

Chapter 6:

The Real Dialectic of the Enlightenment

In the section “Marxism and the Enlightenment”, North makes a statement with which we can agree,

Your differences with the International Committee are not over isolated programmatic points, but rather over the most fundamental questions of philosophical world outlook upon which the struggle for socialism is based. (62) ¹

The rest of this section is an exercise in philosophical charlatanry. North’s basic thesis is that because we have criticized the WSWS for its uncritical cheerleading of the Enlightenment, that we are therefore opponents of the Enlightenment and Reason and have made common cause with postmodernism and other forms of subjective idealism. This falsification of our position is in keeping with the cynical and dishonest approach characterizing North’s document as a whole. The flavor of North’s prose is evident right at the start:

A principled approach to polemics requires that the arguments of an opponent be presented accurately. The fact that you are unable to do this, that you feel compelled to mislead and misrepresent – in effect, to lie – has, itself, serious and disturbing political implications. As Trotsky pointed out, the lie serves an essential function in political life: it is employed to conceal social interests and to cover over weaknesses and contradictions in a political position. In your case, the dishonest methods flow from your efforts to pose publicly as a Marxist while having rejected – and not all that unconsciously – the theoretical and political foundations of Marxism. (61)

Indeed we agree that “a principled approach to polemics requires that the arguments of an opponent be presented accurately”. How accurate are North’s representations of our position? As will become clear, North’s level of misrepresentation in this section of his document is prodigious, even when judged by the low level set by his document as a whole.

North’s case rests on one small excerpt from our document *Objectivism or Marxism* that he quotes out of context. He completely ignores the many other much more comprehensive statements that we have made about the Enlightenment in our other documents. After presenting a lengthy quote from a lecture he gave at the WSWS Summer School of 2005, North writes that,

You proceed to attack this analysis, writing in response:

¹ We would make one qualification of this statement. Our differences are with the mechanical and pragmatic outlook that North has developed in the past decade. We do not believe that the International Committee is a monolith and we do not believe that North speaks for every member of the International Committee.

Anyone defending the Enlightenment heritage of reason is progressive and anyone against is reactionary. But this crude dichotomy obscures the important truth that in the battle over reason Marxism has to fight on *two* fronts – against irrationalism (whether in the form of religious mysticism or the Nihilism of the Nietzsche-Heidegger line and its postmodern derivatives) but also against the much more pervasive “reason” of bourgeois society that rationalizes class domination (notably in the form of pragmatism and empiricism). In the latter sense Marxism represents a dialectical negation of the Enlightenment: Marx stripped away the “reason” of the Enlightenment philosophes and uncovered the rationalizations of a new form of class oppression. (65-66)

North’s excerpt from our statement omits some important sentences that precede as well as follow it, both of which are essential in providing the context of our remarks. The following is an accurate excerpt from our document, with the sentences excised by North highlighted:

Philosophical problems are reduced to a simple litmus test – for or against objective reality; beyond that, they are a mere sideshow to politics. Hurling a few very belated barbs at postmodernism is not the development of revolutionary theory but its evasion.

4. This evasion is especially evident in the way the critique of postmodernism is used to sanction an uncritical defense of the Enlightenment. Anyone defending the Enlightenment heritage of reason is progressive and anyone against is reactionary. But this crude dichotomy obscures the important truth that in the battle over reason Marxism has to fight on *two* fronts – against irrationalism (whether in the form of religious mystification or the nihilism of the Nietzsche-Heidegger line and its postmodern derivatives) but also against the much more pervasive ‘reason’ of bourgeois society that rationalizes class domination (notably in the form of pragmatism and empiricism). In the latter sense Marxism represents a dialectical negation of the Enlightenment: Marx stripped away the ‘reason’ of the Enlightenment philosophes and uncovered the rationalizations of a new form of class oppression. **To ignore this dialectical break is to blur the distinction between Marxism and liberalism, which is all for being ‘reasonable’ and ‘realistic’. And ironically this ends up lending credibility to Nietzschean-style irrationalism, whose appeal largely derives from identifying reason as such with the debased reason of bourgeois society.**

In the truncated version of what we wrote, North makes much of our statement that, “Anyone defending the Enlightenment heritage of reason is progressive and anyone against is reactionary.”

He writes,

This is a complete muddle. First of all, your use of the pronoun “anyone” is sufficiently obscure to prevent the reader from clearly identifying the tendencies to which you are referring. (66)

Our use of the pronoun “anyone” is perfectly clear when read in the context of the preceding sentence. We are characterizing the vulgarization of philosophy orchestrated by North wherein there are good guys and bad guys and if you support the good guys you are progressive and if you support the bad guys you are a reactionary. The “anyone” in our statement is the ideal

subject of North's perorations on postmodernism and the Enlightenment. If only philosophy were that simple.

The Contradictions of the Enlightenment

What this non-dialectical approach misses completely is the contradictory nature of the Enlightenment itself, a topic to which we will return shortly. It also glosses over the fundamental difference between those critics of the Enlightenment who took forward the gains of the *philosophes* of the 18th century while overcoming their theoretical limitations and the reactionary opponents of the Enlightenment inspired by the *Ancien Regime* and the Church. Under North's Manichean system of classification, all are labeled as opponents of the Enlightenment.

In our remarks, we began with a criticism of the superficial approach to philosophical issues that characterizes much of the writing one finds on the WSWS. This approach basically reduces all philosophical issues to the question of whether one is for or against objective reality, transforming philosophy into a comic book caricature of itself. We then point out that this approach to philosophy is not accidental, but serves a definite political content, namely to blur the differences between Marxism and liberalism. In opposition to this distortion of Marxism, we maintained that Marxism is in a battle not only against subjective idealism and all forms of irrationalism, but also against those philosophical schools that claim to defend objective reality but whose notion of objective reality encompasses an adaptation to bourgeois society. We cited the uncritical approach toward the Enlightenment as a notable example of the manner in which a bridge is built between Marxism and liberalism.

Furthermore, there was nothing "vague" or "obscure" about the targets of our criticism. To make this claim North has to once again ignore our previous written statements on this subject. He ignores the fact that Steiner, in his 2004 document, included the following extensive comment on this issue,

Parallel to the reevaluation of contemporary philosophical trends there has been a reevaluation of the history of philosophy. This has been particularly evident in relation to an uncritical enthusiasm over the Enlightenment in the pages of the World Socialist Web Site for the past several years. Increasingly, Marxism has been portrayed as the modern continuation of the Enlightenment. All but forgotten is the fact that Marx inherited and took to a higher level the critique of the Enlightenment found in Hegel. This view is spelled out in one of Marx's earliest published pieces, his essay *On the Jewish Question*. There he takes as a given the inadequacy of the bourgeois liberal conception of freedom and equality... In recent years, a series of articles have presented a reassessment, and in my opinion a distortion, of the Marxist critique of liberal political and social theory. While it is certainly correct to defend the gains represented by bourgeois theories of constitutional law from the ahistorical attacks of the postmodernists, this impulse has been developed one-sidedly to the point where the critique of bourgeois theories has become emasculated. Icons of bourgeois liberalism such as Hobbes, Locke and Jefferson have been elevated at the expense of the historical ancestors of modern communism, Winstanley, Munzer or Babeuf. I thought it somewhat peculiar that a recent obituary of the historian Christopher Hill criticized him for not recognizing the importance of Locke while at the same time barely mentioning Hill's most important book, *The World Turned Upside Down*, where Hill drew a memorable

portrait of those personages involved in the English Revolution who went beyond the bounds of bourgeois property relations. ("These the times... this the man": an appraisal of historian Christopher Hill, by Ann Talbot, http://www.wsws.org/articles/2003/mar2003/hill-m25_prn.shtml) In that book you will find the following spirited defense of one of the great precursors of the communist movement while at the same time providing a critique of the misanthropic bourgeois philosopher Thomas Hobbes.

