

Lecture nine: The rise of fascism in Germany and the collapse of the Communist International

Part 1

By Peter Schwarz
11 October 2005

The following is the first part of the lecture “The rise of fascism in Germany and the collapse of the Communist International.” It was delivered by Peter Schwarz, the secretary of the International Committee of the Fourth International and a member of the WSWS Editorial Board, at the Socialist Equality Party/WSWS summer school held August 14 to August 20, 2005 in Ann Arbor, Michigan. The lecture will be presented in three parts. (See Part 2 and Part 3).

This is the ninth lecture given at the school. The first, entitled “The Russian Revolution and the unresolved historical problems of the 20th century” was posted in four parts, from August 29 to September 1. The second, “Marxism versus revisionism on the eve of the twentieth century,” was posted in three parts on September 2, 4 and 5. The third, “The origins of Bolshevism and What Is To Be Done?” was posted in seven parts from September 6 to September 13. The fourth, “Marxism, history and the science of perspective,” was posted in six parts from September 14 to September 20. These lectures were authored by World Socialist Web Site Editorial Board Chairman David North.

The fifth lecture, “World War I: The breakdown of capitalism,” was delivered by Nick Beams, the national secretary of the Socialist Equality Party of Australia and a member of the WSWS Editorial Board. It was posted in five parts, from September 21 to September 26. The sixth, “Socialism in one country or permanent revolution” was delivered by Bill Van Auken and posted in three parts, from September 27 to September 29. The seventh, “Marxism, art and the Soviet debate over ‘proletarian culture,’ ” was given by David Walsh, the arts editor of the World Socialist Web Site, and posted in four parts from September 30 to October 4. The eighth, “The 1920s—the road to depression and fascism,” was given by Nick Beams and posted in five parts from October 5-10.

Along with the rise and fall of the Soviet Union, the rise of fascism in Germany is another major question of the twentieth century that has not been understood. By “not understood” I do not mean unknown. German National Socialism and the Second World War are included in the curriculum of almost every school in the world—and certainly of every German school. Countless historical articles, papers and books have been written on the theme, and most aspects of the Third Reich have been investigated in detail. But as far as the historical lessons of these events are concerned, there is an enormous amount of confusion.

The rise of Hitler to power and the horrendous crimes committed by his regime—culminating in a war of aggression that cost the lives of 80 million people, including the systematic annihilation of 6 million Jews—is certainly the most traumatic experience of the twentieth century. Even more so, as Germany was known as one of the leading, if not *the* leading,

cultural nations in the world. It has produced thinkers like Kant, Hegel and Marx; musicians like Bach, Beethoven and Brahms; writers like Goethe, Heine and Thomas Mann; and scientists like Röntgen, Planck and Einstein—to name just a few. In the decade preceding the assumption of power by Hitler, Berlin was the cultural centre of Europe, bursting with artistic life in every field—music, theatre, painting, etc.

How is it possible that this nation of culture fell back into the darkest forms of barbarism? Why did Hitler succeed? Why was he not stopped? Who is responsible?

Sixty years after Hitler’s downfall, official ideology has given no satisfactory answer to these questions. References to Auschwitz, the Holocaust and other Nazi crimes are utilized to justify all and everything, among them not a few historical crimes: the oppression of the Palestinian people, the war against Yugoslavia and the bombing of Belgrade, the Iraq war and the imperialist occupation of the country, the ban on left-wing, as well as extreme right-wing, parties in Germany.

Typical, and in many ways an important factor in the prevalent confusion concerning the meaning of Nazism, is a document that was written in the final years of World War II and published shortly after the war: “Dialectic of Enlightenment,” by Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno. In this document, the two leading representatives of the so-called Frankfurt School set themselves the task of providing a fundamental explanation of Nazism. “What we had set out to do was nothing less than to explain why humanity, instead of entering a truly human state, is sinking into a new kind of barbarism,” they announce in the introduction.

This document had a major impact on the interpretation of Nazism in Germany and internationally. Soon after the end of the war, Horkheimer and Adorno left their American exile for Germany and became professors at Frankfurt University. The German government entrusted them with the task of working out a conception for the education on Nazism in German schools. Later on, the Frankfurt School had a considerable impact on the 1968 student movement. One cannot understand the evolution of the Greens—the heirs of the 1968 protest movement—into a major pillar of the German state, without an examination of the ideology of the Frankfurt School.

