

## Chapter 8:

### Objectivism and Socialist Consciousness – Part 2

North's remarks in the section "Socialists and the masses" (87-91) are an exercise in demagoguery. North presents himself as a defender of workers' democracy (with what justification, we will come to shortly) and lambastes Brenner for arguing that socialists need policies and a clear vision as to what kind of society they want to bring about once they take power. For North this is a heinous argument: he conjures up images of "diktats issued by the ruling socialists" who "will be spending at least as much time suppressing people as they will emancipating them", and for good measure he throws in a mocking reference to "Commissar Brenner" (88-9).

What accounts for this vitriol? To any literate Marxist who reads what Brenner wrote (in Section 1 of *To know a thing is to know its end*), it is evident that all he was doing was summarizing lessons that have long been part of Marxist tradition, particularly the lessons of the 1917 revolution and the Bolsheviks' years in power before the onset of Stalinism. To put these remarks in context, in his initial letter to the WSWS editor (see the appendix to *To know a thing is to know its end*), Brenner had argued that questions by readers about life under socialism deserved to be answered with clear explanations about the party's socialist program. All such questions

are in essence one question - *what would socialists do if they ran society?* Surely a movement that calls for a revolution has to have a convincing answer to that question, and that means policies on a wide gamut of social issues and a clear vision of the kind of society this revolutionary program is meant to bring about. Otherwise, there is something fundamentally unserious about the call to revolution.<sup>1</sup>

Beams disputed this, arguing that it won't be socialists but the masses that will run society. In his document, Brenner responded as follows:

According to Beams, it will not be socialists but the masses who will run socialist society, and so there is no need for socialist policies – which he refers to disparagingly as 'prescriptions' – on issues like the family, work, the environment etc, let alone a coherent vision of what socialist society will be like. There is a basic truth here – that the working class must emancipate itself – which is fundamental to the socialist project. But never before has this been interpreted to mean that socialists don't need to have a program. **Otherwise, what point was there to *The Communist Manifesto*, *The Transitional Program* and the many other programmatic documents of revolutionary Marxism? Beams pulls out a quote from Marx on the Paris Commune to justify this position (which I take up in the next section), but he simply ignores the great burden of evidence to the contrary, including most obviously the experience of the Russian revolution: Lenin and Trotsky did not disappear once the masses had taken power through**

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<sup>1</sup>[http://www.permanent-revolution.org/polemics/to\\_know.pdf](http://www.permanent-revolution.org/polemics/to_know.pdf)

**the soviets; on the contrary, their leadership – and their socialist ‘prescriptions’ – became more important than ever.<sup>2</sup>**

North quotes the first part of this paragraph, omitting the section we have highlighted here. That in itself is telling because his position cannot be sustained in light of the experience of the Russian revolution. (Indeed North makes no mention in this section of Bolshevism, Lenin or Trotsky – quite a feat considering this is supposed to be a discussion about the relationship of socialists and the masses in the aftermath of a revolution!) Clearly *the Bolsheviks did run Soviet society*; the revolution would never have survived had they not done so. Their leadership became more important than ever after the revolution, and the essence of that leadership was a tremendous struggle to transform social life through the implementing of what Beams and North derisively call socialist “prescriptions.”

North claims that Brenner misrepresents the issue, that it isn’t about “a repudiation of program”, but here North is engaging in what he accuses Brenner of – a sleight of hand (88). As we pointed out in the last chapter, when Brenner wrote his document in 2003, the WSWS was still in a ‘programmatically drought’ that had lasted for 6 years: between the US presidential election of 1996 and the California gubernatorial campaign of 2003, the party (at least in the US) issued no programmatic statements. And to this day there has never been any statement on the WSWS of ‘What We Stand For’. Given that record, the dismissive attitude to socialist “prescriptions” on Beams’s and North’s part was very much a question of the “repudiation of program.” And behind that repudiation lay the dead weight of abstentionism. Hence North’s vitriol over this issue – because it brought to light the party’s abandonment of its revolutionary responsibilities under his leadership.

Insofar as there is any political content to North’s demagoguery, it is the same capitulation to spontaneous consciousness that we noted in the previous chapter. Nothing makes such a capitulation more heroic-sounding than ringing declarations about the masses emancipating themselves, about how the masses “must create and work out the forms of their own liberation”, about “democratic control of the working class” (88). But North never explains why any of this should be at odds with the revolutionary movement having a program and fighting to carry out that program after the revolution. If Bolshevism proves anything, it is that the emancipation of the masses can only happen through the revolutionary party’s leadership in making the revolution and in constructing socialism. Talk about the ‘self-emancipation of the masses’ which ignores this decisive historical lesson is merely radical-sounding hot air.

## **How the Masses Emancipate Themselves**

It is noteworthy that what provoked North’s angriest rhetoric (in which he virtually accuses Brenner of being a closet Stalinist) was Brenner’s explanation as to why there is no contradiction between the masses emancipating themselves and socialists running society. Here is the passage in full; we have highlighted the one part that North quoted.

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<sup>2</sup> [http://www.permanent-revolution.org/polemics/to\\_know.pdf](http://www.permanent-revolution.org/polemics/to_know.pdf)

The point here is that there is no contradiction between the masses emancipating themselves and socialists running society. This is for two reasons. First, socialists are not alien elements – or ‘outside agitators’, as the bourgeois stereotype would have it – stirring up otherwise docile workers; rather, socialists are the most conscious and determined section of the working class. So emancipation isn’t the work of the masses *as opposed to socialists*, but a process in which socialists play an integral – and necessarily a leading – part. (The middle class origins of many Marxists, including the greatest ones, does not change this, since what is decisive is class allegiance, and that is determined by what one fights for, not who one’s parents were.)

Second, the term ‘masses’ is an abstraction that tends to obscure important social and political differentiations which become acute in a revolutionary crisis. **Some workers will actively oppose the revolution: to imagine them running anything in a socialist society is perverse. Others will be politically neutral: to foist responsibilities on them right away for a revolution they have barely begun to understand will probably do little more than antagonize them; their political consciousness (and more broadly, their general cultural level) will have to be patiently nurtured. So for a considerable period of time the running of socialist society will be in the hands, not of amorphous ‘masses’, but of *class conscious workers* – in other words, that section of the class (necessarily a large portion of it and hopefully a majority) whose political consciousness has been shaped by the revolutionary socialist movement. This, it needs to be emphasized, is what is meant by ‘socialists running society’ – i.e. not a small clique of party bureaucrats but a broad section of workers imbued with socialist consciousness.** And that very consciousness is itself the best guarantee against bureaucratization, though clearly the instituting of workers’ democracy and workers’ control over production have to be central concerns of the revolution and spelled out in unequivocal terms in any revolutionary program.

But it is completely wrong-headed to make a rigid distinction between workers’ emancipation and socialist leadership precisely because that emancipation is only achieved through workers becoming socialists themselves. Without socialist consciousness – i.e. without freedom from the invisible shackles of middle class prejudice and habits of thought that makes it possible in the first place for the working class to become the subject of history – talk of workers’ democracy becomes largely hollow. Which in turns means that deflecting virtually every question about socialist policy with the response that ‘the masses will deal with it’ is an evasion, like a ‘no comment’ comeback to an embarrassing question. More to the point, *it tells the masses nothing* – it ignores an important part of the struggle to win them to socialism, the ‘bridge’ that a program can create for workers between the atomized consciousness of bourgeois individualism and the class consciousness of socialist solidarity.<sup>3</sup>

It is evident that in order to make his accusations, North ignored much of what Brenner had to say: first, that socialists were themselves part of the working class; second, that it was the class conscious proletariat, not a clique of party bureaucrats, that would be running society; third, that workers’ democracy and workers’ control over production

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.permanent-revolution.org/polemics/to\\_know.pdf](http://www.permanent-revolution.org/polemics/to_know.pdf)

were central concerns of the revolution; fourth, that the masses emancipate themselves in terms of their political consciousness precisely by becoming socialists, which is why the disparaging of socialist ‘prescriptions’ was a disservice to the masses. The overall theme here is evident: the emancipation of the masses is *one and the same thing* as the struggle for socialist consciousness in the working class. But this is just what makes this passage so irritating to an objectivist like North.

