

# Marxism, History & Socialist Consciousness

## Parts 8-10

By David North  
29 August 2007

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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. It was written in reply to a critique of the work of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), entitled "Objectivism or Marxism", by Alex Steiner and Frank Brenner, two former members of the Workers League (predecessor of the Socialist Equality Party).*

*The WSWWS has begun publishing the text of the new book. The Foreword was posted on August 17, Parts 1-3 were posted on August 24, and Parts 4-7 were posted on August 27. Below we post Parts 8-10.*

### 8. The WSWWS and "political exposures"

Now let us return to your analysis of my conception of the struggle for socialist consciousness. Referring to (but not quoting from) my lecture on *What Is To Be Done?*, you state that "North tries to shoehorn Lenin into providing a justification for this abstentionism by highlighting the phrase 'political exposures' by which Lenin contrasted his approach to developing class consciousness to the Economists' focus on bread-and-butter issues. North jumps on this phrase because it seems to sanction the journalistic existence of the WSWWS, but 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 worst sort of polemics, Comrades Steiner and Brenner, is that which either assumes or appeals to the ignorance of readers. And that is precisely the method you employ. As I have already noted, you never quote accurately and in context from any of my reports. Your aim is not to educate but to mislead and deceive. In your attack on my analysis of *What Is To Be Done?*, you quote neither my lecture nor any part of the text of Lenin's seminal work to which I referred. "Political Exposures" is not a phrase that I "highlighted" (i.e., exaggerated) in order to provide a false authority for the work of the WSWWS. These words actually appear as part of the title of the third section ("Political Exposures and Training in Revolutionary Activity") of Chapter III, "The Spontaneity of the Masses and the Consciousness of Social Democrats." As employed by Lenin, "Political Exposures" is not a mere phrase, but rather a central concept in his theory of socialist consciousness. This concept developed over several years in the course of the struggle against Economism, which was the specific form taken by Bernsteinite revisionism in Russia. The latter tendency sought to replace the revolutionary Social Democratic concentration on the political education of the working class, to which Plekhanov and Lenin attributed primary and overriding importance, with agitation over economic issues along conventional militant trade unionist lines. Lenin wrote in the third section of Chapter III:

A basic condition for the necessary expansion of political agitation is the organization of *comprehensive* political exposure. In no way

except by means of such exposures can the masses be trained in political consciousness and revolutionary activity. Hence, activity of this kind is one of the most important functions of international Social-Democracy as a whole, for even political freedom does not in any way eliminate exposures; it merely shifts somewhat their sphere of direction. [*Collected Works*, Volume 5 (Moscow, 1961), p. 412, emphasis in the original]

Lenin continued:

Working-class consciousness cannot be genuine political consciousness unless the workers are trained to respond to *all* cases of tyranny, oppression, violence, and abuse, no matter what class is affected - unless they are trained, moreover, to respond from a Social-Democratic point of view and no other. The consciousness of the working masses cannot be genuine class-consciousness unless the workers learn, from concrete, and above all from topical, political facts and events to observe every other social class in all the manifestations of its intellectual, ethical, and political life; unless they learn to apply in practice the materialist analysis and the materialist estimate of all aspects of the life and activity of all classes, strata, and groups of the population. [*ibid.* emphasis in the original]

At the conclusion of the same paragraph, Lenin states that "These comprehensive political exposures are an essential and *fundamental* condition for training the masses in revolutionary activity." [*ibid.* p. 413, emphasis in the original]

Attempting to disparage the work of the ICFI, you refer contemptuously to "the journalistic existence of the WSWWS," and even equate political exposures with mere "journalism." [11] This is nothing more than an appeal to political backwardness and anti-intellectualism. You are attacking the International Committee for creating an organ through which it presents its analysis and program to a world audience of socialist and politically progressive workers, intellectuals and young people. Only those who oppose the struggle for Marxism and socialist ideas would disparage such essential activity. Would you prefer that the work of political analysis be left to the reactionary bourgeois press, or to the left-liberal advisers of the Democratic Party in such publications as *Salon* and *The Nation* (which has recently devoted considerable resources to the development of its web site), or to the myriad perpetually disoriented petty-bourgeois radical groups?

