

## Chapter IV:

### The Long Road Back to Pragmatism

We made the point that so invisible has pragmatism become in the IC's outlook that when the late Richard Rorty<sup>1</sup> was discussed in one of North's lectures, no mention was made of his role as the leading proponent of pragmatism. North shrugs this off:

Do you seriously believe that no one in the audience knew that Richard Rorty, America's most celebrated philosopher, is a pragmatist? Or that they were unaware that postmodernism is itself a major tendency within contemporary pragmatic philosophy. (17-18)

In other words, it wasn't worth mentioning because everyone already knew. But how did they know? Surely not from the WSWS, since there has never been an article examining Rorty's evolution in the context of the history of pragmatism, much less an analysis of the relationship of postmodernism to contemporary pragmatism, or for that matter any discussion at all of contemporary pragmatism.<sup>2</sup> It is utter nonsense to suppose that workers and youth unfamiliar with philosophical literature will automatically know of Rorty's affiliation to pragmatism, much less of the latter's relationship to postmodernism. This is nothing more than a crass evasion on North's part. The truth is that Rorty's pragmatist credentials weren't mentioned because the fight against pragmatism is of absolutely no interest to the IC of today.

But there is something more in North's formulation that needs to be considered. When North says that "postmodernism is itself a major tendency within contemporary pragmatic philosophy" *he is in effect saying that by attacking postmodernism he has therefore disposed of pragmatism and we need no longer be concerned with it.*

To write that "postmodernism is itself a major tendency within contemporary pragmatic philosophy" without any further discussion or clarification, as North does, is to accept the narrative woven by Rorty himself, who made the following astonishing statement when characterizing the relationship between pragmatism and postmodernism:

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<sup>1</sup> Rorty passed away earlier this summer (2007).

<sup>2</sup> Steiner included a brief discussion of Rorty in an article on Martin Heidegger published in the WSWS: <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2000/apr2000/heid-a05.shtml>. Nevertheless the topic of Rorty and postmodernism was incidental to the main theme in that essay. The WSWS has also featured discussions of Rorty's politics, but pointedly, not his philosophy: <http://www.wsws.org/polemics/1996/oct1996/colum.htm>

James and Dewey were not only waiting at the end of the dialectical road which analytic philosophy traveled, but are waiting at the end of the road which, for example, Foucault and Deleuze are currently traveling.<sup>3</sup>

Rorty's narrative does contain a partial truth. There is some justification for Rorty claiming the legacy of William James (and the French postmodernists for that matter). James after all, pretty much invented the notion of pluralism as a guiding principle in both epistemological and political matters. Thus he can with some legitimacy be seen as the precursor of Rorty's attack on the possibility of objective truth or the postmodernists' notion of 'otherness' and '*differance*'.<sup>4</sup> Although even there, Rorty's claim to the legacy of James would have to be qualified. For one thing, Rorty denies that philosophy is of any importance whatsoever for political life. It is basically a private matter in which every individual constructs his or her own 'narrative' of the way the world works.<sup>5</sup> James on the other hand thought that the personal and the political were inseparable. James also held to a notion of human nature that was determined through the mechanism of Darwinian evolution. Rorty rejects all such claims about human nature as holdovers from metaphysics and 'essentialism'. Yet it cannot be denied that Rorty took a few basic themes in the work of James and radicalized them in the direction of postmodernism. Rorty can therefore with some legitimacy see himself as the culmination of the Jamesian strand of pragmatism and its convergence with postmodernism.

However, when it comes to the legacy of Dewey that is quite another matter. Although in his public pronouncements, Rorty has claimed this legacy - much more insistently than that of James - many followers of Dewey bristle at the suggestion.<sup>6</sup> As we will see, Dewey's instrumentalism is very far removed from Rorty's brand of neo-pragmatism.<sup>7</sup>

North apparently accepts Rorty's account of the evolution of pragmatism and its culmination in Rorty. This is made clear when North, quoting himself, writes of Rorty that,

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<sup>3</sup> Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism*, p. xviii

<sup>4</sup> Rorty has argued, again with some degree of legitimacy, that Nietzsche is another precursor of his in this respect. On the other hand, his claim to a Hegelian pedigree is based on a crude misreading of Hegel's notion of historicism.

<sup>5</sup> To quote Rorty, '...within our increasingly ironist culture, philosophy has become more important for the pursuit of private perfection rather than for any social task.' Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge, 1989), p.94.

<sup>6</sup> For example, the contemporary pragmatists David Depew and Robert Hollinger have written, "On no possible interpretation, however, can Dewey be construed as treating democratic culture as one in which the private expressive life is to thrive at the expense of the public life of shared learning, making and governing. What is more seriously doubtful however is whether Rorty's refusal to regard the public sphere as a site for the realization of intrinsic goods is consistent with the deepest impulses of pragmatism itself, and its continuity as a tradition over time...Rorty's version of pragmatism incorporates the ideas of Max Weber and Daniel Bell more than the ideas of Dewey." Depew and Hollinger, "Introduction: Pragmatism and the Postmodern Condition", in *Pragmatism: From Progressivism to Postmodernism*, (Praeger, 1995), p. 236.

<sup>7</sup> Still another commentator, remarking on the kinship between Rorty and James, made the following observation, "Rorty can choose whomever he wishes for his philosophical grandfather. But it is surprising that Rorty should find in Dewey, more than in William James, an appropriate ancestor. After all, much of Rorty's recent work ... would seem to have a more appropriate and obvious precursor in James." George Cotkin, William James and Richard Rorty: Context and Conversation, in *Pragmatism: From Progressivism to Postmodernism*, p. 38.

He proposes to banish from discussion the product of more than 200 years of social thought. Underlying this proposal is the conception that the development of thought itself is a purely arbitrary and largely subjective process. Words, theoretical concepts, logical categories, and philosophical systems are merely verbal constructs, *pragmatically* conjured up in the interest of various subjective ends. The claim that the development of theoretical thought is an objective process, expressing man's evolving, deepening, and ever-more complex and precise understanding of nature and society is, as far as Rorty is concerned, nothing more than a Hegelian-Marxian shibboleth. (18)

North then rhetorically asks,

Is this not, Comrades Steiner and Brenner, a concise and correct explanation of an essential conflict between Marxism and pragmatism? (18)

No Comrade North, this is not a correct explanation of the essential conflict between Marxism and pragmatism.

## **The Janus Face of Pragmatism**

While North's characterization may serve as a depiction (again with some qualifications) of James's form of subjective idealism, it leaves out of the picture the far more influential varieties of pragmatism represented by Peirce, Dewey and their intellectual descendents. Contrary to Rorty (and North), Dewey would doubtless roll over in his grave if anyone had asked him whether he thought that his philosophy would eventually culminate in the subjective idealism and cultural relativism of Rorty and the French postmodernists.

What North's explanation buries is precisely what has characterized pragmatism from its inception in the writings of C.S. Peirce and William James - its dualistic nature. Pragmatism presents us with a Janus face, encompassing both a subjective and an objective visage in uneasy residence under the same banner. The subjective side of this duality can be located in the extreme individualism and cultural relativism championed by William James. The version of neo-pragmatism championed by Rorty and other contemporary neo-pragmatists such as Stanley Fish and Donald Davidson clearly traces its lineage to this tradition. The objective side of this duality, on the other hand, can be traced back to C.S. Peirce and John Dewey. Hilary Putnam and Nicholas Rescher are some of the leading contemporary exponents of this trend, which can be called, following the nomenclature of Nicholas Rescher, 'objectivist pragmatism'.

Objectivist pragmatism repudiates the relativistic conclusions of Rorty and company and seeks to ground philosophy in something like Peirce's idea of a scientific community or Dewey's concept of experience. Peirce had a strong commitment to the objective nature of scientific truths, though insisting on their tentative and fallible status. Dewey's philosophy of instrumentalism likewise sought to ground ideas in the collective experience of a historically situated community. It is clearly at odds with James appeal to personal intuition.

