

Of sterile flowers, poisonous weeds and a political smokescreen

By Alex Steiner and Frank Brenner

On Jan. 6, the WSWS carried yet another polemic against us, the second one in a week. This one came with a purple prose title, “Adam Haig responds to Alex Steiner’s burst of outrage”.¹

Burst of outrage? This same Haig had four days earlier posted a 17-page attack on us in which he baldly declared that we “cannot be regarded as Marxist-Trotskyists”, claimed that we reject the materialist conception of history, are skeptical about the revolutionary role of the working class and much else.²

We posted a brief response (a little over a page in length) on our website blog in which we pointed out that most of the essay was devoted to using Herbert Marcuse as a straw man and that much of the rest of it brought in irrelevant material regarding Erich Fromm and Slavoj Žižek.³

There was no “burst of outrage” in what we wrote. It is true that we called the title of Haig’s piece pretentious and we characterized his ruminations on Fromm and Žižek as the kind of padding a clever graduate student would engage in, but this is pretty routine stuff in the cut-and-thrust of polemical debate, and given what we were dealing with, it was eminently fair comment. By any objective measure, our criticisms of Haig were a good deal more restrained than his accusations against us.

But that isn’t how Haig saw it. Our brief note enraged him and he vented his anger in a new posting which the WSWS editors were only too happy to run (a point we will come back to). In this latest posting we are accused of writing an “angry response”, of making “several outrageous charges” in our brief note, and that we are supposedly “intent on discrediting the ICFI.” Steiner, “in his hysteria,” apparently “employs a deceitful use of quotation marks”. Later we are told that Steiner “exploded” and later still that Steiner “has no capacity for logical argumentation.” The piece winds up by consigning us to the garbage heap of history (having “embraced Herbert Marcuse, Freud-Marxism, and Utopia ... it is fairly clear where they [i.e. Steiner and Brenner] will end up”).

¹ <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2009/jan2009/haig-j06.shtml>

² Adam Haig, “Steiner, Brenner and Neo-Marxism: The Marcusean Component”, *WSWS*, Jan. 2. 2009: <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2009/jan2009/bren-j02.shtml>.

³ Alex Steiner and Frank Brenner, “A brief note on the publication of ‘Steiner, Brenner and Neo-Marxism: The Marcusean Component’”, permanent-revolution.org, Jan. 2, 2009: <http://www.permanent-revolution.org/forum/2009/01/brief-note-on-publication-of-steiner.html>.

“Hysteria”, “exploded”, “burst of outrage” – the violence of this language is striking. Clearly, the “hysteria” here is Haig’s, not ours. In psychology this is known as projection; in a more familiar idiom it is a case of the pot calling the kettle black.

Some points are in order:

First, it is noteworthy how most of Haig’s invective is directed at Steiner: it is Steiner’s “burst of outrage” that is featured in the title and it is Steiner who is ‘hysterical’, who ‘explodes’ and who “has no capacity for logical argumentation.” This is odd not only because our response to Haig was written and signed by both of us, but also because the theme of Haig’s original essay is the supposedly “Marcusean component” of our position, which is far more Brenner’s province than Steiner’s. Why then single out Steiner in this way? Clearly because this best serves the needs of the smear campaign which the WSWS launched against Steiner back in October.⁴ One of Steiner’s many failings, if we are to believe David North, is that he suffers from “extreme emotional volatility”, and as North’s diligent pupil, Haig has set out to provide some ‘proof’ for that ‘diagnosis’.

Second, Haig’s riposte is not only overheated in its language but also murky in its logic. Take the charge that we employ “a deceitful use of quotation marks.” Haig claims that he never characterized our position as being “that the Frankfurt School critical theory is Marxism.” He then quotes himself, but doesn’t mention that we had actually quoted this full text in our note:

“One of the arguments Steiner and Brenner make is that despite the incompatibilities of the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory with orthodox Marxism, not everything by the critical theorists is worthless. That is beside the point. The question is whether or not Frankfurt School critical theory is Marxism.”