At any rate, since when have Marxists considered it inappropriate to concentrate their energies on the publication of a theoretical and political organ? As you well know, the creation of a political newspaper, *Iskra*,

represented a milestone in the Russian socialist movement. This was a task to which Lenin had devoted years of his early political life. As he wrote in 1901, in his article *Where to Begin*:

In our opinion, the starting-point of our activities, the first step toward creating the desired organization, or, let us say, the main thread which, if followed, would enable us steadily to develop, deepen, and extend that organization, should be the founding of an All-Russian political newspaper. A newspaper is what we most of all need; without it we cannot conduct that systematic, all-round propaganda and agitation, consistent in principle, which is the chief and permanent task of Social-Democracy in general and, in particular, the pressing task of the moment, when interests in politics and in questions of socialism has been aroused among the broadest strata of the population. ... Without a political organ, a political movement deserving of the name is inconceivable in the Europe of today. Without such a newspaper, we cannot possibly fulfill our task - that of concentrating all the elements of political discontent and protest, of vitalizing thereby the revolutionary movement of the proletariat. We have taken the first step, we have aroused in the working class a passion for "economic," factory exposures; we must now take the next step, that of arousing in every section of the population that is at all politically conscious a passion for *political* exposure. [ibid. p. 20-21, emphasis in the original]

Sensing that your dismissal of "political exposures" is extremely vulnerable to theoretical rebuttal, you suddenly shift gears and assert that "it is no disservice to Lenin to note that times have changed since 1902: today's petty-bourgeois radicals, unlike their Economist predecessors, are far removed not only from bread-and-butter issues but from anything to do with the working class."

Here you manage to combine an empty cliché, a political non-sequitur, and a clearly false statement in just one sentence. You tell us that "times have changed." Yes, we all know that we live in 2006, not 1902. But what is it in the present situation that has diminished the relevance of the principled and theoretically-grounded emphasis that Lenin placed on the development of political consciousness in the working class? The concept of political exposures arose out of an analysis of the problem, rooted in the very nature of capitalist society, of developing the class consciousness of the proletariat. The relevance of that analysis could be diminished only if there has 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. But if this were the case, then we would be compelled to reconsider the relevance of Lenin's more general claim that socialist consciousness cannot develop spontaneously, that it must be introduced into the working class from the outside.

You assert that a critical difference between present conditions and those of 1902, which therefore lessens the importance of political exposures, is that petty-bourgeois radicals are completely different from the old Economists in that they "are far removed not only from bread-and-butter issues but from anything at all to do with the working class."

First of all, the relevance of Lenin's theory of consciousness depends not on what forms of activity petty-bourgeois radicals may or may not be engaged in, but upon the objective structure and social relations of capitalist society. Second, your claim is absolutely false from a factual standpoint. The present-day bureaucracy of the trade unions is *saturated* with middle-class refugees from the radical political organizations of the

1960s, 1970s and 1980s. The president of the SEIU, Andrew Stern, is only one of scores of ex-radicals who have made careers in the upper councils of the labor bureaucracy. The New Directions movement that controls TWU Local 100 is the creation of various radical tendencies. The petty-bourgeois radical Solidarity tendency is deeply integrated into the bureaucracy of various unions. And we might point out that none other than Nancy Fields Wohlforth, whom I am sure you remember, has recently been elected to the International Executive Board of the AFL-CIO. [12] So much for the claim that petty-bourgeois radicals have nothing "at all to do with the working class." The exact opposite is the case: they have become the most fanatical converts to trade union opportunism in its most reactionary forms. Their activities are directed ruthlessly against the development of socialist political activity in the working class.

