

# Marxism, History & Socialist Consciousness

## Parts 1-3

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*Mehring Books has published a new book by David North, Marxism, History & Socialist Consciousness, which is now available for purchase online. Last Friday, we began publication of the book's text. The Foreword was posted on August 17, and below we post Parts 1-3.*

### 1. Introduction

Dear Comrades Steiner and Brenner:

The International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) has asked that I reply to your document, "Objectivism or Marxism,"\* on its behalf. This is a task that I undertake with a certain degree of regret. Notwithstanding the different paths our lives have taken over the past three decades, I retain warm recollections of the time when we worked closely together within the movement. However, that was very long ago, and your latest document serves only to underscore what your various writings over the past several years have made increasingly apparent: that you have traveled very far politically from Marxism, the political heritage of the Trotskyist movement, and the ICFI. This inescapable political reality must determine the content and the tone of this reply.

Your letter begins by protesting that the ICFI has failed to answer your previous documents, from which you draw the most disturbing conclusions: The ICFI suffers from "an aversion to criticism" that is "symptomatic of deeper problems within the movement that every member and supporter of the IC should be concerned about." The leadership of the movement "stonewalls political debate," and seeks "to quell discussion in order to insulate itself from criticism." Our alleged failure to respond to your documents "only underscores how alien a practice genuinely critical debate has become within the movement."

To the uninformed observer, the situation you describe can only evoke images of a besieged opposition tendency in a dictatorial political party, battling against a bureaucratic regime's suppression of its democratic right to be heard by the rank-and-file membership. The reality, as you both know, is radically different. Neither of you is a member of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP). You have been out of the movement for just short of 28 years. [1] This does count for something. You refer to your "long histories *with* the movement" - a description that is self-consciously ambiguous. There is a difference between "with" and "within." For most of your adult lives, you have not been members of the party. The mere fact that you have maintained cordial relations with the movement does not obligate us to respond to your documents as we would to those of members of the SEP or other sections of the ICFI.

No one in the ICFI is stopping you from criticizing the policies and program of our movement, and posting what you write on your own web site for all to read (to the extent that you are willing to moderate what appears to be your rejection of the internet as a fully-legitimate mode of political communication). You are free to gather the support of like-minded individuals and campaign for your views. In turn, the ICFI and the SEP are well within their political rights to reply or not to your

documents as we see fit. It is not our responsibility to provide you with a forum for a perspective that opposes the traditions and program of the Fourth International. In submitting this reply to your public criticisms, the ICFI is not fulfilling a "legal" responsibility, but making clear the deep and fundamental differences between Marxian socialism and the pseudo-utopianism - a form of middle-class ideology - that you, Comrades Steiner and Brenner, espouse.

### 2. The International Committee and the World Socialist Web Site

Although you have not been members of our movement for almost three decades, and have no knowledge of its internal life, you make the most sweeping accusations against the International Committee. You assert that there is "a disturbing absence of organized theoretical or political discussion within the movement." On what is this claim based? Other than your displeasure with the manner in which we have dealt with your documents, how has this theoretical and political decay manifested itself in our political line? This is a question that you do not address. Even if one were to admit the possibility that the ICFI failed to give your documents the attention they merited, this error would not by itself rise to the level of a world-historical event. It is still necessary for you to demonstrate that there exists a connection between your complaint and more serious political problems relating to world developments external to yourselves. It is not sufficient for you to assert that a connection exists. You must prove it, and the 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 last 20 years have witnessed colossal changes: in technology, the structure of world capitalism, the relation of national states to the global economy, and, let us not forget, the political geography of the world. Maps printed 20 years ago are now useless. All of these interrelated processes - technological, economic and political - have had a profound impact on the international class struggle. 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 of, or even reference to, the political line of the International Committee. One does not even find the words "Iraq War," "Bush administration," "September 11th," "China," "Afghanistan," "Iran," "terror," or "globalization." These are not careless omissions. You are not interested in political analysis and perspectives, at least as these concerns have been understood historically in the Fourth International. *Quite the opposite: you believe that the International Committee's concentration on Marxist political analysis and commentary is itself a fundamental mistake. You vehemently reject the conception that such analysis and commentary, based on the method of historical materialism, is essential or even relevant to the development of socialist consciousness.* This position underlies your bitter hostility toward the World Socialist Web Site, which

you consider to be the main expression of all that you believe wrong with the International Committee.

