

Marxism, History & Socialist Consciousness

Parts 11-13

By David North
31 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 WSWS has begun publishing the text of the new book. The Foreword was posted on August 17, Parts 1-3 were posted on August 24, Parts 4-7 were posted on August 27, and Parts 8-10 were posted on August 29. Below we post parts 11-13.

11. The origins of the campaign for "Utopia"

The purpose of your attempt to build a case against the International Committee is to show that our refusal to accept your pseudo-utopian enterprise as an essential component of the revolutionary program is the product "of the devadening effect of objectivism on the fight for socialist class consciousness." Not only that, my "strident condemnation of utopianism" demonstrates that "Marxism continues to be plagued by a spurious and reductive materialism that 'disdains the human factors' and denigrates the struggle for socialist class consciousness."

It is at this point necessary to retrace the path, extending back over nearly a decade, which led you to this damning indictment of the International Committee and of my own theoretical and political outlook.

The first serious indication that we were moving along different political trajectories emerged in 1998, when you, Comrade Brenner, submitted to the World Socialist Web Site a lengthy article on the subject of sexuality and gender identity that we chose not to publish. The article seemed to us to be based on highly speculative and dubious propositions that minimized, if not entirely denied, the significance of biology in sexual orientation. There was no indication that the article was informed by a serious study of evolutionary biology or anthropology. Comrade Dave Walsh, who had reviewed the article, brought some of his concerns to your attention. To this you sent a lengthy reply, dated June 28, 1998, which not only failed to assuage our objections to your article, but raised in our own mind concerns about your new programmatic agenda.

Your letter informed us that it was urgently necessary to develop "an alternative theory of gender," that "this would have a profound effect on any socialist project to restructure the family," that "the stakes for Marxists on this issue are considerable," and that "our position on this kind of question can help - or hinder - our effort to win support for making the revolution."

Until your letter had arrived, it had not occurred to any of us that there was any pressing need for a "socialist project to restructure the family," let alone a new conception of gender or "a Marxist theory of sexuality." Moreover, the style of Comrade Brenner's letter - written in a manner that seemed self-consciously and immaturely intent on shocking the reader - was distinctly deficient in literary aesthetics.[13] But worst of all,

the letter did not offer a single citation from a scientific text to bolster its own extravagant and lurid arguments.

Although we heard informally that you were dissatisfied with our refusal to publish your article on gender, it was not until 2002 that new differences emerged. On May 30, 2002, the World Socialist Web Site posted a letter that Comrade Nick Beams, the national secretary of the Socialist Equality Party in Australia and member of the International Editorial Board of the WSWS, had written in response to questions raised by a reader about the nature of life under socialism. The questions touched on a range of issues, including the relationship between economic efficiency and full employment, the problem of individual motivation and initiative, the future of small business, the forms of governmental decision-making, the precise location of a future world capital, the moral basis of socialist society, and the impact of socialism on the family, human rights and the ecology. The questions were typical of those that arise in political discussions with people who are just being introduced to socialism. While such questions certainly deserve a serious reply, Marxists also understand that it is important to explain, in the interests of theoretical and political clarification, that socialism does not consist of a series of prescriptions laid down in advance. It is not that we decline, under all circumstances, to speculate about the future under socialism. But, as historical materialists, we understand the limits of such speculation, which must, at any rate, base itself on a profound analysis of the real contradictions of the capitalist mode of production and the social relations to which it gives rise. Moreover, a socialist society is one whose fundamental features will emerge as an expression of the self-emancipation of the working class, rather than in accordance with a schema worked out by leaders in advance.