Your next argument against the WSWS is an absurdity. You tell us that political exposures are to be found "on a plethora of radical websites on the internet and in the increasingly popular medium of documentary filmmaking. Michael Moore has become famous producing 'political exposures,' but this is still very far from class consciousness, and the gap is painfully evident in the way a film like *Fahrenheit 9/11* was used to enlist support for the Democrats."

Do you expect this to be taken as a serious argument against the work of the WSWS? What conclusion is to be drawn from your dubious syllogism: 1) The WSWS produces political exposures; 2) Michael Moore produces political exposures; therefore 3) the politics of the WSWS and the politics of Michael Moore are the same? Or, perhaps, 1) Petty-bourgeois radicals produce political exposures; 2) WSWS writers produce political exposures; therefore 3) WSWS writers are petty-bourgeois radicals?

You conclude this section of your document with the following astonishing statement, "If Lenin were alive today, he'd be far more likely to say that while 'political exposures' are all well and good, the crying need is for Marxists to do what they can to fill the immense vacuum of leadership in struggles like those of the transit workers." Lenin as a trade union activist! If that is true, then it is just as possible that Marx, were he alive today, might be running the arbitrage department at the Deutsche Bank. And Engels, perhaps, would be the CEO of Daimler Benz. But then these re-incarnations would not be Marx, Engels and Lenin.

#### **9. The 2004 Election**

In your next paragraph, you assert that I was unable, on account of my alleged objectivist and mechanical conception of consciousness, to explain the results of the 2004 elections, and that I considered the result of the election "inexplicable." On this one occasion, you actually quote one complete sentence - from a lecture that I gave in November 2004 on the results of the recently completed election, in which I referred to the majority pro-Bush vote in the most impoverished states: "To claim that its voters backed the Republicans because of 'values' that they hold far dearer than their own material interests is to substitute mysticism for scientific socio-political analysis." You end the quote there (without providing a page reference), and proclaim: "But this leaves us completely at a loss to understand what happened in the election, since clearly values of some kind played a role in that."

If the sentence that you cited were all that I said, it would have been inadequate as an explanation of why Bush swept the most impoverished states. But, as a matter of fact, it was actually the beginning of an extended analysis that you leave out. I went on to say (immediately after that sentence) the following:

Abstract references to "values," whose precise meaning is clear to no one, do little to explain why workers have come under the influence of the Republican Party and its retinue of religious

hucksters and moralizing comen. A more convincing explanation is that the virtual collapse of the old labor movement in states that were once bastions of militant trade unionism has left millions of workers without any means of confronting social problems and defending their interests as a class. Let us consider the social experience of just one section of the American working class.

For much of the twentieth century, the struggles of coal miners, organized inside the UMWA, raged across West Virginia and Kentucky, as well as significant sections of Virginia, Tennessee, Arkansas, Ohio and even Indiana. The coal miners were arguably the most class conscious section of the American working class. They fought “with fine impartiality”—as John L. Lewis might have said—mighty coal corporations and defied the White House on innumerable occasions. But during the 1980s the miners suffered a series of devastating defeats, for which the treachery of the union bureaucracy was principally responsible, that reduced the UMWA to a hollow and insignificant shell. Thousands of coal mining jobs were wiped out.

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. For the children of such workers, who have grown up entirely outside the milieu of an organized labor movement and with little or no awareness of the traditions of class struggle, the obstacles to the development of class consciousness are considerable. From what source will they acquire the information and insights that facilitate the development of a critical attitude toward contemporary society, let alone a sense that a better and more humane society—in *this world and in their lifetime*—is possible? Certainly not from the existing political parties or from the cesspool of the mass media.

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.

A number of reports have emerged that already call into question the significance of the ‘values’ issue in the 2004 Election. It now appears that the polling data upon which the initial post-election claims were made were either misleading or misinterpreted. This, I am sure, is the case. But 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. The Democrats, the Republicans and the mass media form different parts of one massive chorus that sings rapturous hymns to the glories of American capitalism.