What is the basis for such contradictory theories coexisting under the same label? This was first explained by Leon Samson, an American Marxist social theorist of the 1930s, who wrote:

It is also of interest to note that this contradiction that inheres in pragmatism is natural to a nation that is in the process of transition to an imperial order or things. Imperialism, as is well known, shifts the focus of a nation's history from internal self-development, which depends in the main, on the competitive capacity of enterprising individualism, to a policy of a "place in the sun," that, finding a unified national front politically indispensable, can no longer tolerate declarations of independence among its individual members and demands, on the contrary, a mood of fatalistic surrender to an objective destiny. This is the reason pragmatism, appearing in America during its imperial turning point, was bound to be torn into the two opposite poles of subjective and objective, theoretic self-sufficiency and practical applicability, the illusion of fancy and the fatality of fact. And this is also the reason for the earlier Jamesian emphasis on the subjective and the latter-day Deweyan emphasis on the objective test for truth. For instrumentalism, in a measure, abandons the Jamesian base, when instead of talking about the "will to believe" it increasingly emphasizes the social barometer for truth and thus reflects more closely the contemporary imperialistic leavening of the people, their reduction to de-individualized Behavioristic robots.<sup>8</sup>

Samson's insight into the dual character of pragmatism was more fully explored in a relatively recent study of the impact of pragmatism on the Marxist movement in the United States by Brian Lloyd. Lloyd wrote,

This duality [of pragmatism], I argue, represents the manifestation in philosophy of the faultline that historians of U.S. political thought have charted by distinguishing during this same period between an old and new liberalism – roughly, a politics rendered obsolete by and a politics geared to accommodate the emergence of corporate capitalism. James's fear and loathing of the big and the national correspond to the outlook of the petty bourgeoisie that dominated the mercantile culture of small proprietor, localized capitalism. He battled the philosophical world's totalizing abstractions and acquisitive monisms with the same aggrieved sense of purpose that motivated this class to fight the monopolists and the gold bugs. The mission Dewey assigned to philosophy embodied a different set of ideological imperatives. While James defended the individual and the immediate against the indignities of big organizations and expansive concepts, Dewey saw great promise in the cooperative and social character of industrial America and modern science. Like the builders of the modern corporation, he was driven to produce a more

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<sup>8</sup> Leon Samson, *The New Humanism*, p. 5-6. Samson is an intriguing figure about whom very little is known. He wrote three books (at least that we know of), the last and most influential being *Toward a United Front: A Philosophy for American Workers* (1933). From the books themselves, it is evident that he was a Marxist, and it seems that Samson was either a supporter or member of the Trotskyist movement in the Thirties. (The source for the last piece of information is Prof. Michael Kazin, who, in response to a query from Brenner, related that Irving Howe had told him that he had known Samson in the Thirties and that he was then a Trotskyist.)

general and impersonal kind of knowledge than circulated in face-to-face communities of farmers and merchants. His credo that “abstraction is liberation” matched the strategy of the railroad magnate, the scientific manager, and the financier, who plotted in their own way to order and control the particulars or raw experience – specifically, to subordinate the local, the artisanal, and the laissez-faire to the rationality of mass production and the imperatives of a national market. In his preference for the continuous over the discrete, the coordinated over the disjointed, the integrated over the autonomous, Dewey sided in the realm of ideology with the real-life despoilers of all that James held dear.<sup>9</sup>

Samson’s and Lloyd’s historical approach clarifies the common misconception that sees a similarity between pragmatism, particularly its Peircean/Deweyan variant, and many of the fundamental tenets of Marxism. The tentative nature of scientific knowledge, the repudiation of dogma and formalism, the rejection of rigid dichotomies between fact and value, the recognition of the social construction and class origins of ideology, and the placing of social practice at the center of the theory of knowledge are all trends that over the years have impressed some into theorizing a convergence between Marxism and pragmatism.<sup>10</sup> Yet history shows that this supposed convergence was largely a misunderstanding, resulting on the one hand from the low level of theoretical development of the early American Marxist and socialist movement, where pragmatism largely filled the void, and on the other hand the temporary alliance between the working class and a section of the petty bourgeoisie and intelligentsia who rebelled against the harsh consequences of American capitalism and the horrors of an unbridled imperialism.<sup>11</sup>

The tension between Rorty’s brand of neo-pragmatism and the classical formulations of pragmatism were thus present at the very beginning. Peirce found William James’s subjectivist appropriation of pragmatism so disconcerting that he was considering renaming his doctrine “pragmaticism” to distinguish it from James’s enterprise.

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<sup>9</sup> Brian Lloyd, *Left Out: Pragmatism, Exceptionalism, and the Poverty of American Marxism 1890-1922*, pp. 24-25. Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997.

<sup>10</sup> Among the numerous pragmatists who attempted to reconcile pragmatism with Marxism Max Eastman and Sidney Hook were perhaps the most noteworthy. Eastman in particular deserves serious attention as he was early on the most vociferous champion of a lobotomy of the dialectic from Marxist theory. Eastman felt that Marxism could become a genuine science only if it was shorn of what he considered its mystical Hegelian heritage.

<sup>11</sup> George Novack, along with other commentators, notes that Dewey first came to prominence as a philosopher in the age of the Robber Barons and became the high-minded spokesperson for the ideas of Progressivism as a political movement:

Dewey belongs wholly to this movement. He was a foremost participant in many of its most important enterprises. In time he became the supreme and unchallenged theoretical head of the movement...Dewey performed for the philosophy of Progressivism a service similar to that performed by Henry George and Veblen for its economics, Beard for its history, Parrington for its literary criticism, Holmes and Brandeis for its jurisprudence, Sandburg for its poetry, Charles Edward Russell and Lincoln Steffens for its journalism.

George Novack, *Pragmatism versus Marxism: An Appraisal of John Dewey’s Philosophy*, Pathfinder Press, p. 40.

The contemporary pragmatist Nicholas Rescher considers the endeavors of Rorty and other neo-pragmatists to be diametrically opposed to the Peircean tradition:

In recent years, pragmatism has been further transmogrified by theorists who have quite other axes to grind. In their hands, too, it has become something very different from its Peircean original – an instrument, not for pursuing objective validity, but rather one for demolishing the very idea of objectivity in these matters. In this way, pragmatism has been transformed step-by-step with postmodern theorists from William James to Richard Rorty into a means for authorizing a free and easy “anything goes” parochialism that casts objectivity to the winds. We have a total dissolution – a deconstruction or indeed a destruction – of the Peircean approach that saw the rational validity of intellectual artifacts to reside in the capacity to provide effective guidance in matters of prediction, planning, and intervention in the course of nature.<sup>12</sup>

It is **this** branch of objectivist pragmatism, along with its cousins empiricism and positivism that today represents the biggest theoretical challenge facing the Marxist movement. But North’s identifying of postmodernism and pragmatism conveniently ignores **this other branch** of pragmatism. North is attempting to cover up the failure of the movement to do any serious theoretical work on the pressing issues presented by classical pragmatism. Where are the essays on John Dewey, Sidney Hook, and Hilary Putnam? (North did present a lecture on Dewey about a decade ago, but that was concerned primarily with Dewey’s politics and only tangentially with his philosophy.) And while postmodernism certainly exerts some influence, particularly among academics and middle class radicals, we are not the first ones to note that the grip of the ‘POMOS’ is definitely on the wane today. One indication of this is the refusal of all but a handful of diehards to label themselves as “postmodernists”.

By ignoring the major division within the tradition of pragmatism North can claim that he has disposed of pragmatism when all he has done is engage in some superficial jabs against postmodernism. And the treatment of postmodernism is hardly any better. We made the point in Objectivism or Marxism that,

The critique [of postmodernism] in the summer school lectures is notable for how theoretically threadbare it is. We get virtually no analysis of the ideas of Derrida or Foucault or Rorty. Philosophical problems are reduced to a simple litmus test – for or against objective reality; beyond that, they are a mere sideshow to politics. Hurling a few very belated barbs at postmodernism is not the development of revolutionary theory but its evasion.

North’s claim that the only progeny of pragmatism are the most irrational schools of subjective idealism is but another evasion of the responsibility to examine Deweyism and its influence on the Marxist movement. To reinforce his claim, he even goes so far as to

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<sup>12</sup> Nicholas Rescher, *Realistic Pragmatism: An Introduction to Pragmatic Philosophy*, p 63.

enlist two minor intellectual supporters of Italian fascism, Giovanni Pappini and Giuseppe Prezzolini, as negative poster boys for the perils of Jamesian subjective idealism. Now it is true that William James's form of pragmatism accentuated the subjective idealist tendencies within that movement and it is also true that Pappini and Prezzolini had been inspired by their reading of James, but the mystical viewpoint of Pappini has about as much to do with the ideas of Peirce and Dewey as a higher primate bears resemblance to a nematode, although both have a common ancestor. One may as well blame the Futurist and Modernist movements in art for Pappini, as he was also an enthusiastic supporter of those movements. Compare the words of Pappini,

I did not accept reality. No words can express my disgust at the physical, human, rational world, which suppressed me and did not leave room and air enough for my restless wings,<sup>13</sup>

with those of C.S. Peirce,

Different minds may set out with the most antagonistic views, but the progress of investigation carries them by a force outside of themselves to one and the same conclusion. This activity of thought by which we are carried, not where we wish, but to a foreordained goal, is like the operation of destiny. No modification of the point of view taken, no selection of other facts for study, no natural bent of mind even, can enable a man to escape the predestinate opinion. This great law is embodied in the conception of truth and reality. The opinion which is fated to be ultimately agreed to by all who investigate, is what we mean by the truth, and the object represented in this opinion is the real.<sup>14</sup>

While there are certainly problems with Peirce's concept of truth as that which naturally emerges as the consensus of a scientific community, it is still many miles distant from Pappini's extreme personalism and subjective idealism. It is however much easier to declaim against the worst excesses of irrationalism and postmodernism than to engage in a serious critique of classical pragmatism precisely because it is the latter that has historically been a major influence within American Marxism.

