

Chapter 7: Objectivism and Socialist Consciousness – Part 1

There remain a variety of issues raised by North's document, and this chapter and the next are devoted to responding to his claims or to pointing out how he has distorted our positions. We will do so in the order issues are raised in North's document. If there is an overarching theme in this section, it is socialist consciousness, specifically how Marxists understand its development and their own role in bringing that about. Perhaps nowhere is North's objectivism more evident than in relation to this issue, and so, not coincidentally, this is where his distortions become particularly egregious.

1. On the issue of "political exposures," the gist of our criticism (in *Objectivism or Marxism*) was that North was using Lenin's remarks from *What is to be done?* in a one-sided way, to rationalize the party's abstentionism and its largely journalistic existence. North spends three pages (49-52) proving that Lenin stressed the importance of political exposures and the need for a party newspaper, something that we never denied. In the battle against the bread-and-butter trade unionism of the Economists, Lenin rightly stressed the need to educate the working class politically. But the history of Bolshevism was only about to begin in 1902: vital lessons were learned in the ensuing years about how to carry out that political education and those lessons were later embodied in *The Transitional Program*, which, Trotsky emphasized, was "derived from the long experience of the Bolsheviks."¹

There is no mention of the term political exposures in *The Transitional Program*, which is not what you would expect if they really were the be-all and end-all of party-building that North makes them out to be. And this was the point we were making: "it is nonsense to suppose that Lenin saw this phrase as some sort of all-purpose recipe for dealing with an issue as complex as the development of class consciousness." The history of Bolshevism and Trotskyism attests to this: journalism was indeed an important component of party work, but it was just that – a component in a many-sided political practice that focused above all on actively intervening in the mass struggles of the working class. The crux of *The Transitional Program* was "to help the masses in the process of the daily struggle to find the bridge between present demands and the socialist program of the revolution."² Of course party journalism (i.e. political exposures) was a necessary part of carrying that work out, but it was never a *substitute* for that work, and neither Lenin nor Trotsky ever conceived of it that way.

It needs to be added that there is an over-the-top quality to North's argument on this, as on many other issues. At one point he claims that since "the concept of political exposures" came out of an analysis of the problem of how class consciousness develops, this means that, "The relevance of that analysis could be diminished only if there has

¹ "The Political Backwardness of the American Workers," transcript of a discussion with American SWP leaders on May 19, 1938, in *The Transitional Program*, p. 129.

² *The Transitional Program*, p. 75.

occurred such basic structural changes in the capitalist mode of production and the general organization of bourgeois society that the development of socialist class consciousness no longer required the additional impulse of Marxist-inspired political exposures” (53). In other words, if one argues that political exposures are not the *one and only way* by which Marxists can bring about the development of class consciousness, then according to North, this amounts to repudiating the core thought of *What is to be done?*, i.e. that spontaneous consciousness is bourgeois consciousness, and indeed repudiating the Marxist analysis of capitalism itself! This is nonsense. No one is denying the need for Marxist journalism, which is all that “the concept of political exposures” amounts to in practice. The issue here is North’s insistence that *only* such journalism is required to raise the political consciousness of the working class, and this is patently a false position that finds no support in the classical Marxist tradition and is transparently a rationalization for abstentionism.

2. North takes exception to our claim that “today’s petty bourgeois radicals, unlike their Economist predecessors, are far removed not only from bread-and-butter issues but from anything at all to do with the working class.” He argues that the union bureaucracy is “saturated with middle class refugees from the radical political organizations of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s” (53). But our point wasn’t about *ex-radicals*, who certainly are well represented in the bureaucracy, and for that matter in the corporate boardrooms as well. Our point had to do with the middle class radical movements as they are now. From the 1980s on, there has been a major swing by these movements *away* from any involvement in the working class, as they have embraced identity politics. In the 1960s and 1970s, it was commonplace for radical groups to be part of a ‘militant caucus’ in various unions or to set up a ‘worker-student alliance’ on campus. Needless to say, these efforts never got beyond militant trade unionism and the backing of left-talking bureaucrats, but they did signify that the labor movement was a focus of activity for the radicals.

That has long since stopped being the case: today their focus is far more on anti-globalization, anti-racism, feminism, gay rights, etc, and these groups do little in the working class beyond a very occasional ‘strike support committee’ (i.e. boosterism for the bureaucracy on the rare occasion when it calls a strike). To the extent that the working class gets any mention on their websites or in their publications, it is usually as part of a list of ‘isms’ – racism, sexism, classism etc. – and not infrequently ‘white workers’ get denounced as racist or sexist. Of course this milieu is anything but homogenous and there are some groups that espouse syndicalism and operate within the various factions of the labor bureaucracy, but they are clearly a minority and even in the case of some of these groups (the International Socialists for example), the predominance of identity politics is evident.³ While the IC has not embraced identity politics, it too has swung away from any involvement in the working class. In other words, in this crucial respect, the IC is swimming *with* the stream of petty bourgeois radical politics rather than

³ North cites the example of Nancy Wohlforth, but her case actually affirms the prevalence of identity politics. What the public record available on her indicates is that she made a career for herself in the bureaucracy as a lesbian activist, and it seems reasonable to conclude that she now sits on the AFL-CIO executive board as their token gay member.

against it. North would rather not draw attention to that, which is why he denies the obvious about the political evolution of the radicals.

A further point: we made a similar argument about “political exposures” in *Objectivism or Marxism*, noting that radical journalism has never been more widespread than today, with the proliferation of radical websites, alternative media, weblogs and the explosion of documentary filmmaking, most famously in the case of Michael Moore. North dismisses any comparison in this regard between the radicals and the IC as a non sequitur (54), but the IC’s retreat into journalism does indeed represent another disturbing parallel with the evolution of petty bourgeois radicalism. What would truly buck the trend of radicalism are meaningful interventions in the mass struggles of the working class.

Political Consciousness and the 2004 US Election

3. We criticized North’s reaction to the 2004 US presidential election, specifically his inability to explain why Bush got the support of the most impoverished states in that election. This fact revealed a major disconnect between consciousness and class interest in the American working class, but such a disconnect is hard to fathom for an objectivist, who conceives of consciousness in a mechanical way, i.e. as little more than a reflection of social being.

North accuses us of selectively quoting his position and he then includes a long extract from the speech of his that we had cited (“After the 2004 election: perspectives and tasks of the Socialist Equality Party”, WSWS, Nov. 15, 2004⁴) to prove that he did provide a coherent explanation of the election result. But as we’ll show, an analysis of that speech confirms our criticism.

(We originally wrote a much longer analysis of this speech, but in *Objectivism or Marxism* we limited ourselves to the gist of that analysis for reasons we have already explained. We are taking this opportunity to examine the speech at greater length because of its relevance to the issue of class consciousness. Moreover, North underscored the significance of this speech by including it in his volume, *The Crisis of American Democracy*, and so we can safely assume that it is not just a hurried response to immediate events but rather represents his considered judgment.)

Let’s begin with the remark of North’s that we did cite: “To claim that its voters [i.e. from the impoverished states] backed the Republicans because of ‘values’ that they hold far dearer than their own real material interests is to substitute mysticism for scientific socio-political analysis.” This is an unequivocal statement that “real material interests” rather than “values” are the key to a scientific understanding of consciousness. But it also makes the election result inexplicable, since millions of workers in the so-called ‘red states’ plainly did vote against “their own real material interests.”⁵

⁴ <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2004/nov2004/dnor-n15.shtml>

⁵ Needless to say, a vote for the Democrats is no more in the class interests of these workers than a vote for the Republicans. But the issue here is motivation: a vote for the Democrats is a vote for what workers *believe* to be the defense of their economic interests, even though that belief is totally misguided. No such belief, however, can be motivating them to vote Republican; they can only be doing so by disregarding

Yet in the next sentence (the first of the long extract from his speech that North cites), North doesn't amend his point, he reinforces it: "Abstract references to 'values,' whose precise meaning is clear to no one, does little to explain why workers have come under the influence of the Republican Party and its retinue of religious hucksters and moralizing conmen." Why should references to values necessarily be abstract? Of course there was a great deal of empty media hype on this score, but there was also Thomas Frank's much-discussed book, *What's the Matter With Kansas?*, which was neither abstract nor mystical, but which focused on how right-wing populism had exploited 'values' issues like abortion and gay marriage to gain widespread support among 'red state' workers. Though North quotes Frank's book approvingly elsewhere in this speech, he ignores its central theme, which is the gaping disconnect between the political consciousness of workers and their material interests.

In any case, for North the key to understanding the election result is the collapse of the old labor movement. Summarizing his point in the next paragraph, he writes: "Without jobs, cut off from the deep-rooted social relations that sustained class consciousness over generations of struggle, alienated from a union that had deserted them, the militant workers of yesterday became susceptible to well-practiced pitchmen of the Evangelical Industry, always on the look-out for new customers." The collapse of the traditional labor movement was indeed a crucial factor, but it can only be part of the explanation: it tells us why there was a political vacuum in the working class, but it doesn't explain how that vacuum was filled. When it comes to the latter, North finally acknowledges, with his reference to the evangelicals, that 'values' did play a role in the election. But in the next paragraph, even that acknowledgement is retracted:

This does not mean that the average American worker buys into the propaganda to which he or she is subjected relentlessly by the mass media and the Republican political machine. Not by a long shot. They see enough of life to know that things are not as they should be. When a worker speaks of "values," it has a very different meaning for him than it does for Enron's Kenneth Lay or for George Bush.

So while workers may have become susceptible to the blandishments of evangelicals, it would seem that somehow – because of their experience of life – their values aren't really reactionary at all. But this leaves us right back where we started – completely in the dark as to why so many of them voted Republican.

The reference to Lay and Bush betrays more confusion. Right-wing populism isn't about emulating the elites of Wall Street or Washington, anymore than Nazism was about emulating the Krupps or the Junkers. There is indeed considerable animosity, as Frank shows, between the old guard Republican party (Bush's "haves and have mores") and the plebeian 'forgotten men' mobilized by the 'backlash' demagoguery of right-wing populism. But like everything else about this movement, this animosity takes on a perverse form: the plebeians tend to be more militant on issues like abortion, gun control and gay rights – which is to say more reactionary.

their economic interests. This is why the support for Bush in the impoverished 'red states' generated so much political discussion.

And it is certainly true that workers intuitively feel that “things are not as they should be,” but again North misses the salient point: it is just that anger and alienation that right-wing populism is appealing to. What workers desperately need is some sense of how things *should be*, but that is something they cannot get simply from their experience of living.

North never resolves this incoherence in his analysis of the election. Instead, in the next paragraph, he claims that the media were exaggerating the significance of ‘values’. But this is just dodging the problem: irrespective of the rubbish the media put out, they didn’t invent the millions of votes Bush got from impoverished workers. Trying to dispense with the issue, North states that “the really important point that must be made is that the ‘values’ issue has arisen in a political vacuum created by the absence of any articulation by either party of the genuine social, economic and political interests of the broad mass of working Americans.” But again this only gives us half an explanation: while it is true that the real interests of workers aren’t being articulated by the mainstream parties, it is also true that right-wing populism is filling that vacuum by articulating the anger of those workers, as Frank’s book show in great detail. But North cannot deal with this crucial side of the matter, and the reason for that is the point we began with – as an objectivist, he has a mechanical conception of how consciousness develops.

