*.<sup>5</sup>

But what of the history of philosophy? Does it make sense to view it as primarily a battle between two great schools of thought, namely materialism and idealism? Certainly that is how it has been viewed by a tradition going back to the Second International and continuing right up to the present.<sup>6</sup> The concept itself does not actually originate with Engels, but with the idealist philosophers Leibniz and Fichte and was thereafter passed down to Feuerbach.<sup>7</sup> I think this notion of the two great schools of thought battling it out for supremacy is an oversimplification and in addition implies positions on many other issues whose overall effect is an undialectical and anachronistic reading of the history of philosophy. And I don't think that Engels ever intended that outcome – proof of which can be found in many other statements made by him that depict a far more nuanced and dialectical presentation of the history of philosophy.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> [http://www.permanent-revolution.org/polemics/dialectical\\_path.pdf](http://www.permanent-revolution.org/polemics/dialectical_path.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> One brand new book that presents the history of philosophy in this manner is John Bellamy Foster's *Materialism and Intelligent Design*.

<sup>7</sup> This is discussed by Leszek Kolakowski, whose three volume *Main Currents of Marxism* remains an important scholarly source of Marxist study, despite Kolakowski's ambivalent relationship to Marxism when he wrote that book and his later outright repudiation of it. His discussion of the historical origins of the notion that the basic question in philosophy is the idealism/materialism debate is found in Volume I, *The Founders*. (Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 378.

<sup>8</sup> One indication of Engels's dialectical understanding of the history of philosophy appears in the same work in which he makes his “basic question” statement – *Ludwig Fierbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy*, where he writes,

Truth, the cognition of which is the business of philosophy, was in the hands of Hegel no longer an aggregate of finished dogmatic statements, which, once discovered, had merely to be learned by heart. Truth lay now in the process of cognition itself, in the long historical development of science, which mounts from lower to ever higher levels of knowledge.



There was some truth to that statement in the time Engels was writing, when the Scientific Revolution and the Enlightenment were still pregnant symbols of the battle between a scientific materialist understanding of the world and clerical obscurantism. (This is not to deny that the battle against clerical obscurantism remains a potent issue today.) But it would be difficult to view Ancient Philosophy according to that dichotomy. There were certainly materialists in the Ancient World, Democritus, Leucippus and the school of Epicureans being the most prominent. Because the rise of materialism is closely tied to breakthroughs in the natural scientific view of the world materialist philosophy in the Ancient world could not get beyond certain brilliant but primitive beginnings. The development of science at that time was limited in the final analysis by the low level of the productive forces. Therefore most of the field was left to idealism to work out. That does not mean however that the idealist philosophers of the Ancient world did not make their own contribution to a scientific world outlook. (That is one of those vulgar ideas I was opposing.) But most of the heated controversies in the Ancient World had little to do with the materialism/idealism polarity. Rather they dealt such issues as Chaos versus Order, Knowledge versus Opinion, Natural Right versus Convention, etc. Furthermore, the idealism of the Ancient World was very different than the idealism of post-Cartesian philosophy. The latter form of idealism is ego-centered, whereas Ancient Idealism revolved around the doctrine of the existence of Universals. And in the middle ages, materialism barely existed at all as a philosophical doctrine. In fact, philosophy itself was viewed as a largely extinct discipline, something that was left over from the Ancient World and had long been supplanted by Christianity. And the main philosophical questions that were argued at that time – nominalism versus realism, free will versus determinism, do not easily break down to idealism versus materialism. Moreover idealism, like materialism, can describe very different systems of thought. Lenin came to recognize in his study of Hegel that certain forms of idealism cannot be equated with “clerical obscurantism” and may in fact encompass a materialist content within their idealist form.

Furthermore, there are lots of other issues implied in that dichotomy, issues that Engels undoubtedly did not anticipate when he made it.<sup>9</sup> One implication of that statement is that philosophy is reduced to ideology – i.e. instead of viewing philosophy as a branch of science itself (in the sense originally intended by Marx as a *Wissenschaft*) it is viewed as an epiphenomenon of economic and political forces. The ideological battles waged by philosophy are then closely identified with classes in society - with the class adopting the materialist philosophy identified as “progressive” and the class adopting the idealist position identified as “reactionary”.<sup>10</sup> This mode of viewing the history of philosophy reifies it into nothing more than a political or sociological instrument. It dissolves the

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<sup>9</sup> I don't mean that these are strictly logical implications. They are rather implications in terms of their historical connections. If philosophies are considered ideologies, then it is natural, to think of them as not being scientific. Marxists however maintain that philosophy can be both partisan and scientific. The positivist tradition on the one hand and radical social constructivism on the other hand both dismiss the claims of philosophy to be scientific. (The latter in fact question all claims to scientific truth.)

<sup>10</sup> One book that presented the history of ancient philosophy in this vulgarized manner is the early work of Ellen Meiksins Wood (who otherwise has written some admirable books defending Marxist historiography), *Socrates and Ancient Philosophy*. George Novack's *Origin of Materialism* is written in essentially the same vein, though he at least takes philosophical questions more seriously than Wood did.

scientific content of philosophy altogether and relativizes its moments. It is, surprisingly, the kind of analysis that is typical of radical social constructivists and post-modernists. North and the Talbots adopt this kind of schema when they look at the history of philosophy and are clueless to the fact that methodologically they have fallen into the same trap as their bitter opponents, the postmodernists. These considerations should not be taken to suggest that in the history of the philosophy there is no relationship between class position and philosophical outlook, but the relationship is certainly not a one to one correspondence. Rather the relationship is a complex one that goes through many layers of mediation. It cannot be grasped through a vulgarized and over-simplified schema.

