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Part IV, [The Long Road Back to Pragmatism](#), was posted on Sept 22.

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Part VI, [The Real Dialectic of the Enlightenment](#), was posted on Oct 5.

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Part X, [Mass Psychology and Marxism](#), and the Conclusion, [The International Committee at the Crossroads](#), were posted on Dec 16.

This is our reply to a polemic by David North, [Marxism, History and Socialist Consciousness](#). The latter in turn was a reply to our Open Letter to the International Committee, [Objectivism or Marxism](#). As we explain in our document, we wrote *Objectivism or Marxism* only after waiting 3 years for North to reply to our two earlier documents, Frank Brenner’s [“To Know a Thing is to Know its End”](#) and Alex Steiner’s [The Dialectical Path of Cognition and Revolutionizing Practice](#). All these documents are posted on our website. The World Socialist Web Site has serialized North’s polemic, which has also been published in a printed version. In the interest of readability, when quoting from North’s *Marxism, History and Socialist Consciousness* we will provide page references to the printed version of his document rather than footnotes.

Marxism Without its Head or its Heart: A Reply to David North

by Frank Brenner and Alex Steiner

Introduction

They call themselves Marxists, but their conception of Marxism is impossibly pedantic. They have completely failed to understand what is decisive in Marxism, namely, its revolutionary dialectics. – Lenin¹

Sectarianism is hostile to dialectics (not in words but in action) in the sense that it turns its back upon the actual development of the working class. – Trotsky²

To the members and supporters of the International Committee of the Fourth International:

For three years we tried to engage the leadership of the ICFI in a discussion over grave concerns we had about the theoretical and political orientation of the movement. Finally David North responded to our documents with his *Marxism, History and Socialist Consciousness*. It isn't empty rhetoric on our parts to say that we would have welcomed being proven wrong. This would have demonstrated the basic political health of the IC, to say nothing of sparing us the thankless task of pursuing this polemic any further. Instead, North has produced a dreadful piece of work that only confirms in a striking manner all the concerns we have raised. It is a document that is rife with misrepresentations and evasions, it compounds serious political errors of judgment by stridently refusing to acknowledge them and all too often it responds to our criticisms either by ignoring them outright or by attempting to demonize us (with an occasional resort to name-calling thrown in for good measure). Both its bombastic style and meager substance betray a leader who has long not had to face serious political criticism from within the ranks of his own party. One telling sign of this is North's repeated attempts to portray our critique of the IC's politics as evidence of our "bitter hostility" to the party and the WSWS, a claim that ignores our lifelong support for the IC and the important articles we have both contributed to the web site. The unstated assumption here is that criticism equals disloyalty, whereas just the opposite is true: genuine loyalty to Trotskyism requires the most searching and thoroughgoing debate and discussion. Without the latter a revolutionary movement is bound to

¹ "Our Revolution," Jan. 1923, v.33, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1923/jan/16.htm>

² "Sectarianism, Centrism and the Fourth International," Oct. 22, 1935, *Writings 1935-36*, p. 153.

degenerate, and North's document is, above all else, a demonstration of how theoretically impoverished the IC leadership has become. What North calls 'Marxism' is missing its head and its heart – i.e. dialectics and the proletariat – which is to say, the very things that make Marxism a revolutionary doctrine.³

In writing this response, we originally set out to answer North point for point, but it eventually became obvious to us that this was inadequate. To begin with, in many cases North's arguments were so threadbare, both politically and intellectually, that they deserved not much more than a perfunctory response. More importantly, our main political task wasn't to answer North so much as to assess where the International Committee was heading. Thus we responded to his arguments insofar as that contributed to such an assessment, but in some crucial respects – notably in relation to the WSWS record on Iraq – it was necessary to considerably broaden the framework beyond North's document.

It bears underscoring at the outset that while the bulk of our criticism is necessarily directed at North, much more is involved here than the failings of an individual. In the past, notably in the struggle against the WRP, Comrade North produced polemical material that made a genuine contribution to Marxist theory. In this latest document, however, he is no longer defending the heritage of revolutionary Marxism but instead rationalizing the IC leadership's abandonment of key parts of that heritage. This is the crucial issue – not the predilections or personality of an individual but the debilitating of Marxism and the growing estrangement of the ICFI from the working class.

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³ 'The *emancipation of the German* is the *emancipation of man*. The *head* of this emancipation is *philosophy*, its *heart* the *proletariat*. Philosophy cannot realize itself without the transcendence [*Aufhebung*] of the proletariat, and the proletariat cannot transcend itself without the realization [*Verwirklichung*] of philosophy.'

Karl Marx, Introduction to A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right, MECW, Volume 3, p.187. <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1843/critique-hpr/intro.htm>

Chapter 1: Rationalizing Objectivism and Abandoning Marxism

North begins *Marxism, History and Socialist Consciousness* in the manner of a legal brief. To our objections that the IC leadership has stonewalled political debate, North replies: “The mere fact that you have maintained cordial relations with the movement does not obligate us to respond to your documents as we would to those of members of the SEP or other sections of the ICFI ... The ICFI and the SEP are well within their political rights to reply or not reply to your documents as we see fit.” (2) ⁴

This is an evasion. Nowhere in our documents did we claim that there was some sort of legal ‘obligation’ on the IC’s part to answer us or that we had a ‘right’ to expect a reply, and we never portrayed ourselves as “a besieged opposition tendency,” as North mockingly puts it. But the political responsibilities of a revolutionary leadership go far beyond a legalistic notion of ‘obligations’ and ‘rights’. In our last statement, *Objectivism or Marxism*, we wrote: “It is no exaggeration to say that our two documents, which together are over 100 pages long, constitute the only serious Marxist critique of the politics of the IC in decades.” North could have refuted this by providing evidence of the sort of robust internal political life that prevailed in the Bolshevik party under Lenin or the Fourth International under Trotsky, where polemics and political debate abounded. Instead his silence only confirms that there is little, if any, such debate within the IC today. So here we have a situation where “the only serious critique of the politics of the IC in decades” goes unanswered *for three years!* This is what concerned us – not any supposed abrogation of our ‘rights’ but what this failure to respond to our documents said about the theoretical and political *atrophy* of the movement. We wrote: “How can one speak of Marxism as a science in the absence of critical dissent and debate? Without it, a movement is condemned to atrophy, no matter how superficially successful it might seem.”

Indeed when North moves beyond legalisms to explain why he has now finally decided to respond to our documents, he makes evident, albeit unintentionally, the underlying political problem: “In submitting this reply to your public criticisms, the ICFI is not fulfilling a ‘legal’ responsibility, but making clear the deep and fundamental differences between Marxian socialism and the pseudo-utopianism – a form of middle-class ideology – that you, Comrades Steiner and Brenner, espouse.” (2-3) Which at once raises the question: ***if these differences are “deep and fundamental,” then why wait three years to respond to them?*** At the very least, this is an admission of political irresponsibility. And the more one probes this, the worse it gets. Why has North decided to answer now? The reference to “public” criticisms seems to hold the key: it wasn’t so much anything that we actually said in our last statement that finally got North busy on his computer but rather the fact that we posted the statement (and our other documents) on a web site we had set up. In other words, what concerned North was that we had gone ‘public’ with our

⁴ David North, *Marxism, History and Socialist Consciousness*, (Mehring Books, Oak Park, Michigan, 2007) <http://www.permanent-revolution.org/polemics/mhsc.pdf>

All further references to this document will just include the page number in the printed version.

criticisms; presumably if we had kept them private, he would have gone on ignoring them. This way of ‘handling’ political dissent may be commonplace in mainstream bourgeois politics but it is thoroughly alien to the principled traditions of revolutionary Marxism.⁵

More can be said here. For instance, to justify his failure to respond to our documents, North makes much of the fact that neither of us have been members of the party for many years. We have no desire to belittle the significance of party membership, but in this regard North ignores an embarrassing fact which we raised in *Objectivism or Marxism*: Steiner applied to rejoin the party in 1998, but the party leadership – and that would mean primarily North – never acted on his application and never explained why. This application was made years before any political differences emerged and at a time when Steiner was contributing material to the WSWS. In short, it is North who kept Steiner out of the party and now he is blaming Steiner for not being a party member!

