

Marxism, History & Socialist Consciousness

Parts 14-16

By David North
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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, Parts 8-10 were posted on August 29, parts 11-13 were posted on August 31. Below we post Parts 14-16.

14. Socialists and the masses

Proceeding on the basis of similar idealist conceptions, you, Comrade Brenner, arrive at a conception of the relationship between socialists and the masses that resembles to a remarkable degree the position of the "critical critics" as summarized above by Plekhanov.

"According to Beams," you write, "it will not be socialists but the masses who will run socialist society, and so there is no need for socialist policies - which he refers to disparagingly as 'prescriptions' - on issues like the family, work, the environment, etc., let alone a coherent vision of what socialist society will be like. There is a basic truth here - that the working class must emancipate itself - which is fundamental to the socialist project. But never before has this been interpreted to mean that socialists don't need to have a program."

Once again, you resort to a polemical sleight of hand: Beams' statement that a socialist society is not one "run" by socialists and that it is the task of the working class, in the process of its self-emancipation, to work out the new forms of society, without "prescriptions" laid down in advance, is misrepresented as a repudiation of program.

You insist that "there is no contradiction between the masses emancipating themselves and socialists running society." Are the masses to assume that this is the case because you, Commissar Brenner, say so? Either the self-emancipation of the working class means that it is the masses who must create and work out the forms of their own liberation or it does not. This is not merely an issue of abstract theoretical interest. The question has merely to be posed: Would a revolutionary socialist government, in the aftermath of the conquest of political power, be subject to the democratic control of the working class? Would the working out of policies proceed on the basis of diktats issued by the ruling socialists or through the open struggle among diverse social tendencies, whose right to fight for their viewpoints and policies would be among the most precious and zealously defended of democratic rights?

One has only to read your description of the state of affairs in the aftermath of the revolution to imagine your reply to these questions:

Some workers will actively oppose the revolution: to imagine them

running anything in a socialist society is perverse. Others will be politically neutral: to foist responsibilities on them right away for a revolution they have barely begun to understand will probably do little more than antagonize them; their political consciousness (and more broadly, their general cultural level) will have to be patiently nurtured. So for a considerable period of time the running of socialist society will be in the hands, not of the amorphous "masses," but of class conscious workers - in other words, that section of the class (necessarily a large portion of it and hopefully a majority) whose political consciousness has been shaped by the revolutionary socialist movement. This, it needs to be emphasized, is what is meant by "socialists running society" - not a small clique of party bureaucrats but a broad section of workers imbued with socialist consciousness.

One doesn't know whether to laugh or to cry as one reads your vision of the situation with which a socialist government will be confronted. Though you hold out the hope that a majority of the working class (though clearly not the majority of the population as a whole) will support the revolution, there seems to be no question in your mind that the socialists will be spending at least as much time suppressing people as they will emancipating them. Moreover, if all those sections of the working class from whom you anticipate opposition or indifference are to be excluded from "running anything," the continued functioning of a substantial portion of the economic, technological and social infrastructure of an advanced society will be, to put it mildly, problematic. There are limits to what can be decided on the basis of purely political considerations. In the aftermath of winning power, a socialist workers' government will require the interested cooperation of large numbers of people who, whatever their political convictions, will continue to play critical roles in the infrastructure of society. Socialists, even if they were so inclined, could not simply order these people about. They will have to be not only listened to, but also treated with the respect that their experience and expertise merits.

Fixated as you are on conjuring up prescriptions for the socialist society of the future, it does not seem that you have given too much thought to the problems of the transition from capitalism to socialism. By its very nature, socialism is inconceivable without mass participation in the making of decisions on all issues affecting the lives of the people, that is, without a vast expansion in democracy. As Engels put the matter so well, in his May 1895 Introduction to a new edition of Karl Marx's *The Class Struggle in France* (completed just three months before his own death): "The time of surprise attacks, of revolutions carried through by small conscious minorities at the head of masses lacking consciousness is past. Where it is a question of a complete transformation of the social organization, the masses themselves must also be in on it, must have already grasped what is at stake, what they are fighting for, body and soul.