In essence that means conceiving of consciousness as a mirror-like reflection of reality, as little more than an epiphenomenon of objective conditions. Hence the insistence that the consciousness of workers must in some way reflect their “real material interests” – even if this is demonstrably not the case. This is what accounts for the basic incoherence in North’s analysis of the election. Any notion that consciousness (in this case, ‘values’) can play a decisive role in politics on its own – and that therefore it has its own special features that need to be studied – is typically dismissed as mystification.

A Mechanical Distortion of Marxism

4. In *Objectivism or Marxism*, we argued that this mechanical conception rests on a distortion of the Marxist tenet that social being determines consciousness:

Social being does determine consciousness, but mechanical materialism makes an unwarranted assumption that such consciousness will accurately comprehend the reality that shaped it, i.e. that objective conditions translate themselves directly into a *correct* consciousness of those conditions. That assumption is not true, especially for an exploited class. Marxist materialism also insists that the dominant ideology of any class society is the ideology of the ruling class, which is to say that the prevailing consciousness of an exploited class is necessarily *skewed* against its own material interests. This happens because consciousness is clearly not some mirror-like reflection of objective conditions: though it emerges from nature, this emergence entails a dialectical leap from quantity to quality. Or as Trotsky put it: “The dialectic of consciousness is not thereby a *reflection* of the dialectic of nature, but is a *result* of the lively interaction between consciousness and nature and – in addition – a method of cognition, issuing from this interaction ... Consciousness is a

quite original *part* of nature, possessing peculiarities and regularities that are completely absent in the remaining part of nature. Subjective dialectics must by virtue of this be a distinctive part of objective dialectics – with its own special forms and regularities” (*Trotsky’s Notebooks, 1933-35*, pp. 101-2)⁶.

We will have occasion to come back to the question of “subjective dialectics” when we deal with North’s remarks on psychology and utopia, but once we conceive of consciousness as having “its own special forms and regularities,” then what is incoherent to North about the election becomes readily understandable. Again from *Objectivism or Marxism*: “Anger and resentment abound among American workers, and to that extent social being – especially the polarization of wealth – is indeed determining their consciousness. But what happens to that anger is *not* automatically determined by objective conditions: here the relatively autonomous role of political consciousness holds sway.” Hence the stark reality of a right-wing populism that can exploit class anger precisely in order to enlist the votes of workers behind a political party devoted to ruining their lives.

In his reply to us, North insists that his view of consciousness is “the absolute opposite of that which you attribute to me” (61). As proof he quotes two and a half pages from a summer school lecture he gave in 2005, whose basic point is that a worker “is not in a position to grasp, on the basis of immediate experience,” either the origins of capitalism, “its internal contradictions or the historically-limited character of its existence” (61) – in other words, objective conditions don’t automatically give rise to a correct consciousness of those conditions. But in the context of a lecture, this is what one would expect North to say because all this amounts to is a reassertion of Lenin’s basic insight that spontaneous consciousness is bourgeois consciousness. The real test of one’s position, however, is never in these formal statements but in the party’s political practice. Undoubtedly there are numerous statements from North defending the permanent revolution as well, and yet when it came to Iraq those statements counted for very little.

If North’s adherence to Lenin’s insight were not purely a formal one, then the 2004 election offered him a perfect opportunity to make that evident, given how that election had exposed the acute problems of the political consciousness of the working class. But instead North’s response only exposed his own incoherence about how consciousness develops, his own inability to get beyond a mechanical conception (falsely labeled as ‘scientific’) that sees the consciousness of workers as necessarily reflecting their “real material interests.”

One might add that this problem is evident even in the summer school lecture with its formally correct position on class consciousness. All North does there is restate basic truths: workers cannot spontaneously understand capitalism, only Marxist science can do that, and so “the knowledge obtained through this science, and the method of analysis involved in the achievement and extension of this knowledge, must be introduced into the working class. That is the task of the revolutionary party” (61). But North ends precisely where he needs to begin. *How* does the revolutionary party introduce that knowledge into the working class? This is one of the great and enduring problems that Marxists face.

⁶ http://www.permanent-revolution.org/polemics/objectivism_marxism.pdf

Unless that problem itself becomes the subject of scientific study by Marxists, then talk about the importance of fostering class consciousness in the working class is nothing more than empty rhetoric. In other words, a ‘science of Marxism’ that ignores the problems of the development of class consciousness, that ignores the unique features of “subjective dialectics,” is a form of objectivism masquerading as Marxism.

We get the same pattern in North’s speech on the election. North readily acknowledges that the political consciousness of the working class is a problem and he even provides a long list of the obstacles to class consciousness in America:

We neither deny nor minimize the difficulties that will arise in the struggle for socialism in the United States. The impact of decades of anti-Communist propaganda and witch hunting, the corruption and betrayals of the trade unions, the relative absence of a politically-engaged intelligentsia, the low level of popular culture and the degrading influence of the mass media, the traditions of national insularity, the persistence of “rugged individualism,” and the pragmatic disdain for history and theoretical generalizations—all these are factors which complicate the struggle for socialist class consciousness.

You would think, given such a long list, that the problems of developing class consciousness would be a pressing concern. (Ditto for fighting pragmatism.) But these difficulties are raised more for the purpose of dispelling than confronting them. Immediately, North reverts to the ‘safer’ terrain of objective conditions:

But we take as our point of departure the objective implications of the crisis of American and world capitalism. Moreover, however complicated the process, social being does in the final analysis determine social consciousness. As Leon Trotsky once said so well, history will in the long run cut a path to the consciousness of the working class.

Saying that objective conditions should be “our point of departure” is a truism. Of course that is where we have to begin, but the problem with consciousness from an objectivist standpoint is that we never get beyond this point of departure: this is where the analysis not only begins *but also ends*. Thus invoking objective conditions becomes a way of making consciousness – or rather the problems of developing it – *disappear*. In the next sentence Marx’s famous dictum is used for precisely this purpose: because social being determines consciousness “in the final analysis,” then presumably we can leave it to objective conditions to solve the many problems of class consciousness that North has just finished listing. This is made explicit in the following sentence, with history brought in like a *deus ex machina* to do the job of cutting a path to class consciousness.

These remarks prove that the mechanical conception of consciousness we attributed to North is in fact the position he holds, his denial notwithstanding. Thus when he states here that “social being does in the final analysis determine social consciousness,” clearly what he means is that this consciousness will “in the final analysis” be a *correct* understanding of social conditions; otherwise, the next sentence, about history cutting a path to the consciousness of the working class, makes no sense. And that is the distortion of Marxism we were drawing attention to: social being does determine social

consciousness, but it cannot by itself provide workers an accurate understanding of social life. Adding the phrase “in the final analysis” changes nothing in this regard: spontaneous consciousness will go on being bourgeois consciousness until kingdom come, unless and until revolutionary Marxists themselves find a path to mass consciousness. But that is something North completely ignores, both in his speech and in his lecture.

(It is worth noting that while North invokes Trotsky to legitimize this position, he doesn't actually quote him. No doubt there are many instances in which Trotsky expressed his faith in the laws of history, but to thereby use Trotsky to sanction objectivism is a gross distortion. Bolshevism came out of a struggle against the objectivism of classical Social Democracy. The latter held that socialism was inevitable and – what necessarily follows from that – that workers would inevitably be won over to the socialist cause. As we pointed out in *Objectivism or Marxism*, not long after *What is to be done?* came out, it was attacked by no less a figure than Plekhanov precisely on the grounds that it repudiated this core position of what then passed for Marxist ‘orthodoxy’, i.e. that history would cut a path to class consciousness. For Plekhanov this position was irreconcilable with Lenin's view that the spontaneous consciousness of workers was bourgeois consciousness – and to that extent, he was absolutely right. But Plekhanov's claim that Lenin's position was an idealist “perversion of Marxism”⁷ was rubbish; the real perversion was the mechanical and objectivist notion that saw socialist consciousness and even the revolution as an ‘inevitable’, ‘objective’ process that required no struggle for consciousness by revolutionary Marxists. From its very birth, then, Bolshevism entailed a rejection of the position North is putting forward here. And Trotsky's entire career as a revolutionary Marxist, no less than Lenin's, was a repudiation of objectivism. The author of *The Transitional Program*, to say nothing of the organizer of the October insurrection, did not simply wait for history to cut paths to class consciousness. Finally, it needs to be pointed out that though we raised Plekhanov's criticism of *What is to be done?* in *Objectivism or Marxism*, North has nothing to say in response, despite the admiration for Plekhanov he so vehemently professes.)

Ultimatums to the Working Class

5. North's speech closes with the following remarks:

American workers will find no other way to solve the problems arising out of the crisis of capitalism except along the path of socialism and internationalism. All other paths lead to catastrophe. That is the alternative that confronts the working class. The responsibility of the Socialist Equality Party and the *World Socialist Web Site* is to confront the working class, as clearly and precisely as we can, with this alternative. As long as we do this, we can leave it to the working class to decide which alternative they prefer.

Here we get a clearer picture of what waiting for ‘history to cut a path to class consciousness’ means. The job of the party is “to confront the working class” with the alternatives of socialism or catastrophe (or more famously, socialism or barbarism). And

⁷ Samuel H. Baron, *Plekhanov: The Father of Russian Marxism*, p. 251.

that is pretty much all the party has to do: history takes care of class consciousness and, once the party does its ‘confronting’, then the workers themselves do the rest, since “we can leave it to the working class to decide which alternative they prefer.” But this is far more an objectivist daydream than a credible paradigm of how class consciousness develops. In reality, Marxists have been confronting the working class with ‘socialism or barbarism’ for a very long time: Rosa Luxemburg first coined the phrase, Trotsky used it often and it has been a staple of Marxist agitation and propaganda for most of the last century. But until now no one has ever imagined that merely confronting workers with these alternatives would be enough to sway mass consciousness: if that were all it took, then the revolution would have happened long ago.

(North’s position isn’t far removed from Plekhanov’s. Of course, formally North rejects the view that workers would ‘inevitably’ come to socialism, but here he limits almost to the vanishing point the scope of the party’s work in raising class consciousness. Beyond its ‘confronting’ job, the party doesn’t seem to have anything to do, with history and the workers themselves taking care of everything else. It is as if North has refurbished Plekhanov’s objectivism for the 21st century.)

Moreover the assumption that workers will know how to decide once the alternatives are presented to them flies in the face of history. We have just come through a century littered with defeated revolutions, where workers time and again took paths that led to catastrophe. Of course the responsibility for those defeats lies with treacherous leadership, but this is just another way of saying that it lies with inadequate consciousness; either that or we renounce the revolutionary role of the working class entirely. The task of Marxists is to fight the betrayers and provide an alternative leadership to the working class, but that entails finding a ‘road to the masses’, as Marxists used to say in Trotsky and Cannon’s day. But finding a ‘road to the masses’ is the antithesis of North’s conception, where it is ‘history’ that gets assigned that job.

Remarkably, at the end of a speech dealing with the crisis in the political consciousness of the American working class, there is not a word about mobilizing workers, about intervening in their struggles, about building bridges to socialist consciousness: we have here virtually a mini-manifesto of abstentionism. Instead, party building is reduced to presenting the working class with what is in effect an ultimatum: either you follow us or you face catastrophe. But in revolutionary politics, ultimatums are usually a symptom of political despair, of throwing up one’s hands in the face of difficult problems.

