

[We are publishing a letter from David North to Alex Steiner that is relevant to the polemic between North and Steiner and Brenner. The letter is followed by our comments.]

Letter from David North to Alex Steiner

January 3, 1999

Dear Alex,

Thanks for your redraft -- I will begin reading it sometime during the coming week.

I have begun a study of American pragmatism, a project which I believe is quite overdue in our movement. As I was reading the Phelps book on Hook several months ago, I was struck by the author's ignorance of the underlying philosophical issues. But the biography of Hook poses serious questions (which Phelps cannot deal with) about the historical crisis of American liberal-reformism. As the author believes that pragmatism is thoroughly compatible with Marxism (indeed, he suggests that Marxism is merely a form of pragmatism "consistently carried out"), Phelps denies that there exists any essential link between Hook's pragmatism and his political degeneration. Of course, this link should not be simplified as if some sort of mechanical connection existed between Hook's philosophical views and his transformation into an anti-communist. But by failing to examine the relation between method, epistemology and politics, Phelps evades what is really a critical question: What is the relation between pragmatism and the political and intellectual bankruptcy of American liberal-reformism?

I would like to trace the development of pragmatic thought in the United State -- from Peirce to James to Dewey and, finally, to its most squalid modern-day representative, Rorty. I must say that I find Peirce to be extraordinarily interesting: there is a profound difference between his "pragmaticism" and the pragmatism of James. Peirce insisted upon the reality of objects independent of consciousness and flatly rejected the Kantian "unknowable" thing-in-itself.

Peirce's conception of truth was objective, socially-oriented and historical. The Jamesian concept of truth -- deeply subjective, ahistorical and individualist -- was profoundly alien to Peirce (which is the reason why he utilized the term pragmaticism to distinguish his views from James). Are you familiar with the following passage?:

"It seems to be that we are driven to this, that logicity inexorably requires that our interests shall *not* be limited. They must not stop at our own fate, but must embrace the whole community. This community, again, must not be limited, but must extend to all races of

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beings with whom we can come into immediate or mediate intellectual relation. It must reach, however vaguely, beyond this geological epoch, beyond all bounds. He who would not sacrifice his own soul to save the whole world is, as it seems to me, illogical in all his inferences, collectively. Logic is rooted in the social principle.

“To be logical men should not be selfish.”

I think this is a remarkable statement. It would be important, I believe, to examine the historical causes and implications of the triumph in the United States of Jamesian pragmatism over Piercian pragmatism. At any rate, this project is just beginning. But if you don't mind, I will seek your advice and input from time to time.

With best wishes for the New Year,

David

Comment on North's Letter of Jan. 3, 1999

We are posting the letter from David North to Alex Steiner from January 1999 because of its relevance to the philosophical issues at the heart of our current polemical dispute with North. This letter deals with the question of pragmatism and it demonstrates an attitude to this issue that is in striking contrast to the utter neglect of the struggle against pragmatism that now prevails within the International Committee. In this respect, the words of North in 1999 are a condemnation of the theory and practice of North today.

(Before dealing with the philosophical issues, the friendly tone of this letter bears some mention. In his 2006 polemic, *Marxism, History and Socialist Consciousness*¹, North presented Steiner as having merely “cordial relations” with the movement, and even that characterization was later undercut by claims that Steiner and Brenner harbored a “bitter hostility” towards the party and that they had a secret agenda they were trying to impose on the movement. This letter shows that the reality was quite different: in 1999 North looked upon Steiner as a valued collaborator and wished to avail himself of the latter's “advice and input from time to time.” In fact the year before, Steiner had applied for membership in the party, and at about the time this letter was written North asked Steiner to become the editor of the Philosophy section of the World Socialist Web Site. All that changed once Steiner expressed some serious philosophical and political differences with North. And in order to justify three years of stonewalling after Steiner and Brenner first made their criticisms known, North tried to marginalize them by conveniently revising this history of close collaboration with the movement.)