"For Hobbes, reason 'is nothing but reckoning (that is adding and subtracting) of the consequences of general names agreed upon for the marking and signifying of our thoughts.' But for Winstanley Reason is Love, is Christ rising in the sons and daughters of God: the bloom is restored to science, to the universe which is the clothing of God. Winstanley's mythological, poetic approach is at the opposite pole to Hobbes's abstractions, just as it is poles apart from Hobbes's Calvinist assumptions about the inherent selfishness and competitiveness of natural man. Hobbes thought that man's ruling passion was fear of death: Winstanley wanted all men to choose life, and to have it more abundantly" (392-3). Hill was here echoing the assessment made by Marx, who located Hobbes in the tradition of mechanical materialism...

The reevaluation of the Enlightenment has served a definite political function. It has served to justify a philosophical blurring of the lines between socialism and liberalism. Indeed, about the only criticism made of liberalism in recent years is that liberalism is cowardly and has betrayed its own principles. I might add that the door has been left open, mostly through a lack of criticism, to the suggestion that liberalism and socialism are not necessarily irreconcilable opposites.²

Is this not a clear and concrete discussion that identifies those philosophical and political tendencies that we think are being strengthened by the uncritical enthusing over the Enlightenment? We can add that in recent years, the traditional liberal defense of the Enlightenment has been complemented by a distinct form of right wing Enlightenment boosterism. Proponents of this intellectual trend include such figures as Sam Harris and Christopher Hitchens. Harris, in his book, *Letters to a Christian Nation*, defends a version of Western Enlightenment culture that is distinctly chauvinist and supportive of "humane" imperialism. Hitchens, as is well known, is a former leftist who has become an enthusiastic supporter of the Bush Administration and its "War on Terror". But Hitchens puts his own spin on his support for the Bush Administration. He claims that the Left has abandoned the Enlightenment (and indeed there is some truth to that statement when applied to most petty bourgeois radical groups) whereas the Bush Administration is defending those very values by exporting the principles of Western democracy to Iraq. In the face of such gangrenous claims to the legacy of the Enlightenment, the task of Marxists, one would think, would be to stake out an understanding of the Enlightenment such that it is clearly differentiated from both the liberal and right wing narratives. Conversely, an oversimplified and schematized version of the Enlightenment can only lend credence to the liberal and right wing accounts.

In his zeal to paint us as defenders of irrationalism North illustrates the very simplistic "either-or" logic we have criticized. While ignoring our comments about the need for Marxists to battle against irrationalism, he claims that in criticizing his discussion of postmodernism, we must be supporters of those people he is criticizing. He writes,

² *The Dialectical Path of Cognition and Revolutionizing Practice:*
http://www.permanent-revolution.org/polemics/dialectical_path.pdf

In the passage to which you object, I attacked the basic concept of post-modernism, which claims that the “modernist” project based on the belief in the possibility of human progress – dating back to the Enlightenment and lasting through much of the 20th century – ended in failure. Your response to this passage in my lecture can only signify that you identify with the positions that I am criticizing. (66)

First of all, North’s claim that we object to some passage of a lecture he gave at the Summer School of 2005 is a product of his own imagination. We made no comment whatsoever on this lecture.³ North simply makes this bald assertion without providing a single quote, assuming that his readers have not read our statements. But that is not all. Building his case on top of our non-existent comments on his passage, he then compounds his false statement with a classic example of a logical fallacy. He states that,

Your response to this passage in my lecture can only signify that you identify with the positions that I am criticizing. (66)

As any student of elementary logic should know, the fact that one does not agree with Socrates arguments against Thrasymachus (in Plato’s *Republic*) does not mean that one is thereby forced to agree with Thrasymachus’s arguments against Socrates. The fact that we may not agree with North’s treatment of postmodernism does not mean that we are therefore fated to be defenders of postmodernism.⁴

Our critique of the WSWS discussion of the Enlightenment did not depend on some specific lecture given by North at the Summer School of 2005. North’s 2005 lecture in fact presents nothing new in relation to the IC’s assessment of the Enlightenment and postmodernism. Our brief remarks in *Marxism or Objectivism* consisted of a few general considerations summing up our assessment of the attitude of the WSWS as a whole toward the Enlightenment. As we have shown, Steiner in his 2004 document gave some very specific examples of the problem with this approach.

Shadow-Boxing with Postmodernism

³ The absurdity and dishonesty behind North’s claim that we are sympathizers of postmodernism can be easily demonstrated by a perusal of some of our work. For instance, the last section of Steiner’s essay on Martin Heidegger contains a trenchant critique of postmodernism:

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

In addition, Steiner replied to a reader of the series on Heidegger with yet another critique of postmodernism:

<http://www.wsws.org/articles/2000/nov2000/heid-n01.shtml>

These essays were published in the World Socialist Web Site with North’s approval. In addition, Steiner includes a discussion of postmodernism and its antipathy to genuine dialectics in his essay on irony after 9/11, *The End of Irony or the Irony of Ends*. This essay was submitted to the WSWS for publication but the editorial board chose not to publish it and never provided any explanation for their decision.

http://www.permanent-revolution.org/essays/end_irony.pdf

⁴ The technical term for this type of logical fallacy is the “Undistributed Middle Term”. It is however better known in ordinary parlance as the fallacy of “guilt by association”. North is quite fond of this mode of argumentation. He employs the exact same ‘logic’ elsewhere to prove that we are defenders of the labor bureaucracy because we have criticized the IC’s abstentionist approach in relation to struggles in the unions.

Furthermore, because we have been critical of the WSWS's presentation of the Enlightenment, it does not follow that we disagree with every single sentence in every single paragraph that has been written about the Enlightenment in the pages of the WSWS. To be more specific, the fact that North has a one-sided understanding of the Enlightenment and postmodernism does not mean that he is wrong when he criticizes Rorty and the attitude of contempt for history shown by postmodernism as a whole.

What we have focused on in our remarks is that in confining his polemics almost entirely in the direction of Rorty and the postmodernist opponents of the Enlightenment, North is standing on safe ground. He refuses to confront the more serious ideological threat to Marxism that comes in the guise of a false objectivity represented by the schools of positivism, empiricism and pragmatism. Furthermore, North's critique of postmodernism is confined to its most extravagant practitioners and fails to consider the arguments of its more serious advocates. It is not terribly difficult to poke fun at the stupidities of postmodernist "science", as Alan Sokol has done, or the latest *bon mot* from an obscure academic. It is much more of a challenge to take on Foucault or Derrida. The professor Jenkins's of the world who are the primary targets of North's polemics are doing nothing more than repeating in a more or less vulgarized form slogans they have been taught at the feet of Foucault and Derrida. If you want to really "deconstruct" postmodernist thought, then you need to go to its source.⁵

Nor can a serious critique of postmodernism rest its case on the principles of the Enlightenment. Even North admits as much in his own backhanded way when he refers to the "the historically-conditioned illusions of the Enlightenment thinkers". That is why we have maintained that a genuine critique of "post-rational thought" can only be undertaken on the basis of the more profound concept of Reason that Marxism makes possible. Insofar as this is not done, it allows postmodernism to get off the hook.