And that is what objectivism is really about – despair about ever finding a road to the masses. History doesn’t cut any paths to class consciousness; only socialists can do that. All history provides are better or worse conditions in which to wage that struggle. To claim that history will somehow do that work for us is *to give up on the working class*. “Scratch an objectivist,” we wrote in *Objectivism or Marxism*, “and you will find a skeptic. You will find someone who has been overwhelmed by the problems of fighting for socialist consciousness in the working class and who has given up hope of ever making inroads in that struggle.” That is the real subtext of North’s analysis of the 2004 election. This underlying skepticism will never be overcome so long as Marxists remain

willfully blind to mass psychology, so long as they don't treat subjectivity with the same intellectual rigor that they bring to the study of objective conditions.

(Near the end of his document, North claims that the real issue isn't his objectivism but rather that we "sneer" at the party's "preoccupation with history" (139). The passage in question, from *Objectivism or Marxism*, is the one we have just partly quoted, but to assess North's accusation we need to quote the passage in full:

Scratch an objectivist and you will find a skeptic. You will find someone who has been overwhelmed by the problems of fighting for socialist consciousness in the working class and who has given up hope of ever making inroads in that struggle. Hence the search for salvation in Objective Conditions, in Science or History, etc. Of course objective conditions are crucial: without the contradictions of capitalism, socialism would be an impossible dream. But objective conditions can do no more than provide the possibility for socialism: to make the leap from necessity to freedom requires the working class to become the conscious subject of history. That leap cannot be the inevitable outcome of objective conditions, because if that were true then freedom would be the outcome of blind necessity, which is to say the outcome of unfreedom. Of course the problems are difficult; if they weren't, socialism would have been achieved long ago. But these problems are not intractable – they only seem so to the extent that they are ignored. This is just why objectivism is so paralyzing: there is no surer way of magnifying a problem than by ignoring it. The more one "disdains the human factors" in theory, the more one is overwhelmed by them in practice.⁸

North quotes only part of one sentence from this passage, the words "search for salvation in Objective Conditions, in Science or History," and on this basis spends several pages attacking us for sneering at history and being "dismissive" of science (141). It is obvious from the passage as a whole – and indeed already from the next sentence after the one North cites – that North's accusation is false and that he is only able to make it by resorting to selective quoting with a vengeance. But this is indicative of the intellectual dishonesty running right through North's document. He constantly turns any criticism we make of his objectivism into a supposed attack on objectivity, on science, on history etc. But we have never disputed the crucial significance of objective conditions: our point is that they are a necessary *but insufficient* condition for the revolution. That is the real nub of our dispute with North, because for him there is no such insufficiency.)

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A Cynically Pragmatic Calculation

6. In the first chapter of this statement we took note of North's attempt to demonize us by claiming that we were involved in a "campaign to infiltrate the disoriented anti-Marxist pseudo-utopianism of Wilhelm Reich, Ernst Bloch and Herbert Marcuse into the Fourth International," a campaign whose purpose was supposedly to get "the International Committee to concern itself primarily not with politics and history, but with psychology

⁸ http://www.permanent-revolution.org/polemics/objectivism_marxism.pdf

and sex.” North devotes the last half of his document to substantiating this claim, focusing his attack on Brenner’s writings on issues related to psychology and utopia. Before we get down to specifics, however, it is worth saying something about the one-sidedness of North’s polemic and what this reveals about his methods.

North spends a great deal of time lambasting something he calls ‘neo-utopianism’ (or sometimes ‘pseudo-utopianism’), which is either alternatively a movement that is largely a figment of his imagination or else a catch-all phrase for branding a diverse group of thinkers. For example, in the promotional blurb on the back of the printed version of North’s document, we are told that the book “offers perceptive evaluations of the works of such representative figures of neo-utopianism as Ernst Bloch, Hendrik de Man and Wilhelm Reich.” This underscores the vacuousness of the term ‘neo-utopianism’ (to say nothing of North’s “perceptive evaluations”) since Reich was a radical psychoanalyst who had nothing to do with utopianism and de Man, a reformist enemy of Bolshevism who ended up as a Nazi collaborator, was as much an opponent of utopianism as he was of psychoanalysis. Indeed, by the time North is done, he has turned even Eduard Bernstein, who coined the ultimate anti-utopian phrase – “The movement is everything, the goal is nothing” – into a utopian!

Clearly, North spends so much time on the straw man of ‘neo-utopianism’ because he feels this is our ‘weak spot’. One can argue that hitting at your opponent’s perceived weakness is fair game in a polemic, but more than this is going on here. While North devotes half his document to this issue, he says nothing, as we’ve already noted, about Steiner’s document, *The Dialectical Path of Cognition and Revolutionizing Practice*. Now, if the theoretical education of the party membership were North’s paramount concern, then there is at least as much controversy to be found in Steiner’s work as in Brenner’s. As we pointed out in the first chapter of this statement, Steiner presents a highly critical analysis of one of the canonical works of classical Marxism, Plekhanov’s *The Role of the Individual in History*. Steiner also puts forward an important reevaluation of the relationship between Lenin’s *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* and his later *Philosophical Notebooks* on Hegel, again sharply departing from the way the movement has traditionally viewed Lenin’s philosophical development. Surely theoretical issues of this significance, that go to the very foundations of Marxism, deserved some attention. Surely a few pages could have been found for them alongside the more than 70 pages that North devoted to ‘neo-utopianism’. But there isn’t so much as a mention of any of these issues.⁹ This shows that North’s concern isn’t the theoretical education of his members, nor is it upholding the tradition of classical Marxism, which he is constantly claiming to be doing. Rather, his preoccupation with ‘neo-utopianism’ is little more than a cynically pragmatic calculation that this is the best way to discredit us. Let us now see how effective he was.

⁹ It is worth adding here that even in relation to Brenner’s document, North’s critique is notable for its aversion to issues relating to the heritage of classical Marxism. Brenner included a lengthy assessment of another canonical work, Engels’s *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, focusing on the growing body of evidence in modern anthropology that disputes the existence of prehistoric matriarchy. That evidence is certainly extensive enough to call for a critical reevaluation of the traditional Marxist conception of primitive communism. But for all of North’s bombast about science, he shows not the slightest interest in this issue.

On North's Fictions and his 'Literary Aesthetics'

7. North begins this part of the document with a highly selective and dishonest account of how this whole dispute began. He traces it back to an article on gender identity that Brenner wrote in 1998, which the WSWS editorial board refused to run because it contained “highly speculative and dubious propositions” (70). A long letter by Brenner in defense of the article only made matters worse, disclosing that he supposedly had a “new programmatic agenda”, specifically “a socialist project to restructure the family” (70). Nothing more was heard about these “pseudo-utopian” proclivities of Brenner’s for four years until he wrote a letter to the editor in 2002 expressing his strong disagreement with the way Nick Beams of the WSWS editorial board had responded to a reader’s questions about life under socialism.¹⁰ Beams in turn wrote a reply to Brenner rejecting his criticism, which prompted the latter to compose what North, with evident sarcasm, calls a “manifesto on Utopia” (76), i.e. the 2003 document, *To know a thing is to know its end*.

This ‘narrative’ depends entirely on unpublished articles and letters. North easily could have appended this material to his document and given his readers the opportunity to make up their own minds about the validity of his account, but he chose not to. However, in a footnote he did toss in two brief quotes from Brenner’s follow-up letter on the gender article, not to explain anything but rather to sneer. It seems that North’s ‘sensibilities’ were offended by the letter: he declares that Brenner was “self-consciously and immaturely intent on shocking the reader” and that caused the letter to be “distinctly deficient in literary aesthetics” (70). What is one to make of this bizarre accusation? The quotes cited by North concern human genitals and sexual acts, which are rather unavoidable in any discussion of gender identity. But this was what aroused North’s revulsion. The claim that Brenner was using this material for ‘shock effect’ is absolute nonsense. It will be readily apparent to anyone who reads both the article and the follow-up letter that these are serious attempts to delineate a materialist conception of gender identity. North’s reaction here can only be described as indicative of his own cultural backwardness: a frank discussion of sexuality provokes in him the kind of snickering that wouldn’t be out of place in a high school locker room.

(We’ll run into further instances of North’s backwardness when we get to his views on the family and the oppression of women. However, to reiterate something we said at the outset of this statement, what is at issue here is not North’s failings as an individual, but rather deep-seated problems in the movement, in this case its all-but-total ignoring of – and hence ignorance about – subjectivity, specifically in this case the realm of psychology.)

In any case, we are posting all this material on [permanent-revolution.org](http://www.permanent-revolution.org) so readers can make up their own minds.¹¹ Here some points of fact need to be made: First, North’s

¹⁰ The commentary by Beams was titled “Some questions and answers on life under socialism”, WSWS, May 30, 2002: <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2002/may2002/corr-m30.shtml>

¹¹ Frank Brenner, *Gender and Materialism and Related Correspondence*, http://www.permanent-revolution.org/essays/gender_materialism.pdf

claim that the article was wild speculation is not true. It offered a thoroughly orthodox account of the development of gender roles from the standpoint of Freudian psychoanalysis.¹² North complains that there was no evidence in the article of any “serious study of evolutionary biology or anthropology” (70). Again not true: while the article was never intended as a scholarly study (which in any case would have been inappropriate for the WSWS), it did contain citations from Frans de Waal, a leading contemporary primatologist, V. Gordon Childe, a widely read Marxist anthropologist and Benjamin Spock, the famous American ‘baby doctor’, as well as quotes from Engels and Freud. Which made this article better researched than the great majority of articles that appear on the WSWS. (As for the follow-up letter, which so shocked North’s “aesthetic” sensibilities, it contains among other things a lengthy discussion of Engels’s labor theory of human origins, along with a quote from a contemporary left-wing anthropologist, a summary of psychoanalytic theory concerning gender as well as a quote from *Capital* relating to the need for a Marxist theory of human nature.)

North also misrepresents the reaction of the WSWS editorial board to this article. He claims that “Comrade Dave Walsh, who had reviewed the article, brought some of his concerns to your attention” (70). In fact, Walsh’s initial reaction to the article had been “very positive”, as he stated in his email to Brenner on May 23, 1998, which we are posting. It was only after consulting with North (and Barry Grey) that Walsh’s position changed, which is evident in the 3-page letter he sent to Brenner on June 5. Walsh’s initial reaction shows that the article was not the piece of ‘wild speculation’ that North wants to make it out to be, and that in fact there were differences within the editorial board over it. It is also clear that the June 5 letter was largely an expression of North’s concerns, though if one compares it to North’s statements in 2006, it is clear that Walsh was doing his best to make North’s unvarnished backwardness seem more reasonable. (He was only partly successful, however: the remarks on homosexuality in that letter are quite troubling, as Brenner indicated in his response.)¹³

8. Furthermore the claim by North that Brenner’s follow-up letter disclosed a “new programmatic agenda” on Brenner’s part is also nonsense. The socialist movement has always been associated with the struggle against the oppression of women, and as a necessary consequence of that it has promoted collective forms of family life. (This is attested to by the record of the Bolsheviks in the early years of the revolution, discussed in part 3 of *To know a thing is to know its end*.) North mocks Brenner for supposedly wanting the party to issue “‘socialist’ encyclicals” on “the appropriate form of the post-

¹² In the United States especially, it is now commonplace to deny the scientific legitimacy of psychoanalysis. Without getting into a long discussion, the point needs to be made that ‘Freud-bashing’, as it has come to be known, has as little validity as those other popular pastimes – ‘Marx-bashing’ and ‘Darwin-bashing’.