The history of the last fifty years has taught us that.” [Marx-Engels *Collected Works*, Volume 27, (Moscow 1990), p. 520]

In other words, the revolution cannot be made *for* the workers. It must be made *by* the workers who understand what they are fighting for. The conception that the working class is capable of fighting for, and winning, political power can appear reasonable only to those who believe that masses of workers will be drawn to the perspective of socialism out of the experiences of their own lives. But you, Comrade Brenner, do not believe this. All that you see in the masses is a spectacle of appalling backwardness. You write: “If by the sheer act of participating in a revolution the undifferentiated masses can, as it were, leap out of their skins and transcend a lifetime of oppression and backwardness to the point of being able to carry out the mammoth task of socialist construction *on their own*, i.e., without any guidance or ‘prescriptions’ from socialists, then one has to wonder why they would need these same socialists to lead them in making a revolution in the first place. One has to wonder, in short, why they would need a change in consciousness at all.”

Backward the workers come into the revolution. Backward they leave it. Only through the Herculean efforts of Frank Brenner can something be salvaged from this general mess and the masses led, despite themselves, to the new utopia.

15. Consciousness and socialism

Fortunately, the real historical process proceeds quite differently. The change in social consciousness that necessarily precedes the outbreak of revolution as well as its subsequent evolution in the course of great struggles is rooted in and is the expression of socio-economic processes that develop independently of individual consciousness. Moreover, the immense “leaps” in consciousness characteristic of a period of revolutionary struggle represent the long-postponed (and therefore explosive) realignment of social thought with external social reality.[18] The experience of mass struggles changes people and their consciousness. Or as Marx and Engels put it when replying to the Brenners of the 1840s:

Both for the production on a mass scale of this communist consciousness and for the success of the cause itself, the alteration of men on a mass scale is necessary, an alteration which can only take place in a practical movement, a *revolution*; the revolution is necessary, therefore, not only because the *ruling* class cannot be overthrown in any other way, but also because the class *overthrowing* it can only in a revolution succeed in ridding itself of the muck of ages and become fitted to found society anew. [Marx-Engels *Collected Works*, Volume 5 (New York, 1976), pp. 52-53, emphasis in the original]

This justly celebrated passage appears in *The German Ideology*, written jointly by Marx and Engels in 1845. This work represented the first elaboration of the materialist conception of history, which explained man’s social consciousness on the basis of his social being, rather than man’s being on the basis of his consciousness. The forms of man’s thinking, they discovered, develop on an objective, material basis. “It is not consciousness that determines life, but life that determines consciousness.” [ibid. p. 37] Their new conception of history and the development of consciousness “relies on expounding the real process of production - starting from the material production of life itself - and comprehending the form of intercourse connected with and created by this mode of production, i.e., civil society in its various stages, as the basis of all history...” [ibid. p. 53]

The conception of social revolution as an objective product of real socio-economic contradictions in the emerging capitalist system dealt a death-blow to all idealist interpretations of history. Moreover, the

development of the working class itself as a revolutionary force within society, the “gravedigger” of capitalism, was an objective process. Its world-historical role was determined, in the most fundamental sense, not by its consciousness, but rather by its unique position in the capitalist mode of production. Answering what was to prove to be the most enduring objections to the conception of the proletariat as a revolutionary force - that the working class lacked revolutionary consciousness, that it did not want revolution, etc. - Marx and Engels replied in *The Holy Family*:

It is not a question of what this or that proletarian, or even the whole proletariat, at the moment *regards* as its aim. It is a question of what the proletariat is, and what, in accordance with this being, it will historically be compelled to do. Its aim and historical action is visibly and irrevocably foreshadowed in its own life situation as well as in the whole organization of bourgeois society today. [Marx-Engels *Collected Works*, Volume 4 (New York, 1975), p. 37, emphasis in the original]

