

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

## Part Three

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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.*

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The political bankruptcy of Steiner and Brenner's opportunist theory of "experience" has been exposed by subsequent developments. Alexis Tsipras repaid their infatuation and political subservience by forming a government in alliance with the Independent Greeks, an extreme right-wing bourgeois party. Tsipras then embarked on a policy consisting of the repudiation of every promise that Syriza had made to oppose the European Union's austerity program.

### Syriza's betrayal

The culmination of this betrayal was the calling of a referendum on July 5, 2015, which was intended by Tsipras to provide political cover for his government's capitulation to the European Union's demands. The International Committee denounced this maneuver, pointing out that the Syriza government, which had been placed in power just five months earlier to oppose austerity, had no legitimate reason to call a referendum on whether or not to capitulate to the EU. Alexis Tsipras was, in effect, providing European imperialism and its allies in the Greek ruling elites an opportunity to get rid of his government, thus relieving Syriza of the onus of accepting and imposing concessions.

Brenner, predictably, was outraged by the International Committee's exposure of Tsipras' maneuver and leapt to his defense. Syriza, he wrote, "has turned to the Greek people and asked them to decide: yes or no to more austerity ... this is one of the rare occasions when bourgeois democracy actually lives up to its hype." [1]

The warnings made by the International Committee, to which Brenner so bitterly objected, were quickly vindicated. Tsipras was horrified by the massive "No" vote, which he had neither foreseen nor desired. An article that appeared in Britain's *Daily Telegraph* on July 8, 2015, written by international business editor Ambrose Evans-Pritchard, confirmed the analysis of the World Socialist Web Site:

Greek Premier Alexis Tsipras never expected to win Sunday's referendum on EMU [Economic and Monetary Union] bail-out terms, let alone to preside over a blazing national revolt against foreign control.

He called the snap vote with the expectation—and intention—of

losing it. The plan was to put up a good fight, accept honourable defeat, and hand over the keys of the Maximos Mansion, leaving it to others to implement the June 25 "ultimatum" [from the European institutions] and suffer the opprobrium.[2]

In an interview with the *Guardian*, published on July 14, 2015, Yanis Varoufakis, Syriza's former finance minister who had been leading the negotiations with the EU, confirmed Evans-Pritchard's report. "I had assumed, and I believe so had the prime minister, that our support and the no vote would fade exponentially," Varoufakis told the *Guardian*. He also stated that Golden Dawn, the Greek fascist party, would benefit from Syriza's capitulation. "I cannot see any other possible outcome than the further strengthening of Golden Dawn." [3]

Steiner and Brenner reacted to the betrayal of the Greek working class not by denouncing Syriza and its leader, Alexis Tsipras, but by publishing new and more vitriolic attacks on the World Socialist Web Site. The crime of the WSWS was its "blanket denial that the EXPERIENCE of the Syriza government could prove crucial to raising the political consciousness of the masses and open opportunities to win large numbers to revolutionary socialism." [4] This bizarre argument leads to the conclusion that political betrayals that disorient and demoralize the working class are to be welcomed as positive contributions to the development of consciousness. The more betrayals the better! And what if the betrayals result in the victory of Golden Dawn? If we accept the political logic of Steiner and Brenner, this would provide yet another invaluable consciousness-raising experience! The task of "socialists," according to their theory of consciousness, is to promote illusions in the parties that are betraying the working class. One must "stand with them [the workers] in their experiences..." [5] No doubt, if reaction triumphs in Greece, Steiner, in Manhattan, and Brenner, in Toronto, will "stand with" the workers, but they will do so from a very safe distance, 5,000 miles from Athens.