I wrote a major work critiquing this type of vulgarized presentation while championing a dialectical understanding of the history of philosophy way back in 1971, *The Liberal Philosophy of George Novack*. It was written under the guidance of the leadership of the Workers League and the International Committee and was meant as a reply to the butchery of dialectics at the hands of those who had abandoned Trotskyism. This work has now been forgotten by North and his collaborators. It is yet another part of the heritage of the International Committee that North has abandoned.

In that work I took up Novack's essentially mechanical understanding of the history of philosophy. I introduced this discussion by first quoting Novack:

*“The historian of materialism should try to show the social and scientific conditions which produced these three stages (the Ionian, Epicurian and 18th century materialists-A.S.) of materialist philosophy; the historical changes which transformed, outmoded and elevated them; and the identities and differences between them. One of the objectives of scientific study is to demonstrate, contrary to the sceptics, that history, including the history of philosophy, makes sense and has positive results. Despite its aberrations, repetitions and relapses, philosophy has had a logical line of growth which has been governed by the changing conditions of social and intellectual life in the Western world. So has the history of materialism which has been the most fruitful product of that growth and provides the best guide to understanding the universe around us.”*

I then commented on the passage from Novack as follows,

This is a mechanical way of looking at the history of philosophy. First of all, it is not possible to trace the development of philosophy in terms of the development of one of its major tendencies, materialism, for philosophy can only develop historically out of the opposition between the poles of materialism and idealism. Modern dialectical materialism is the highest stage of this process and not merely the most finished product of the materialist side alone. Second, although philosophy has a logic of development, this logic is not that of a linear development. To pose it in those terms means that this development is seen as an evolutionary process of gradual accumulation of more and better knowledge. This denies the revolutionary aspect of all development: that qualitative leaps take place which negate the old forms and replace them with new forms. Moreover, what Novack tries to dismiss as “aberrations, repetitions, and relapses” away from the “logical line of growth” are an essential part of the entire process of contradictory development through a conflict of opposites...

Materialism of the ancient world, as well as the mechanical materialism of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries could not overcome this basic limitation because of the necessary limits which scientific knowledge could reach—which was itself a reflection of the limits of the development of the productive forces. Thus, all previous attempts to explain nature and society and man's relation to it materially had to be imbued with elements of speculation, i.e., with non-scientific, idealist explanations such as *deus ex machina*, chance, etc. Within these limits however, great advances were made which paved the way for a consistently materialist outlook. Certain aspects of the world, certain areas of inquiry, could be developed scientifically, although the totality of phenomena could not previous to Marx. It is important to remember, furthermore, that this development was not only the product of the materialist thinkers, but of the idealists as well, or rather it was out of man's struggle against nature, reflected philosophically at crucial points in idealism and materialism, that scientific thought developed.

Another mechanical notion that Novack develops is the tendency to see the materialists as automatically reflecting a progressive social movement and the idealists as automatically reflecting a reactionary ruling class in ancient Greece. Things were not that simple. Rather, each of the successive materialists, as well as the idealists emerged out of a conflict with the prevailing notions of their time and while reflecting the class struggle of their time, did not do so in any direct way.

To understand this, we must trace the actual history of thought in its contradictory development, and not burden it with ahistorical notions of what is progressive and what is reactionary.<sup>11</sup>

A fine supplement to the last point – that in the history of philosophy you do not always find the idealists on the side of reaction and the materialists on the side or progress – can be found in the famous essay by Boris Hessen that is elsewhere cited by the Talbots. (The Talbots make no mention of this section of Hessen's essay.)<sup>12</sup> In discussing the English Revolution, Hessen, relying largely on Engels, noted that here was a case where one wing of the materialist philosophy was lined up with the most reactionary forces in society and its opposition came from Protestant idealism. Hessen wrote,

[I]n opposition to the materialism and deism of the aristocracy, it was those Protestant sects who had provided the cause and the fighters against the Stuarts who also provided the main fighting forces of the progressive middle class.

It should be obvious that in my discussion of Novack's mechanical interpretation of the history of philosophy, I was indebted, not only to Engels, but to Hegel. In his Introduction to the *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, Hegel says,

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<sup>11</sup> Alex Steiner, *The Liberal Philosophy of George Novack*, (Labor Publications, 1972), pp.33-35.

<sup>12</sup> Hessen was a Soviet scientist who delivered a ground-breaking paper on the social origins of Newtonian physics at a conference in London in 1931. He is mentioned by Chris and Ann Talbot in their companion essay to North's polemic, *Marxism and Science: An addendum to the "Frankfurt School vs. Marxism"*. <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2008/oct2008/scie-o28.shtml>. I will discuss Hessen more fully in a subsequent essay.

[E]very philosophy has been and still is necessary. Thus none have passed away, but all are affirmatively contained as elements in a whole.<sup>13</sup>

It is important to return to Hegel to remind us just what philosophy is or should be. There is a danger that in seeing the history of philosophy as a battle between different schools that we tend to forget an important truth, that if philosophy is indeed a kind of science, then ultimately there is only one Philosophy, the different historical schools of philosophy being just moments of it that have been sublated. And that is why if you view the history of philosophy dialectically you cannot just dismiss the contributions of the idealists nor can you describe all its phases under a single category. If Marxism is the overcoming of philosophy, that should not be taken to mean as the positivists mean it, that science replaces philosophy,<sup>14</sup> but that philosophy has finally become science and understands itself to be such.

