

# **Objectivism or Marxism: A Letter to the International Committee of the Fourth International**

“‘History’ does nothing, it possesses no colossal riches, it fights no battles! It is rather man, actual and living man, who does all this; ‘history’ does not use man as a means for its purposes as though it were a person apart; it is nothing but the activity of man pursuing his own ends.”

(Karl Marx, *The Holy Family*)

To the comrades of the ICFI:

We are writing to protest the lack of response to two documents we submitted raising crucial theoretical and political issues confronting the Trotskyist movement. The two documents are *‘To know a thing is to know its end’: On why utopia is crucial to a revival of socialist consciousness* by Frank Brenner (May 2003) and *The Dialectical Path of Cognition and Revolutionizing Practice: Once More on Lenin, Plekhanov and Marx* by Alex Steiner (March 2004). (We have posted the two documents at [www.permanent-revolution.org](http://www.permanent-revolution.org).)

Three years have passed since the first document was submitted and two years since the second one, which is more than ample time for any response to have been forthcoming. And yet so far there has been none from the IC leadership. This is despite the fact that the first document was written in response to an exchange between Brenner and Nick Beams and the second grew out of correspondence between Steiner and David North – and yet neither Beams nor North have had anything to say.

Perhaps even more distressing is the fact that no one else in the IC leadership has chosen to respond, even to submit so much as a brief comment or query. It seems clear that this aversion to criticism is not just an individual shortcoming but is symptomatic of deeper problems within the movement that every member and supporter of the IC should be concerned about.

It is no exaggeration to say that our two documents, which together are over 100 pages long, constitute the only serious Marxist critique of the politics of the IC in decades. Our criticism was not an act of disloyalty or an attempt to factionalize against the movement; if nothing else, our patience in waiting for a response testifies to that.

(For the record, we were planning to register our protest a year ago, when it already seemed clear to us that we weren’t going to get a response. Then, Steiner had a brief conversation with North at a party public meeting in April 2005 in which North promised to arrange a discussion of our documents where we would be allowed to

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participate. North indicated that this would happen the following autumn. In light of that promise, there was no point in going ahead with our letter. North also told Steiner that he had made extensive notes on Steiner's document. Steiner followed up this conversation by writing North to confirm the interest we both had in participating in such a discussion and to urge North to put his notes into a readable form so as to circulate them in the lead-up to the discussion. The autumn came and went and so did winter and spring, but we have heard nothing from North regarding either his notes or any plans for a discussion. Clearly North's promise was an empty one and he has no intention of ever having such a discussion.)

A healthy movement would welcome critical debate. If our criticisms were misguided, then debate would make this evident, while at the same serving to clarify and strengthen the party's perspectives. But by the same token if those criticisms proved to be valid, then they could be instrumental in reorienting the movement. This is not some incidental aspect of party life, but an essential part of the struggle to develop Marxism. How can one speak of Marxism as a science in the absence of critical dissent and debate? Without it, a movement is condemned to atrophy, no matter how superficially successful it might be.

What sort of example does it set for new members and supporters when the leadership of the movement stonewalls political debate? It is hard to avoid the impression that the only sort of discussion the IC leadership is interested in having is either with people who agree with it or else with the sorts of opponents – e.g. middle class radicals or outright reactionaries – whose views pose no meaningful challenge to the IC's politics.

But consider what this means. The only reason for the movement's existence is to build a mass revolutionary party of the working class. How can anyone conceive of this happening without provoking intense discussion on the widest possible range of political and theoretical issues? And yet, confronted for the first time in decades with two thoughtful political critiques that are entirely within the tradition of Marxism, the IC leadership's reaction is to quell discussion in order to insulate itself from criticism. It is painfully evident that this way of handling criticism will do nothing but alienate the best elements within the working class and intelligentsia, the very elements who are indispensable to building a mass revolutionary movement.