You write that “for all intents and purposes the International Committee has ceased to function.” On what is this conclusion based? “It is hard even to recall the last time the International Committee held a meeting in its own name. For years now virtually all the authoritative statements of the movement have been issued as WSWs statements, and now the gathering in Australia - which was clearly an international conference of the movement - is presented not in the name of a revolutionary party but rather in that of an editorial board of a web site.”

That is not all. You ask: “Was the morphing of the IC into the WSWs ever discussed or voted on at a party conference?” And “Where is the document that explains to the working class public the reasons for such an important shift? How is it possible to square the repeated proclamations of internationalism with the mothballing of the organizational expression of revolutionary internationalism?”

You speak of the “morphing of the IC into the WSWs” as if there were something illegitimate and underhanded in the founding of the latter. In this regard, your attack closely parallels the response of the Spartacist League to the establishment of the *World Socialist Web Site*.<sup>[2]</sup> However, nowhere do you claim that the founding of the WSWs involved a change in the political line of the International Committee. The *World Socialist Web Site*, as its masthead explicitly states, is published by the International Committee. While you may be in doubt about the political connection of the ICFI to the *World Socialist Web Site*, it is not a secret to its thousands of daily readers. Moreover, since the days of Marx’s *Neue Rheinische Zeitung*, the theoretical and programmatic identity of a revolutionary tendency has been synonymous with the name of its publication. We might include in our list the *Neue Zeit* of the revolutionary German Social Democratic Party, the *Iskra*, *Vperyod* and *Pravda* of the Leninists, the *Bulletin* of the anti-Stalinist opposition in the U.S.S.R., *The Militant* and, later, *The Socialist Appeal* of the Trotskyists in the United States during the late 1920s and 1930s, *The Newsletter* produced by the British Trotskyists working inside the British Labour Party, and even the *Bulletin* of the Workers League. We have no reason to be troubled by the fact that the *World Socialist Web Site* is looked to by thousands of readers as the authentic voice of socialist internationalism.

Your suggestion that the WSWs was somehow established behind the back of the ICFI is absurd on its face. Yes, there was a public statement issued on the founding of the *World Socialist Web Site*, which you can still access if you are interested.<sup>[3]</sup> And, since you have asked, the founding of the WSWs was indeed preceded by an intensive discussion spanning almost one year within every section of the ICFI. How else would it have been possible to mobilize the high level of active support and participation by the cadre that has sustained daily publication of the WSWs for the last eight and a half years? Since the founding of the WSWs in February 1998, more than 18,000 articles have been published by an international editorial board that directs the collective work of a constantly-expanding cadre of Marxist writers assembled on the basis of the principles, history, theoretical outlook and perspective of the International Committee. In both theory and practice, the WSWs represents a historic milestone in the development of revolutionary internationalism. Your political blindness, exacerbated by personal subjectivism, leads you to speak of the “mothballing of the organizational expression of revolutionary internationalism” at a time when the ICFI is directing the daily publication of a web site that provides commentary in 13 languages: English, French, German, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, Russian, Polish, Serbo-Croatian, Turkish, Sinhalese, Tamil and Indonesian. If this represents in your mind the end “for all intents and purposes” of the International Committee, one can only wonder what you think constitutes real international activity? Three decades ago, when you were still members of the movement, the internal life of the ICFI

consisted of little more than occasional visits by representatives of affiliated or sympathizing sections to the offices of the WRP in London. Cliff Slaughter, the nominal secretary of the ICFI, maintained no regular contact with the international cadre. There was no systematic discussion, let alone collaboration, on the perspective of the International Committee. To the extent that your conception of internationalism was shaped in the era of the extreme degeneration of Healy’s organization, it is simply impossible for either of you to conceive of what it is to work in a movement whose daily political activity entails the most intense international collaboration.

### 3. The International Editorial Board and the perspectives of the ICFI

During the past year the International Committee sponsored two major theoretical and political projects: first, the series of nine lectures on “Marxism, the October Revolution and the Historical Foundations of the Fourth International” that were delivered in Ann Arbor, Michigan, August 14-20, 2005; second, the meeting of the International Editorial Board of the *World Socialist Web Site*, held in Sydney, Australia, January 22-27, 2006. Your reaction to these events is a devastating self-exposure of your abandonment of Marxism and hostility to the political outlook and traditions of the Trotskyist movement.

