

# Foreword to *The Frankfurt School, Postmodernism and the Politics of the Pseudo-Left: A Marxist Critique*

## Part Two

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*The WSWS is publishing the foreword by David North to his new book, The Frankfurt School, Postmodernism and the Politics of the Pseudo-Left: A Marxist Critique. The book is available for purchase at Mehring Books. A pdf file of the complete foreword is available here.*

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### Ukraine

During the past year (2014–2015), Steiner and Brenner have joined the stampede of the pro-imperialist pseudo-left behind the right-wing Ukrainian government. In an article posted on May 20, 2014, Brenner declared: “Marxists should oppose the dismemberment of Ukraine.” With utter cynicism he continued: “That means opposing any and all annexations, whether by Russia or by any other ‘players’ like Poland and its imperialist partners in NATO.”[1] Brenner announced this policy three months *after* the United States and Germany orchestrated a coup d’état in Kiev, carried out by fascistic organizations that accomplished, for all intents and purposes, the annexation of Ukraine by the major imperialist powers. Brenner’s opposition to annexations meant, in reality, opposition only to the decision of the population of Crimea to rejoin Russia. This de facto endorsement of the right-wing coup was further justified by Brenner as a defense of Ukraine’s right to self-determination, which, he wrote, “means one thing only: the right to separate, to establish an independent state.” Brenner’s concept of “self-determination” means only total control by the Kiev regime over all of Ukraine. He denies the right of separation to those sections of Ukraine opposed to the Poroshenko government.

The International Committee has subjected the program of self-determination to a detailed critique, proving, on the basis of numerous examples, that it has served—particularly in the aftermath of the dissolution of the USSR—either as a mechanism for the imperialist-sponsored dismemberment of states targeted for intervention or as a means of enriching a particular faction of a national bourgeois elite. Often it is a combination of both. This demand has no progressive content independent of the unified struggle of the working class against imperialism and its local patrons, on the basis of an international revolutionary program. In the case of Ukraine, to identify, as Brenner does, national self-determination with the political hegemony of the imperialist-backed Poroshenko regime, staffed by fascists, is politically obscene.

### A more peaceful imperialism

Continuing the exercise in pro-imperialist subterfuge begun by his colleague, Steiner followed, in September 2014, with an angry denunciation of the resolution, titled “The Fight Against War and the Political Tasks of the Socialist Equality Party,” passed unanimously by the SEP at its Third Congress in August 2014. Steiner began his article by counting the number of times the resolution used the words “war” (97), “imperialist” (23) and “imperialism” (36). Steiner, it seems, would have his readers believe that these were words that appeared infrequently in the writings of Lenin, Luxemburg and Trotsky!

The SEP, declared Steiner, was engaged in a massive exaggeration of the danger of imperialist war. He wrote:

The SEP sees imperialism in 2014 as a return to 1914 and are convinced that history is repeating itself complete with a tense summer of international incidents reprising the tension of the summer of 1914. *But imperialism while it continues to plague the planet is very different today than it was 100 years ago. For one thing, the use of military power to back up economic interests, while certainly still in play, is embarked upon with much greater reluctance today, as witnessed by the obvious paralysis of the Obama Administration toward the events in Syria, Iraq and now Ukraine.* [2]

It is hard to take this nonsensical combination of apathy and stupidity seriously. Steiner fails to enumerate the objective changes that have rendered imperialism so much more peaceful and risk averse than it was a century ago. He seems not to have noticed that the United States has been at war, on a virtually continuous basis, for a quarter century; that its military operations have ravaged entire countries, killed hundreds of thousands of people, and created fifty million refugees; and that it is engaged in a global deployment of military forces unprecedented in its history. Are these all manifestations of a “much greater reluctance” to use military power than was the case 100 years ago? As for the preparation of the United States for war against China and Russia, this is not a matter of speculation, but a geo-political and military fact, which is widely acknowledged and discussed in strategic journals and the international press. Steiner, however, dismisses the warnings made by the *World Socialist Web Site* as “crisis mongering.”