(It may be objected that since we are not currently party members, we have no right to expect a response. We believe, however, that such an objection has no merit. First of all, for the record Steiner did submit an application for membership in 1998, years before any political differences had emerged, but the party leadership never acted on his application and never explained why. Furthermore, we each have long histories with the movement, both as members and supporters, and until we expressed our differences with the IC leadership we were also both active contributors to the WSWS. Given the scope and seriousness of the criticisms we are making and given the lack of any other political debate within the movement, we feel there is a pressing need for a response to our documents. It is also worth mentioning here that in the same conversation with Steiner, North claimed that our documents had been discussed

within the party. But seeing that the authors of the documents were excluded from participating, this could only have made for a ‘discussion’ that was egregiously, even laughably, one-sided. This only underscores how alien a practice genuinely critical debate has become within the movement.)

At issue here is more than just the lack of response to our documents. For a long time there was a disturbing absence of organized theoretical or political discussion within the movement. There hasn’t been an IC perspectives document issued since 1988, and years, even decades, went by without any public record of national or international party conferences having taken place. One had the sense of a movement whose political direction was largely established on an ad hoc basis. This is not just a matter of organizational forms: the membership of a revolutionary movement has to have an instrument for holding its leadership to account, for testing the validity of its perspectives and the unity of its theory and practice. When no such instrument exists, when the political line of the party is handed down by the leadership and never subject to review or discussion, the inevitable effect is not only to stifle debate but also to habituate the membership to accepting this critical vacuum as the ‘norm’.

In the last year there has been a noticeable change, but not necessarily for the better. There was the party summer school and more recently a meeting in Australia of the international editorial board of the WSWS, both of which produced a lengthy series of lectures and reports. We will come to the content of some of this material shortly, but one thing that bears mention here is the fact that for all intents and purposes the International Committee has ceased to function. It is hard even to recall the last time the International Committee held a meeting in its own name. For years now virtually all the authoritative statements of the movement have been issued as WSWS statements, and now the gathering in Australia – which was clearly an international conference of the movement – is presented not in the name of a revolutionary party but rather in that of an editorial board of a web site.

Was this morphing of the IC into the WSWS ever discussed or voted on at a party conference? Where is the document that explains to the working class public the reasons for such a significant shift? How is it possible to square the repeated proclamations about the importance of internationalism with this mothballing of the organizational expression of revolutionary internationalism? The IC leadership obviously feels no need to provide a public accounting, and that itself should be cause for concern. Nor does the substance of the lectures and reports issued from these gatherings suggest any new openness to critical debate. The editorial board reports in particular are more a simulacrum of a perspectives document than the real thing: they are less a guide to revolutionary practice than a version of Foreign Affairs with a Marxist coloration. They are indeed *editorial board* reports – i.e. perspectives for more journalism. The question of what is to be done hardly enters into them at all, aside from ritualistic statements at the end about the need to build the revolutionary party. In other words, the essence of a revolutionary perspective is missing in these reports, but this is the very thing the IC leadership refuses to discuss.

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

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Dialectics is a dead letter in the IC. The movement hasn't produced a single article on dialectical philosophy in 20 years and no lecture was devoted to it at the summer school. Predictably enough, the abandonment of dialectics has also meant the abandonment of the struggle against pragmatism. The latter didn't rate so much as a single mention in any of the lectures. A telling instance of how invisible pragmatism has become in the IC's outlook is the fact that while Richard Rorty is discussed in one lecture as a representative postmodernist, his role as a prominent philosophical pragmatist is completely ignored. This is astonishing given that the struggle against pragmatism was at one time considered the most important element in the training of a conscious revolutionary leadership within the International Committee. As Trotsky warned the SWP in 1940: "Dialectic training of the mind, [is] as necessary to a revolutionary fighter as finger exercises to a pianist." The mandate for the struggle against pragmatism goes back to the split in the Trotskyist movement with the Shachtman-Burnham tendency on the eve of the Second World War. It was then that Trotsky urged his American followers to give primary importance to the struggle against pragmatism. The urgency of a turn toward dialectics was especially important in the United States with its historical prejudices against theorizing. As one of the participants in that fight wrote later, "Nowhere is dialectics held in so little esteem as in the United States, the homeland of pragmatism. It shares the same unpopularity here as do the other ideas of socialism." (George Novack, *An Introduction to the Logic of Marxism*, p.8) Novack's words notwithstanding, we know that in practice the Socialist Workers Party had abandoned the struggle against pragmatism shortly after Trotsky's death, thinking it could get by simply through an adherence to orthodoxy. And whereas adherence to orthodoxy may have been sufficient to take on Pablo in 1953, it was no longer sufficient in the changed political climate of 1963. By 1963, the SWP found its way back to Pablo on the basis of a pragmatic adaptation to Castroism. In that same year, the International Committee issued its call to renew the struggle for dialectics against pragmatism and empiricism in the important document that cemented the break with Pabloism, *Opportunism and Empiricism*. The question of dialectics remained a key issue in the split between Healy and his followers within the International Committee some 20 years later. At that time North correctly defended dialectics from the distortions introduced by Healy. Yet if one looks at how matters stand within the IC today, it is as if these vital lessons from the history of the revolutionary movement have all been afflicted by a case of political amnesia. Pragmatism doesn't rate a mention either in the summer school lectures or the earlier