There is something further that needs to be said about North introducing into a discussion of pragmatism the theories of such intellectual lightweights as Pappini and Prezzolini. This is North's intellectual dishonesty. North quotes Pappini as a singular lesson in the dangers of the pragmatist elevation of voluntarism. North fails to mention that the source for his discussion of Pappini and Prezzolini, Cornelis De Waal's book, *On Pragmatism*, discusses them in the context of an overview of the Florentine school of pragmatism that thrived in the years prior to the First World War. As De Waal's account demonstrates, the Florentine school of pragmatism exhibited the same dualism that marks pragmatism as whole. For within the Florentine school one could find not only the "magical pragmatism" of Pappini and Prezzolini, but a variant of objectivist pragmatism in the

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<sup>13</sup> *Un uomo finito*, 1912 <http://www.kirjasto.sci.fi/papini.htm>

<sup>14</sup> C.S. Peirce, "How to Make Our Ideas Clear" in the anthology, *Pragmatism: A Reader*, edited by Louis Menand, p. 45.

works of Giovanni Vailati and Mario Calderoni. This version of Florentine pragmatism, what De Waal calls “logical pragmatism”, took its inspiration not from James but the work of Peirce. De Waal includes a nice summary of the differences between the divergent strains of Florentine pragmatism:

According to Vailati, pragmatism is often misinterpreted as a justification for the subject’s believing anything she wants to believe. This he calls the pragmatism of the will-to-believers. In contrast, Vailati argues that pragmatism ought to go in the opposite direction. Far from suggesting a subjective turn, pragmatism embodies a quest for more objectivity by its unrelenting insistence on experiments and hard facts. The pragmatic maxim is not a personal criterion but a public criterion, in which meaning and truth are interpreted in terms of the scientific method.<sup>15</sup>

Though North goes out of his way to dig up the long forgotten work of Pappini and Prezollini, he does not examine the views of their Florentine opponents or even hint at their existence. He cannot claim ignorance for the source for his discussion of Pappini and Prezolini, the book by De Waal, fully documents their conflict with Vailati and Calderoni. Similarly, in his discussion of Rorty and his version of neo-pragmatism, North ignores the legacy of Dewey. What accounts for this one-sided take on pragmatism, to say nothing of the decades-long ignoring of the subject that preceded it? The answer is evident in North’s remarks on what he considers to be the main philosophical problem we face today:

You write in the most haughtily abstract manner of the need for a struggle against pragmatism, but seem wholly unaware that it spawned numerous tendencies in the 20<sup>th</sup> century that sought to dissolve – through the extreme glorification of the transformative capacities of human practice – the essential ontological distinction, upon which dialectical materialism insists, between the objective world and the forms of its reflection in subjective consciousness. From the recognition that the world in which man lives is one acted upon and changed by human activity, certain pragmatic tendencies proclaimed it philosophically absurd to speak of an *objective* reality, existing independently of man, that places limits on man’s activity. Thus, from the absence of an absolute separation between object and subject, they deduced the non-existence of even a relative separation. The subjective premises of James’ pragmatism were developed in this extreme form by F.C.J Schiller, Henri Bergson, Georges Sorel, and the Italians Giuseppe Prezzolini and Giovanni Pappini. The latter are particularly significant, inasmuch as the politically fascistic implications of the extreme forms of subjective voluntarism espoused in their pragmatism emerge most openly. (33)

Thus, for North, the main problem posed by pragmatism is the possibility of an extreme voluntarism. North makes this statement explicitly and even generalizes it to encompass the entire history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century:

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<sup>15</sup> Cornelis De Waal, *On Pragmatism*, p 81. Wadsworth Philosophical Topics, 2005.



Pragmatic voluntarism can have disastrous results even in the context of radical left politics. A political initiative that is based on an impressionistic appraisal of the objective situation, which assumes that subjective determination can, under all circumstances, impart to the political situation a revolutionary potential that may not be present objectively, can leave the working class exposed to a devastating counter-attack.

This danger, I should stress, is not merely a theoretical possibility. The history of 20th century revolutionary movements is littered with the political and social wreckage created by voluntarist policies that ignored the objective logic of law-governed historical and socio-economic processes. Stalin's policies (i.e. collectivization, super-rapid industrialization) should provide sufficient proof of the disastrous consequences of policies formulated with insufficient knowledge of or indifference to the existing objective conditions and which exaggerate the transformative revolutionary potential of subjective will. (34-35)

But this is simply to read the history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century upside down. ***The main philosophical problem facing the American working class, as indeed the international working class, is not excessive voluntarism, but precisely the opposite, an excessive willingness to adapt to existing reality.*** This is the basis of all forms of opportunism and reformism. It is the underlying ideology of trade unionism. And it is this ideology that has received sustenance from the objectivist forms of pragmatism.

It is one thing when Trotsky criticized the voluntarist turns of the Stalinist bureaucracy in the 1930s and it is quite another when North declaims against the dangers of excessive voluntarism. For in North's case his statements have to be viewed in the context of a movement whose main activity is commenting on events. What an objectivist practice always lacks is the quality of revolutionary will. Trotsky put it thus:

It is necessary to remember that Marxism both interprets the world but also teaches how to change it. The will is the motor force in the domain of knowledge too. The moment Marxism loses its will to transform in a revolutionary way political reality, at that moment it loses the ability to correctly understand political reality.<sup>16</sup>

Furthermore, North's assessment that the essence of Stalinism is practice based on an excessive voluntarism goes counter to the historically worked-out perspective the Trotskyist movement has developed over many decades. The essence of Stalinism was an opportunist adaptation to the status quo of an isolated workers state in a backward country. The Stalinist bureaucracy reacted pragmatically to the objective situation it encountered. In its early stages these pragmatic adaptations were capable of a left wing and "voluntarist" character to be sure. Thus we see the episodes of forced collectivization in the late 1920s and the ultra-left Stalinist policy of the "Third Period" in

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<sup>16</sup> Leon Trotsky, "Perspectives on American Marxism: Open Letter to V. F. Calverton", Nov. 4, 1932, in *Writings of Leon Trotsky: 1932*, p. 296.

the early 1930s whereby the Social Democrats were labeled “social fascists” and any possibility of a united front against Nazism was ruled out. Similar episodes were repeated in the history of Chinese Stalinism. In the early 1950s Mao proclaimed the “Great Leap Forward” which sought to industrialize China overnight by building furnaces in every peasant’s backyard. In the 1960s Mao proclaimed the “Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution” during which students were mobilized in a campaign against a section of the bureaucracy that was said to be taking “the capitalist road”. But these turned out to be merely swings within the context of an overall right wing orientation. It is clear today, as it was to the Trotskyist movement at the time, that these ultra-left adventures were merely episodic reactions within a fundamentally right wing turn. Trotsky, when analyzing the experience of the struggle against Stalinism at the time of the Seventh Congress of the Communist International, summarized it thus:

In the very heat of the “Third Period” we forecasted with absolute precision that this paroxysm of ultra-Leftism would lead inevitably to a new opportunistic zigzag, immeasurably more profound and fatal than all those preceding. In the days when the Communist International still played with all the rainbow colors of “revolutionary defeatism”, we warned that from the theory of “socialism in a single country” there would flow inevitably social-patriotic conclusions with all their treacherous consequences. The Seventh Congress of the Comintern provided a truly remarkable confirmation of the Marxian prognosis. And what happened? The leaders of the S.A.P., who have forgotten everything and learned nothing, hail the new and severest stage of an incurable disease, discovering in it symptoms . . . of a realistic convalescence. Isn’t it clear that we have two irreconcilable positions before us?

From the above-indicated point of view, it is in the highest degree interesting what will be the precise reaction to the Seventh Congress of that Left-Centrist party which has been hitherto closest to the Communist International, namely, the I.L.P. of England. Will it be attracted by the vile “realism” of the Seventh Congress (“united front”, “masses”, “middle classes”, etc., etc.) or will it, on the contrary, be repelled by the belated and all the more fatal opportunism (class collaboration under the hollow banner of “anti-Fascism”, social-patriotism under the cover of the “defense of the U.S.S.R.”, etc.)? The future fate of the I.L.P. hinges upon this alternative.

One may say, in general, that regardless of the isolated partial stages and episodes, the turn of the Communist International sealed by the Congress simplifies the situation in the working class movement. It consolidates the social-patriotic camp, bringing closer the parties of the Second and Third Internationals, regardless how matters proceed with organizational unity. It strengthens the centrifugal tendencies within the Centrist groupings. To the revolutionary internationalists, i.e., the builders of the Fourth International, it opens up all the greater possibilities.<sup>17</sup>

As far as Trotsky was concerned then, what finally marked the political character of Stalinism was not its occasional voluntarist episodes, but the,

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<sup>17</sup> “On The Seventh Congress of the Comintern”, first published in *New International* October 1935, Volume 2 No. 6 pages 177-179.  
<http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/works/1935/1935-comintern.htm>

...vile “realism” of the Seventh Congress (“united front”, “masses”, “middle classes”, etc., etc.)”, which was marked by “...fatal opportunism (class collaboration under the hollow banner of “anti-Fascism”, social-patriotism under the cover of the “defense of the U.S.S.R.”, etc.)

The corollary phenomenon that Trotsky highlights in the above passage is the reaction to this voluntarism on the part of centrist outfits like the Independent Labour Party. The ILP, while criticizing the ‘excessive voluntarism’ of the Comintern during its brief period of ultra-left swings, felt more comfortable when Stalinism found its natural equilibrium in a turn toward open class collaboration. North, on the other hand, prefers to focus on voluntarism as the main danger to rationalize his own abstentionism. And that means burying the fight against the principal strand of pragmatism, the one that stems from Dewey.