These insights were incorporated into a major statement of the International Committee explaining its break with the opportunist French organization, *Organization Communiste Internationaliste* (OCI). The statement was written in reply to a polemic by George Novack, “A Malignant Case of Sectarianism in Philosophy” in which Novack replied to my original critique of his philosophical method as well as other criticisms raised by the International Committee. We find the following powerful defense of a dialectical understanding of the history of philosophy in this statement:

The *materialist* content of Marxism is the very opposite of what Novack puts forward. It is not the old mechanical materialism (and certainly not empiricism) simply fused with the dialectical principles of Hegel understood as rules of thinking. That would lead precisely to the misuse of dialectics condemned by Hegel, in which it becomes a mere play of thinking to arrange the impressions recorded as ‘facts’ by the empiricist.

Hegel’s dialectical idealism was not a development parallel to or separate from materialism. Hegel’s philosophical system attempted to integrate all the previous developments in philosophy, materialist and idealist, by taking them up to and beyond their own limits, and seeing them all as the expression of the development of the Absolute Idea. Within the idealist systematizing was the precious germ of truth which Marx and Engels discovered, ‘rescued’ (Lenin) and developed: that the development of philosophy is the reflection in men’s minds of the eternal contradictory development of nature and society.<sup>15</sup>

Elsewhere in the same document, we find the following spirited repudiation of Novack’s mechanical approach:

Novack is perfectly consistent in re-writing the history of philosophy to adapt it to the present purposes. Both his book on Greek philosophy (*The Origin of Materialism*) and on empiricism (*Empiricism and its Evolution, A Marxist View*) identify materialism and empiricism and present it as always ‘progressive’. However, Locke’s empiricism, for example, contained major inconsistencies which opposed a consistent materialism and

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<sup>13</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, Volume I, (Humanities Press, 1968), p. 37.

<sup>14</sup> Or as one unfortunate writer misunderstood it, as an “attempt to leave philosophy”. See Daniel Brudney, *Marx’s Attempt to Leave Philosophy*, (Harvard University Press, 1998)

<sup>15</sup> *Trotskyism Versus Revisionism, Volume Six*, In Defense of Trotskyism, statement by the International Committee of the Fourth International, January, 1973, (New Park Publications, 1975), p. 210-211.

opened the door to idealism. ('As to myself, I think God has given me assurance enough of the existence of things without me...' and '... there are some things that are set out of the reach of our knowledge'.) But his 'sensationalism' was used in France to develop materialistic social doctrines. As Marx points out in *The Holy Family*, natural science in the 18<sup>th</sup> century was assured a free development through the internal critique of the metaphysical aspects of Descartes' rationalism, and *not* by the straightforward development of empiricism. Nor is it true that in the earlier 'scientific revolution' that empiricism was the method and outlook employed by those who made the major scientific discoveries. <sup>16</sup>

North has the temerity to quote from this same document, in Part III footnote 13. He quotes a paragraph from this document in order to prove that when I say that Marxist philosophy incorporates all previous philosophy in sublated form, including its idealist moments, that I am therefore blurring the distinction between materialism and idealism. North picks out the following statement to try to support his view that there are no other major issues in the history of philosophy but the battle between idealism and materialism and that idealism is always retrogressive,

The question of 'sectarianism' can be raised here only by those who propose to blur the line between dialectical materialism and bourgeois philosophy.

North apparently takes this statement to mean that the only consistent defense of dialectical materialism is to roundly denounce in an ahistorical and vulgar manner all previous forms of idealism, as if they made no contribution to the history of philosophy. The position that dialectical materialism is in irreconcilable struggle with bourgeois philosophy is however completely consistent with a dialectical understanding of the origins and history of philosophy and does not at all imply North's vulgar view. North merely repeats Novack's undialectical grasp of this history – a view that is roundly condemned in the essay *In Defense of Trotskyism*. And while North finds a quote in this document that he thinks can be useful against me, he dishonestly refrains from reproducing any of the arguments in the same document against Novack's undialectical grasp of the history of philosophy. <sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid. p. 215.

<sup>17</sup> My essay on Novack also came in for sharp criticism by a group that broke from the Workers League and the International Committee in the period 1975-1976 centered around Tom Cagle and Steve Zeltzer, who were then allied with Alan Thornett. Calling itself the Socialist League/Democratic Centralist, the group published a bulletin in 1976 that included an essay by one, Max Lange, titled, *Philosophy, Wohlforth and the International Committee*. This long forgotten polemical essay is of some interest in that it anticipates the attack launched against me by North and the Talbots in 2008. The main difference being that Max Lange's polemic is a much more honest and far better informed work than the diatribes of North and the Talbots. Lange at least tried to present my arguments fairly without creating straw men. Lange's basic contention is that I am soft on idealism. Lange takes exception to my critique of Novack's view of the history of philosophy whereby I insist that idealism played a role as well as materialism. Among other things, Lange states that in my discussion of the contributions of Kepler,

"Steiner has given too much credit to the Pythagorean number cosmology. His conception of the contribution of idealism seems to give credit where none is due."

Lange quotes my discussion, where I said that,

It also turns out that my attempt to comprehend the history of philosophy dialectically was paralleled by the efforts of a Soviet philosopher, Theodore Oizerman. He considered that Hegel provided the basis for a scientific understanding of the history of philosophy despite his idealist flaws. Oizerman wrote,

In creating his theory of the history of philosophy, Hegel's studies form the basis of that subject as a science. That essentially dialectical theory is the theory of the development of philosophical knowledge which, in turn, serves as a basis for Hegel's specific and systematic study of the worldwide history of philosophy. He interprets the development of philosophy as a distinct form of development, radically different from other forms of development in nature and society. The existence and struggle of opposing doctrines is a salient feature of the development of philosophy; according to Hegel, their conflict does not rule out the interrelationship of their content or the inevitable transition from one doctrine to another. The concept of the conflicting unity of the history of philosophy and the dialectical understanding of historical continuity are the greatest accomplishments of Hegel's history of philosophy.<sup>18</sup>

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“[Kepler] was a neo-Pythagorean who held a mystical belief that nature embodies a mathematical structure which reflects divinity. His empirical research was conducted solely in order to confirm and demonstrate this thesis.”