Beams argued along these lines when asked to draw a picture of the future socialist society. [The correspondence can be found here] "The development of a socialist society," he wrote, "will not take place according to a series of prescriptions and rules laid down by an individual, a political party or a government authority. Rather, it will develop on the basis of the activity of the members of society, who for the first time in history will consciously regulate their own social organization as part of their daily lives, free from the domination and prescriptions of either the free market or a bureaucratic authority standing over them." Nick also stressed that the material precondition for a society that strives to realize genuine human emancipation "is the development of the social productivity of labor to such a point that the vast bulk of humanity does not have to spend the greater portion of the day merely trying to obtain the resources to maintain itself. The great contribution of capitalism to the advance of human civilization is that, through its continuous development of the productive forces and the productivity of labor, it has created the necessary material foundations for such genuine human emancipation." Beams then briefly outlined how, on the basis of these material foundations, a socialist society might tackle some of the economic and social questions raised in the correspondent's letter. But in relation to the

issue of morality, Beams noted that “Marxism has always rejected the attempt to impose some moral dogma, pointing out that, inasmuch as society has always been divided into classes, morality is a class issue. Moral values either justify the interests of the ruling stratum or represent the interests of the oppressed classes. When class society is abolished, a new morality will develop.” This response was not, obviously, intended as the final word on the subject of Marxism and morality. It was, however, adequate and correct in the context of a brief letter written in response to a reader’s questions. Similarly, on the issue of the family, a subject of vast complexity, Nick confined himself to stating, correctly, that “socialist society will have no prescriptions. However, people will have the material means to freely enter into those relationships that they find meaningful.”

Comrade Brenner, you then wrote a letter dated July 24, 2002 registering your strong disagreement with the manner in which Beams had replied to the reader’s questions. “From Beams’s reply,” you wrote, “it is impossible to get a sense of where Utopia is in the outlook of contemporary Marxism.” The short answer to this question - though it is not one that you wanted to hear - is that Utopia is precisely where it is supposed to be in a serious revolutionary program that bases itself on an analysis of the socio-economic foundations of capitalism and the laws of historical development: *that is, it is not part of a Marxist program*. We shall amplify on this point somewhat later; but first we must return to your letter. Protesting that Beams failed to properly answer the reader, you declared: “All his [the reader’s] questions are in essence one question: What would socialists do if they ran society? Surely a movement that calls for a revolution has to have a convincing answer to that question, and that means policies on a wide gamut of social issues and a clear vision of the kind of society this revolutionary program is meant to bring about. Otherwise there is something unserious about the call for revolution.”

The suggestion that the Fourth International and its sections lack a program, that we are missing policies “on a wide gamut of social issues,” and that our movement calls for revolution without having any clear sense of what kind of society we propose as an alternative to capitalism, is totally unfounded. There is no party whose record of programmatic statements is as comprehensive as that of the International Committee of the Fourth International. [14] When you accused the ICFI of lacking a program, what you really meant is that the Marxist conception of program and its relationship to the struggle for working class power contradicts your own. You believe, as we shall see, that the revolutionary movement should issue “socialist” encyclicals on subjects and issues that fall well outside the boundaries of a political program, such as the appropriate form of the post-revolutionary family and the nature of sexuality under communism. Comrade Brenner, you are not particularly interested in the formulation of demands whose content is rooted in the objective contradictions of bourgeois society and which express the political and socio-economic interests of the working class in its struggle against capitalist oppression, exploitation and inequality. Rather, you conceive of program as, to quote your letter, “a socialist dream, in which socialism and a happy life become associated in the minds of millions of people.” This constitutes the essential foundation of your call for a revival of Utopianism.

When Beams replied to Brenner’s complaint on August 29, 2002, he focused on one critical issue: “The point I was making and to which you so strenuously object, is that socialist society is not one which is run by socialists. Rather, it is a form of society in which the working class, the overwhelming majority of the population, for the first time in history takes economic and political power in its hands. There is one very important conception here: The emancipation of labor is not to be worked out in a series of prescriptions handed down from some authority but must be worked out by the masses themselves.”