## **Deweyism and the Dialectic**

Deweyism in particular has played an important role in cementing an alliance between the petty bourgeois intelligentsia and American capitalism. Although the initial impulse of Deweyism lay in the Progressive movement and its hostility to capitalism, by the turn of the century this movement was played out. When the petty bourgeois intelligentsia made their peace with American capitalism they at the same time invoked the specifically American character of Deweyism as a counterweight against the alien influence of Marxism. Dewey’s support for American imperialism in World War I is one telling example of this trend. The transformation of Max Eastman and Sidney Hook from sympathizers of Trotsky in the 1930s into rabid cold warriors in the 1950s is another such example. As the work of Lloyd and other historians demonstrates, Dewey’s form of pragmatism was embraced by leading intellectuals of the Socialist Party in the years just before World War I as a specific American counterweight to the influence of European Marxist theory.<sup>18</sup>

If we consider what it was about Dewey’s form of pragmatism that the radical intellectuals found so attractive, the answer is to be found in the conception of science articulated by Dewey. In many cases these radical intellectuals were looking for an alternative to the vulgar Marxism that emanated from the Second International and they thought they found it in Dewey’s more flexible yet still “objective” conception of science as a collective, experimental enterprise. This was a specifically American form of “science” that reinforced the prejudices of American exceptionalism, namely that socialism would come to America in its own unique form and manner irrespective of

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<sup>18</sup> The previously cited work of Brian Lloyd, *Left Out*, explores in great depth the intellectual influence of pragmatism on the early socialist and communist movement in the United States. That this important work has never been reviewed or even mentioned on the World Socialist Web Site is yet another indication of the IC’s utter indifference to the history of pragmatism and its relationship to Marxism.

developments internationally. Sidney Hook, the foremost theoretician of the convergence between Marxism and pragmatism characterized his project as an attempt

... to develop a kind of Americanized Marxism, strengthened by John Dewey's activist theory of mind and knowledge, as well as his philosophy of education and naturalistic humanism, that would be in consonance with the American revolutionary tradition.<sup>19</sup>

Whereas Hook, at that point in his career, still thought that the dialectic was compatible with pragmatism, another pragmatist from the same era, Jim Cork, also arguing for a convergence between pragmatism and Marxism, completely dismissed the dialectic.

If the pragmatists would stop confusing Marx with some Marxists, recognize the hard, ineradicable, humanist-democratic core of Marx's thinking as akin to their own, and implement their praiseworthy, general value judgments with concrete instrumentalities applied to political and social questions; and if the socialists on their part would drop overboard the ludicrous excess baggage of the dialectic, rid themselves of the remaining shreds of inevitabilism, abandon their narrow class conception of democratic values, and learn to think experimentally in politics ... their positions would converge on a set of common hypotheses leading to common activities.<sup>20</sup>

Dewey himself, over the course of a very long career as the leading American philosopher and public intellectual, went from radical Progressivism in his early period, to advocating a form of socialism during the New Deal and opposing Roosevelt from the left, to ending his career as an anti-Communist liberal, (though one opposed to the persecution of Communists.) The divergence of possible political views emanating from Dewey can be seen as well in the careers of other pragmatists.<sup>21</sup>

Dewey's influence on the socialist and later the communist movement cannot be discounted. Having adopted Dewey's conception of instrumentalism, left liberal and socialist intellectuals in the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century thought they had developed a methodology that was superior to the positivist notion of a "value free" science and with it the deadening embrace of opportunism that was evident in the case of Hilferding. At the same time, Dewey promised to rid philosophy of what he called "the Hegelian bacillus". This was an attractive proposition to many left wing intellectuals who were predisposed to reject out of hand anything resembling outmoded European modes of

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<sup>19</sup> From "Towards the Understanding of Karl Marx", quoted by the biographer of Dewey, Robert Westbrook, in *John Dewey and American Democracy*, p. 467.

<sup>20</sup> From "John Dewey and Karl Marx", Quoted in Westbrook, p. 466.

<sup>21</sup> The contemporary pragmatist, Hillary Putnam, began his career as a Maoist and is now a left-liberal social reformist. It is well known that Sidney Hook, one of John Dewey's most gifted students, who began his career by trying to wed Marxism and pragmatism ended it by repudiating Marxism and supporting Richard Nixon and the Vietnam War, even when he still called himself a socialist. As the careers of Sidney Hook and James Burnham show, it is quite possible to be a pragmatist in the mould of Dewey and espouse strongly right wing views.

speculative metaphysics. It did not help that virtually all anyone knew of Hegel and dialectics was transmitted second and third hand by way of the conservative school of neo-Hegelians in the U.S. and Britain at that time.

Dewey's notion of science, while nominally opposed to the positivist idea of a "value free" enterprise, was not in the end significantly different from it. Dewey held onto a conception very similar to the positivist definition of truth as encompassing only propositions that can be empirically verified. This well-known "verification criteria of truth", a hallmark of positivism, was advocated by Dewey in his *Essays in Experimental Logic*, where he wrote that "verification and truth completely coincide." And while Dewey always held onto the idea of process that he inherited from his youth as a student of Hegel, he completely rejected the entirety of dialectical logic.

The tradition of pragmatism has displayed an ambivalent attitude toward positivism. In its early years the pioneers of pragmatism were highly critical of positivism and the dogmas of empiricism, but by mid-century the leading American pragmatists had pretty much embraced positivism. Whereas Dewey and others criticized positivism as well as traditional empiricism as dogmatic, they borrowed much from the positivists. The 1930s in particular was a period when there was a great deal of cross fertilization between American pragmatism and the school of logical positivism that emerged in Europe, thanks in part to the arrival on American shores of a large contingent of refugees from the Nazi-controlled German and Austrian universities. One author described this convergence between pragmatism and positivism thus,

The pragmatists, to varying degrees, sought to develop a method imbued with the values and procedures of science so that philosophy could take its rightful place alongside the other sciences in the academy. Philosophers who were not pragmatists, such as Arthur O. Lovejoy and Morris Cohen, also incorporated a scientific orientation and method into their philosophies, so that, by 1930, when logical positivism began to be known in the United States, there was widespread agreement, if not universal assent, that a properly conceived philosophy adopted the methods and values of science, if it did not itself become simply another science.<sup>22</sup>

The important thing to remember is that pragmatism was vulnerable to being influenced by positivism, despite the overt antipathy to positivism by some of the founders of pragmatism, as a result of its rejection of dialectics and its more or less wholesale dismissal of the entire history of philosophy as constituting one long metaphysical illusion. The practical upshot of this confluence between pragmatism and positivism, when it came to Dewey's public political pronouncements, was that he often lost his way, becoming trapped in some of the same illusions that overtook the liberal intelligentsia.

Dewey was a complicated and contradictory figure. His deep-seated beliefs about the integrity of the scientific enterprise and his commitment to genuine democracy, including democracy in the economic realm, often found him practically alone, going against the stream of liberal and left public opinion. This was certainly the case when he agreed to head the commission investigating the Moscow Trials. He also exhibited great courage

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<sup>22</sup> Daniel J. Wilson, "Fertile Ground: Pragmatism, Science and Logical Positivism", in *Pragmatism: From Progressivism to Postmodernism*, ed. Robert Hollinger and David Depew, (Praeger, 1995), p. 123

criticizing the Roosevelt Administration from the left throughout the 1930's, in opposition to virtually the entire liberal intelligentsia represented by people like Walter Lippman. Yet his personal courage and commitment to democratic ideals was in itself an insufficient guarantee against being blinded by some of the same illusions that overtook other members of the liberal intelligentsia.

Perhaps the biggest mistake in Dewey's life was his uncritical enthusiasm for Woodrow's Wilson's entry of America into the First World War. It is telling that the arguments he used to support the war were based on his notion of Science as a collective experimental enterprise. He saw in the rapidly expanded role of the government in mobilizing the economy for the war effort a harbinger of the rational reorganization of society that he considered to be the goal of socialism, a goal consonant with his own ideal of an egalitarian society. Dewey's commitment to a naively conceived ideal of America's role as a catalyst of democracy abroad made him particularly vulnerable to the false internationalism with which Wilson cloaked the ambitions of American imperialism. Thus he played the role, however unconsciously, of a left liberal apologist for Woodrow Wilson's war propaganda. Writing in 1915 at the height of the pro-war hysteria, he proclaims,

War to put a stop to war is no new thing. History shows a multitude of wars which have been professedly waged in order that a future war should not arrive. History also shows that as a pacifist, Mars has not been a success. But a war to establish an international order and by that means to outlaw war gains force and this war becomes a war for a new type of social organization. It will be a war of compelling moral import.<sup>23</sup>

To be sure, other pragmatists who were members of the left-liberal intelligentsia, some of whom had been very close to Dewey, were appalled by his support for the war. Randolph Bourne, who took up the cudgels in a series of blistering polemics against Dewey's support for Wilson's War, deserves particular credit. Bourne tried to demonstrate that Dewey's stand was inconsistent with his stated principles, that no justification for support for the war was possible in terms of Dewey's scientific instrumentalism.