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series of lectures on the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the International Committee or the series of editorial board reports in Australia. A key document like *Opportunism and Empiricism* is all but forgotten, and with it the gist of the 1963 split. And much the same is true of *In Defense of Marxism*: for all the reverence paid to Trotsky, the philosophical content of his last great political struggle plays absolutely no role in the life of the movement today. The International Committee has abandoned the fight against pragmatism without so much as offering a word of explanation.

### \*\*\* 2 \*\*\*

The assumption that postmodernism has replaced pragmatism and empiricism as the principal ideological threat to Marxism is deeply misguided. Postmodernism is an academic fad that gained currency out of the rightward shift of the generation of Sixties radicals and the incorporation of many of them into the upper middle class. By contrast, pragmatism and empiricism are bound up with the entire historic development of Western capitalism. To imagine that they have been superseded by postmodernism as the mainstay of bourgeois ideology is not so very different than the various theories of ‘neo-capitalism’ which are enthralled by relatively superficial changes within capitalism while missing the persistence of its fundamental and explosive contradictions. (Even the use of postmodernism as a cultural catch-all phrase is more a journalistic buzzword than a sign of real influence. There isn’t much in postmodernist art that isn’t recycled modernism, though it is the vices more than the virtues of modernism that tend to get recycled.)

### \*\*\* 3 \*\*\*

Moreover postmodernism is by now very much a fad on the wane. Many of its principal spokesmen have either passed away or gone into retirement and those who remain active often find themselves on the defensive, with condemnations of postmodernism now commonplace in radical and liberal circles. Twenty years ago it would have mattered to mount an attack on postmodernism; today it is an exercise in flogging, if not a dead horse, at least a very puny one. Even at that, the critique in the summer school lectures is notable for how theoretically threadbare it is. We get virtually no analysis of the ideas of Derrida or Foucault or Rorty. Philosophical problems are reduced to a simple litmus test – for or against objective reality; beyond that, they are a mere sideshow to politics. Hurling a few very belated barbs at postmodernism is not the development of revolutionary theory but its evasion.

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This evasion is especially evident in the way the critique of postmodernism is used to sanction an uncritical defense of the Enlightenment. Anyone defending the Enlightenment heritage of reason is progressive and anyone against is reactionary. But this crude dichotomy obscures the important truth that in the battle over reason Marxism has to fight on *two* fronts – against irrationalism (whether in the form of religious mystification or the nihilism of the Nietzsche-Heidegger line and its

postmodern derivatives) but also against the much more pervasive ‘reason’ of bourgeois society that rationalizes class domination (notably in the form of pragmatism and empiricism). In the latter sense Marxism represents a dialectical negation of the Enlightenment: Marx stripped away the ‘reason’ of the Enlightenment philosophes and uncovered the rationalizations of a new form of class oppression. To ignore this dialectical break is to blur the distinction between Marxism and liberalism, which is all for being ‘reasonable’ and ‘realistic’. And ironically this ends up lending credibility to Nietzschean-style irrationalism, whose appeal largely derives from identifying reason as such with the debased reason of bourgeois society.