Lange's objection to this statement is that, it is,

“A bizarre statement which seems in line with writers such as Arthur Koestler, who think the great astronomers were essentially “sleep walkers”. In fact Kepler, a mystic who cast horoscopes, did construct a model of the solar system from the classical solids, but the model did not fit the precise statistics of the motion of the heavenly bodies gathered by his teacher, Tycho Brahe, and had to be discarded. *Only then* did Kepler discover the famous laws of planetary motion for which he was famous.” (International Bulletin, Winter 1976, Volume 1 Number 2, Philosophy, Wohlforth and the International Committee, by Max Lange, p. 22)

My belated reply to this is that it is true that Kepler was inclined to see the solar system according to the model of classical solids and it is true that he discarded this model when precise observations did not match the predicted behavior of this model. But Lange forgot that the model Kepler arrived at that replaced the classical solids was no less inspired by Pythagoreanism. It was equally non-intuitive and seemed to validate the kind of a mathematical cosmology Kepler had been trying to discover his entire life. Kepler's three laws of motion were seen by him as providing proof of the celestial harmony of the planets. His third law says that “the square of times of revolution of any two planets around the sun are proportional to the cubes of their mean distance from the sun”. That Kepler verified this law with the use of Tycho's observations is undoubtedly true, but how in the world did he come up with it in the first place? The answer is that he was looking for mathematical relationships to validate the mystical Pythagorean notion of celestial harmony and he kept at it until he found the right relationship. As I Bernard Cohen has asked about this, “Is this science or numerology?” (Cohen, *The Birth of the New Physics*, p. 145.) The answer is that it is both. Kepler's third law, while describing the relationships between the motions and times of the planets, still remained a mystery for a long time as no one could explain just why this relationship is the way it is. That task was finally solved by Newton who was able to incorporate it as a special case of his general laws of motion.

<sup>18</sup> Theodore Oizerman, *Dialectical Materialism and the History of Philosophy: Essays on the History of Philosophy*, (Progress Publishers, 1982),

Before leaving this subject I would like to comment on one of the more egregious examples of North's misrepresentation of my views on philosophy. In the last part of his series, in a section called "Steiner's views on science" North returns to my discussion of the idealism versus materialism question and makes the following statement,

Defending his rejection of Engels' definition of the basic question of philosophy, Steiner argued that Marxism is a "qualitatively heterogeneous" philosophy, combining within itself both materialist and idealist tendencies.

North puts quotes around the phrase "qualitatively heterogeneous", saying that I argue that this is the nature of Marxist philosophy. He then quotes a later section of my letter to Chris Talbot where I make the point that Marxism is the culmination of all the previous moments in the history of philosophy but pointedly does not quote the part where the words "qualitatively heterogeneous" appear. Here is that section, with the sentence containing the incriminating phrase "qualitatively heterogeneous" highlighted:

Furthermore, the history of philosophy is distorted in other ways by trying to fit it into this very narrow framework. The Stalinists used to present the history of philosophy as a progressive march toward materialism. They put a plus sign next to every philosopher designated as a materialist, and a minus sign next to those designated as idealists. George Novack followed this same methodology. I have noted from private discussions that the great majority of people who call themselves Marxists think exactly the same way. Engels, when he actually wrote about the real historical development of philosophy, never made the mistake of Novack and the Stalinists. He always recognized that the progressive development of philosophy is itself contradictory. I wrote about the dangers of this mechanical methodology some three decades ago (in my *Liberal Philosophy of George Novack*) and I see no reason to change my mind now. Such an approach is fundamentally ahistorical. It takes the categories of idealism and materialism and abstracts them out of their historical context. It fails to recognize that idealism may be a progressive development in one period, while materialism can just as surely be a retrogressive tendency under certain conditions in another period. **It also fails to distinguish between philosophies that are qualitatively heterogeneous.** Thus there are many people who do not recognize that the materialism developed by Marx is fundamentally different from the materialism of the 18th century *philosophes*. (Marx made this point very clearly in his Thesis on Feuerbach.) Ultimately, the development of philosophy, allied with the sciences, does lead to a fundamentally materialist outlook, but one that contains all the richness, of all previous philosophy, both idealist and materialist and various shades in between. If as Hegel said, Truth is the Whole, then we can draw no other conclusion.

It turns out then that when I used the phrase "qualitatively heterogeneous" I was not talking about Marxist philosophy at all, but rather of the divergent systems in the history of philosophy that have been artificially lumped together by some Stalinist historians and others who viewed the categories of materialism and idealism abstracted out of their historical context. North is free to agree or disagree with that statement, but what he is not free to do is to misrepresent my words through the deceptive use of quotation marks taken completely out of context to make it appear that I am saying something about Marxist philosophy when I am commenting on something entirely different.

## **The June 25, 1999 Letter Concluded**

In yet another attack on my June 25 letter, North writes that,

Steiner's assertion that “The reciprocal relationship between Being and consciousness *is just as important* to Marxism as the *logical* priority of Being” (emphasis added) was a major concession to philosophical idealism. An understanding of the interaction between Being and consciousness can only be established on the basis of a recognition of the primacy of matter over consciousness. Moreover, Marxism, as a world scientific outlook, views humankind, the mind and consciousness as a product of the dialectical evolution of nature. From the standpoint of science, though not of idealist-tinged philosophy, the primacy of Being is a *material* and *historical*, and not merely a *logical*, priority.