¹³ Disingenuously, North declares that “we heard informally that you [i.e. Brenner] were dissatisfied with our refusal to publish your article” (71). There was nothing informal about it, given that Brenner had written a 12-page letter defending the article and urging its publication. Neither North nor anyone else on the editorial board ever responded to that letter. (No doubt North’s later discovery as to the letter’s deficiency in “literary aesthetics” was meant to justify this indifference, since presumably such a letter required no response.) But North is also insinuating here that a writer’s ‘hurt feelings’ played a role in launching Brenner’s “pseudo-utopian enterprise”. This is about as perceptive as North’s judgments on “literary aesthetics”.

revolutionary family and the nature of sexuality under communism” (75), but this is an obvious distortion. What Brenner did call for, in *To know a thing is to know its end*, was “programmatically demands to fight backwardness and sexual oppression”, specifically measures to fight wife and child abuse, the overcoming of domestic drudgery, universal access to daycare and to abortion, and the deinstitutionalization of marriage. To portray such demands as part of any neo- or pseudo-utopian “agenda” is nonsense; they have long been part of the socialist tradition. (As we’ll see later, North has trouble with some of these demands, though in this respect he is the one who is adopting a “new programmatic agenda.”)

But Brenner also called for “educational material about the goal of a collective family and the nature of personal life under socialism,” which is presumably what provoked North’s wisecrack about socialist “encyclicals”. North however ignores the social conditions which such educational material was meant to address – the pervasive crisis of the family within bourgeois society. As Brenner wrote:

The nuclear family today is in an advanced stage of disintegration, something that even the professional liars of the mass media have to admit to, and no one within the entire spectrum of bourgeois public opinion has anything to offer except platitudes about ‘family values’ along with lots more of the economic oppression and social and moral degradation that is destroying the fabric of family life in the first place. Under these conditions, socialists should be taking every opportunity to bring our goals to public attention, including the new kind of family life that would be possible in a society finally free of class oppression. This is why Beams’s approach to these issues is so wrong-headed: it cuts off any consideration of the socialist future when that kind of vision could prove invaluable in promoting socialism as a great political and moral ideal (*To know a thing is to know its end*, part 3).¹⁴

If this is ‘utopian’, it is in precisely the same spirit as Cannon’s lecture, “What Socialist America Will Like” (which we discussed in chapter 5 of this statement) – i.e. that “the prospect of socialism—what the future socialist society will look like—is a question of fascinating interest and has a great importance in modern propaganda” because of its ability to galvanize support for socialism, especially (as Cannon notes) among youth.¹⁵ North’s disparaging of this kind of educational material is yet a further indication of his own *disinterest* in galvanizing such support.

Brenner’s Work on Marxism and Psychoanalysis

9. What was new about Brenner’s article wasn’t its “programmatic agenda” but rather its use of psychoanalytic theory. But North’s ‘narrative’ to the contrary, this was not some bolt from the blue on Brenner’s part in 1998, nor did it disappear until 2002. As the record of Brenner’s contributions to the IC press demonstrates, Brenner had worked consistently for a number of years to draw attention to the important political implications of psychoanalytic theory, focusing on the fascinating (and largely unknown)

¹⁴ http://www.permanent-revolution.org/polemics/to_know.pdf

¹⁵ James P. Cannon, “What Socialist America Will Look Like,” *The Militant*, Jan. 23, 1953. <http://www.marxists.org/archive/cannon/works/1953/socialistamer.htm>

history of the efforts, primarily in the 1930s, by the ‘Freudian left’ to incorporate the insights of psychoanalysis within the framework of Marxism. This theoretical work was already evident in a number of Brenner’s articles before the one on gender identity. For example, the Feb. 24, 1997 issue of *The International Workers Bulletin* (printed predecessor of the WSWS) ran an article called “Monday mornings and heart attacks”, which made use of Freud’s theory of repression and sublimation along with Marx’s theory of alienation to account for why heart attacks were more frequent on Monday mornings. Starting on June 16, 1997, the IWB ran a two-part series by Brenner and David Walsh on the life and work of Surrealist poet Andre Breton¹⁶, which (in part 2) dealt with the complex relationship of Surrealism and psychoanalysis, while also bringing in some of Trotsky’s insights into Freudian theory.

It is also around this time (i.e. 1996-7) that Brenner wrote a 30-page essay called “Marxism and Psychoanalysis” whose stated aim was “to show that a familiarity with the basic concepts and major discoveries of Freud’s psychoanalysis can be of great value to Marxists.”¹⁷ This essay wasn’t intended for publication since it would have been too long to run in the IWB, but Brenner sent it to Walsh in the hope that it would be circulated internally and generate some discussion. The purpose was pedagogical: there had been no consideration of these issues within the movement since quite literally Trotsky’s day, so it was necessary to acquaint comrades with basic concepts. As it turned out, the essay generated no feedback. Despite that (and the negative reaction to the gender article), Brenner continued to attempt to bring these matters to the attention of the movement. On June 11 and 12, 1999, the WSWS ran Brenner’s review of *Freud and the Bolsheviks*, a history of Soviet psychoanalysis by the American academic Martin A. Miller.¹⁸ This finally did generate some important discussion, notably an exchange between Brenner and WSWS writer Allen Whyte on the validity of psychoanalysis and its relevance to Marxism, which ran on the WSWS on Nov. 30, 1999.¹⁹ Finally on March 24 and 25, 2000, the WSWS ran Brenner’s “Mental illness and the American dream”²⁰, which tried to show how a Marxism informed by psychoanalytic concepts could be brought to bear on seemingly ‘non-political’ matters like statistics on mental illness and sexual dysfunction.

This record demonstrates that North’s ‘narrative’ is false: the gender article was not some anomaly and neither was Brenner’s 2002 letter to the editor concerning utopia. There is a

¹⁶ “Art and freedom: Andre Breton and the problems of 20th century culture”, originally in the IWB, starting June 16, 1997, but now posted on the WSWS. Part one:

<http://www.wsws.org/arts/1997/jun1997/breton1.shtml> Part two:

<http://www.wsws.org/arts/1997/jun1997/breton2.shtml>

¹⁷ This essay is now available at http://www.permanent-revolution.org/essays/marxism_psychoanalysis.pdf
The uncertainty as to the date of this essay is because Brenner only has an undated hard copy in his files.

¹⁸ “Intrepid thought: psychoanalysis in the Soviet Union”, WSWS, June 11 and 12, 1999. Part one:

<http://www.wsws.org/articles/1999/jun1999/freu-j11.shtml> ; Part two:

<http://www.wsws.org/articles/1999/jun1999/freu-j12.shtml>

¹⁹ “An exchange of letters on Freudianism and Marxism”, WSWS, Nov. 30, 1999:

<http://www.wsws.org/articles/1999/nov1999/freu-n30.shtml>

²⁰ “Mental illness and the American dream”, WSWS, Mar. 24 and 25, 2000. Part one:

<http://www.wsws.org/articles/2000/mar2000/ment-m24.shtml> ; Part two:

<http://www.wsws.org/articles/2000/mar2000/ment-m25.shtml>

consistent line of theoretical work here, focused on what Trotsky called “subjective dialectics”. The deeper that work went, the more its political implications became evident. Here is the concluding paragraph of “Mental illness and the American dream”:

We are living in the twilight of the American dream. The epidemic of mental illness, the pervasiveness of sexual misery—these both show that the rift between the happy surface of society and the despair underneath is becoming too great to sustain. Millions of people are losing any hope that life will ever get better. But the fading away of a false dream can also be the beginning of a revival of hope. Society needs to find a new road forward so that the mass of humanity isn't condemned to misery, and the desire for happiness needs to find a new dream, one that isn't a mirage. Happiness can become a reality only if its human content is restored to it, and that means that the happiness of one is inseparable from the happiness of all. This is a dream that only socialism can realize. With the dawning of the twenty-first century, happiness is once again becoming a revolutionary longing.

It is noteworthy that in 2000 the WSWS was prepared to run material like this. Even though, as Brenner heard informally, there were reservations about this article on the part of some party members, the piece generated a considerable amount of interest. Yet when Brenner pursued this theme in his 2002 letter to the WSWS editor, the editorial board refused to publish the letter. Though Nick Beams did reply privately to Brenner (the correspondence is contained in an appendix to *To know a thing is to know its end*²¹), when Brenner requested that both letters be posted on the WSWS, again the editorial board refused. It needs to be underscored exactly what this means: here we have an exchange of letters on the subject of a vision of socialist society, including whether one needs such a vision and what it entails. This was an exchange between a contributing writer to the WSWS and a member of its editorial board, the correspondence wasn't particularly long (8 printed pages) and it dealt with such matters as the family, the environment, work and productivity – topics of obvious interest to WSWS readers. And yet the editorial board would not run it.

Clearly something important had changed between 2000 and 2002. And the moment one puts those two dates together, it is obvious that there was a huge change in the political atmosphere in that interval – the trauma of 9/11. This suggests a very different ‘narrative’ to North’s, but one that is a good deal more credible politically. Here we need to go back to the point originally raised by Steiner (and discussed in the first chapter of this statement) about the troubling record of the SEP on the Afghan war in this same post-9/11 period: the party held no meetings in the US to protest the war for nearly a year, it raised no programmatic demands about the war and no independent slogans or banners in anti-war demonstrations. This is the unmistakable sign of a movement (and particularly its leadership) caving in to the intense bourgeois class pressures and mass media hysteria generated in the aftermath of 9/11. The IC was already well down the road to objectivism and abstentionism prior to 9/11 (as we saw in relation to its abandonment of political work in the working class during the Clinton era), but these conservative tendencies were reinforced to a significant degree after 9/11. The more the party retreated into its journalistic shell, the less tolerant the leadership became of any creative development of

²¹ http://www.permanent-revolution.org/polemics/to_know.pdf

Marxism, particularly any insights into mass consciousness, since that kind of theoretical work would have, if only by implication, called into question the party's abstentionist practice. That is the real issue behind North's repeated denunciations of 'neo-utopianism', 'psychology and sex', etc.

Programmatic Droughts and Socialist Dreams

10. North essentially reiterates Beams's response to Brenner's 2002 letter, and since Brenner dealt with that at length in *To know a thing is to know its end*, there is no reason to cover the same ground again here. One point, however, does deserve mention: North rejects our criticism about the IC lacking a program, claiming that no party has "a record of programmatic statements ... as comprehensive" as the IC (73-4). Of course the Trotskyist movement has a long history of programmatic statements, but our criticisms applied specifically to the IC in recent years, as the movement has become increasingly dominated by abstentionism.