We are not surprised by your angry response to the reports and lectures delivered at these meetings. Notwithstanding your official “protest” over the ICFI’s alleged failure to respond to your documents, you quite clearly recognized that the theoretical conceptions and perspective elaborated in the presentations represented an unequivocal repudiation of your campaign to infiltrate the disoriented anti-Marxist pseudo-utopianism of Wilhelm Reich, Ernst Bloch and Herbert Marcuse into the Fourth International - that is, to fundamentally change the theoretical and programmatic foundations and class orientation of the Trotskyist movement. That is what you are actually referring to when you write that “the substance of the lectures and reports issued from these gatherings [does not] suggest any new openness to critical debate.”

You describe the editorial board reports as “more a simulacrum of a perspectives document than the real thing: they are less a guide to revolutionary practice than a version of Foreign Affairs with a Marxist coloration. They are indeed *editorial board* reports - i.e., perspectives for more journalism. The question of what is to be done hardly enters into them at all, aside from ritualistic statements at the end about the need to build the revolutionary party. In other words, the essence of a revolutionary perspective is missing in these reports, but this is the very thing the IC refuses to discuss.”

That is the sum total of what you have to say about the reports delivered at the editorial board meeting. There is no analysis of the material that was actually presented. Your indifference to the content of the reports - which collectively represented the most comprehensive examination of the world political situation ever presented at a gathering of the International Committee since its founding in 1953 - provides the key to an understanding of your own political outlook and class standpoint.

Let us review the content of the IEB meeting that you so contemptuously dismiss as a “simulacrum of a perspectives document...” What you are rejecting is the effort of the International Committee to establish the *objective* foundations, based on a comprehensive and integrated analysis of the world political and economic situation, of the prospects for socialist revolution. The approach taken by the IEB to the development of world revolutionary perspectives is best explained by presenting a lengthy citation from my opening report.

Any serious attempt at a political prognosis, at an estimate of the potentialities within the existing political situation, must proceed from a precise and accurate understanding of the historical

development of the world capitalist system.

The analysis of the historical development of capitalism must answer the following essential question: Is capitalism as a world economic system moving along an upward trajectory and still approaching its apogee, or is it in decline and even plunging toward an abyss?

The answer that we give to this question has, inevitably, the most far-reaching consequences, not only for our selection of practical tasks, but for the entire theoretical and programmatic orientation of our movement. It is not a subjective desire for social revolution that determines our analysis of the historical condition of the world capitalist system. Rather, the revolutionary perspective must be rooted in a scientifically-grounded assessment of the objective tendencies of socio-economic development. Detached from the necessary objective socio-economic prerequisites, a revolutionary perspective can be nothing more than a utopian construction.

How, then, do we understand the present stage of capitalism's historical development? Let us consider two opposed conceptions. The Marxist position is, as we know, that the world capitalist system is at an advanced stage of crisis - indeed, that the outbreak of the world war in 1914, followed by the Russian Revolution in 1917, represented a fundamental turning point in world history. The convulsive events of the more than three decades between the outbreak of the First World War and the conclusion of the Second World War in 1945 demonstrated that capitalism had outlived its historic mission, and that the objective prerequisites for the socialist transformation of world economy had emerged. That capitalism had survived the crisis of those decades was, to a very great extent, the product of the failure and betrayals of the leaderships of the mass parties and organizations of the working class, above all the Social-Democratic and Communist parties and trade unions. Without their betrayals, the restabilization of world capitalism after World War II - drawing on the still substantial resources of the United States - would not have been possible. Indeed, despite the post-war stabilization, the global opposition of the working class and oppressed masses in the old colonial regions to capitalism and imperialism persisted; but its revolutionary potential was suppressed by the old bureaucratic organizations.

Finally, the betrayal and defeats of the mass struggles of the 1960s and 1970s cleared the way for a capitalist counter-offensive. The economic processes and technological changes that made possible the unprecedented global integration of the capitalist system shattered the old working class organizations, based on national perspectives and policies. The collapse of the Stalinist regimes in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe - based on the bankrupt anti-Marxist program of a nationalistic pseudo-socialism - was the outcome of this process.