If North's statement were true, then one wonders why it is that all materialists prior to Marx were unable to articulate the relationship between being and consciousness although all of them, from Democritus on down, recognized the priority of Being to consciousness. You can assert the priority of Being to consciousness and still get the relationship between them wrong. And North's statement about “idealist-tinged philosophy” exhibits the prejudices against philosophy typical of positivism with the erection of a dichotomy between science and philosophy. He asserts that the priority of Being over consciousness is three-fold – that of a historical priority, a material priority, and a logical priority - and implies that I only recognize the logical priority. In fact my statement clearly notes both the historical priority and the logical priority of Being to consciousness. As for “material” priority, this is either an empty tautology or it is nonsense. What does it mean to say that the priority of matter over consciousness is material? It is akin to saying that the justification for matter being primary to consciousness is ... matter! Where in the annals of Marxism has such a description ever been used? This is an example where North's overheated rhetoric must have gone on automatic pilot.

Next North tries to paint me as one of those who have joined forces with the anti-Engels cottage industry,

The paragraphs that followed presented a familiar litany of objections to classical Marxism. There was the suggestion that Engels, though not entirely lacking in talent, had in some way contributed to a vulgarization of Marxism: “Engels was not Marx ... Marx was fundamentally the theorist and Engels the popularizer.” This review of Engels' supposedly ambiguous legacy was followed by an all-too-familiar critique of Lenin's *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*: “...the version of materialism Lenin expounds in this work has much more in common with 18<sup>th</sup> century mechanical materialism than with Marx's materialist dialectic.” Steiner's arguments—counterposing the “vulgar” materialist Lenin of *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* to the Hegelianized “dialectical” Lenin of the *Philosophical Notebooks*—were ones that I had come across many times in the past, in the writings of idealist opponents of Marxism.

My objections were not to classical Marxism but to the vulgarized Marxism whose pedigree goes back to the theoreticians of the Second International. If I mentioned the



topic in my letter it was because I was concerned that there was not sufficient clarity within the movement as to the difference between the two. As subsequent developments would bear out, my suspicion proved correct. My point was not that Engels contributed to the vulgarization of Marxism, but that the use of Engels's popular works as a kind of catechism had contributed to the vulgarization of Marxism.<sup>19</sup> This was the same exact point that Lenin alludes to in his *Philosophical Notebooks*. Pace North, Lenin did undergo a profound philosophical development between the time he wrote *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* and his *Philosophical Notebooks*. I argued this position in detail in my essay *The Dialectical Path of Cognition*. North has never replied to any of the points I raised there and has never produced a scintilla of textual evidence justifying his position that the Lenin of Volume 14 is philosophically equivalent to the Lenin of Volume 38. Rather North has enshrined this thesis as a matter of dogma within the SEP against which it is impossible to argue lest one be accused of defending idealism.

In the remainder of my June 25 letter I emphasized a number of issues that I thought needed clarification within the movement. The main thrust of my comments was to warn against attempts to think that one has mastered the dialectic by repeating formulas and to oversimplify difficult theoretical issues. While I was cautiously optimistic that the International Committee had adopted a healthy attitude toward the airing of controversial theoretical issues, I was also concerned about the possible dangers of a creeping dogmatism that had often plagued the Marxist movement in the past. I had in mind the lessons of the degeneration of the Second International and the US Socialist Workers Party. I wanted to make it clear that in joining the movement I saw it as one of my responsibilities to combat tendencies that would lead in that direction. In this connection it is more than a little disingenuous for North to turn around and to accuse me in 2008 of pandering to the anti-communist canard that Marxism is by its nature "dogmatic" – "The accusation of dogmatism has been raised all too frequently by opponents of Marxism, as a means of discrediting its defense of materialism" - when he knows very well that my point was to warn against the dangers of dogmatism corrupting Marxism. And to compound this by pretending that this has never been a problem in the Marxist movement is to make a mockery of the entire theoretical heritage of the International Committee.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Laying the blame for this vulgarization on Engels, as many commentators have done, is a specious argument. By that same token, you can blame the Inquisition on the doctrine of Christianity as popularized by Paul or Nazism on Nietzsche.

<sup>20</sup> The International Committee in many of the documents published from the 1960s and early 1970s repeatedly stressed that adherence to orthodoxy – which easily transforms into dogma – is in the long run no guarantee against degeneration. One example from the archives of the International Committee should suffice to highlight this point. In the key theoretical statement produced in the aftermath of the split in the International Committee with the French Organisation Communiste Internationaliste (OCI), *In Defense of Trotskyism*, the theory and practice of the US Socialist Workers Party is characterized as follows:

While collaborating every day with the followers of Marcuse, Wright Mills and others who openly rejected the Marxist theory of the leading revolutionary role of the proletariat, they would occasionally produce articles abstractly defining the position of Marxism on these questions.

Such a combination of formally strict adherence to 'orthodoxy' on the one hand and opportunist adaptation to surface political changes on the other is familiar enough in the history of the workers movement. In the United States, if it is not opposed and corrected consciously in a struggle for dialectical materialism, it must result – as it has done in the SWP – in an inability to break from

I also advocated a more open attitude to the development of Marxism. By “open” I did not mean adopting some form of false pluralism, but of being sensitive to developments in different fields – in the natural and social sciences as well as in the arts – that could contribute to Marxist theory. I contrasted that approach, which looks to a creative development of Marxism by incorporating insights from all areas of human culture after having been critically reworked, with the stale practice that often dominated the movement in the past. That practice consisted of noting that a development in this field or that field once more “confirmed” the correctness of dialectics. This reduced the development of Marxist theory to the piling up of examples. This Marxism by the number of examples approach to theory was something that Lenin noted and warned against in his Hegel Notebooks.