In the most revealing expression of his own demoralization, Brenner blurts out: "In revolutionary politics IT ISN'T ENOUGH TO KEEP PROCLAIMING THE TRUTH." [6] Only a person who has been irremediably corrupted by cynicism and has severed all his internal intellectual and moral links to socialism could write these words. Marxism and all forms of progressive thought and culture are inspired by the conviction that there is nothing more powerful than truth. The Fourth International is distinguished from all other political movements, including those that claim some connection to socialism, in the emphasis

it places on the immense political significance of the fight for truth in an age when capitalism depends for its survival upon lies. As Trotsky declared so powerfully in 1937: “Neither threats, nor persecutions, nor violations can stop us! Be it even over our bleaching bones, the truth will triumph! We will blaze the trail for it. It will conquer!”[7] The fight for truth—which means, first of all, telling the truth to the working class—is the essential foundation of Marxist politics, and is incompatible with all forms of political opportunism.

Steiner and Brenner’s defense of Syriza has exposed the combination of intellectual bad faith, theoretical charlatanry and political duplicity underlying their denunciations of the International Committee. They initiated their attack in 2004 with the charge that my “objectivist” proclivities and “neglect of the dialectic”—arising from my high esteem for the work of Plekhanov—represented a departure from Marxist theory that threatened the very survival of the International Committee. By 2007 they had concluded that the International Committee, having failed to accept their criticisms of my “objectivism,” was finished as a revolutionary movement. And now, a decade after they initiated their campaign, Steiner and Brenner have functioned as willing accomplices of petty-bourgeois politicians who have carried out a monstrous betrayal of the working class.

### The return of Savas Michael-Matsas

Politics is rich in irony. In his initial polemic, written in 2004, when he was still proclaiming his devotion to the International Committee, Steiner claimed that he recognized the importance of its critique of Gerry Healy’s “bastardization of dialectics.” He acknowledged, “The break with Healy in 1985 was an important milestone in the sense that it saved the International Committee from complete destruction.”[8]

But the political logic of their struggle against the International Committee and their defense of Syriza has led Steiner and Brenner to forge a political alliance with Savas Michael-Matsas, who supported Healy unconditionally in 1985 and broke with the International Committee. He was the national secretary of the Workers Internationalist League in Greece, the only section of the ICFI that supported Healy. Michael-Matsas backed Healy, not out of personal loyalty, but because the latter’s opportunist policies were most closely aligned with his own efforts to form political alliances with Stalinist and left bourgeois parties in Greece. In the aftermath of his break with the International Committee, Michael-Matsas proclaimed a “New Era for the Fourth International,” in which Trotskyism would be liberated from “abstract propagandism” and “the practices of the defeats and isolation of Trotskyism.” In practice, this “New Era” consisted of supporting the bourgeois Pasok party in Greece, endorsing, in alliance with the Stalinists, a bourgeois candidate for the presidency of Cyprus, and hailing Mikhail Gorbachev’s *Perestroika* as the beginning of the “political revolution” in the Soviet Union.

Now, thirty years after he broke with Trotskyism, Steiner and Brenner have placed their blog site at the service of Michael-Matsas, where he is afforded space to denounce the “sectarian” International Committee. While the ICFI and WSWP, he wrote on January 22, 2015, “can say some correct things about the bourgeois nature of Syriza’s leadership, they also discount the significance of Syriza’s victory. ... The sectarian groups are blind to the opportunities because they are indifferent to the mass movement.”[9] Like all political opportunists, Michael-Matsas invokes the “mass movement” without defining the class nature and political program of its leadership.

As for the evolution of Michael-Matsas’ theoretical conceptions since he broke with the International Committee, his *Wikipedia* entry informs us that:

He has been trying to offer “a reinterpretation of the revolutionary

theory and marxism from the perspective of messianism and Jewish mystic, and vice versa”. His position may be classified as that of a “religious atheism” or else of a “profane messianism”.[10]

One will not find on the Steiner-Brenner blog site a single critical word about Michael-Matsas’ “bastardization of dialectics.” They are no more troubled by his efforts to incorporate into Marxism the medieval mysticism of the Kabbalah than they are by the claims of Syriza’s ideologists that we live in a “post-Marxist” era. But Steiner and Brenner could not abide my “objectivist” philosophy—that is, the utilization of historical materialist analysis to disclose and advance the interests of the working class.