Nor does North provide anything resembling a credible account of the circumstances that gave rise to this polemic. If we are to believe him, two individuals who left the party decades ago and who in that time have “traveled very far politically from Marxism” have suddenly taken it upon themselves to engage in lengthy polemics for the purposing of venting their “bitter hostility” to the party and infusing it with their ‘pseudo-utopian’ middle class ideology. North allows that we “have maintained cordial relations” with the IC, but it is a complete mystery why this should be the case given the antipathy to Marxism he ascribes to us. Why should we care anything at all about a movement, which we are supposedly so distant from and hostile to? And why should we spend long hours writing documents addressed to that movement for the sole purpose of prompting a political debate within it? In fact our relations with the IC were a good deal more than “cordial”: we were both active as supporters of the party and especially as contributors to the WSWS. Steiner wrote a major series on philosopher Martin Heidegger and Brenner wrote a number of widely read articles on psychology and Marxism (“Intrepid Thought” on the history of psychoanalysis in the early Soviet Union and “Mental Illness and the American Dream”) as well as co-authoring an important series with David Walsh on Surrealist poet Andre Breton. It would seem that our presumed hostility to Marxism wasn’t evident to the WSWS editorial board when they posted these articles. The plain truth is that we were valued collaborators of the movement *until we voiced concerns about the philosophical and political direction the IC was heading in* – and from that time on (i.e. 2002) our contributions to the WSWS were no longer welcome and our efforts to open up a political discussion were stonewalled.

There is one more remark of North’s in this regard that bears considering. He writes: “Even if one were to admit the possibility that the ICFI failed to give your documents the attention they merited, this error would not by itself rise to the level of a world-historical event.” (3) Or to put this in plain language – even if we were wrong, what’s the big deal? It’s the mindset expressed in this remark that’s noteworthy because it isn’t anything like that of a revolutionary Marxist. Was there an error or wasn’t there? North finagles around the issue with the qualifier “even if” and then brushes off the problem with a cynical remark about it not being “a world-historical event.”

⁵ The irony here is that we only set up the web site – www.permanent-revolution.org - after it became clear that neither North nor anyone else in the IC leadership had any intention of responding to us. For the record, the site’s only purpose is to provide a forum for debate and discussion for members and supporters of the IC, and for that reason we have made no effort – whether by external links or by promoting the site’s existence on search engines – to broadcast our criticisms of the IC to a wider audience.

Who ever claimed it was? But it is inconceivable that a Lenin or a Trotsky would have penned such a statement: for them learning from mistakes *was* a big deal. To allude to Trotsky's great polemic against Max Shachtman, 'scratches' that are left unattended in revolutionary politics have a tendency to become infected or much worse. Errors left unexamined can be symptomatic of serious political rot, especially when the error in question is the prolonged stonewalling of political debate over "deep and fundamental differences." Only a movement that doesn't take itself seriously or, much more to the point in this case, a leadership that places itself above criticism, could take such a dismissive attitude to errors. As we'll see, this remark is anything but an anomaly in North's document.

The Document that Dare Not Be Named

As soon as North comes to the contents of our documents, he resorts to distortion. Thus he claims, "nowhere in your document is there to be found any analysis of, or even reference to, the political line of the International Committee." (4) Much depends here on the word "document" being singular: North's sleight-of-hand consists in looking at *Objectivism or Marxism* in isolation. North deliberately ignores Steiner's document *The Dialectical Path of Cognition and Revolutionizing Practice* from March 2004, which contains a 12-page section titled "Where is the International Committee Going?" devoted to an analysis of the political line of the IC. Before turning to the content of that analysis, however, a striking fact needs to be noted: *there is no mention of Steiner's document anywhere in the 44,000 words of North's opus*. It is as if for North, Steiner's is the 'document that dare not be named'. As we'll soon see, this blind spot says much about North's attitude to Marxist theory, but it also makes it much easier for him to attack our positions by pretending that a large chunk of them don't exist.

North criticizes us for making no mention of the IC's line on, among other things, the Iraq and Afghan wars. In fact, Steiner made a very pointed criticism about the party's role in the anti-war movement, and those remarks deserve to be repeated here in full.

If as I am maintaining, the Socialist Equality Party has been paring down its revolutionary perspective, how has this manifested itself in the work of the movement against imperialism? It is true that there have been many excellent commentaries as well as important historical investigations as part of the campaign against US imperialism in Iraq and Afghanistan. However, what has been missing is an active intervention within the anti-war movement to forge an alternative leadership and advance our own program for ending imperialist war. Our opposition to imperialism therefore remains on the level of propaganda. We participated in the mass anti-war marches that took place last in April of 2002, and in February and March of 2003. However, we did not march under our own banners with our own slogans. We did give out flyers at these demonstrations but the material we handed out did not propose any active program for workers and youth other than reading our Web Site. We did not call a single meeting of our own at either of the large anti-war rallies of the past 2 years. Finally, when the U.S. aggression in Afghanistan first broke out, it took the Socialist Equality Party nearly a year to organize a public meeting denouncing this act of American imperialism. The war against Afghanistan broke out in November 2001, yet we did not convene a public meeting on the issue in the U.S. until October 4, 2002 when we sponsored an event in Ann Arbor. The first and only meeting in New York took place on Dec 15, 2002.

I cannot think of a similar situation in the past 65 years wherein the Trotskyist movement failed to promptly call a public meeting to rally support against imperialist war.

What a damning picture this adds up to – no programmatic demands, no independent slogans or banners, no meetings in the US to protest the Afghan war for nearly a year. A Marxist leader who takes seriously his movement's responsibilities to fight imperialism would not ignore such an accusation. It raises grave political concerns: under conditions of the war hysteria whipped up by US imperialism in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, *the SEP backed away from its responsibilities and restricted its opposition to imperialist war solely to journalism*. If North has chosen to ignore this accusation, it is first and foremost because he has no credible answer. But it is also the case that North would not even recognize this as constituting a criticism of the SEP's "political line" because, as we shall see, what he understands by that term has little to do with the party's political *practice*. Rather for him a "political line" is manifested almost exclusively by the coverage an issue receives on the WSWS (and, one might add, not always even by the content of that coverage so much as by its sheer volume).

Here is a summary of some of the other principal points Steiner raised in this section of his document:

*The abstentionism in fighting imperialist war was also evident with regard to the economic and political struggles of the working class, and in relation to that Steiner noted the increasingly objectivist character of the IC's perspectives "in which the role of the working class is seen as something separate from our struggle to transform its consciousness as well as our own."

*Analyzing WSWS political coverage, Steiner demonstrated that the approach embodied in the Transitional Program of building bridges to socialist consciousness had all but disappeared. Instead journalism was combined with ritualized calls at the end of most articles for building "an independent, mass political party of the working class," but such calls "not only come out of nowhere, but are devoid of any real content," telling workers nothing about how such a party was going to emerge, what program it needed to adopt, what its relationship would be to traditional labor organizations like the unions, what the SEP was doing to create this party and what actions WSWS readers could take to promote its formation.

*Finally, he made an analysis of the SEP programs in the 2003 California gubernatorial election and the 2004 US presidential election, and in both cases he raised concerns about a dangerous tendency "to blur the distinction between liberalism and revolutionary socialism" expressed in a number of politically muddled formulations which presented socialism as "the subordinating of the profit motive" and which dropped the demand for workers' control, replacing it with the much vaguer and weaker "democratic control."

Back to Shachtman and Burnham

While a reading of Steiner's document is enough to put paid to North's claim that we ignore the political line of the IC, there is a more important issue involved here that brings into focus the major fault line in this dispute. Before getting to that, however, we readily concede that we did

not repeat every point of this critique in *Objectivism or Marxism*. This wasn't because of any change in our views; the truth is that we could have added a good deal more material (as we'll see when we come to discussing the WSWS record on Mexico and particularly Iraq) and it is also the case that on some points (i.e. with regard to abstentionism in the working class in relation to the New York City transit strike), we actually expanded our analysis. But we explained at the outset of *Objectivism or Marxism* that we had no intention of reprising everything we had said in our previous documents:

What follows are a series of points examining some key theoretical and political issues raised by the summer school lectures, among other things. There is no question that these issues merit a much fuller discussion which we would be eager to engage in, but there is equally no point in writing yet another hundred pages that will simply be ignored. Our hope is that these points will stimulate interest in our earlier critiques and provoke further discussion about where the IC is heading.