North's analysis of postmodernism pays little attention to the historical evolution of this school of thought. In fact, he entirely fails to differentiate postmodernism from other contemporary forms of bourgeois thought. This is what is behind his protests at our insistence that postmodernism is a fad on the wane. He writes elsewhere in his document,

A petty-bourgeois academic, who flits from one half-baked conception to another, may describe postmodernism as a "fad," especially as he prepares to jump on some new intellectual bandwagon without bothering to give a proper accounting of his last philosophical escapade. But that is not how a Marxist appraises the significance of a theoretical trend. What one or another subjective-idealist philosophical tendency calls itself is secondary. The main issue is its relationship to the history of philosophy. (20)

What a petty-bourgeois academic calls his school of thought may be a secondary issue, but it is not one that should be ignored. North simply conflates all forms of subjective idealism under the

⁵ In contrast to North's theoretically impoverished remarks on postmodernism, there have been a number of good studies on the subject, some of them from a Marxist perspective. One of the best of these is Alex Callinicos, *Against Postmodernism: A Marxist Critique*, (St. Martins Press, 1990). Although we cannot agree with all of Callinicos's arguments and we part company with him politically, his book is on the whole an excellent discourse on the subject. It should also be noted that Callinicos's book was first published in 1989, whereas North didn't find time to get to the topic of postmodernism for another decade.

common rubric of “postmodernism”. Is North really unaware that the heroic days of French postmodernism are long since over, having been eclipsed by the rise of the right wing New Philosophers such as André Glucksman, Alain Finkielkraut and Bernard-Henri Lévy? ⁶ Is he not aware that the followers of Heidegger in Germany are today being challenged by the followers of Habermas, who has lead the remnants of what was once “critical theory” into the clutches of American pragmatism? ⁷ Is he not aware that postmodernism never obtained substantial recruits among the philosophy departments of American and English universities who remained wedded to various versions of positivism and analytic philosophy?

True, postmodernism still commands considerable support within literature departments in the United States. And postmodernist thought permeates the various ethnic studies departments and other disciplines inspired by the identity politics of the last two or three decades. But even in these areas one can see signs that the truisms of postmodernist thought are no longer taken for granted. In any case, when you weigh up the influence of the cultural studies departments and their allies, it barely makes a dent when compared to the influence of engineering schools and centers of scientific research such as MIT. And there are hardly any postmodernists there at all. Yet it is to the latter as well as places like Harvard Business School that the bourgeoisie will turn as it grooms the leaders of the next generation of American and world capitalism.

If one looks at the intellectual products emanating from these quarters, one finds mostly positivist and reductionist theories of science and society. From the mechanical conceptions of “evolutionary psychology” (a new name for “sociobiology”) to the various proponents of what is called “philosophy of mind”, the impetus of all the literature emanating from these institutions are heavily laden with theories that explain human behavior in terms of genes and neuro-transmitters. ⁸ And since the dominant ideologies of any period are the ideologies of the ruling class, such theories do not remain within the Ivory towers of Harvard and other elite institutions. They eventually find their way into the thinking of ordinary people through the transmission of popular articles in the press and the mass media. They also begin to influence the various left wing and radical movements that fail to consciously struggle against them. This much should be clear from the history of pragmatism and its influence on the Marxist movement in the 20th century.

⁶ Even WSWS journalist Stefan Steinberg acknowledged the prominence of Glucksman, Finkielkraut and Lévy in a recent article chronicling the support of the New Philosophers for Nicolas Sarkozy. “Prominent French intellectuals rally to presidential candidate Nicolas Sarkozy” March 3, 2007:

<http://www.wsws.org/articles/2007/mar2007/fran-m03.shtml>

All of which leads to an obvious rejoinder to North – if the New Philosophers are so prominent today then the postmodernists (who first came to prominence in the early 1970s) must be somewhat less “prominent”. That is to say, they are a fad on the wane.

⁷ Some of Habermas’ most recent theoretical work has been concerned with the American sociologist, George Herbert Meade, a contemporary of Dewey and prominent pragmatist of the first part of the 20th century.

⁸ A rather extreme version of reductionism are the theories advocated by Paul and Patricia Churchland, who expect to see a world in which all conscious thought is someday reduced to the working of the brain. A recent article on this husband and wife team who have become very influential in both scientific and philosophical circles states of Paul that, “[He] likes to imagine a world in which language has disappeared altogether. . . Presumably it will someday be possible for two brains to be linked artificially. . . and to exchange thoughts infinitely faster than the muddled, custom clotted, serially processed medium of speech”. (Larissa MacFarquhar, *A Two Heads: A Marriage Devoted to the Mind-Body Problem*, The New Yorker, Feb 12, 2007, p.69.) In other words, the ideal of this *scientistic* dystopia is a world in which anything human, such as language and culture, is replaced by biological functions.

But none of this is of any concern to North. Having identified the enemy as the ahistorical bogeyman that he labels postmodernism, he is able to blithely ignore the intellectual trends of the past two decades. It's all so much internal bickering among the petty bourgeois as far as he is concerned. Yet even if it were the case, to cite one example, that the debates between Habermas and Foucault were just an internal affair, is it not of any interest for Marxists to follow the evolution of such contemporary cultural and philosophical movements?

Lumping Together the Moderate Enlightenment and the Radical Enlightenment

It is not only postmodernism that is vulgarized and distorted in North's employment of that term, but the Enlightenment likewise falls victim to North's fundamentally vulgar and ahistorical approach. For the Enlightenment was never a unified movement, it was never simply one pole of an opposition to reaction, or as depicted by North,

The revolutionary thinkers of the 17th and 18th centuries forged the weapons that were ultimately to be used by the new socialist movement and emerging working class against bourgeois society in the 19th century. It was the betrayal of the ideals of reason by the bourgeoisie in the aftermath of the French Revolution that provided so much of the theoretical impulse for the critique of bourgeois society. (67)

North does not tell us which "revolutionary thinkers" of the 17th and 18th century he has in mind. This is a convenient dodge for it allows North to paper over the historical fact that there were, according to the eminent historian Jonathan Israel, at least three different tendencies at work during the 17th and 18th centuries. The first of these is what most conventional historians think of as the Enlightenment and identified with such figures as Locke, Voltaire, Montesquieu and Lessing. Another major tendency contending for the hearts and minds of the public in this period was the Catholic-inspired Counter Enlightenment that waged war against the philosophes on the basis of a defense of tradition, authority and of course religion. Finally there was a third tendency which has not been widely recognized till recently, what Jonathan Israel called the Radical Enlightenment. This movement was identified above all with Spinoza, but also included such figures as Bayle and Diderot. The figures of the Radical Enlightenment were not satisfied with toleration and compromise, the watchwords of the Moderate Enlightenment of Montesquieu and Locke, but sought to base society on the principles of Reason and equality. Although they were also caught up in illusions about the possibilities of freedom within bourgeois society, they were much more likely to be advocates not just of empty "rights" for all but that the bounty of society should be enjoyed by all. As Jonathan Israel's book, *Enlightenment Contested* dramatically shows, there were as many polemics between defenders of the Moderate Enlightenment and those of the Radical Enlightenment as there was between the former and the Counter Enlightenment. In Israel's words, the heritage of the Enlightenment is a contradictory one:

From the outset then, in the late seventeenth century, there were always two enlightenments. Neither the historian nor the philosopher is likely to get very far with discussing 'modernity' unless he or she starts by differentiating Radical Enlightenment from conservative – or as it

is called in this study – moderate mainstream Enlightenment. For the difference between reason alone and reason combined with faith and tradition was a ubiquitous and absolute difference. Philosophically, ‘modernity’ conceived as an abstract package of basic values – toleration, personal freedom, democracy, equality racial and sexual, freedom of expression, sexual emancipation, and the universal right to knowledge and ‘enlightenment’ – derives, as we have seen, from just one of these two, namely the Radical Enlightenment; historically however, ‘modernity’ is the richly nuanced brew which arose as a result of the ongoing conflict not just between these two enlightenments but also (or still more) between both enlightenments, on the one hand, and, on the other, the successive counter-enlightenments, beginning with Bossuet and culminating in Postmodernism, rejecting all these principles and seeking to overthrow both streams of Enlightenment.⁹

It would thus be much more accurate to say that it was the Radical Enlightenment, (not simply “the Enlightenment”) that prepared the way for the radical egalitarian movements of the 19th, 20th and 21st centuries, including the socialist movement. North’s conflation of the Radical Enlightenment with the Moderate Enlightenment is but another bridge he builds between the pioneers of modern liberalism and those of modern socialism. North’s brush is so broad that it erases all differences, whether he is talking about pragmatism, postmodernism or the Enlightenment. But as Nietzsche said (in *The Gay Science*), “To perceive resemblances everywhere is a sign of weak eyesight.” North’s eyesight has proved very poor indeed when it comes to discerning the differences between heterogeneous intellectual and cultural trends.