In response to this letter from Nick Beams, you produced your manifesto on Utopia. The purpose of this document, you (Comrade Brenner) informed us, was two-fold: first, to correct “seriously misguided” conceptions about the relationship between Marxism and utopianism; and, second, to examine “the tension between science and utopianism that turned the latter into a virtual taboo” within the Marxist movement. Having warned us that a “definitive account of all these matters would require a book-length discussion,” you limited your treatment of these issues to a mere 27,393 words. This, you assured us, was “sufficient to make the case that a renewed attention to utopianism is vital to a rebirth of socialist culture within the working class.”

12. Marx, Engels and utopianism

As we have already noted, you claim that Beams’ “seriously misguided” views on utopianism are “indicative of prevailing (and longstanding) opinion within the Marxist movement...” Beams’ errors, moreover, arise from “the tension between science and utopianism that turned the latter into a virtual taboo.” You state that Beams is the latest in a long line of revisionists, dating back to the Second International in the late 19th century, who have falsely claimed that Marx and Engels were hostile to utopianism in order to advance their own anti-revolutionary reformist agendas. Citing an extract from *The Civil War in France* (which Marx wrote in 1871 in defense of the Paris Commune), you assert:

The relationship between utopianism and Marxism as it is presented in this passage is markedly different from the way that relationship is usually presented by Marxists. By the latter I mean essentially the view that once Marxism had made socialism into a science, utopianism became irrelevant. The primary text on which this view is based is Engels’ *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*, and there is no question that there, as elsewhere, both he and Marx subjected utopian socialism to a profound critique that was crucial to the whole project of a scientific socialism. But that critique didn’t render utopianism irrelevant, any more than the advent of Marxism rendered Hegel’s philosophy or Smith and Ricardo’s political economy irrelevant.

Your introduction of the word “irrelevant” is a terminological sleight of hand. The issue is not whether the ideas of the great utopian socialists are “irrelevant.” Nick Beams did not make such a statement. “Irrelevant” is not a word that students of intellectual history apply to works of great thinkers of the past. Every new generation of thinkers stands on the foundations laid down by those who preceded them. A deep understanding of Marxism requires the *critical* assimilation of the entire antecedent history of socialist thought, from Plato to the utopians of the late 18th and early 19th century. However, an appreciation of the contribution of past thinkers does not mean that their theories can be utilized, in their historically given form, in contemporary conditions.

Marx and Engels acknowledged on numerous occasions the immense intellectual debt that modern *scientific* socialism owed to the great utopians Saint-Simon, Fourier and Owen. They also explained at great length the historically-conditioned character and limitations of their predecessors’ contributions. As Engels wrote, the utopians “were utopians because they could be nothing else at a time when capitalist production was as yet so little developed. They necessarily had to construct the elements of a new society out of their own heads, because within the old society the elements of the new were not as yet generally apparent; for the basic plan of the new evidence they could only appeal to reason, just because as yet they could not appeal to contemporary history.” [*Marx-Engels Collected Works*, Volume 25 (New York: 1987), p. 253]

Your claim that the views of Marx and Engels on the subject of utopianism have been misrepresented by subsequent generations - that is, that their supposed hostility to utopianism has been exaggerated - is without foundation. Anyone who has access to their *Collected Works* can easily locate innumerable citations in which their critical attitude toward utopianism is precisely formulated. Paying necessary respect to its contribution to the development of socialism, they insisted that utopianism belonged to the past, not the present or the future, of the revolutionary socialist movement. This is the very point that is made in the passage from *The Civil War in France* that you quote. How you, Comrade Brenner, can claim that this passage supports your potted interpretation of Marxism is beyond me. It explains that the epoch of utopianism ended precisely at the point when the maturation of capitalism brought the working class into existence as a revolutionary force. The position is made even more explicit when one includes the four sentences that precede the extract that you cite:

All the Socialist founders of Sects belong to a period in which the working class were neither sufficiently trained and organized by the march of capitalist society itself to enter as historical actors upon the world's stage, nor were the material conditions of their emancipation sufficiently matured in the old world itself. Their misery existed, but the conditions of their own movement did not yet exist. The utopian founders of sects, while in their criticism of present society clearly describing the goal of the social movement, the supersession of the wages system with all its economic conditions of class rule, found neither in society itself the material conditions of its transformation nor in the working class the organized power and the conscience of the movement. They tried to compensate for the historical conditions of the movement by fantastic pictures and plans of a new society in whose propaganda they saw the true means of salvation. [*Marx-Engels Collected Works*, Volume 22 (New York, 1986), p. 499]

It is at this point that you pick up the citation:

From the moment the workmen class movement became real, the fantastic utopias evanesced, not because the working class had given up the end aimed at by these Utopists, but because they had found the real means to realize them, but in their place came a real insight into the historic conditions of the movement and a more and more gathering force of the military organization of the working class. But the last two ends of the movement proclaimed by the Utopians are the last ends proclaimed by the Paris Revolution and by the International. Only the means are different and the real conditions of the movement are no longer clouded in utopian fables. [Ibid. pp. 499-500]

To all those who can understand what they read, it is perfectly clear that Marx is arguing that utopianism belongs to an earlier stage in the development of socialism, one that has been overtaken and superseded by the development of capitalism and the emergence of a mass working class.

For Marx, the Paris Commune represented the supreme historical substantiation of the struggle he had waged over nearly 30 years, in opposition to myriad forms of utopianism, to place socialist theory on a scientific basis. The theoretical work of Marx and Engels between 1843 and 1847 - whose greatest achievement was the critique of Hegelian

idealism and, on this basis, the elaboration of the materialist conception of history - laid down the philosophical and political foundations of the modern socialist movement. This period of intense intellectual labor culminated in the writing of *The Communist Manifesto*. During the next 20 years, Marx devoted his energies almost entirely to the scientific substantiation of the revolutionary perspective that it advanced. This substantiation consisted principally of 1) the successful utilization of the materialist conception of history as an instrument of political analysis (making possible the demystification and rational comprehension of political developments, such as the notorious coup d'état that established the dictatorship of Louis Bonaparte); and 2) the discovery of the economic laws governing the motion of capitalist society, culminating in the publication of the first volume of *Capital* in 1867. [15]

During the early years of the German Social Democratic Party, Marx and Engels were brutally critical of any tendency that expressed a retreat from these theoretical conquests. In the climate of political reaction that followed the suppression of the Commune and the consolidation of Bismarck's German empire, they had to contend repeatedly with political-ideological currents that sought to revive antiquated doctrines that Marx and Engels had refuted decades earlier. On October 19, 1877, Marx penned an angry complaint to his friend Friedrich Adolph Sorge, who was living in Hoboken, New Jersey.

In Germany a corrupt spirit is asserting itself in our party, not so much among the masses as among the leaders (upperclass and "workers"). The compromise with the Lassalleans has led to further compromise with other waverers; in Berlin (via *Most*) with Dühring and his "admirers," not to mention a whole swarm of immature undergraduates and over-wise graduates who want to give socialism a "higher idealistic" orientation, i.e., substitute for the materialist basis (which calls for serious, objective study if one is to operate thereon) a modern mythology with its goddesses of Justice, Liberty, Equality and Fraternité. Dr. Höchberg [16], the gentlemen who edits the *Zukunft* [Future], is a representative of this tendency and has "bought his way" into the party - no doubt with the "noblest" of intentions, but I don't give a fig for "intentions." Seldom has anything more pitiful than his program for the *Zukunft* been ushered into the world with more "modest pretensions."

The workers themselves, when like Mr. Most and Co. they give up working and become *literati by profession*, invariably wreak "theoretical" havoc and are always ready to consort with addle-heads of the supposedly "learned" caste. In particular, what we had been at such pains to eject from the German workers' heads decades ago, thereby ensuring their theoretical (and hence also practical) ascendancy over the French and English, - namely *Utopian socialism*, the play of the imagination on the future structure of society, - is once again rampant and in a far more ineffectual form, not only as compared with the great French and English Utopians, but with - Weitling. [17] It stands to reason that Utopianism which bore within itself the seeds of critical and materialist socialism, before the advent of the latter, can now, *post festum*, only seem silly, stale and thoroughly reactionary. [*Marx-Engels Collected Works*, Volume 45 (Moscow, 1991), pp. 283-84.]