North treats what Brenner had to say about the differentiation among the masses in a revolutionary crisis as if this were some terrible heresy: “[T]here seems to be no question in your mind that the socialists will be spending at least as much time suppressing people as they will emancipating them” (89). But this is demagoguery. North knows perfectly well that the sort of differentiation Brenner refers to has characterized every great revolutionary struggle, from the bourgeois revolutions in England, America and France to the Russian Revolution itself. When Lenin and Trotsky talked about the dictatorship of the proletariat, that was always understood to mean the dictatorship of the *class conscious* proletariat. There is no question that the big majority of Russian workers backed the Bolsheviks in 1917, but there were elements in the working class who were against the revolution; indeed, as we saw in Chapter 5, North himself, when it suited his purpose of proving the reactionary nature of the ‘union-form’, noted that the rail workers’ union, led by the Mensheviks, came out against the October insurrection.<sup>4</sup> The most famous instance of such a differentiation in the Russian working class were the events of Kronstadt in 1921, when a group of workers who had come under the influence of anarchist and counter-revolutionary forces staged an uprising that threatened the existence of Soviet power. This necessitated the forcible suppression of the uprising by the Bolsheviks. Trotskyists have always defended that action, and unless North has renounced that traditional position, his attacks against Brenner on this issue are pure hypocrisy.<sup>5</sup>

North compounds his distortion by making it seem as if Brenner is arguing that non-socialist workers should be barred from having any role in a post-revolutionary society. To make this claim, North pulls out the words “running anything” from Brenner’s remarks and then declares: “if all those sections of the working class from whom you anticipate opposition or indifference are to be excluded from ‘running anything,’ the continued functioning of a substantial portion of the economic, technological and social infrastructure of an advanced society will be, to put it mildly, problematic” (89-90). This is nonsense. The sentence which contained these words – “Some workers will actively oppose the revolution: to imagine them running anything in a socialist society is perverse.” – and indeed the rest of the passage, which has already been quoted, make it clear that by “running anything”, Brenner was talking about the exercise of political

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<sup>4</sup> *Globalization and the International Working Class: A Marxist Assessment*, p. 81.

<sup>5</sup> All the relevant articles by Lenin and Trotsky on the suppression of the Kronstadt uprising are contained in a 1979 volume put out by the American SWP called *Kronstadt*. While Lenin’s articles don’t seem to be available on line, a few of Trotsky’s are, specifically two pieces he wrote in 1938 responding to attacks from anarchists and liberals attempting to use the Kronstadt events to discredit him and the Fourth International. See: “Hue and Cry Over Kronstadt,” Jan. 15, 1938: <http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1938/01/kronstadt.htm> and “More on the Suppression of Kronstadt”, July, 6, 1938: <http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1938/07/kronstadt2.htm>

power by the class conscious proletariat and had nothing to do with “economic, technological and social infrastructure.” Insisting that socialists will be running society politically after a revolution in no way prevents, say, a doctor or engineer from fulfilling their professional responsibilities, irrespective of their political allegiances. North has to distort Brenner’s position to the point of absurdity because otherwise the untenable nature of his own position becomes evident.

## What Having Faith in the Masses Really Means

North also takes issue with the following remarks by Brenner:

If by the sheer act of participating in a revolution the undifferentiated masses can, as it were, leap out of their skins and transcend a lifetime of oppression and backwardness to the point of being able to carry out the mammoth task of socialist construction *on their own*, i.e., without any guidance or ‘prescriptions’ from socialists, then one has to wonder why they would need these same socialists to lead them in making a revolution in the first place. One has to wonder, in short, why they would need a *change* in consciousness at all.<sup>6</sup>

North finds these remarks appalling and his response is dripping with irony: “Backward the workers come into the revolution. Backward they leave it. Only through the Herculean efforts of Frank Brenner can something be salvaged from this general mess and the masses led, despite themselves, to the new utopia” (91). But if we set aside this overheated rhetoric, all that Brenner was saying here was that if the proletariat needed a revolutionary vanguard in order to make the revolution, it would also need the same vanguard in order to carry through the construction of socialism (or, more accurately, the transition to a socialist society). And North notwithstanding, this has been the position of classical Marxism since Lenin and Trotsky’s time.

The only substantive point North makes about this is as follows:

[T]he revolution cannot be made *for* the workers. It must be made *by* the workers who understand what they are fighting for. The conception that the working class is capable of fighting for, and winning, political power can appear reasonable only to those who believe that masses of workers will be drawn to the perspective of socialism out of the experiences of their own lives. But you, Comrade Brenner, do not believe this. All that you see in the masses is a spectacle of appalling backwardness (90-1).

Everything here is an objectivist muddle. First of all, there is no contradiction between the revolution being made by workers and the working class needing a revolutionary vanguard. North’s statement that the revolution “must be made by workers *who understand what they are fighting for*” (emphasis added) is itself a backhanded acknowledgement that there is no such contradiction. After all, what is that understanding

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<sup>6</sup> [http://www.permanent-revolution.org/polemics/to\\_know.pdf](http://www.permanent-revolution.org/polemics/to_know.pdf)

if not socialist consciousness and where would workers get that understanding except from the revolutionary vanguard? But that is not what North is getting at; instead, he tells us that the capability of the working class to fight for and win power “can appear reasonable only to those who believe that masses of workers will be drawn to the perspective of socialism out of the experiences of their own lives.” But to that we give the same answer as Lenin, the answer we already quoted in the previous chapter: while it is true that “the working class spontaneously gravitates towards socialism; nevertheless, most widespread (and continuously and diversely revived) bourgeois ideology spontaneously imposes itself upon the working class to a still greater degree.”<sup>7</sup> Thus the capability of workers to win political power is dependent, *not* on the spontaneous consciousness produced by “the experiences of their own lives”, as the objectivist North would have it, but on the extent to which the revolutionary vanguard is able to overcome that spontaneous consciousness.

North’s claim that all that Brenner sees in the masses “is a spectacle of appalling backwardness” is rubbish. Yes, the masses are possessed of many progressive instincts, but a Marxist analysis isn’t about weighing up progressiveness versus backwardness but of understanding the dialectical relationship between them. A revisionist like Alan Woods is positively aglow with admiration for the progressive instincts of the masses, but this leads him theoretically to the oxymoron of an ‘unconscious socialist consciousness’ and in practice to opportunism. Workers don’t need Marxists to pat them on the back and tell them how progressive they are: this sort of ‘faith’ in the masses is just the flip side of skepticism and resignation. Workers need a revolutionary vanguard that is able to *counteract* the “still greater degree” to which their spontaneous consciousness is overwhelmed by bourgeois ideology. Real faith in the masses is faith in their ability to overcome spontaneous consciousness and rise to the level of socialist consciousness. But that depends entirely on the extent to which the revolutionary vanguard itself resists capitulating to spontaneous consciousness, whether in the form of opportunism or abstentionism.

## **The Unlikely Champion of Workers’ Democracy**

It also needs to be said here that North’s pose as the champion of workers’ democracy is a little hard to take at face value. First of all, as Steiner pointed out in his document, the party under North’s leadership has abandoned the demand for workers’ control in its programmatic statements, replacing it instead with the vague slogan of “democratic control”. Steiner wrote:

In the programmatic statement for the California election campaign [of 2003], there is nothing mentioned about workers control nor any call for autonomous organizations of the working class to begin to exercise the prerogatives of management. Without the latter, the call for public works, or nationalization of industries is indistinguishable from a program advocated by certain left wing

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<sup>7</sup> V.I. Lenin, *What is to be done?* in *Collected Works*, v. 5, p. 386, n.:  
<http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1901/witbd/ii.htm#v05fl61h-373-GUESS>



reformists who dream of achieving the type of welfare state that Britain had in the immediate postwar period when the coal mines were nationalized.<sup>8</sup>

Without workers controlling production and exercising “the prerogatives of management,” talk about the self-emancipation of the masses is empty rhetoric.<sup>9</sup>

But more than anything it is North’s attitude to democracy within his own party that makes his championing of workers’ self-emancipation hard to credit. So far as one can tell, the SEP does not have so much as a semblance of internal democracy. We already raised this point in Chapter 1 with regard to the International Committee, but it bears repeating here: this is a party that holds no national or international conventions where the leadership can be held accountable to the membership. When was the last time North or the rest of the leadership of the SEP stood for election? And what has become of the structures that are typical of Bolshevik democratic centralism – political committees and central committees? For many years now, these committees have disappeared off the

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<sup>8</sup> “Where is the International Committee Going” in *The Dialectical Path of Cognition and Revolutionizing Practice*: [http://www.permanent-revolution.org/polemics/dialectical\\_path.pdf](http://www.permanent-revolution.org/polemics/dialectical_path.pdf). The SEP platform for that election was: “Vote ‘No’ on the California recall. Vote John Christopher Burton for governor, for a socialist solution to the crisis”, WSWS, Aug. 30, 2003: <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2003/sep2003/california30.shtml>. Steiner’s criticism about the absence of workers’ control refers to point no. 53 in that platform.