It is not, we repeat, philosophy that drives their politics. Rather, their subjective and eclectic philosophy arises from the requirements of the class orientation and social interests that find expression in their politics.

### A definition of the pseudo-left

The betrayal of Syriza marks a significant milestone within Greece and internationally. Nothing remains of the “leftism” of the social milieu from which organizations such as Syriza arose, except deceitful phrases. Its repudiation of its anti-austerity program has exposed the unbridgeable chasm between the political representatives of the better-off sections of the middle class and the broad mass of the working population. This objective conflict of social interests will set into motion a necessary process of political realignment. The advanced sections of the working class and youth will turn against the pseudo-left and seek to make their way to the genuinely socialist and Marxist left. This objective process of social and political differentiation requires the intervention of the Trotskyist movement. Mere anger against those who have betrayed is not sufficient. Marxists must strive to impart to the workers’ radicalization and the intensification of the class struggle a high level of political and historical consciousness.

As a contribution to this process, and in order to help workers identify their political enemies, we offer the following working definition of the contemporary pseudo-left:

- The pseudo-left denotes political parties, organizations and theoretical/ideological tendencies, which utilize populist slogans and democratic phrases to promote the socioeconomic interests of privileged and affluent strata of the middle class. Examples of such parties and tendencies include Syriza in Greece, Podemos in Spain, Die Linke in Germany, and numerous offshoots of ex-Trotskyist (i.e., Pabloite) and state capitalist organizations such as the Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste (NPA) in France, the NSSP in Sri Lanka and the International Socialist Organization in the United States. This list could include the remnants and descendants of the “Occupy” movements influenced by anarchist and post-anarchist tendencies. Given the wide variety of petty-bourgeois pseudo-left organizations throughout the world, this is by no means a comprehensive list.
- The pseudo-left is anti-Marxist. It rejects historical materialism, embracing instead various forms of subjective idealism and philosophical irrationalism associated with existentialism, the Frankfurt School and contemporary postmodernism.
- The pseudo-left is anti-socialist, opposes class struggle, and denies the central role of the working class and the necessity of revolution in the progressive transformation of society.[11] It counterposes supra-class populism to the independent political organization and mass mobilization of the working class against the capitalist system. The economic program of the pseudo-left is, in its essentials, pro-capitalist and nationalistic.
- The pseudo-left promotes “identity politics,” fixating on issues related to nationality, ethnicity, race, gender and sexuality in order to acquire greater influence in corporations, the colleges and universities, the

higher-paying professions, the trade unions and in government and state institutions, to effect a more favorable distribution of wealth among the richest 10 percent of the population. The pseudo-left seeks greater access to, rather than the destruction of, social privilege.

- In the imperialist centers of North America, Western Europe and Australasia, the pseudo-left is generally pro-imperialist, and utilizes the slogans of “human rights” to legitimize, and even directly support, neo-colonialist military operations.

The analysis and exposure of the class basis, retrograde theoretical conceptions and reactionary politics of the pseudo-left are especially critical tasks confronting the Trotskyist movement in its struggle to educate the working class, free it from the influence of the petty-bourgeois movements, and establish its political independence as the central progressive and revolutionary force within modern capitalist society. *The Frankfurt School, Postmodernism and the Politics of the Pseudo-Left* is intended as a contribution to the achievement of that goal.

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The first document in this volume, “Plekhanov and the Tragedy of the Second International,” dated June 20, 2003, was written as a criticism of Alex Steiner’s subjective, and essentially ahistorical, approach to the life of the “Father of Russian Marxism.”