This passage is a concise summation of Marx's estimate of efforts to reintroduce utopianism into the socialist movement. Yes, it is true that Beams' disavowal of utopianism represents, as you, Comrade Brenner, state, "prevailing (and longstanding) opinion within the Marxist movement." But if this "opinion" is "misguided," your differences are, first and foremost, with Marx and Engels rather than with Nick Beams.

13. The idealist method of utopianism

Ideas develop in accordance with a certain historically-determined logic. As a product of their time, the conceptions of the great *progressive* utopians of the late 18th and early 19th centuries were grounded in the materialist philosophy of that epoch. But that materialism was of a primarily mechanical, static and ahistorical character, and therefore could not account adequately for the development of social consciousness. The limitation of this form of materialism found its most significant expression in the utopians' conception of the relationship between consciousness and the realization of the social ideals that they advocated. The French materialists of the late 18th century insisted that man is a product of his social environment. Both his virtues and vices arose from this objective source; and, therefore, it was only through changes in his social environment that man's virtues could be multiplied and his vices eliminated. Thus, alterations in consciousness required the alteration of the social environment within which man's consciousness developed. But this raised a further question: how was this social environment to be changed? It was here that the French materialists found themselves trapped within a conundrum from which their philosophy offered no escape. Man is a product of his environment. But the social environment, they argued, is a product of ... public opinion! Where did this conclusion leave the materialists of the 18th century? If man is a product of his social environment, it would seem to follow that public opinion itself is a product of that environment. Yet, the materialists turned the argument around and made the social environment a product of public opinion! And so, notwithstanding the essentially materialist foundations of their epistemology, the French *philosophes* arrived at the idealist conclusion that changes in the social environment depended principally upon changes in thought, or, as the French materialists often posed the issue, in "human nature."

Within the framework of French materialism, no solution could be found to the Social Environment - Public Opinion conundrum. Rather, a solution depended upon the discovery of objective forces, not dependent upon "public opinion," that both determined the social environment and shaped the form and direction of social consciousness. The discovery of such objective forces was the singular achievement of the materialist conception of history elaborated by Marx and Engels.

What has all this to do with your document, Comrade Brenner? In pleading for the revival of utopianism, you more or less reproduce the theoretical conundrum that bedeviled the materialists of the 18th century. But while their errors had the charm of originality and genius, yours, 250 years later, appear merely foolish. "The central point I am making," you write, "is that it is just because the proletariat is the only conceivable revolutionary subject of history that utopia is important: *class consciousness will never be revived until socialism becomes once again a great social ideal*, the focal point for the aspirations and dreams of the broad mass of workers, young people and intellectuals." [Emphasis added]

Let us examine this argument with the attention it deserves: "Class consciousness will never be revived until socialism becomes once again a great social ideal." But the emergence of socialism as "the focal point for the aspirations and dreams of the broad mass of workers, young people and intellectuals" could only mean that a colossal development of class consciousness had already occurred. Stripped down to its naked essentials, your formula makes the revival of class consciousness dependent upon the revival of ideals, that is, upon one of the aspects or components of class consciousness. You might just as well have written that "Socialism (as an especially advanced expression of class consciousness) will never be revived until socialism becomes once again a great social ideal." We are left with a tautology. You fail to answer the obvious question: how will socialism become a "great social ideal"? Do there exist objective conditions independent of consciousness that will

provide a real socio-economic impulse for that development? For all your invective against mechanical materialism, you reproduce the fundamental flaws of that mode of thought.