This is not a temporary weakness that can be overcome through a reshuffling of personnel or the recruitment of better candidates. It is a product of the evolution of American capitalism, the extraordinary concentration of wealth in relatively few hands, the extreme levels of social inequality, the rapid decline of the traditional ‘middle class’ strata that once served as arbitrators in the class struggle between capitalists and workers and which formed a substantial constituency for social reformism, and, finally, the disappearance within the ruling elite itself of any substantial bloc seriously committed to the maintenance of traditional bourgeois democratic forms of rule.” [*The Crisis of American Democracy: The Presidential Elections of 2000 and 2004* (Detroit, 2004), pp. 104-05, emphasis in the original]

It is quite clear that I did not at all consider the outcome of the election “inexplicable.” You simply chose not to quote my explanation. But the falsification does not end there. You then assert that I, as a “mechanical materialist,” assume that “consciousness will accurately comprehend the reality that shaped it, i.e., that objective conditions translate themselves directly into a *correct* consciousness of those conditions.” Such a conception is, indeed, incorrect. However, as you well know, I never said any such thing. As a matter of fact, I devoted a substantial portion of the third lecture that I delivered last summer to an explanation of why the consciousness that arises spontaneously within the working class is not socialist consciousness. As a consequence of your unscrupulous approach to polemics, in which you are prepared to attribute to your political opponents positions that are the opposite of what they believe and have actually said, I am again obligated to provide a lengthy extract from my lecture:

When people go to work, to what extent are they aware of the vast network of global economic interconnections of which their own job is a minute element? One can reasonably assume that even the most intelligent worker would have only the vaguest sense of the relationship of his job, or his company, to the immensely complex processes of modern transnational production and exchange of goods and services. Nor is the individual worker in a position to penetrate the mysteries of international capitalist finance, the role of global hedge funds, and the secret and often impenetrable ways (even to experts in the field) that tens of billions of dollars in financial assets are moved across international borders every day. The realities of modern capitalist production, trade and finance are so complex that corporate and political leaders are dependent upon the analyses and advice of major academic institutions, which, more often than not, are divided among themselves as to the meaning of data at their disposal.

But the problem of class consciousness goes beyond the obvious difficulty of assimilating and mastering the complex phenomena of modern economic life. At a more basic and essential level, the precise nature of the social relationship between an individual worker and his employer, let alone between the entire working class and the bourgeoisie, is not and cannot be grasped at the level of sense perception and immediate experience.

Even a worker who is convinced that he or she is being exploited cannot, on the basis of his or her own bitter personal experience, perceive the underlying socio-economic mechanism of that exploitation. Moreover, the concept of exploitation is not one that is easily understood, let alone derived directly from the instinctive sense that one is not being paid enough. The worker who fills out an application form upon applying for a job does not perceive that she is offering to sell her labor power, or that the unique quality of that labor power is its capacity to produce a sum of value greater than the price (the wage) at which it has been purchased; and that profit is derived from this differential between the cost of labor power and the value that it creates.

Nor is a worker aware that when he purchases a commodity for a definite sum of money, the essence of that exchange is a relation not between things (a coat or some other commodity for a definite amount of money) but between people. Indeed, he does not understand the nature of money, how it emerged historically as the expression of the value form, and how it serves to mask, in a society in which the production and exchange of commodities have been universalized, the underlying social relations of capitalist society.

What I have just been speaking about might serve as a general introduction to what might be considered the theoretical-epistemological foundation of Marx's most important work, *Capital*. In the concluding section of the critical chapter one of volume one, Marx introduces his theory of commodity fetishism, which explains the objective source of the mystification of social relations within capitalist society—that is, the reason why in this particular economic system social relations between people necessarily appear as relations between things. It is not, and cannot be apparent to workers, on the basis of sense perception and immediate experience, that any given commodity's value is the crystallized expression of the sum of human labor expended in its production. The discovery of the objective essence of the value form represented a historical milestone in scientific thought. Without this discovery, neither the objective socio-economic foundations of the class struggle nor their revolutionary implications could have been understood.