Despite the rapid territorial expansion of capitalism in the 1990s, the historical crisis persisted and deepened. The processes of globalization that had proved fatal to the old labor movements raised to an unprecedented level of tension the contradiction between the globally integrated character of capitalism as a world economic system and the nation-state structure within which capitalism is historically rooted and from which it cannot escape. The essentially insoluble character of this contradiction - or, at least, its "insolubility" on any progressive basis - finds daily expression in the mounting disorder and violence that characterizes the present world situation. A new period of revolutionary upheaval has begun. That, very briefly, is the Marxist analysis.

What is the alternative perspective? Let us consider the following counter-hypothesis:

What the Marxists, to use Leon Trotsky's florid phrase, termed the

"death agony of capitalism" was, rather, its violent and protracted birth pangs. The various socialist and revolutionary experiments of the twentieth century were not merely premature, but essentially utopian. The history of the twentieth century should be read as the story of capitalism overcoming all obstacles to the inexorable triumph of the market as the supreme system of economic organization. The fall of the Soviet Union and the turn of China to market economics represented the culmination of this process. This decade and, in all likelihood, the decade that follows will continue to witness the rapid expansion of capitalism throughout Asia. The most significant element of this process will be the emergence of China and India as mature and stable world capitalist powers.

Moreover, if this hypothesis is correct, we may assume that within 20 years or so capitalism will enter—in accordance with the paradigm of W.W. Rostow—its 'takeoff' stage in Africa and the Middle East. Countries such as Nigeria, Angola, South Africa, Egypt, Morocco and Algeria (and/or perhaps others) will experience explosive economic growth. Thus, during the next half century—perhaps even in time for academic observances of the 200th anniversary in 2047 (only 41 years from now) of the publication of Karl Marx's and Friedrich Engels' *Communist Manifesto*—the global triumph of world capitalism will be completed and secured.

Does this hypothesis offer a realistic basis for the understanding of contemporary global processes? If it does, then there is little that is left of the Marxist revolutionary perspective. We would not be obligated to renounce our concern for the conditions of the working class. Indeed, there would be no shortage of conditions to be concerned about. We would attempt to formulate a program of minimum demands to improve the conditions of the world's poor and exploited. This, however, would be, to some extent, an exercise in social philanthropy. For erstwhile Marxists would be obligated to recognize the utopian character of the revolutionary project—at least for the historically foreseeable future. And they would be compelled to revise substantially their understanding of the past.

But is the hypothesis—of a globally triumphant capitalism—realistic? Is it reasonable, in light of all previous historical experience, to imagine a set of conditions that would allow the world capitalist system to resolve, or at least contain, the many potentially explosive problems already visible on the economic and political horizon before they threaten the very existence of the existing world order?

Do we consider it likely that geo-political and economic conflicts between the major world powers, within the framework of the imperialist system, will be resolved on the basis of negotiation and multi-lateral agreements before these disputes reach, and even pass beyond, the point at which they profoundly destabilize international politics?

Is it probable that disputes over access to and control of raw materials critical for economic development—especially, but not limited to, oil and natural gas—can be settled without violent conflict?

Will the innumerable struggles for regional influence—such as that between China and Japan or China and India for a dominant position in Asia—be resolved without resort to arms?

Is it likely that the United States can continue to pile up current accounts deficits to the tune of trillions of dollars without fundamentally destabilizing the global economy? And can the world economy absorb without significant financial turmoil the impact of a major economic crisis in the United States?

Will the United States be prepared to retreat from its hegemonic aspirations and accept a more egalitarian distribution of global power among states? Will it be prepared to yield ground, on the basis of compromise and concessions, to economic and potential military competitors, whether in Europe or in Asia?

Will the United States graciously and peacefully accommodate the rising influence of China?

On the social front, will the staggering rise in social inequality throughout North America, Europe and Asia continue without generating significant and even violent levels of social conflict? Does the political and social history of the United States support the view that the American working class will accept for years and decades to come, without substantial and bitter protest, a continuing downward spiral of its living standards?

These are the sorts of questions that must be answered before concluding that world capitalism has entered upon a new Golden Age of expansion and stability.

Those who would answer all the above questions in the affirmative are placing heavy bets against the lessons of history.

In the course of the coming week, these questions will be addressed.

In conclusion, I briefly explained the analytical method that guided the International Editorial Board:

The main task to which we will devote ourselves this week is to provide an outline of the main features of the rapidly developing crisis of the world capitalist system.