All Marxist discussion on the role of consciousness - a topic which, we should point out, in case you, Comrade Brenner, have not noticed, has been of considerable interest to the Trotskyist movement - must proceed from a correct understanding of its relationship to material processes of socio-economic development. Plans for the building of a revolutionary party and the development of socialist consciousness would come to nothing if there did not exist objective conditions permitting the realization of these goals. The elaboration of the materialist conception of history marked a gigantic advance in man’s comprehension of his own social practice and consciousness. As Engels explained, “the final causes of all social changes and political revolutions are to be sought, not in men’s brains, not in man’s better insight into eternal truth and justice, but in changes in the modes of production and exchange. They are to be sought, not in the philosophy, but in the economics of each particular epoch.” [Marx-Engels *Collected Works*, Volume 24 (London, 1989), p. 306] Even the emergence of a general “feeling” within broad sections of society that “things must change” is a reflection in social consciousness of the archaic character of the prevailing political and economic system. [19]

The recognition that the emergence of the socialist movement has an objective foundation does not diminish the importance of the struggle to develop socialist consciousness. Indeed, the clarification of the objective basis of socialism is itself a critical component of the theoretical education of the working class. But the correct formulation of the socialist movement’s pedagogical tasks is possible only within the framework of an understanding that the contradictions of capitalism provide the principal and decisive impulse for the development of revolutionary consciousness.

The problem of socialist consciousness presents itself in one manner to those who recognize the latter as the ideal reflection of a real socio-economic process, and in quite another manner to those for whom no such objective and necessary relationship exists between the economic foundations of capitalist society and the formation of social thought. For the Marxists, the fight for socialist consciousness does not consist of convincing the broad mass of workers to conduct a struggle against capitalism. Rather, proceeding from a recognition of the inevitability of such struggles, arising out of the objectively exploitative process of surplus-value extraction, intensified by the deepening economic and social crisis of the capitalist system, the Marxist movement strives to develop, within the advanced sections of the working class, a scientific understanding of history as a law-governed process, a knowledge of the

capitalist mode of production and the social relations to which it gives rise, and an insight into the real nature of the present crisis and its world-historical implications. It is a matter of transforming an unconscious historical process into a conscious political movement, of anticipating and preparing for the consequences of the intensification of the world capitalist crisis, of laying bare the logic of events, and formulating, strategically and tactically, the appropriate political response.

But for those who see no basis for socialism in the objective conditions created by capitalism itself, who have been demoralized by the experience of defeats and setbacks, and who neither understand the nature of the capitalist crisis nor perceive the revolutionary potential of the working class, the problem of transforming consciousness is posed in essentially ideal and even psychological terms. Insofar as there does not exist a real basis for socialist consciousness, the possibility for its development must be sought elsewhere. That is precisely why you, Comrades Brenner and Steiner, believe that “utopia is crucial to a revival of socialist culture.”

16. Brenner on the family and backwardness

For you, Comrade Brenner, the principal source of the virtually insuperable obstacles to the building of a socialist movement is to be found in the traumatized state of the human psyche. The blame for this, you believe, lies with the impact of the family upon consciousness. Therefore, before any real progress can be made toward the development of socialist consciousness, a program to deal with this institution will have to be worked out and made the focus of party work. “One shouldn’t have to argue over whether socialists need a policy on the family,” you exclaim. “Since we are fighting to create a world where people can live fully human lives for the first time in history, it is obvious that this goal is inconceivable without an overhaul of the institution responsible for the socialization - i.e., humanization - of children, and where in class society the earliest and often the deepest wounds are inflicted on the human personality.” The family represents “sexual oppression and backwardness.” Beams’ failure to address this supreme problem, you assert, “is simply incredible.” While you assure us that “it isn’t the business of socialists to dictate to people how to live their personal lives,” you are nothing less than aghast that Beams “completely ignores the measures that need to be taken” to overcome the obstacles created by the family to the development of consciousness. Socialists, you insist, “should have a great many things to say about the family - from programmatic demands to fight backwardness and sexual oppression to educational material about the goal of a collective family and the nature of personal life under socialism.”