As to the philosophical issues, the letter shows not only that at the time North felt that the struggle against pragmatism was still essential to the theoretical development of the International Committee, but he also concedes that the “study of American pragmatism” was “a project which I believe is quite overdue in our movement.” If anything, that was an understatement. There had not been a single essay written on pragmatism in the International Committee since the 1970's. Still, in 1999 North was at least willing to acknowledge that this was a problem, which stands in sharp contrast to his present attitude. Yet there is no evidence that the intentions expressed in this letter led anywhere: there is no record of any theoretical articles by North about pragmatism posted on the WSWS or published elsewhere. Instead, what was “overdue” in 1999 simply vanished off the radar screen, which meant that philosophical and ideological assumptions alien to Marxism continued to fester in the movement.

This neglect is made evident in the work of a major educational effort conducted by the International Committee, the summer school of 2005, when North and other leading IC comrades gave a series of lectures over a period of a week or more, all later posted on the WSWS.² There is not a single mention of pragmatism in any of the nine lectures delivered at this event. When we raised this as evidence that the IC had abandoned the struggle against pragmatism, North's cynical

¹ David North, *Marxism, History and Socialist Consciousness*, (Mehring Books, Oak Park, Michigan, 2007)

<http://www.permanent-revolution.org/polemics/mhsc.pdf>

² <http://wsws.org/articles/2005/oct2005/lect2005.pdf>

reply was that the lectures constituted “massive anti-pragmatic exercises” - without ever mentioning the word pragmatism!

The views expressed by North in 1999 are irreconcilable with this cynical claim. For this reason the letter is an important confirmation of the analysis we made of the theoretical degeneration of the International Committee - i.e. that in the aftermath of 9/11 (the crucial political landmark in the years from 1999 to 2005) there was a shift to the right by the IC leadership both in terms of its theoretical standpoint and its political orientation to the working class. In 1999 the significance North attached to the study of the history of pragmatism was in line with the historical legacy of the IC, going back to the 1963 fight against the renegacy of the American SWP and ultimately to Trotsky’s last, great struggle against pragmatism documented in *In Defense of Marxism*. By 2005 the crucial lessons from that legacy had been relegated to a black hole of political amnesia. In fact it was only in our polemic, *Marxism Without its Head or its Heart*, that the issues that North had raised in his letter nine years ago were finally addressed - specifically the various tendencies within pragmatism and their political significance.

It is also noteworthy that North takes a position in this letter that is completely at odds with the position he took in his exchange with Steiner over Plekhanov four years later, in 2003 (posted as an appendix to Steiner’s document, *The Dialectical Path of Cognition and Revolutionizing Practice*³). In 1999 he argued – correctly - against the position of Hook’s biographer, Christopher Phelps, that Phelps is wrong when he “... denies that there exists any essential link between Hook’s pragmatism and his political degeneration.” North correctly qualified this with the statement that,

“Of course, this link should not be simplified as if some sort of mechanical connection existed between Hook’s philosophical views and his transformation into an anti-communist. But by failing to examine the relation between method, epistemology and politics, Phelps evades what is really a critical question: What is the relation between pragmatism and the political and intellectual bankruptcy of American liberal-reformism?”

Yet this “link” is precisely what North denied four years later with regard to Plekhanov. There North loudly proclaimed that there was no link between the betrayal of Plekhanov and his false epistemology. Rather he ascribed Plekhanov’s betrayal to objective forces completely removed from his philosophical method. Taking issue with Steiner’s assertion of a link between Plekhanov’s politics and his philosophical method, North wrote,

“The cause of this degeneration is not to be explained merely by reference to false epistemological conceptions.”⁴

Although North’s 1999 letter was an honest statement of his views at the time, he was seriously mistaken in his assessment of the fortunes of pragmatism in the United States. The recognition that pragmatism contained two very different traditions was at least a better vantage point than North’s