The first thing that comes to mind when reading “Dialectic of Enlightenment” is the complete absence of any reference to concrete historical, economic or political events, social classes, political parties or questions of perspective. Neither the policies of the Social Democrats nor those of the Communist Party are examined. Not even Hitler is mentioned. Instead, everything is treated at the level of pure thought, which is presented as an independent subject, completely detached from

thinking individuals, social consciousness, the struggle of classes and the struggle of ideas. Horkheimer and Adorno describe this as “thought ... reflecting on its own guilt.”

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

Most of their arguments proceed on a strictly philosophical level, written in an esoteric language that is almost incomprehensible. They are very outspoken, however, when they deal with the consequences of economic and industrial progress and its impact on the masses.

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

They deplore “the mysterious willingness of the technologically educated masses to fall under the spell of any despotism” and their “self-destructive affinity for nationalist paranoia.”

Further down they write: “Humanity, whose skills and knowledge become differentiated with the division of labor, is thereby forced back to more primitive anthropological stages, since, with the technical facilitation of existence, the continuance of domination demands the fixation of instincts by greater repression. Fantasy withers.... *The curse of irresistible progress is irresistible regression*” (emphasis added).

And: “The more complex and sensitive the social, economic, and scientific mechanism to the operation of which the system of production has long since attuned the body, the more impoverished are the experiences of which the body is capable. The elimination of qualities, their conversion into functions, is transferred by rationalized modes of work to the human capacity for experience, which tends to revert to that of amphibians.... *The powerlessness of the workers is not merely a ruse of the rulers, but the logical consequence of industrial society...*” (emphasis added).

These passages—and there are many similar ones in the book—demonstrate very graphically the conclusions drawn by Horkheimer and Adorno from the Nazi experience: The Marxist conception, that the essential impulse for historical change is the dialectical interaction of the productive forces and social relations of production, has proven to be wrong. The growth of the productive forces results, on the contrary, in the strengthening of capitalist rule and the regression of society into barbarism.

The subjects, they write, “accept the existing development, which renders them a degree more powerless with each prescribed increase in their standard of living, as inviolably necessary. Now that the livelihood of those still needed to operate the machines can be provided with a minimal part of the working time which the masters of society have at their disposal, the superfluous remainder, the overwhelming mass of the population, are trained as additional guards of the system, so that they can be used today and tomorrow as material for its grand designs. They are kept alive as an army of unemployed. Their reduction to mere objects of administration, which operates every department of modern life right down to language and perception, conjures up an illusion of objective necessity before which they believe themselves powerless.”

Where is the way out of this dead end of society?

In critical thought, answer Horkheimer and Adorno. “It is the servant which the master cannot control at will,” they write. While “power” subjugates everything, “thought” develops a high degree of independence.

“The instrument [i.e., thought] is becoming autonomous: independently of the will of the rulers, the mediating agency of mind moderates the immediacy of economic injustice. The instruments of power—language, weapons, and finally machines—which are intended to hold everyone in their grasp, must in their turn be grasped by everyone. In this way, the moment of rationality in domination also asserts itself as something different from it. The thing-like quality of the means, which makes the means universally available, its ‘objective validity’ for everyone, itself implies a criticism of the domination from which thought has arisen as its means.”

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

Marxism puts great emphasis on critical thought and consciousness as well. As we have seen in the lecture on Lenin’s *What Is To Be Done?*, it is the task of Marxists to bring socialist consciousness to the working class from without. But the power of this socialist consciousness is derived from the fact that it is based on a scientific understanding of the development of society governed by laws. “We call our dialectic materialist, since its roots are neither in heaven nor in the depths of our ‘free will’, but in objective reality, in nature,” Trotsky once wrote. (*In Defence of Marxism*)

Marxists strive to develop the practice of the working class in accordance with the objective tendencies of historical development. With the Frankfurt School, it is the other way round. Here, critical thought conducts a heroic—and rather hopeless—struggle *against* the objective tendencies of historical development. According to their views, economic and technological progress and the increasing division of labour force humanity “back to more primitive anthropological stages.” They tend to revert the human capacity for experience “to that of amphibians” and lead to “irresistible regression.” Critical thought can oppose this development only by detaching itself from objective tendencies of social development and confronting them as an independent object.