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The defense of classical Marxism is only conceivable as a dialectical development of its theoretical heritage. A reversion to ‘orthodox Marxism’ all too often leads to eventual apostasy, as the evolution of parties as different as the German Social Democrats and the American SWP demonstrates. IC-style orthodoxy increasingly takes the form of an attempt to revive the stale and discredited heritage of the objectivism of classical Social Democracy, and in line with that are the efforts to reinstate Kautsky and downplay any criticism of Plekhanov. North’s letters to Steiner (see the appendix to Steiner’s document) lay out this objectivist standpoint in the clearest possible terms: Kautsky and Plekhanov were victims of objective conditions, their betrayals had nothing to do with their attitudes to revolutionary theory. If this is true, then we are at a complete loss to understand why it is that Lenin and Trotsky, who were subject to the same objective conditions, didn’t betray. And the implications for today are obvious: if the theoretical practice of figures of Kautsky and Plekhanov’s stature made no difference to their ultimate fate, then why should we be any different? This sort of ‘defense’ of classical Marxism turns into a rationalization instead of a guide to action. And typically ‘orthodoxy’ turns out to be anything but orthodox, in this case ignoring some of the most important lessons of the history of Bolshevism.

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What objectivism routinely downplays is the significance of consciousness. The practice which goes with an objectivist outlook is abstentionism, which in the IC’s case takes the form of a retreat from any involvement in the working class into a journalistic existence on the internet. The occasional election campaign doesn’t so much contradict as complement this abstentionism, serving more as a dose of activism to let off steam than a meaningful engagement with the working class. Nor does it change anything to affix a ‘science of perspective’ label to such an outlook. Marxist science is not science in the conventional sense: its aim is not only to understand the world but also to transform it. And this is precisely where objectivism becomes a caricature of Marxism: it is not enough to make a correct analysis of objective conditions; it is just as essential to convince millions of workers of the correctness of that analysis. Indeed, from a Marxist standpoint no analysis can truly be correct unless it includes this ‘subjective side’, i.e. unless it grapples with how to change the world instead of merely interpreting it.

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The proletariat as the revolutionary subject of history is always the blind spot of objectivism. Of course the working class is routinely invoked on the WSWS in the same ritualistic way most articles call for building the party. But the struggle *to build a bridge to socialist consciousness* – the crux of *What is to be done?* and the *Transitional Program* – plays virtually no role in the life of the movement. It has been well over a decade since the party made the assessment that there was no longer any potential left for the trade unions to play a progressive role, and yet in all that time nothing has been done to propose any alternatives to the working class. Nor has anything been done to work through the implications of the degeneration of the unions with the millions of workers still left within these organizations, since apart from journalism any work inside the unions seems to have long since been abandoned. For years it was impossible even to find a program of demands on the WSWS, and to this day there is still no concise statement of ‘Where We Stand’ for a worker to read. Whenever a worker does write in looking for advice, he is typically given a lecture on the history of the labor bureaucracy but no indication whatever on how to conduct the struggle he is involved in. Even the notion that this is a central responsibility of Marxists is rejected.

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A notable example of how the movement relates to the class struggle was the three-day New York transit workers’ strike in December. On the one hand there was the objective analysis, which hailed the strike as being “a new stage in the class struggle.” Given that kind of claim you would think a bold intervention was called for, but aside from the usual journalism the intervention was remarkable for nothing so much as its incoherence. Though there was a long buildup to this strike and though this was a union where the party had a long history, there were no demands raised until the day before the strike began. It was only [then](#) that the WSWS called for independent strike committees, but it gave no indication of how these committees should be set up, how they should function and above all what they should fight for. [The next day](#) the WSWS added the demand for mass demonstrations and preparations for a general strike to support the transit workers, but again there wasn’t any indication of how this would happen and more importantly there wasn’t any attempt made to provide a focal point like repeal of the Taylor Law around which to mobilize support for such action. Even this scant program disappeared [the following day](#), with the first WSWS editorial board statement on the strike making no demands at all apart from the pro forma calling on workers to contact the web site and join the party (though even with regard to that, there was no attempt to organize a meeting). [The next day](#) the demand for strike committees was back, but again the unseriousness of this demand was evident from the fact that there was no effort to incorporate the experience of the strike so far in order to demonstrate how these committees could do a better job of conducting the struggle than the bureaucracy. The only other demand was a call for “solidarity actions” by other workers, though again without programmatic demands, and even