Covering up the Limitations of the Enlightenment

There is something else that needs to be said. Even the Radical Enlightenment does not provide us with an uninterrupted line of continuity between the 18th century and the revolutionary outlook of Marxism. Rather we have insisted that the Enlightenment (and in this case specifically the Radical Enlightenment) had to be dialectically sublated, ie, at once preserved and overcome in order to serve as a point of departure for Marxism.¹⁰ North claims otherwise and on this point he has a fundamental disagreement not only with us but with the entire tradition of Marxism as we will demonstrate shortly.

North tries to deflect attention away from his own position by painting a false picture of our position. He claims that we see no value in the Enlightenment, that we reject it in the manner of Horkheimer, Adorno and Foucault. This is the import of his statement that,

In a manner that crudely suggests that the Reason of the Enlightenment thinkers merely provided rationalizations for class oppression, your passage conflates into one undifferentiated and ahistorical process the mighty theoretical struggles that laid the intellectual foundations for the great bourgeois revolutions of the 18th century and the socio-economic reality of the bourgeois-capitalistic societies that emerged eventually from those upheavals. (66-67)

⁹ Jonathan Israel, *Enlightenment Contested: Philosophy, Modernity, and the Emancipation of Man 1670-1752*, (Oxford University Press, 2006), p.11.

¹⁰ To make this assertion it is necessary to get beyond the perspective of Jonathan Israel and other liberal and radical historians of the Enlightenment. As much as there is of value in Israel’s work, he fails to recognize the limitations of the Radical Enlightenment.

The key to North's falsification here is the interjection of that word "merely". Nowhere in anything that we have written have we ever said that the Enlightenment "merely" provided rationalizations for class oppression. What we have maintained on a number of occasions is that the Enlightenment had the seeds within it for spawning both liberalism and Marxism, that it provided an ambivalent legacy. Insofar as the mystifications of private property were not overcome in the theory of the Enlightenment, it does indeed provide the ideological basis for liberalism and the rationalization of class oppression. But that is certainly not the entire content of the Enlightenment. For in its most radical versions, the thinkers of the Enlightenment tended to reject social inequality and class oppression. But to provide a useful social theory, the egalitarian instincts of the Radical Enlightenment had to be liberated from the straightjacket of a way of thinking which was stuck in the tradition of dualism combined with mechanical materialism that it inherited from Descartes. This overcoming of the shortcomings of the Enlightenment was the theoretical work that animated the very earliest writings of Marx.

North does not agree. He claims that there is a straight line of development from the Enlightenment to Marxism, that the sole problem with the Enlightenment was that that bourgeoisie betrayed its principles after the French Revolution.

It was the betrayal of the ideals of reason by the bourgeoisie in the aftermath of the French Revolution that provided so much of the theoretical impulse for the critique of bourgeois society. Moreover, your claim that the Enlightenment philosophers provided "rationalizations of a new form of class oppression" is grotesquely one-sided and basically false. You simply ignore the implicitly communist theories advanced by Enlightenment thinkers, and seem to be unaware that the materialist philosophy of the Enlightenment, notwithstanding its limitations, tended in the direction of the repudiation of property and inequality. (67)

Historically speaking North's depiction of the "betrayal of the ideals of reason by the bourgeoisie in the aftermath of the French Revolution" is utter nonsense. The French Revolution, particularly in its radical Jacobin phase, did not betray the ideals of reason – *it realized those ideals*. That was certainly the view of Engels, who in writing about the relationship between the ideals of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution, says the following:

The French Revolution had realized this rational society and government. But the new order of things, rational enough as compared with earlier conditions, turned out to be by no means absolutely rational.¹¹

¹¹ The quote is taken from Engels classic, *Socialism Utopian and Scientific*. It is worth reproducing a longer excerpt from this work to see just how sharply Engels polemical knife cuts through the unresolved contradictions of the Enlightenment.

We saw how the French philosophers of the 18th century, the forerunners of the Revolution, appealed to reason as the sole judge of all that is. A rational government, rational society, were to be founded; everything that ran counter to eternal reason was to be remorselessly done away with. We saw also that this eternal reason was in reality nothing but the idealized understanding of the 18th century citizen, just then evolving into the bourgeois. The French Revolution had realized this rational society and government.

But the new order of things, rational enough as compared with earlier conditions, turned out to be by no means absolutely rational. The state based upon reason completely collapsed. Rousseau's *Contrat*

The ideals of the *philosophes* entailed the creation of a modern bourgeois republic with guaranteed rights for all citizens under the rule of law. Those ideals never included the abolition of property with the notable exception of some of the followers of the proto-communist Babeuf. Even Marat, the most radical figure among the Jacobins, never advocated the abolition of private property. Rather what the Jacobins, lead by Robespierre and St. Juste, accomplished was to put flesh and blood on the theories of the 18th century *philosophes* and materialists. Far from challenging the rule of private property, the French Revolution, by realizing the ideals of the Enlightenment, insured the triumph of the bourgeoisie throughout continental Europe. While this was a genuinely progressive development in world history, it should not be forgotten that at the same time it forged new chains around the necks of the working class.

The new forms of capitalist oppression were hardly discernable to even the most radical theorists of the 18th century and we do not blame them or dismiss them on that account. But neither do we paper over the theoretical leap that separates Marx from his 18th century predecessors. By the time Marx was writing in the middle of the 19th century, those same ideals that once inspired the French Revolution were being used as the justification for the worst forms of class oppression. Marx nicely parodied this new form of oppression, in which it is not the army of the king that forces the proletariat to toil all his life, but the very principles of Freedom, Equality, Property and Bentham.¹²

The sphere of circulation or commodity exchange, within whose boundaries the sale and purchase of labour-power goes on, is in fact a very Eden of the innate rights of man. It is the exclusive realm of Freedom, Equality, Property and Bentham. Freedom because both buyer

Social had found its realization in the Reign of Terror, from which the bourgeoisie, who had lost confidence in their own political capacity, had taken refuge first in the corruption of the Directorate, and, finally, under the wing of the Napoleonic despotism. The promised eternal peace was turned into an endless war of conquest. The society based upon reason had fared no better. The antagonism between rich and poor, instead of dissolving into general prosperity, had become intensified by the removal of the guild and other privileges, which had to some extent bridged it over, and by the removal of the charitable institutions of the Church. The “freedom of property” from feudal fetters, now veritably accomplished, turned out to be, for the small capitalists and small proprietors, the freedom to sell their small property, crushed under the overmastering competition of the large capitalists and landlords, to these great lords, and thus, as far as the small capitalists and peasant proprietors were concerned, became “freedom *from* property”. The development of industry upon a capitalistic basis made poverty and misery of the working masses conditions of existence of society. Cash payment became more and more, in Carlyle’s phrase [See Thomas Carlyle, *Past and Present*, London 1843], the sole nexus between man and man. The number of crimes increased from year to year. Formerly, the feudal vices had openly stalked about in broad daylight; though not eradicated, they were now at any rate thrust into the background. In their stead, the bourgeois vices, hitherto practiced in secret, began to blossom all the more luxuriantly. Trade became to a greater and greater extent cheating. The “fraternity” of the revolutionary motto was realized in the chicanery and rivalries of the battle of competition. Oppression by force was replaced by corruption; the sword, as the first social lever, by gold. The right of the first night was transferred from the feudal lords to the bourgeois manufacturers. Prostitution increased to an extent never heard of. Marriage itself remained, as before, the legally recognized form, the official cloak of prostitution, and, moreover, was supplemented by rich crops of adultery.