In other words, we had no intention of producing yet another lengthy document for the dubious pleasure of having it ignored by North and the rest of the IC leadership. Thus, apart from registering our protest over this political stonewalling, the main purpose of *Objectivism or Marxism* was to "stimulate interest in our earlier critiques." That North ignores this statement is one more indication of his intellectual bad faith in this polemic.

But it also needs to be said that we did not repeat or add new material to our critique of the political line of the IC *because that was not our paramount concern*. And here a crucial contrast becomes evident between our approach and North's. For North what matters above all else is the political line. Early on in his document he declares that "even if" stonewalling debate with us was an error (though of course no "world-historical event"!), it was still necessary for us "to demonstrate that there exists a connection between your complaint and more serious political problems ... and the way this has been done in the history of the Marxist movement is through a careful and exhaustive analysis of the political line of the organization that is the subject of the criticism." (3) For North this sort of analysis is the only "theoretically principled manner" by which to proceed and he goes on to list some of the "colossal changes" of the last 20 years "in technology, the structure of world capitalism, the relation of nation states to the global economy" etc., informing us that the response of the IC to these changes "would easily fill up several dozen volumes." We will get back to this last remark in a bit, but let us follow North a little further: by contrast to the "theoretically principled manner" exemplified in the many volumes of IC analysis, he finds that in our document "one does not even find the words 'Iraq War,' 'Bush administration,' 'September 11th,' 'China,' 'Afghanistan,' 'Iran,' 'terror,' or 'globalization.' These are not careless omissions. You are not interested in political analysis and perspectives, at least as these concerns have been understood historically in the Fourth International." (4)

We have already shown that the claim that we are "not interested in political analysis and perspectives" is rubbish, and we will have much to say on the political line of the WSWS later on. But it is certainly true that this was not the focus of *Objectivism or Marxism*. Our starting point wasn't the Iraq War or 9/11 or China or globalization. Point Number One in *Objectivism or Marxism* begins: "Dialectics is a dead letter in the IC." In other words, for us the fundamental issue was *the absence of Marxist philosophy* in the work of the International Committee, not the political analysis of specific issues. North proceeds differently: he calls for "a careful and

exhaustive analysis of the political line”; this, so far as he is concerned, is the only way to determine the existence of “serious political problems” within the movement. He makes a further claim, however – that his is the traditional approach of Marxists, “the way this has been done in the history of the Marxist movement.” In fact this is not true – and any politically literate Trotskyist would know it isn’t true.

It was not Trotsky’s approach in *Defense of Marxism*; rather it was Shachtman and Burnham who focused on “concrete issues” and who dismissed as a “red herring” Trotsky’s insistence on probing the political differences within the movement to their philosophical roots. Nor was it the approach of the British SLL in the 1962-63 fight against the American SWP’s reunification with the Pabloites: anyone who has read the principal document of that struggle, *Opportunism and Empiricism*, knows that it was SWP leader Joseph Hansen who insisted that all that mattered were “the facts” and who dismissed as mystification the efforts by the British comrades to uncover the entrenched philosophical problems that accounted for the degeneration and ultimate betrayal of Cannon’s party. In both these decisive episodes in the history of Trotskyism, the focus of the defenders of Marxism was on philosophical issues, whereas the focus of those who were abandoning Marxism was on “concrete issues,” “the facts” – i.e. the political line.

Trotsky deserves to be heard directly on this question. Here are two well known passages from *In Defense of Marxism*, both taken from his polemic against Shachtman, “From a Scratch – To the Danger of Gangrene”:

The opposition circles consider it possible to assert that the question of dialectic materialism was introduced by me only because I lacked an answer to the “concrete” questions of Finland, Latvia, India, Afghanistan, Baluchistan and so on. [Or make that now: Iraq War, Bush administration, September 11th, China, Afghanistan, Iran ... – FB, AS.] This argument, void of all merit in itself, is of interest however in that it characterizes the level of certain individuals in the opposition, their attitude toward theory and toward elementary ideological loyalty. It would not be amiss, therefore, to refer to the fact that my first serious conversation with comrades Shachtman and Warde, in the train immediately after my arrival in Mexico in January 1937, was devoted to the necessity of persistently propagating dialectic materialism. After our American section split from the Socialist Party I insisted most strongly on the earliest possible publication of a theoretical organ, having again in mind the need to educate the party, first and foremost its new members, in the spirit of dialectic materialism. In the United States, I wrote at that time, where the bourgeoisie systematically instills vulgar empiricism in the workers, more than anywhere else is it necessary to speed the elevation of the movement to a proper theoretical level.⁶

There is a crucial point that needs to be underscored here: Trotsky is not only emphasizing the importance of dialectics, he is also pointing out that he raised his concerns about the philosophical training of the party *long before* any of the political differences had emerged over the class nature of the Soviet Union that would eventually split the movement. In other words Trotsky didn’t begin with the political line; rather, he foresaw that the party’s lack of attention to dialectics would eventually produce serious political dangers and he tried to sound the alarm to prevent this from happening. This is in direct contrast to North’s approach. Repeatedly in his document North dismisses our concerns about the IC’s abandonment of dialectics on the grounds

⁶ Leon Trotsky, *In Defense of Marxism*, pp. 141-2: <http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/works/1942-dm/ch04.htm>

that we haven't demonstrated that this has had any impact on the party's political line. Here is a characteristic statement:

If Trotsky's criticism of the pragmatic method retains its validity, you should have no problem in demonstrating the inconsistencies and blunders in the political line of the ICFI over the past two decades. You present no such analysis. Thus, only two conclusions are possible: either method is not important as it has no discernable effect on the formulation of a political line; or your claim that we have abandoned dialectics and succumbed to pragmatism is a rhetorical flourish without any substance. We think that the second explanation is the correct one. (22)

This is nothing more than a clever dodge. Later on we will indeed demonstrate "the inconsistencies and blunders" that the IC's abandonment of dialectics has led to. But what is evident is that North's approach to this vital question is the opposite of Trotsky's. For North, everything hinges on the political line: if there aren't any problems with "concrete" political issues, then concerns about philosophy are just "rhetorical flourish." One can imagine North sitting on that train in Mexico in 1937 and dismissing Trotsky's concerns about dialectics because Trotsky hadn't demonstrated any "inconsistencies and blunders" in the SWP's political line ... and one can also imagine what Trotsky's reaction would have been.

A few paragraphs later Trotsky cited a notorious passage from an article by Shachtman and Burnham that played a central role in the dispute: "...nor has anyone yet demonstrated that agreement or disagreement on the more abstract doctrines of dialectic materialism necessarily affects today's and tomorrow's concrete political issues—and political parties, programs and struggles are based on such concrete issues." Trotsky subjected this claim for the priority of 'concrete' issues over philosophical 'abstractions' to a withering attack:

What is above all astonishing is this formula, unworthy of revolutionists: "... political parties, programs and struggles are based on such concrete issues." What parties? What programs? What struggles? All parties and all programs are here lumped together. The party of the proletariat is a party unlike all the rest. It is not at all based upon "such concrete issues." In its very foundation it is diametrically opposed to the parties of bourgeois horse-traders and petty-bourgeois rag-patchers. Its task is the preparation of a social revolution and the regeneration of mankind on new material and moral foundations. ***In order not to give way under the pressure of bourgeois public opinion and police repression, the proletarian revolutionist, a leader all the more, requires a clear, far-sighted, completely thought-out world outlook. Only upon the basis of a unified Marxist conception is it possible to correctly approach "concrete" questions*** (emphasis added)⁷.

To anyone who joined the International Committee in the Sixties and early Seventies – and that would include North and much of the present leadership of the IC – these lessons were central to our political education. Indeed, it wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that the last passage quoted from *In Defense of Marxism*, especially the section we have highlighted, was the touchstone of everything the International Committee did theoretically and politically in this period. (Healy's gross distortions of dialectics later on no more detract from the validity of these lessons than the betrayals of Social Democracy and Stalinism detract from the validity of Marxism.) And yet today it is as if these lessons were never learned. North wants the criterion for determining the

⁷ Ibid, pp. 143-4.

political health of the IC to be its line on Iraq, 9/11, globalization etc, *but not its 'line' on Marxist philosophy*, not its record on developing and imparting to its members “a clear, far-sighted, completely thought-out world outlook.” This amounts to renouncing the central lesson of *In Defense of Marxism* and of the IC’s fight against the SWP’s betrayal of Trotskyism.

