

Chapter 3:

Their Science and Ours

In the section of his essay, *What is Objectivism?*, North denies our charge that in the theory and practice of the International Committee, Marxism has been replaced by objectivism. It is a curious reply to what we said because nowhere does he quote anything we wrote about this issue. North launches into this topic by claiming that our critique of his and the International Committee's "alleged abandonment of dialectics and the fight against pragmatism is a subterfuge." North goes on to characterize our charge of objectivism in the following manner:

What you refer to falsely as "objectivism" is the Marxist striving to reflect accurately in subjective thought the law-governed movement of the objective world of which social man is a part, and to make this knowledge and understanding the basis of revolutionary practice. For all your talk about "dialectics" and the "fight against pragmatism," everything you write demonstrates indifference to the requirements of developing a working class movement whose practice is informed by Marxist theory. (30)

In other words, North is claiming that when we decry him for being an "objectivist" that we are actually denying the necessity for practice to be based on an assessment of objective reality. North provides no evidence for our supposed rejection of objective reality. He indulges in a bit of subliminal sleight-of-hand by substituting the word "objective" for "objectivism" and claiming that we are opponents of a practice based on a cognition of objective reality because we have written a critique of his "objectivism". It is hardly necessary to comment at all on such a crude distortion of our position. Yet it is on the basis of this crude distortion that North proclaims,

Your usage of the word "objectivism" is incorrect, and reflects a basic disagreement with materialism. (30)

As North completely ignores what we actually said about objectivism, let us reiterate a few remarks we made on the subject:

North's letters to Steiner (see the appendix to Steiner's document) lay out this objectivist standpoint in the clearest possible terms: Kautsky and Plekhanov were victims of objective conditions, their betrayals had nothing to do with their attitudes to revolutionary theory. If this is true, then we are at a complete loss to understand why it is that Lenin and Trotsky, who were subject to the same objective conditions, didn't betray. And the implications for today are obvious: 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. And typically 'orthodoxy' turns out to be anything but orthodox, in this case ignoring some of the most important lessons of the history of Bolshevism.

What objectivism routinely downplays is the significance of consciousness. The practice which goes with an objectivist outlook is abstentionism, which in the IC's case takes the form of a retreat from any involvement in the working class into a journalistic existence on the internet.

The Use and Abuse of Objectivism

The issue that we highlighted in raising the charge of “objectivism” was therefore not the dismissal of objective reality, but the relationship between the objective and the subjective. Nor is our use of the term “objectivism” some kind of departure from its long accepted meaning within the Marxist movement. As proof, we can cite none other than North himself, from his 1988 book *The Heritage We Defend*:

The standpoint of objectivism is contemplation rather than revolutionary practical activity, or observation rather than struggle; it justifies what is happening rather explains what must be done. This method provided the theoretical underpinnings for a perspective in which Trotskyism was no longer seen to as the doctrine guiding the practical activity of a party determine to conquer power and change the course of history, but rather as a general interpretation of a historical process in which socialism would ultimately be realized under the leadership of nonproletarian forces hostile to the Fourth International. Insofar as Trotskyism was to be credited with any direct role in the course of events, it was merely as a sort of subliminal mental process unconsciously guiding the activities of Stalinists, neo-Stalinists, semi-Stalinists and, of course, petty bourgeois nationalists of one type or another.¹

In characterizing the practice that goes along with an objectivist outlook, North added the following prescient remark:

Thus Marxism ceased to be an active political and theoretical weapon through which the vanguard of the working class established its authority among the masses and trained and organized them for the socialist revolution. Rather, it was merely “confirmed” by an abstraction called the “historical process,” working in quasi-automatic fashion through whatever political tendencies were at hand, regardless of the class forces upon which they were objectively based or and no matter how notorious their past or reactionary their program.²

Twenty years ago, North had important things to say about objectivism as a standpoint that always minimizes the role of the conscious element. Today he deliberately tries to obscure that understanding of objectivism by pulling a number of quotes out of context. This is particularly true of the use North makes of a quotation from an early work of Lenin which contrasts the attitude of the materialist with that of an “objectivist”.

¹ David North, *The Heritage We Defend: A Contribution to the History of the Fourth International*, (Labor Publications, 1988), p. 188.

² *The Heritage We Defend*, p. 189.

The objectivist speaks of the necessity of a given historical process; the materialist gives an exact picture of the given social-economic formation and of the antagonistic relations to which it gives rise. When demonstrating the necessity for a given series of facts, the objectivist always runs the risk of becoming an apologist for these facts: the materialist discloses the class contradictions and in so doing defines his standpoint. The objectivist speaks of “insurmountable historical tendencies”; the materialist speaks of the class which ‘directs’ the given economic system, giving rise to such and such forms of counteraction by other classes. Thus, on the one hand, the materialist is more consistent than the objectivist, and gives profounder and fuller effect to his objectivism. He does not limit himself to speaking of the necessity of a process, but ascertains *exactly what class* determines this necessity. In the present case, for example, the materialist would not content himself with stating the “insurmountable historical tendencies,” but would point to the existence of certain classes, which determine the content of a given system and preclude the possibility of any solution except by the action of the producers themselves. On the other hand, materialism includes partisanship, so to speak, and enjoins the direct and open adoption of the standpoint of a definite social group in any assessment of events. [*Collected Works*, Volume 1 (Moscow, 1972), pp. 400-01, emphasis in the original] (31)

Lenin’s point in this piece is that an “objectivist” while noting the facts, becomes a slave to those same facts and fails to delineate the significance of those facts from the standpoint of the working class, whereas a materialist [i.e. a revolutionary Marxist] assesses the facts from the standpoint of locating the historical forces that could overcome them. North’s introduction of this quote is provided without any context and for good reason. For Lenin is here arguing against the mechanical materialist notion of historical inevitability that we ourselves have raised in bringing up the issue of objectivism.

North does not bother to inform the reader that the Lenin quote is an excerpt from the early work of Lenin, *The Economic Content of Narodism and the Criticism of it in Mr. Struve’s Book*, which is a critique of the treatment of Narodism by the legal Marxist Peter Struve. To properly understand Lenin’s intent in this piece it is necessary to know something about the historical background behind it. Narodism was a populist movement that thrived in the latter part of the 19th century in Russia and attracted a following among the revolutionary intelligentsia. It was for all intents the major revolutionary movement prior to the rise of Marxism on Russian soil. The Narodniks looked toward the peasantry as the revolutionary class and through them hoped to put an end to the Czarist autocracy. They theorized that Russia could advance to a form of socialism based on the ancient peasant communes that once played an important role in the economic life of Russia, some of whose vestiges still remained in the 19th century.

The first Russian Marxists argued against the Narodniks that capitalism would inevitably gain a bigger and bigger foothold in Russia and with it would develop a powerful working class. It would be the working class and not the peasantry that was fated to be the agent of revolutionary change whose goal would be not the ancient peasant commune reborn but a bourgeois democratic revolution that in turn would prepare for a socialist revolution at another stage. The position of the “Legal Marxists”, defended by Peter

Struve, represented the most retrograde strand among these early followers of Marx. Struve and his co-thinkers took the thesis of the inevitability of capitalism in Russia and transformed it into a very conservative apology for the Russian bourgeoisie.

What Lenin is getting at in his critique of Struve is that the criticism made of the Russian populists by Struve and other “Legal Marxists”, that the Narodnik’s theory of society was unscientific and based on the method of subjective idealism, was actually an attack on Narodism from the right, dressed up in the language of Marxism and materialism. Lenin recognized that Struve and the Legal Marxists were employing a pseudo-Marxist terminology in order to convince the public that objective conditions were paving the way for capitalism in Russia and therefore it was useless to struggle against the inevitable political supremacy of the bourgeoisie. Whereas Lenin agreed that objective conditions were paving the way for, indeed had already introduced capitalism in Russia, he opposed Struve’s position that the working class must therefore simply bow down to these facts and accept its fate as an exploited class. In the section immediately preceding the quote provided by North Lenin writes the following:

We must object to a remark which Mr. Struve directs against Mr. Mikhailovsky. “According to his view,” the author says, “there are no insurmountable historical tendencies which, as such, should serve on the one hand as a starting-point, and on the other as unavoidable bounds to the purposeful activity of individuals and social groups”.

That is the language of an objectivist, and not of a Marxist (materialist). Between these conceptions (systems of views) there is a difference, which should be dwelt on, since an incomplete grasp of this difference is one of the fundamental defects of Mr. Struve’s book and manifests itself in the majority of his arguments.