The 'liberals' who claim a realistic and pragmatic attitude in politics have disappointed us in setting and up and then clinging wistfully to the belief that our war could get itself justified for an idealistic flavor, or at least for a world-renovating social purpose. If these realists had had time in the hurry and scuffle of events to turn their philosophy on themselves, they might have seen how thinly disguised a rationalization this was of their emotional undertow.<sup>24</sup>

Bourne's stand against Dewey is to be commended. It is however, hardly the case, as Westbrook claims, that "Bourne turned pragmatic realism back upon Dewey"<sup>25</sup>, and thereby demonstrated the validity of the pragmatic method. At bottom, Bourne's analysis

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<sup>23</sup> From "Morals and Conduct of States" (1918), quoted in Westbrook, p. 209.

<sup>24</sup> Randolph Bourne, "A War Diary", (1917), quoted in Westbrook, p. 206.

<sup>25</sup> Westbrook, p. 207.

of the war, although more worthy of our sympathy than Dewey's, still remained rather shallow, recognizing neither the interests of classes nor the economic crisis of world imperialism that precipitated it. It was thus inevitable that Bourne would likewise entertain certain illusions about the possibilities of pacifism. While opposing outright U.S. entry into the war, Bourne supported a "realistic pacifism" that "argued for the use of naval force to keep the shipping lanes free, a policy of 'armed neutrality' aimed directly at the submarine problem."<sup>26</sup> If this episode in the history of pragmatism indicates anything, it is that Dewey's form of scientific instrumentalism provides a very poor method for finding one's way in a rapidly changing political situation. More generally, we can say that even an attempt to improve upon the positivist ideal of science as a "value free" enterprise, as Deweyism was, shows by its failure in a critical moment, the false "objectivity" that such a concept of science entails.

### **Deweyism and American Trotskyism: Max Eastman and Sidney Hook**

Dewey's form of pragmatism had an early impact on the American Trotskyist movement in the person of Max Eastman. Eastman, a student of Dewey and a member of the Socialist Party and later the American Communist Party, was a very early supporter of Trotsky in America, at a time when there was as yet no Trotskyist movement. Eastman provided Trotsky with much needed assistance during the initial years of the latter's period in exile. He was also the translator into English of Trotsky's monumental classic, *The History of the Russian Revolution*. Eastman was also an avowed opponent of the dialectic, eschewing it as so much mystical rubbish. Eastman is of interest for our account because he developed the clearest formulation of the supposed antithesis between science and the dialectic.

The rejection of illusions – religious, moralistic, legal, political, aesthetic – is the immortal essence of Marx's contribution to the science of history, and to history itself. And if he did not succeed in rejecting also the illusions of philosophy, those who really esteem his life and his genius ought to carry out that process. Marx himself declared that philosophy, like law and politics and religion and art, is subject to an economic interpretation at the hands of science. But he also declared – and within a year of the same date – that Hegel wrote the true history of philosophy. Since Hegel's history of philosophy is a history of "the self-developing reason," a "history of thought finding itself," these two statements are directly contradictory, and we have to choose between them. We have to choose between Marxism as a Hegelian philosophy, and Marxism as a science which is capable of explaining such a philosophy.<sup>27</sup>

No account of the influence of pragmatism in the early years of American Trotskyism can be complete without a mention of Sidney Hook. Hook was in some ways the

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<sup>26</sup> Westbrook, p. 207.

<sup>27</sup> Max Eastman, *Marx and Lenin: The Science of Revolution* (New York, 1927), p. 46.

philosophical antithesis of Eastman. While Hook was also a student of Dewey's, he was a professional philosopher whereas Eastman was a free-lance journalist. He was one of the few professors who openly embraced Marxism. Not only that, but Hook took up the philosophical defense of the dialectic against Eastman's snide dismissal. In fact, in the 1930's, Eastman and Hook staged a series of public debates around the country on the question of the dialectic.

For some years in the 1920's and 1930's Sidney Hook was the most important Marxist intellectual in America. He was the first person to introduce the ideas of the Left Hegelians to an English speaking audience and was also one of the first to discuss the theme of alienation that played a prominent role in Marx's early writings.<sup>28</sup> Hook also played an important political role in the early years of the Trotskyist movement as he facilitated the merger between original Trotskyist group around James Cannon and a group of workers around A.J. Muste to form the Workers Party. Hook was also instrumental in enlisting the services of John Dewey to head the investigation into the Moscow Trials. Philosophically, Hook is particularly noteworthy because he articulated the most systematic defense of a philosophical convergence between Deweyan pragmatism and Marxism.<sup>29</sup> Yet Hook's defense of the dialectic proved to be short-lived and he eventually turned his back on Marxism altogether and ended his career as a right wing social democrat and Cold Warrior.

### **James Burnham: The Confluence of Deweyism with Positivism**

Hook and other left intellectuals prepared the ground for an easy traverse between Marxism and pragmatism. This soon had reverberations not only on the edges but within the leadership of the Trotskyist movement. A generation of left intellectuals was seduced by the false objectivity of Deweyan "science". Among these can be counted the figure of James Burnham. His evolution had a direct impact on the history of the Trotskyist movement. Burnham in fact provides a salutary case study. He ended his career as an editor of the right wing *National Review* and was given an award for distinguished service by President Ronald Reagan. He is credited with being the intellectual inspiration behind both paleo-conservatism and neo-conservatism.

But in the 1930s, Burnham, along with Max Shachtman, were the leading Trotskyist intellectuals in the United States, contributing many articles to the theoretical publications of the Trotskyist movement. In 1939 he and Shachtman became the chief spokesmen for the opposition inside the Socialist Workers Party. Burnham was philosophically a pragmatist in the mold of John Dewey and even in his most ardent days as a Trotskyist always disdained the dialectic. When the struggle broke out in the movement in 1939, Burnham argued against the dialectic invoking the pragmatic

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<sup>28</sup> Thanks to a visit to the Marx-Engels Institute in Moscow in the 1920's, Hook was given an advanced look at some of Marx's previously unpublished early works. Hook presented this material in his book, *From Hegel to Marx: Studies in the Intellectual Development of Karl Marx*.

<sup>29</sup> Christopher Phelps defends the relevance of Hook's attempted reconciliation of Deweyism and Marxism in his intellectual biography of Hook in his Marxist period, *Young Sidney Hook: Marxist and Pragmatist*.



conception of “Science” as an alternative. The following extract from Burnham’s polemic against Trotsky, *Science and Style*, is typical:

Since in the course of the factional struggle, you write, ‘the question (of dialectics) has been posed point blank ...’ How innocent, objective and impersonal, Comrade Trotsky! Dialectics, suddenly, like Banquo’s ghost, thrust its wild face into our political midst, to dismay all sceptics. But, alas, as in the case of all ghosts, it was a very human hand that manipulated the apparatus producing our supernatural phenomenon; and that hand was yours, Comrade Trotsky. Like all good mediums, you attribute the visitation to the working of another and a higher realm—to ‘the logic of events’, the ‘historical course of the struggle’—but like all good observers, we will admire the artistry, and smile at the explanation.

I can understand, and even sympathise with, your recourse to dialectics in the current dispute. There is little else for you to write about, with every appeal you make to actual events refuted the day after you make it, with each week’s development in the war smashing another pillar of your political position. An argument about dialectics is 100 per cent safe, a century ago or a century hence. Among those lofty generalities, no humble and inconvenient *fact* intrudes; no earthiest (sic) or observation or experiment mar their Olympian calm; those serene words remain forever free from the gross touch of everyday events.<sup>30</sup>

The only thing unique about Burnham’s remark is that it was written by a leading intellectual in the Socialist Workers Party. Otherwise it is typical of the disdain toward the dialectic that marked pragmatist and positivist circles.

The thin veneer of Burnham’s Marxism was already evident years earlier when, as a leading figure of the American Trotskyist movement, he was asked by Trotsky to write an article for the New International against Eastman’s “retrograde adventure.” Burnham was even then already in Eastman’s camp philosophically speaking. As Burnham would explain many years later, “he found himself agreeing with Eastman despite himself.”<sup>31</sup>

The article Burnham wrote for the New International, *Max Eastman As Scientist*, included the following equivocation about Marxist philosophy at the very beginning,

In the first place, he [Eastman] revives at length his perennial attack upon the “philosophy” and “religion” which he attributes to Marx. Now, the problem of what Marx “really meant” is an interesting one for scholarly research. We all know, moreover, that Marx made a number of false statements. None of us, if we take historical method seriously, is surprised that Marx was limited by the stage which scientific knowledge had reached in his day, or that his terminology was influenced by the social context in which he lived. I, for one, agree with Eastman that it is desirable to change, in part, this terminology, in order to bring it more closely into accord with contemporary scientific method and practice.

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<sup>30</sup> *In Defense of Marxism*, “Science and Style: A Reply to Comrade Trotsky”, New Park Publications, p.235.

<sup>31</sup> John P. Diggins, *Up From Communism: Conservative Odysseys in American Intellectual Development*, (Columbia University Press, New York, 1994), p. 173.

However, these problems of scholarly research and linguistic reform are comparatively leisurely, impersonal and postponeable. The Marxism which is of decisive moment to revolutionists is not the dried letter of Marx's books but the theory and strategy of the living revolutionary movement.<sup>32</sup>

Later, Burnham challenges Eastman's credentials as a scientist, without however in any way challenging Eastman's conception of science,

It is Eastman's claim that he approaches his problem, and reaches his conclusions, as a scientist; and he criticizes Marxists for not being scientific. I wish to begin by examining Eastman's right to this claim, as shown by the evidence of the article itself. I certainly agree with Eastman about the desirability of employing scientific method in all problems where truth and falsity are at issue; but a method is not scientific merely from being called so by its user.