However the worker may dislike the social consequences of the system in which he lives, he is not in a position to grasp, on the basis of immediate experience, either its origins, its internal contradictions or the historically-limited character of its existence. The understanding of the contradictions of the capitalist mode of production, of the exploitative relationship between capital and wage-labor, of the inevitability of class struggle and its revolutionary consequences, arose on the basis of real scientific work, with which the name of Marx will be forever linked. 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.

These passages, quoted directly from last summer's lectures, advance a position that is the absolute opposite of that which you attribute to me.

#### **10. Marxism and the Enlightenment**

A principled approach to polemics requires that the arguments of an opponent be presented accurately. The fact that you are unable to do this, that you feel compelled to mislead and misrepresent - in effect, to lie - has, itself, serious and disturbing political implications. As Trotsky pointed out, the lie serves an essential function in political life: it is employed to conceal social interests and to cover over weaknesses and contradictions in a political position. In your case, the dishonest methods flow from your efforts to pose publicly as a Marxist while having rejected - and not all that unconsciously - the theoretical and political foundations of Marxism. Your differences with the International Committee are not over isolated programmatic points, but rather over the most fundamental questions of philosophical world outlook upon which the struggle for socialism is based.

Before you rise from your seat to protest this "slur" on your revolutionary honor, permit me to point out that your document includes passages that are totally alien to the world-historical outlook of Marxism. A particularly noteworthy example is your statement that my "critique of postmodernism is used to sanction an uncritical defense of the Enlightenment."

The passage in my first lecture to which you are referring, but do not quote, appears in a section entitled "Historical consciousness versus postmodernism." I said the following:

The conception of history that we uphold, which assigns to the knowledge and theoretical assimilation of historical experience such a critical and decisive role in the struggle for human liberation, is irreconcilably hostile to all prevailing trends of bourgeois thought.

The political, economic and social decay of bourgeois society is mirrored, if not spearheaded, by its intellectual degradation. In a period of political reaction, Trotsky once noted, ignorance bares its teeth.

The specific and peculiar form of ignorance championed today by the most skilled and cynical academic representatives of bourgeois thought, the postmodernists, is *ignorance of and contempt for history*. The postmodernists' extreme rejection of the validity of history and the central role assigned to it by all genuine progressive trends of social thought is inextricably linked with another essential element of their theoretical conceptions—the denial and explicit repudiation of objective truth as a significant, let alone central, goal of philosophical inquiry.

What, then, is postmodernism? Permit me to quote, as an explanation, a passage written by a prominent academic defender of this tendency, Professor Keith Jenkins:

"Today we live within the general condition of *postmodernity*. We do not have a choice about this. For postmodernity is not an 'ideology' or a position we can choose to subscribe to or not; postmodernity is precisely our condition: it is our fate. And this condition has arguably been caused by the general failure—a general failure which can now be picked out very clearly as the dust settles over the twentieth century—of that experiment in social living that we call modernity. It is a general failure, as measured in its own terms, of the attempt, from around the eighteenth century in Europe, to bring about through the application of reason, science and technology, a level of personal and social wellbeing within social formations, which, legislating for an increasingly generous emancipation of their citizens/subjects, we might characterize by saying that they were trying, at best, to become 'human rights communities.'

"... [T]here are not now—nor have there ever been—any 'real' foundations of the kind alleged to underpin the experiment of the modern."

Permit me, if I may use the language of the postmodernists, to "deconstruct" this passage. For more than two hundred years, stretching back into the eighteenth century, there were people, inspired by the science and philosophy of the Enlightenment, who believed in progress, in the possibility of human perfectibility, and who sought the revolutionary transformation of society on the basis of what they believed to be a scientific insight into the objective laws of history.