There is a very specific historical and class content to Lenin’s use of the term “objectivism” in this essay. Contrast that with North’s explanation:

Lenin does not use the term “objectivism” as an epithet directed against those who study the socio-economic processes that constitute the basis of revolutionary practice. Rather, he strives to impart a richer, more profoundly materialist content to the study of the objective world by demanding that it identify the class dynamics of any given social situation, and, on that basis, define as precisely as possible the political tasks of the revolutionary party. Lenin’s vast theoretical output was characterized principally by his unrelenting determination to ground the perspective, program and activity of the Russian workers’ movement in a precise and comprehensive understanding of objective reality. (31-32)

In reading North’s description, one would never guess that Lenin is here criticizing the misuse of the Marxist criticism of populism and subjective idealism by a mechanical materialist defender of the bourgeois order. North’s piling up of the adjectives “richer”, “more profound” to qualify the already qualified “materialist content ... of the objective world” (indeed does an objective world have any other kind of content?) conveys the impression that Lenin is here waging a battle on behalf of materialism against the forces of subjective idealism. An unpacking of the context of this essay

however shows that the target of Lenin's polemic was a form of mechanical materialism – objectivism – not very different from the one North espouses. Thus North deliberately distorts both the context and significance of Lenin's remarks for his own polemical purposes.

Yet at one time the author of *The Heritage We Defend* knew better. There, after quoting this same article by Lenin, North wrote the following:

The above-quoted lines were directed against the school of “legal Marxism” which, while correctly establishing the capitalist nature of Russian economic development in the 1890s, habitually referred to “insurmountable historical tendencies” as if they operated outside of and independent of the class struggle. For objectivists, classes exist merely as programmed, unconscious executors of economic forces. Thus, the legal Marxists acknowledged and established the necessity of capitalist development in Russia, but would not recognize nor countenance the historical and political legitimacy of the struggle of the working class against the bourgeoisie.³

The North of 1988 does a good job here of rebutting the North of 2006.

As we pointed out, our usage of the term “objectivism” is hardly an innovation. We were applying the definition in the way it has always been understood in the polemical writings of the International Committee. The issue first emerged in Steiner's 2004 document, *Dialectical Cognition and Revolutionizing Practice*. While the word itself does not appear in that essay, the critique of Plekhanov in that essay identified him as a mechanical materialist who believed in the inevitability of socialism emerging as a result of the maturation of objective conditions. North sharply differed with our assessment of Plekhanov, claiming we were somehow diverging from Marxism and materialism by bringing up the philosophical shortcomings of Plekhanov. Yet an examination of the manner in which Plekhanov's role was understood within the International Committee in the mid-1960s clearly shows that it is North and not us who departed from the assessment of Plekhanov. Take for example, this excerpt from a review of a biography of Plekhanov published in 1964 in the theoretical journal of the International Committee. The review was written by Tom Kemp, a leading party intellectual in the British Trotskyist movement:

Plekhanov's manner of presenting the problem of the coming Russian revolution was thus a mechanical one. It depended upon the maturing of objective conditions in the economic sphere and upon the destruction of the autocracy in the political sphere. The task of socialists in the immediate period was first and foremost to hasten the downfall of Czardom. Beyond that, as capitalism developed and the proletariat grew, the conditions would be prepared for the socialist revolution. **This emphasis on objectivism conditioned Plekhanov's political responses to the developments of the last phase of his life, notably the revolutions of 1905 and 1917.** [our emphasis] It made him see the tasks of socialists as essentially propaganda in character; to enunciate principles rather than programmes of action. Caught up in the discussions which took place inside the Russian Social Democratic Party over the party organisation and policy, his positions seem to lack consistency until it is seen

³ *The Heritage We Defend*, p. 190.

that he was trying to maintain his own 'orthodoxy' which, in the end, won but a handful of adherents.⁴

Kemp's article, to say nothing of North's own writings, confirm that our use of the term objectivism is entirely consistent with how that term has been traditionally used within the Trotskyist movement. It is North who is departing here from the heritage of Trotskyism.

It is much the same story when North raises the case of the employment of the term "objectivism" in the International Committee's critique of Pabloite revisionism.

As a matter of historical fact, the method of "objectivism" – which may lead depending on circumstances to one or the other political form – found its most developed expression in the Fourth International in the revisionist theories and politics of Pablo and his acolytes, Mandel and Hansen. Pabloite revisionism made a specialty of invoking demagogically, in an entirely abstract manner, the image of an all-powerful wave of revolutionary struggles that would – regardless of the political leaderships of those struggles and the masses' level of consciousness – sweep all obstacles before it and conquer power. (36)

North proceeds to quote Cliff Slaughter,

"The fundamental weakness of the SWP resolution is its substitution of 'objectivism,' i.e. a false objectivity, for the Marxist method. From his analysis of imperialism as the final stage of capitalism, Lenin concluded that the conscious revolutionary role of the working class and its party was all-important. The protagonists of 'objectivism' conclude, however, that the strength of the 'objective factors' is so great that, *regardless* of the attainment of Marxist leadership of the proletariat in its struggle, the working-class revolution will be achieved, the power of the capitalists overthrown." [*Trotskyism Versus Revisionism*, Volume 3 (London, 1974), p. 161] (37)

Then North declares:

"Objectivism" as it is defined here by Cliff Slaughter in opposition to the Pabloites has absolutely nothing to do with your use of the term as an epithet directed against those who attempt to base revolutionary politics on a correct *Marxist* analysis of socio-economic phenomena. (37)

But this is as much a distortion of the historical record as North's use of the quote from Lenin. To begin with, nowhere did we ever use the word "objectivism" as a term of abuse "directed against those who attempt to base revolutionary politics on a correct Marxist analysis of socio-economic phenomena". This is a constant refrain of North's throughout his document: he obviously feels that repeating this crude distortion often enough will eventually make it ring true. Instead what we pointed to was the *inadequacy* of such an

⁴ Tom Kemp, Review of *Plekhanov; the Father of Russian Marxism*, Fourth International, Fall-Winter 1964. We have posted the essay at: http://www.permanent-revolution.org/archives/plekhanov_review.pdf

approach. Of course an analysis of socio-economic conditions is a necessary prerequisite for Marxists, but that is all it can be, as the example of the Legal Marxists, Plekhanov and many others demonstrates. “Objectivism” is a diagnosis of a general philosophical-political standpoint. It always represents a dichotomy between the objective and subjective factors of history and leads to adaptation to existing reality in the name of “objective facts”, about which there is little we can do. Pabloism in the 1950s and 1960s represented one particular form of objectivism. The “objective facts” to which Pabloism capitulated was the apparent hegemony of the Stalinist bureaucracy in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, which to them precluded the possibility of building independent revolutionary parties for an entire historical period. Therefore, the search was on for a substitute for the working class and the revolutionary party and this was soon proclaimed to be either Tito in Yugoslavia, Ben Bella in Algeria, or Castro in Cuba.

As we have seen, the objectivism of Struve and the Legal Marxists in Russia at the turn of the last century took a very different form. Rather than looking for a substitute for the revolutionary role of the working class, the Legal Marxists proclaimed that the inevitable laws of historical development lead to the hegemony of the bourgeoisie in Russia, and consign the working class to the subservient role of supporting the progressive wing of the bourgeoisie. Their perspective left no independent role either for the working class or for Marxists. The Legal Marxists eventually followed the logic of their position and joined the political parties associated with the bourgeoisie.

The objectivism of North and the International Committee has taken yet a different form. We have characterized it thus:

The practice which goes with an objectivist outlook is abstentionism, which in the IC’s case takes the form of a retreat from any involvement in the working class into a journalistic existence on the internet.

It is revealing that North nowhere denies that the IC has retreated into a largely journalistic existence. Rather his only reply is the shameless distortion that when we employ the term “objectivism” we mean it in the sense of dismissing the need for a study of objective historical conditions.

The Embrace of Positivism

Politically, objectivism is grounded in a philosophical outlook that is inimical to Marxism. The profound difference between the two can be further assessed if we examine the closely related conception of science as the objectivist sees it and as Marx conceived of it. Let us first of all examine North’s conception of science. North chastises us in the following paragraph:

You tell us that “Marxist science is not a science in the conventional sense: its aim is not only to understand the world but also to transform it.” But to what extent, Comrades Steiner and Brenner, is the revolutionary, i.e., historically progressive, transformation of the world dependent upon a correct understanding of it? You need to think much more carefully about the answer you give to this question. Whether

you call it “conventional” or “unconventional,” Marxism can be considered a science only to the extent that the goal of its world-transforming practice – the ending of capitalist exploitation and the establishment of a socialist society – is based on a correct understanding of the laws of social development, rather than a mere desire for change, let alone a “will to power.” In Marxism, the means by which revolutionists seek to transform the world is rooted in and inseparable from their understanding of the objective laws that govern the movement of society. This is a critical codicil of Marxist theory that cannot be violated without inviting political catastrophe and, I must add, moral shipwreck. (33)

North is here trying to paint us as opponents of science. He completely avoids the issue that we have raised, namely what, if anything, is the difference between the Marxist conception of science and the conventional understanding of that term? North even mocks us for raising the question, as if only a muddle-headed mystic could possibly imagine that the question has any meaning. This is inexcusable and cannot be explained on the basis of ignorance. It is well-known that the German word Marx employed, *Wissenschaft*, has a much broader meaning than its common English equivalent, “science”, particularly as that term is applied to the natural sciences. For example, the textbook, *A Hegel Dictionary*, provides the following definition of *Wissenschaft*:

It applies to the natural sciences (*Naturwissenschaften*), but is less closely associated than ‘science’ with the natural sciences and their methods. Thus it is applied more widely than ‘science’ now is: e.g. the systematic study of art, religion, history, ethics, etc, is a *Wissenschaft*. Hence it is natural to regard philosophy, as long as it is systematic as a *Wissenschaft*.⁵

For Hegel and German idealism as a whole, science was not merely contemplative but was intrinsically tied to the realization of freedom in history. For Marx too, science always meant *Wissenschaft* rather than the narrow construction it eventually became in Anglo-American philosophy. Marx shared the ideal that science in this broad sense, Reason writ large, is to be realized in the historical process, even as he rejected Hegel’s view that freedom could be realized within the framework of bourgeois society. Science for Marx was inherently critical and revolutionary. Thus, in the *Poverty of Philosophy* he writes,

Just as the economists are the scientific representatives of the bourgeois class, so the socialists and the communists are the theoreticians of the proletarian class ... In the measure that history moves forward, and with it the struggle of the proletariat assumes clearer outlines, they no longer need to seek science in their minds; they have only to take note of what is happening before their eyes and to become its mouthpiece.⁶

This historical understanding of science was emasculated in the latter part of the 19th century at the hands of the positivists. Positivism arose as a philosophical and political

⁵ Michael Inwood, *A Hegel Dictionary*, (Blackwell Publishers, 1992), p. 265

⁶ *MECW*, Vol. 6, p.177

movement in reaction to what it considered the dangers of an idealism that was then still tied to the idea of Freedom. As Marcuse discusses in his study of the rise of social theory, *Reason and Revolution*,

The Enlightenment affirmed that reason could rule the world and men change their obsolete forms of life if they acted on the basis of their liberated knowledge and capacities.

Comte's positive philosophy lays down the general framework of a social theory that is to counteract these 'negative' tendencies of rationalism. It arrives at an ideological defense of middle-class society and, moreover, it bears the seeds of a philosophic justification of authoritarianism⁷

Positivism in its further development sought to eviscerate philosophy from science. Henceforth, science would be narrowly defined as the endeavor of a class of specialists who employ the tools of empirical observation to arrive at a series of immutable laws. Furthermore, the categories which delimited the scope of each science were presupposed. Thus was born the notion of science as a "value free" enterprise. The positivist definition of science was borrowed from the practice of the natural scientist but a practice that was comprehended in a crude empirical fashion. This model of science, taken from a poorly understood conceptualization of the natural sciences, was systematically applied to the social sciences. As Marcuse explains,

The science of society is, in principle, not to be distinguished from natural science. Social phenomena are 'exact' to a lesser degree and more difficult to classify than natural phenomena, but they can be subjected to the standard of exactness and to the principles of generalization and classification; for this reason the theory of society is a real science.⁸

But the rise of the new positivist science of society is incompatible with a dialectical theory of society.

The very principles, however that make sociology a special science set it at odds with the dialectical theory of society... The dialectical theory emphasized the essential potentialities and contradictions within the social whole, thereby stressing what could be done with society and also exposing the inadequacy of its actual form. Scientific neutrality was incompatible with the nature of the subject-matter and with the direction for human practice derived from an analysis of it.⁹

Positivism eventually metamorphosed into several branches, but all of them had in common a stripped down theory of science and, as we will show, an aversion to

⁷ Herbert Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution*, (Beacon Press, 1960), p. 342

⁸ *Ibid*, p. 377

⁹ *Ibid*, pp. 377-378

dialectics. In the 20th century positivism, in the form of what was to be known as the school of Logical Positivism, was to play a very important role in molding the attitudes of generations of intellectuals.

Marxist science, on the other hand, contrary to what North maintains, is a special kind of science. It is not like sociology or any of the social sciences. Nor is it like physics or any of the natural sciences. It is distinguished first of all by the fact that it is systematic, in the original sense of a *Wissenschaft*. That means that it cannot, as is the common practice in sociology or physics, take its categories for granted and simply work within the framework that is defined by such categories. Rather, for Marx, every category is critically examined. That is why instead of proceeding like the political economists do, Marx does not simply accept the categories of the everyday world of economic life such as commodities, money and capital. Instead Marx asks what these entities are and peels away layer upon layer of the mysteries lurking within them. This is only possible because for Marx science is inseparable from philosophy, from a comprehensive inquiry into the ontological and historical status of man and his world and the contradictory process whereby one social formation gives way to another. Take the following justly famous passage from *Capital* in which Marx contrasts the positivist science of political economy with his endeavor,

Political economy has indeed analysed value and its magnitude, however incompletely, and has uncovered the content concealed within these forms. But it has never asked the question why this content has assumed that particular form, that is to say, why labour is expressed in value, and why the measurement of labour by its duration is expressed in the magnitude of the value of the product.¹⁰

Note that for Marx, political economy is a science only in a very restricted sense. Whereas its best practitioners such as Smith and Riccardo did “uncover the content concealed within these forms”, they never thought to ask the question why this content is expressed in this particular form. In other words, they took for granted the categories that were handed down to them in their world of bourgeois social relations. Why did they stop at that point and why didn't Marx? To answer this question is to get to the heart of the difference between science as a narrowly construed methodology working within pre-given boundaries, and science in Marx's sense. The latter is summed up in Marx's description of his employment of the dialectic in the Postface to the Second Edition of *Capital*,

In its mystified form, the dialectic became the fashion in Germany, because it seemed to transfigure and glorify what exists. In its rational form it is a scandal and an abomination to the bourgeoisie and its doctrinaire spokesmen, because it includes in its positive understanding of what exists a simultaneous recognition of its negation, its inevitable destruction; because it regards every historically developed form as being in a fluid state, in motion, and therefore grasps its transient aspect as well; and because it does not let itself be impressed by anything, being in its very essence critical and revolutionary.¹¹

¹⁰ Karl Marx, *Capital* Volume I, (Penguin Classics, 1990), pp. 173-174

¹¹ *Ibid*, p. 103

In this sense science is indeed a search for truth, but certainly not an impassive or nonpartisan affair. Marx made the point very early on in his career that the search for truth, which is at one with the struggle for human emancipation, can only be realized when the theoretical project is united with a living social force. That force is the working class.

Here is how he put it in the Introduction to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right:

Philosophy cannot realize itself without the transcendence [*Aufhebung*] of the proletariat, and the proletariat cannot transcend itself without the realization [*Verwirklichung*] of philosophy.¹²

In this conception of science, we are at once collecting factual evidence, making generalizations from that evidence and deriving the regularity, interconnectedness that define the behavior of the phenomena under investigation. But we do not stop there. If we did, we would simply be doing what bourgeois social science does and imprisoning ourselves ideologically within the confines of the "laws of motion of society". While we recognize these "laws of motion", if we are taking the standpoint of a critical, dialectical and revolutionary theory we also recognize the inhuman character of the life that these laws prescribe. And when it comes to the "laws of motion" of bourgeois society, these are at once as Marx described them, both objective laws and "absurd", i.e. they prescribe a way of life that is not worthy of our human nature. Thus Marx observes,

If I state that coats or boots stand in a relation to linen because the latter is the universal incarnation of abstract human labour, the absurdity of the statement is self-evident. Nevertheless, when the producers of coats and boots bring these commodities into a relation with linen, or with gold or silver (and this makes no difference here), as the universal equivalent, the relation between their own private labour and the collective labour of society appears to them in this absurd form.¹³

The categories of bourgeois economics consist precisely of forms of this kind. They are forms of thought, which are socially valid, and therefore objective, for the relations of production belonging to this historically determined mode of production, i.e. commodity production.¹⁴

As the above statement makes clear, Marx's conception of science does not end with the articulation of the "objective laws of motion" of society. Marx is thus not simply trying to provide a more consistent account of bourgeois society than the bourgeois economists.

¹² 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>

¹³ Cyril Smith has pointed out that a better translation of the German word Marx employs, *verrückte*, is "crazy" rather than "absurd". See his *Marx at the Millenium*, (Pluto Press, 1996), p. 76.

¹⁴ Marx, Capital Volume I, p. 169

His aim is different. He is uncovering the deformed modes of human relationships that are hidden behind these laws. He is looking at the internal contradictions hidden within these relationships and their transitions and transformations into their determinate negations. It is only because Marx goes beyond the parameters of non-dialectical social science that he is able to uncover the objective basis for the transition from capitalism to socialism. For Marx, we are not simply observers, but active participants in this process and in this way bring together the objective and the subjective, theory and practice. This difference in philosophical outlook explains why Lenin, looking at the same facts as Struve, can adopt such a diametrically opposed standpoint to those facts and those laws.

What happened from the time in the 1840's when Marx, transforming the heritage of the Enlightenment, the French Revolution and German idealism, articulated his revolutionary and dialectical vision of science, to the 1890's when Struve could articulate his sclerotic, narrow and essentially apologetic version of science? The intervening decades saw the retreat of the working class movement, first as a result of the defeats suffered in 1848 and later the defeat of the Paris Commune. With the wave of political retrenchment there came about a cultural and philosophical backlash against the ideas that inspired these movements. Thus by the 1850's, just two decades after the premature death of Hegel, his star had plummeted from being the leading philosopher in Germany to being a "dead dog". With the passing of Hegel the dialectic was also consigned to the museum of historical antiquities.