Beams’ failure to commit the revolutionary movement to the advocacy of an alternative to the existing nuclear family represents a form of “socialist *laissez-faire*.” Rejecting Beams’ statement that the future family “will develop on the basis of the constantly evolving forms of economic and social organization which will arise in socialist society,” you reply: “The whole point of socialism, however, is that for the first time in history human beings will *consciously direct* those changes, including in the family.”

The panacea that you offer is the “collective family,” which will “make it possible for both children and parents to break out of what Wilhelm Reich once called ‘family-itis,’ that stifling atmosphere of emotionally overloaded and compulsive family ties that breed so many deep and abiding psychological problems.” You are somewhat vague as to how the “collective family” will be established and how it will differ from the present state of affairs. Those who count themselves among your disciples will have to satisfy themselves with only a few general indications of how the family will operate in your utopia:

There are deep sexual and emotional bonds between lovers, and between parents and children that must also be accommodated within

a collective family. In that sense the collective family doesn’t abolish the nuclear family but transcends it in a dialectical sense, i.e. it preserves romantic love and parental love while doing away with the repressive relationships and social alienation that make family life such a misery in bourgeois society.

For you, Comrade Brenner, the problems of the family are rooted essentially, not in social conditions, but in individual psychology. Your animus is directed not so much against the existing economic system, as it is against the family, which you are convinced generates out of itself intense misery. What you therefore demand of socialists is that they invent a different, ideal, relationship - the so-called “collective family” - and place it in their program. This requires a significant misrepresentation of the attitude taken by Marx and Engels to this issue. [20]

For all your visionary pretensions, you seem singularly uninterested and ill-informed about the realities of life for most working class families. Fixated on the psychological and sexual dimension of the family trauma, you have remarkably little to say about the practical aspects of the problems confronting most working class families. [21] A reference to universal access to quality day care is thrown in as an aside. You give the impression of believing that there is relatively little that a socialist revolution can do, in terms of practical measures, which will significantly improve the conditions of working class families, aside from waging a propaganda campaign against various forms of social backwardness. “The nub of the issue is that the problems of the family,” you write, “will not automatically disappear once socialism has arrived.”

Whoever imagined that anything would happen automatically? The socialist revolution is not the same as launching an auto-install program on one’s computer (which, as it so happens, is usually a process fraught with unforeseen difficulties). But this sort of remark, so typical of philistines, is intended to denigrate the basic perspective of socialism - that the key to the alleviation of all forms of human suffering lies in overthrowing the existing capitalistic property relations upon which contemporary society is based. The solution to the great problem posed by private ownership of the means of production will clear the way for the gradual solution of many other important problems of the human condition.

No, not all problems of inter-familial relationships will be solved in the first year of socialism, or even, perhaps, in its first century. No one can reasonably assume that under socialism all marriages or unions between conjugal partners will be happy or that all children will be satisfied with their parents or vice-versa. However, what we certainly can assume is that the major material causes of a great deal of present family hardship and misery will be alleviated fairly rapidly by a revolutionary reorganization of the economic structure of society along socialist lines.

A modern socialist program must address itself practically to the problems of men, women and children as they manifest themselves concretely in the first decade of the 21st century. Your reference to freeing women “from domestic servitude” appears somewhat quaint at a time when the overwhelming majority of mothers hold jobs outside their homes. You apparently have not noticed that the percentage of households corresponding to the “Father Knows Best” two-parent model is a fraction of what it was when that sitcom aired in the 1950s. And, we might add, the image of the authoritarian *paterfamilias* bears little relation to contemporary reality - especially that of working class fathers who find themselves in the clutches of that system of legal torture known as the “Friend of Court” (which can order the deduction of as much as half his weekly wage to cover child-support expenses). Working class families are beset by financial difficulties from which they can find no escape. The vast complexity of social life and the pressure it places upon families requires not the invention of a new family form, but rather shifting the

weight of the burdens that now fall more or less entirely upon individuals to society as a whole.