North has good reason not to want to be judged by the IC’s record on philosophy because, in stark contrast to the “several dozen volumes” of political analysis, the movement under his leadership is virtually bereft of any work on dialectics or the struggle against pragmatism, as even a cursory glance at the WSWP philosophy archive will show. To our criticism that “dialectics is a dead letter in the IC” and that there hasn’t been a single article on it in two decades, North counters that this last statement “as a matter of fact, is not true,” citing a review he recently did on a book about Marx by the American Hegelian Tom Rockmore. We will have more to say on this review later, but we readily concede that we stand corrected: in the last twenty years the number of articles on dialectical philosophy produced by the IC stands not at zero but at one! If ever there was a case of the exception proving the rule, this has got to be it, and yet this obvious truth is something that North blithely ignores. What this overwhelming record of philosophical *underachievement* amounts to is a rejection of Trotsky’s urgent warning, cited above, about “the necessity of persistently propagating dialectic materialism.” Persistently! Presumably Trotsky had something more in mind than a single offering every two decades. (And as we’ll get to later, even that article, far from signaling a change, actually perpetuates the problem.)

An Objectivist Disregard for Theory

The abandonment of this important theoretical heritage of the Trotskyist movement is evident not only in what North says but more significantly in what he doesn’t say. And again this brings us back to ‘the document that dare not be named’. The bulk of Steiner’s work concerns Marxist philosophy and is the outcome of a correspondence with North focusing on Plekhanov, Engels and Lenin. (The correspondence is reproduced in the appendix to Steiner’s document.⁸) What chiefly characterizes North’s position is an objectivism that devalues the importance of Marxist philosophy and, bound up with that, the role of consciousness in revolutionary theory and practice. Thus North takes strong exception to Steiner’s position that Plekhanov’s theoretical weaknesses, especially his one-sided and superficial conception of the dialectic, played a decisive role in his eventual betrayal of Marxism and the revolution. Instead that betrayal is chalked up to objective circumstances, which as Steiner explains, makes of Plekhanov little more than a tragic plaything of history:

Your version of Plekhanov paints him as a man whose ideas are always “overtaken by events”. This is a tragedy from which there is no deliverance. History assigned to him a role and he played it out to its predestined end. It was not his fault that history proved to be more complex than he had envisioned. In the end, Plekhanov is seen to be a great if tragic figure on the historical stage. This may be a good version of Greek tragedy, but it hardly rises to the level of a theoretical investigation of one man’s strengths and weaknesses. Throughout your account of Plekhanov, you write as if he had nothing to do with his own

⁸ http://www.permanent-revolution.org/polemics/dialectical_path.htm

development, as if forces completely outside of him were directing him, much as the fates guided Oedipus toward his final denouement.

As Steiner goes on to say, North's line of argument makes it incomprehensible why the same objective conditions that supposedly forced Plekhanov and Kautsky to betray didn't also force Lenin or Trotsky (or Luxemburg or Mehring) to do the same. As we argued in *Objectivism or Marxism*, this attempt "to revive the stale and discredited heritage of the objectivism of classical Social Democracy" is more than just a dispute about history: "If the theoretical practice of figures of Kautsky and Plekhanov's stature made no difference to their ultimate fate, then why should we be any different? This sort of 'defense' of classical Marxism turns into a rationalization instead of a guide to action."

What needs to be underscored here is that, even after breaking his long silence over our critique of the IC, North has chosen to say nothing about the crucial issues of Marxist theory raised in Steiner's document. He says nothing about Steiner's critical analysis of Plekhanov's *The Role of the Individual in History*, which Steiner characterizes as "one of the clearest expressions of the philosophical vacuum at the center of the Second International." Steiner argues that in this essay Plekhanov "introduces a mechanical form of historical determinism into Marxist philosophy, one that denies the role of human agency. In doing so, he forgets entirely the first term of Marx's epigram that, 'Men make their own history, but not in conditions that they themselves have chosen'. He prefers to concentrate on the qualifying clause. The result is an attitude of fatalism and passivity toward historical events." And nowhere, Steiner adds, is that attitude more deadly than in relation to the proletarian revolution, where the role of consciousness is absolutely critical.

Nor does North have anything to say about Steiner's discussion of the relationship between Lenin's *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* of 1908 and his *Philosophical Notebooks* on Hegel from 1914-15. Steiner makes a powerful case that, first, the latter work represents a leap of development on Lenin's part occasioned by his efforts to come to grips with the philosophical roots of the betrayal of international Social Democracy and that this leap is evident above all in Lenin's profound insights into the transformative role of consciousness; and second, that there was an important shift of emphasis from 1908, when "the issue was the defense of materialism against the challenge of skepticism and philosophical agnosticism" to 1914 "when Lenin recognized a new and even more malignant philosophical trend, one that had derailed the leaders of the Second International – i.e. vulgar materialism." Steiner argues that vulgar materialism remains to this day the main threat to Marxism and he goes on to show how North's own arguments reproduce vulgar materialist distortions of Marxism, notably the devaluing of consciousness and a muddled and superficial notion of what constitutes revolutionary practice.

North's silence on Steiner's document is silence on all these theoretical problems. If North were truly proceeding in a "theoretically principled manner," then these issues would be front and center in his document. All the volumes of political analysis avail us nothing in the absence of a "clear, far-sighted, completely thought-out world outlook." (Let us not forget that Burnham and especially Shachtman were both talented journalists who produced a good deal of fine political analysis when they were in the Trotskyist movement, including even large parts of the infamous article "Intellectuals in Retreat", which Trotsky praised – apart, of course, from its single but damning paragraph on dialectics.) How else can one gauge the state of health of a revolutionary

movement except by coming to grips with the extent to which its theory and practice embody a Marxist world outlook? But North sweeps all these theoretical problems under the rug and instead focuses on the political ‘line’.

And one can add that in this respect his theory and practice are consistent – except that the theory involved is not Marxism but objectivism. This is because for an objectivist, theory is ultimately not decisive: it matters little as a guide to action since the determining factor will always be objective conditions. If we can no more overcome our ‘destiny’ than a Plekhanov or a Kautsky, then theory loses its vital significance. Thus, if one is engaged in a correspondence that brings out important but difficult theoretical problems (and with a correspondent who won’t simply defer to one’s political authority), the simple answer is to ignore the problems altogether. After all, there are so many pressing “concrete issues” to be tackled.

One minor but telling indication of North’s attitude to theory deserves to be mentioned in this context. In a letter to Steiner (June 3, 2003) that is part of their correspondence appended to Steiner’s document, North makes much of his admiration for Plekhanov, jocularly calling himself “member Number 1 of the Michigan Branch of the G.V Plekhanov fan club.” He then announces to Steiner: “Later this week, the WSWS will publish a series of articles commemorating the 85th anniversary of the death of this brilliant and tragic figure in this history of Marxism. We intend to disinter the good that Plekhanov did in his life, and urge a renewed critical acquaintance with his many brilliant and profound writings.” An admirable sentiment indeed, and despite our differences with North over Plekhanov, we would have welcomed such a series as a potentially valuable contribution to Marxist theory. But then nothing happened – the series never appeared.⁹ One can only assume from North’s pronouncement that a draft version was written, but it never made it on line for reasons best known to North himself. But what is noteworthy here is that three and a half years later there is still no such series or anything resembling it. Given that Steiner’s document came out the year after North wrote this letter (i.e. in March 2004) and that the assessment of Plekhanov is a central issue in that document, one would think that finally publishing such a series would become an urgent priority for “member Number 1 of the Michigan Branch of the G.V Plekhanov fan club”. And yet clearly it hasn’t been a priority of any kind. In other words, *even when it comes to substantiating his own theoretical positions*, North has better things to do with his time. After all, it may be a noble gesture “to disinter the good that Plekhanov did in his life,” but it doesn’t tell you a whole lot about the Iraq war or 9/11.