In a word, compared with the splendid promises of the philosophers, the social and political institutions born of the “triumph of reason” were bitterly disappointing caricatures.

¹² The principle of “Bentham” is Marx’s amusing reference to the English philosopher Jeremy Bentham who theorized that the innate selfish desires of every individual could be harnessed to serve the greater good of society if society was organized according to the principles of utility.

and seller of a commodity, let us say of labour-power, are determined only by their free will. They contract as free persons, who are equal before the law. Their contract is the final result in which their joint will finds a common legal expression. Equality, because each enters into a relation with the other, as with a simple owner of commodities, and they exchange equivalent for equivalent. Property because each disposes only of what is his own. And Bentham, because each looks only to his own advantage. The only force bringing them together, and putting them into relation with each other, is the selfishness, the gain and the private interests of each. Each pays heed to himself only, and no one worries about the others. And precisely for that reason, either in accordance with the pre-established harmony of things, or under the auspices of an omniscient providence, they all work together to their mutual advantage, for the common weal, and in the common interest.¹³

What should be remembered in reading this well-known passage is that Marx is *not* condemning the bourgeoisie for betraying their ideals. Rather what he is bringing out is that it is the very realization of those ideals that reveals what was previously hidden, a new form of class oppression, but one that cannot even be conceived of in terms of those ideals.¹⁴ Within the framework provided by those ideals, as long as the buyer and seller of labour-power are not being coerced to make their choices, it is impossible to speak of class oppression. Yet we know that this formal equality under the law masks a fundamental inequality. As much as the worker knows this instinctively, it will require a fundamental theoretical leap to scientifically cognize this new form of class oppression in its specificity. Marx devoted much of his life to this theoretical project in which he actively engaged with and overcame the limitations of the ideals of the Enlightenment.

Is there a Marxist Critique of the Enlightenment?

North is apparently oblivious to this history. Thinking he is landing a solid polemical blow, he asks us,

And, may I ask, in which of the writings of the great Marxists will one find either condemnation of Enlightenment thinkers or praise for their opponents? (66)

Of course it is not a matter of “condemning” the Enlightenment or “praising” its opponents. North’s rhetorical landscape is rife with these kind of straw men. What Marx engaged in, and this is very easy to demonstrate, was a consistent **critique** of the Enlightenment. For instance, in one of his earliest essays, *On the Jewish Question*, Marx pointed out that the political emancipation of the Jews is inadequate. The genuine emancipation of the Jews requires their human emancipation. Marx writes,

¹³ Marx, *Capital*, Volume I, Penguin, p. 280.

¹⁴ The contradictory outcome of the Enlightenment was nicely characterized by Meszaros, who wrote, Thus no sooner are the achievements of the Enlightenment realized than they are liquidated. Everything must fit the narrowly and ambiguously define model of “Rational Man”. Only those aspects of alienation are recognized which can be classified as “Alien to Reason”, with all the actual and potential arbitrariness involved in such an abstract criterion.

Istvan Meszaros, *Marx’s Theory of Alienation*, (Harper Torchbooks, 1972), p. 47.

Thus none of the so-called rights of man goes beyond egoistic man, man as he is in civil society, namely an individual withdrawn behind his private interests and whims and separated from the community. Far from the rights of man conceiving of man as a species-being, species life itself, society appears as a framework exterior to individuals, a limitation of their original self-sufficiency. The only bond that holds them together is natural necessity, need and private interest, the conservation of their property and egoistic person.¹⁵

In arguing thus, Marx takes on one of the themes beloved of the Enlightenment, that the solution of the problems faced in trying to create a liberal nation state is to offer national minorities, such as the Jews in much of Europe, equal political rights under the law. Marx considered that remedy inadequate because it did not address the problem posed by their isolation from world culture through the institutionalization of ghettoized minorities.

In his *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx takes on the most radical of all the progeny of the Enlightenment, the early communists of the first half of the 19th century. Marx notes that these early communists did not have a dialectical grasp of what is entailed in overcoming private property. This was because, whereas the mainstream liberal theorists of their day championed private property, these early communists simply adopted the other side of the pole in their attempt to negate it. Marx noted that that their negation was a “simple” negation and not a dialectical overcoming (*Aufheben*). In other words, they said ‘NO’ when the advocates of private property said ‘YES’. In practice this meant that instead of overcoming private property, they would generalize it throughout society. This led to various schemes for the redistribution of wealth.

This line of thought was taken up most prominently by Proudhon and his followers. The Achilles heel of these plans were that they failed to consider that the forms of distribution of wealth were inextricably linked to the mode of production. The Proudhonists thought they could transform distribution and leave the relations of production untouched. To this simple negation of the early communists Marx posited a dialectical overcoming,

...as the positive abolition of private property and thus of human self-alienation and therefore the real appropriation of the human essence by and for man. This is communism as the complete and conscious return of man conserving all the riches of previous development for man himself as a social, i.e. a human being.¹⁶

But perhaps the most explicit critique of the Enlightenment comes in Marx’s *Theses on Feuerbach*. The Theses taken in their entirety represent a very profound critique of both the leading theorists of the 18th century French Enlightenment as well as the mechanical materialism of Feuerbach. But if one has to pick one passage we can quote the Third Thesis:

The materialist doctrine concerning the changing of circumstances and upbringing forgets that circumstances are changed by men and that it is essential to educate the educator himself. This doctrine must, therefore, divide society into two parts, one of which is superior to society.

¹⁵ Karl Marx, *Selected Writings*, ed David McLellan, p. 54

¹⁶ Marx, *The Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* (International Publishers, New York, 1964), p. 135.

The coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity or self-changing can be conceived and rationally understood only as *revolutionary practice*.

The materialist doctrine concerning the changing of circumstances is of course one of the key building blocks of the Enlightenment, and the Radical Enlightenment at that. The reference to “educating the educator” is doubtless to some of the descendents of the Enlightenment who thought that a new society could be created primarily through an educational project. Robert Owen, one of the early Utopian socialists fits this description better than anyone. He tried to create a community at his cotton mills in New Lanark that would be the model of the new society. The education and cultivation of the intellectual powers of the workers in New Lanark was a key component of his vision. Marx pinpoints the contradiction inherent in this Enlightenment notion. How does one change circumstances if you are already the product of those circumstances to begin with?

Decades earlier, Rousseau, one of the sharpest critics of the Enlightenment and also one of its foremost progeny, grappled with this conundrum in his novel of the cultivation of a moral man, *Emile*. In that work, Rousseau tries to think through the seemingly insoluble problem that the *philosophes* found themselves in – how to change society if men are merely products of their society. In Marx’s discussion the “educators” were the “Enlighteners” - those *philosophes* who thought that the very transmission of human knowledge would provide the impetus for a better world. A full discussion of this passage would take us too far from our present topic, but suffice it to say that its very existence exposes the emptiness behind North’s claim that there is no Marxist critique of the Enlightenment.