But the significance of your discussion of the family lies not in the demands that you advance, but rather in the light you, Comrade Brenner, unwittingly shed on the wholly idealist outlook and method of contemporary neo-utopianism. You stress repeatedly that the family is a bulwark of social backwardness. But, as always, you locate the source of this backwardness not in the economic organization of society, but in individual psychology, specifically in “the repressed feelings in the unconscious” which persist in a human being’s “congealed, unexamined past.” You oppose the view that changes in the economic organization and structure of society will prove decisive in overcoming backwardness, which “will persist and perpetuate itself.” An intervention of a different sort will be required: “*The content of that intervention is what this discussion is all about - the fight against sexual oppression and the socialist transformation of the family, since the only way to address problems at the root of human personality is to change the way human beings are brought up.*” [Emphasis added]

The chasm between your perspective and that of the revolutionary socialist movement could not be stated more explicitly. Were your proposals and perspective to be adopted, the result would be the dissolution of the SEP, the ICFI and the Trotskyist movement. There would be no need for an international party whose aim is the revolutionary-strategic orientation of the international working class, based on the development of its conscious understanding of the objective laws governing the entire socio-economic system. The ICFI would be replaced by an organization focused on psychotherapy, examining the “repressed feelings in the unconscious” of its members and supporters, and addressing the sexual anxieties that you believe are embedded in the family structure.

We will return somewhat later to the very disturbing and reactionary implications of this deeply disoriented perspective. But first it is necessary to take note of the glaring contradiction in your argument. If, as you state, the vanquishing of social backwardness requires nothing less than a massive program of psychological rehabilitation, personality reconstruction, and the transformation of the family, how can the consciousness of the masses ever be raised to the point where the revolution itself - upon which this unprecedented project of societal reengineering depends - is even possible? In a society that consists of people who are, according to you, Comrade Brenner, psychologically damaged as a result of their upbringing, how can socialism become a mass movement? You cannot resolve this contradiction. Instead, you deepen it by reproducing the ahistorical conceptions of the old utopians. You assert, as did the old utopians, that “the only way to address problems at the root of human personality is to change the way human beings are brought up.” In other words, we must provide them with a different type of family. But since this cannot be done, for obvious reasons, before the social revolution, it means that this conquest of power must depend on the actions of people as they exist now - which would seem to rule out a revolution. Yet, if, by some miracle, all these damaged humans still manage to overthrow capitalism, it will then be necessary to repair and reeducate them. Your conviction that the running of society must be left “for a considerable period of time” in the hands of specially trained socialists, pre-indocrinated with the prescribed consciousness, follows logically from your idealist schema. [22]

Notes:

[18] This process was explained by Trotsky as follows: “The swift changes in mass views and moods in an epoch of revolution thus derive, not from the flexibility and mobility of man’s mind, but just the opposite, from its deep conservatism. The chronic lag of ideas and relations behind new objective conditions, right up to the moment when the latter crash over people in the form of a catastrophe, is what creates in a period

of revolution that leaping movement of ideas and passions which seems to the police mind a mere result of the activities of ‘demagogues.’” [*The History of the Russian Revolution* (London, 1977), p. 18] [return]

[19] As Engels further writes in *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*:

The growing perception that existing social institutions are unreasonable and unjust, that reason has become unreason, and right wrong, is only proof that in the modes of production and exchange changes have silently taken place, with which the old social order, adapted to earlier economic conditions, is no longer in keeping. From this it also follows that the means of getting rid of the incongruities that have been brought to light, must also be present, in a more or less developed condition, within the changed modes of production themselves. These means are not to be invented by deduction from fundamental principles, but are to be discovered in the stubborn facts of the existing system of production. ...