The mechanical character of 18th century materialism, which made a relapse into an idealist conception of the development of social consciousness unavoidable, was historically conditioned by the existing level of socio-economic and scientific-technological development. Neither industrial capitalism nor the working class had matured to the point required for the discovery that the development of the productive forces and the social relations to which they give rise comprise the real and objective foundation of social consciousness. Socialist thought assumed a utopian character precisely because historical conditions did not yet exist for establishing the link between social consciousness and the objective development of socio-economic forces. Moreover, precisely because the utopians were unable to identify the objective source of changes in consciousness, the process of changing consciousness could only be conceived of in terms of education carried out by enlightened individuals.

By the 1840s there had been a considerable development of both capitalism and the working class in Britain, France and Germany. It became possible to identify the objective forces, operating in relative independence of peoples' thinking, which underlay dramatic changes in social consciousness and generated immense eruptions of open class conflict. In the face of these developments, conceptions which made fundamental shifts in social consciousness dependent upon the pedagogical efforts of advanced and isolated thinkers assumed an ever-more apparent reactionary character. In Germany, such conceptions were associated with a tendency known as the critical critics, whose principal representative was Bruno Bauer. Analyzing this tendency, Plekhanov wrote:

"Opinion governs the world" - thus declared the writers of the French Enlightenment. Thus also spoke, as we see, the Bauer brothers when they revolted against Hegelian idealism. But if opinion governs the world, then the prime movers of history are now those men whose thought criticizes the old and creates the new opinions. The Bauer brothers did in fact think so. The essence of the historical process reduced itself, in their view, to the refashioning by the "critical spirit" of the existing store of opinions, and of the forms of life in society conditioned by that store...

Once having imagined himself to be the main architect, the Demiurge of history, the "critically thinking" man thereby separates off himself and those like him into a special, higher variety of the human race. This higher variety is contrasted to the *mass*, foreign to critical thought, and capable only of playing the part of clay in the creative hands of "critically thinking" personalities. [*The Development of the Monist View of History* (Moscow, 1974), pp. 118-19]

To be continued

Notes:

[13] A few characteristic passages: "Thus, if we contend that biology provides an impetus to genital sex, we must also be willing to admit that biology provides an impetus to oral sex - which is of course a type of sex that can be gratified by either gender. And, for that matter, in shifting libido to the penis, biology doesn't at the same time compel the penis to seek gratification only in the vagina: on the contrary, the mouth and anus — again, of either gender, will do as well, to say nothing of masturbation." And: "Surely, there is nothing mature or fully developed about a genital sexuality in which the sexual act consists solely of a man

mounting a woman and thrusting his penis into her vagina until ejaculation; on the contrary, this kind of behavior is clearly a mark of extreme repression, of the constriction of sexuality to a mechanical, inhuman coldness.” [return]

[14] A comprehensive collection of documents in which the programmatic record of the Fourth International and its sections was presented (dating back to 1938) would run into dozens of volumes. For the sake of brevity, I will cite only one example of our programmatic position, which is taken from the report I delivered in June 1995 proposing the transformation of the Workers League into the Socialist Equality Party:

The aim of our party should be stated clearly in its name and in a manner that the workers can both understand and identify with. I propose at this time that we initiate preparations for the transformation of the Workers League into the Socialist Equality Party.

Briefly, in presenting this party to the working class, we must explain that its goal is the establishment of a workers’ government: and by that we mean a government for the workers, of the workers and by the workers. Such a government will utilize the political power it intends to gain through democratic means, if possible, to reorganize economic life in the interests of the working class, to overcome and replace the socially-destructive market forces of capitalism with democratic social planning, to undertake a radical reorganization of production to meet the urgent social needs of the working people, to effect a radical and socially-just redistribution of wealth in favor of the working population, and thereby lay the basis for socialism.

We will stress that these aims of the Socialist Equality Party are realizable only in alliance with, and as an integral part of, a consciously internationalist movement of the working class. There cannot be social equality and social justice for the American worker as long as multinational and transnational corporations oppress and exploit his class brothers and sisters in other countries. Moreover, there exists no viable national strategy upon which the class struggle can be based. The working class must consistently and systematically counterpose its international strategy to the international strategy of the transnational corporations. There can be no compromise on this essential question, which is the cutting edge of the socialist program.