North now takes particular umbrage at this warning. He quotes the following statement from my letter, “The Marxist movement, organized as an international political party, can and has played an important role in the development of Marxist philosophy.”

North’s response:

This was a puzzling statement, for *where else* and by *whom else* has Marxism been developed? Steiner offered no specific example of Marxist philosophy being developed by individual theoreticians working *outside of and unconnected to* the Marxist movement. He noted that “developments that are of significance for philosophy come from very unexpected quarters, such as for instance chaos theory.”

It is not my statement that is puzzling but North’s retort to it. He is saying that Marxist theory cannot be developed by anyone who has not been approved by the Political Committee (of which he is the head) for membership in the SEP. Think of the implications of that statement! A bureaucratic yardstick is to be applied – ultimately relying on North’s judgment – as to who is and who is not capable of developing Marxist theory. This is hubris with a vengeance.

Now it is one thing to say that the revolutionary movement provides the optimal conditions for the development of Marxism. No one can argue that Marxist theory, when developed in isolation from the working class and revolutionary practice, will be one-sided at best. But that statement presumes that the movement is healthy to begin with. Nor does postulating the unbreakable connection between theory and practice imply that the party and its leadership are the sole arbiters of all areas of culture and science, as if they have assimilated all the wisdom of the Delphic oracle. In these areas, especially where highly technical, specialized knowledge is involved, a little humility is called for.

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pragmatism, the dominant bourgeois outlook. Marxist theory is emptied of its revolutionary content by rejection of the dialectical method, it becomes ‘a clock without a spring’ (Trotsky). It is seen as a checklist of ‘principles’ drawn from past experience to be formally compared to new experiences. The very materialist basis of Marxism is thus soon completely undermined.

*Trotskyism Versus Revisionism, Volume Six: The Organisation Communiste Internationaliste breaks with Trotskyism*, In Defense of Trotskyism, (New Park Publications, 1975), p. 223.

The party must be open to developments outside its ranks and not dismiss the possibility that something of importance to Marxist theory can emerge in strange and unexpected quarters. I cited one example – that of chaos theory. The example comes from mathematics and natural science, but I could have cited examples from the social sciences or the arts as well. (Frank Brenner has devoted much effort, in vain, to try to convince the IC that the insights of Freud can be incorporated into a systematic Marxist approach to psychology, thereby filling the “empty place” of psychology within Marxism.) North’s response to my allusion to chaos theory was that,

[E]xcept for the vague reference to chaos theory, he offered no concrete example of the “developments” to which he was referring.

I did not offer other examples because I was writing a letter stressing the importance of approaching certain issues from a proper methodological perspective – I was not attempting to provide an exhaustive list of work that needs to be done. But North’s reaction to the one example I did provide is revealing. He calls the example “vague”. Perhaps it was “vague” to North because he has not been involved in any of the discussions that have been taking place in the last two decades about the possible significance of chaos theory for dialectics. North can do worse than to look at books such as *Biology Under the Influence: Dialectical Essays on Ecology, Agriculture, and Health*, which includes essays on the significance of chaos theory, complexity theory and systems theory for dialectics.<sup>21</sup> All these developments in science and mathematics have made claims to replacing dialectics or making dialectics obsolete. Those claims, the authors of these essays conclude, are unfounded. But at the same time there are approaches to dialectics within those theories and there are some genuine new discoveries that have to be assimilated in the work of the sciences. For instance, the author writes of systems theory that,

I wanted to emphasize the distinctness of dialectics from contemporary systems theory, to proclaim that our theoretical foundations are not obsolete and continue to have something important to say of the world of science that systems theory has not already adopted. On the other hand, along with Engels, I found it gratifying to see science, grudgingly and haltingly and inconsistently but nevertheless inexorably, becoming more dialectical. Both affirmations are true, but their emotional appeal can also lead to errors of one-sidedness.<sup>22</sup>

I was quite aware even in 1999 of the fact that North and IC had neglected dialectics since 1985 when the issue came to the forefront in the split with Healy. North was at that time exhibiting a keen interest in philosophical questions as can be garnered from some of our correspondence from this period and I was hoping to use that to rekindle his interest in dialectics. Although I was not thinking of the SEP specifically, perhaps it was impolitic of me to use the word “ossified” in characterizing the approach to theoretical questions that had plagued the Marxist movement in the past when I wrote,

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<sup>21</sup> Chris Talbot has recently attacked this work in a piece ostensibly reviewing the engagement between Marxism and Darwinism. <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2009/jun2009/dar3-j19.shtml>. I will be replying to Talbot in a subsequent essay.

<sup>22</sup> Richard Lewontin and Richard Levins, *Biology Under the Influence: Dialectical Essays on Ecology, Agriculture, and Health*, (Monthly Review Press, 2007), Dialectics and Systems Theory, p. 102.

[D]evelopments [in the sciences] should be seen as avenues for enriching our theoretical comprehension, and not simply as another example illustrating the correctness of our (ossified) perspective.

As it turned out, the word “ossified” now seems quite appropriate in assessing the theory and practice of International Committee under North’s leadership. What I did not reckon with at the time is that the neglect of dialectics would become crystallized in the next period into an antipathy to dialectics and an ever more open adoption of the methods of positivism and pragmatism. In any case, the “condition”, as North puts it, for my rejoining the party was not as he says that I be given *carte blanche* to expound anti-Marxist theories to the public, but that I be allowed to continue prodding the movement to return to a consideration of theoretical questions that it had neglected for many years.