³ http://www.permanent-revolution.org/polemics/dialectical_path.pdf

⁴ See the letter from David North to Alex Steiner dated 6/3/2003 and included in the appendix of *The Dialectical Path of Cognition and Revolutionizing Practice*. North’s formulation is deceptive as Steiner never used the adjective “merely” in characterizing the relationship between Plekhanov’s politics and his philosophical method. http://www.permanent-revolution.org/polemics/dialectical_path.pdf

position in 2006, where pragmatism is characterized only in the form championed by William James and Richard Rorty. Yet the notion that there is a ‘good’ objective pragmatism as opposed to a ‘bad’ subjective pragmatism is too schematic. The quote from Peirce that North cited is indeed remarkable. Peirce undoubtedly represented the best of American social thought at the time. Yet among the pragmatists Peirce stands out as a solitary figure whose ideas (some of which were well ahead of their time) were claimed by many but genuinely developed by none.⁵ In terms of the relation of pragmatism to politics, Peirce’s ideas had little influence on the radical movements of his time. (The historian Brian Lloyd, in his important study of American pragmatism and its influence on radical movements in the early part of the 20th century, does not even deal with Peirce because “his variety of pragmatism was not a presence in Debs-era radical discourse.”⁶) That was not the case with James and Dewey, both of whom had an enormous influence on the early socialist movement in the United States and whose ideas and methods pose a challenge to those concerned with the question of how to develop revolutionary consciousness in the working class. Moreover, whereas both James and Dewey claimed allegiance to Peirce, Dewey’s brand of pragmatism was much closer to the spirit of Peirce than that of James. We can admire Peirce as well as Dewey for their defense of democratic ideals. But their work must be critically assimilated by Marxists and cannot simply be judged on the basis of isolated quotes. Above all what is needed is a historical-philosophical investigation into the dialectical development of pragmatism.

North’s 1999 letter, which amounts to an initial glimpse at this history, leaves out the crucial role played by Dewey, whom North only mentions in passing. The idea that the basic direction of contemporary pragmatism represented “the triumph in the United States of Jamesian pragmatism over Peircian pragmatism” is but a short step to the position – one that North defends in *Marxism, History and Socialist Consciousness* – that in polemicizing against Richard Rorty, North has done his duty in taking on and doing battle with pragmatism. (One might add that even in this respect, neither North nor anyone else in the IC has ever done a serious examination of Rorty’s philosophical positions; there hasn’t been much more than a few paragraphs in various lectures, dealing mostly with Rorty’s liberal politics. A striking example of this neglect is one of North’s summer school lectures of 2005, where he manages to discuss Rorty without ever mentioning that Rorty was a pragmatist.) As we noted in our polemic, North’s formulation conveniently avoids any responsibility for dealing with Dewey’s as well as Peirce’s version of “objectivist pragmatism.”⁷ Pragmatism actually gave birth to two rather different traditions and Jamesian subjective idealism was only one of them and not even the most important one. The other strand of pragmatism, the one identified with Dewey, is actually far more influential and it is that strand of pragmatism that was adopted by the opponents of the dialectic in the Socialist Workers Party in 1939 and remains the bane of working class politics to this day. Whether North would have corrected his error and begun to take objectivist pragmatism and positivism seriously had he actually followed through on his intention to study the history of pragmatism, no one can say. What we can say is that the complete

⁵ It is only in the last few years that many of Peirce’s ideas are finding contemporary relevance, particularly in the work of theorists of complexity, self-organization and emergent properties - fields of research that have vast implication for semiotics, biology and even cosmology.

⁶ *Left Out: Pragmatism, Exceptionalism, and the Poverty of American Marxism 1890-1922*. (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), p. 425.

⁷ See especially Chapter 4 of *Marxism Without its Head or its Heart: The Long Road Back to Pragmatism* http://www.permanent-revolution.org/polemics/mwhh_ch04.pdf

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neglect of this theoretical work guaranteed the eventual political disorientation of the movement, which we analyzed in detail in *Marxism Without its Head or its Heart*.

Alex Steiner
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