

IYSSE in US holds successful meetings on postmodernism and identity politics

By our reporters
10 May 2019

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) in the US held a series of meetings last month on the topic, “Materialism versus Postmodernism: A Marxist critique of irrationalism and identity politics.”

The meetings were held at the University of California (UC), Berkeley; UC Los Angeles; and Portland State University—three college campuses where both postmodernism and identity politics exercise a strong influence. There was a very positive response from students at all the meetings, with over 125 attending the three meetings.

The presentations were given by Gabriel Black, a member of the IYSSE national committee. Black reviewed the theoretical and ideological background of postmodernism and its contemporary influence. He explained that postmodernism has its roots not in Marxism, as is often falsely claimed, but rather its philosophical opponent: subjective idealism.

Black reviewed certain common conceptions in the theories of subjective idealists, such as Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) and Martin Heidegger (1889-1976); the theoreticians of the Frankfurt School; and modern postmodernists—rejection of science and the Enlightenment; opposition to the concept of objective truth; and skepticism of or outright hostility to the working class.

The presentation showed that both Nietzsche and Heidegger’s rejection of the Enlightenment was bound up with hatred of and hostility toward the working class and socialism. Nietzsche, for example, wrote in 1888, “Whom do I hate most among the rabble of today? The socialist rabble, the chandala apostles, who undermine the instinct, the pleasure, the worker’s sense of satisfaction with his small existence—who make him envious, who teach him revenge. The source of wrong

is never unequal rights but the claim of ‘equal’ rights.”

Drawing on the book, *The Frankfurt School, Postmodernism and the Politics of the Pseudo-Left*, by David North, Black examined how a layer of left intellectuals associated with the Frankfurt School, including Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer, blamed Enlightenment thought and science for the horrors of World War II.

The lecture traced opposition to a belief in objective truth and reason through the thinking of Foucault to modern postmodernists like Jean-Francois Lyotard, who proclaimed in 1979 that postmodernism means “incredulity to all meta-narratives”—above all, Marxism. He reviewed the thinking of French philosopher Michel Foucault (1926–1984), as well as Ernesto LaClau (1935–2004) and Chantal Mouffe (1943–).

LaClau and Mouffe’s *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, published in 1985, was based, Black explained, on the rejection of what the authors called “the ontological centrality of the working class,” in favor of racial, gender and nationalist politics.

Black ended by referring to the work of Jörg Baberowski, a historian at Humboldt University in Germany. An ex-Maoist and admirer of Foucault, Baberowski has refashioned postmodern conceptions, declaring that “there exists no reality apart from the consciousness that produces it.” Baberowski’s opposition to objective truth has been used to justify the most right-wing positions, including the rehabilitation of the work of Ernst Nolte, the Nazi-apologist historian.

The “Grievance Studies Hoax,” the work of three professors to expose the irrational and absurd character of postmodern “left” academia was also raised. Black explained that the obsession with sex, racial and gender

identity is a mechanism by which sections of the upper-middle class compete with each other for positions in academia, corporate and non-profit boards, the art world, and public office.

The presentation provoked significant discussion. Many students expressed relief, surprise and excitement to hear a genuine left-wing critique of political tendencies that are palmed-off on college campuses as “left-wing,” and even “Marxist.”

The discussion at UCLA was marked by two individuals from a Maoist group disrupting the meeting and yelling expletives. One of their members exclaimed, “Class is just another identity!”

Black rejected this effort to reduce class to just one of a number of “identities.” Capitalism’s fundamental feature is not the oppression of one race or gender by another, but rather the exploitation of the working class as whole. The vast majority of humans, regardless of their gender, ethnicity, nationality, or sexual identity, own nothing and must sell their labor power to the capitalist class to survive. In contrast, a tiny parasitic elite control almost all of society’s wealth.

For Marxists, the foundation of society is the material process of production, which gives rise to class relations and objective class interests. Quoting Marx and Engels’ *The Holy Family* (1845), Black explained, “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.”

The vast numerical superiority of the working class over the ruling class encourages the ruling class to divide workers along national lines, racial lines and sexual lines. It is the role of the Marxist movement to oppose this and *unify* the working class in opposition to capitalism.

Students at all three locations responded strongly to the presentations, with dozens expressing interest in getting involved with the IYSSE and coming to future meetings.

Jane, a philosophy student at Portland State University, told the WSWS, “It was a very interesting talk. I have tended towards subjectivism and idealism lately, but my ideas have been challenged. I like how these ideas were made accessible to people who don’t have a background in it. I will definitely be back to

future meetings.”

Peggy, a retired health care worker, said, “I like your perspective on equality and the differentiation from the other forms of socialism and the ‘pseudo-left.’ The historical summary was great, and the quotes shared were very poignant. I’d like to reflect more on many of them.”

Peter, a freelance writer and editor, said, “I liked the point about the collective part of society being this broader 90 percent, rather than the 99 percent. This describes the group of people who have more in common than anyone may realize, based on their affiliations with either the “left” [Democrats] or the right [Republicans].”

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>