Despite his fulminations in 2008, my letter did not particularly trouble North at the time, as can be seen in his reply to me. He seemed to welcome my honest explanation of my hopes as well as doubts. He went out of his way to reassure me that my remarks were within the confines of proper debate among Marxists, that **“the points you raise are not as ‘heretical’ as you may think”**. But in 2008 North cannot find enough words to condemn this very same letter. What happened in the interval is that North has now discovered those very same “heresies” which he denied previously – all in the service of creating a phony historical pedigree of my “hostility” to Marxism.

North ends his discussion of my June 25 letter with one last fillip,

If he were to join the SEP, it would be on his terms. His interest in becoming a member was primarily to obtain a public forum, via the WSWS, to advance a theoretical platform alien to the philosophical standpoint of the Fourth International. And in return for providing Steiner with a world audience to criticize Marxism, the SEP would receive whatever small portion of his free time and spare change that he felt willing to part with.

No amount of prose, however well crafted, can cover up the incredible dishonesty behind North’s treatment of this episode. What he assessed at the time as a discussion that was **“within the dialectical tolerance of Marxian debate”** is transformed for purposes of his smear campaign into **“a theoretical platform alien to the philosophical standpoint of the Fourth International.”** And my bringing up concerns about theoretical questions as part of an internal party discussion, is transformed into my desire **“to obtain a public forum”** giving me access to **“a world audience to criticize Marxism and the SEP”**. And finally my attempt to clarify the responsibilities of party membership, as any serious candidate for membership in a revolutionary organization should do, is transformed into my reluctant willingness to give **“whatever small portion of ...free time and spare change [I] am willing to part with.”**

Next I turn to North’s comments about my application to join the SEP.

**Preamble: Why did my application not mention differences?**

North begins this section by claiming that my application for party membership in 1999 made no mention of my differences with the party on a number of issues that were discussed years later in MWHH. He writes,

Several weeks later, in August 1999, the Political Committee of the SEP received from Steiner a formal application for membership. This was a very different document from the letter that he had sent me in June. His application did not mention the differences on philosophical questions that Steiner had raised in June. Nor did the letter indicate that Steiner was critical of the political orientation and practice of the SEP. There were no references to “objectivism” and “abstentionism,” or, for that matter, “degeneration”—which, if the Steiner/Brenner of MWHH are to be believed, had been underway since 1993, six years before Steiner decided that he wanted to become a member! Steiner did not criticize the SEP for failing to fight pragmatism, or chastise the party for holding an uncritical view of the Enlightenment.

As I noted previously, in our assessment of the evolution of the SEP, it was difficult to place an exact time on this process. But there was in retrospect a retreat from the positions advocated in 1992. However it was not yet clear to me in 1999 that the SEP was embarking on an objectivist practice and that the SEP had thrown in the towel on questions of theory. I did at the time agree with the political perspective of the SEP – which is after all the basic criteria for membership - and I thought that whatever theoretical problems existed could be resolved through patient discussion and collaboration with the comrades as we undertook the work of a theoretical journal.

The complaint about my application not mentioning the differences I had raised in my June letter are specious. The reason those issues were not discussed was because I had been expecting a reply to my June 25 letter, one that North had promised me in his response to my letter of June 25 – and one far more extensive than the brief note I had already received from North. I was then still assuming that there would be a separate discussion on philosophical questions based on the issues I raised in my June 25 letter.

**My Intellectual and Political Origins According to North**

In the next section of North’s cross-examination of my letter of application, he initiates a discussion of my intellectual and political origins.

North:

Steiner recalled that he studied philosophy at the New School for Social Research in New York, an institute that was related intellectually to Horkheimer’s Institute of Social Research (the Frankfurt School). Though he referred to his areas of philosophical interest,

Steiner did not review the major theoretical influences that he encountered at the New School—though one of its major figures at the time was Hannah Arendt, the former pupil (like Marcuse) of Martin Heidegger.

Here is the place in North's narrative where he places my origins. Because North is employing the mythological metaphor of the odyssey, he invests a lot of time in discussing my origins because in the mythical realm one's origin always determines one's ultimate fate. According to North my origins are to be found in the New School, "that was related intellectually to Horkheimer's Institute of Social Research." That North can make such a statement shows that he knows nothing about the Frankfurt School, let alone my origins. The Frankfurt School never had a relationship, intellectually or otherwise, to the New School. Quite the opposite, the Frankfurt School in exile, when it came to New York, was affiliated to Columbia University and maintained a sometimes bitter rivalry with the exile community that set up shop at the New School.<sup>23</sup> Perhaps the fact that both institutions had the words "Social Research" in their title and the fact that both accommodated exiles from Nazi Germany confused North. The following account from Rolf Wiggerhaus, a student of Adorno who has written the most comprehensive history of the Frankfurt School, discusses the relations between the Frankfurt School and the New School,