<sup>9</sup> The same backing away from the demand for workers’ control emerges in the WSWS coverage of the recent two-day UAW strike (Sept. 24-25, 2007) at General Motors in the United States. The day after the strike began, the WSWS editorial board wrote a statement that did raise the issue, demanding the transformation of “GM and the entire auto industry into a public enterprise, democratically controlled by auto workers and the working population as a whole. Workers have intricate knowledge of the industry’s operations and, with the assistance of trained engineers and other professionals devoted to the common good, could run the industry far more efficiently than the bosses.” (“US auto workers shut down General Motors,” WSWS, Sept. 25, 2007: <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2007/sep2007/auto-s25.shtml>). To its credit, the editorial board is unambiguous here in calling for workers to run the auto industry. But two days later, in its first reaction to the strike being called off, the editorial board blurred the revolutionary edge of this demand: “The auto industry must be transformed into a public enterprise, democratically controlled by working people, to provide safe, affordable and environmentally sustainable transportation, and economic security for the producers.” (“Total surrender by US auto union”, WSWS, Sept. 27, 2007: <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2007/sep2007/gmst-s27.shtml>). Instead of clearly calling for the auto workers to control production in the auto plants, we get a much more amorphous demand for ‘democratic control’ by unspecified “working people”. And on Oct. 1, in a major statement calling for the contract to be rejected, this demand is pared down even further: “The auto industry must be transformed into a public enterprise, democratically controlled by working people.” (“Vote ‘no’ on UAW sellout at GM!”, WSWS, Oct. 1, 2007: <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2007/oct2007/uaw-o01.shtml>). By this point, the demand has moved so far away from revolutionary socialism that it appears indistinguishable from left-reformism. The term “public enterprise” avoids the issue of expropriation: are the parasites who run the auto companies going to be compensated or not? The phrase “democratically controlled by working people” avoids the question of who will run production inside the plants: will it be the auto workers themselves or some ‘worker-friendly’ reformist scheme, as in Western Europe, where government-run “public enterprises” subordinate the needs of workers to national and global capital? Even the term “working people” is a deliberate softening of “working class”, so much so that it has become common parlance for every bourgeois political hack (and, as a result, is often understood to include ‘hard-working’ bosses and bankers). We have here yet another instance of a pragmatic adaptation under the pressure of events: what happened to the demand for workers’ control is not so very different from what happened to the permanent revolution in the WSWS line on Iraq. Always the tendency of these adaptations is to ‘build bridges’, not to socialist consciousness, but to petty bourgeois and bourgeois class forces. One might add that in the GM strike, the WSWS only raised demands of any kind for the first time the day after the strike began.

radar screen: they issue no statements, make no decisions and hold no gatherings. The only reasonable conclusion is that they don't exist. But if that is so, then the SEP is a party that is run in a completely undemocratic manner, with an entrenched leadership centered around North that is never subject to account or review and which makes all the decisions affecting the movement. Can any worker, youth or intellectual take seriously the commitment of such a party to workers' democracy?

(It has to be said that while the need for centralism and discipline in a revolutionary party are obvious enough, the value of internal party democracy hasn't been sufficiently emphasized. This isn't a matter of the sort of democratic charades one gets in mainstream politics, where you get to vote on changing the leader every few years, but never on the party's commitment to capitalism. Democracy in a revolutionary movement isn't primarily about 'changing the regime'; it is far more about raising the political consciousness of the membership by fostering internal debate and critical thought. A leadership that suppresses democracy, that holds no conventions and doesn't allow for the election and functioning of leading committees, inevitably also suppresses critical discussion within the movement. A revolutionary party can never be an organization of hand-raisers: this kind of 'unity' comes at a terrible price of eviscerating the revolutionary soul of the movement.<sup>10</sup>)

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## **The Oppression of Women and Domestic Drudgery as a “Quaint” Relic of the Past**

North's remarks in the section, “Brenner on the Family and Backwardness” (96-103), combine a raft of misrepresentations with a remarkable degree of ignorance regarding socialist traditions. Once again it is noteworthy that North never mentions the experience of the Bolshevik revolution in this regard, even though the relevance of that history is obvious and the section of Brenner's document that North is critiquing focuses on that history.<sup>11</sup> As we'll see, here as elsewhere, North's position is irreconcilable with Bolshevism. Yet again it is a position marked by abstentionism and estrangement from the life of the working class.

A revolutionary policy on the family starts from the fight against the oppression of women. We can go right back to Marx and Engels on that issue, and for the Bolsheviks this was a central feature of their policy once they were in power, as Brenner demonstrated in his document. Trotsky summarized the attitude that always prevailed within classical Marxism:

A revolution does not deserve its name if, with all its might and all the means at its disposal, it does not help the woman – twofold and threefold enslaved as she has

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<sup>10</sup> We will have more to say about this last point in particular at the conclusion of the next chapter.

<sup>11</sup> “Socialism and the family”, Part 3 of *To know a thing is to know its end*: [http://www.permanent-revolution.org/polemics/to\\_know.pdf](http://www.permanent-revolution.org/polemics/to_know.pdf)



been in the past – to get out on the road of individual and social progress. A revolution does not deserve its name, if it does not take the greatest care possible of the children – the future race for whose benefit the revolution has been made.<sup>12</sup>

Now before we go any further, the question arises: are women still oppressed? Are they still, as Trotsky had it, “twofold and threefold enslaved”? On the face of it, this is a silly question to ask, since the answer seems so obvious, but in fact North never mentions the phrase “oppression of women” in this section on the family or anywhere else in his document. North, however, does take exception to a statement in Brenner’s document about the need “to free women from domestic servitude.” North writes:

A modern socialist program must address itself practically to the problems of men, women and children as they manifest themselves concretely in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Your reference to freeing women “from domestic servitude” appears somewhat quaint at a time when the overwhelming majority of mothers hold jobs outside their homes. You apparently have not noticed that the percentage of households corresponding to the “Father Knows Best” two-parent model is a fraction of what it was when that sit-com aired in the 1950s. And, we might add, the image of the authoritarian *paterfamilias* bears little relation to contemporary reality – especially that of working class fathers who find themselves in the clutches of that system of legal torture known as the “Friend of Court” (which can order the deduction of as much as half his weekly wage to cover child-support expenses).  
(101)

Since these remarks express the gist of North’s position on the oppression of women, we are going to examine them in some detail. First of all, it needs to be said that it will come as news to the great majority of the world’s women that domestic servitude (or domestic drudgery, as Brenner more commonly refers to it) is a “quaint” relic from some long-ago past. The evidence to the contrary on this score is so overwhelming and so widely known that it hardly needs proof, but it is worth bringing in a quote from North’s comrades in Sri Lanka to demonstrate how preposterous his position is. Here is one of the planks of the Sri Lankan SEP’s program for the 2005 presidential election in that country:

***\* End the oppression of women workers***

Women workers are among the most oppressed layers of the working class, condemned by poverty to bear a double burden of poorly paid work and domestic drudgery. Women habitually carry out the most onerous labour—in garment factories, tea plucking, rubber tapping and other forms of agricultural work. Yet, the average female wage is only 71 percent of the male wage in the tea industry, 75 percent in the rubber industry, and 78 percent in rice cultivation.

The most obvious consequence of globalised production is the growth of the garment industry, which now employs more than 300,000 people, mostly young girls from impoverished rural areas. In the free trade zones, they labour in squalid conditions for less than \$US2 for a “flexible” working day and live in rudimentary

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<sup>12</sup> Leon Trotsky, “The Struggle for Cultured Speech”, May 15, 1923, in *Problems of Everyday Life*, p. 53.

accommodation with inadequate facilities. The ending of the previous international quota system this year threatens to consign many of these young girls back to their villages, where conditions are even worse.

In order to provide an income for their families, and the possibility of a decent education for their children, hundreds of thousands of women go to work in the Middle East as housemaids and menial workers, where they are frequently subjected to abuse by their employers. Successive governments have failed to lift a finger to defend the rights of these workers, even in the many cases of suspicious death. Colombo's main concern is not to damage this modern slave trade, which is currently the country's largest earner of foreign exchange.