It would be possible to give an entire lecture on the political implications of this conception. The hopeless undertaking of confronting a hostile social reality equipped exclusively with the weapon of critical thought reminds one of Don Quixote’s famous battle against the windmills. This conception produces the pessimistic mood that runs like a thread through the Frankfurt School and all its derivatives. Here, the cultural pessimism of the German “Bildungsbürger,” the highly educated philistine, intermarries with a deep-rooted distrust of any kind of mass movement. This is particularly evident in Horkheimer and Adorno’s writings on mass culture: Their reaction to cultural innovations like film or popular music, mainly jazz, is sheer horror.

The writings of the Frankfurt School exerted a major influence on the 1968 student protest movement. The generation of ’68, born towards the end or shortly after the war, was intensely searching for answers to the question of fascism—an issue that had been suppressed for two decades after the war. They were horrified by the crimes of their fathers’ generation, and this was one of the main driving forces of the protest movement in Germany, providing it with a sharply anti-capitalist character. But the answers given by the Frankfurt School led to a dead end.

The Frankfurt School criticised certain aspects in the superstructure of bourgeois society in a brilliant manner. But it was unable to reveal the contradictions in the capitalist foundation of society that created the

conditions for its final overthrow. The working class was not seen as a potentially revolutionary subject, but as a passive, accommodated mass, terrorized by consumerism. After an initial radicalization that, in the most extreme cases, assumed the form of individual terrorism, the '68 movement flowed back into the channels of the bourgeois order and finally, with the Greens' entrance into the federal government in 1998, assumed political responsibility for that order.

Many themes suggested by Horkheimer and Adorno in their 1944 document can easily be detected in the platform of the Green Party and its evolution: Scepticism towards technological and scientific progress, distrust towards the masses, and many more. After roaming around for decades, the critical spirit finally found shelter in the apparatus of the German state.

The Greens, for a long time opponents of state repression and pacifist adversaries of militarism, are now glorifying the repressive apparatus of the state as the guarantor of democracy and the German army as the guardian of international civilization and peace. But this is not the subject of today's lecture.

In answering Horkheimer and Adorno, general theoretical considerations are not sufficient. It is necessary to analyse the historical event that led them to their conclusions: the rise of National Socialism. In this respect, the writings of Leon Trotsky are unsurpassed up to the present day. A comparison of Trotsky's writings on National Socialism and the analysis of Horkheimer and Adorno demonstrates the deep gulf that separates the critical theory of the Frankfurt School from Marxism and historical materialism.

Despite its name, critical theory amounts to a mere apology. It explains why things had to happen this way, and why they could not happen differently. It explains the "sinking of humanity into a new kind of barbarism" by general deficits of enlightened thought, by some kind of original sin of enlightenment. It explains the affinity of the masses (in general) "to nationalist paranoia" by the division of labour (in general) and technological progress (in general). Despite the complicated arguments and the dialectical phraseology, the analysis remains superficial, speculative, idealistic, metaphysical—and deeply mendacious.

It is entirely different with Trotsky. The general platitudes of Horkheimer and Adorno are completely alien to him. For him, the cause of National Socialism is not a deficit of enlightened thought, technical progress or capitalism in general, but the contradictions of a specific capitalism under definite historical circumstances—the impasse of German capitalism under the conditions of imperialist decline. He does not speculate on the masses as such, but carefully examines the situation of all the different classes in society. And, above all, he deals intensively with the programme and politics of the political parties and their leaders.

Trotsky wrote numerous articles and pamphlets on Germany in the fire of events. The German edition of his writings on Germany, published in the 1970s, contains 76 articles written between 1929 and 1940, the overwhelming majority in 1932 and in 1933. Trotsky's aim was to change the course of the Communist Party. With a correct policy, this party would have been able to stop the rise of National Socialism and prevent Hitler's victory.

To be continued

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>