Such people believed in History (with a capital H) as a law-governed process, determined by socio-economic forces existing independently of the subjective consciousness of individuals, but which men could discover, understand and act upon in the interests of human progress.

But all such conceptions, declare the postmodernists, have been shown to be naïve illusions. We now know better: there is no History (with a capital H). There is not even history (with a small h), understood merely as an objective process. There are merely subjective "narratives," or "discourses," with shifting vocabularies employed to achieve one or another subjectively-determined useful purpose, whatever that purpose might be.

From this standpoint, the very idea of deriving "lessons" from "history" is an illegitimate project. There is really nothing to be studied and nothing to be learned. As Jenkins insists, "[W]e now just have to understand that we live amidst social formations which have no legitimizing ontological or epistemological or ethical grounds for our beliefs beyond the status of an ultimately self-referencing (rhetorical) conversation... Consequently, we recognize today that there never has been, and there never will be, any such thing as a past

which is expressive of some sort of essence.”

Translated into comprehensible English, what Jenkins is saying is that 1) the functioning of human societies, either past or present, cannot be understood in terms of objective laws that can be or are waiting to be discovered; and 2) there is no objective foundation underlying what people may think, say, or do about the society in which they live. People who call themselves historians may advance one or another interpretation of the past, but replacement of one interpretation with another does not express an advance toward something objectively truer than what was previously written—for there is no objective truth to get closer to. It is merely the replacement of one way of talking about the past with another way of talking about the past—for reasons suited to the subjectively-perceived uses of the historian.

The proponents of this outlook assert the demise of modernity, but refuse to examine the whole complex of historical and political judgments upon which their conclusions are premised. They do, of course, hold political positions which both underlie and find expression in their theoretical views. Professor Hayden White, one of the leading exponents of postmodernism, has stated explicitly, “Now I am against revolutions, whether launched from ‘above’ or ‘below’ in the social hierarchy and whether directed by leaders who profess to possess a science of society and history or be celebrators of political ‘spontaneity.’”

The legitimacy of a given philosophical conception is not automatically refuted by the politics of the individual by whom it is advanced. But the anti-Marxist and anti-socialist trajectory of postmodernism is so evident that it is virtually impossible to disentangle its theoretical conceptions from its political perspective.

You proceed to attack this analysis, writing in response:

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

This is a complete muddle. First of all, your use of the pronoun “anyone” is sufficiently obscure to prevent the reader from clearly identifying the tendencies to which you are referring. In the passage to which you object, I attacked the basic concept of postmodernism, which claims that the “modernist” project based on the belief in the possibility of human progress - dating back to the Enlightenment and lasting through much of the 20th century - ended in failure. Your response to this passage in my lecture can only signify that you identify with the positions that I am criticizing. However, you fail to state which defenders of the Enlightenment heritage of reason and confidence in the possibility of human progress you consider reactionary and which of its opponents you consider progressive. And, may I ask, in which of the writings of the great Marxists will one find either condemnation of Enlightenment thinkers or praise for their opponents?

In a manner that crudely suggests that the Reason of the Enlightenment thinkers merely provided rationalizations for class oppression, your passage conflates into one undifferentiated and ahistorical process the mighty theoretical struggles that laid the intellectual foundations for the great bourgeois revolutions of the 18th century and the socio-economic reality of the bourgeois-capitalistic societies that emerged eventually from those upheavals. However, whatever the historically-conditioned illusions of the Enlightenment thinkers - specifically, that the liberation of the “third estate” represented the liberation of all mankind - their theoretical work ultimately provided the intellectual and, one might add (though within certain limits), moral basis for the socialist assault on bourgeois society. The revolutionary thinkers of the 17th and 18th centuries forged the weapons that were ultimately to be used by the new socialist movement and emerging working class against bourgeois society in the 19th century. It was the betrayal of the ideals of reason by the bourgeoisie in the aftermath of the French Revolution that provided so much of the theoretical impulse for the critique of bourgeois society. Moreover, your claim that the Enlightenment philosophers provided “rationalizations of a new form of class oppression” is grotesquely one-sided and basically false. You simply ignore the implicitly communist theories advanced by Enlightenment thinkers, and seem to be unaware that the materialist philosophy of the Enlightenment, notwithstanding its limitations, tended in the direction of the repudiation of property and inequality. As Marx pointed out in his commentary on French 18th century materialism in *The Holy Family*:

There is no need for any great penetration to see from the teaching of materialism on the original goodness and equal endowment of men, the omnipotence of experience, habit and education, and the influence of environment on man, the great significance of industry, the justification of enjoyment, etc., how necessarily materialism is connected with communism and socialism. [*Marx Engels Collected Works*, Volume 4 (New York, 1975), p. 130]

Your reference to the “reason” of bourgeois society - which you call upon Marxists to fight - is confused and misleading. In the course of the historical development of bourgeois society and the growth of class antagonisms, the bourgeoisie tended more and more to abandon “Reason” in favor of increasingly subjective and irrationalist philosophies. The decline of Hegel’s stature in the aftermath of the failed 1848-49 Revolutions, and his replacement by Schopenhauer and later Nietzsche as the towering figures of philosophy, represented the bourgeois repudiation of Reason. Thus, the great Marxists have always claimed to represent the revolutionary heritage of the Reason of the Enlightenment, understanding by that term the capacity of man, acting on the basis of a scientific insight into the laws of nature and society, to put an end to exploitation, oppression and injustice. It is this heritage that Trotsky invoked at the conclusion of his great oration before the Commission of Inquiry, chaired by American philosopher John Dewey, into the Moscow Trial charges:

Esteemed Commissioners! The experience of my life, in which there has been no lack of successes or failures, has not only not destroyed my faith in the clear, bright future of mankind, but, on the contrary, has given it an indestructible temper. This faith in reason, in truth, in human solidarity, which at the age of eighteen I took with me into the workers’ quarters of the provincial Russian town of Nikolaiev - this faith I have preserved fully and completely. [*The Case of Leon Trotsky* (New York, 1969), pp. 584-85]

The tradition that you represent in your strictures against the Enlightenment traces its origins not to Marx, but to the demoralized petty-bourgeois theorists of the Frankfurt School - particularly, to the conceptions initially propounded by Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. In this work, the Enlightenment of the 18th century is held accountable for the catastrophes of the 20th century. Human reason, science, technology and even social progress are listed as factors contributing to the triumph of fascism. The central arguments in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* were summed up in the lecture given last summer at Ann Arbor by Comrade Peter Schwarz. Your document makes no reference to his analysis. Throwing in terms like “dialectical negation” and “dialectical break” adds neither cogency nor profundity to your assault on the Enlightenment. Rather, it illustrates how you seek to exploit pseudo-Hegelian phraseology in the service of conceptions that are inimical to Marxism.

*To be continued*

#### **Notes**

[11] One is entitled to ask when journalism, the occupation of so many revolutionary Marxists, became a term of abuse? What little money Marx earned came from his work as a journalist. Prior to 1917, Trotsky listed “journalist” as his profession. Countless other Marxists practiced this profession. One might say, following Wilde, that it is neither moral nor immoral to practice journalism. The issue is whether one does it well or badly, as a conscientious observer and analyst, or as a propagandist and apologist for the interests of the ruling elite. [return]

[12] Her evolution entirely substantiates the assessment that we jointly made of Fields and her former husband, Tim Wohlforth, in the pamphlet that you, Comrade Steiner, and I co-authored more than 30 years ago, *The Fourth International and the Renegade Wohlforth*. I would strongly encourage you to re-read this work. [return]

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