To anyone who can read, the meaning here is clear. We had advanced the view that “not everything by the critical theorists is worthless.” Haig dismisses this view as being “beside the point” and then claims that the “question is whether or not Frankfurt School critical theory is Marxism.” Since he then spends 17 pages answering this question in the negative and associating us with the opposite point of view, this can only mean that he is claiming that our position is that “Frankfurt School critical theory is Marxism.”

But Haig doesn’t want to admit that because to do so would be to concede our point that he has set up a straw man. As we asked in our note, why is it “beside the point” that “not everything by the critical theorists is worthless”? Haig has no answer to this question. Instead he rephrases his remarks as follows:

“Even if one were to accept that not all the work of the Frankfurt School and Marcuse is ‘worthless,’ and that scattered among their voluminous writings are various interesting

⁴ See Alex Steiner, “Unable to answer our political criticisms: The WSWS resorts to a smear campaign”, permanent-revolution.org, Nov. 9, 2008: http://www.permanent-revolution.org/polemics/smear_campaign.htm.

observations, that does not begin to justify Steiner and Brenner's effort to revise, if not replace, modern Marxism (i.e., Trotskyism) with the pseudo-Marxist Frankfurt School.”

But this only confirms our point: Haig is indeed claiming – falsely – that we are attempting “to revise, if not replace, modern Marxism . . . with the pseudo-Marxist Frankfurt School.” As for our real position – i.e. that “not all the work of the Frankfurt School and Marcuse is ‘worthless’” – Haig simply dodges the issue with an “even if”, just as he dodged it before with his remark about it being “beside the point.”

Haig then tries to seal his argument with a quote from Brenner: “Marxism in the 21st century is neither conceivable nor viable without assimilating the best insights of these thinkers.” But this only reiterates our position: we are not for revising Marxism but for “assimilating the best insights” of the critical theorists to it. (And the latter, by the way, includes not just Marcuse but towering intellectual figures of the last century like Walter Benjamin and Georg Lukacs.) Indeed, we are for Marxism “assimilating the best insights” from every field – science, philosophy, culture etc. Any other position amounts to a hopeless dogmatism that is totally alien to the outlook of the great classical Marxists. Read in context, it is clear that this is just what Brenner’s remark was meant to say.⁵

Incidentally, in this same passage, Brenner characterizes critical theory in terms of Lenin’s famous description of philosophical idealism as “a sterile flower” but one “that grows on the living tree . . . of human knowledge.” This rather jars with the claim that we are trying to “revise, if not replace” Marxism with critical theory.

In any case, Haig sets out to prove that there is very little worth assimilating from his chosen target, Marcuse, whom he summarily characterizes as “a reactionary neo-Marxist.” For Haig, Marcuse is much less “a sterile flower” than a poisonous weed, and in his first opus Haig hunts down a page-worth of quotes to prove that a key work of Marcuse’s, *Eros and Civilization*, “adds nothing to scientific thought or socialist theory” and that it constitutes “libidinal fairy tales.”

This kind of quotation-hunting is an intellectually dishonest way of proving whatever one wants to prove. Using the same method, one could show that Hegel, for example, was a hopeless reactionary – a supporter of the Prussian state, a god-believer and spinner of metaphysical “fairy tales”. And one could then take Marx to task for his “eclecticism” in assimilating any ideas from such a figure (as, indeed, Eduard Bernstein, Max Eastman and many others did).

Haig is nothing if not ambitious: having set out to demolish Marcuse, he is also eager to do battle with Freud. We are told that psychoanalysis “is not an experimental or quantitative field”, that Freud’s “methodology” is an “ahistorical subjective idealist orientation,” and then (somewhat

⁵ See Frank Brenner, “On the Vulgar Critique of Vulgar Materialism,” permanent-revolution.org, July 26, 2008: http://www.permanent-revolution.org/polemics/vulgar_critique.pdf, pp. 16-7.

inconsistently) that “Freudian individual psychoanalysis was based on mechanical materialism” and that it was a form of “biological determinism”.⁶