What Has Become of the International Committee?

⁹ Just to check our memories, we went to the WSWS archives for June 2003 but no such series is listed there. We also plugged Plekhanov’s name into the WSWS search engine and again nothing about such a series comes up.

Let us now turn to an important concern we raised about the functioning of the International Committee. Here it is easy enough to rebut North's argument since he has simply dodged the issue. He quotes from *Objectivism or Marxism* where we state that "for all intents and purposes the International Committee has ceased to function." Then he asks, "On what is this conclusion based?" (3) He then proceeds to quote us again: "It is hard even to recall the last time the International Committee held a meeting in its own name. For years now virtually all the authoritative statements of the movement have been issued as WSWS statements, and now the gathering in Australia – which was clearly an international conference of the movement – is presented not in the name of a revolutionary party but rather in that of an editorial board of a web site." Significantly, North never answers this criticism for the obvious reason that it is the simple truth: the IC has not held a meeting or issued statements in its own name in years.¹⁰

But the fact is that our conclusion about the IC was based not only on this point. In a preceding paragraph, which North makes no mention of, we wrote, "For a long time there was a disturbing absence of organized theoretical or political discussion within the movement. There hasn't been an IC perspectives document issued since 1988, and years, even decades, went by without any public record of national or international party conferences having taken place." Were there national and international party conferences, and if so, where is the record of their work? Where is their perspectives documents, their manifestoes, their statements of solidarity with workers in struggle etc.? To be sure, revolutionary parties have the right to hold their deliberations in private, but even in the worst of times, even when the movement has had to function under conditions of illegality, party congresses have still tried to issue public statements or declarations to the working class. The absence of any such public record is clear proof that no such conferences took place, and North's silence on this issue confirms it. So we have an international party which holds no conferences or meetings in its own name, issues no statements in its own name and has not produced a perspectives document in nearly two decades. What other conclusion can one possibly draw except that this international party has ceased to function?

North is oblivious to such concerns. For him the international movement is thriving, except that the only evidence he adduces for this is the work of the WSWS. But this is precisely our point – that the movement functions almost entirely as a website. North makes much of the traditions of revolutionary journalism, as if this provides him some justification, but he ignores other important traditions of the Marxist movement that the IC has abandoned. He also tells us of the various languages WSWS commentary is produced in, as if multi-lingualism is some irrefutable proof of internationalism, and then he asks rhetorically, "one can only wonder what you think constitutes real international activity?" (6) To which our reply is – *the holding of international and national conferences and the issuing of perspectives documents!* As we stated in *Objectivism or Marxism*, "This is not just a matter of organizational forms: the membership of a revolutionary movement has to have an instrument for holding its leadership to account, for testing the validity of its perspectives and the unity of its theory and practice. When no such instrument exists, when the political line of the party is handed down by the leadership and never subject to review or discussion, the inevitable effect is not only to stifle debate but also to

¹⁰ Let us note that *after* we raised this criticism in *Objectivism or Marxism*, there was something of a shift, with statements now occasionally being issued jointly by the WSWS editorial board and the IC. But this is nothing more than a superficial adaptation, sticking another label on a byline, not at all an indication that the IC functions as a meaningful body. The irrelevance of the IC is underscored by the fact that North chose to sign off on his document as chairman of the WSWS editorial board, not as a spokesman for the International Committee.

habituate the membership to accepting this critical vacuum as the ‘norm.’” A movement that functions in this way is nothing but a shell of Marxist internationalism, no matter how many languages it can post commentary in on a website.

Last but not least in this regard, we are not disputing the necessity for revolutionary journalism, anymore than we are disputing the need for a political line. Again, North’s claim that we are “bitterly hostile” to the WSWS is rubbish, belied by the contributions we have both made to the website. But there is a fundamental distinction between acknowledging the need for revolutionary journalism and *having a purely journalistic orientation*. A movement that limits itself to commentary and analysis of events without actively participating in those events is running away from its responsibilities.

A Conspiracy Theory and an Embarrassing Question

The extent to which the IC has morphed into a largely journalistic enterprise is apparent in the reports given to the WSWS International Editorial Board (IEB) meeting in Australia in January 2006. To start with, even the form this meeting took was indicative of this journalistic orientation. As we stated in *Objectivism or Marxism*: “[The] gathering in Australia – which was clearly an international conference of the movement – is presented not in the name of a revolutionary party but rather in that of an editorial board of a web site.”

Before we get to an analysis of the reports, however, it is necessary to address some comments of North’s. He tries to make a great deal of the fact that we did not provide a detailed analysis of these reports in *Objectivism or Marxism*. He devotes a half-dozen pages in his document to the issue, most of which is spent quoting himself by repeating virtually the entire text of his opening report to the IEB, while the rest is devoted to berating us. We are denounced yet again for “hostility to the political outlook and traditions of the Trotskyist movement,” but this time the accusations take on a sinister twist:

Notwithstanding your official “protest” over the ICFI’s alleged failure to respond to your documents, you quite clearly recognized that the theoretical conceptions and perspective elaborated in the presentations represented an unequivocal repudiation of your campaign to infiltrate the disoriented anti-Marxist pseudo-utopianism of Wilhelm Reich, Ernst Bloch and Herbert Marcuse into the Fourth International – that is, to fundamentally change the theoretical and programmatic foundations and class orientation of the Trotskyist movement. (7-8)

This is the stuff of a conspiracy theory, evident in the overheated rhetoric (“campaign to infiltrate”). Later in the same section, North comes back to this theme: the purpose of this insidious campaign is for “the International Committee to concern itself primarily not with politics and history, but with psychology and sex – particularly as presented in the works of Wilhelm Reich and Herbert Marcuse.” (16)

The intellectual dishonesty of these remarks is evident right from the start. There is nothing “alleged” about the IC leadership’s failure to respond to our documents nor is there any reason to

put scare quotes around ‘protest’: both the failure and our protest against it are quite real. Furthermore, the explanation North offers about why we ignored the IEB reports makes no sense. If these reports really were such an “unequivocal repudiation” of our position, the last thing we would do is ignore them; on the contrary, we would do everything possible to argue against them.¹¹ The truth, as we have already explained, is that because we had been stonewalled by the IC leadership for so long, we kept our remarks in *Objectivism or Marxism* to a minimum. We acknowledged that some of the points we made (including our brief remarks on the IEB reports) “merit a much fuller discussion which we would be eager to engage in,” but there was “no point in writing yet another hundred pages that will simply be ignored.” As we’ve already stated, our primary concern in *Objectivism or Marxism* was not political commentary, which is what these reports were mostly about, but rather problems of Marxist philosophy and, related to that, the IC’s retreat from political activity in the working class. If North sees that as a repudiation of Marxism, that says a good deal more about his own relationship to Marxism than it does about ours.

As for North’s conspiracy theory, this is a shameful exercise in fear mongering and demonization. North wants his readers to believe that something underhanded and insidious is going on, a conspiracy against Marxism spiced up with lurid suggestions about “psychology and sex”. But the only “campaign” we have conducted to “infiltrate” our ideas is to write documents and request that they be discussed. If North sees a conspiracy in this, it is because for him *any criticism* of his leadership constitutes a conspiracy.

As for North’s claim that we want the IC “to concern itself primarily not with politics and history, but with psychology and sex,” this a good example of the way conspiracy theories typically weave lies and half-truths together. First of all, where did we ever make such a statement or even imply it? North cannot produce a single quote from any of our documents to back this up for the simple reason that no such quote exists. Of course we have raised the issue of the relationship of psychology to Marxism, not only in Brenner’s document, *To know a thing is to know its end*, but more extensively in some of Brenner’s articles for the WSWs.¹² But North’s assertion that this is about substituting psychology (and sex!) for politics and history is an outrageous distortion. Our concern with psychology stems entirely from the issue of class consciousness, which is – or should be – a question of central importance for revolutionary Marxism. This is no more a diversion from Marxist politics than is a concern with dialectical philosophy. As for sex, what this actually refers to are issues we have raised about the family and the rights of women. To claim that these questions are somehow outside the bounds of Marxist politics is preposterous (though, as we’ll eventually see, preposterous is not a bad description of

¹¹ Moreover, how “unequivocal” a repudiation could this have been when there wasn’t a single mention of our documents or positions in any of the reports? If it was North’s intention to respond to our criticisms in the IEB reports, then there was nothing stopping him (or the other presenters) from doing so explicitly. North seems to have a curious notion of how to engage in a polemic: he renders his opponents invisible by never mentioning them and then ‘repudiates’ them to his heart’s content. One can think of this as a form of shadowboxing, and the nice thing about it is that you always win. As we’ll see later, North is fond of this kind of shadowboxing when it comes to polemics against us.