Steiner’s entire approach to world politics is characterized by impressionism of the most banal sort. He asserts that Obama heads “a

weak administration unsure of what to do and reluctant to get involved in any long term military escapades aside from some easy pickings through the employment of drones with its minimal commitment of US military resources.” There is not a trace of theoretical insight into the objective forces shaping the policies and actions of imperialism. In the *Transitional Program*, Trotsky identified the internal crises of imperialist governments as a key indicator of the approach of war. “In the historically privileged countries,” he wrote, “...all of capital’s traditional parties are in a state of perplexity bordering on a paralysis of will.” The ruling elites were driven to war not because they subjectively desired it, but because they saw no way out of their crisis. The bourgeoisie, Trotsky stated, “toboggans with closed eyes toward an economic and military catastrophe.”[3]

Incapable of working through the implications of any political argument, Steiner does not seem to recognize that his dismissal of the danger of imperialist war involves an entirely different appraisal of the epoch than that upon which the Fourth International is based. If imperialism is not objectively driven to war, and if it can manage its affairs with far greater restraint than in 1914 or 1939, then this would indicate that it has found a way of containing its fundamental contradictions—that is, between the global character of capitalist production and the nation-state system, and between the social character of the productive forces and the private ownership of the means of production. It was Kautsky who foresaw the possibility of a successfully managed global capitalism. This new form of “ultra-imperialism,” he claimed, would enable the ruling classes to dispense with war. Lenin, in his celebrated work *Imperialism—The Highest Stage of Capitalism*, wrote:

...the only objective, *i.e.*, real, social significance Kautsky’s “theory” can have, is that of a most reactionary method of consoling the masses with hopes of permanent peace being possible under capitalism, distracting their attention from the sharp antagonisms and acute problems of the present era, and directing it towards illusory prospects of an imaginary “ultra-imperialism” of the future. Deception of the masses—there is nothing but this in Kautsky’s “Marxian” theory.[4]

Steiner—who prefers to ignore the lessons of the struggles waged by the Bolsheviks against opportunism—fails to tell us when, and through what process, the development of imperialism confirmed Kautsky’s perspective and refuted that of Lenin and Trotsky.

### The crisis in Greece

The Greek election of January 2015 marked yet another stage in Steiner and Brenner’s repudiation of basic Marxist political principles. They hailed, with deep-felt enthusiasm, the victory of Syriza. This response came as no surprise as Syriza—with its postmodernist theories, amorphous and opportunist program, and upper-middle-class social constituency—epitomizes all that they, and the petty bourgeois pseudo-left as a whole, represent. Countless Steiners and Brenners are to be found in Syriza’s leadership bodies and organizational periphery. Steiner and Brenner reacted bitterly to the International Committee’s refusal to participate in the celebration of Syriza’s victory. They denounced our analysis of its program and our warnings of its inevitable betrayal of the Greek working class. In an article posted on February 2, 2015, Brenner angrily cited the statements posted by the *World Socialist Web Site* after the election:

The International Committee of the Fourth International rejects

with contempt the political excuse offered by the petty-bourgeois pseudo-left to justify support for Syriza and its pro-capitalist agenda—that a Tsipras government is a necessary “experience” for the working class, from which it will somehow come to understand the necessity for genuinely socialist policies.

Such sophistries are advanced only to oppose the emergence of a revolutionary movement of the working class, a development possible only through a relentless political exposure of Syriza. This task is undertaken by the *World Socialist Web Site* in order to prepare workers and young people for the decisive struggles they face in Greece and internationally.[5]

After noting that he had placed what he considered the most egregious phrases in italics, Brenner quoted a second statement posted by the *World Socialist Web Site* on January 28:

Another of their [the pseudo-left] arguments is that one must support Syriza, *so that the working class can go through these experiences and learn from them. This is pure cynicism.* Given the enormous dangers posed by a Syriza government, *the task of a Marxist party is to expose the class interests represented by Syriza, to warn the working class against its consequences and provide it with a clear socialist orientation.*

*This is how the World Socialist Web Site and the International Committee of the Fourth International participate in the “experiences” in Greece.* The numerous pseudo-left groups cling to Syriza because they represent the same class interests as this party. They speak for better-off layers of the middle class, *who fear an independent movement of the working class*, and who are concerned to ensure their own social elevation within the bourgeois order.[6]

“These quotes,” wrote Brenner in response, “are both examples of what Marxists call sectarianism.” He did not provide the names of his Marxist sources. Marx, Engels, Lenin and Trotsky were certainly not among them. They were the most irreconcilable opponents of all opportunist parties and tendencies that acted to politically subordinate the working class to the bourgeoisie. If it is “sectarianism” to expose and oppose a bourgeois government, which that led by Syriza certainly is, then the entire history of Marxism as a revolutionary socialist movement is a long and dreary chronicle of “sectarianism,” and Lenin and Trotsky were its foremost practitioners.

