

Unable to answer our political criticisms The WSWS resorts to a smear campaign

By Alex Steiner

In politics a sure sign that you can't answer criticism is that you try to change the subject. And one of the most tried and true methods for doing that is to smear the reputation of your opponent: discredit the critic so as to ignore the criticism.

That is precisely what the World Socialist Web Site (WSWS) has done with its series, "The Frankfurt School vs. Marxism: The Political and Intellectual Odyssey of Alex Steiner."¹ This series, by SEP chairman David North (along with an addendum by Ann and Chris Talbot), purports to be a response to the polemic, *Marxism Without its Head or its Heart* (MWHH), written by me and my colleague, Frank Brenner. ***But it addresses not a single one of the criticisms we made of the International Committee's political line.*** Instead it is a blatant effort to discredit my reputation.

To that end, the series resorts to the usual modus operandi of smear campaigns – lies, half-truths, innuendoes and pulling quotes out of context. At its sleaziest, it becomes an exercise in character assassination, as in North's claim that I suffer from "extreme emotional volatility, susceptibility to discouragement when confronted with problems, and pessimistic view of life." After that 'diagnosis', there is presumably no need to take the arguments of such an individual seriously. (How ironic that North, who routinely denounces any references to psychology as subjective idealism, should resort to armchair psychologizing when it suits his purpose.)

It should be said that this way of dealing with criticism and political dissent is quite common in middle class radical circles. A notable example are the Spartacists and their various offshoots, whose internal disputes frequently involve mutual accusations of being 'insane', 'deranged' etc. That North now stoops to these kinds of accusations says more about the state of his political degeneration than about my state of mind.

The bulk of North's document is supposedly an account of my "political and intellectual odyssey" over the last four decades. This account bears about the same relationship to the truth as North's psychological 'diagnosis'. It relies heavily on private correspondence, often of a personal nature, ripped out of context.

Furthermore, while North (and the Talbots) attack me for being "duplicitous" in not posting this material, supposedly because I was trying to hide my real positions, they themselves never post these texts, choosing instead to pick out whatever quotes they find 'useful'. If this material is as damning as they claim, why not let readers judge for themselves? This is indicative of the intellectual dishonesty that pervades this enterprise.

¹ <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2008/oct2008/fran-o22.shtml>

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I will be posting all the relevant texts and also issuing a full reply to this smear campaign in due course. What I am posting now is a preliminary statement in order to warn readers of the nature of these documents and the political motives behind them. In this regard, a number of points need to be made:

First, the title of the series – “The Frankfurt School vs. Marxism” – is a misnomer. There is little discussion of the Frankfurt School, let alone a serious critique of the latter from the standpoint of Marxism. The only purpose for the title is to prettify a smear campaign with a veneer of theoretical high purpose. As we have pointed out in MWHH, the International Committee has never produced anything resembling a serious analysis of the legacy of the Frankfurt School. North invokes the latter as a bogeyman epitomizing irrationalism and then uses that to discredit me through guilt by association.

Second, there is a striking disconnect between North’s ‘line of attack’ on me in this series and his previous polemic, *Marxism, History & Socialist Consciousness*. There North condemned Brenner and myself for allegedly ignoring the party’s political line in our critique. It was the political line, North insisted, that was the paramount concern in assessing the work of the revolutionary movement:

[T]he way this has been done in the history of the Marxist movement is through a careful and exhaustive analysis of the political line of the organization that is the subject of the criticism. If you had chosen to proceed in this theoretically principled manner, there is no shortage of materials upon which you would be able to draw ... The response of the International Committee to these historic changes would easily fill up several dozen volumes. However, nowhere in your document is there to be found any analysis, or even reference to, the political line of the International Committee.²

In fact it wasn’t true that we had ignored the IC’s political line in our previous documents³, but in MWHH we greatly expanded our criticisms, providing precisely the “careful and exhaustive analysis” that North had demanded. I will cite here just the three most noteworthy examples:

1. We devoted an entire chapter (34 pages) to a detailed analysis of the WSWS line on Iraq. That chapter examined dozens of WSWS articles over a three-year period (2004-2007), and based on that analysis we contended that the party had abandoned the perspective of the permanent revolution in Iraq. The WSWS failed to report on any of the struggles of the Iraqi working class and it never put forward a perspective or program for building a Trotskyist party in Iraq. Instead the WSWS became a left apologist for a bourgeois nationalist Shiite cleric, Moqtada al-Sadr.⁴

² *Marxism, History & Socialist Consciousness*, pp. 3-4.