When Brenner was writing his 2002 letter to the editor, he did a search of the WSWS looking for any programmatic statements, and the only thing that came up was the party's 1996 US presidential election statement. For instance, in what turned out to be the historic election of 2000, the SEP produced a three-part statement called "The working class and the 2000 US elections"²² which didn't contain a single programmatic demand. There is no indication, at least on the WSWS, that the SEP ran any candidates that year and the same is true for the mid-term elections of 1998 and 2002 – no program and no candidates. This means that for six years – i.e. 1996 to 2002 – the party (at least in the United States) put out no programmatic statements. Six years! It is doubtful that there has ever been such a long period of what one might call here 'programmatic drought' in the history of the Trotskyist movement, even when it had to work under conditions of illegality. If this does not constitute abstentionism, then the word has no meaning.

(This 'programmatic drought' ended only in 2003 with the gubernatorial campaign in California and then the national elections the following year. But as Steiner pointed out in the final section of his document ["Where is the International Committee going?"], the programs the SEP finally issued in those campaigns were deeply flawed in that a number of the demands were formulated in a way that "blurred the distinction between liberalism and revolutionary socialism." Put these facts together and what becomes evident is that the rightward drift that led to the absence of any program for so many years found expression in these blurred demands when the party finally did put out a program.)

Moreover, it should go without saying that a revolutionary socialist party isn't just an election campaign machine. It should continuously be putting forward a program of socialist demands to the working class, irrespective of whether there happens to be an election going on. A worker who visits the party website or reads its literature should easily be able to find a clear and concise statement of what the party stands for – its basic principles, the demands it fights for, its long-term goals. But there has never been such a statement on the WSWS. (It is noteworthy that though *The Transitional Program* was

²²<http://www.wsws.org/articles/2000/oct2000/elec-o03.shtml>

posted on the WSWS in 2000, there is no link to it on the home page nor on the “About the ICFI” page; the only way to find it is to plug in the title on the website search engine. That surely says something about the attitude of the IC leadership both to its program and its history.)

11. There is one further point that North makes in regards to program that deserves comment. In contrasting his position to Brenner’s, North states:

Comrade Brenner, you are not particularly interested in the formulation of demands whose content is rooted in the objective contradictions of bourgeois society and which express the political and socio-economic interests of the working class in its struggle against capitalist oppression, exploitation and inequality. Rather, you conceive of program as, to quote your letter, “a socialist dream, in which socialism and a happy life become associated in the minds of millions of people.” This constitutes the essential foundation of your call for a revival of Utopianism (75-6).

What is striking here is the assumption that these are two different things – i.e. a “socialist dream” on the one hand, and on the other hand, a program which expresses “the political and socio-economic interests of the working class”. Why can’t they be one and the same thing? The famous program of the Bolsheviks in 1917 – Peace, Bread and Land – certainly was about meeting the objective needs of the working class, but it also formulated the most powerfully-felt aspirations of the masses, which is to say that it was the embodiment of the “socialist dream” in the conditions of war-time Russia. And that was of crucial importance, since it was key to the Bolsheviks’ winning over the masses. Peace, Bread and Land is the archetype of transitional demands, whose defining characteristic is the bridge they build to socialist consciousness – a bridge built precisely by linking the subjective aspirations of workers to their objective interests. No one could accuse Lenin of utopianism, but as a famous passage in *What is to be done?* attests, he knew the value of dreams.²³ And he paid the most careful attention to the thoughts and aspirations of workers, as the following remarks in a speech by Trotsky indicate:

To overhear the masses, overhear what they think, what they want, to understand all this and mentally jump over all those who bureaucratically think for the masses but don’t listen to them – for this the head of a Lenin is necessary. You now have the opportunity to read all that Lenin wrote. I advise you – this is very useful! – to pay special attention to those parts of the books where he was listening to the masses, to what they wanted, what they needed – not only what they wanted but what they had not yet been taught to want.²⁴

What workers want, what they need and what they have “not yet been taught to want” – that can serve very well indeed as the definition of a socialist dream. Trotsky offers us here insight into an essential part of what constitutes revolutionary leadership. This is the antithesis of objectivism, i.e. of the conception that history on its own will “cut a path” to socialist consciousness. It is equally far removed from ‘confronting’ workers with

²³ V.I. Lenin, *What is to be done?* in *Collected Works*, v. 5, pp. 509-10. The passage on dreaming is in the fifth chapter: <http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1901/witbd/v.htm#v05fl61h-492-GUESS>. Brenner discusses this passage in the final section of *To know a thing is to know its end*.

²⁴ Leon Trotsky, “Leninism and Library Work” (1924) in *Problems of Everyday Life*, p. 153.

ultimatums. Lenin listened to the masses, needless to say not to adapt to their moods or illusions, but rather to find in their wants and needs the raw material for building bridges to socialist consciousness. Without this continuous, dialectical engagement with mass consciousness, it would never have been possible to advance a program that won the workers over to the revolution.

After the seizure of power, that engagement flourished in the heroic early years of the revolution: for millions of workers, not only in Russia but around the world, socialism came to be seen as a great beacon of hope, as opening up the possibilities for ‘a new life’. (This socialist dream of ‘a new life’ was everywhere in the social and cultural life of revolutionary Russia, as is evident in Richard Stites’s informative account, *Revolutionary Dreams: Utopian Vision and Experimental Life in the Russian Revolution*.) Until the betrayals and brutality of Stalinism destroyed it, socialism was indeed a dream for the masses that rivaled (and even for a time outshone) the American dream. It is inconceivable that we will ever be able to rebuild a socialist culture in the working class without rekindling those aspirations for ‘a new life’. But a movement mired in objectivism and abstentionism has no interest in listening to the masses, let alone inspiring them with what they have “not yet been taught to want.”

Classical Marxism and Utopianism

12. Brenner’s discussion of utopianism in the classical Marxist tradition hinges on redefining it, contrasting it with the pre-Marxist utopians as “an anticipation of the possibilities of human liberation rather than the invention of schemes for a perfect world.”²⁵ North completely ignores this distinction and spends several pages proving that Marx and Engels were not utopians in the traditional sense of that term. Since Brenner never claimed they were, North’s remarks are beside the point.

For those who have not read Brenner’s document, it is worth reiterating what he says about this distinction. The utopianism within the classical Marxist tradition

has nothing to do with the traditional notion of utopianism as the conjuring up of imaginary societies, but the problem is that this is much too restrictive (and pejorative) a notion. Above all, it excludes utopian vision in the sense of *foresight*, of anticipating or prefiguring the possibilities of human liberation rather than inventing them. Marx was a utopian in this sense, as was Lenin. But Marxists have lost sight of this kind of vision for far too long because of the sweeping dismissal of utopianism that passes for Marxist orthodoxy.²⁶

Brenner makes this point several times in the document, including in a discussion (in Part 11) of a passage from Lenin’s *What is to be done?* about what Lenin called “useful dreaming.”²⁷ Lenin quotes the revolutionary critic Pisarev (follower of the great Russian utopian Chernyshevsky): “... if man were completely deprived of the ability to dream in this way, if he could not from time to time run ahead and mentally conceive, in an entire

²⁵ *To know a thing is to know its end*, Part 8: http://www.permanent-revolution.org/polemics/to_know.pdf

²⁶ Part 2: http://www.permanent-revolution.org/polemics/to_know.pdf

²⁷ http://www.permanent-revolution.org/polemics/to_know.pdf

and completed picture, the product to which his hands are only just beginning to lend shape, then I cannot at all imagine what stimulus there would be to induce man to undertake and complete extensive and strenuous work in the sphere of art, science, and practical endeavor.” And Lenin adds: “Of this kind of dreaming there is unfortunately too little in our movement.”²⁸ It is precisely in this sense of “useful dreaming” that one can legitimately talk about utopianism in the classical Marxist tradition.²⁹

As we’ve already seen, a good example of “useful dreaming” is Cannon’s lecture on “What Socialist America Will Look Like”. Cannon too made a distinction between the old utopianism of drawing up blueprints for socialist society as opposed to the approach he took in his lecture, which he called “a forecast of the lines of future development

²⁸ V.I. Lenin, *What is to be done?* in *Collected Works*, v. 5, pp. 509-10:

<http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1901/witbd/v.htm#v05fl61h-492-GUESS>

²⁹ A small but telling example of North’s intellectual dishonesty comes up in this regard. It concerns a quote that Brenner cited from an early draft of Marx’s book on the Paris Commune, *The Civil War in France*. Brenner argued that both here and elsewhere Marx and Engels conceived of the relationship between utopianism and Marxism in a way that was significantly different than the orthodox view that came to predominate within classical social democracy, i.e. the view that with the advent of scientific socialism, utopianism was a relic of the past that could be ignored. The passage in question is about a page and a half in print. Brenner summarized the first two-thirds, which is key to understanding the passage, since it is necessary to know whom Marx had in mind in making these remarks. North dismisses Brenner’s point, declaring: “How you, Comrade Brenner, can claim that this passage supports your potted interpretation of Marxism is beyond me” (78). But it is only beyond North because he has ‘potted’ the passage: he shaves off the first third – precisely where Marx spells out whom he is targeting in these remarks. He also ignores Brenner’s summary of that material. This is a deliberate distortion. Marx was targeting what he called “some patronizing friends of the working class” who admired the Commune because to them it proved that once workers were in power, they were reasonable people who would never resort to any socialist schemes. The whole point of the passage is to burst that patronizing bubble: the workers were very much unreasonable socialists, as extreme in the ends they were fighting for as the great utopians, but fundamentally different from the utopians in their means and in their understanding of history.

Here is the text in full, with the part North omitted in bold:

Some patronizing friends of the working class, while hardly dissembling their disgust even at the few measures they consider as “socialist,” although there is nothing socialist in them except their tendency, express their satisfaction and try to coax genteel sympathies for the Paris Commune by the great discovery that, after all, workmen are rational men and whenever in power always resolutely turn their back upon socialist enterprises! They do in fact neither try to establish in Paris a *phalanstère* nor an *Icarie*. Wise men of their generation! These benevolent patronizers, profoundly ignorant of the real aspirations and the real movement of the working classes, forget one thing. All the socialist founders of sects belong to a period in which the working class themselves were neither sufficiently trained and organized by the march of capitalist society itself to enter as historical agents upon the world’s stage, nor were the material conditions of their emancipation sufficiently matured in the old world itself. Their misery existed, but the conditions of their own movement did not yet exist. The utopian founders of sects, while in their criticism of present society clearly describing the goal of the social movement, the supersession of the wages system with all its economical conditions of class rule, found neither in society itself the material conditions of its transformation, nor in the working class the organized power and the *conscience* [consciousness] of the movement. They tried to compensate for the historical conditions of the movement by phantastic pictures and plans of a new society in whose propaganda they saw the true means of salvation. From the moment the working-men class movement became real, the phantastic utopias evanesced, not because

already indicated in the present”. The “guiding line” of that forecast came from “marvelous flashes of insight” about the socialist future to be found in the works of “the great Marxists.”³⁰ And if anything, the value of such material “in modern propaganda,” as Cannon put it, is even greater today than it was in his time.

And as Cannon himself indicated, his lecture was in line with a long tradition in the socialist movement. Far and away the most popular book ever produced by the German Social Democrats in their classical period was such a vision of socialism, August Bebel’s *Women and Socialism* (discussed in part 10 of *To know a thing is to know its end*). Trotsky devoted the last chapter of *Literature and Revolution* to a vision of a transformed humanity under socialism and communism. Lenin’s *State and Revolution* is ‘utopian’ in the sense we are using here. In Marx’s case, the best-known example is the *Critique of the Gotha Program*, but there are “flashes of insight” in many of his other works, including *The Communist Manifesto* and *Capital*.