While these objections shed little light on psychoanalysis (we will soon be posting some material that addresses these issues), this strident antipathy to Freud (and Marcuse) is consistent with prevailing opinion in academia. Here it is worth noting Haig’s background in “literary and cultural studies”, since probably no academic field has been more imbued by postmodernism than this one.⁷ The postmodernist rejection of ‘metanarratives’ applies as much to Freud as it does to Marx. And just as relevant here is the postmodernist hostility to utopianism.⁸ It isn’t a

⁶ The only evidence adduced for these sweeping assertions is an essay by the Bolshevik, Aleksandr Voronsky, from the 1920s. In an exchange posted on the WSWS a decade ago Brenner critiqued that essay, noting, among other things, that it was “indicative of the confusion which permeated much of the Soviet discussion about psychoanalysis in the twenties. Sexuality gets barely a mention and the same goes for repression, while the Oedipus complex is dismissed as psycho-pathology, i.e. mental illness.” (See “An exchange of letters on Freudianism and Marxism”, *WSWS*, Nov. 30, 1999: http://www.permanent-revolution.org/essays/intrepid_thought_exchange.htm). Brenner also pointed out that other Marxists, Trotsky among them, had a more positive view of psychoanalysis. Haig gets around Trotsky’s well-known interest in psychoanalysis by saying that, while it is true that Trotsky believed that Freudian theory could be reconciled with materialism, he also felt that it was a “vague and unstable field” prone to “fanciful and arbitrary ideas.” Given what Haig says about Freud’s “subjective idealist orientation” along with his “mechanical materialism” and “biological determinism”, it is hard to see how Trotsky could have found anything positive in psychoanalysis. This is a distorted view of Trotsky’s position, one that makes it seem that his problem with psychoanalysis was that it wasn’t “experimental or quantitative” enough. In fact, Trotsky had, if anything, stronger reservations about the “experimental or quantitative” psychology of his time, exemplified by Pavlov’s reflexology, than he had about psychoanalysis. Brenner discussed Trotsky’s views on this issue in an article he did for the *WSWS* on the history of Soviet psychoanalysis: (See “Intrepid thought – psychoanalysis in the Soviet Union”, part 2, *WSWS*, June 12, 1999: http://www.permanent-revolution.org/essays/intrepid_thought_two.htm.) As noted there, Trotsky came to a view of psychology (particularly in his autobiography, *My Life*, and his *Notebooks 1933-35*) that in some respects foreshadowed the standpoint of none other than Marcuse, a point made by the editor of the *Notebooks*, Philip Pomper: “In this respect, Trotsky was a forerunner of thinkers like Marcuse, who not only saw connections between the repression of Eros and social domination, but believed that the unconscious was not merely a burden, that it contained creative resources that might further historical progress” (*Trotsky’s Notebooks, 1933-35: Writings on Lenin, Dialectics and Evolutionism*, ed. Philip Pomper, New York: Columbia UP, 1986, pp. 72-3). The Trotsky who could make the following statement – “Psychoanalysis, with the inspired hand of Sigmund Freud, has lifted the cover of the well which is poetically called the ‘soul’” – is clearly all but impossible to fathom for anyone trained in the objectivist-blighted version of Marxism that prevails in today’s International Committee.

⁷ Both in *Marxism Without its Head or its Heart* and in Brenner’s essay, “On the vulgar critique of vulgar materialism”, we pointed out that North has consistently misrepresented the relationship between the Frankfurt School and postmodernism, presenting the one as virtually a direct forebear of the other when in fact the postmodernists have a great deal of animosity towards the Frankfurters. Nowhere is that animosity more evident than in cultural studies, a point Brenner drew attention to in “On the vulgar critique of vulgar materialism”, citing Thomas Frank’s incisive account of the 1990s, *One Market Under God: Extreme Capitalism, Market Populism, and the End of Economic Democracy*. Frank devotes a chapter to cultural studies where he notes that the ‘cult-stud’ academics had a particular contempt for Marcuse (as well as Adorno). See: http://www.permanent-revolution.org/polemics/vulgar_critique.pdf, pp. 8-9.