³ North could only make this allegation by completely ignoring my 2004 document, *The Dialectical Path of Cognition and Revolutionizing Practice*, which contained a 12-page section titled “Where is the International Committee Going?”, devoted precisely to the party’s political line: http://www.permanent-revolution.org/polemics/dialectical_path.pdf

⁴ http://www.permanent-revolution.org/polemics/mwhh_ch02.pdf

2. We devoted another chapter (29 pages) to examining the party's perspective on the everyday struggles of the working class and the trade unions. We looked at the WSWS's abysmal intervention in the New York City transit strike of December 2005, we showed how the SEP had come to adopt an abstentionist propagandism completely alien to the traditions of Trotskyism, and how the party had become almost totally estranged from the working class in its political activity.⁵
3. We also looked at the shameful record of the WSWS and the SEP in relation to the mass demonstrations that swept Mexico in the summer of 2006 in protest over the ruling party's attempt to steal the presidential election. While over a million workers marched through the streets of Mexico City (or fought pitched battles with police in Oaxaca), the SEP made no effort to intervene in this mass movement, to hold a meeting or even issue a programmatic statement on the crisis. Whatever coverage there was on the WSWS were routine rewrites from the bourgeois press, and only one article was ever translated into Spanish.⁶

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

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

That agenda is to 'personalize' this polemical dispute in order to poison the atmosphere so that no party member or supporter will give any consideration to our criticisms. This is already evident in some of the letters the WSWS has posted regarding North's latest document. One such letter declared: "Steiner and Co. will soon enough be urging on the fascistic buffoons at the Sarah Palin rallies, all in the name of irrationality and 'sexuality.'" ⁷ This vile and inflammatory slander was posted without comment by the

⁵ http://www.permanent-revolution.org/polemics/mwhh_ch05.pdf

⁶ http://www.permanent-revolution.org/polemics/mwhh_ch01.pdf

⁷ Note: This letter was originally posted in a special letters section of the WSWS: "Letters on 'The Frankfurt School vs. Marxism'", WSWS, Nov. 8, 2008: <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2008/nov2008/corr-n08.shtml> If you now go to that location, the offensive letter is gone. See the following for the full story of the "disappearing letter", *The Revealing Case of a Disappearing Letter*, by Frank Brenner, http://www.permanent-revolution.org/polemics/smear_campaign2.htm

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WSWS editorial board, which means they either condone such slander or consider it reasonable commentary. The mentality behind this letter is the mentality this smear campaign is designed to engender.

One further point needs to be made here. At the end of his document, North impugns me for my supposedly “new political relations” with the New Space, which he presents as a kind of political “swamp” consisting of various radical academics who have come together to push the agenda of the Frankfurt School and destroy Marxism. He further claims that I have tried to keep this new “political affiliation” a secret from the readers of our web site and at the same time I have tried to keep my connections to Trotskyism a secret from the New Space because such ties are looked upon with disdain by the radicals who populate the New Space and whose approval I desperately seek.

There is not a word of truth in anything about this account of my association with the New Space. First of all, the New Space is not a political organization at all. It is thus not possible for me to have a “political affiliation” with it. My affiliation with the New Space is that of an instructor, not a political spokesman. The New Space is an alternative educational institution that was founded to provide a venue where left wing ideas and theories can be discussed and studied.

It is true that there are people of different political persuasions who attend the talks and classes at the New Space and it is also true that the instructors at the New Space cover a wide variety of political and philosophical tendencies. There have been instructors and lecturers who exhibit some sympathy for some members of the Frankfurt School whereas other lecturers are quite hostile to the Frankfurt School. In any case, the Frankfurt School is not a major item in the syllabus of the New Space classes.

As for my own work there, I have taught classes on Hegel, specifically his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, *Philosophy of History*, and *Logic*. I have never hidden my Trotskyist politics from my students but I also haven’t advertised my politics, as it has no bearing on the courses I teach. In this respect I am no different than at least one SEP member that I am aware of, who has taught for decades at a major university: I very much doubt that he advertised his Trotskyist politics in the course catalogue of his university. (I might add, however, that there is one difference between myself and this comrade: I have never earned a cent for my lectures, which I do on a voluntary basis.)

The North/Talbot document is a shameful work. As I’ve said, a full response to its many lies and distortions is forthcoming, but even at this preliminary stage it is possible to state that this work marks a new low in the degeneration of the leadership of the International Committee, which behaves increasingly in a manner that besmirches the name of Trotskyism.