In striving to politically organize the working class, the Socialist Equality Party must respond to the pressing needs of the masses that arise out of existing social conditions. At a time when international capital is engaged in an unrelenting offensive against the working class, the social demands which address the basic needs of the working class assume a revolutionary character. After all, the old organizations would not have abandoned reformist demands if it were possible to achieve them through reformist measures. Every demand of the working class, on the most basic questions, poses a direct confrontation between the working class and the capitalist state.

We must outline, in detail, the demands that we will incorporate into our program. It is not necessary, however, to write a program as if it were a blueprint for the socialist utopia of the future. Rather, it must provide the working class with a unifying aim that corresponds to its objective interests. Moreover, it must strike a chord in the consciousness of the masses. The demand for social equality not only sums up the basic aim of the socialist movement; it also evokes the egalitarian traditions that are so deeply rooted in the genuinely democratic and revolutionary traditions of the American workers. All the great social struggles of American history have inscribed on their banners the demand for social equality. It is no accident that today, in the prevailing environment of political reaction, this ideal is under relentless attack. [return]

[15] The most splendid narration of the origins of Marxism is to be found in Engels’ *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*. I will resist the temptation to reproduce the text in its entirety, and cite only the most relevant

passage:

Hegel had freed history from metaphysics - he had made it dialectic; but his conception of history was essentially idealistic. But now idealism was driven from its last refuge, the philosophy of history; now a materialistic treatment of history was propounded, and a method found of explaining man’s ‘knowing’ by his ‘being,’ instead of, as heretofore, his ‘being’ by his ‘knowing.’

From that time forward Socialism was no longer an accidental discovery of this or that ingenious brain, but the necessary outcome of the struggle between two historically developed classes - the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. Its task was no longer to manufacture a system of society as perfect as possible, but to examine the historico-economic succession of events from which these classes and their antagonism had of necessity sprung, and to discover in the economic conditions thus created the means of ending the conflict. But the Socialism of earlier days was as incompatible with this materialistic conception as the conception of Nature of the French materialists was with dialectics and natural science. The Socialism of earlier days certainly criticized the existing capitalistic mode of production and its consequences. But it could not explain them, and, therefore, could not get the mastery of them. It could only simply reject them as bad. The more strongly this earlier Socialism denounced the exploitation of the working-class, inevitable under Capitalism, the less able was it clearly to show in what this exploitation consisted and how it arose. But for this it was necessary — (1) to present the capitalistic method of production in its historical connection and its inevitableness during a particular historical period, and therefore, also, to present its inevitable downfall; and (2) to lay bare its essential character, which was still a secret. This was done by the discovery of *surplus-value*. It was shown that the appropriation of unpaid labor is the basis of the capitalist mode of production and of the exploitation of the worker that occurs under it; and even if the capitalist buys the labor-power of his laborer at its full value as a commodity on the market, he yet extracts more value from it than he paid for; and that in the ultimate analysis this surplus-value forms those sums of value from which are heaped up the constantly increasing masses of capital in the hands of the possessing classes. The genesis of capitalist production and the production of capital were both explained.

These two great discoveries, the materialistic conception of history and the revelation of the secret of capitalistic production through surplus-value, we owe to Marx. With these discoveries Socialism became a science. The next thing was to work out all its details and relations. [*Marx-Engels Collected Works*, Volume 24, (London, 1989), p. 305] [return]

[16] Karl Höchberg (1853-1885) was a wealthy supporter of the socialist movement. [return]

[17] Wilhelm Weitling (1808-1871) was one of the earliest leaders of the young workers’ movement in Germany in the late 1830s and 1840s. He promoted a form of utopian communism that Engels described as “sentimental Love-mongering.” [return]

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>