The SEP defends the rights of women workers to equal pay and decent conditions, including free, high quality childcare and maternity leave on full pay. We call for the outlawing of all forms of discrimination against women, including within the marriage laws, which relegate women to the status of second class citizens. Abortion must be legalized and made freely available to all women. While it is not possible to end centuries of stifling tradition by legal fiat, the SEP unequivocally fights for the creation of an enlightened cultural climate in which men and women alike can fully develop their talents and personality.<sup>13</sup>

It would appear that for the Sri Lankan comrades, the domestic drudgery of women is anything but a "quaint" relic. North will no doubt argue that his remarks apply to women in the advanced capitalist countries, hence his reference to "Father Knows Best" etc. We will consider in a moment whether his position is valid even in the West, but here it needs to be emphasized that there was absolutely nothing in what Brenner had to say on the family, and particularly his remarks on domestic drudgery, that applied solely to women in the advanced capitalist countries. North has simply chosen on his own to frame the question in these terms. Moreover, in doing so he declares: "A modern socialist program must address itself practically to the problems of men, women and children as they manifest themselves concretely in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century." But why shouldn't the women (and children) of Sri Lanka, India, Indonesia, China, Africa, Latin America etc. also be included in "a modern socialist program"? Why shouldn't such a program address their needs? To them, domestic drudgery is very much a 21<sup>st</sup> century reality. North's blindness on this question is shameful and inexcusable, all the more so for the leader of an international Marxist party.

(In a footnote, North takes Brenner to task: "There is no indication in your document that you have considered the urgent needs of families that live outside the wealthiest countries" [100]. But this is a case of the pot calling the kettle black: North dismisses domestic drudgery as a "quaint" relic of the past, makes no mention of the oppression of women, and then blames Brenner for ignoring the urgent needs of families in less developed countries!)

But let us now consider if North's claim about domestic drudgery is true for Western countries. Above all, is it true for *working class women* in these countries? North seems

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<sup>13</sup> "Support the Socialist Equality Party in the 2005 Sri Lankan presidential election", WSWS, Oct. 22, 2005: <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2005/oct2005/sri-o22.shtml>

to think that because “the overwhelming majority of mothers hold jobs outside their homes”, this on its own has done away with domestic drudgery. It is certainly true that the entry of women into the labor force has meant big changes in family life, but North ‘forgets’ that these changes have taken place under capitalism, which means that an age-old problem like domestic drudgery has in some respects actually been exacerbated.<sup>14</sup> Anyone familiar with the facts of working class life would know that while most women now work full-time outside the home, *they also do the lion’s share of domestic work and child care*. Of course the amount of time women spend on housework and child care is considerably less than it was a half-century ago, but this is because women have less time to spend at home. If we look only at a working mother’s ‘free time’ – i.e. the time not taken up by employment outside the home – then the proportion of it consumed by housework and child care is as great as, if not greater than, it was in the days of “Father Knows Best”. To be sure, there has been a big change in social attitudes since the Sixties, with men contributing a lot more than they used to on the domestic front, but from the data it seems that in most families the effect of this contribution isn’t so much to alleviate the burden on women as fill in for them when they aren’t at home. In any case, even now women still typically do twice as much domestic work and child care as men, with the ratio much higher in some Western countries such as the US. More than any other group in society, working mothers report themselves to be “time stressed” or “severely time stressed”, which is a telling indication of the extent to which they remain subjected to domestic drudgery.<sup>15</sup>

Furthermore, any consideration of domestic drudgery also has to take into account the exponential growth of families led by single mothers, since in these families the entire domestic burden is placed on women. Over a quarter of all US children under the age of 18 (26 percent, to be precise) now live in single-parent homes – a staggering statistic in itself, which says a lot about the crisis of the family. The big bulk of these families are headed by mothers, and 4 million of them (just under 30 percent of all single-mother households) live below the poverty line. Indeed, it is five times as likely in the US for the children of single mothers to be living in poverty as the children of married couples, and the younger the children the worse the poverty: over half (52.6 percent) of children under six years of age from single-mother homes are living in poverty. There are similar numbers in the UK: one in four children now live in single-parent families; by comparison, in 1972, only one in 17 children were in such families, which means their numbers have more than tripled in three decades. (In parts of London, single parent families now account for over 40 percent of all children.) Well over half these families

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<sup>14</sup> It should be added here that, as the Sri Lankan election statement indicates, in less developed countries the entry of women into the labor force can actually deepen, rather than alleviate, the oppression of women, as in the case of the “hundreds of thousands of [Sri Lankan] women [who] go to work in the Middle East as housemaids and menial workers, where they are frequently subjected to abuse by their employers.”

<sup>15</sup> An excellent on-line resource for facts about the family is The Factbook website, <http://www.pobronson.com/factbook/>, which summarizes a great many academic and UN studies, highlighting their conclusions. The material in this paragraph drew on two reports from this website, “Housework” (<http://www.pobronson.com/factbook/pages/278.html>) and “How People Spend Their Time” (<http://www.pobronson.com/factbook/pages/45.html>). Some interesting statistics: American women do 70-80 percent of total domestic work, regardless of their employment status; 61 percent of Australian working mothers with partners reported themselves as “time stressed” and 38 percent of Canadian mothers reported themselves as “severely time stressed”.

(63 percent) are living in poverty, and they account for nearly half (45 percent) of all the UK children living in poverty.<sup>16</sup> A key factor linking single motherhood and poverty is the lack of affordable daycare, but even where daycare facilities are available, this only makes it possible for single mothers to go to work but changes nothing about the domestic drudgery they have to confront when they get home.

North never mentions single mothers, which makes it a lot easier for him to dismiss domestic drudgery as a “quaint” relic of the past. But he does go out of his way to express his sympathy with fathers facing legal action for failing to make child-support payments – “working class fathers who find themselves in the clutches of that system of legal torture known as the ‘Friend of Court’ (which can order the deduction of as much as half his weekly wage to cover child-support expenses)” (101). There is something twisted about this: while it is true that working class fathers can be abused by the legal system, their problems are simply not in the same league as the terrible plight of single mothers and their children. That North can mention the one and completely ignore the other testifies to his indifference to the oppression of women.

As for North’s claim that “the image of the authoritarian *paterfamilias* bears little relation to contemporary reality”, here again one is struck by the superficiality (and complacency) of his position. Yet again, he misses what should be essential for a Marxist – that these changes in paternal roles have happened under capitalism. Thus while the family patriarch is history, the violence inherent in the oppression of women has not been done away with – it has only been transmuted. One need only look at the appalling figures on rape and sexual abuse to see that: one in every four women in the US (which means over 25 million women) will be raped and/or physically assaulted by an intimate partner at some point in their lives. This domestic violence (by spouses, former spouses or dates) accounts for over three-quarters of all rapes and physical assaults committed against women.<sup>17</sup> Progress under capitalism is always partial, halting and reversible (as the unceasing attack on abortion rights in America makes plain), and it always comes accompanied with ‘progress’ in exploitation. Women have more rights than ever, and yet in their millions their lives continue to be blighted by domestic violence. So long as that violence continues, so long as domestic drudgery continues to be the lot of most women’s lives and so long as it is overwhelmingly women who are made to pay the crushing cost of family breakdown through single motherhood – so long as all that is true, the oppression of women remains anything but a “quaint” relic of the past. And to paraphrase Trotsky, a revolutionary party “does not deserve its name” if it ignores that oppression.

## **On the Nuclear and Collective Family**

At the end of the “Father Knows Best” paragraph of North’s that we cited earlier, he writes:

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<sup>16</sup> The statistics in this paragraph are again taken from The Factbook website, specifically the reports, “Single Parents” (<http://www.pobronson.com/factbook/pages/43.html>) and “Poverty” (<http://www.pobronson.com/factbook/pages/330.html>).

<sup>17</sup> See The Factbook report, “Domestic Violence”: <http://www.pobronson.com/factbook/pages/161.html>

Working class families are beset by financial difficulties from which they can find no escape. The vast complexity of social life and the pressure it places upon families requires not the invention of a new family form, but rather shifting the weight of the burdens that now fall more or less entirely upon individuals to society as a whole. (101)

The reference to “the invention of a new family form” has to do with North’s claim that Brenner is peddling the collective family as a “panacea” (97). What North means by “panacea” is much the same as what Nick Beams meant by socialist “prescriptions”<sup>18</sup> – i.e. any long-term goals for the family under socialism and any programmatic demands to advance those goals. For North there are no such goals and (as we’ll see) virtually no demands. North insists that the revolutionary movement’s job is restricted to ending the economic problems besetting working class families and “shifting the weight of the burdens” on those families from the individual to society. What those burdens are is unclear, since North has just finished telling us that domestic drudgery is no longer an issue. Elsewhere in the same section, he talks about “practical measures” that the revolution can take “which will significantly improve the conditions of working class families” (100) and though he never spells those out either, there is an indirect reference to daycare, (we will quote these remarks in full and comment on them in a moment), so we can at least assume that daycare would be among the practical measures he has in mind.