What rose in its place were retrograde philosophical trends such as neo-Kantianism and positivism. Positivism in particular really took off in the second half of the 19th century. The project of positivism was to purify the scientific enterprise from what was considered obsolete hangovers from philosophy. This had implications not only for the practice of the scientist, but positivism soon carved out brand new disciplines from what was previously considered areas of philosophy. The rise of the social sciences, inspired by positivism, takes place in this period. The model upon which these new sciences were founded was the template created by Newtonian physics. Thus sociology was supposed to locate certain lawful relations within society that had the precision and certainty, and causal connections exhibited by the laws of Newtonian mechanics. But the social relations between people, unlike the laws of physics, are neither timeless and immutable, nor are they the product of forces outside of us about which we can have no role.

Furthermore, this rise of what was "value free" social science was not confined to the universities and the writings of bourgeois professors. They soon influenced and eventually dominated the thinking of the intellectuals of the Marxist movement organized in the Second International. The chief theoreticians of Second International Marxism, Kautsky, Plekhanov and Hilferding, were all heavily influenced by positivist notions of science. We owe to Hilferding, who in his time was considered the chief economic theorist of the Second International, the following classic *positivist* statement of the scientific method and its relationship to socialism:

To know the laws of commodity-producing society is to be able, at the same time, to disclose the causal factors which determine the

willed decisions of the various classes of this society. According to the Marxist conception, the explanation of how such class decisions are determined is the task of a scientific, that is to say a causal, analysis of policy. The practice of Marxism, as well as its theory, is free from value judgments.

It is therefore false to suppose, as is widely done *intra et extra muros*, that Marxism is simply identical with socialism. In logical terms Marxism considered only as a scientific system, and disregarding its historical effects, is only a theory of the laws of motion of society. The Marxist conception of history formulates these laws in general terms, and Marxist economics then applies them to the period of commodity production. The socialist outcome is a result of tendencies which operate in the commodity producing society. But acceptance of the validity of Marxism, including a recognition of the necessity of socialism, is no more a matter of value judgment than it is a guide to practical action. For it is one thing to acknowledge a necessity, and quite another thing to work for that necessity. It is quite possible for someone who is convinced that socialism will triumph in the end to join in the fight against it. The insight into the laws of motion which Marxism gives, however, assures a continuing advantage to those who accept it, and among the opponents of socialism the most dangerous are certainly those who partake most of the fruits of its knowledge.

On the other hand, the identification of Marxism with socialism is easy to understand. The maintenance of class rule depends upon the condition that its victims believe in its necessity. Awareness of its transitory character itself becomes a cause of its overthrow. Hence the steadfast refusal of the ruling class to acknowledge the contribution of Marxism. Furthermore, the complexity of the Marxist system requires a difficult course of study which will be undertaken only by those who are not convinced in advance that it will prove either barren or pernicious. Thus Marxism, although it is logically an objective, value-free science, has necessarily become, in its historical context, the property of the spokesmen of that class to which its scientific conclusions promise victory. Only in this sense is it the science of the proletariat, in contradistinction to bourgeois economics, while at the same time it adheres faithfully to the requirements of every science in its insistence upon the objective and universal validity of its findings.¹⁵

Hilferding's notion of Marxist science as a "value free" enterprise, having no necessary connection to the struggle for socialism was typical of the thinking of Second International Marxism and far from its most vulgar example.¹⁶ Hilferding himself

¹⁵ Rudolf Hilferding, *Finance Capital: A Study of the Latest Phase of Capitalist Development*, (Routledge, 1981), pp.23-24.

¹⁶ Karl Korsch deserves credit for being the first to point to this passage in Hilferding's book as illustrative of the theoretical degeneration of the Second International. Korsch in his 1923 book, *Marxism and Philosophy*, identified positivism as the bacteria that had infected the body of Second International Marxism. Korsch's words are still relevant:

exemplified the flawed brilliance and tragedy that marked other leading figures of the Second International. He was in the ‘Center’ of the German Social Democratic Party, and although he was opposed to the abdication of the party in 1914, he did not openly fight the leadership. He later became a harsh critic of the Bolsheviks and the Russian Revolution and followed roughly the same political trajectory as Kautsky in the period after the war. Intellectually he was a figure of considerable stature: the work from which the above quote was taken, his *Finance Capital*, was one of the major sources for Lenin’s study of imperialism. ***Yet Hilferding and Lenin, while looking at what were essentially the same facts drew diametrically opposed conclusions in terms of their political practice.*** This striking historical contrast demonstrates that what North calls a “correct understanding” is never by itself a sufficient condition upon which to base a revolutionary movement. ¹⁷You could have a “correct understanding” of society and react like either a Hilferding or a Lenin.

Hilferding’s statement is illustrative of the rot that had taken hold of the Second International in the years prior to World War I. And that rot was simply the other side of the coin – dialectically speaking – of the open revisionism of Eduard Bernstein. Whereas Bernstein repudiated the conclusions of Marxist theory by denying that there was any objective basis for the struggle for socialism, Hilferding repudiated the methodological foundations of Marxism. Bernstein sought to substitute an ethical imperative having no objective grounding as the basis for socialist politics. Hilferding proclaimed that the objective basis for socialism was all that we need – in the process ignoring dialectics and what Trotsky called “revolutionary will”.

Yet Hilferding’s position was representative of the great majority of the orthodox Center of the Second International, of the Kautskys and the Plekhanovs. That is why even as Kautsky and Plekhanov – correctly – took up the battle against Bernstein’s open

The minimization of philosophical problems by most Marxist theoreticians of the Second International was only a partial expression of the loss of the practical, revolutionary character of the Marxist movement which found its general expression in the simultaneous decay of the living principles of dialectical materialism in the vulgar Marxism of the epigones... Nothing was further from [Marx and Engels] than the claim to impartial, pure, theoretical study, above class differences, made by Hilferding. The scientific socialism of Marx and Engels, correctly understood, stands in far greater contrast to these pure sciences of bourgeois society (economics, history or sociology) than it does to the philosophy in which the revolutionary movement of the Third Estate once found its highest theoretical expression. (*Marxism and Philosophy*, NLB, 1970, p. 68-69)

Further developing Korsch’s critique of Second International Marxism was the epochal book by Georg Lukacs, *History and Class Consciousness*. In particular the two brilliant essays in that collection, *What is Orthodox Marxism?* and *Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat* provided the foundation, along with Lenin’s *Hegel Notebooks* and the subsequent discovery and publication of the early writings of Marx, for a rediscovery of the Hegelian heritage of Marxism. Unfortunately the consolidation of the Stalinist bureaucracy in the Soviet Union cut off this possibility for decades to come.

¹⁷

This is not to imply that the objective situation will always be assessed in the same way by a Marxist and an objectivist. Contrary to the tenets of positivism, “facts” can never be separated from concepts and the dialectical method is inextricably interwoven in the Marxist understanding of the crisis of capitalism. The abandonment of the dialectical method has resulted historically in such theoretical abortions as the later Kautsky’s theory of ultra-imperialism or Mandel’s theory of neo-capitalism. Our point is that even in the case where the objectivist and the Marxist substantially agree as to the nature of the objective situation, they will draw different conclusions.

repudiation of Marxist theory – they were unable to maintain a revolutionary orientation in the face of the onset of wars and revolutions that beset the world in the first decades of the 20th century. Reflecting on the experience of the betrayal of the Second International in 1914, Lenin recognized that to some degree the orthodox defense of Marxism on the part of Kautsky and Plekhanov against the open revisionist Bernstein, masked over the theoretical atrophy that was eating its way through the orthodox Center. That is why, in his Hegel Notebooks, Lenin wrote the following remark,

Plekhanov criticizes Kantianism (and agnosticism in general) more from a vulgar materialist standpoint than from a dialectical-materialist standpoint, *insofar as* he merely *rejects* their views a limine, [from the threshold] but does not *correct* them (as Hegel corrected Kant), deepening, generalizing and extending them, showing the *connections* and *transitions* of each and every concept.¹⁸

What the ‘number one member of the Michigan branch of the Plekhanov fan club’ (as North once referred to himself in his correspondence with Steiner) cannot explain is the relationship between Plekhanov’s impoverished version of the dialectic and his political opportunism despite his adherence to Marxist ‘orthodoxy’. Indeed, he denies that there is any connection between them. But this relationship was pointed out over forty years ago in the theoretical work of the International Committee. The following is a cogent observation on this subject from the same essay we had previously cited,

His [Plekhanov’s] mechanical acceptance of Marxism led him to believe that proletarian self-consciousness would develop automatically; his Populist background left him with a belief in the mission of the intelligentsia, its role being now to raise class consciousness. When members of the socialist intelligentsia accepted Bernsteinism or took the workers as they were, with their existing level of consciousness, they committed a kind of treason. He was not able to understand the dialectics of this process in its full complexity.¹⁹

Although Lenin was well acquainted with the political shortcomings of the Second International, the extent of its theoretical atrophy only became clear to him at the moment of betrayal in 1914.²⁰

What North has done in his attempt to ridicule our statement that Marxist science is something entirely different from the ordinary conception of science is essentially to erase the significance of the difference between a Hilferding and a Lenin. Furthermore, to make his case, North has to wipe out an important episode in the history of the Marxist movement, namely the ideological degeneration suffered by Marxism in the period of the Second International when dialectics gave way to positivism in philosophy.