more confusingly there was no longer any mention of the call for a general strike that had been made two days previous. Put this all together and the unmistakable impression is of a party that doesn't take its own demands seriously. How can you call for a general strike one day and drop it the next, or call for strike committees without any program or conception of how to organize them? It is obvious these demands were never intended to be anything more than journalistic phrases, militant-sounding rhetoric to fill out an article. How can anyone imagine a transit worker being attracted to such a vacuous and incoherent policy? How can anyone imagine this stimulating the political consciousness of workers or providing the least challenge to the bureaucracy? It is much the same story if one looks at the WSWS coverage of the aftermath of the strike. [There were](#) a couple of articles about the sellout which carried a vague call for "new forms of organization" to replace the unions (though there was no indication whether this was to be some kind of new workers committees or SEP party branches) and [in the second article](#) there was a demand made in passing for transit workers to vote down the contract. Then for a month there was no coverage at all – [until](#), that is, the transit workers did indeed vote down the contract, a development that must have been as much of a surprise to the WSWS as it was to Bloomberg and the labor bureaucrats. This dropping of the story shows how unseriously the party leadership took its own perspective, let alone its demands. If it truly believed this strike was "a new stage of the class struggle," then it would have been just as important to continue an intervention after the strike was over, to bring home the lessons of the sellout and mobilize opposition to it. This could have entailed organizing meetings, interviews with workers, perhaps even opening up the WSWS as a forum for transit workers trying to figure out how to take their struggle forward. Of course this is often difficult and frustrating work, with no guarantees that any workers would be won over. But the seething discontent that manifested itself in the turning down of the contract was also an opportunity to open up an important dialogue with these workers. Instead nothing was done: when the story disappeared from the mass media headlines, it disappeared from the WSWS as well.

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In his lecture on *What is to be done?* North tries to shoehorn Lenin into providing a justification for this abstentionism by highlighting the phrase "political exposures" by which Lenin contrasted his approach to developing class consciousness to the Economists' focus on bread-and-butter issues. North jumps on this phrase because it seems to sanction the journalistic existence of the WSWS, but it is nonsense to suppose that Lenin saw this phrase as some sort of all-purpose recipe for dealing with an issue as complex as the development of class consciousness. Even North concedes that "Lenin did not counsel indifference, let alone abstention, from the economic struggles of the working class," but this is just what the 'practice' of the WSWS amounts to. In any case the whole issue is presented in a false manner, as if there were only a choice between "political exposures" – i.e. journalism – on the one hand and trade unionism on the other. In effect this reproduces the sterile dichotomy between maximum and minimum programs, i.e. between journalism with ritual calls to build the party tacked on at the end of articles counterposed to outright syndicalism. But



there is another choice – the one articulated by the Transitional Program and embodied in the history of Bolshevism and Trotskyism, where the objective of revolutionary activity is to forge a living link between the everyday struggles of workers and the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism. Moreover, it is no disservice to Lenin to note that times have changed since 1902: today’s petty bourgeois radicals, unlike their Economist predecessors, are far removed not only from bread-and-butter issues but from anything at all to do with the working class. But one thing that does abound in these circles is “political exposures,” notably on the plethora of radical websites on the internet and in the increasingly popular medium of documentary filmmaking. Michael Moore has become famous producing “political exposures,” which do indeed have a big impact on his audiences, but this is still very far from class consciousness, and the gap is painfully evident in the way a film like *Fahrenheit 9/11* was used to enlist support for the Democrats. If Lenin were alive today, he’d be far more likely to say that while “political exposures” are all well and good, the crying need is for Marxists to do what they can to fill the immense vacuum of leadership in struggles like those of the transit workers.