North quotes a single line from the joint work of Marx and Engels, *The Holy Family*, to demonstrate that Marx was an unabashed supporter of the Enlightenment. But he fails to mention the following quote from the same work in which Marx is sharply critical of the evolution of materialism in the hands of one of the great thinkers of the Enlightenment, Thomas Hobbes:

In its further development materialism became one-sided. Hobbes was the one who systematized Bacon’s materialism. Sensuousness lost its bloom and became the abstract sensuousness of the geometrician. Physical motion sacrificed to the mechanical, geometry was proclaimed the principal science. Materialism became hostile to humanity. In order to overcome the first anti-human incorporeal spirit in its own field, materialism itself was obliged to mortify its flesh and become an ascetic. It appeared as a being of reason, but it also developed the implacable logic of reason.¹⁷

Marx notes in this remarkable passage that in the hands of Hobbes, “materialism became hostile to humanity”. Is this not a straightforward critique of a major Enlightenment thinker? Furthermore, it is not only Hobbes’s ‘misanthropic materialism’ that Marx critiqued. Marx also rejected in toto the entire tradition of social contract theory that Hobbes more or less inaugurated in the modern world - social contract theory being one of the pillars of the Enlightenment and of modern liberalism. Istvan Meszaros provides a good summary of Marx’s understanding of social contract theory:

¹⁷ *The Holy Family*, from *Selected Writings of Karl Marx*, edited by David McLellan, p. 152.

The principle function of the much glorified “contract” was, therefore, the introduction – in place of the rigidly fixed feudal relations – of a new form of “fixity” which guaranteed the right of the new master to manipulate the allegedly “free” human beings as things, as objects without will, once they have “freely elected” to enter into the contract in question by “*alienating at will* that which belonged to them”.

Thus human alienation was accomplished though turning everything “into alienable, saleable, objects in thrall to egoistic need and huckstering. Selling is the practice of alienation. Just as man, so long as he is engrossed in religion, can only objectify his essence by an alien and fantastic being; so under the sway of egoistic need, he can only affirm himself and produce objects in practice by subordinating his products and his own activity to the domination of an alien entity, and by attributing to them the significance of an alien entity, namely money” (Marx, “On the Jewish Question”). Reification of one’s person and thus the “freely chosen” acceptance of a new servitude – in place of the old feudal, politically established and regulated form of servitude, could advance on the basis of a “civil society” characterized by the rule of money that opened the floodgates for the universal “servitude to egoistic need.”¹⁸

We have already quoted Engels on the subject of the limitations of the Enlightenment and its principles. This assessment of the Enlightenment was at the center of Engels’s presentation of the birth of socialism as first arising out of a critique of the Enlightenment.

Modern Socialism is, in its essence, the direct product of the recognition, on the one hand, of the class antagonisms existing in the society of today between proprietors and non-proprietors, between capitalists and wage-workers; on the other hand, of the anarchy existing in production. But, in its theoretical form, modern Socialism originally appears ostensibly as a more logical extension of the principles laid down by the great French philosophers of the 18th century. Like every new theory, modern Socialism had, at first, to connect itself with the intellectual stock-in-trade ready to its hand, however deeply its roots lay in material economic facts.

The great men, who in France prepared men’s minds for the coming revolution, were themselves extreme revolutionists. They recognized no external authority of any kind whatever. Religion, natural science, society, political institutions – everything was subjected to the most unsparing criticism: everything must justify its existence before the judgment-seat of reason or give up existence. Reason became the sole measure of everything. It was the time when, as Hegel says, the world stood upon its head; first in the sense that the human head, and the principles arrived at by its thought, claimed to be the basis of all human action and association; but by and by, also, in the wider sense that the reality which was in contradiction to these principles had, in fact, to be turned upside down. Every form of society and government then existing, every old traditional notion, was flung into the lumber-room as irrational; the world had hitherto allowed itself to be led solely by prejudices; everything in the past deserved only pity and contempt. Now, for the first time, appeared the light of day, the kingdom of reason; henceforth superstition, injustice, privilege, oppression, were to be superseded by eternal truth, eternal Right, equality based on Nature and the inalienable rights of man.

We know today that this kingdom of reason was nothing more than the idealized kingdom of the bourgeoisie; that this eternal Right found its realization in bourgeois justice; that this equality reduced itself to bourgeois equality before the law; that bourgeois property was proclaimed as one of the essential rights of man; and that the government of reason, the

¹⁸ Istvan Meszaros, *Marx’s Theory of Alienation*, (Harper Torchbooks, 1972), p. 34.

Contrat Social of Rousseau, came into being, and only could come into being, as a democratic bourgeois republic. The great thinkers of the 18th century could, no more than their predecessors, go beyond the limits imposed upon them by their epoch.¹⁹

Finally, we can call to the stand one of North's intellectual heroes, the Russian Marxist Georgi Plekhanov. And indeed Plekhanov, despite his theoretical limitations, did make a number of important contributions to Marxist theory. Among those positive contributions was the following critique of Enlightenment thinking:

Whenever they began speaking of the historical development of mankind, they forgot their sensationalist view of "man" in general and, like all the philosophers of "enlightenment" of that age, affirmed that the world (i.e., the social relations of mankind) is governed by opinions (*c'est l'opinion qui gouverne le monde*). In this lies the radical contradiction from which the materialism of the eighteenth century suffered, and which, in the reasoning of its supporters, was divided into an entire series of secondary and derivative contradictions, just as a bank note is exchanged for small cash.²⁰

So much for North's claim that a critique of the Enlightenment is somehow alien to the traditions of Marx and Marxism.

Shadow-Boxing with Horkheimer and Adorno

North wraps up his discussion of Marxism and the Enlightenment with the accusation that we are inspired by the work of Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.

He writes,

The tradition which you represent in your strictures against the Enlightenment traces its origins not to Marx, but to the demoralized petty-bourgeois theorists of the Frankfurt School – particularly, to the conceptions initially propounded by Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. (68-69)

This charge is a total fabrication. We have never defended the viewpoint of Adorno and Horkheimer's in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Our critique of the Enlightenment is rooted in a very different perspective than Adorno and Horkheimer's misanthropic thesis. Nevertheless, although North himself is oblivious to it, his interjection of Adorno and Horkheimer's book into his polemic raises an important question. Just what would a Marxist critique of Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* look like? Needless to say we get little more than one line diatribes from North about the "demoralized petty-bourgeois theorists of the Frankfurt School". However, North does recommend to us a lecture by Peter Schwarz that purports to deal with the topic of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.

¹⁹ Friedrich Engels, *Socialism Utopian and Scientific*

²⁰ Plekhanov, *The Development of the Monist View of History* in *Collected Works Volume I*, p. 550

The central arguments in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* were summed up in the lecture given last summer at Ann Arbor by Comrade Peter Schwarz. Your document makes no reference to his analysis. (69)

Let us then briefly examine Schwarz's talk and see if it presents us with a genuine Marxist critique of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. In his talk, Schwarz notes that,

According to Marx and Engels, the productive forces developed by capitalism come into conflict with the capitalist property relations, initiating an era of social revolution and providing the basis for a higher, socialist form of society. Horkheimer and Adorno hold the opposite view. According to them, progress of the productive forces inevitably results in the stultification of the masses, in cultural decline, and finally in a new kind of barbarism.²¹

Insofar as Schwarz's remarks pertain to the pessimistic conclusions of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, he makes a valid point here. Writing in the early 1940s from their vantage point in New York and Los Angeles, isolated both from the mainstream of American intellectual culture and the working class movement, while the European culture to which they were wedded was being shredded by Nazism and World War, it is little wonder that many of the residents of the Frankfurt School-in-exile sank into a pessimistic torpor. Of course understanding the conditions that gave rise to *Dialectic of Enlightenment* does not make its central thesis any more valid. But one would think that a Marxist assessment of that work would approach it historically and discuss this context. But such considerations are entirely missing from Schwarz's talk.