Relations between the Institute and the New School for Social Research were particularly tense. The New School had been founded after the First World War by a group of liberals, and had for a number of years been a centre for progressive academic intellectuals in the USA. Thorstein Veblen, for example, had taught there up to 1927. In the 1920s, under Alvin Johnson, it turned conservative and developed into an ordinary institution for adult education, dependent on financial grants. In the 1930s, with the 'University in Exile' affiliated to it as a genuine university, it became the numerically most important concentration of émigré academics in the USA. The Rockefeller Foundation had given its immediate agreement to Johnson's request for finance for one hundred professorships - but the New School never came near to reaching the full number. Johnson founded the journal *Social Research* in 1934 as a publication outlet for his émigrés. The New School, with the anti-Marxist Adolph Lowe and the anti-Freudian Max Wertheimer, confronted Horkheimer's Institute with old acquaintances from the time in Frankfurt. Hans Speier, also an anti-Freudian, had written a condescending, patronizing review of *Studies on Authority and the Family* for *Social Research* in 1936. Emil Lederer, who was particularly favoured by Johnson, and up to his death in 1939 played a leading role among the émigrés at the New School, was an anti-Marxist, and even an opponent of the New Deal. Lederer sent a manuscript on 'Imperialism' by Wolfgang Hallgarten, who was considered to be a Marxist, back to France unopened. The personal friendship between Lowe and Horkheimer, Tillich's connection with both institutions, and the fact that a communist such as Hans Eisler was able to teach at the New School, led to impenetrable strategic confusion.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Eventually practically all the members of the Frankfurt School in exile moved to Los Angeles for the duration of the war as did much of the German exile community, including Thomas Mann. The institutional ties to Columbia University were still maintained in this period.

<sup>24</sup> Rolf Wiggerhaus, *The Frankfurt School, Its History, Theories, and Political Significance*, (MIT Press, 2007), p.254.

The other major study of the history of the Frankfurt School, Martin Jay's *Dialectical Imagination*, also bears out the picture of deep hostility between the New School and the Frankfurt Institute. Jay recounts Speier's review of the *Study of Anti-Semitism*:

Although the *Studien* was an important link in the Institut's own development, its impact on the outside world was mixed. Largely because of its appearance in German, the American academic community was slow to assimilate its findings and methodology. This process was not abetted by the extremely hostile review the work received in the New School's journal, *Social Research*, at the hands of Hans Speier. Not only did the Institut's Marxist tinge arouse the New School's ire, but so did its enthusiasm for Freud. Max Wertheimer, the founder of Gestalt psychology, was the doyen of the New School's psychologists from 1934 until his death in 1943. His disdain for psychoanalysis was echoed in Speier's disparaging review.<sup>25</sup>

In a peculiar attempt to somehow connect me to various suspect philosophical currents, North notes that I did not mention the fact that Hannah Arendt taught at the New School while I was a student there. He writes,

Steiner did not review the major theoretical influences that he encountered at the New School—though one of its major figures at the time was Hannah Arendt, the former pupil (like Marcuse) of Martin Heidegger.

What does the fact that both Arendt and Marcuse were once students of Heidegger have to do with my "influences"? It certainly fails to establish my "connection" to the Frankfurt School as it is well known that Arendt, like her one-time mentor Heidegger, was a bitter opponent of the Frankfurt School. And whereas Marcuse was of course closely associated with the Frankfurt School, he never had any institutional affiliation with the New School and never even taught there as a visiting lecturer. I did take a couple of classes with Hannah Arendt and whereas I admired her as a writer I cannot detect any particular "influence" she had on me. In any case, as Arendt was hostile to the Frankfurt School, if such influence were to be discovered, it would undermine rather than strengthen North's narrative of my being influenced by the Frankfurt School early in my graduate school career.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Martin Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research, 1923-1950*, (University of California Press, 1973), p.133.

<sup>26</sup> Later on North makes one of his more bizarre attempts to link Marcuse to the New School and through guilt by association, to myself as a student at the New School. In footnote 15 of part II of his piece he writes,

[Marcuse] delivered a lecture at the New School, while Steiner was a student, in which he claimed that among the American "people at large, a configuration of political and psychological conditions point to the existence of a proto-fascist syndrome".

Of what relevance is it to insert "while Steiner was a student" to the above description of Marcuse's lecture at the New School? This is a crude attempt to subliminally link me to Marcuse's lecture, as if I was sitting at Marcuse's feet in admiration. It's a good try by North to manufacture another piece of "evidence" to buttress his fantasy account of my "origins" in the Frankfurt School., but he will not win any cigars for this particular effort. Marcuse gave his lecture in 1970, having been invited by a group of students at the height of the anti-war movement, when he was considered the intellectual guru of the New Left. I joined the Workers League in the spring of that year and was a close sympathizer from at least the beginning of the

North in fact knows nothing about what he calls my “intellectual origins”. These had nothing to do with the Frankfurt School which had hardly more popularity in the 1960s than it had in the 1930s at the New School. Neither in the philosophy department nor in the political science department, where I was taking my courses, was there the slightest sympathy for the Frankfurt School. The only exceptions to the New School’s traditional antipathy to the Frankfurt School that I recall came from the sociology department, which employed one professor who was a follower of Habermas, and from the anthropology department where Stanley Diamond was then doing a kind of critical theory version of anthropology. The philosophy department was of a distinctly conservative temper, dominated by Husserlian phenomenology. The other trends in philosophy that were represented there were Deweyan pragmatism, philosophy of science from a positivist perspective, Ancient philosophy from a Straussian perspective and the occasional visiting professor who would lecture on Hegel or Heidegger. There was not a single Freudian on the faculty. Marcuse would never have been able to get a job at the New School, either in the philosophy department, which hated Marx, nor in the psychology department which was dominated by behaviorists.

To be continued.

[Link to Chapter 1: Concocting a smear campaign: A dash of political blackmail and a serving of pseudo-history](#)

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year. By the time of the lecture I had rejected whatever vague feelings of sympathy I previously harbored for the New Left and was extremely unsympathetic to Marcuse. As it happens, although I was indeed still a graduate student at the time, I did not even attend Marcuse’s lecture. But why let the facts get in the way of a good smear campaign?