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It is impossible to assimilate the essence of *What is to be done?* to an objectivist perspective, notwithstanding whatever homage orthodoxy pays to it as a canonical work. This is because objectivism can only conceive of class consciousness in a mechanical rather than a dialectical way. A good example here is the 2004 US presidential election because it raised the question of political consciousness in a stark manner. In a speech after the election (WSWS, Nov. 15, 2004) North remarked on “one of the strangest facts of American political life: that many of the states that voted Republican ... are among the most impoverished in the United States,” and this had indeed generated widespread discussion, with much of it focused on Thomas Frank’s cogent account of the rise of right-wing populism in his book, *What’s the Matter with Kansas?*. There Frank argued convincingly that while there is a great deal of class anger in America, it has been diverted by the so-called ‘culture wars’ over issues like abortion and gay marriage into a populist ‘backlash’ against a mostly mythical liberal elite. In other words, the main point of Frank’s book – which the election results confirmed in a striking manner – was that there is a major disconnect between consciousness and class interest. But for North that disconnect was not only strange but inexplicable. Thus he declares: “To claim that its voters [i.e. from impoverished states] backed the Republicans because of ‘values’ that they hold far dearer than their own real material interests is to substitute mysticism for scientific socio-political analysis.” But this leaves us completely at a loss to understand what happened in the election, since plainly these voters did vote *against* “their own real material interests.” And clearly values of some kind played a role in that. Of course this doesn’t mean buying into the conventional wisdom of the mass media, with its red-state/blue-state stereotypes. But why should an analysis of the political role of values – and therefore of consciousness – necessarily mean a substitution of “mysticism for scientific socio-political analysis”? There is nothing mystical about Frank’s book, which makes such an analysis. More importantly, the notion that there is a fundamental disconnect

between the consciousness and class interest of workers – the notion that North condemns as “mysticism” – is exactly what Lenin was arguing for in *What is to be done?* when he wrote that the spontaneous consciousness of workers is bourgeois consciousness. If there were no such disconnect, then spontaneous consciousness would be socialist consciousness.

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From an objectivist standpoint, however, Lenin’s conception has to be “mysticism” because it seems to violate the materialist tenet that social being determines consciousness. This is indeed what North ends up contending, though of course he makes no mention of Lenin in this regard. But if we go back a century to when *What is to be done?* came out, we find that the book was subjected to precisely such criticism from a defender of Marxist ‘orthodoxy’. The critic was none other than Plekhanov, who after breaking with Lenin produced a long attack on *What is to be done?*. Plekhanov’s biographer Samuel Baron summarizes the article as follows: “Plekhanov denounced Lenin’s outlook as a perversion of Marxism ... For Plekhanov, the capitalistic mode of production predisposed the workers toward socialism, and socialist theory itself represented a generalization of the experience of the working class. Although it left room for reciprocal influence of the socialist intelligentsia on the proletariat, his interpretation took the content of the intelligentsia’s consciousness to be fundamentally conditioned by the proletariat’s situation. To argue otherwise, he contended, was to deny the central truth of Marxian materialism – ‘being determines consciousness.’ Lenin’s theory bespoke the opposite conviction: it constituted a new embodiment of the idealist doctrine that consciousness determines being” (*Plekhanov: The Father of Russian Marxism*, p. 251). Plekhanov went on to contend that Lenin’s conception amounted to a renunciation of the belief “in the inevitability of the proletarian revolution.” And in fact this was true: *What is to be done?* could not be reconciled with the economic determinism – i.e. objectivism – that was the essence of Social Democratic orthodoxy. Objective conditions would *not* inevitably create class consciousness or bring about a revolution. But Plekhanov’s claim (and by implication North’s as well) that this represents an idealist departure from Marxism is nonsense. The real divide here isn’t between materialism and idealism but rather between a mechanical conception of consciousness, which conceives of it as a mere epiphenomenon of objective conditions, as against a dialectical conception which sees the struggle to develop class consciousness as the heart of revolutionary theory and practice.

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Social being does determine consciousness, but mechanical materialism makes an unwarranted assumption that such consciousness will accurately comprehend the reality that shaped it, i.e. that objective conditions translate themselves directly into a *correct* consciousness of those conditions. That assumption is not true, especially for an exploited class. Marxist materialism also insists that the dominant ideology of any class society is the ideology of the ruling class, which is to say that the prevailing

