

An interview with David North

Socialism or Barbarism: Reflections on Global Disorder

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In October 2017, David North delivered a lecture on the centenary of the October Revolution at St. Andrews College in Scotland. Prior to the lecture, he was interviewed by Adam Stromme, the editor-in-chief of the *The St Andrews Economist*, the official publication of the St Andrews Economics Society.

We reprint below the transcript of the interview, which was published on the journal's website [thestandrewseconomist.com] on November 26, 2017.

This week, Editor-in-Chief Adam Stromme sits down with David North, a visiting Marxist scholar, active revolutionary socialist, and Chairman of the Socialist Equality Party in the United States.

Background

Adam Stromme: Tell us a little bit about yourself, and how you first became involved in socialist politics.

David North: I am part of a generation that was politically radicalized during the 1960s. My generation was, of course, deeply affected by the on-going Vietnam war. But, at a more fundamental level, the radicalization was a response to the horrors of fascism and the Second World War. The tens of millions killed, the genocidal extermination of the Jews, and the dropping of two atomic bombs by the United States on defenseless cities, weighed heavily upon us.

This recent history had a powerful impact on how we responded to contemporary events.

Within this historical context, the brutal war waged by the United States against Vietnam completely discredited liberal anti-communism. The claims that the United States was defending the “free world” lost all credibility among broad sections of student youth. Young people began looking for an alternative to capitalism and imperialism, and socialism became increasingly popular.

But what was socialism? There was the example of the Russian revolution, but the reality of Stalinist dictatorship led many to have serious doubts as to whether revolution was a viable option. This is why the fate of the revolution became such a central question. And the questions could only be answered by studying the history of Trotsky's struggle against Stalinism, by reading such books as his *Revolution Betrayed*. It became clear that Stalinism and bureaucratic dictatorship were not the inevitable outcome of socialist revolution. The study of this history led me to become a Marxist and Trotskyist.

AS: What are the aims of the Socialist Equality Party, and how has the party evolved over time?

DN: The Socialist Equality Party is part of the International Committee of the Fourth International. The Fourth International was founded by Leon Trotsky in 1938 in response to the betrayal of the October revolution and the world socialist revolution by Stalin and Stalinism. The American Trotskyist movement emerged from this historic split.

Our aim is to replace the current system of capitalism, as practiced in the United States and the world, with the democratic control of the means of production and the introduction of scientific planning. It is our firm belief that by these means the working class will establish an economic system based not on the striving of individuals for wealth and profit, but rather on the eradication of poverty and the creation of the means for genuine political democracy. And in so doing, the working class will also be eliminating the causes of war, political oppression, and all other forms of the suppression of genuine and humane values and aspirations.

Theoretical Analysis

AS: Why is capitalism a problematic economic system? Can it be reformed? If not, why not?

DN: The Marxist materialist conception of history views capitalism in the context of man's struggle with nature to guarantee his subsistence. Slavery, feudalism, the “Asiatic mode of production” and capitalism, represented stages in the historical development of mankind's productive forces.

Capitalism is based on the exploitation of the working class. The creation of profit is, necessarily, derived from the extraction of surplus value from the working class. Though Marx's theory of value is bitterly contested, every capitalist understands that profitability depends upon the labor of the working class.

The tendency of the rate of profit to decline arises inexorably out of the development of the productive forces. The efforts of the capitalists to offset this tendency leads, in turn, to greater levels of exploitation and the intensification of the class struggle.

The present-day class struggle is developing within the framework of a global economy, defined by internationally integrated production and exchange. It is increasingly difficult to identify where, exactly, any commodity is produced.

The contradiction between the global character of the productive forces, and the persistence of an obsolete system of national states, manifests itself politically in the re-emergence of extreme chauvinism, persecution of refugees, and the growing threat of third world war.

The Soviet Union was dissolved in 1991. We have had more than 25 years to see what capitalism could do, without any threat from socialism. And yet, we are witnessing the reemergence of these fascistic-like symptoms. They are the political manifestation of an underlying economic disease. The source of that disease is the private ownership of the means of production, and the existence of a national-state political system that is incompatible with a globalized economic system.

Thus, every state is now engaged in a bitter struggle to survive: beggar thy neighbor economic policies, trade wars, currency wars, the throwing up of borders, the turning away of refugees, and so on.

All of this testifies to the bankruptcy of the capitalist system.

Can it be reformed? No. Nationally-based reformist policies dominated

in country after country in the aftermath of the Second World War. After two wars, the bourgeoisie came within inches of blowing its brains out! Thus, there was a massive array of mechanisms created to try to contain the crisis. One after another, they failed. By 1971, the Bretton Woods system, based on dollar-gold convertibility, had failed. Then came other monetary systems, like floating exchange rates. But more and more the persistence of these contradictions propelled the development of crisis. And we are at a very advanced stage of crisis right now.