⁸ This was a point we drew attention to in both *Objectivism or Marxism* and *MWHH*. In his recurring attacks on a largely fictitious ‘neo-utopianism’ North completely ignores the affinity between his own stance and the anti-utopianism of postmodernism. For an account of the hostility to utopianism in cultural studies, see chapter 3 of

huge stretch to see in the contemptuous way Haig dismisses Marcuse's "libidinal fairy tales" – which is to say, Marcuse's efforts to envision a non-repressive civilization free of the stranglehold of alienated labor – the lingering influence of his academic studies.

There is much more we could comment on (for example, Haig completely misrepresents Trotsky's argument in *Results and Prospects* which was aimed against the kind of "shallow moralizing" that calls for a "moral awakening" of the working class before it can come to socialist consciousness – a position that is held not by us but by David Walsh of the WSWS editorial board.⁹)

And we could also point out that despite his eagerness to hit back at our brief note, Haig manages to ignore one of the three points that we made (and indeed the one we spent the most space on) – which is that when his original essay was first posted on the WSWS, it had hyperlinks to the documents of ours that he was quoting, but several hours later those hyperlinks were removed and replaced by a deliberately vague reference to "Permanent Revolution", not even indicating whether this was a book, a journal or a website. There is no reasonable explanation for this except that the WSWS editorial board did not want WSWS readers to have direct access to our material so that they could judge for themselves the validity of Haig's arguments. While Haig gets very indignant over our brief note, he has no comment on – and therefore, one has to assume, no objection to – this obvious bit of intellectual bad faith.¹⁰

But let us go back to something we raised earlier – the willingness of the WSWS editorial board to post this second statement of Haig's. Veteran members of that board like North or Walsh would have readily recognized this statement for what it is – an overheated expression of writer's pique by someone relatively new to polemical debate – and in the normal course of things would probably have advised against rushing into (electronic) print.

But clearly the normal course of things doesn't apply when it comes to the polemical dispute with Steiner and Brenner. Back in October, North launched his smear campaign against Steiner, with help from Ann and Chris Talbot; now Haig has been pressed into service for the same basic political agenda – *which is to divert the discussion away from the criticisms we made of the IC leadership's political line.*

According to Haig, we are wrong in claiming that North's series against Steiner is a smear campaign: "This is not demonization, but a well-grounded assessment of their [i.e. Steiner and Brenner's] theoretical and political conceptions." But a central part of our "political conceptions"

Russell Jacoby's *The End of Utopia: Politics and Culture in an Age of Apathy*.

⁹ See Frank Brenner, "Shallow moralizing instead of Marxism", permanent-revolution.org, Dec. 24, 2008: http://www.permanent-revolution.org/polemics/shallow_moralizing.pdf.

¹⁰ For the evidence see the following dossier: http://permanent-revolution.org/polemics/hyperlinks_beforeafter.pdf

is our critique of the IC leadership's politics: how can North (or the Talbots) have provided "a well-grounded assessment" *when they never said a single word about any of these criticisms?*

Let us review the key criticisms we did raise in *Marxism Without its Head or its Heart* (MWHH):

1. We devoted an entire chapter (34 pages) to a detailed analysis of the WSWS line on Iraq. That chapter examined dozens of WSWS articles over a three-year period (2004-2007), and based on that analysis we contended that the party had abandoned the perspective of the permanent revolution in Iraq. The WSWS failed to report on any of the struggles of the Iraqi working class and it never put forward a perspective or program for building a Trotskyist party in Iraq. Instead the WSWS became a left apologist for a bourgeois nationalist Shiite cleric, Moqtada al-Sadr.¹¹
2. We devoted another chapter (29 pages) to examining the party's perspective on the everyday struggles of the working class and the trade unions. We looked at the WSWS's abysmal intervention in the New York City transit strike of December 2005, we showed how the SEP had come to adopt an abstentionist propagandism completely alien to the traditions of Trotskyism, and how the party had become almost totally estranged from the working class in its political activity.¹²
3. We also looked at the shameful record of the WSWS and the SEP in relation to the mass demonstrations that swept Mexico in the summer of 2006 in protest over the ruling party's attempt to steal the presidential election. While over a million workers marched through the streets of Mexico City (or fought pitched battles with police in Oaxaca), the SEP made no effort to intervene in this mass movement, to hold a meeting or even issue a programmatic statement on the crisis. Whatever coverage there was on the WSWS were routine rewrites from the bourgeois press, and only one article was ever translated into Spanish.¹³