Denouncing the International Committee as “sectarian” because it opposes the Syriza government is tantamount to rejecting the political principles that found expression in Lenin’s fight against Menshevism and the Second International, Trotsky’s struggle against Stalinist “Popular Frontism,” and the International Committee’s opposition to the Pabloite capitulation to Stalinist and bourgeois nationalist organizations. Based on the positions they now hold, neither Steiner nor Brenner could explain why they joined the Workers League in the early 1970s. At that time, the Pabloites continuously denounced the International Committee as “ultra-left sectarians.”

Everything written by Steiner and Brenner is opposed to the principles for which Trotsky indefatigably fought. In his discussions with the American Trotskyists in 1938, on the significance of the *Transitional Program*, he insisted that the revolutionary party’s program must take, as its point of departure, the objective crisis of capitalism, in all its acuteness, and not the subjective consciousness and confusion of the workers. At a meeting with James P. Cannon and other leaders of the American section in May 1938, Trotsky said:

The political backwardness of the American working class is very great. This signifies that the danger of a fascist catastrophe is very great. This is the point of departure for all our activity. The program must express the objective tasks of the working class rather than the backwardness of the workers. It must reflect society as it is, and not the backwardness of the working class. It is an instrument to overcome and vanquish the backwardness.[7]

In his discussions with the American leaders, Trotsky warned against pandering to the confusion and prejudices of the masses:

...the task is to adapt the mentality of the masses to those objective factors. ... The crisis of society is given as the base of our activity. The mentality is the political arena of our activity. We must change it. We must give a scientific explanation of society, and clearly explain it to the masses. That is the difference between Marxism and reformism.

The reformists have a good smell for what the audience wants—as Norman Thomas—he gives them that. But that is not serious revolutionary activity. We must have the courage to be unpopular, to say, “you are fools,” “you are stupid,” “they betray you,” and every once in a while with a scandal launch our ideas with passion. It is necessary to shake the worker from time to time, to explain, and then shake him again—that all belongs to the art of propaganda. But it must be scientific, not bent to the mood of the masses.[8]

Trotsky warned the leaders of the American movement that if the American workers refused to accept the program of socialist revolution, the danger existed that they would be compelled to accept the program of fascism. There was no guarantee that the workers would act in time. “We cannot take responsibility for this,” he said. “We can only take responsibility for ourselves.”[9]

Steiner and Brenner take responsibility for nothing. In order to justify their support for a bourgeois political party and the government it leads, they invoke the “experience” of the working class as if it were an unfolding stream of purely psychic phenomena, unaffected by class forces, which one must observe passively, in respectful silence. Above all, they insist that the conscious activity of the revolutionary party—the critical element of negativity as the “moving and generating principle”[10] in the dialectic of the objective historical process—must be excluded from the unfolding social experience. Steiner and Brenner argue, in effect, that it is impermissible to intrude upon that blessed psychic state of virgin innocence with critical analysis and discordant exposures. Experience must not be “denigrated.” Rather, the “experience” must be allowed to take the workers wherever it will—that is, to defeat.

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[1] [http://forum.permanent-revolution.org/2014\\_05\\_01\\_archive.html](http://forum.permanent-revolution.org/2014_05_01_archive.html)

[2]

<http://forum.permanent-revolution.org/2014/09/a-brief-comment-on-resolution-of-sep-on.html> [Emphasis added]

[3] *The Transitional Program: The Death Agony of Capitalism and the Tasks of the Fourth International* (New York: Labor Publications, 1981), p. 1.

[4] V.I. Lenin, *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism* (New York: International Publishers, 1970), p. 118.

[5] [www.wsws.org/en/articles/2015/01/27/pers-j27.html](http://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2015/01/27/pers-j27.html) [Brenner’s emphasis].

[6] [www.wsws.org/en/articles/2015/01/28/syri-j28.html](http://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2015/01/28/syri-j28.html) [Brenner’s emphasis].

[7] *The Transitional Program for Socialist Revolution* (New York: Pathfinder, 1977), pp. 189–190.

[8] *ibid.*, p. 219.

[9] *ibid.*, p. 191.

[10] *Marx-Engels Collected Works, Volume 3* (New York: International Publishers, 1975), p. 332.

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