AS: *Marxism, and socialism more generally, are both politically powerful and contentious theories in mainstream circles, liable to misrepresentation and contortion because they have been invoked by countless movements across centuries of struggle. What do Marxism and socialism mean to you, and how do these contrast with how many people have been taught to understand them?*

DN: First of all, there is a well-known saying: “If geometric axioms impinged on economic interests, an attempt would be made to refute them.” Marxism is so contentious because it advances a theory of history that asserts the transitory nature of the existing economic order. Marxism, to the extent that it draws inspiration from Hegel, argues that all that exists deserves to perish. All that comes into the world, comes with the seeds of its own demise. But unlike Hegelianism, Marxism doesn’t just prophesize this. It has uncovered the real, existing economic contradictions that produce crises and create conditions for the socialist revolution. This is anathema to the bourgeoisie. It does not want to hear that its days are numbered.

Marxism presents, in part, a theory of history that says that capitalism is not timeless, and provides an insight into the laws and contradictions of the socio-economic process. It does not assert the inevitability of socialism—in the sense that socialism will be established automatically—without human agency and conscious political struggle. But it does assert that the abolition of private ownership of the means of production is foreshadowed in objective economic processes, and develops out of an objective process in which capital becomes, effectively, socialized.

The first use of the word “socialism” came from a person by the name of Lorenz Stein, in the 1820s. He defined it as “a systematic science of social equality.”

The revolutionary role of the working class is embedded in its objective place in the whole of the system of production.

AS: *As a socialist, what do you say to those who charge actually-existing-socialism with irresistibly tending to the authoritarian politics of regimes like the USSR and Maoist China?*

DN: It is, first of all, a very legitimate question. Anyone who is interested in socialism, and seeking to find a way beyond capitalism, will, of course, want to know: what happened to the Soviet Union? If someone wants to dedicate their lives to making the world a better place, they can’t help but ask: what if I am chasing a fool’s paradise?

In the case of the Soviet Union, the answer is that there was a social revolution. But there was a nationalist and bureaucratic reaction against the revolution, of which the Stalinist regime was the expression. Stalinism was responsible for the vast extermination of many of the leaders of the international socialist revolution.

So here is the main question: did Stalinism arise organically out of Bolshevism, out of Leninism, or was Stalin a perverted distortion of Bolshevism, and of the principles of the October revolution?

The answer is to be found by asking the following: in the process of this degeneration, was there a fight against it? And here we don’t have to engage in guess work. In 1923, there emerged a Left Opposition, under the leadership of Trotsky, which developed a systematic critique of the bureaucratization of the state and the Communist Party. In 1924, Stalin and Bukharin advanced the program of “socialism in one country.” That is to say, it would occur independently of socialist revolutions in other

countries. Other revolutions would be welcomed, but not required.

Trotsky, basing himself on the Marxist tradition, argued that the program of nationalist economic autarky was incompatible with socialism. Lenin’s orientation towards power in 1917, was not determined primarily by Russian conditions, but by international conditions, arising from the first world war.

Trotsky called for the overthrow of the Stalinist regime. He denounced the counterrevolutionary role of that bureaucracy. He warned that without a political revolution, the policies of the Stalinist regime would lead ultimately to the destruction of the USSR. He was proved correct.

AS: *How does Trotskyism, the theoretical doctrines espoused by Leon Trotsky that you and the SEP adhere to, differ from Leninism, Stalinism, and Maoism?*

DN: Trotsky and Lenin represent the classical Marxist tradition. This tradition is materialist, profoundly hostile to all forms of philosophical irrationalism, and attributes to the working class a uniquely revolutionary role. Stalinism, Maoism, and the like, are all nationalist perversions of Marxism. In other words, a nationalist form of Marxism is essentially anti-Marxist. In the Soviet Union, Stalinism used Marxist phrases to justify the usurpation of power. But Lenin and Trotsky employed Marxism as an instrument of socio-economic analysis and political orientation.

Current Events

AS: *Hugo Chavez, the former democratically-elected leader of Venezuela, famously ran, and repeatedly won, on a program of “Socialism for the 21st Century.” Since his death, however, some even on the left, including Noam Chomsky, charge the Venezuelan government with having resorted to increasingly authoritarian measures. What do you make of the current situation in Venezuela, and its coverage by the international press?*

DN: Venezuela has unquestionably been targeted by the United States for destabilization. Infamously, *The New York Times* published, prematurely, an editorial welcoming the overthrow of the government, back in the 2000s.

But the crimes of the United States should not be an excuse for glorifying these essentially national bourgeois regimes. To paraphrase Marx, just as we don’t explain people by the terms they give themselves, so, too, should we not judge the Venezuelan regime by the labels it gives itself, especially that of socialism. In many countries, where the bourgeoisie has been exceptionally weak, and the national bourgeoisie finds itself caught between two powerful forces, the working class and international imperialism, sections of the ruling elite tend to adopt a socialist phraseology to maintain popular support. Chavez’s program was to be financed by the temporary, favorable price of oil.