But what would be the impact on the family once we shifted the burden of childcare away from individuals – which, in this context, can only mean individual families – to society? And (extrapolating beyond North’s blinkered view) let us say that we also shift the burden of domestic drudgery from women to collective kitchens and laundries. What then remains of the nuclear family? North bristles at the term “collective family”, but what else is universal access to daycare if not the collectivizing of childcare? And if you collectivize childcare and cooking and cleaning (under conditions, of course, of a socialist economy where you have first of all collectivized private property), then you are well on the way to collectivizing the family itself. This is why socialists have traditionally associated collective forms of family life with socialism. It was widely understood that so long as the nuclear family persisted, that would mean that the burdens of childcare and domestic work would continue to be borne by the family, which means primarily by women. You cannot talk meaningfully about ending the oppression of women without addressing the basic structures of family life. Of course since North doesn’t talk about the oppression of women at all, it is easy for him to dismiss the collective family as a “panacea”.

To say that socialists have traditionally supported collective forms of family life doesn’t mean that the collective family can be reduced to a programmatic demand, to be carried out the day after the revolution by government edict. It would be absurd to suppose that such a fundamental transformation of the family could come about this way. But issuing edicts doesn’t define the limits of what a revolutionary government does (or what a

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<sup>18</sup> See the appendix (Part 12) of *To know a thing is to know its end*: [http://www.permanent-revolution.org/polemics/to\\_know.pdf](http://www.permanent-revolution.org/polemics/to_know.pdf)

revolutionary party aspires to do). Just as important as concrete measures around matters like daycare is the need for a coherent vision of the new possibilities of life under socialism, including the possibilities of a new personal life beyond the constraints of the nuclear family. And as Brenner argued in his document, this isn't just important after the revolution: the acute crisis and fragmentation of the nuclear family under capitalism makes such a vision a potentially important part of winning support for making the revolution in the first place.

Needless to say, North discounts the need for such a vision, to say nothing of the collective family itself. For North, Brenner's "panacea" is prime evidence of Brenner's insidious efforts to smuggle in ("campaign to infiltrate") alien ideas into the party about psychology and sex. North writes:

For you, Comrade Brenner, the problems of the family are rooted essentially, not in social conditions, but in individual psychology. Your animus is directed not so much against the existing economic system, as it is against the family, which you are convinced generates out of itself intense misery. What you therefore demand of socialists is that they invent a different, ideal, relationship – the so-called "collective family" – and place it in their program. (98)

Besides misrepresenting Brenner's position, these remarks are also internally inconsistent: in the first sentence, we are told that Brenner's position is that "the problems of the family are rooted ... in individual psychology"; in the second sentence, Brenner's position is the reverse: it is the problems of individual psychology that are now rooted in the family, which "generates out of itself intense misery". As for the first position, it is an invention of North's: Brenner never made such a claim and North can produce no quote to back it up. One hardly needs to be a Marxist to recognize the obvious truth that the family is above all else a social institution. As for the second position, Brenner did indeed argue that the nuclear family within bourgeois society is often the source of "intense misery". But how could anyone possibly dispute this in the face of the mountain of evidence about divorce rates, wife and child abuse, single motherhood and all the other manifestations of the crisis of the family? North, however, phrases his remark – "generates *out of itself* intense misery" – in such a way as to make it seem that Brenner is attributing all these problems to the family *separate from* bourgeois society. This is yet again North's invention; everything Brenner says about the family treats it in its relation to bourgeois society, as for instance in this statement:

The nuclear family today is in an advanced stage of disintegration, something that even the professional liars of the mass media have to admit to, and no one within the entire spectrum of bourgeois public opinion has anything to offer except platitudes about 'family values' along with lots more of the economic oppression and social and moral degradation that is destroying the fabric of family life in the first place. Under these conditions, socialists should be taking every opportunity to bring our goals to public attention, including the new kind of family life that would be possible in a society finally free of class oppression.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup>*To know a thing is to know its end*, Part 3, [http://www.permanent-revolution.org/polemics/to\\_know.pdf](http://www.permanent-revolution.org/polemics/to_know.pdf)



Thus the source of family breakdown is capitalism, and the same is true for psychological problems, a point that Brenner discussed at length in his WSWS series, “Mental Illness and the American Dream”.<sup>20</sup> But capitalism doesn’t operate in an abstract way; it manifests itself through social relations and institutions. And when it comes to the formation – or, more to the point, *malformation* – of the individual psyche, the crucial social institution is the family. Brenner made this point in the course of contrasting the collective and nuclear families:

The whole point of the collective family is to make it possible for both children and parents to break out of what Wilhelm Reich once called ‘family-itis’, that stifling atmosphere of emotionally overloaded and compulsive family ties that breed so many deep and abiding psychological problems. It hardly requires any far-fetched ‘utopianism’ to see the need for children to have strong emotional bonds to a network of ‘mothers’ and ‘fathers’, while retaining an especially close relationship to one or two. Indeed, this need has been evident for so long now that a number of attempts at collective family life were made even within bourgeois society in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the best known being the Israeli kibbutzim. As I’ll get to in a moment, similar attempts were made in the Soviet Union.<sup>21</sup>

North reads these remarks as indicative of Brenner having an “animus” directed “against the family,” but that is nonsense. It is like saying that to warn the riders in a car that their brakes aren’t working is to have an “animus” against driving. It is not the family in general that breeds psychological problems, but the specific form that the family takes under capitalism – i.e. the nuclear family. And because it is a social institution shaped by bourgeois society, the nuclear family inevitably manifests the dehumanizing alienation of that society. This isn’t a matter of having an “animus” against the family but of understanding it. And when it comes to understanding *how* alienation manifests itself within the family, the contribution of Freud (and of Freudo-Marxists like Reich) is indispensable.<sup>22</sup>

According to North, not only does Brenner have an animus against the family but he is also

singularly uninterested and ill-informed about the realities of life for most working class families. Fixated on the psychological and sexual dimension of the family trauma, you have remarkably little to say about the practical aspects of the problems confronting most working class families. A reference to universal access to quality day care is thrown in as an aside. You give the impression of believing that there is relatively little that a socialist revolution can do, in terms of practical measures, which will significantly improve the conditions of working class families, aside

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<sup>20</sup> <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2000/mar2000/ment-m24.shtml>

<sup>21</sup> [http://www.permanent-revolution.org/polemics/to\\_know.pdf](http://www.permanent-revolution.org/polemics/to_know.pdf)

<sup>22</sup> It is worth mentioning that one of the few abiding friendships of Wilhelm Reich’s tragic and erratic life was with the socialist educator A. S. Neill, whose Summerhill school was probably the most famous experiment in collective child-rearing in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, one which incorporated some of Reich’s – and of course many of Freud’s – psychoanalytic insights. The standard account of the school is by Neill himself: *Summerhill: A Radical Approach to Child Rearing* (1959), a seminal work in relation to the wave of experimental schools and efforts to rethink education that began in the Sixties.

from waging a propaganda campaign against various forms of social backwardness.  
(100)

Nothing North says here is true. As we have already seen in relation to the oppression of women and domestic drudgery, it is North who is “singularly uninterested and ill-informed about the realities of life for most working class families.” It is again North who “has remarkably little to say about the practical aspects of the problems confronting” those families. In fact this was one of the issues that set off Brenner’s exchange with Beams, who claimed that socialists didn’t need to raise programmatic demands with regards to the family because socialists had no “prescriptions” for dealing with such problems and shouldn’t be telling people how to live their personal lives. Brenner wrote:

Of course no one is going to disagree with the position that it isn’t the business of socialists to dictate to people how to live their personal lives. But to say *only this and nothing more* ignores, first and foremost, the fight against sexual oppression and backwardness. Everything from wife and child abuse to domestic drudgery to abortion rights to access to daycare to the institution of marriage and on and on – it is simply incredible that to all this our response should be that we have ‘no prescriptions’. Beams talks in the most general terms about “the development of consciousness” in socialism, but he completely ignores the measures that need to be taken in order to make it possible for that development of consciousness to take place.<sup>23</sup>

North claims that a reference to daycare “is thrown in as an aside” by Brenner. In fact, just the opposite is true, as the following remarks by Brenner show:

Though clearly the freeing of women from domestic drudgery and the burden of childcare is directly bound up with the economic restructuring of society, these problems won’t disappear on their own either. It needs to be added that policies on these issues can play a major role in developing socialist consciousness – that is, before the revolution – because of their deep impact on everyday life. To take one obvious example, daycare is an absolute scandal in bourgeois society – for everyone but the wealthy the cost of daycare is a crushing burden, assuming that one can even find room for one’s child in a space that isn’t a firetrap. Few issues could bring home more graphically the superiority of a socialist economy than the demand for access to free, quality daycare as a right of every child. But if we imagine a vast expansion under socialism so that daycare becomes universally accessible, then this in itself becomes a bridge to collectivizing family life. The same is true for the setting up of collective kitchens and laundry facilities. Indeed, there already exists a ready-made model for collective kitchens in that exemplar of contemporary capitalism – the fast-food restaurant. Socialist literature that speaks to issues like these, that takes an everyday feature of life like the local MacDonald’s or Kentucky Fried Chicken and turns it into an object lesson in socialism by showing how, once corporate profit is no longer a factor, the lives of millions of families can benefit from food that is nutritious, as well as being fast and good-tasting – that kind of literature can have a significant impact on class consciousness.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>23</sup> [http://www.permanent-revolution.org/polemics/to\\_know.pdf](http://www.permanent-revolution.org/polemics/to_know.pdf)

<sup>24</sup> [http://www.permanent-revolution.org/polemics/to\\_know.pdf](http://www.permanent-revolution.org/polemics/to_know.pdf). The term “collective kitchens” bears some comment. Brenner used it in this passage because of its historical association with Bolshevism, but in the 21<sup>st</sup> century the term is more likely to conjure up images of soup kitchens. A more accurate but more

Yet again it is North, not Brenner, who really ignores this issue. As a matter of fact, three months after North finished writing his polemic against us, the SEP came out with its program for the 2006 US elections, which contained no demand about daycare and not even a mention of it being a problem.<sup>25</sup> Clearly, beyond its use against his polemical opponents, the issue has little interest for North. As for Brenner supposedly believing the revolution can do little for families besides propaganda campaigns against backwardness, the quotes already cited from Brenner's document are sufficient to show that this accusation of North's is also completely untrue. Brenner raised a number of measures – on daycare and housing and collective kitchens, on the protection of victims of wife and child abuse, on abortion rights, on the deinstitutionalization of marriage – that can be taken by the revolution virtually from day one (and that also need to play a prominent part in mobilizing political support to make the revolution happen). In this field, the revolution necessarily works on two tracks – the concrete economic and political measures that can be taken in the short-term and the long-term work of cultural enlightenment. One might add that though for North, only people with an “animus” against the family would see the need for such enlightenment, his Sri Lankan comrades, living in a country where it isn't so easy to ignore the oppression of women, see that need quite clearly: “[T]he SEP unequivocally fights for the creation of an enlightened cultural climate in which men and women alike can fully develop their talents and personality.”

### **Tradition, Revolution, Cultural Enlightenment**

Predictably, North recycles Beams's charge that Brenner is an idealist because “You oppose the view that changes in the economic organization of society will prove decisive in overcoming backwardness” (102). This makes it sound as if Brenner discounts the significance of a socialist economy, which is not true, but Brenner did insist that such economic measures on their own would not be sufficient to overcome backwardness in the family, that this would require the active intervention of socialists. North conveniently ignores the fact that this was also the position of Lenin and Trotsky, a point Brenner underscored:

Finally, let me address Beams's philosophical criticism. According to him, anyone who thinks that the overthrow of capitalism is “not sufficient to do away with social backwardness” is rejecting materialism, because such a position must mean that this backwardness is not only a product of social environment but that it is to some extent inherent in the working class. First, it needs to be said that if this is right, then Lenin and Trotsky were idealists because they plainly didn't believe that backwardness would disappear on its own, they believed instead that it had to be fought using ‘all the might and means’ of the revolution. The problem here is that Beams's argument is based on a mechanical notion of materialism, one that

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cumbersome term would be the ‘collectivizing of food preparation’. The point isn't to impose a gray uniformity on one of the great pleasures of life, but to free families, and especially women, from an onerous burden.

<sup>25</sup> “For a socialist alternative in the 2006 US elections”, WSWS, Sept. 28, 2006:

<http://www.wsws.org/articles/2006/sep2006/prog-s28.shtml>

conceives of individual psychology as little more than a direct reflection of external reality. Trotsky painted a much more complicated picture when he came to consider the changes in the Soviet family after 1917: “In regard to family relations and forms of individual life in general, there must also be an inevitable period of disintegration of things as they were, of the traditions inherited from the past which had not passed under the control of thought. *But in this domain of domestic life the period of criticism and destruction begins later, lasts very long, and assumes morbid and painful forms which, however, are complex and not always perceptible to superficial observation.*”<sup>26</sup>

Trotsky is simply making the point, evident to anyone who isn't blinkered by a mechanical conception of consciousness, that traditions within the family change at a much slower pace than the great upheavals within politics and economics. To which Brenner added that the same “is also true of the internalized past within each individual, particularly those painful feelings that have been repressed into unconsciousness but that still exert a powerful influence on the shape of the individual's character.” People are not ciphers: their pasts don't vanish as soon as a revolution happens. This doesn't mean that these repressed feelings or the sway of traditions are impervious to social reality, but it does mean that the process of change is far more protracted and that one cannot rely on such backwardness to disappear spontaneously. In that sense the family is no different than other realms of social and economic life: it requires a conscious intervention to overcome backwardness and to bring about what Trotsky called “socialist forms of life.”<sup>27</sup> Ultimately, the real solution to these problems lies in changing the way children are raised, freeing them from the lingering hold of reactionary traditions and the psychological scarring endemic to bourgeois society. Of course this is part of the long-term process of cultural enlightenment that will only be fully realized generations after a revolution.

Again predictably, North distorts Brenner's argument. Brenner had written:

[I]t is entirely appropriate to warn that without a *conscious social intervention*, backwardness will persist and perpetuate itself. The content of that intervention is what this discussion is about – the fight against sexual oppression and the socialist transformation of the family, since the only way to address problems at the root of human personality is to change the way human beings are brought up.<sup>28</sup>

It is perfectly obvious, both from the context and from the phrase “the socialist transformation of the family” that in referring to changing “the way human beings are brought up,” Brenner is talking about a process that will happen *after* the revolution. North ignores this and proceeds to put his own spin on these remarks, making it out that what Brenner is saying is that the revolution cannot happen until backwardness has been eradicated and children are raised in new types of families: “But since this cannot be

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<sup>26</sup> [http://www.permanent-revolution.org/polemics/to\\_know.pdf](http://www.permanent-revolution.org/polemics/to_know.pdf) The internal quote is from Trotsky's article, “From the Old Family to the New”, July 13, 1923 in *Problems of Everyday Life*, p. 38: [http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/women/life/23\\_07\\_13.htm](http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/women/life/23_07_13.htm) The emphasis in this quote is added.

<sup>27</sup> “From the Old Family to the New”, p. 39.

<sup>28</sup> [http://www.permanent-revolution.org/polemics/to\\_know.pdf](http://www.permanent-revolution.org/polemics/to_know.pdf)

done, for obvious reasons, before the social revolution, it means that this conquest of power must depend on the actions of people as they exist now – which would seem to rule out a revolution” (103). Having set up this straw man, North knocks him down with the following harangue:

The chasm between your perspective and that of the revolutionary socialist movement could not be stated more explicitly. Were your proposals and perspective to be adopted, the result would be the dissolution of the SEP, the ICFI and the Trotskyist movement. There would be no need for an international party whose aim is the revolutionary-strategic orientation of the international working class, based on the development of its conscious understanding of the objective laws governing the entire socio-economic system. The ICFI would be replaced by an organization focused on psychotherapy, examining the “repressed feelings in the unconscious” of its members and supporters, and addressing the sexual anxieties that you believe are embedded in the family structure. (102)

Not a word of this is true, but of course North needs this blatant distortion to bolster his claim that Brenner and Steiner are trying to waylay the movement with “psychology and sex”.