The second document, “Marxism, History & Socialist Consciousness,” was written in June 2006. It replied to “Objectivism or Marxism,” which Steiner and Brenner had written in May 2006. My reply also referenced a number of their earlier documents. My document was serialized on the World Socialist Web Site in August 2007 and published later in booklet form.[12]

The third document, “The Political and Intellectual Odyssey of Alex Steiner,” was originally published in serial form by the World Socialist Web Site in October 2008.

The fourth document, “The Theoretical and Historical Origins of the Pseudo-Left,” was delivered as the opening report to the Second National Congress of the Socialist Equality Party in August 2012 and later published in booklet form.

The fifth document, “The Science of Political Perspective,” was delivered as a lecture at an international school sponsored by the Socialist Equality Party in July 2005.

The sixth document, a review of Professor Tom Rockmore’s *Marx After Marxism*, was originally published on the World Socialist Web Site in May 2006. It was later included as a chapter in *The Russian Revolution and the Unfinished Twentieth Century*, published in 2014. I have decided to make use of this essay once again, because its subject—the refutation of the claim that Marx was a secret idealist—is highly relevant to the theoretical issues with which this present volume is concerned.

The appendix consists of two appraisals of the life and legacy of Georgi Plekhanov by Leon Trotsky and Alexander Voronsky. These essays, written by revolutionary Marxists who had broken with Plekhanov in 1914, pay tribute to the immense historical role played by this great and tragic figure in the propagation of Marxist philosophy and the development of the revolutionary socialist movement in Russia. In his knowledge of French materialism and the idealism of the German philosophers, Hegel, Fichte and Feuerbach, wrote Voronsky, “Plekhanov knew no equals.” The inclusion of the essays by Trotsky and Voronsky, which are magnificent examples of historical materialist objectivity, serves as a fitting reply to Steiner’s subjective and ignorant attack on the great theoretician, who educated the leaders of the Russian socialist revolution of October 1917.

In preparing this volume for publication, the editors carefully rechecked citations in the original documents and made, where necessary, corrections in grammar and style. In order to assist the reader, several paragraphs that originally appeared as footnotes have been moved into the main body of the text. Except for such minor changes, which left the

content of the polemics unchanged, the documents in this volume appear as they were originally published.

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Detroit, MI  
July 16, 2015

[1] <http://forum.permanent-revolution.org/2015/06/the-working-class-in-fantasy-and-reality.html>

[2] [www.telegraph.co.uk/finance/economics/11724924/Europe-is-blowing-itself-apart-over-Greece-and-nobody-can-stop-it.html](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/finance/economics/11724924/Europe-is-blowing-itself-apart-over-Greece-and-nobody-can-stop-it.html)

[3] <http://www.theguardian.com/business/2015/jul/14/golden-dawn-will-be-strengthened-by-worse-austerity-yanis-varoufakis-warns>

[4] <http://forum.permanent-revolution.org/2015/07/sectarianism-and-greek-working-class.html> [Emphasis in the original]

[5] *ibid.*

[6] *ibid.* [Emphasis in the original]

[7] Leon Trotsky, *I Stake My Life*, (New York: Labor Publications, 1977), p. 26.

[8] [http://permanent-revolution.org/polemics/dialectical\\_path.pdf](http://permanent-revolution.org/polemics/dialectical_path.pdf)

[9]

<http://forum.permanent-revolution.org/2015/01/for-revolutionary-intervention-in.html>

[10] [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Savas\\_Matsas](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Savas_Matsas)

[11] As Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe wrote in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, “What is now in crisis is a whole conception of socialism which rests upon the ontological centrality of the working class, upon the role of Revolution, with a capital ‘r’, as the founding moment in the transition from one type of society to another...” (London: Verso, 2001, p. 2.)

[12] All the documents written by Steiner and Brenner referenced in this volume can be accessed on their blog site, [www.permanent-revolution.org](http://www.permanent-revolution.org). Readers who are so inclined can devote as much time as they wish to the exploration of this site. Specific passages from the Steiner-Brenner texts cited in this volume can be located by using the site’s search function.

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Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>