¹² See “Intrepid Thought,” <http://www.wsws.org/articles/1999/jun1999/freu-j11.shtml> and <http://www.wsws.org/articles/1999/jun1999/freu-j12.shtml> and an important exchange with Allen Whyte on psychoanalysis and Marxism http://www.wsws.org/articles/1999/nov1999/freu-n30_prn.shtml. These essays were posted with North’s approval, so presumably he didn’t see them as representing any conspiracy against Marxism at the time. Clearly what has changed since then is that we have come out with criticisms of him.

for some of North's views on these matters). But of course it is more lurid to bandy about a term like 'sex', and lurid is useful when it comes to demonizing one's opponents.

No conspiracy theory is complete without some name-dropping, and so North drags in Reich, Marcuse and Bloch. He says nothing here about their ideas apart from the vague charge of "pseudo-utopianism." (In fact, Reich had nothing to do with utopianism and the label "pseudo" is meaningless with regard to either Marcuse's or Bloch's ideas on utopia.) He also says nothing about the use we make of their ideas, whether we are critical of them in any way and what relevance any of this might have to Marxism. North is concerned with one thing at this point, which is to establish guilt by association: it is as if the simple invocation of these men's names constitutes *prima facie* evidence of our abandonment of Marxism. That this is being done under the banner of defending Marxist science only adds a bitter irony to the whole exercise.¹³

But it is remarkable that North builds this entire conspiracy theory on the basis of our supposedly damning silence over the IEB reports. All these outrageous claims – that we are trying to divert the movement away from politics and history to psychology and sex, that we are conducting "a campaign to infiltrate" alien ideas – North *intuits* not from anything we actually said but from what we didn't say. But the fact is that we weren't totally silent about these reports, we did say something, and though North quotes our remarks, he never answers them. Here they are:

The editorial board reports in particular are more a simulacrum of a perspectives document than the real thing: they are less a guide to revolutionary practice than a version of *Foreign Affairs* with a Marxist coloration. They are indeed *editorial board* reports – i.e. perspectives for more journalism. The question of what is to be done hardly enters into them at all, aside from ritualistic statements at the end about the need to build the revolutionary party. In other words, the essence of a revolutionary perspective is missing in these reports, but this is the very thing the IC leadership refuses to discuss.

So – there is nothing here about Reich or Marcuse or Bloch, and not a mention of psychology or sex. Instead, what we argue is that the IEB reports are yet one more symptom of the purely journalistic orientation of the IC, and that the main problem with them is that "the question of what is to be done hardly enters into them at all." Surely even North couldn't find anything 'pseudo-utopian' in that question. It should be easy enough to test the validity of our criticism, and we intend to do so by looking at some of the IEB reports in detail. But we can already test the validity of North's conspiracy theory. It turns out to be nothing more than a way of dodging an embarrassing question – what is to be done? And what is embarrassing about it is that it exposes the divide between objectivism and Marxism.

The WSWS International Editorial Board Reports: Roots Without Trees

Steiner had something similar to say in his document about the work of the WSWS, and it is worth recalling those remarks as a preface to our analysis of the IEB reports:

¹³ North has more to say on Reich later on. His remarks on Marcuse and Bloch are mostly in passing and have little substance. We will comment on all this as we get to the relevant parts of North's document.

The problem is not so much that the specific analysis of this event or that event is wrong, rather the problem is that such analysis becomes the totality of the political work of the movement. With few exceptions, the movement no longer actively intervenes into the struggles of the working class to build an alternative leadership . . . ***The “perspective”, our best determination of the tempo and line of development of the objective situation, is one in which the role of the working class is seen as something separate from our struggle to transform its consciousness as well as our own.*** This becomes the practical expression of the viewpoint enunciated in your thoughts on Plekhanov, one that sees the working class as the object of history instead of as its subject, or in the words of Lukacs, as the identical subject-object of history. Thus, the turn away from questions of theory is accompanied by a turn away from the working class (emphasis added).

There are really two points being made in the highlighted sentence. First, the purpose of political analysis for Marxists is – or should be – to correctly orient the party’s practice in raising the political consciousness of the working class. Second, that practice is itself an objective factor, and depending on the situation, a potentially decisive one. If we leave out that part of the equation, we are leaving out *the revolutionary potential of the working class*. Our analysis of the objective situation then becomes *objectivist* precisely in the sense that it conceives of the working class as an object of history, as “something separate from our struggle to transform its consciousness as well as our own.” It should go without saying that one doesn’t get beyond objectivism merely by tacking on at the end of an article a few ritualized phrases about building the revolutionary party.

If we keep these points in mind, it quickly becomes evident that for the most part the IEB reports are not Marxist perspectives. This is not to say that everything in them is wrong. Just as with WSWS reporting, the IEB reports often contain interesting material, especially when it comes to commenting on specific events or the current political conjuncture in a particular country or part of the world. It is also evident that a lot of research went into some of the reports (though, frankly, a few have the slapdash quality of bad journalism). Marxism is a very powerful analytical tool, and it can be used to gain insights and generate commentary and analysis that has little or no connection to a revolutionary purpose, as can be shown by the work of any number of academics, ‘Marxist’ or otherwise. One can, in fact, trace such a tendency back to classical Social Democracy, where the revisionist followers of Bernstein and even ‘centrists’ like Rudolf Hilferding pioneered a conception of Marxism as scientific analysis divorced from revolution (a subject we’ll come back to later). By contrast, in the Bolshevik and Trotskyist tradition, perspectives documents were always conceived of as guides to revolutionary action. Nowhere is this more evident than in Lenin and Trotsky’s writings for the early Comintern and Trotsky’s writings for the Fourth International.¹⁴ Indeed, the original title of the *Transitional Program* underscores precisely the link between political analysis and revolutionary practice that is essential to a Marxist perspective: *The Death Agony of Capitalism and the Tasks of the Fourth International*. The trouble with most of the IEB reports is that the part after ‘and’ is entirely missing.

¹⁴ The Marxist Internet Archive has a useful compendium of some of Lenin and Trotsky’s writings and speeches for the Comintern, <http://www.marxists.org/history/international/comintern/index.htm> . Trotsky’s Comintern writings are collected in the two-volume *The First Five Years of the Communist International*. Trotsky’s writings for the Fourth International are voluminous, though a good selection of them is available at the Leon Trotsky Internet Archive <http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/works/index.htm>. Mention should also be made of the 1973 volume *Documents of the Fourth International: The Formative Years (1933-40)*.

The objectivist tone is set by North himself in his opening report.¹⁵ Taking as his theme the question of whether capitalism is progressing or in decline, he soon establishes that globalization marks an ever-deeper crisis of the system and that “a new period of revolutionary upheaval has begun.” He then spends the bulk of the report debunking the views of capitalism’s apologists. Which is all well and good except that if this were truly a Marxist perspective, this would only be the start of what needs to be addressed. The conclusion that “a new period of revolutionary upheaval has begun” calls for – indeed cries out for – a consideration of the huge implications this is necessarily going to have for the political development of the working class and for the work of the revolutionary movement. But we get nothing on this from North and very little from the other reports. North is content to establish the correctness of his position, and the other reports are for the most part elaborations on this basic theme, filling in details of how the crisis of capitalism manifests itself in different parts of the world.

North presents a rationale for this approach in his own report. A political prognosis, he writes, “must proceed from a precise and accurate understanding of the historical development of the world capitalist system.” Hence that understanding – i.e. of whether capitalism is on the way up or down – is the decisive question, having “the most far-reaching consequences, not only for our selection of practical tasks, but for the entire theoretical and programmatic orientation of our movement.” He then declares:

It is not a subjective desire for social revolution that determines our analysis of the historical condition of the world capitalist system. Rather, the revolutionary perspective must be rooted in a scientifically-grounded assessment of the objective tendencies of socio-economic development. Detached from the necessary objective socio-economic prerequisites, a revolutionary perspective can be nothing more than a utopian construction.