¹⁸ V.I. Lenin, *Collected Works* Volume 38, (Progress Publishers), p.179.

¹⁹ Tom Kemp, Review of *Plekhanov; the Father of Russian Marxism*, Fourth International, Fall-Winter 1964 http://www.permanent-revolution.org/archives/plekhanov_review.pdf

²⁰ The issue of Lenin’s critique of Plekhanov and of Second International orthodoxy was discussed in great detail in Steiner’s document, *The Dialectical Path of Cognition and Revolutionizing Practice: A Reply to David North*, http://www.permanent-revolution.org/polemics/dialectical_path.pdf

But although North avoids an explicit discussion of the subject, he provides us with a fair account of his notion of science in the following remarks:

Marxism, as a method of analysis and materialist world outlook, has uncovered laws that govern socio-economic and political processes. Knowledge of these laws discloses trends and tendencies upon which substantial historical ‘predictions’ can be based, and which allow the possibility of intervening consciously in a manner that may produce an outcome favorable to the working class.

North is here quoting his own words from one of his summer school lectures. He advises us, in a footnote, that, “This is a passage from the fourth lecture, which included a substantial section devoted to the refutation of Sir Karl Popper’s attack on Marxism. Your document contains not a single reference to this lecture and its attack on Popper’s empiricism.” We will turn to North’s confrontation with Popper momentarily, but it is worth reflecting on the above statement from the summer school lecture, as it gives us a good indication of how North conceives the relationship between Marxists and the working class.

That relationship is something akin to being a good weatherman who is able to make predictions that assist the working class in avoiding a dangerous storm while taking advantage of a spell of sunshine to “produce an outcome favorable to the working class.” It is not at all obvious what North means when he refers to “an outcome favorable to the working class.” But what is clear is that North hangs everything on the ability of Marxists to make correct predictions, and that this in itself is sufficient to correctly orient the working class. What is missing from North’s equation is what Marx called “revolutionizing practice”, i.e. the transformative activity of the party and the working class.

Now it is of course true that Marxists must work out a prognosis about the direction and tempo of socio-economic and political developments. And it is also true that because Marxists base their prognosis not on superficial trends but on the essential movement of capital whose laws work themselves out beneath the surface of daily appearances, they have a more profound insight into the nature of the crisis of capitalism and its possible resolution. But the entire purpose of working out a prognosis is to serve as a guide to the conscious intervention of the party in the struggles of the working class. In that sense a *prognosis* is very different than a *prediction*. A prediction is what a physicist or a sociologist of the positivist persuasion does when he extrapolates “trends” that exist completely outside of us. But in the living struggle of classes it is not possible, without debasing the entire project, to assume that developments will proceed according to laws that exist outside of us. The reason is that in the sphere of politics, particularly at a moment of revolutionary crises, the subjective becomes a decisive part of the objective and the outcome can never be predicted in advance. At least that is how the relationship between the party and the class was conceived by Trotsky when he presented his remarkable prognoses during the first five years of the Communist International. We have quoted parts of Trotsky’s speech to the Third Congress of the Comintern previously, but it is worth repeating in the context of the present discussion:

History has provided the basic premise for the success of the revolution – in the sense that society cannot any longer be develop its productive forces on bourgeois foundations. But history does not at all assume upon itself – in place of the working class, in place of the politicians of the working class, in place of the Communists, the solution of this entire task. No, History seems to say to the proletarian vanguard (let us imagine for a moment that history is a figure looming above us), History says to the working class, ‘You must know that unless you cast down the bourgeoisie, you will perish beneath the ruins of civilization. Try, solve this task!’ Such is the state of affairs today.²¹

North’s comments on the anti-historicist Karl Popper are revealing of his own approach to history and science. He introduces his remarks by noting that Popper was, “Among the fiercest critics of the possibility of a science of society which can make meaningful predictions about the future...” He noted that Popper, “... rejected what he called “historicism,” by which he meant “an approach to the social sciences which assumes that *historical prediction* is their principal aim, and which assumes that this aim is attainable by discovering the ‘rhythms’ or the ‘patterns,’ the ‘laws’ or the ‘trends’ that underlie the evolution of history.” Popper wrote that he was ‘convinced that such historicist doctrines of method are at bottom responsible for the unsatisfactory state of the theoretical social sciences...’²² In his lecture, North does present a number of valid objections to Popper’s anti-historicism, but in the process he misses the central problem with Popper’s attack on Marxism. The central issue is that Popper’s depiction of what he called “historicism” is a vulgar caricature of Marxism or what Marxists have meant by the term “historicism”. For Popper “historicism” is the attempt to apply a positivist model of the natural sciences onto the social sciences.

Here is the gist of Popper’s argument,

...we must reject the possibility of a *theoretical history*; that is to say, of a historical social science that would correspond to *theoretical physics*. There can be no scientific theory of historical development serving as a basis for historical prediction.

The fundamental aim of historicist methods is therefore misconceived, and historicism collapses.²³

In his lecture North quotes these statements and correctly disputes Popper’s contention that “there can be no scientific theory of historical development.” But he lets pass completely Popper’s litmus test for historical science, namely that a historical science must correspond to (i.e. follow the model of) theoretical physics and match its predictive capacity.

²¹ Trotsky, *The First Five Years of the Communist International*, Volume 2, New Park Publications, p. 6

²² Lecture four: “Marxism, history and the science of perspective”, by David North, 14 September 2005 <http://wsws.org/articles/2005/sep2005/le4-all.shtml>

²³ Karl Popper, *The Poverty of Historicism* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. xi-xii.

Popper's contention is that history is too complex, contains too many factors to be amenable to any law-governed process. In rebuttal, North correctly cites meteorology as an enterprise which is considered a science despite the fact that it cannot produce the kind of exact predictions that are possible in physics. Instead, meteorology is characterized by tentative predictions that have only a statistical degree of accuracy. Indeed it is even the case that with quantum mechanics, physics itself exhibits laws that are only expressed through statistical norms. Yet no thinking person would object to calling meteorology, let alone modern physics, a real science. Therefore, argues North, Popper's rejection of historical science on the basis that it cannot exhibit the kind of exact predictability that is accomplished in physics is a false argument.

North's arguments against Popper are correct, but for all that they entirely miss the mark. All they demonstrate is that Popper's line of reasoning against historical science is false. But they tell us nothing about what historical science is. Worse than that, North's line of argument reinforces Popper's belief that the model of science is the natural sciences, where predictability is the *sine qua non* of the genuine article even if predictability is not always exact. But historical science in the Marxist sense is not at all like meteorology. What North entirely leaves out of account is that whereas predictability is characteristic of a certain form of science, namely the natural sciences, there is another criteria by which we may judge whether a discipline is a true science. What about the ability to provide an *explanation* of a phenomenon in terms that bring together a particular with a universal? ²⁴ When it comes to historical science, we are looking to the explanatory value of a theory more than its ability to make predictions. And it is this explanatory value that is critical for Marxism. Popper's anti-historicism must be rejected because it denies the possibility of finding what had been called meaning in history – i.e. the discovery of the rationality behind the multifarious contingent events that comprise history. And without 'meaning in history' universal projects are off the table, and no project is more universal than that of the revolutionary transformation of society. At best we are left with pragmatic experiments that may alleviate pain a bit but can never overcome existing social relations. That in a nutshell is Popper's formula for what he called the "Open Society".

²⁴ Although we must reject the conservative implications of the notion that World History as it is 'is the image and enactment of reason', no one has presented the case for the explanatory power of historical science more eloquently than Hegel:

'We are compelled to ask whether, beneath the superficial din and clamor of history, there is not perhaps a silent and mysterious inner process at work whereby the energy of all phenomena is conserved. What may well perplex us however is the great variety and even inconsistency of the content of history. We see complete opposites venerated as equally sacred, capturing the attention of different ages and nations. We feel the need to find a justification in the realm of ideas for all this destruction. This reflection leads us to the third category [of historical science], to the question of whether there is such a thing as an ultimate end in itself. This is the category of reason proper; it is present in our consciousness as a belief that the world is governed by reason. Its proof is to be found in the study of world history itself, which is the image and enactment of reason.'

Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History: Introduction*, Translated by H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge), p 33.

In contrast, it is the responsibility of Marxists to develop a practice in the working class based on a prognosis about the objective situation such that the working class will be brought closer to an understanding of its historical role. That is not equivalent however to obtaining a tactical advantage as a result of making a correct prediction. Insisting on the predictive ability of historical science is simply falling into the trap of identifying historical science as another one of the natural sciences following the model of positivism. It is a trap that has ensnared North.