As for workers being able to make a revolution despite lingering backwardness on matters like the family, there isn’t anything difficult or idealist about understanding how that can happen. A male worker can be a revolutionary and yet abuse his wife. A working class family can support the socialist cause and yet be homophobic or not want their children to marry anyone from a different race or religion. It is obvious that in any mass revolutionary movement, such contradictions will abound. Of course making the revolution will itself be a transformative experience, but on its own it cannot resolve all these problems. The great leaps in consciousness that workers undergo in a revolutionary crisis are entirely in the realm of politics. “All the active forces [of the working class],” wrote Trotsky, “are concentrated in politics and in the revolutionary struggle, everything else is shoved back into the background and everything which is a hindrance is cruelly trampled under foot.”<sup>29</sup> Trotsky had in mind here backwardness with regard to artistic culture, but the problems of family life are also “shoved back into the background”. In the aftermath of a revolution those problems will necessarily re-emerge: tackling them is an essential part of building a socialist society.

But not for North. With obvious sarcasm he writes:

Yet, if, by some miracle, all these damaged humans still manage to overthrow capitalism, it will then be necessary to repair and reeducate them. Your conviction that the running of society must be left “for a considerable period of time” in the hands of specially trained socialists, pre-indoctrinated with the prescribed consciousness, follows logically from your idealist schema. (103)

The idea that socialists need to lead the fight for cultural enlightenment after the revolution arouses such revulsion in North that his remarks take on the tone of anti-

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<sup>29</sup> L. Trotsky, *Literature and Revolution*, (1960, [1923]), p. 189.  
<http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1923/art/tia23c.htm>

communist demagoguery (“pre-indoctrinated with prescribed consciousness”). Revolutionary socialists are indeed “indoctrinated” – the doctrine is called Marxism! – and its traditions teach us that when socialists confront backwardness and prejudice, they fight back “with all [their] might and all the means at [their] disposal.” What does North propose to do instead? What should socialists do when faced with wife and child abuse, the oppression of women, homophobia and other manifestations of backwardness? Free of ‘doctrine’, North has nothing to propose except to wait for economic progress to resolve all these problems. When Beams put forward the same argument, Brenner characterized it as “acquiescence to backwardness.” It is a shameful position and one that has nothing to do with the traditions of Marxism.

## **Marx and Engels on the Family**

Let us briefly look at what those traditions are. First it is necessary to say something about Marx and Engels. North claims Brenner made “a significant misrepresentation” of their position (98). In fact, Brenner devoted all of one sentence to Marx and Engels on this issue: “From its origins, socialism has been linked to the struggle against the oppression of women, and Marx and Engels openly defied the stifling morality of the Victorian age by calling for the abolition of the family and denouncing marriage as legalized prostitution.” According to North, this is misleading because it makes it seem as if Marx and Engels “were for the dissolution of all family relations, the practice of universal free love, etc.”(98). Actually the phrase, “abolition of the family”, is directly from *The Communist Manifesto*: “Abolition of the family! Even the most radical flare up at this infamous proposal of the Communists.”<sup>30</sup> It was this defiance of bourgeois morality – i.e. “even the most radical flare up at this infamous proposal” – that Brenner was evoking in his remark. Brenner wasn’t examining Marx and Engels’s views on this matter in detail, but from the rest of Brenner’s remarks on the family and particularly on the history of Bolshevism, it is evident to any reader that the Marxist tradition is not about “the dissolution of all family relations” but the development of a new type of family – “From the Old Family to the New”, as one of Trotsky’s most important essays on the subject is called.

As for “universal free love”, North has dragged this in to bolster his “psychology and sex” accusations; nowhere in Brenner’s remarks on the family is there any suggestion of support for such a position. Marx was an opponent of bourgeois sexual promiscuity (he referred to it as “community of women”), which he pilloried in the *Manifesto* and elsewhere. His ideal was that sex should always be associated with love, and this meant monogamous (if sometimes temporary) relationships between one man and one woman. But it should also be said that he and Engels were strong proponents of sexual freedom in the sense of men and women being allowed to form intimate relationships free of any constraints imposed on them by social class and property considerations, family traditions, religious superstitions etc. In the midst of the Victorian era, that was a courageous stand, which, as one historian has written, “constituted a powerful libertarian

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<sup>30</sup> <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1848/communist-manifesto/ch02.htm>



motif in nineteenth century socialist ideology”.<sup>31</sup> That was the point Brenner was making, and he was also pointing out that few traces of that “libertarian motif” are left in the IC’s eviscerated version of Marxism: “It is quite a comedown to go from that stirring precedent [i.e. of Marx and Engels] to the pat response [i.e. of Beams and North] that we have ‘no prescriptions.’”<sup>32</sup>

To go back to the family, what Marx and Engels wanted to “abolish” was the bourgeois family. But what exactly did this mean? Did it refer only to families of the wealthy and the middle classes? Presumably then working class families would continue on under socialism much as they have been under capitalism. But that wasn’t what Marx and Engels said. Noting that the “foundation” of “the present family, the bourgeois family” is “capital, private gain”, they draw the obvious conclusion: “In its completely developed form, this family exists only among the bourgeoisie.” As for working class families, what characterizes them is not an alternative form of the family, but the *dissolution* of the family: “But this state of things finds its complement in *the practical absence of the family among the proletarians*, and in public prostitution” (emphasis added).<sup>33</sup> Thus the abolition of the bourgeois family is the abolition of *the only form of the family that exists under capitalism*, which necessarily means that socialism would see the emergence of a new form of the family.<sup>34</sup>

Marx and Engels didn’t pursue this issue much beyond their call for the family’s abolition, but as Marx scholar Bertell Ollman has shown in his essay on “Marx’s Vision of Communism,” it is possible to get a general picture from Marx’s writings of what that new form of the family would be:

The communist alternative to the family is never stated very clearly, but it can be pieced together from Marx’s scattered comments on this subject. Its main features appear to be group living, monogamous sexual relationships, and the communal raising of children. The group living aspect is apparent from Marx’s contrast of the family with what he calls a “communal domestic economy.” All the advances of modern science are used to make living together as comfortable and harmonious as possible. Whether people eat in communal dining rooms, sleep in the same building, share household tasks, etc., is not disclosed, though I suspect this is the kind of thing Marx had in mind.

After noting Marx’s support for monogamy and opposition to promiscuity, Ollman looks at the issue of childcare:

<sup>31</sup> Wendy Z. Goldman, *Women, the State and Revolution*, p. 35.

<sup>32</sup> [http://www.permanent-revolution.org/polemics/to\\_know.pdf](http://www.permanent-revolution.org/polemics/to_know.pdf)

<sup>33</sup> *The Communist Manifesto*, Part 2: <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1848/communist-manifesto/ch02.htm>

<sup>34</sup> It deserves to be noted that Eduard Bernstein, father of revisionism and ‘realist’ opponent of Marxist ‘utopianism’, took strong exception to the demand for the abolition of the family, citing it as a prime example of why Marxist theory was in need of ‘revision’. Specifically he claimed that Marx and Engels were wrong about the proletarian family: instead of disintegrating, it “increasingly assumes a bourgeois form.” Which was a good thing, as far as Bernstein was concerned: “I doubt if there are many among us who would lament the demise of a concept postulating the total transformation of the family” (Eduard Bernstein, “The Marx Cult and the Right to Revise” [1903] in *Selected Writings of Eduard Bernstein 1900-1921*, ed. Manfred Steger, pp. 48-52).

The communal raising of children is never mentioned explicitly, but can be deduced from other aspects of communist life which seem to require it. For Marx, aside from minor differences due to heredity, a child's development is determined by his or her environment, an important part of which is the parental home. In capitalism, parents have considerable control over their children's health, education, work, marriage, etc., but, given the parents' own problems and limitations, this power is seldom used wisely. In communism, parents will no longer be allowed to exercise a destructive influence on their children. This does not mean that they will be forcibly separated from their young. Given communist sociality, that is without the pervading selfishness and emotional insecurity which characterize current parent-child relations, communist parents will want a community no less perfect for their children than the one they construct for themselves.