...The new productive forces have already outgrown the capitalistic mode of using them. And this conflict between productive forces and modes of production is not a conflict engendered in the mind of man, like that between original sin and divine justice. It exists, in fact, objectively outside us, independently of the will and actions even of the men that have brought it on. Modern Socialism is nothing but the reflex, in thought, of this conflict in fact; its ideal reflection in the minds, first, of the class directly suffering under it, the working class. [ibid. pp. 306-07] [return]

[20] You claim that Marx and Engels “openly defied the stifling morality of the Victorian age by calling for the abolition of the family and denouncing marriage as legalized prostitution.” Without directly quoting Marx and Engels, you suggest to a reader unfamiliar with their writings that they were for the dissolution of all family relations, the practice of universal free love, etc. This corresponds to the caricature of communism found in the most reactionary literature. As a matter of fact, Marx and Engels did not speak of the family as an ahistorical abstraction in the *Communist Manifesto*. Rather, they posed the following question: “On what foundation is the *present* family, the *bourgeois* family, based?” They answered:

On capital, on private gain. In its completely developed form this family exists only among the bourgeoisie. But this state of things finds its complement in the practical absence of the family among the proletarians, and in public prostitution.

The bourgeois family will vanish as a matter of course when its complement vanishes, and both will vanish with the vanishing of capital.” [New York, 1988, p. 71.]

Similarly, Marx and Engels speak not of marriage in general, but of bourgeois marriage. Their treatment of this issue begins with a mocking dismissal of the bourgeois claim that it is the intention of communists to create a “community of women,” i.e., to make women the property of a public harem. They reply:

The bourgeois sees in his wife a mere instrument of production. He hears that the instruments of production are to be exploited in common, and, naturally, can come to no other conclusion than that the lot of being common to all will likewise fall to the women.

He has not even a suspicion that the real point aimed at is to do

away with the status of women as mere instruments of production.

For the rest, nothing is more ridiculous than the virtuous indignation of our bourgeois at the community of women which, they pretend, is to be openly and officially established by the Communists. The Communists have no need to introduce community of women; it has existed almost from time immemorial.

Bourgeois marriage is in reality a system of wives in common and thus, at most, what the Communists might possibly be reproached with, is that they desire to introduce, in substitution for a hypocritically concealed, an openly legalized community of women. For the rest, it is self-evident that the abolition of the present system of production must bring with it the abolition of the community of women springing from that system, i.e., of prostitution both public and private.” [ibid. p. 72]

In another essay, entitled *Principles of Communism* and which was written almost simultaneously with the *Communist Manifesto*, Engels offered the following reply to the question, “What influence will the communist order of society have on the family?”

It will make the relation between the sexes a purely private relation which concerns only the persons involved, and in which society has no call to interfere. It is able to do this because it abolishes private property and educates children communally, thus destroying the twin foundations of hitherto existing marriage - the dependence through private property of the wife upon the husband and of the children upon the parents. Here also is the answer to the outcry of moralizing philistines against the communist community of women. Community of women is a relationship that belongs altogether to bourgeois society and is completely realized today in prostitution. But prostitution is rooted in private property and falls with it. Thus instead of introducing the community of women, communist organization puts an end to it. [*Marx-Engels Collected Works*, Volume 6 (New York, 1976), p. 354] [return]

[21] There is no indication in your document that you have considered the urgent needs of families that live outside the wealthiest capitalist countries. [return]

[22] The idea that the transformation of society depends upon changing human personality (i.e., human nature), which, in turn, depends upon changing their upbringing, is the very conception that led the utopians and their followers to organize their own sectarian societies, in which the education of the youth would proceed in accordance with principles laid down by the official educators. But these experiments, which all led eventually to dead ends, were based on a fundamentally false conception of social development. Marx subjected this utopian illusion to trenchant criticism in the third of his *Theses on Feuerbach*:

The [mechanical] materialist doctrine that men are product of circumstances and upbringing, and that, therefore, changed men are the product of other circumstances and changed upbringing, forgets that it is men who change circumstances and that the educator must himself be educated. Hence, this doctrine is bound to divide society into two parts, one of which is superior to society (in Robert Owen for example).

The coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity can be conceived and rationally understood only as revolutionary practice. [*Marx-Engels Collected Works*, Volume 5, p. 7] [return]

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