Instead, Schwarz hypostatizes this moment of cultural pessimism and thinks he has discovered the leading thread of the Frankfurt School. Thus he writes,

In its early years, the Frankfurt School borrowed many conceptions from Marxism and even now it is sometimes wrongly described as a variety of Marxism. The passages from "Dialectic of Enlightenment" quoted above demonstrate that the contrast between Marxism and the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School could hardly be deeper.²²

Suddenly Schwarz has shifted gears – he is no longer discussing *Dialectic of Enlightenment* but the entire Frankfurt School and painting it with a very broad brush. Yet even a cursory examination of Martin Jay's classic account of the history of the Frankfurt School, *The Dialectical Imagination*, demonstrates that Schwarz's decontextualized understanding of the Frankfurt School does not stand up to a closer scrutiny. For the Frankfurt School, while it may be characterized by a common set of themes and interests, was never a homogeneous institution. We don't have to agree with all the premises of the Frankfurt School to note that in its early years in the 1920s it was much closer to Marxism than it would be during its period of exile after 1933 and that it took yet another turn in the postwar period. Furthermore, the different personalities that at one time or another were affiliated with the Frankfurt School were hardly in agreement. In its early years, one of the founders of the Frankfurt School, Friedrich Pollack, traveled to the Soviet Union and befriended the head of its Marx-Engels Institute, David Ryazanov. Through Ryazanov he was introduced to some members of the Opposition within the Bolshevik Party. Out of these contacts he developed a skeptical attitude toward the Stalinist

²¹ "Lecture nine: The rise of fascism in Germany and the collapse of the Communist International", WSWS, Oct. 11, 2005: <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2005/oct2005/le9-all.shtml>

²² Ibid.

program of forced collectivization. Although he did not become an active supporter of the Opposition, his skepticism towards the propaganda of the Stalinist bureaucracy was in sharp contrast to the unreflective enthusiasm over the Soviet Union that characterized other Frankfurt School affiliates such as Karl Wittfogel and Henryk Grossman.²³ Another example of the internal conflicts within the Frankfurt School is the lively and sometimes bitter debate that transpired in the 1950's between Herbert Marcuse and Erich Fromm over the issue of Freudian revisionism.²⁴ It is beyond the scope of the present discussion to explore this history in any depth, but let it be noted that there was indeed a rich and heterogeneous history associated with the Frankfurt School. And that history can hardly be encompassed in Schwarz's oversimplified formula.

Moreover, whereas Schwarz offers a number of valid criticisms, he never gets to the heart of the problem with *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, the philosophical and historical fallacy that supports its main thesis. Schwarz mentions that fallacy but fails to confront it when he writes,

They [Horkheimer and Adorno] claim that the germs of the social regression manifested by Nazism were already contained in the Enlightenment. "The first matter we had to investigate," they write, was "the self-destruction of enlightenment." And: "We have no doubt ... that freedom in society is inseparable from enlightenment thinking. We believe we have perceived with equal clarity, however, that the very concept of that thinking, no less than the concrete historical forms, the institutions of society with which it is intertwined, already contains the germ of the regression which is taking place everywhere today."

Although Schwarz rightly considers this position outrageous, he never explains why it is outrageous. To do so, he would have to provide an account of the ideological roots of Nazism that is missing in Horkheimer and Adorno. Those roots lie not in the Enlightenment, as Adorno and Horkheimer mistakenly claimed, but in the Counter Enlightenment. This was the thesis championed by George Lukacs in his classic study of the rise of irrationalism in bourgeois thought, *The Destruction of Reason*. Any serious student of the Enlightenment should know that from the beginning the *philosophes* had their ideological opponents. If the Enlightenment in its best traditions stood for reason, equality and a challenge to arbitrary authority, the Counter Enlightenment stood for obedience to authority and the force of tradition and superstition. That Adorno and Horkheimer could not discern the difference between these two opposing currents of thought was their biggest historical and philosophical failure. It is what led them to identify the idea of progress with totalitarianism and the Reason of the Enlightenment with the irrationalism of Nazism.

However, Adorno and Horkheimer were not entirely wrong. They recognized the internal contradictions within the Enlightenment and delineated the logic by which a theory of liberation, once it "realizes" its full capacity, becomes a new form of domination. Their error was twofold; first they ascribed to this new form of domination an absolute power – one that is so overwhelming that it can even dispense with human agents enforcing its rule.

While bourgeois economy multiplied power through the mediation of the market, it also multiplied its objects and powers to such an extent that for their administration not just the

²³ 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. 19.

²⁴ *Ibid.* p. 106-112

kings, not even the middle classes are no longer necessary, but all men. They learn from the power of things to dispense at last with power.²⁵

We can say that while the forms of domination of what Adorno and Horkheimer called the “culture industry” were quite real, they were not insurmountable. Adorno and Horkheimer were analyzing the forms in which bourgeois ideology maintains itself by providing the illusion of freedom while emptying it of any substance. With the birth of the mass media and popular culture in the 20th century, new forms of domination do indeed arise in the superstructure of society. But contrary to Adorno and Horkheimer, these forms of domination are not absolute. The working class remains the revolutionary agent of history, but its ideological task is now more complex.

Secondly, Adorno and Horkheimer erred in identifying Nazism and fascism with this new form of domination. In fact the new forms of domination that Adorno and Horkheimer delineated were more appropriate as a description of liberal capitalism than of Nazism. There is in fact a historically muddled lumping together of liberalism with Nazism in Adorno and Horkheimer’s book. The roots of this are clearly their reaction to the evolution of the Weimar Republic. But what the self-destruction of the Weimar Republic demonstrated was not that Nazism is the “logical inheritor” of the dialectic inaugurated by the Enlightenment, but that one of the offspring of the Enlightenment, liberalism, was quite powerless when confronted with a mass fascist movement. And that the temporizing and compromising with the Nazis by liberalism, in the hope of bringing the Nazis into the fold of parliamentary democracy, only emboldened and strengthened them.²⁶

Thus, because Adorno and Horkheimer misread the real dialectic of the Enlightenment, their insights into the Enlightenment forms of domination are shrouded in a mystical shell. The two must be disentangled to properly critique this book. *But it is not possible to disentangle them if one does not even recognize that there is a dialectic of the Enlightenment, even if that dialectic is not the one Adorno and Horkheimer discussed.* And that is the main problem with commentaries such as those by Schwarz. Schwarz has nothing to say about the *real* dialectic of Enlightenment. He is satisfied with contradicting their thesis but apparently has no interest in exploring a Marxist critique of the Enlightenment.

Elsewhere Schwarz has to admit that the Frankfurt School had some brilliant insights. He says, “The Frankfurt School criticised certain aspects in the superstructure of bourgeois society in a brilliant manner.”²⁷ However Schwarz offers this remark as an aside, and cannot proffer any explanation of these “brilliant” insights. Presumably Schwarz is referring to the unmasking of the new forms of domination inherent within liberal capitalism (what today is often incorrectly called “modern consumer society”) that was a staple of much of the literature of the Frankfurt

²⁵ Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, (Continuum), p. 42

²⁶ Stephen Eric Bronner, in his *Reclaiming the Enlightenment*, has a lengthy discussion on this topic. Bronner sets out both to repudiate the irrationalist side of Adorno and Horkheimer while defending liberalism. His thesis is that any indictment of liberalism as a result of the collapse of the liberal parties in Germany in 1933 must be temporized by the knowledge that European liberalism always had a distinct right wing strain and was a different animal than American liberalism. Without denying that European and American liberalism had different philosophical and historical foundations, those differences cannot be used to whitewash the sorry reputation of American liberalism.