If we let the air out of this inflated language, what is being said here is this: a revolutionary perspective has to be based on an understanding of the crisis of capitalism. This is certainly true, indeed for any Marxist or even a class-conscious worker, it is so self-evidently true that it amounts to little more than a truism. To be sure, it is misguided to base one’s analysis of the system on “a subjective desire for social revolution.” And to be sure, “a revolutionary perspective must be rooted in a scientifically-grounded assessment of the objective tendencies of socio-economic development.” And again to be sure, any perspective detached from these “necessary objective socio-economic prerequisites” is going to be wishful thinking, i.e. “a utopian construction.” But what this all amounts to is a piling up of truisms. An analysis of the crisis of capitalism is indeed the essential starting point for a revolutionary perspective, but it is just that – a starting point.

North is fond of using ‘roots’ as a metaphor and he piles it on in this passage: we are told that a revolutionary perspective has to be “rooted” in a “scientifically-grounded assessment,” (to say that something is “rooted” in something else that is “grounded” is metaphoric overkill), and then he warns against having a perspective “detached” from its objective “prerequisites”, which is to say severed from its roots. And there is no denying it – roots are important, essential, indispensable. But is that all there is to a living organism (or a revolutionary perspective) –

¹⁵ “David North: Opening report to meeting of WSWS International Editorial Board”, WSWS, Feb. 27, 2006: <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2006/feb2006/ssdn-f27.shtml>

roots? What about everything else – the trunk, the branches, the foliage? Without all that, one has nothing more than a stunted tree or even just a stump. And that is all that North is offering us in these reports – the stump of a perspective.

Latin America: A Case Study in Objectivist Theory and Abstentionist Practice

One such stump is the “Report on Latin American perspectives” given by Bill Van Auken, the SEP’s US presidential candidate in 2004.¹⁶ When it comes to ‘roots’, the report contains a good deal of interesting commentary on the economic and political situation in the region. We learn about: the decline of US economic influence in the region and the corresponding growth of European and Chinese investment; the much touted ‘turn to the left’ of bourgeois nationalist regimes in Venezuela, Bolivia, Brazil etc. who combine populist rhetoric and limited reforms with subservience to global capital; and the important role that the Pabloite revisionists are playing in both Venezuela and Brazil in propping up these regimes.

But we come to the end of the report without any indication of the way forward for Latin American workers. This isn’t just a question of raising programmatic demands, though at least that would be something. (What, for instance, has become of the demand for a United Socialist States of the Americas, which has probably never been more relevant than in the era of globalization, but which the report never mentions?) A revolutionary perspective has to be more than just an accounting of the economic shifts of capitalism and the political machinations of the bourgeoisie or its petty bourgeois hangers-on, as important as all that is. We also need to have some sense of where the working class is heading, how its resistance to capitalism is manifesting itself, and what challenges and opportunities this presents to the party in raising (or, with apologies to Lenin, sparking) the class consciousness of workers.

But this is where the objectivist character of the report becomes evident. The working class gets little mention, and to the extent that it does, it is treated as an object of history, notably as the victim of globalization. Occasionally the report refers to “explosive conditions,” and in one case (Venezuela in 1989) we hear of social protest bypassing the traditional unions and assuming “an explosive and spontaneous form” – an uprising against the then-government’s IMF-backed austerity program, which resulted in 1500 people being killed. This was no isolated incident: in fact these social explosions have continued right down to the present day throughout the region. It would seem evident that we need to know what these events can tell us about the revolutionary potential of the working class in Latin America, and what we have to do to make that potential a reality.

But Van Auken doesn’t seem that interested in them: he makes no mention of any important struggles after 1989 and instead moves on to a general statement that sees these social explosions as yet one more feature of the objective situation, yet one more factor (the word he uses is “antecedent”) accounting for the ‘turn to the left’: “These types of developments, repeated in various forms throughout the continent, constitute the immediate social and economic

¹⁶ “Report on Latin American perspectives,” WWSWS, Mar. 18, 2006:
<http://www.wsws.org/articles/2006/mar2006/van1-m18.shtml>

antecedents of what is now being called Latin America's turn to the left, i.e., the recent election of Evo Morales in Bolivia, the governments of Tabare Vasquez in Uruguay, Lula in Brazil, Kirchner in Argentina and, of course, Chavez in Venezuela." But this is an "antecedent" with a difference. Earlier in his report Van Auken had made the point that this 'turn to the left' was bound up with the shift in economic influence from the US to Europe and China: "In some ways this trend could perhaps better be described as a turn to the euro and the yuan." Now it is clear that the 'turn to the left' is *also* an expression – though a highly distorted one – of the social pressure of the masses. That is significant, not because it changes anything about the bourgeois character of these regimes, but rather because it gives us some sense of the tremendous striving of the masses to break the stranglehold of the bourgeoisie on economic and political power. In other words, it gives us a much clearer understanding of the revolutionary potential of the working class in the current historical context, because once the masses find a way into the political arena, there are never any guarantees that they can be contained.

A revolutionary perspective would be alive to these contradictions. This doesn't mean giving a shred of support to Chavez, Morales et al., much less kowtowing to them, as do virtually all the petty bourgeois radical groups; on the contrary, the whole point would be to fight for the political independence of the working class from the bourgeois nationalists. But for that it is necessary to find ways of intervening in the mass movements that are the social base of this 'turn to the left'. No such perspective animates this report. Van Auken simply goes on to say that, "Further such developments [i.e. more 'turns to the left'] are on the horizon," and then mentions in this regard the candidacies of Ollanta Humala in Peru, Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador in Mexico and Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua. In other words, the prospect is for more of the same, i.e. more bourgeois nationalist regimes spouting populist denunciations of globalization while keeping a lid on the masses. That the masses might be a wild card in this scenario, that their social explosions might open up opportunities *not just* for populist demagogues but also for the intervention of the revolutionary movement – no such possibility enters into this 'perspective'.¹⁷

As it so happened, six months after this report was given, a social explosion did erupt in Mexico. With obvious parallels to Bush's theft of the White House in 2000, there was evidence of massive fraud on the part of the conservative ruling PAN party in the July 2nd presidential election. In response, Lopez Obrador and his liberal reformist PRD party called the masses out into the streets to protest the official result (which gave PAN candidate Felipe Calderon a suspiciously narrow margin of victory) and to demand a recount. The response of the masses was overwhelming. At various times throughout that summer, millions of people from all over the country packed the Zocalo square at the center of Mexico City. One demonstration alone had well over a million people participating, making it the largest demonstration in Mexican history. The class composition of these demonstrations was primarily working class: "The Mexico City demonstration was dominated by employed and unemployed workers from the working class

¹⁷ This objectivism also distorts the assessment of revisionism. Van Auken devotes three pages to the subject and has some correct things to say about the role of the various Pabloite tendencies, particularly in propping up the regimes in Venezuela and Brazil. But without an orientation to the revolutionary potential of the working class, this sort of account can have a very different effect than intended: reading of one betrayal after another by various middle class radical tendencies can leave the impression that the working class can be endlessly contained, betrayed, diverted etc. Of course it is essential to expose the role of the revisionists, but the whole purpose of such an exposure is to galvanize support for revolutionary Marxism. We need to demonstrate *how* our politics can break through the cacophony of radical phrase-mongering and win a hearing in the working class. But that is well beyond the 'stumpish' concerns of objectivism.

neighborhoods that encircle the city and university and high school students. Peasants, small farmers and merchants arrived from southern Mexico.”¹⁸ Revolutionary sentiments were widespread among the demonstrators. In between the demonstrations, thousands of supporters of Lopez Obrador set up an on-going occupation in the form of tent cities in the Zocalo and in over 40 locations around Mexico City, at various times bringing traffic in the city to a standstill.