Point 2 in the revision is much more remarkable. "Problems of being and of universal history arising from this situation should be acknowledged to exist ..." Do I need to remind scientist and anti-metaphysician Eastman that contemporary science recognizes *no* problems of "being" or of "universal history"? These, the problems of traditional, arch-metaphysical Ontology and Cosmology are interpreted by contemporary science as either empirically meaningless or purely analytic, and are ruled out of scientific discourse. "It is a question," Eastman writes, "of going forward or of being stuck in the mud." Here, as elsewhere, Eastman is not in the least going forward in the light of contemporary science, but returning backward to pre-Marxian conceptions, to the very rationalist metaphysics which Marx himself so vigorously rejected.

As the above text makes clear, Burnham accepts what is essentially a positivist notion of science as a "value-free" enterprise guided strictly by testable hypotheses and empirical observations. He differs with Eastman only in his contention that Eastman's claims to support this notion of science are false. He chides the latter for introducing arcane philosophical issues about "being" and "universal history" that have no place in "science". In other words, for Burnham, Eastman wasn't enough of a positivist!

To anyone who had followed his philosophical evolution, it should have been no surprise that when Trotsky raised the issue of the dialectic in the 1939-40 party struggle, Burnham took refuge in the positivist conception of "Science" and asserted that the introduction of the dialectic into the discussion was "a red herring". In this stand, Burnham was simply following in the footsteps of Dewey, who had pledged to rid philosophy of the "Hegelian bacillus". The antidote to this bacillus was one version or another of "science". The appeal to science became the touchstone for justifying one's conduct in the public realm. We have already seen how this argument was used by Dewey in justifying his stand on World War I.

This discussion brings us back directly to North's unwillingness to discuss Dewey's philosophy. The secret behind this intellectual abstentionism is that North is unwilling to

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<sup>32</sup> "Max Eastman as Scientist", From **New International**, Vol.4 No.6, June 1938, pp.177-180.  
<http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/writers/burnham/1938/06/eastman.htm>

interrogate his own notion of “science” lest he find it resembles that of Dewey more than that of Marx. In fact, North’s version of science is actually closer to the positivist model of science than Dewey, for at least Dewey was clear about the connection between knowledge and interests. North considers the criteria of Marxist science to be the ability to make successful predictions:

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. (36)

Whereas for Dewey the actual process of inquiry was guided by material interests (although Dewey denied that material interests expressed themselves through the class struggle), for North, interests are only acknowledged as the culmination of the process where we “intervene” after we have gained knowledge of laws and tendencies in order “to produce an outcome favorable to the working class.”<sup>33</sup> In either case, the dialectic has nothing to do with it, which means that from the standpoint of Marxism, North’s conception (and of course Dewey’s) involves a profound *misconception* of science. As Lukacs rightly explained in *History and Class Consciousness*:

When ‘science’ maintains that the manner in which data immediately present themselves is an adequate foundation of scientific conceptualization and that the actual form of these data is the appropriate starting point for the formation of scientific concepts, it thereby takes its stand simply and dogmatically on the basis of capitalist society. It uncritically accepts the nature of the object as it is given and the laws of that society as the unalterable foundation of ‘science’. In order to progress from these ‘facts’ to facts in the true meaning of the word it is necessary to perceive their historical condition as such and to abandon the point of view that would see them as immediately given: they must themselves be subjected to a historical and dialectical examination.<sup>34</sup>

## **How Pragmatism Looks on the Ground**

One final question raised by pragmatism, one that North entirely fails to consider, is how philosophies such as pragmatism and postmodernism express themselves in the day to day consciousness of the working class. This is an area of investigation that is yet to be plumbed, but it should be obvious why it is important to understand this process. It is through the lens of everyday consciousness that prevailing notions are stripped of their academic garb and translated into practical activity. The version of pragmatism we

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<sup>33</sup> Dewey’s attitude to positivism was ambivalent. In his early writings he made some well-reasoned critiques of the positivist model of science, but in the end his form of instrumentalism was not distinctly different than that of the positivist model.

<sup>34</sup> Georg Lukacs, *History and Class Consciousness*, p. 7.

encounter in this arena is likely to be an eclectic form of that expounded in the academic journals and contain inconsistent admixtures borrowed from other sources. John Dewey, in one of his key essays, noted the difference between pragmatism as understood by its leading theorists and its popular interpretations:

Many critics have jumped at the obvious association of the word pragmatic with practical. They have assumed that the intent is to limit all knowledge, philosophic included, to promotion of “action,” understanding by action either just any bodily movement, or those bodily movements which conduce to the preservation and grosser well-being of the body. James’s statement that general conceptions must “cash in” has been taken (especially by European critics) to mean that the end and measure of intelligence lies in the narrow and coarse utilities which it produces.<sup>35</sup>

Dewey undoubtedly has a valid point in distinguishing philosophical pragmatism from its vulgar associations. Some criticism of pragmatism, including material written from a supposedly Marxist perspective, has indeed been guilty of conflating philosophical pragmatism with its reflection in the popular imagination. Nevertheless, there is a definite relationship between pragmatic philosophy and the “pragmatism” of the ordinary understanding. This relationship was nicely articulated by Nicholas Rescher, who wrote,

In everyday usage, “pragmatic” contrasts with “principled.” Pragmatic individuals or policies are concerned for expediency instead of principles – they prioritize the achievement of desired results, without much scrupulous care about the ways and means of their realization. “The ends justify the means” is their motto. In particular, pragmatism in its political sense turns on the illustrative contrast between the “principled” statesman who pursues changeless aims through acting on fixed rules and stable goals, and the “pragmatic” politician whose position is flexible and whose opinions and actions bend with the wind of shifting conditions and circumstances. Pragmatic in this sense involves to what is practical, down-to-earth, and opportunistic, as opposed to that which is idealistic and scrupulous about long-term consequences and larger causes. It is – or should be – clear that this sort of thing is not at issue with philosophical pragmatism.

However, “pragmatism” in the everyday usage sense of the term and in its philosophical sense agree in one important respect. Philosophical pragmatism also accepts that absolute perfection – the idealized very best – is generally unrealizable. And it therefore insists that we must be prepared to accept that the best we can achieve in practice has to be acknowledged as good enough: that it makes no sense – be it in matters of knowledge or planning or action or evaluation – to regard the best that can be had as just not good enough. For example, consider the sceptic who says that even the best “knowledge” we can achieve still does not qualify as genuine – as altogether certain and absolute. “Get real!” replies the pragmatist: “Neither with theoretical knowledge nor with anything else does it make sense to ask for something that simply cannot be had.” Against more idealistic tendencies of thought, pragmatism thus takes the realistic position that we have no sensible alternative but to make do with the best we can get.

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<sup>35</sup> Dewey, “The Need for a Recovery in Philosophy” in *Pragmatism: A Reader*, p. 227.

The tenor of the term's ordinary usage therefore does carry over to philosophical pragmatism to some extent.<sup>36</sup>

This is a good summary of the thrust of pragmatic politics. The “realistic” position “that we have no sensible alternative but to make do with the best we can get” is the guiding principle of all brands of reformist politics. It is without question the dominant ideology of our time. And whereas pragmatism was initially a specifically American product, it has now – riding on the tailwinds of globalization – spread across the planet.

When Trotsky said that pragmatic ways of thinking were the bane of the American working class, he was referring to the manner in which a specifically American form of bourgeois ideology plays itself out concretely in day to day struggles. Pragmatic ways of thinking in the working class are not precisely the same as the theories that are expounded by John Dewey and others. But at the same time there is a relationship between the two. That is why in grappling with the weaknesses of Dewey we are also grappling with some of the limitations of working class consciousness, though we ought not to expect to find a clear articulation of the theories of John Dewey in the implicit philosophical assumptions behind, say, trade union politics.

Pragmatism as a way of thinking and acting preceded its official philosophical articulation. For good reason, it has been called America's “National Philosophy”. George Novack, who was personally entrusted by Trotsky in 1940 to do special theoretical work on pragmatism, put it thus:

The pragmatic viewpoint emerged organically from the special conditions of American historical development. It came to flourish as a normal mode of approaching the world and reacting to its problems because the same social environment that shaped the American people likewise created an atmosphere favoring the growth of pragmatism. It permeated the habits, sentiments, and psychology of the American people and their component classes long before receiving systematic formulations by professional philosophers. In fact, these philosophers were as much influenced by those surrounding conditions of life which gave rise to pragmatism as the fellow citizens they thought and spoke for.<sup>37</sup>

It is only necessary to think through the implications of what kind of theoretical and practical work is required to get beyond a way of thinking that ‘organically permeates our habits, sentiments and psychology’, to begin to get a handle on the enormity of the theoretical tasks facing Marxists in this ideological climate. This was the challenge that Trotsky articulated to the Socialist Workers Party in 1940. Trotsky understood that the majority faction lead by Cannon was vulnerable to the same ideological illusions to which the Burnham-Shachtman minority had succumbed. He warned the SWP leadership that unless it undertook a conscious effort to train its members in Marxist dialectics and the role of pragmatism, they too could become unwitting spokesmen for alien class forces at some future turn of events. Unfortunately, Trotsky's advice was not heeded and his

<sup>36</sup> Nicholas Rescher, *Realistic Pragmatism: An Introduction to Pragmatic Philosophy*, (State University of New York Press, 2000), pp. 48-49.