²⁷ “Lecture nine: The rise of fascism in Germany and the collapse of the Communist International”, WSWS, Oct. 11, 2005: <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2005/oct2005/le9-all.shtml>

School. Schwarz does not tell us if he includes sections of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* among the “brilliant” insights of the Frankfurt School, but if Schwarz is referring to the work of Walter Benjamin or Marcuse and even some of the other work of Adorno and Horkheimer, we can agree that that Frankfurt School did produce some brilliant insights into contemporary culture. And although the discussion of the “culture industry” is seriously marred by their pessimism in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, there remain isolated passages in that book as well that contain valuable insights. But all this leaves us at a loss for an explanation of where the “brilliance” of the Frankfurt School comes from.

The answer lies in the fact that some members of the Frankfurt School asked the right question at least, even if their answers were often wrong.²⁸ It is not possible to have any insights into the “culture industry” unless you first have some notion that there is a dialectic of the Enlightenment. And the link between the oppressive role of the “culture industry” and the Enlightenment is what Adorno and Horkheimer, as well as other members of the Frankfurt School, called “instrumental reason”. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer mistakenly conflate “instrumental reason” with reason as such and in that sense open up a door to irrationalism. But this does not mean that there is no such thing as “instrumental reason”. The term is but another name for the constricted and reified concept of science that derives from positivism. (We discussed this issue previously in Chapter 3.) From the standpoint of a Marxist critique of Adorno and Horkheimer, we reject the identification of “instrumental reason” with reason, but at the same time we recognize that “instrumental reason” is indeed a profound social phenomenon of our time. As there is no recognition of the dangers of positivism on the part of Schwarz and North, they have no explanation for how the Frankfurt School can provide any insights about the role of “instrumental reason” and its employment in the “culture industry”.

Without connecting the “brilliant” insights of the Frankfurt School to this dialectic of the Enlightenment (even the mystified and distorted form in which it appears in Adorno and Horkheimer’s book) Schwarz cannot account for them other than as a product of individual ‘genius’. And that as any Marxist should know, is the hallmark of an idealist method.

While we reject the thesis of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* we also maintain that there is a correct way of responding to it and an incorrect way. Schwarz’s response simply reiterates a few obvious points that have been made before and fails to penetrate to the heart of the problem of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Furthermore, Schwarz compounds the problem by lumping the entire Frankfurt School together with the pessimistic conclusions reached by Horkheimer and Adorno in the 1940s.

A genuine Marxist critique would not stop at simply rejecting the abandonment of Reason represented in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, but would proceed from there to examine the revolutionary character of the Marxist dialectic as opposed to the self-contradictory character of liberal Reason. North’s (and Schwarz’s) procedure, on the other hand, is to simply cheer on the Enlightenment, thereby obscuring the critical difference between liberalism and revolutionary socialism.

²⁸ Again it should be borne in mind that the Frankfurt School was a heterogeneous entity and it is not possible to make general statements about what the Frankfurt School as a whole thought. At best, we can delineate the main threads of certain members of the Frankfurt School at various times.

How Should Marxists Reclaim the Enlightenment?

The logic of North's position can better be seen if we examine a recent book by Professor Stephen Eric Bronner. Bronner wrote his work, *Reclaiming the Enlightenment*, specifically as a reply to Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.

Bronner is an ex-socialist, having once written a book about Rosa Luxembour. But like many intellectuals in the post-Soviet world, he no longer identifies with socialism. He now considers himself a left-liberal and looks to the heritage of social democracy for his inspiration. It is from this perspective that he seeks to "reclaim" the Enlightenment. In the course of his book, Bronner scores a number of valid points against the postmodernist opponents of the Enlightenment and their radical supporters. But that is only part of his concern. The other part of his concern is to clearly draw a line in the sand between the ideals of the Enlightenment and those of Marxism. In short, Bronner is an unabashed champion of the Moderate Enlightenment and an opponent of Marxism, which he sees as having dangerous "utopian" tendencies. The following excerpt gives one a flavor of Bronner's work:

Conservative and postmodern critics can note how both [i.e. Lenin and the Enlightenment thinkers] shared a commitment to progress, secularism, modernization, and even utopia. But these terms meant something very different for Communism than for the Enlightenment: Lenin was concerned with preserving the working class from the temptations of reform in the name of revolution while the philosophes opposed revolution and were everywhere intent upon introducing reforms; Lenin's vanguard was guided by the principle of "democratic centralism," which required that disagreements be kept within the confines of the party, while the philosophes constantly and openly battled among themselves; Lenin embraced a moral relativism predicated on class interest for his ethics while Enlightenment thinkers, for the most part, sought to uncover universal rules of moral judgment; Lenin never evidenced any concern with constraining his vanguard party while Enlightenment political theory highlighted the need to check and mitigate the exercise of power. Most important, while Enlightenment thinkers served as the radical expression of a burgeoning modernity, Leninism was always understood, using the language of Marxism, as the political reflection of economic underdevelopment. That is probably why most postmodern and conservative critics have been content with establishing an indirect connection between communism and the Enlightenment mediated by Marx, the Jacobins, and the French Revolution.²⁹

It is not our purpose here to refute the numerous distortions in Bronner's depiction of Leninism. Suffice it to say that Bronner recycles a number of myths about Lenin and Leninism from the annals of Social Democracy. (He even credits Kautsky with the observation that Leninism was "the political reflection of underdevelopment".) This is history presented as apologetics instead of science, and Bronner is hardly the first to tread these waters. What is notable however in this passage is that Bronner, in replying to right wing and postmodernist attacks on the Enlightenment, feels it incumbent to place a Chinese wall between Lenin and the Enlightenment.

²⁹ Stephen Eric Bronner, *Reclaiming the Enlightenment: Toward a Politics of Radical Engagement*, (Columbia University Press, 2004), p. 102-103.

This is then extended, with various qualifications, not only to Marx, but also to the Jacobins and the French Revolution.

Clearly, Professor Bronner thinks the only Enlightenment worth reclaiming is one that repudiates revolution. On the face of it, this is the direct opposite of North's position that sees an uninterrupted line of continuity between the Enlightenment and Marxism. But they are simply two sides of the same non-dialectical coin. In both cases the contradictory relationship between Marxism and the Enlightenment is denied. Bronner wishes to eviscerate the Radical Enlightenment in order to make a case for the Enlightenment as the harbinger of liberalism and delegitimize the claims of Marxism as having any roots in the Enlightenment. North on the other hand glosses over the contradictory nature of the Enlightenment in order to draw a line of continuity between what turns out to be the Moderate Enlightenment and Marxism. Both are different ways of building bridges to liberalism.

Bronner's evolution is a summary warning revealing the nature of the social and class tendencies at work when the line between liberalism and socialism is not clearly drawn and history is reinterpreted to suit modern sensibilities. It is a salutary lesson in the wrong way to defend the Enlightenment.

In contrast to North's uncritical cheerleading, and Bronner's emasculation of its revolutionary implications, a Marxist critique of the Enlightenment, while recognizing its progressive side, is not afraid of acknowledging and confronting the contradictions inherent in this divided legacy. How else should one approach a great cultural phenomenon that gave birth to both liberalism and socialism?

In the end, the real dialectic of the Enlightenment remains as much of a mystery to North as to Bronner. All North can do is to defend one-sidedly the heritage of the Enlightenment. But this leads him to forget the other side of that heritage, that the Marxian dialectic decisively transforms the Enlightenment once the built-in contradiction at the heart of the Enlightenment revealed itself. From that point on a non-dialectical (and essentially ahistorical) and uncritical cheerleading of the Enlightenment must be seen as a retrograde tendency, looking backward to the illusions of a bourgeois society in its youth instead of forward to the classless society of the future.

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