These mass protests persisted all through the summer and fall, as the various legal challenges wound their way through the apparatus of the bourgeois state. Lopez Obrador was forced to engage in political theatrics, like having himself sworn in as head of a government of ‘resistance’, in order to keep control over the mass movement, while making it abundantly clear that this represented no revolutionary challenge to the state. An indication of how extreme political tensions had become was the fact that the new president, Calderon, had to sneak in the back door of Congress to take his oath of office in early December, something that had never happened before in Mexican history. Meanwhile, in the impoverished southern state of Oaxaca, a strike by teachers that began in May against a corrupt state government escalated into open insurrection, with barricades on the streets and pitched battles between strikers and the government’s armed thugs that left at least 17 strikers and their supporters dead. Nurses and thousands of other workers rallied to the teachers and established their own popular assembly, commandeering TV and radio stations to broadcast their message.

North declared in his IEB report that “a new period of revolutionary upheaval has begun,” and surely here was the very thing itself. A revolutionary party couldn’t have asked for a better opportunity to demonstrate the validity of its perspectives, i.e. *the extent to which its theory was a correct and meaningful guide to revolutionary action*. These were ideal circumstances for staging a powerful intervention and winning an important hearing among Mexican workers, youth and intellectuals for Trotskyist politics. And what is more, the IC was in a position to stage such an intervention. Though it has no section in Mexico, it has a number of comrades who speak Spanish fluently, including Van Auken, and sending a group of comrades to do political work in Mexico was easily within the financial and organizational means of the movement. It also happened to be the case that Van Auken was running as the SEP senatorial candidate in New York that summer. It is not hard to imagine if a Spanish-speaking American socialist running against Hillary Clinton had shown up in Mexico City, that quite a few workers and youth might have been interested in what he had to say.

Of course there are never any guarantees that an intervention will produce immediate results in the form of new members, but the whole point of political activity from the standpoint of Marxism is to test the revolutionary possibilities within a given political situation to its limits. And in no situation is this more urgent than in the midst of a “revolutionary upheaval.” To stand aside in such a situation, to make no attempt to reach the masses with a Marxist program and perspective, is to abdicate one’s most fundamental responsibility as a revolutionary.¹⁹

¹⁸ “Over a million march to demand recount in Mexican election”, WSWS, Aug. 2, 2006: <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2006/aug2006/mexi-a02.shtml>

¹⁹ It is also worth noting that North finished writing *Marxism, History and Socialist Consciousness* just four days before the Mexican elections. Here was a golden opportunity to show up the profound difference between the “Marxist concept of perspective,” which he repeatedly proclaimed himself to be defending, and the “alien” ideas we were supposedly trying to “infiltrate” into the movement.

So what happened? Did the IC intervene politically at the mass demonstrations at the Zocalo and or in any other way try to make contact with the millions of workers protesting the election fraud? Did it hold meetings on the political crisis and lay out a perspective for the socialist revolution in Mexico? Did it send a reporting team to Oaxaca to cover the resistance of the workers there? Did it at the very least produce a programmatic statement to provide some guidance for Mexican workers in their struggles?

In fact the party did none of these things. Instead, it posted some articles about Mexico on the WSWS. And even by journalistic standards, the coverage was routine: no statements from the editorial board (much less the all but invisible IC), no programmatic demands, no exposes on Lopez Obrador and the PRD, no appeals for international solidarity with the Oaxaca strikers, no historical background on Mexican politics and class struggle (to say nothing of the long history of Trotskyism in Mexico going back to Trotsky himself). No, it was all very much business as usual, with articles that were often informative but with little content that was distinctively Marxist, apart from a few ritualized phrases. During the height of the crisis in July, there were two or three reports a week, but soon that dribbled out. The last report was on Oaxaca and it began: “The Mexican city of Oaxaca is under police occupation. Government security forces are engaging in a ‘dirty war’ of arbitrary detentions and disappearances reminiscent of the operations carried out in the 1970s.”²⁰ That report was posted Nov. 16. Yet, incredibly, there was no follow-up: it wasn’t even felt important enough to let WSWS readers know what the outcome of this police repression was or what became of the strike.²¹ And entirely consistent with this record, there hasn’t been any attempt to draw up a balance sheet of this crisis to educate workers in Mexico and internationally. Finally there is one more fact that says something about the IC leadership’s attitude to the Mexican working class: of the dozen WSWS articles on the Mexican crisis from July to November 2006, only one was ever posted in Spanish.

In a movement genuinely committed to a “Marxist concept of perspective,” a record like this would be a scandal and would provoke the most searching internal political debate. But there is no reason to suppose that anything of the sort has happened within the IC. On the contrary, to an objectivist nothing about this record is particularly troubling. Objective forces played themselves out in an entirely predictable manner: the masses were reined in, the strikes were sold out, the bourgeois state is intact. One can well imagine a gathering of the IEB a few years down the road where another report is given on Latin America, and the reporter (perhaps Van Auken again) will declare that the perspectives presented in 2006 have been completely “confirmed.” Should anyone raise an awkward question about what the party has done, they will no doubt be given a statistical breakdown of the number of articles (preferably only in English) that the WSWS has run on the region. The whole operation functions like some nicely designed piece of software: it can generate articles and so-called ‘perspectives’ reports that will always and forever be “confirmed.” What it cannot generate – and what the IC is oblivious to – is socialist consciousness in the working class.

²⁰ “Mexican government steps up repression in Oaxaca”, WSWS, Nov. 16, 2006:
<http://www.wsws.org/articles/2006/nov2006/mexi-n16.shtml>

²¹ The same was true of the extraordinary scene a few weeks later of Calderon having to sneak in the back door of Congress to be sworn in as president – again no coverage.

It is much the same story with virtually all the other IEB reports: they lack any perspective for realizing the revolutionary potential of the working class. A brief mention should be made of the two reports on the United States, by Barry Grey and Patrick Martin, because of the striking example they offer in this regard.²² These reports were given in January 2006, which happened to be one month after the 3-day strike by New York City transit workers. At the time of the strike the WSWS editorial board hailed it as nothing less than “a new stage in the class struggle,” so you would think that in reports on American perspectives given so soon afterwards, the strike and its lessons would figure prominently. Yet this wasn’t the case at all: Grey’s report has only a passing reference to the strike (contrasting the wages of the transit workers with the greed of the corporate elite), and in Martin’s report, whose focus, according to its title, was on “the social and political crisis in the United States,” there is not a single mention of this (or indeed any other) strike, much less any “new stage in the class struggle.”

This glaring omission isn’t just about forgetting a strike; far more importantly, it is about ‘forgetting’ what is essential to a revolutionary perspective. If the transit strike did mark “a new stage in the class struggle,” then this would have vast implications for the party’s work; on the other hand, if it didn’t, then it was important to know why that assessment was mistaken. But to say nothing about this “new stage in the class struggle” a mere month after proclaiming it is to reveal that one’s orientation to the working class – what should be the axis of revolutionary socialist politics – amounts to nothing more than *journalistic rhetoric*. And if this is true on such a vital question, this can only mean that the entire ‘perspective’ in such reports is nothing but a hollow shell, an exercise in political commentary that is devoid of revolutionary content. (Later on we’ll have more to say about North’s defense of the WSWS intervention in the transit strike.)²³

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²²“The Bush Administration and the global decline of American capitalism” (WSWS, Mar. 4, 2006: <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2006/mar2006/bgp1-m04.shtml>) and “The social and political crisis in the United States and the 2006 SEP election campaign” (WSWS, Mar. 7, 2006: <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2006/mar2006/pmp1-m07.shtml>).

²³ Mention should also be made of another report – the one on European perspectives by Uli Rippert – but for the opposite reason. It is the only one of the 14 reports where the working class makes it into the title: “The dead-end of European capitalism and the tasks of the working class” (WSWS, Mar. 13, 2006: <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2006/mar2006/uli1-m13.shtml>). And it is the only one that spends any time on the struggles of the working class and that has something to say about class consciousness beyond the perfunctory remarks typical of the other reports. Of course there is no reason to suppose that Rippert’s report was in any way intended as a critique of the IC’s objectivism and eventually it too conforms to the movement’s prevailing journalistic orientation. All that can be said here is that for whatever reason, Rippert, a longtime leader of the German section, has chosen not to entirely forget the fundamentals of Trotskyist politics like the *Transitional Program*, which is why his report is the only one that even comes close to being what a revolutionary Marxist perspective should be.