But over time, his program of national “pseudo-socialist” development proved an illusion. Socialism requires the international organization of the productive forces. The Bolivarian revolution, and other left regimes, to the extent that they base themselves on a national program, and to the extent that the working class has not been able to create its own organs of power, cannot be regarded as socialist. As a result, our fundamental support for the potential latent in the Venezuelan and Latin American working class should not be read as apologetics for the regime.

The coverage of Venezuela by the international press has been terrible, and our publication routinely calls them out on their coverage of the regime, especially the *New York Times*.

AS: *In addition to your work for the SEP, you are also the international editor-in-chief of the World Socialist Web Site (WSWS), an online magazine currently facing serious censorship from Google, Facebook, and other online search engines. How did the daily come to be, and what caused these internet conglomerates to blacklist you?*

DN: In 2018, we will be marking the 20th anniversary of the WSWS. I think we can justly say that the International Committee was very quick to

recognize the revolutionary potential of the communications revolution. We had been paying attention to this, and eventually decided, in 1997, to replace our existing newspaper with the online daily that is now the WWSWS. Over the last 20 years we've developed the largest readership of any revolutionary socialist publication.

During the past six months, we began to notice that there was a precipitous decline in the readers gaining access to the website through Google's search engines. We eventually saw that the readership of those coming to our site through Google had been reduced by almost 70 percent. Google had implemented a new search algorithm to get rid of so-called "fake news." This term was, itself, a fake phenomenon, but one nonetheless used to justify the suppression of websites like our own.

AS: *Earlier this month, you interviewed Chris Hedges, the Pulitzer-prize winning radical journalist, about the state of American politics. What is the state of American politics, and how has it affected your perception of humanity's course, moving into the 21st century?*

DN: Trump is a product of a sick political, social and cultural environment. So there should be no confusion about this. Hillary Clinton is herself a manifestation, albeit in a different form, of this very same sickness. Many people who followed this election were keenly aware that they were the most unpopular candidates who had ever been run, and, given the last half-century of American elections, this marks an unprecedented development. A half century of almost unending decay.

Now, what is Trump? Trotsky once referred to the "bad Hitler" theory of history—that "if only Hitler would disappear, Europe would bloom like a garden." Trump emerged from the corrupt New York real estate market, Wall Street, Las Vegas gambling, and so on. When these are put together, you have this monstrosity called Donald Trump. He represents the coming to power of the contemporary "*lumpen-bourgeoisie*."

Trump is also the personification of two interrelated and highly dangerous processes. One is the creation of a staggeringly unequal society. Since the coming to power of Reagan, there has been a colossal growth of social inequality, and the concentration of wealth, to an inconceivable scale, into the hands of the top 1.0, 0.1, and 0.01 percent of the population. This oligarchy controls an astonishing amount of wealth, which is the very antithesis of democracy. And as this oligarchy has acquired greater power, there has been an erosion of the traditional power of liberal institutions, and the concentration of power into the hands of the military, and the intelligence agencies of the US, in particular. Both political parties are completely dominated by this phenomenon. The Democratic Party is essentially an alliance of Wall Street with the military-intelligence community.

While a vast proportion of wealth has been concentrated at the very top, this has produced a sort of envy amongst those in roughly the top ten percent of the population, which has begun to express itself in a form of pseudo-left, manifesting ultimately in "identity politics." Sexual preference, gender, ethnicity and race form the basis of the "discourse" of identity politics, which provides the ideological foundation for a specific form of reactionary middle class politics. The competing claims of aggrieved identities are really aimed at gaining access to a larger share of the wealth sloshing about in the upper echelons of society. There is nothing progressive about such politics, in my mind. It is ugly, selfish and vindictive. Predictably, it has found a huge and enthusiastic audience amongst academics working in the humanities.

AS: *What has been the motivating force keeping you going across decades of political agitating? What lessons do you see as most applicable, from your life's work, to both future activists and the general public?*

DN: The motivation comes from the objective situation itself. To the extent that one follows all of this as a conscious person, and tries, as a Marxist, to derive from these events a solution to these problems, one begins to understand the enormous danger that we confront as a society.

What are the lessons? Study the experience of the 20th century. Familiarize yourself with a Trotskyist analysis of the USSR. Occupy yourself with the great question: how are we to avoid a repetition of the catastrophes of the 20th century? Because truly, if these catastrophes are repeated, humanity will not recover from them.

The 20th century was an age of revolution and counter revolution. The October revolution was humanity's first attempt to take hold of its own destiny, on the basis of a conscious restructuring of the socio-economic foundations of society. But we know great historical changes are not easily accomplished.

To contact the WWSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>