Not only children, of course, but adults as well require special conditions to realize their full human potential. We have already seen the importance Marx attaches to free time. Though he never deals with the drain children are on their parents, particularly on mothers, he surely was aware of it. Already living in the "communal domestic economy," the arrangement which seems best suited to permit self-realization of young and old alike is some kind of communal raising of children. Parents and children simply spend as much time together and apart as their respective development requires. Unlike today, however, the time together is no longer rooted in necessary work and customary duties, but in the same desire to satisfy common needs which characterizes all social contact in the communist society.<sup>35</sup>

## **Bolshevism and the Family**

What lends credibility to this reading of Marx's views is not only Ollman's diligence as a scholar but also the fact that this reading coincides with what many second-generation Marxists, notably the Bolsheviks, understood by the "abolition of the family." Brenner discussed this in *To know a thing is to know its end*, but here it is worth citing a passage from that document about the policies on the family and the emancipation of women implemented by the Bolsheviks a year after taking power:

"Soviet legislation and social policy on issues of marriage and procreation in the 1920s were the most daringly progressive in the world. As early as 1918, women were accorded full equal rights with men in all social and private areas, including marriage and family relations. Women had the right to choose their surname, place of residence, and social status. Their involvement in productive labor was supposed to ensure them economic independence of men. If they became pregnant, they were entitled to paid holidays. To relieve women of onerous 'domestic servitude,' the state began to set up a system of crèches, nurseries and communal food supplies. Medical service for mothers and children were expanded and improved and became entirely free." Also, to the list of measures cited here one should add the ending of marriage as a religious institution, the right of divorce, the right to an abortion and the decriminalization of homosexuality. This is a record that speaks for itself. All

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<sup>35</sup> Bertell Ollman, "Marx's Vision of Communism":  
[http://www.nyu.edu/projects/ollman/docs/vision\\_of\\_communism.php](http://www.nyu.edu/projects/ollman/docs/vision_of_communism.php)

one could add is that by today's standards this would still be a "daringly progressive" program in many parts of the world.<sup>36</sup>

It is also relevant to note the ideological spirit that animated this most "daringly progressive" of family policies, and here American academic Wendy Z. Goldman's 1993 book, *Women, the State and Revolution: Soviet Family Policy and Social Life 1917-1936*, is a useful guide. In the epigraph to her opening chapter, Goldman quotes a Soviet sociologist of the time as declaring that the family "will be sent to a museum of antiquities so that it can rest next to the spinning wheel and the bronze axe, by the horsedrawn carriage, the steam engine, and the wired telephone." This is an obvious reference to Lenin's *State and Revolution*, where Engels is quoted on the "withering away" of the state in virtually identical terms. And it wasn't just the families of the bourgeoisie that were going to be relegated to a museum, but rather the bourgeois form of the family, which is to say the nuclear family. As Goldman writes:

In October 1918, barely a year after the Bolsheviks had come to power, the Central Executive Committee of the Soviet, the highest legislative body, ratified a complete Code on Marriage, the Family and Guardianship. The Code captured in law a revolutionary vision of social relations based on women's equality and the "withering away" of the family. According to Alexander Goikhbarg, the young, idealistic author of the new Family Code, it prepared the way for a time when "the fetters of husband and wife" would become "obsolete."<sup>37</sup>

Significantly, it was the crisis of the *proletarian* family that was the central concern of Bolsheviks. The large-scale entry of women into the workforce under capitalism had brought about the dissolution of the working class family that Marx and Engels had already talked about in the *Manifesto*, with working class women and children bearing the brunt of this crisis. Capitalism could do nothing to resolve these problems, except to make matters worse:

...the Bolsheviks believed that capitalism had created a new contradiction, felt most painfully by women, between the demands of work and the needs of the family. As more and more women were forced to work for wages with the advent of industrialization, the conflict between the demands of production and reproduction resulted in high infant mortality, broken homes, neglected children, and chronic health problems ... The Bolsheviks argued that only socialism could resolve the contradiction between work and family. Under socialism, household labor would be transferred to the public sphere: The tasks performed by millions of individual unpaid women in their homes would be taken over by paid workers in communal dining rooms, laundries, and childcare centers. Women would be freed to enter the public sphere on an equal basis with men, unhampered by the duties of the home. At last women would be equally educated, waged, and able to pursue their own individual goals and development. Under such circumstances, marriage would become superfluous. Men and women would come together and separate as they wished, apart from the deforming pressures of economic dependency and need. Free union would gradually replace marriage as the state ceased to interfere in the union

<sup>36</sup> [http://www.permanent-revolution.org/polemics/to\\_know.pdf](http://www.permanent-revolution.org/polemics/to_know.pdf) The internal quote is from Igor S. Kon, *The Sexual Revolution in Russia*, p. 55.

<sup>37</sup> Wendy Z. Goldman, *Women, the State and Revolution*, p. 1.

between the sexes. Parents, regardless of their marital status, would care for their children with the help of the state; the very concept of illegitimacy would become obsolete. The family, stripped of its previous social functions, would gradually wither away, leaving in its place fully autonomous, equal individuals free to choose their partners on the basis of love and mutual respect.<sup>38</sup>

The “withering away” of the family (specifically the nuclear family as its bourgeois form) through the collectivizing of childcare and household work as the necessary prerequisite for the emancipation of women (and with that, the real emancipation of men as well) – this was the Bolshevik vision of the “new family” under socialism. This was how the Bolsheviks (and for that matter, socialists internationally) understood Marx and Engels on this issue. One might add here that the influence of the utopian socialists, and specifically Chernyshevsky in the Russian context, also contributed significantly to this Bolshevik vision.

A word about marriage is in order here. North claims that “Marx and Engels speak not of marriage in general, but of bourgeois marriage” (98). This implies that the institution can somehow be rescued from its bourgeois form. But if you eliminate the latter, what is left of marriage? Unlike the case of the family, this isn’t a matter of moving towards some new form of marriage under socialism. “Abolition” in regards to marriage really means that. You get rid of the meddling of the priests by making marriage a civil arrangement and you get rid of the meddling of the state by eventually deinstitutionalizing marriage altogether (and as a transition to that, by making divorce universally and easily accessible). The goal of the Bolsheviks, as Goldman recounts in the quote we have just cited, was to make marriage “superfluous”: “Men and women would come together and separate as they wished, apart from the deforming pressures of economic dependency and need. Free union would gradually replace marriage as the state ceased to interfere in the union between the sexes.” It is interesting to note that the issue of marriage became a bone of contention in discussions within the Bolshevik party over the new family legal code of 1918. The objections from some party members was that the code didn’t go far enough in deinstitutionalizing marriage: though it ended the control of the church over marriage, it still called for government registration and the issuing of marriage licenses. Goikhbarg, the author of the code, recounted some members shouting at him: “Registration of marriage, formal marriage, what kind of socialism is this?” And Goldman quotes a Soviet delegate from the Ukraine as denouncing the code for being “some kind of bourgeois survival” because it had the effect of “moving the population away from a basic socialist understanding, from the freedom of the individual, and from the freedom of marriage relations as one of the conditions of individual freedom.”<sup>39</sup> The Bolshevik leadership rightly dismissed this criticism as completely unrealistic given the conditions of Soviet society at the time, but what is noteworthy here is that within the party membership as a whole, the abolition of marriage as an institution was assumed to be part of “a basic socialist understanding.”<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid, pp. 2-3.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, p. 55.

<sup>40</sup> One might add that this “basic socialist understanding” regarding marriage was applied by many socialists to their own personal lives. Long before it became commonplace to do so in the Sixties, they often chose to live in common-law relationships rather than government-sanctioned ones.

Let us bring in a final word here from Trotsky, who provides us with a striking image of how the Bolsheviks saw their own role in this arena of social life. In December 1925, Trotsky gave a speech to the Third All-Union Conference on Protection of Mothers and Children. Paraphrasing some remarks of Lenin's, Trotsky drew an analogy between nationalist and racist prejudice that is used to divide workers, and backwardness in the family. Lenin had spoken of "a shell of national arrogance which has been built up over centuries," and Trotsky picked up on this metaphor:

And just so, comrades, has the shell of family prejudices, in the attitudes of the head of the family toward woman and child – and woman is the coolie of the family – this shell has been laid down over millennia, and not centuries. And thus you are – you must be – the moral battering ram which will break through this shell of conservatism, rooted in our old Asiatic nature, in slavery, in serfdom, in bourgeois prejudices, and in the prejudices of the workers themselves, which have arisen from the worst aspects of peasant traditions. Inasmuch as you will be destroying this shell, like a battering ram in the hands of the socialist society that is being built, every conscious revolutionary, every Communist, every progressive worker and peasant is obliged to support you with all his might.<sup>41</sup>

A "moral battering ram" is how Trotsky saw the role of socialists in the fight against backwardness in the family and the oppression of women. The contrast couldn't be starker to the acquiescence to backwardness that characterizes North's position. One can only imagine what sort of "animus" against the family that North would have unearthed in these remarks if Trotsky's name weren't attached to them.

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<sup>41</sup> L. Trotsky, "The Protection of Motherhood and the Struggle for Culture" in *Leon Trotsky: Women and the Family*, pp. 43-4.