But as we have shown, this positivist model of science was not what Marx had in mind when he spoke of history as a *Wissenschaft*. To make this point clearer, imagine for a moment that it would be possible to overcome Popper's objections and marry his vision of science with history, thereby producing a science of history that "corresponds" to physics. What would the science from this unlikely marriage look like? It would certainly not bear any resemblance to what Marx or Lenin understood by a science of history. Rather what would emerge from such a confluence is the positivist version of a "value-free" science that was championed by Hilferding – in other words, a 'science' that ultimately functioned as an ideological prop of the existing order.²⁵

A Case Study in the Neglect of Dialectics

It was our contention that dialectics is a dead letter in the IC, as is the struggle against pragmatism. The evidence we offered is that there hasn't been any articles or lectures on these issues in 20 years, and in the 2005 party summer school lectures the word pragmatism did not appear once. North countered this criticism by citing one article, his own critique of *Marx After Marxism* by Tom Rockmore,²⁶ but as we pointed out, this is a clear case of the exception proving the rule. In the philosophy archives of the WSWS, which go back to 1998, there isn't any other article on dialectics and nothing on pragmatism, and it is much the same picture if one were to go back a decade prior to the advent of the WSWS. Thus, even if the review of Rockmore's book were every bit the serious discussion of dialectics that North claims it to be, this one lone piece in two decades, no matter how profound, would still signify a shameful legacy of neglect of this central concern of Marxist theory.

²⁵ Lest anyone think that a positivist theory of history has no relevance for contemporary thought, that it is merely a remnant of a turn-of-the-last-century Social Democracy, a perusal of the work of the "Analytical Marxists" would prove salutary. This body of academic Marxism, first developed by G.A. Cohen in his 1978 book, *Karl Marx's Theory of History*, became very influential in the 1980's. Cohen and his associates worked out the logical implications of a positivist theory of history and soon found that there was little left in Marx with which it was compatible. Cohen originally started out as a defender of historical materialism while jettisoning the labor theory of value and of course dialectics. His version of "historical materialism" was however a form of technological determinism that evoked some of the work of the Second International but had little to do with Marx. Cohen's work spawned many other works which had even less to do with Marx. This is not the place to explore the Byzantine twists and turns of this philosophical misadventure but suffice it to say that Cohen and his associates were at least honest enough to make explicit their rejection of the methodological building blocks of Marxism.

²⁶ "Hegel, Marx, Engels, and the Origins of Marxism: A review of *Marx After Marxism: The Philosophy of Karl Marx* by Tom Rockmore", By David North, 2 May 2006, <http://wsws.org/articles/2006/may2006/rock-m02.shtml>

Unfortunately, North's article hardly qualifies as a discussion of dialectics at all. Its main concern is to beat back a tendentious interpretation of Marx and Engels by Professor Rockmore. Rockmore's book decries Engels as a vulgar positivist who did not absorb the subtlety and depth of Marx's thought. As for Marx, he is painted by Rockmore as a Hegelian, an idealist and a reformist. North's brief, as he sees it, is to rescue Marx and Engels from the distortions promulgated by Rockmore. The overwhelming bulk of this review is concerned with demonstrating that yes, Marx was indeed a materialist and Engels was no vulgar positivist. While we can agree with North in these conclusions, they do not in any way constitute an examination of dialectics. True, the word "dialectic" is mentioned a dozen times or so in the course of this two part series, about half the time in the words of others whom North quotes. But nowhere is there, outside a couple of quotes from Marx, even a brief discussion of the meaning of dialectics, whether it be the dialectics of Hegel or that of Marx.

Rather, the bulk of North's remarks on dialectics concern his amplification of Marx's statement: "My dialectical method is not only different from the Hegelian, but exactly the opposite to it." This leads North into a discussion of materialism versus idealism. What is interesting about this discussion is not what he says about materialism and idealism, but what he fails to say about dialectics. North's treatment of dialectics, if it can be called that, is in marked contrast to the attitude adopted by Lenin when he studied Hegel's *Logic* in the first months of World War One,

Dialectics is the theory of knowledge of (Hegel and) Marxism. This is the "aspect" of the matter (it is not "an aspect" but the essence of the matter) to which Plekhanov, not to speak of other Marxists, paid no attention ... Dialectics as living, many-sided knowledge (with the number of sides eternally increasing), with an infinite number of shades ... here we have an immeasurably rich content as compared with "metaphysical" materialism, the fundamental misfortune of which is its inability to apply dialectics to the *Bildertheorie*, to the process and development of knowledge.²⁷

Instead of a serious discussion of dialectics, North seizes on Rockmore's book as one more opportunity to don the mantle of orthodoxy in defense of materialism as he engages in combat against the professorial class. He is reprising the role of Kautsky and Plekhanov taking on Eduard Bernstein. But as we have seen, the defense of orthodoxy by the leaders of the Second International, while necessary, had a far from harmless subtext. For behind the defense of orthodoxy was hidden the internal decay of Marxist theory. Plekhanov's defense of materialism allowed him to elide the difference between Marxism and mechanical materialism. And whereas the idealism of Bernstein was the most obvious manifestation of the theoretical crisis of the Second International, the increasing influence of vulgar materialism, which evolved largely underneath the radar, in the end proved a more potent and long-lasting enemy of Marxism.

We can say, to paraphrase Marx, that all great polemical battles appear twice: the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce. If Plekhanov's polemics against Bernstein constituted an important if contradictory event in the history of Marxism, then North's

²⁷ V.I. Lenin, *Collected Works* Volume 38, (Progress Publishers), p. 360.

battle against Rockmore is little more than a sorry attempt to cover up a neglect of theory lasting over two decades.

North begins his piece by placing Rockmore's book within the context of what he calls the 'Pseudo-Hegelians.' North makes a valid point in identifying a group of academics who have reacted to the demise of the Soviet Union by searching for an alternative to Marx in the work of Hegel.²⁸ But as we have seen elsewhere, when North does make a valid point, it is often made one-sidedly and conceals something else. In this case, North avoids mentioning that the Hegel that is being resurrected by the 'Pseudo-Hegelians' is not the Hegel who inspired Marx when he wrote *Capital* – even as he critiqued him, nor the Hegel to which Lenin turned in 1914. Rather it is Hegel the political theorist and author of the *Philosophy of Right* to which this group turns – in short the most conservative part of Hegel.

It is also curious that North does not include in this group the political theorist Charles Taylor, who has been dubbed by some of his colleagues 'The Canadian Hegel'. (For some reason Canadians play a prominent role in this milieu..) For it is Taylor who actually pioneered that revival of Hegel even prior to the fall of the Soviet Union.²⁹ What motivated Taylor as well as a number of the other philosophers and political theorists mentioned by North was not only the need to find a 'leftist' alternative to Marx, but also the need to find a theoretical alternative to liberalism. Thus the Hegel that was resurrected by Taylor and others is the political theorist, whose critique of social contract theory – the touchstone of traditional liberalism – seemed to provide a more robust theoretical underpinning for reformist politics than was available in the works of Hobbes, Locke, Montesquieu and J.S. Mill. As to Hegel the dialectician, Taylor and the other Hegel revivalists make a point of rejecting what they consider the "mystical" and "speculative" parts of Hegel. With few exceptions, this group is not interested in a revival of the dialectic. The selective focus of this group has recently been noted by a Hegelian scholar,

²⁸ However, the term 'Pseudo-Hegelian' suggests a more coherent intellectual movement than actually exists, and some of the writers he mentions simply do not fit in. For instance, one of the 'Pseudo-Hegelians' that North identifies is Errol Harris. Now Harris may be a Hegelian, but there is little 'pseudo' about him. This 99 year old retired professor is about as close to an orthodox Hegelian as you are likely to find on either side of the Atlantic. He is one of the very few contemporary philosophers who have tried to defend Hegel as a metaphysician and profound religious thinker. He is also one of the very few contemporary philosophers who have seriously tried to develop Hegel's *Philosophy of Nature*. Another of the authors North mentions, David MacGregor, is on the fringe of Hegel scholarship with a very idiosyncratic interpretation of Hegel (to say the least) that is not accepted even by his fellow 'Pseudos'. MacGregor has in recent years proposed a kind of conspiracy theory to account for Hegel's apparent conservatism in his later years. According to MacGregor Hegel was part of a secret conspiratorial group and his public pronouncements were made to throw the conservative Prussian monarchy off the trail of he and his comrades. MacGregor makes this case in particular in his work, *Hegel and Marx after the Fall of Communism*, (University of Wales, 1998). It is partly on the basis of this historical interpretation that MacGregor concludes that Hegel was really a communist, and a more radical one at that than Marx. MacGregor's thesis is actually far less radical than it sounds once one understands that what he means by "communism" is little more than the welfare state of his native Canada.

²⁹ In his book, *Hegel*, (Cambridge University Press, 1975).