<sup>37</sup> George Novack, *Pragmatism versus Marxism*, p.19.

prognosis was borne out. The SWP abandoned the effort to train its membership in dialectics only a short period after the death of Trotsky, and found itself pragmatically drifting for the next two decades until it finally abandoned Trotskyism altogether in the early 1960s. The SWP did undertake some important political work in this period, particularly its break with Pablo in 1953, but in the final analysis its reliance of adhering to Trotskyist orthodoxy to maintain its revolutionary perspective proved fatally inadequate.<sup>38</sup>

These lessons from the history of the struggle against pragmatism in the SWP and the tragic demise of that organization as a revolutionary party should have been burnt into the consciousness of every comrade. They were the mother's milk upon which new comrades were nurtured in the International Committee in the 1960s. Unfortunately, this is no longer the case.

Steiner's 2004 document showed that when comrades speak 'off the record', it is quite openly admitted that empiricism and pragmatism are no longer an important concern of the movement.<sup>39</sup> Despite all of North's fulminating (including a resort to name-calling), the simple truth is that there is absolutely no attention being paid to the fight against pragmatism in the IC today. And to that extent the movement has turned its back on a vital part of the revolutionary heritage of Trotskyism.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> A good account of the SWP's embrace of pragmatic methods of work in its internal life and how this impacted on its political evolution in this period can be found in Tim Wohlforth's 1965-1966 study, *The Struggle for Marxism in the United States: A History of American Marxism*. North's discussion of this period in his *The Heritage We Defend: A Contribution to the History of the Fourth International*, written two decades later, provides an accurate historical account of this period but pays little attention to the philosophical issues behind the differing positions that emerged.

<sup>39</sup> In a private correspondence, Chris Talbot, of the British Socialist Equality Party, made the following statement:

The problem with this emphasis is that it assumes that vulgar materialism and empiricism are the main philosophical opposition faced by Marxists...That may have been the case for the circles [Scott] Meikle [author of *Essentialism in the Thought of Karl Marx*] was writing for, twenty years ago, but it is certainly not true today.

In a similar vein, a member of the German Socialist Equality Party, speaking at a meeting in Berlin, said that the task for Marxists today consisted in forming a "united front" with empiricists against the postmodernists. This comrade was not speaking in an official capacity but he undoubtedly expressed, perhaps in more candid terms, the thinking of much of the movement today about these philosophical issues.

<sup>40</sup> That the International Committee at one time emphasized the lessons of the 1939-40 struggle can be easily demonstrated by a perusal of the literature produced by the International Committee in the period from 1961-1970. An important contribution in this respect was Tim Wohlforth's series, *The Struggle for Marxism in the United States: A History of American Marxism*. The essays in this series first appeared in the theoretical journal of the International Committee, *Fourth International*, during the years 1965-1966. While Wohlforth's work suffered from a number of problems, it was nevertheless a pioneering effort of paramount importance in the education of the members in the early years of the movement. It revived, for the first time since 1940, the question of the relationship between Marxism and pragmatism in the building of the revolutionary movement. Wohlforth's conclusion is worth repeating for it speaks directly to the issues we have addressed:

## **The IC Conducts “Massive Anti-Pragmatic Exercises”**

When we insist on the centrality of dialectics in the training of a revolutionary movement, North’s reaction betrays nothing so much as a gnawing irritation. In both Steiner’s document and *Objectivism or Marxism* we cited Trotsky’s injunction:

Dialectical training of the mind is as necessary to a revolutionary fighter as finger exercises to a pianist.

Our citing of this injunction provoked the following angry outburst from North:

In virtually every document that you write, you ritualistically invoke Trotsky’s statement that “dialectical training of the mind is as necessary to a revolutionary fighter as finger exercises to a pianist.” When Trotsky wrote these words, they carried the full force of the work of a political genius whose mastery of the dialectical method found incomparable expression in his brilliant analyses of world

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Cannon’s whole history is the story of American Marxists facing a new situation which made it impossible for them to simply maintain a revolutionary perspective on American soil. They were forced to turn elsewhere for their programme. But they took over this programme without understanding the method which produced it and sought to survive by simply applying it to the American scene empirically – with a method hostile to the method which produced the programme. Trotsky’s role and Trotsky’s intervention made it possible for the SWP to survive as long as it did. All other tendencies had long since broken from the revolutionary road. But in the end the SWP turned on Trotskyism itself and repudiated a revolutionary perspective in the United States.

The American Marxists of the future must begin their work with an understanding of the history of this 40 year struggle for Marxism in the United States. The main lesson of this history is the need for American Marxists, no matter how few in number, to begin their qualitative theoretical development through an understanding of the Marxist method. Only such a qualitative development will prepare them to reach the new generation of working-class militants now clearly coming on the scene in the United States. Any formation which continues to neglect this task will simply be bypassed by revolutionary developments in the United States, regardless of size of the amount of ‘busy work’ they do.

The fact that Wohlforth failed to heed his own advice and later abandoned the movement does not detract from his important contribution in its early years.

Many of the key theoretical and programmatic statements issued by the International Committee in relation to the struggle against the SWP’s reunification with the Pabloites in the early 1960’s stressed the need for serious educational work on pragmatism and dialectics. Take for example the following statement that Steiner quoted in his 2004 document:

Empiricism, ignoring the history of philosophy, rejects the dialectical theory of knowledge as ‘metaphysics’. Only the dialectical materialist view can explain the world, because it includes a materialist explanation of the development of our concepts as well as of the material world which they reflect. Empiricism must be rejected, not made more ‘consistent.’ There are many sides to this methodological error of Hansen’s.

Trotsky warned the SWP leadership in his last writings that they must encourage a determined struggle on the theoretical front against the ‘American’ philosophy of pragmatism, a more recent development of empiricism; unless this was done, there would be no real Marxist development in the U.S.

*Trotskyism Versus Revisionism*, Volume 4, (Labor Publications), p. 76

events. Unfortunately, when you use these words, it sounds more like a couch potato declaiming hypocritically on the importance of aerobics. (21)

While the extent of Comrade North's mastery of aerobics is not known to us, we can say with confidence that one does not master dialectics by ignoring it for twenty years. Moreover, North's remarks are not only vituperative but also inane: he makes it seem as if Trotsky's being a genius somehow frees us from heeding his advice, when just the opposite should be the case. Beneath this outburst lies a guilty political conscience.

When North finally does confront our criticism regarding the IC's neglect of the fight against pragmatism, he comes up with a novel response, at least terminologically speaking. He maintains that the lectures at the party summer school of 2005 and the subsequent WSW International Editorial Board reports constitute a series of "massive anti-pragmatic exercises". This is a rather fantastic statement to make considering that the word 'pragmatism' does not appear even once in any of the lectures. Is a lecture on any topic whatsoever now to be considered an "anti-pragmatic exercise"? If North really believes that, then he must think that one can confront pragmatism without any conscious effort or study. It is clear that North thinks that our bringing up the subject of dialectics and the battle against pragmatism is just a red herring. For North, the only relevant questions are those of political and historical analysis. Thus North states that,

The International Committee of the Fourth International has sought to revive and develop the socialist consciousness of the working class based on a persistent and systematic reworking of the whole historical experience and lessons of the international class struggle in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, while at the same time seeking to base the practice of the working class on a scientific understanding of the significance and implications of contemporary socio-economic, political and cultural phenomena. (29)

Elsewhere North pays lip service to the notion that a correct political analysis is impossible without a correct method:

Trotsky did not simply tell Burnham and Shachtman that dialectics was important. He demonstrated how Burnham's pragmatism and Shachtman's agnostic attitude toward materialist dialectics were manifested in their analysis of the class nature of the Soviet state and their rejection of the defense of the U.S.S.R. against imperialist attack. In the 1939-40 struggle inside the Socialist Workers Party, the issue of dialectics was not introduced as a means of evading political questions, but in order to clarify them. (21)

But here one has to ask: ***how is it possible to employ the dialectical method in the first place without actually studying it?*** Are the leaders of the International Committee "natural dialecticians" who have arrived on the scene fully formed, having absorbed all the lessons of 2500 years of science and philosophy, in the manner of Botticelli's Venus springing to life full blown out of a clam shell?

When you strip North's position away from his rhetorical flourishes, he is saying that dialectics is little more than a byproduct of historical and political analysis. There simply



is no room in North's lexicon for the independent role of dialectics as the logic of change or as Herzen described it, "the algebra of revolution." Here North is directly at odds with Engels, who wrote in the *Dialectics of Nature*, that dialectics is operative in the realms of nature, society and **thought**.