Were we writing MWHH today, we could have added to this list the SEP's record in the 2008 US presidential election. Given that this election was held under conditions of an unprecedented global economic and political crisis, it was probably never more crucial that the voice of revolutionary socialism be heard than in this campaign. Instead the SEP ran as close to a non-campaign as was possible without being explicitly abstentionist: they made no effort to get ballot status in any state (and the free mass media time this would have meant), and even the write-in campaign they were supposedly running was treated as an empty formality.¹⁴

¹¹ http://www.permanent-revolution.org/polemics/mwhh_ch02.pdf

¹² http://www.permanent-revolution.org/polemics/mwhh_ch05.pdf

¹³ http://www.permanent-revolution.org/polemics/mwhh_ch01.pdf

¹⁴ See our blog entries: "The SEP's 2008 election campaign", Oct. 22, 2008: http://www.permanent-revolution.org/forum/labels/election_2008.html and "A footnote to the SEP's 2008 election campaign", Nov. 18, 2008: <http://www.permanent-revolution.org/forum/2008/11/my-less-than-briliant-career-as-write.html>.

Given both the seriousness and the extent of these criticisms, anyone functioning on the basis of Marxist principles would have made it a top priority to address these matters. But this is precisely *not* how North (and the Talbots) behaved when they came out with their response to MWHH in October. As Steiner pointed out in his initial response to the North series:

Faced with this “careful and exhaustive analysis” of major aspects of his party’s political line, North’s response has been to say ***absolutely nothing about any of these issues!*** Instead he has decided to say a great deal about me.

To anyone not blinded by an unthinking party loyalty, it should be obvious what is going on here: North has no answers to our criticisms, and so to avoid discussing them he has resorted to an ad hominem attack. Even if North’s claims about me weren’t full of distortions and lies, even if I were an idealist, a Frankfurt School devotee and “emotionally volatile” to boot – none of this has any bearing on the SEP’s political line. Either our criticisms of the latter are valid or they aren’t, and the only principled way to respond to them would have been to address their substance with the kind of “careful and exhaustive analysis” that North demanded in relation to the party’s political line. That neither North nor the Talbots have a word to say on any of these issues exposes the thoroughly unprincipled nature of their document. Beneath their many claims to be defending the heritage of Marxism lies a cynical and demagogic agenda that is a discredit to Marxism.¹⁵

Needless to say, Haig has not a word to say about any of these issues either. We are perfectly prepared to discuss Marcuse, Freud, utopianism etc. (in MWHH we addressed every one of North’s many distortions of our views on these matters), but we are convinced, particularly after the posting of the second article by Haig, that the WSWS editorial board’s agenda here has little to do with a desire for genuine clarification on these issues. Instead, they are using Haig’s effusions against Marcuse (and his juvenile rant against us) as a *political smokescreen* so as to cover up the embarrassing truth that they have no answers to our political criticisms.

Let us make this point again: even if everything that Haig says about us is true, even if we are the devotees of Marcuse that he claims, none of this has any bearing on our political criticisms. Are those criticisms right or are they wrong? Readers of the WSWS should be warned: any further broadsides against Steiner and Brenner that don’t address these political criticisms are just adding more smoke to this ongoing smokescreen.

¹⁵ Alex Steiner, “Unable to answer our political criticisms: The WSWS resorts to a smear campaign”, permanent-revolution.org, Nov. 9, 2008: http://www.permanent-revolution.org/polemics/smear_campaign.htm.