In the second half of the twentieth century Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* and *Philosophy of Right* began to reach and be read carefully by a much broader audience than ever before, thanks to the labors of commentators such as Jean Hyppolite and Charles Taylor. But many of Hegel's works still remain largely unexplored ... One Hegelian text that still languishes in particular obscurity is the monumental *Science of Logic*... Lenin, Heidegger, Gadamer, McTaggart, and Hyppolite all read the *Logic* and recognized its enormous importance for Hegel's system and for philosophy generally. Yet for most people today, and even for many Hegelians, the *Logic* remains both figuratively and literally a firmly closed book.³⁰

One can add to this that it is not only for Hegelians that the *Logic*, i.e. the dialectic, remains a closed book. It also remains a closed book for Marxists. The situation is hardly any better today than it was in 1914 when Lenin wrote in the margins of his Hegel notebooks that,

It is impossible fully to grasp Marx's *Capital*, and especially its first chapter, if you have not studied through and understood the whole of Hegel's *Logic*.

Consequently, none of the Marxists for the past ½ century have understood Marx!

³¹

North's review of Rockmore's book completely ignores this side of the Hegelian revival and contributes further to the neglect of the dialectic. Essentially what North does is to focus his fire on those who would revive Hegel's political philosophy while ignoring the burning necessity for a turn to a study of the dialectic. While we agree that the attempt to revive Hegel's political philosophy is a retrograde tendency, we part company with North's usage of this tendency to further reinforce a turn away from that which is revolutionary in Hegel, namely his dialectic. It is against this backdrop that we must examine some of North's arguments.

Against Rockmore, North is quick to point to Marx's articulation of his method as a materialist "inversion" of Hegel's. North writes,

Marx is saying, as clearly as he possibly can, that his own method is fundamentally different than Hegel's—"its direct opposite." And why? Because Hegel's dialectic is that of an idealist for whom the real world is a merely a manifestation of thought; whereas for Marx, thought forms are a reflection in the human mind of a real existing material world.

This is an easy point to make against Rockmore's attempt to paint Marx as an idealist. However, in doing so, North elides the more important question – namely – what kind of a materialist was Marx? To anyone who has read the Theses on Feuerbach, Marx was certainly not a materialist in the mould of the 18th century Enlightenment thinkers. Let us examine once more Marx's First Thesis on Feuerbach,

The chief defect of all hitherto existing materialism (that of Feuerbach included) is that things, reality, sensuousness, are conceived only in the form of the *object*, or of

³⁰ Stephen Houlgate, *The Opening of Hegel's Logic*, (Purdue University, 2006), p.1

³¹ Lenin, *Collected Works*, Volume 38, p. 180.

contemplation, but not as *human sensuous activity, practice*, not subjectively. Hence in contradistinction to materialism, the *active* side was set forth by idealism – but only abstractly, since of course, idealism does not know real sensuous activity as such.

What Marx is saying here is that his materialism is fundamentally different than all previous forms of materialism, including that of Feuerbach. He is also saying that the problem with materialism as it has evolved up till now was that it never could account for the active role of consciousness. The latter was in fact most thoroughly explored by idealism, by which Marx means the idealism that developed in the tradition from Kant to Hegel. But idealism was imprisoned within its own forms of mystification. The new standpoint that Marx articulates is therefore neither that of the old materialism or the old idealism but the sublation of both.

The word ‘sublation’ has become the accepted translation of the German *Aufheben*, a word that in German has a dual meaning for which there is no readily available English equivalent. It is necessary to point this out because in his document North takes us to task regarding our use of this key term in dialectical philosophy:

The manner in which you employ Hegelian phraseology is sophistry of the purest water. In place of a real explanation of the relationship between utopianism and Marxism, you resort to terms such as *aufheben* and “unity of opposites”. This is simply a means of saying nothing, and making it appear profound.

Yet *Aufheben* is no Hegelian chimera. This word is in fact one of the few where Hegel himself feels it incumbent to provide a definition. In the *Science of Logic*, Hegel writes that,

To sublatare, and the sublated (that which exists ideally as a moment), constitute one of the most important notions in philosophy.

[*Aufheben und das Aufgehobene (das Ideelle) ist einer der wichtigsten Begriffe der Philosophie.*]

It is a fundamental determination which repeatedly occurs throughout the whole of philosophy, the meaning of which is to be clearly grasped and especially distinguished from nothing. What is sublated is not thereby reduced to nothing...

‘To sublatare’ has a twofold meaning in the language: on the one hand it means to preserve, to maintain, and equally it also means to cause to cease, to put an end to...

Thus what is sublated is at the same time preserved; it has only lost its immediacy, but is not on that account annihilated.³²

Thus what North called “sophistry” is considered by Hegel to be a “fundamental determination which repeatedly occurs throughout the history of philosophy.” It is well

³² Hegel, *Science of Logic*, translated by A. V. Miller, (Humanities Press, 1969), p. 106-107.

known that Marx also employed the term, though it has rarely been translated consistently as “sublated”. Take, for example, the following passage from *Capital*,

We saw in a former chapter that the exchange of commodities implies contradictory and mutually exclusive conditions. The further development of the commodity does not abolish [*aufheben*] these contradictions, but rather provides the form within which they have room to move.³³

The reason that “*Aufheben*” does not concern North is that he has a non-dialectical grasp of the emergence of Marxism from out of the cauldron of French materialism and German idealism. That is why in his polemic with Rockmore, he fails to acknowledge the active side that was developed by idealism. While it is true to say that Marx was a materialist – this against Rockmore – it is just as true to say that Marx’s form of materialism was at once a cancellation and a preservation of this “active side” – i.e. a sublation. To miss that is to miss the difference between Marxism and “all hitherto existing materialism”.

Thus North’s piece is little more than a dishonest attempt to clothe himself in the mantle of the defense of orthodox Marxism while at the same time smearing over the contradictions between mechanical materialism and Marxism. North inevitably digs himself into a pile of evasions.

To illustrate, as he gets deeper into his subject, North castigates Rockmore for the statement that “few Marxists, including Lenin”, have made a careful study of Hegel. North writes that,

Again, Rockmore relies on the intellectual acquiescence of an academic community steeped in cynicism and indifference. He takes for granted that no one, at least in the academic milieu within which he operates, will take him to task for writing things that have absolutely no basis in fact. Has Rockmore ever bothered to review the writings of G. V. Plekhanov, the “Father of Russian Marxism”? Even those who disagree with Plekhanov’s philosophical conceptions could not claim, in good faith, that his familiarity with Hegel was anything less than exhaustive and profound. Is Rockmore unfamiliar with Lenin’s *Conspectus on Hegel’s Science of Logic*?

We agree with North that Lenin did indeed undertake a careful study of Hegel. There is however an incredible irony here for neither North nor any other writer for the WSWS has seen fit to make more than a passing reference to Lenin’s *Conspectus on Hegel’s Science of Logic* in two decades. In fact, the first serious discussion of Lenin’s *Hegel Notebooks* in any connection to the work of the International Committee since the 1980’s was the essay by Alex Steiner, *The Dialectical Path of Cognition and Revolutionizing Practice: A Reply to David North*, an essay that was written in response to North’s neglect of the dialectic. The truth is that it is not only Rockmore who is unfamiliar with this crucial contribution of Lenin’s to dialectical philosophy - so are the readers of the World Socialist Web Site.³⁴

³³ Marx, *Capital*, Volume I, translated by Ben Fowkes, (Penguin Classics), p.198.

A further point in this regard. In the course of an extended discussion about the Marx-Hegel relationship North makes a number of valid points against Rockmore. It is indeed absurd for Rockmore to claim that Marx was a Hegelian idealist, and even more absurd to claim that in Volume 3 of *Capital* Marx repudiated revolution and embraced reform. But North's own explanation of the Marx-Hegel relationship concentrates almost wholly on the materialist-idealist dichotomy and says barely anything about the dialectic. North therefore distorts what is a very complex subject into easily digestible sound bites. For instance, he tells us that contrary to Rockmore, Marx accepted a theory of reflection. But everything hinges on what one means by a 'theory of reflection'. According to North,

The crucial issue is whether the mind reflects an independent world.

But if that were really "the crucial issue" then virtually everyone in the history of modern philosophy, excepting only a few religious thinkers and solipsists such as Berkeley, could be classified as supporting a theory of reflection. There must be something more to it than that. And indeed, no sooner does North tell us what the crucial issue is than he goes on to qualify it to the point where it is no longer recognizable.

The ideal forms in which the material world is reflected are complex and contradictory. The ideal reproduction of the real in the human mind proceeds through a historically and socially-conditioned process of abstraction. In this specific sense, the mind is not functioning merely as a "mirror," in which reality is, on the basis of immediate reflection, reproduced in all its complexity.