It is therefore from the history of nature and of human society that the laws of dialectics are abstracted. For they are nothing but the most general laws of these two aspects of historical development as well as of thought itself.<sup>41</sup>

Underlying North's position is a form of philosophical reductionism. North would collapse dialectics proper into the materialist conception of history and the analysis of political developments. This is the gist of what he means when he states that,

In place of rhetorical appeals for a "struggle against pragmatism," this analysis invested what had become an empty phrase under Healy and Slaughter with a politically concrete content. The document explained how Marxists, in contrast to the impressionistic and adaptive practice characteristic of pragmatists, seek to locate consciously the daily development of the class struggle and the activity of the party in the broad continuum of its own history and that of the international class struggle. Rather than simply react to events in pursuit of immediate or short-term practical gains, Marxists must identify the essential questions of political principle raised by these new developments, bring to bear in the analysis of the new political phenomenon the party's entire historically-accumulated theoretical capital, and give expression to the long-term interests of the working class as the international revolutionary force in capitalist society. (26)

This rather long-winded account of the Marxist method begs a number of questions. For one thing, how does one distinguish what are the "essential questions of political principle" from what is merely contingent and inessential? From what North says, we must dig into the lessons of history and apply them to the new developments. This is all well and good, but it falls far short of being a guide to action. Much of the time, when confronting a new development, it is appropriate to act in accordance with historical precedent. *But sometimes we are called on to break from historical precedence and open a new road. These are the critical moments when a new development requires a break with the old ways of doing business and the proper response to these dialectical moments of transformation can decide the fate of the working class for decades. How does one distinguish these critical moments from other moments? There is nothing in North's formulation that can help us here. It is here that training in dialectics is critical.*

It is of course true that dialectics is not, as North put it elsewhere, "...some sort of ideological talisman which, once it has been acquired, bestows upon those who possess it protection against the relentless pressure of class forces."<sup>42</sup> But by the same token, neither are appeals to "...identify the essential questions of political principle raised by these new developments" any sort of guarantee that a party can maintain its revolutionary

<sup>41</sup> Friedrich Engels, *Dialectics of Nature*, (International Publishers, 1963), p. 26.

<sup>42</sup> David North, *Gerry Healy and His Place in the History of the Fourth International*, pp. 79-80

orientation. What we can say, to paraphrase Kant,<sup>43</sup> is that if dialectical theorizing divorced from history is empty, then historical analysis divorced from dialectics is blind. And the proof of the pudding is in the eating. Despite all the appeals to historical precedent, the International Committee has today turned its back on much of its heritage.

## **Dialectics as a Red Herring**

Ironically, there is historical precedent in the Trotskyist movement for North's position. In the debate that ensued in the Socialist Workers Party in 1940, no less than four distinct positions on the relationship between dialectics and political perspectives emerged.

First there was the position championed by Trotsky, that mastery of dialectics plays a decisive role in one's political analysis and orientation.

Second, was the totally opposite position of Max Eastman who thought that dialectics was just a lot of hokum that wreaks havoc when applied to politics in the same manner as religion and mysticism. Although Eastman was not a member of the Socialist Workers Party, his disdain for the dialectic clearly had an influence on the course of the struggle in the SWP in 1940.

The third position was that articulated by James Burnham – who essentially agreed with Eastman that dialectics was an unscientific philosophical fantasy, but thought that one's attitude toward it was irrelevant to one's politics.

The fourth position was the one held by Burnham's factional colleague, Max Shachtman. Shachtman considered himself a supporter of dialectics, but he also considered one's position on this philosophical question irrelevant to one's politics.

In the final analysis, Burnham and Shachtman's differences over the dialectic were of little consequence. The practical application of their positions converged. This was clear in the statement they co-authored in their essay, *Intellectuals In Retreat*:

The two authors of the present article differ thoroughly on their estimate of the general theory of dialectical materialism, one of them accepting it and the other rejecting it. This has not prevented them from working for years within a single political organization toward mutually accepted objectives, nor has this required on the part of either of them any suppression of his theoretical opinions, in private or public. There is nothing anomalous in such a situation. Though theory is doubtless always in one way or another related to practise, the relation is not invariably direct or immediate; and as we have before had occasion to remark, human beings often act inconsistently. From the point of view of each of the authors there is in the other a certain such inconsistency between "philosophical theory" and political practise, which *might* on some occasion lead to decisive concrete political disagreement. But it does not now, nor has anyone yet demonstrated that agreement or disagreement on the more abstract doctrines of dialectical materialism necessarily affects today's and tomorrow's concrete political issues—and political parties, programs and struggles

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<sup>43</sup> Kant's famous dictum was, "Concepts without intuitions are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind."

are based on such concrete issues. We all may hope that as we go along or when there is more leisure, agreement may also be reached on the more abstract questions. Meanwhile there is fascism and war and unemployment.<sup>44</sup>

North is today articulating a position very close, if not identical, to that of Max Shachtman in the 1940 debate. And like Shachtman, North finds himself repeating the argument of James Burnham, who famously said in the 1940 debate that the real issue was the sociological analysis of the Soviet Union, while Trotsky's introduction of the issue of dialectics into the discussion was a "red herring". Instead of red herring, North speaks of "subterfuge", but the substance is the same:

If you were honest in your polemics and with yourselves, you would acknowledge that your attack on our alleged abandonment of dialectics and the fight against pragmatism is a subterfuge. The real issue is that you do not agree with the International Committee's insistence that the fight for socialism requires the development within the working class of both a profound knowledge of history – particularly that of the socialist movement itself – and as precise and concrete an understanding as possible (by means of ever-more exact conceptual approximations) of the objective movement of the world capitalist system in all its complex, contradictory and inter-connected forms. (30)

Whereas North's politics is not that of Burnham or Shachtman, his position on the relationship of politics to the dialectic is identical to that of Shachtman and Burnham in 1940. And that is a serious cause for concern because it paves the way for the same kind of pragmatic adaptation to "circumstances" as eventually overtook and destroyed the SWP. Thereby is the real significance behind North's demagogic phrase, "massive anti-pragmatic exercises."

North is doubtless aware that his threadbare attempt to reply to our charge that the IC has neglected a conscious struggle for dialectics against pragmatism is not entirely convincing. For that reason he feels much more confident in challenging us to demonstrate the relationship between the neglect of dialectics and the perspectives and practice of the International Committee. After all, to a pragmatist, practical results are in the final analysis all that matter. Thus North writes that even if the charge of the neglect of dialectics were true,

...it would still be necessary to demonstrate how the neglect of dialectics has expressed itself in the political analyses and work of the movement during this long period. Presumably, we have been working with some method. If, as you assert, the death of dialectics within the IC has been accompanied by the abandonment of the struggle against pragmatism, then the work of our movement has been dominated by the latter method. However, you make no attempt to substantiate that claim. (20-21)

In fact we did provide the demonstration that North rhetorically demands. It was already provided in the section of Steiner's document titled "Where is the International Committee Going?" The first chapter of the present statement provided a textbook

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<sup>44</sup> "Intellectuals in Retreat", From **New International**, Vol.5, No.1, January 1939, pp.3-22. <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/writers/burnham/1939/intellectuals/part2.htm>. While this essay was written prior to the emergence of the factional struggle in 1939-1940, it was sharply criticized by Trotsky in a letter to Shachtman. (The essay is reproduced in *In Defense of Marxism*.) Trotsky interpreted the author's repudiation of the dialectic as a warning of their imminent repudiation of revolutionary politics.

example of the results of abstentionism in Mexico. The second chapter provided another example of the neglect of theory, this time in relation to the adaptation of the IC to bourgeois nationalism in Iraq, and we will have more to say in the next chapter. But North's lame attempts to get around this criticism only reinforce it; indeed you couldn't ask for a more crudely pragmatic formulation than "massive anti-pragmatic exercises".

If one weighs up the philosophical thrust of North's arguments, it is that the great danger facing the Marxist movement today is that of an excessive voluntarism. Thus, in replying to our charge that the IC has abandoned the struggle against pragmatism, North claims that his scattered remarks against Richard Rorty and postmodernism constitute an examination of pragmatism. It is noteworthy that North thinks that the Rortian strain of subjective idealism is the only branch of pragmatism worth addressing. He completely ignores classical pragmatism and the dangers posed by positivism. North even goes out of his way to resurrect two long-forgotten supporters of Italian fascism to convince the reader that the great danger of pragmatism is its embrace of excessive voluntarism. He then generalizes that conclusion to apply to the history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. North's obsession with the supposed dangers of an excessive voluntarism betrays his own anxiety at the possibility that forces coming into the movement may actually want to do something and not be satisfied with a purely journalistic existence.

We will grant North one point. There is little danger of the IC going off in the direction of excessive voluntarism. On the contrary, the direction embraced by North and the IC leadership is that of an excessive passivity. And passivity in the face of great events is fatal to a revolutionary organization. North forgets that pragmatism can express itself in different forms. The hallmark of classical pragmatism, as we have seen, is its spurious 'realism', its adaptation to the world as it is, what Trotsky called "bowing down before the accomplished fact". And that can manifest itself as much in abstentionism as in opportunism. It is abstentionism and the embrace of a positivist conception of science that have marked the IC's long road back to pragmatism. Along that road the lessons of *In Defense of Marxism* and of the 1963 split with the American SWP have been completely abandoned. In the next chapter we will explore the consequences of abstentionism for the work of the IC in the working class.

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