(In a much-cited essay on “Marx’s Vision of Communism” which brings together Marx’s scattered remarks on the subject, the radical academic Bertell Ollman points out that there is evidence that Marx originally intended *Capital* to have a final volume devoted to such a vision. Presumably then, as Ollman states, “Marx’s objection to discussing communist society was more of a strategic than of a principled sort.”³¹ By “strategic” objections,

the working class had given up the end aimed at by these Utopists, but because they had found the real means to realize them, but in their place came a real insight into the historic conditions of the movement and a more and more gathering force of the military organization of the working class. But the last 2 ends of the movement proclaimed by the Utopians are the last ends proclaimed by the Paris Revolution and by the International. Only the means are different and the real conditions of the movement are no longer clouded in utopian fables. <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1871/civil-war-france/drafts/ch01.htm#D1s3vii>

Twice in this passage Marx characterized the difference with the utopian socialists as being over means, not ends. And that is significant because it means that, as Brenner wrote, “utopianism as a standpoint still has something important to say to us” – something important about the *ends* of socialism. One can draw a similar conclusion from Engels’s work, including *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*, which while subjecting the utopians to a profound critique that was essential to the project of a scientific socialism, nonetheless was effusive in its praise of a figure like Fourier, who clearly remained an important influence on Engels throughout his life. Brenner argued that the relationship between utopianism and Marxism was one of a dialectical transcendence – terminating “the ideologically rooted illusions and limitations” of the utopians, “while at the same time preserving – or perhaps more correctly, rediscovering – their positive content.” North of course argues differently: “To all those who can understand what they read,” [he is referring here to his potted version of the Marx quote], “it is perfectly clear that Marx is arguing that utopianism belongs to an earlier stage in the development of socialism, one that has been overtaken and superseded by the development of capitalism and the emergence of a mass working class” (80). But North ‘forgets’ that a dialectical understanding of development involves not only ‘overtaking’ and ‘superseding’ but also *preserving*. And that is just what Marx was saying in this quote – that the revolutionary socialist labor movement *preserved* the socialist ends of the great utopians.

³⁰ James P. Cannon, “What Socialist America Will Look Like,” Jan. 23, 1953: <http://www.marxists.org/archive/cannon/works/1953/socialistamer.htm>

³¹ Bertell Ollman, “Marx’s Vision of Communism” in *Social and Sexual Revolution*, p. 50: http://www.nyu.edu/projects/ollman/docs/vision_of_communism.php.

what Ollman meant was primarily a need to distinguish scientific socialism from the utopian sects that were very much alive in the mid-19th century as well as Marx's belief that visions of the communist future would do far less to promote class consciousness among workers than an analysis of existing conditions. In the 21st century these objections no longer have the same validity. The utopian sects vanished from the political stage long ago [and 'neo-utopianism' is little more than a figment of North's imagination]. As for class consciousness, it was evident by Cannon's day, and indeed for much of the last century, that visions of socialism had value as propaganda in educating the working class. And if anything, that value is even greater now, given today's 'There Is No Alternative' zeitgeist, to say nothing of the nightmare legacy of Stalinism. Indeed it isn't much of a stretch to assume that if Marx were alive today, he would keep to his original intention regarding that final volume of *Capital*.)

13. North also takes Brenner to task for claiming that the ideas of the pre-Marxist utopians still had relevance to contemporary Marxism, claiming that the word "relevant" constitutes "a sleight-of-hand" on Brenner's part. North contends:

A deep understanding of Marxism requires the *critical* assimilation of the entire antecedent history of socialist thought, from Plato to the utopians of the late 18th and early 19th century. However, an appreciation of the contribution of past thinkers does not mean that their theories can be utilized, in their historically given form, in contemporary conditions. (77-8)

Brenner never suggested that the ideas of the utopians should be used *uncritically*, but the issue he was raising was whether they are being used *at all*. He wrote:

The development of Marxism was a dialectical one, a 'transcendence' that terminated the ideologically rooted illusions and limitations of its predecessors, while at the same time preserving – or perhaps more correctly, rediscovering – their positive content. This is widely understood in relation to Hegel, whose influence on Marx was evident long after the latter had settled accounts philosophically with Hegelianism. The utopian socialists, however, have been ignored, even though there is ample indication in the writings of Marx and Engels that the ideas of Saint-Simon, Fourier and Owen continued to play an important role in their thinking. The fact is that *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* is itself hardly a justification for this neglect, with its often effusive praise of the utopians ("we delight in the stupendously grand thoughts and germs of thoughts that everywhere break out through their phantastic covering"), praise that at times seems to go overboard, as when Engels claims that Fourier "uses the dialectic method in the same masterly way as his contemporary, Hegel." If nothing else, this is a rather strong recommendation for reading Fourier (*To know a thing is to know its end*, part 2).³²

But no one reads Fourier or any of the other utopians. There are no lectures or articles on their work and its potential significance for today. Plug in the names Fourier and Saint-Simon on the WSWS web site search engine and you get zero matches. So it would seem that it is North who is engaged here in a "sleight-of-hand": when he talks about critically assimilating the ideas of these thinkers, what he really means is completely ignoring

³² http://www.permanent-revolution.org/polemics/to_know.pdf

them. This was not the attitude of Marx and Engels. As Brenner pointed out, near the end of *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*,

Engels mentions that he had originally intended “to place the brilliant critique of civilization scattered through the works of Fourier by the side of Morgan’s and my own,” but that he couldn’t spare the time. It is a small but telling indication of how the utopian tradition continued to engage Marx and Engels, how for them it was not simply an empty husk that had been discarded once Marxism became a science, but that it remained an important source of ideas (*To know a thing is to know its end*, part 8).³³

This is what a critical assimilation of the utopians would really mean – extracting the brilliance from the dross in their work and making use of the former in the context of contemporary Marxism. But it is impossible to imagine anyone on the WSWS staff taking on a project such as the one described by Engels.

Objectivism as a Capitulation to Spontaneous Consciousness

14. We come now to the nub of North’s criticism – that utopianism is an “idealist method” (84). Here North quotes Plekhanov on the mechanical materialists of the 18th century, specifically about how they were incapable of understanding social change except as the changing of ‘public opinion’. According to North, Brenner falls into the same idealist trap since he makes “the revival of class consciousness dependent upon the revival of ideals, that is, upon one of the aspects or components of class consciousness” (86). By contrast, historical materialism insists that underlying objective forces determine changes in social consciousness.

The first point that needs to be made is that Brenner never claimed that socialist consciousness was *solely* dependent on the revival of socialism as an ideal, which is to say, *independent* of objective conditions. This is the deliberately distorted interpretation that runs right through North’s polemic. There is nothing mutually exclusive about recognizing the essential role that objective conditions play in making revolution *possible* and the essential role that socialist consciousness plays in making that possibility a *reality*. The crux of the issue is how to bring about the development of socialist consciousness, and whether educational material promoting a vision of socialism is essential to that development.

Secondly, North presents a one-sided account of the relationship of Marxism to 18th century materialism. It was not only the discovery of history’s underlying objective forces that demarcated Marxist from earlier forms of materialism but also the fundamental role it ascribed to *revolutionary practice*. This is the crucial point Marx makes in the first of his *Theses on Feuerbach*: “The chief defect of all hitherto existing materialism – that of Feuerbach included – is that the thing, reality, sensuousness, is conceived only in the form of the *object* or of *contemplation*, but not as *human sensuous activity, practice*, not subjectively.” And he ends that thesis by emphasizing that Feuerbach “does not grasp the significance of ‘revolutionary’, of ‘practical-critical’,

³³ http://www.permanent-revolution.org/polemics/to_know.pdf

activity.”³⁴ That criticism could also be aimed at Plekhanov, North’s guide on this question, as on so many others. Not surprisingly then, this same downplaying of the significance of revolutionary practice is evident in North’s own position on how class consciousness develops, as an examination of his remarks will show.

As opposed to the supposedly idealist method of Brenner’s utopianism, North contends that “objective forces ... both determined the social environment and shaped the form and direction of social consciousness” (85). Now, if objective forces shape “the form and direction” of social consciousness, presumably that means *socialist* consciousness as well. But if that is true, then North has landed himself in a trap. Because as we saw in relation the 2004 US election, North vehemently protested when we ascribed that same position to him, viz. that “objective conditions translate themselves directly into a *correct* consciousness of those conditions,” which in the case of the working class would mean socialist consciousness. On the contrary, North declared, his position was “the absolute opposite of that which you attribute to me,” and he proceeded to quote at length from a lecture he had given which explained “why the consciousness that arises spontaneously within the working class is not socialist consciousness” (58). Which amounts to saying that, *in the case of the working class*, objective conditions *misshape* “the form and direction” of social consciousness.

This is because, as Lenin insisted, spontaneous consciousness is bourgeois consciousness. And objective forces on their own can do no more than give rise to spontaneous consciousness, which means they cannot take the working class *beyond* the bounds of bourgeois consciousness. Thus to look to objective conditions to solve the problems of developing socialist consciousness is to *capitulate* to spontaneous consciousness. One can do that directly in the form of opportunism or indirectly by abstaining from the struggle to change spontaneous consciousness, but these are simply two different routes to the same rotten end. Something more than objective conditions is necessary for the development of socialist consciousness, and that something more must be *subjective*, i.e. a form of consciousness – specifically the revolutionary theory of the Marxist movement. But by North’s logic, this reproduces the idealist “tautology” (86) that he accused Brenner of – i.e. it makes one form of consciousness (the socialist consciousness of the masses) dependent on another form of consciousness (revolutionary theory). But of course this “tautology” is the very position that Lenin advanced in *What is to be done?*: “Without revolutionary theory, no revolutionary movement.” Thus either this isn’t a tautology at all or else Lenin is an “idealist.”

15. North tries to get around this problem by speaking of objective conditions providing an “impulse” to socialist consciousness (86), but this resolves nothing. If we follow Lenin, then trade unionism is the limit of any impulse to class consciousness that objective conditions can provide, which still leaves us a long way from socialist consciousness. But North’s objectivism requires a much more ‘robust’ impulse, so at one point he declares that “the contradictions of capitalism provide the principal and decisive impulse for the development of revolutionary consciousness” (95). No doubt this is

³⁴ K. Marx, *Theses on Feuerbach* [1845], emphasis in the original:
<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/theses/theses.htm>

meant to sound orthodox and materialist, but in fact it is just the opposite: if the impulse from objective forces is “decisive” – indeed “the” decisive one – for socialist consciousness, this would have to mean that the impulse from *subjective* forces, i.e. the theory and practice of the revolutionary movement, is *not* decisive – and that amounts to renouncing the central lesson of the history of Bolshevism and Trotskyism.