We can agree with this latter statement, but then what has happened to the "crucial issue"? In fact, the real crucial issue is not the catch-all "whether the mind reflects an independent world" but *how* the mind cognizes this independent world. When the model of cognition is a kind of copy then we have what has been traditionally understood as a theory of reflection. In traditional reflection theory, a thought or a word corresponds to a thing. It is the simple one to one relationship that is characteristic of reflection theory. A dialectical theory of cognition on the other hand, while certainly acknowledging that thoughts reflect objective reality, rejects this one to one model of the relationship. (We may also add, to paraphrase a point made by Lenin in his *Hegel Notebooks*, that the mind, consciousness, does not merely reflect an objective world, it is also part of that world and transforms it through social practice.³⁵) But it was precisely this simplistic

³⁴ North's attitude to a study of Lenin's *Hegel Notebooks* can be gauged by the fact that to this day the WSWS has never even mentioned the only serious study to be published on the subject, Kevin Anderson's *Lenin, Hegel, and Western Marxism*. (University of Illinois Press, 1995). While there are very big problems with Anderson's treatment, particularly in his underestimation of Trotsky as a serious Marxist theoretician, the work nevertheless deserves critical attention. Mention might also be made of several other important philosophical works that have been published in the past twenty years that have been completely neglected by the WSWS. Above all, it is astonishing that the WSWS never wrote a review of Trotsky's *Philosophical Notebooks* although they were published way back in the 1980's. In more recent years, Lukacs' *Tailism and the Dialectic* was published. This book includes important previously unknown material defending his *History and Class Consciousness* against some of its detractors. And just last year, Bukharin's *Philosophical Arabesques* was published, also without comment from the WSWS.

³⁵ Steiner had an extensive discussion of the evolution of Lenin's conception of 'reflection' in his *Dialectical Path of Cognition*. It is relevant to North's discussion with Rockmore for Steiner shows that by 1914 Lenin had gone beyond the simple model of 'reflection' characteristic of Second International

version of cognition that characterized much of the vulgar Marxism that was propounded by Stalinism over several decades. North correctly points to the work of Soviet philosophers such as Ilyenkov who challenged this vulgarized model of cognition, but he fails to acknowledge that reflection theory as it has been understood traditionally, is indeed incompatible with a dialectical theory of cognition.

North berates Rockmore for providing a potted explanation of the following quote from Marx (in the Postface to the Second German Edition of *Capital*), "...if the life of the subject matter is ideally reflected as in a mirror, then it may appear as if we had before us a mere *a priori* construction." He says that Rockmore deliberately distorts the meaning

Marxism. A key passage from that discussion follows.

In the latter notes, [i.e. in his Hegel Notebooks] Lenin still sometimes uses the term "reflection" to denote the relationship between ideas and reality, but this is no longer a passive reflection that merely accepts images from an external world. Rather he is emphasizing the active role of consciousness in deriving concepts and separating appearance from essence. For instance,

"The reflection of nature in man's thought must be understood not "lifelessly", not "abstractly", not devoid of movement, not without contradictions, but in the eternal process of movement, the arising of contradictions and their solution." (Lenin, C.W. Volume 38, p. 195)

Or take the following oft-repeated statement:

"Thought proceeding from the concrete to the abstract ... does not get away from the truth but comes closer to it. The abstraction of matter, of a law of nature, the abstraction of value, etc., in short all scientific abstractions reflect nature more deeply, truly and completely. From living perception to abstract thought, and from this to practice, - such is the dialectical path of the cognition of truth, of the cognition of objective reality." (Lenin, C.W. Volume 38, p. 171)

Or as a final example we have following statement that summarizes Lenin's new view of the transformation of the subjective into the objective:

"The thought of the ideal passing into the real is profound: very important for history. But also in the personal life of a man it is clear that this contains much truth. Against vulgar materialism. NB. The difference between the ideal from the material is also not unconditional, not *uberschwenglich* [inordinate]." (Lenin, C.W. Volume 38, p. 114)

There is nothing like this in his earlier philosophical work. There he emphasized the dichotomy between the ideal and the real. Here he is emphasizing both their dichotomy and their unity. The relationship of the ideal to the real is a unity in difference.

Elsewhere in his document Steiner cites the justly-famous quote by Lenin,

"Alias: Man's consciousness not only reflects the objective world, but creates it." (CW Volume 38, 212)

After which Steiner comments,

The vulgar materialist, whether crude or sophisticated, always insists that man's consciousness reflects the objective world, but forgets the second part of Lenin's thesis, that it also **transforms** (a better word than "creates") the world from which it has arisen.

http://www.permanent-revolution.org/polemics/dialectical_path.pdf

of this passage to avoid the conclusion that Marx held to a reflection theory. What Rockmore said of the above passage is that,

Marx's wording here easily creates misunderstanding. He is obviously not espousing the reflection theory of knowledge pioneered for Marxism by Engels. He is also not saying that knowledge in fact requires that mind literally reflect an independent world.³⁶

Now we can agree that Rockmore's identification of Engels as a crude empiricist and positivist has no basis in the historical record. But Rockmore is correct in saying that Marx's wording can easily create misunderstanding – although his explanation of that misunderstanding is wrong. What is so prone to be misunderstood is the “mirror” metaphor, an image that encourages one to think that, yes indeed, perhaps Marx did hold to a reflection theory of truth in the traditional sense. However, in the context of the entire passage from which this quote is taken, it is clear that Marx did not hold any such theory. Perhaps even more to the point, the mirror metaphor appears in the old Moscow translation of *Capital* and is used by both Rockmore and North. In the far superior Fowkes translation of *Capital*, the mirror metaphor is not present at all. Here is the entire paragraph from that translation:

Of course the method of presentation must differ in form from that of inquiry. The latter has to appropriate the material in detail, to analyse its different forms of development and to track down their inner connection. Only after this work has been done can the real movement be appropriately presented. If this is done successfully, if the life of the subject-matter is now reflected back in the ideas, then it may appear as if we have before us an *a priori* construction.³⁷

This whole matter of reflection theory demonstrates yet again that you cannot master the complex problems of the philosophical development of Marxism by resorting to the undialectical materialism characteristic of Plekhanov and the theoreticians of the Second International. What inevitably results is a botched effort that obscures more than it reveals. And how could it be otherwise given the IC's decades-long neglect of dialectics?

Finally, let us consider North's attempted rescue of Engels from the charge brought by Rockmore that the latter was little more than a vulgar positivist. Once more, North makes a correct point here – Engels is not guilty of the charges brought by Rockmore and a host of others – while at the same time papering over a fundamental historical question. The issue North will not touch is the embrace by the leading theoreticians of the Second International of the methods of positivism. And while it is completely unfair to lay the blame for this theoretical collapse at the feet of Engels, the fact of this theoretical collapse cannot be denied. We have previously discussed the theoretical collapse of the Second International and need not repeat that here. It is however worth quoting Marcuse's succinct summary of this epochal experience in the history of Marxism,

³⁶ Rockmore, *Marx after Marxism*, p.131

³⁷ *Capital, Volume I*, (Penguin Classics), p. 102

With the repudiation of the dialectic, the revisionists falsified the nature of the laws that Marx saw ruling society. We recall Marx's view that the natural laws of society gave expression to the blind and irrational processes of capitalist reproduction, and that the socialist revolution was to bring emancipation from these laws. In contrast to this, the revisionists argued that the social laws are 'natural' laws that guarantee the inevitable development towards socialism. 'The great achievement of Marx and Engels lay in the fact that they had better success than their predecessors in weaving the realm of history into the realm of necessity and thus elevating history to the rank of a science.' (Kautsky) The critical Marxist theory the revisionists thus tested by the standards of positivist sociology and transformed into natural science. In line with the inner tendencies of the positivist reaction against 'negative philosophy', the objective conditions that prevail were hypostatized, and human practice was rendered subordinate to their authority.³⁸

North's defense of orthodoxy inevitably dances around the question of what happened to the great defenders of orthodoxy in the past. A philosophically serious critique of Rockmore would not stop in absolving Engels of the charge of positivism, but would have to deal with the reasons why positivism did in fact arise and eventually dominate the Second International. But this North cannot do because his version of Marxism has no room for the dialectic. He is unable to provide a serious diagnosis of the causes and etiology of the disease to which the Second International (and, one might add, the American Socialist Workers Party later on) succumbed. This is the fruit of the turn away from dialectics.

A new generation looking to Marxism for answers to the crisis that besets us today will not find it in a reread of the orthodoxy of the Second International. Unfortunately, this is all they will get out of North's philosophical exercise. What passed for Marxism in the Second International paved the way for the great betrayal of 1914. The enormity of that betrayal was unsurpassed in its time and was only overtaken by the even greater betrayals of Stalinism a decade later. Any attempt to return today to some idealized version of a "healthy" Social Democracy will only pave the way for new betrayals in the future. What is needed today is not a return to orthodoxy, but a return to Marx's dialectic, the only comprehensive theory of change to arise out of the Western tradition.³⁹ Only then will philosophy rise beyond the level of mere contemplation and become a force, wedded to the struggles of the working class, in changing the world.

© Copyright 2007 by Frank Brenner and Alex Steiner. All rights reserved.

³⁸ Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution*, p. 398.

³⁹ The contemporary evolutionary scientist, Stanley H. Salthe, has written, 'It is time to consider the relations between emergence and the only theory of change constructed in Western culture: dialectics.' *Development and Evolution: Complexity and Change in Biology*, (MIT Press, 1993), p. 227.