Lenin wrote in 1914 that “The splitting of a single whole and the cognition of its contradictory parts . . . is the *essence* (one of the ‘essentials,’ one of the principal, if not the principal, characteristics or features) of dialectics.”

In accordance with this theoretical approach, the reports that we will hear will examine from various sides and aspects the development of global crisis.

My opening remarks were followed by:

1. Nick Beams’ report on the state of the world capitalist economy, which placed the present conjuncture within the context of the decisive and complex role of the United States in the global system during the 20th century.

2. James Cogan’s analysis of “The consequences of the US-led war against Iraq.”

3. Barry Grey’s report on “The Bush administration and the global decline of US capitalism.”

4. Patrick Martin’s examination of “The social and political crisis of the United States and the 2006 SEP election campaign.”

5. John Chan’s study of “The implications of China for world socialism.”

6. Ulrich Rippert’s report on “The dead-end of European capitalism and the tasks of the working class.”

7. Julie Hyland’s presentation on “New Labour and the decay of democracy in Britain.”

8. Bill Van Auken’s report on “Latin American perspectives.”

9. David Walsh’s appraisal of “Artistic and cultural problems in the current situation.”

10. Richard Hoffman’s analysis of “Democratic rights and the attack on constitutionalism.”

11. Wije Dias’s report on “South Asia and the political bankruptcy of bourgeois nationalism and Stalinism.”

12. Richard Tyler’s examination of “Africa and the perspective of international socialism.”

13. Jean Shaoul’s analysis of “The economic, social and political disaster produced by the Zionist project.”

You have nothing to say about any of the reports presented at the meeting of the International Editorial Board. You offer no response to the question that I posed in opening the IEB conference. You do not state whether you agree or disagree with the analyses presented by the reporters. Comrade Nick Beams offered a comprehensive review of the development of the world capitalist economy, placing particular emphasis on the disequilibrium within the world system and its far-reaching implications for both inter-imperialist relations and the international class struggle. This analysis forms a critical foundation for the perspective of the ICFI. What is the reason for your silence on this report? Comrade Cogan’s report was devoted to the single most important international event: the American occupation of Iraq. Your document makes no reference to this report, nor do you raise the question of the war. Are you in agreement or disagreement with Cogan’s analysis? Were I to continue down the list of reports, the same question would be repeated again and again. Why do you fail to address concretely any aspect of the political analysis presented by the ICFI in its extensive reports? Your non-response cannot be explained as mere indifference. What is involved here is the outright rejection of the Marxist concept of perspective, which strives to root revolutionary practice in as correct and precise an analysis of the objective world as possible. As far as you are concerned, this is simply a waste of time. You do not believe that the type of reports given at the editorial board is in any way related to the development of what you consider to be “socialist consciousness.” What you mean by that term, as we shall explain in greater detail somewhat later, differs profoundly from the conception of revolutionary consciousness that inspired the work of the best representatives of Marxism. You want the International Committee to concern itself primarily not with politics and history, but with psychology and sex - particularly as presented in the works of Wilhelm Reich and Herbert Marcuse. These subjects are for you the basis upon which “socialist consciousness” and “socialist idealism” should be constructed. That is why you respond with cold indifference to the work conducted by the International Editorial Board. Its attempt to elaborate a world revolutionary perspective, based on a study of the historically-developed socio-economic and political contradictions of capitalism as a global system, is rooted in a Marxist political tradition from which you have become totally alienated.

*To be continued August 31*

**Notes:**

\* The document can be accessed at <http://www.permanent-revolution.org>. [return]

[1] Comrade Steiner, you left the Workers League in September 1978, and Comrade Brenner, you resigned in January 1979. [return]

[2] The Robertson group wrote in March 1998: “The new SEP Web site, rapidly expanding via the gaseous ‘great Thoughts’ of David North, is the latest in a growing junk belt of virtual fantasy worlds, where posturing little grey men with gigantic egos and dubious politics can play at revolution. . . . To pretend dumping some documents into cyberspace is any substitute for the hard fight - in the real world, among real people - to build a revolutionary workers party, only confirms the total depths of cynicism and humbug for which the Northites are infamous.” [return]

[3] <http://www.wsws.org/about.shtml> [return]

To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>