As we have already pointed out, *What is to be done?* was attacked by Plekhanov precisely on the grounds that Lenin was an idealist. Plekhanov considered it a “libel” for Lenin to claim that working class consciousness could not get beyond trade unionism.³⁵ On the contrary, the working class was “instinctively socialistic” and all the party had to do was elevate the “instinctive to the conscious level.” Thus, “instead of being opposed to each other, consciousness and spontaneity, party and mass, were seen as mutually interpenetrating, ultimately becoming one.”³⁶ This led Plekhanov to the following categorical assertion:

If the socialist revolution is a necessary consequence of the contradictions of capitalism, then it is clear that at a certain stage of social development the workers of capitalist countries would come to socialism even if left to themselves.³⁷

Here we have objectivism served up straight – the workers will come to socialism “even if left to themselves.” One wants to say – would this were true! Humanity would have been spared a century of unparalleled brutality. But today these words only serve to underscore the severe limitations of Plekhanov’s theoretical and political outlook. Let us also note that Plekhanov’s assertion is not far removed from North’s formulation that “the contradictions of capitalism provide the principal and decisive impulse for the development of revolutionary consciousness.” For Plekhanov this view of how the working class will come to socialism was the only one consistent with “that central truth of Marxian materialism – ‘being determines consciousness’”. Lenin’s theory, on the other hand, “constituted a new embodiment of the idealist doctrine that consciousness determines being” and moreover amounted to a renunciation of the belief “in the inevitability of the proletarian revolution.”³⁸ Here the link between objectivism and the capitulation to spontaneity is crystal clear: Plekhanov’s vulgar and one-sided materialism amounted to a renunciation of the struggle for socialist consciousness in the working class, and the consequences of that renunciation for his own political evolution are well known. But while North could never allow himself to make these type of bald assertions, his own objectivism leads him down the same path as Plekhanov – i.e. to persistently downplaying the significance of the revolutionary movement in developing socialist consciousness.

³⁵ Samuel H. Baron, *Plekhanov: The father of Russian Marxism*, p. 250, footnote.

³⁶ Ibid, pp. 250-1. The quotes here are from Baron’s summary of Plekhanov’s 1904 article, “The Working Class and the Social Democratic Intelligentsia.” So far as we can tell, that article has never been translated into English, but Baron devoted three pages to summarizing its contents.

³⁷ Ibid, p. 251. This quote is directly from Plekhanov.

³⁸ Ibid, pp. 251-2.

A Brief Foray into Geometry and Being a Little Bit Pregnant

16. Before we leave this point, a digression into revisionist literature is useful here, since in those circles it is not hard to find an unabashed defense of the virtues of spontaneous consciousness that demonstrates, more directly than North's guarded phrases, the implications of backing Plekhanov's side in this dispute. A good example is offered by Alan Woods, Ted Grant's successor as the leader of the Militant Tendency, in a 1999 book he penned on the history of the Bolshevik Party called *Bolshevism: The Road to Revolution*. Though the work as a whole is an orthodox defense of Bolshevism, Woods singles out *What is to be done?* for criticism, claiming it is "seriously flawed by a most unfortunate theoretical lapse" on Lenin's part – precisely the core idea that the spontaneous consciousness of the working class is bourgeois consciousness. Woods cites several examples (including the Paris Commune and the Spanish civil war) where the spontaneous movement of the working class went beyond trade unionism and he argues that this disproves Lenin's thesis. Woods declares emphatically: "*The class struggle itself inevitably creates not only a class consciousness, but a socialist consciousness*" (emphasis in the original).³⁹ This is identical to Plekhanov's assertion about workers coming to socialism "even if left to themselves".

But if that is true, then what need is there for a revolutionary party? Woods's answer is that the masses need the party in order to take power, and since a revolutionary party can't be improvised at the last minute, that party needs to be built in advance, awaiting, as it were, its date with destiny, i.e. when the masses spontaneously endowed with socialist consciousness come knocking on its door. It is worth noting that this is much the same scenario as North envisioned, with history 'cutting a path' for the masses to socialist consciousness, at which point the party hands the workers a choice between socialism and catastrophe, and the workers follow it to power. Woods has a graphic, or rather geometric, way of illustrating this:

The question of the building of the revolutionary party and the movement of the class, however, are not the same thing. The two processes can be represented by two parallel lines that for a long time do not intersect.

This nicely captures the *undialectical* nature of Woods's – and North's – conception. The party and the class are not two parallel lines; they are *a unity of opposites*. That is why Marxists since Lenin's time have conceived of the party as a *vanguard* of the class, which evokes the dialectical tension between them. True, the building of the party is not the same thing as the movement of the class, but party-building *is* the struggle for socialist consciousness in the working class. That is why it is nonsense to conceive of it as happening apart from the working class: being a vanguard means being in the lead, not off on a 'parallel' track. For Trotsky, party-building was about constructing bridges to socialist consciousness – i.e. bridges between Woods's two 'parallels' – but this sort of revolutionary geometry doesn't have any place in Woods's conception nor, one might add, in the abstentionist 'parallelism' favored by North.

³⁹ Alan Woods, *Bolshevism: The Road to Revolution*, Part One, Section 5. All quotes are from this section: <http://www.marxist.com/bolshevism/part1-5.html>

Equally vapid is Woods's conception of socialist consciousness. Though he insists that socialist consciousness arises spontaneously out of the class struggle, this turns out to be an odd sort of consciousness. "It is the duty of Marxists," Woods states, "to bring out what is already there [in the working class], to give a conscious expression to what is present in an unconscious or semiconscious form." So the 'socialist consciousness' that Woods sees as arising "inevitably" from the class struggle actually exists only "in an unconscious or semiconscious form." But if consciousness is "unconscious or semiconscious", then it *isn't* consciousness. This conception is about as coherent as saying that someone is a little bit pregnant.

In fact all that Woods means by socialist consciousness is working class militancy. And there is no question that such militancy can manifest itself in explosive ways, including general strikes and the establishment of soviets, but that still doesn't make it socialist consciousness. All the examples that Woods cites are of defeated or aborted revolutions, which only proves that what he calls socialist consciousness is not yet *revolutionary* consciousness. Of course those defeats were due to bureaucratic treachery, but they also attest to the limitations of spontaneous consciousness, since the workers, on their own and for all their militancy, could not break free from the stranglehold of the bureaucracies. Here the role of the party is indispensable, but this cannot be a party awaiting its 'date with destiny'; only a party that has developed deep roots in the working class, that has won over the best elements among working class militants through a consistent struggle for socialist consciousness, will be in a position to win the confidence of the masses.

Thus the mass struggles that Woods cites, far from refuting *What is to be done?*, actually confirm it. In fact Lenin explicitly acknowledged not only working class militancy but even the 'instinctive' striving for socialism within the masses that Plekhanov set so much store by. But unlike Plekhanov (or Woods or North), Lenin understood these strivings as part of a dialectical development of class consciousness:

It is often said that the working class *spontaneously* gravitates towards socialism. This is perfectly true in the sense that socialist theory reveals the causes of the misery of the working class more profoundly and more correctly than any other theory, and for that reason the workers are able to assimilate it so easily, *provided*, however, this theory does not itself yield to spontaneity, *provided* it subordinates spontaneity to itself. Usually this is taken for granted, but it is precisely this which *Rabocheye Dyelo* ["The Workers' Cause", an Economist journal] forgets or distorts. ***The working class spontaneously gravitates towards socialism; nevertheless, most widespread (and continuously and diversely revived) bourgeois ideology spontaneously imposes itself upon the working class to a still greater degree*** (emphasis in bold added).⁴⁰

This is a crucial point that cannot be reconciled with objectivism. Thus when North tells us that objective conditions provide "the principal and decisive impulse" for

⁴⁰ V.I. Lenin, *What is to be done?* in *Collected Works*, v. 5, p. 386, n.:
<http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1901/witbd/ii.htm#v05fl61h-373-GUESS>

revolutionary consciousness, he leaves out an essential part of the matter – which is that these objective conditions *also* provide an impulse for bourgeois ideology “to impose itself upon the working class to a still greater degree.”⁴¹ (As we saw earlier, the 2004 US election was a perfect example of this.) Thus objective conditions cannot provide the solution to the development of socialist consciousness; that can only come from the subjective factor, i.e. the revolutionary vanguard. But this is precisely the factor downplayed by North, as by all objectivists.

Sterile Pedagogy and ‘Advanced’ Ciphers

17. That downplaying is evident in what North has to say when he finally shifts from talking about the “impulse” from objective conditions to the role of the party.

The recognition that the emergence of the socialist movement has an objective foundation does not diminish the importance of the struggle to develop socialist consciousness. Indeed, the clarification of the objective basis of socialism is itself a critical component of the theoretical education of the working class. But the correct formulation of the socialist movement’s pedagogical tasks is possible only within the framework of an understanding that the contradictions of capitalism provide the principal and decisive impulse for the development of revolutionary consciousness. (95)

Looked at carefully, these remarks are a kind of optical illusion that seem to offer one thing and then produce something very different. In the first sentence, “the importance of the struggle to develop socialist consciousness” is acknowledged. In the second sentence this struggle is rephrased as the “theoretical education of the working class”. By the third sentence it virtually turns into a different species – the “socialist movement’s pedagogical tasks”. Thus in three short sentences what should be the most important and urgent question facing the Marxist movement – how to raise the political consciousness of the working class, how to win the masses to the socialist revolution – has undergone a metamorphosis into the “correct formulation” of “pedagogical tasks”! Clearly, by comparison to “the principal and decisive impulse” provided by the contradictions of capitalism, “pedagogical tasks” seem like small potatoes.

A paragraph later, North expands on this theme:

For the Marxists, the fight for socialist consciousness does not consist of convincing the broad mass of workers to conduct a struggle against capitalism. Rather, proceeding from a recognition of the inevitability of such struggles, arising out of the objectively exploitative process of surplus-value extraction, intensified by the deepening economic and social crisis of the capitalist system, the Marxist movement strives to develop, within the advanced sections of the working class, a scientific

⁴¹ As the history of the last century demonstrated time and again, the most effective means by which bourgeois ideology has managed to keep imposing itself on the working class is through revisionism in the Marxist movement, most obviously social democratic reformism and Stalinism, but also the revisionist tendencies within Trotskyism, such as the Pabloites. More broadly, it can be said that Lenin here was anticipating one of the defining features of modern bourgeois ideology – its tendency to co-opt political (and, one might add, cultural) opposition.

understanding of history as a law-governed process, a knowledge of the capitalist mode of production and the social relations to which it gives rise, and an insight into the real nature of the present crisis and its world-historical implications. It is a matter of transforming an unconscious historical process into a conscious political movement, of anticipating and preparing for the consequences of the intensification of the world capitalist crisis, of laying bare the logic of events, and formulating, strategically and tactically, the appropriate political response. (95)

The first thing to be noted is that there is no mention here of transitional demands, of building bridges to socialist consciousness, of fighting the bureaucracy and mobilizing workers in defense of their rights – which is to say, the approach by which Trotskyists have traditionally worked to bring about the development of socialist consciousness.⁴² We have left the arena of the class struggle and are instead inside a lecture hall (or an editorial board office) where scientific knowledge about the crisis of capitalism is imparted to “advanced sections” of workers. This is indeed an exercise in ‘pedagogy’, which betrays a sterile, propagandist conception of how class consciousness develops. Everything is couched in the vaguest terms, whether in regards to science (“laying bare the logic of events”) or revolutionary practice (“formulating, strategically and tactically, the appropriate political response” – remarks so general as to be virtually meaningless).

There is no room in such a conception for the careful gauging of and engagement with mass consciousness that characterized the revolutionary practice of Lenin and Trotsky. Here the only role for workers is as ‘meat in the seats’ for lectures or as readers of WSWS articles. And one might well ask, what are the workers supposed to do once they have undergone the party’s ‘pedagogy’? There is no indication that they have any role to play beyond reading more articles or attending more lectures. There doesn’t seem to be any connection between North’s idea of a “scientific understanding of history” and the actual struggles of the working class, to say nothing of ‘vulgarly pragmatic’ matters like strike committee manuals. This is why North’s ‘pedagogical’ conception of the development of socialist consciousness is sterile and propagandist.

The term “advanced sections of the working class” deserves some comment. As we noted in Chapter 5, this term is often a propagandist’s daydream. There isn’t anything that defines a worker as “advanced” beyond his/her willingness to show up at a party lecture or read the WSWS. The designation ‘advanced worker’ doesn’t come out of any struggle or engagement in the life of the working class. To be sure, there are wide variations in the level of political development among workers, but to sort through those differences and to make contact with the best elements in the working class requires a good deal more than “pedagogical tasks.” In Trotsky and Cannon’s day it was commonplace to speak about working class *militants*, and that term was indicative of the party’s orientation to the mass struggles of the working class. (Indeed, so important was that orientation that it was enshrined in the name of the American Trotskyist newspaper, *The Militant*.) What made workers ‘advanced’ was their role in the class struggle, their militancy, their defense of their co-workers, their conflicts with bureaucratic treachery. And the way the party got a hearing from those workers – and therefore an opportunity to raise their

⁴² Indeed, nowhere in the twelve pages or so (84-96) that North devotes to socialist consciousness is there any mention of *The Transitional Program*.

political consciousness – was through its own fight to provide leadership in the class struggle. But none of this enters into North’s conception of how to bring about the development of socialist consciousness in the working class. His ‘advanced worker’ is an empty abstraction, little more than a rhetorical fiction intended to hide the embarrassing truth that the IC has become estranged from the life and struggles of the working class.

The Zeitgeist, Americanism and Socialist Culture

18. That estrangement is also evident in North’s statement: “For the Marxists, the fight for socialist consciousness does not consist of convincing the broad mass of workers to conduct a struggle against capitalism.” Of course no one has to “convince” workers to struggle against capitalism: that is something they do by virtue of their existence as workers. But the restatement of this obvious truth is intended to obscure a much deeper problem: the issue is not whether workers are objectively involved in a struggle against capitalism but rather their own *consciousness* of that struggle. And in that regard there is a great deal of convincing that needs to be done to win workers over to the struggle *for* socialism. To deny this is to turn a blind eye to the horrendous impact on mass consciousness of the betrayals of the labor bureaucracies, above all Stalinism. For the big majority of workers, socialism is associated with police state repression, a regimented society and pervasive misery. Reinforcing this is the ‘There Is No Alternative’ zeitgeist and a debased political ‘left’ that has itself become a ‘true believer’ in the system. The upshot of all this is that we have a working class that for generations now has been bereft of virtually any trace of a socialist culture. As we wrote in *Objectivism or Marxism*:

Rebuilding a socialist culture in the working class *is* the decisive question for Marxism at the outset of the 21st century. But this is inconceivable without utopianism in the form of a revived socialist idealism. North never considers this side of the question in his attacks on utopianism, which is to say he leaves out what is crucial from a revolutionary perspective. The working class doesn’t exist in a cocoon, it isn’t immune to the prevailing zeitgeist. Of course this doesn’t manifest itself in the same way as it does among demoralized radicals or academics, but this doesn’t make it any *less* of an obstacle to socialist consciousness. The growth of right wing populism in America and of Le Pen-type movements across the Atlantic are obvious indications of this: their appeal is in large measure to sections of workers who in the past would have been union members in the US or Socialist or Communist party voters in Europe. And while it is only a minority of workers who have been taken in by this reactionary demagoguery, there are deeper problems that affect the consciousness of virtually the entire class and go back much further than the doom and gloom of the post-Soviet era. First and foremost are the betrayals of the labor bureaucracies and the crimes of the Stalinist regimes that have done more than anything to discredit socialism and undermine class solidarity.⁴³

In the past the need for a revival of socialist culture in the working class was often acknowledged in the IC press, but that acknowledgement never went beyond vague generalities. The question was never seriously posed – ***what does reviving a socialist culture in the working class entail?*** The issue was avoided because to do so would have

⁴³ http://www.permanent-revolution.org/polemics/objectivism_marxism.pdf

drawn attention to the IC's growing abstentionism. Now even the term "socialist culture" has largely disappeared: it is almost never mentioned any longer on the WSWS, and in North's document it crops up three times – twice in quotes from Brenner's document and once in characterizing Brenner's position. When it comes to his own views on the matter, North has nothing to say. Only someone blinded by objectivism can fail to see that "rebuilding a socialist culture in the working *is* the decisive question for Marxism at the outset of the 21st century." Moreover, that same objectivist myopia is evident in North's conception of the party's "pedagogical tasks". There can be no question that we need to impart to workers a scientific understanding of the contradictions of capitalism, but we also need to mobilize them on a program of socialist demands and inspire them with a vision of the possibilities of a 'new life' under socialism – in other words, we need to impart to the working class a renewed sense that 'There *Is* An Alternative' to capitalism.⁴⁴

It also has to be said that nowhere is there a greater need for propaganda for socialism than in America. Earlier in this chapter we cited North's own long list of obstacles to socialist consciousness in America, which to anyone but an objectivist would be ample justification for such propaganda. But such a list wouldn't be complete without taking into consideration the ideology of Americanism. As the American historian Richard Hofstadter once remarked: "It has been our fate as a nation not to have ideologies but to be one."⁴⁵ And no one has written more perceptively about Americanism than the Marxist social theorist Leon Samson. In his seminal 1933 book, *Toward a United Front: A Philosophy For American Workers*, Samson developed the idea that a key reason why socialism had failed to win a mass following in America was that Americanism is what he called a "substitutive socialism":

When we examine the meaning of Americanism, we discover that Americanism is to the American not a tradition or a territory, not what France is to a Frenchman or England to an Englishman, but a doctrine – what socialism is to a socialist. Like socialism, Americanism is looked upon not patriotically, as a personal attachment, but rather as a highly attenuated, conceptualized, platonic, impersonal attraction toward a system of ideas, a solemn assent to a handful of final notions – democracy, liberty, opportunity, to all of which the American adheres rationalistically much as a socialist adheres to his socialism – because it does him good, because it gives him work, because, so he thinks, it guarantees him happiness. Americanism has thus served as a substitute for socialism.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ North quotes (93) the famous lines about the proletariat from *The Holy Family*, i.e. that it isn't a matter of what the proletariat "at the moment regards as its aim" but rather "what the proletariat is, and what, in accordance with this being, it will historically be compelled to do." Nothing has changed in the more than 150 years since these lines were written with regard to their essential idea – i.e. that the working class is an objectively revolutionary force. But a great deal has changed in our understanding of *how* the working class will carry out its historic role. If the past century in particular has taught us anything, it is that without socialist consciousness the proletariat will never succeed in making the revolution, no matter how compelled it is to do so by objective historical forces.

⁴⁵ Quoted in Seymour Martin Lipset and Gary Marks, *It Didn't Happen Here: Why Socialism Failed in the United States*, p. 29.

⁴⁶ Leon Samson, *Toward a United Front: A Philosophy For American Workers*, p. 16.

An obvious example of what Samson is getting at here is the frequency with which the American flag gets hoisted on picket lines or in mass demonstrations, far more often than the Union Jack or the *tricolore* gets paraded by British or French workers. This isn't just a matter of greater patriotism, though that certainly has a debilitating effect through the pernicious influence of the mass media and, within the unions, of the labor bureaucracy. There is also something else going on here, "an impersonal attraction," as Samson says, "toward a system of ideas", i.e. "democracy, liberty, opportunity." To raise the American flag is in effect to demand that the 'promise' of America be fulfilled. But that promise – of freedom, of happiness – is essentially the same promise as that held out by socialism; hence Americanism as a "substitutive socialism." This is particularly evident in relation to immigrant workers (and their children), who have always composed such a large part of the American working class:

So far as the disinherited of the earth are concerned, there have been up to now but two ways open to them out of their misery: to go to socialism or to go to America. America as a substitute for socialism – the one new world which proletarians do not have to rise to, but run to. But a new world nevertheless.⁴⁷

As Samson says later on: "The very act of coming to America is an act of escaping classes."⁴⁸ Indeed so prevalent was this conception that it found an echo even within the Marxist movement. "Our America is in Germany," declared Wilhelm Liebknecht, German SDP leader at the turn of the last century and father of famed revolutionary Karl.⁴⁹ What he meant was that once socialism was established in Germany, workers wouldn't need to emigrate, but clearly this also meant that life in a socialist Germany would be *as good as* life in America, the assumption being that the latter was the model of what a good life was.

Samson devoted most of his book to unmasking the illusions of Americanism. Democracy he saw as a state "where all enjoy to the full their bourgeois rights and freedoms, and each is allowed to go to hell in his own democratic way."⁵⁰ Opportunity, that cardinal virtue of Americanism, was equally a mirage, the old bourgeois conception of competition dressed up in democratic and even socialistic colors: "The idea that everybody can become a capitalist is an American conception of capitalism. It is a socialist conception of capitalism. Socialism is of all systems the only one in which everybody is in it. Capitalism is, in theory, and in Europe, for the capitalists – just as feudalism is for the feudal lords."⁵¹ And socialism itself becomes a "private" matter: "The emancipation of the proletariat here breaks up into so many emancipations from the proletariat, the Dictatorship of the Proletariat into so many breath-taking success stories. The class struggle is with the American a private affair. He fights it out with himself."⁵²

⁴⁷ Ibid, p. 18.

⁴⁸ Ibid, pp. 40-1.

⁴⁹ Quoted in Paul Buhle, *Marxism in the United States: Remapping the History of the American Left*, p. 20.

⁵⁰ *Toward a United Front*, p. ix.

⁵¹ Ibid, p. 21.

⁵² Ibid, p. 26.

Such insights (and the book has many) attest to the analytical value of Samson's key concept of Americanism as a substitute for socialism. There are weaknesses too: for all his scathing denunciations, Samson finally opted for a reconciliation with Americanism in the name of a misguided political 'realism'. (This led to the book being appropriated by the proponents of American exceptionalism such as the late Seymour Martin Lipset, which is sadly ironic given that Samson's principal point was that America isn't exceptional at all, that it is only the distorting lens of Americanism that makes the brutal realities of capitalist rule seem like manifestations of 'democracy' and 'opportunity'.) Nonetheless, read critically, Samson's dissection of Americanism brings to light important obstacles blocking the development of class consciousness in America. One might add that a few years after Samson's book came out, the American Stalinists, in the heyday of Popular Frontism, proclaimed communism to be "20th century Americanism", thereby providing a backhanded but telling vindication of Samson's thesis. A revolutionary party would make the overcoming of those obstacles central to its political and educational work. The American working class needs to be convinced, not to fight capitalism, but to stop putting up with substitutes for socialism.

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