consciousness of an exploited class is necessarily *skewed* against its own material interests. This happens because consciousness is clearly not some mirror-like reflection of objective conditions: though it emerges from nature, this emergence entails a dialectical leap from quantity to quality. Or as Trotsky put it: “The dialectic of consciousness is not thereby a *reflection* of the dialectic of nature, but is a *result* of the lively interaction between consciousness and nature and – in addition – a method of cognition, issuing from this interaction ... Consciousness is a quite original *part* of nature, possessing peculiarities and regularities that are completely absent in the remaining part of nature. Subjective dialectics must by virtue of this be a distinctive part of objective dialectics – with its own special forms and regularities” (*Trotsky’s Notebooks, 1933-35*, pp. 101-2). Subjective dialectics! Now there is a term so far removed from the rhetoric of the WSWS that Trotsky almost seems to be speaking a different language. It is simply unimaginable that anyone in the IC today would devote a lecture or article to such a subject. One can already hear the reproaches – mysticism! subjectivism! anti-science! Of course it would be awkward to attack Trotsky in this way, so despite the fact that these notebooks came to light twenty years ago and represent a significant addition to Trotsky’s oeuvre, there hasn’t been any study of them in the IC press. But once we think of consciousness in terms of “its own special forms and regularities,” then the 2004 election result ceases to be the strange and inexplicable thing it is to an objectivist. Anger and resentment abound among American workers, and to that extent social being – especially the polarization of wealth – is indeed determining their consciousness. But what happens to that anger is *not* automatically determined by objective conditions: here the relatively autonomous role of political consciousness holds sway. This is a lesson that the American political elite has understood for a long time, devoting considerable resources to a vast apparatus of political manipulation (which has the inestimable advantage of operating largely unimpeded by any significant challenges from the left). Ironically it is the liberal Frank rather than the Marxist North who is a lot closer to the gist of *What is to be done?* when he writes, “People getting their fundamental interests wrong is what American political life is all about.”

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Some things need to be said on the subject of utopianism because this helps fill out the picture of the deadening effect of objectivism on the fight for socialist class consciousness. In the not so distant past the need to rebuild “a socialist culture in the working class” was a theme frequently raised in lectures and articles in the party press. This need was evident given the countless betrayals of the various labor bureaucracies, which had crippled class solidarity and debased socialism as an ideal by associating it with the worst crimes. Greatly compounding the problem was the bourgeois triumphalism in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union, epitomized by the ‘end-of-history’ thesis and the Thatcherite slogan There Is No Alternative (i.e. to capitalism). But nothing much came of this call for rebuilding a socialist culture: as with the trade union question, the analysis didn’t bring about any deepening of a political engagement with the working class or new theoretical work but rather a retreat from any engagement at all, and eventually even the phrase itself dropped out

of circulation. What has taken its place is a strident condemnation of utopianism that again bears the stamp of ‘orthodoxy’, in this case conceiving of utopianism and science as mutually exclusive opposites. Here the historical record is of little concern: if it were, then Brenner’s document, which goes into this history at some length, would have provoked some discussion. The truth is that ‘orthodoxy’ in this case (as in many others) is largely an invention by classical Social Democracy to justify its objectivism. ‘Science’ in the prewar Second International was not just a disinterested development of theory (as North seems to believe); it was increasingly an *alibi* for absconding from revolutionary responsibilities, which ‘objective conditions’ would supposedly take care of. Hence the need to turn utopianism into a virtual taboo, because it threatened, not science but rather this objectivism. In the actual historical development of Marxism, however, scientific socialism was a dialectical ‘aufheben’ of its utopian predecessors, and utopia and science were not a rigid dichotomy but a *unity of opposites*, which is readily apparent in such canonical works as *Critique of the Gotha Program* or *State and Revolution*, to say nothing of a little gem like Paul Lafargue’s *The Right to be Lazy*.

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But in the few paragraphs North devotes to the subject in his first summer school lecture, we are back to rigid dichotomies. North aims his attack at what he dubs “neo-Utopianism,” which he defines as a “form of contemporary political pessimism” that seeks “to revive the pre-Marxian and utopian stages of socialist thought.” One would think from this description that there was some new spate of Fourierist phalanxes or Owenite communes springing up, but this is nonsense. ‘Neo-Utopianism’ is simply a straw-man, and the fact that the only evidence for it that North offers are some quotes from a two-decade-old volume by an academic only underscores how flimsy his case is. (That the book, *Utopianism and Marxism* by Vincent Geoghegan, was published two years before the fall of the Berlin Wall also makes it an odd choice to illustrate North’s point about the political pessimism brought on by the collapse of the Soviet Union. North might have chosen a more recent book promoting utopianism like Russell Jacoby’s 1999 volume *The End of Utopia*, but this would have played havoc with his dichotomies because Jacoby demonstrates that hostility to utopianism is one of the defining traits of postmodernism.) To make matters worse, North’s ‘critique’ of Geoghegan’s book is a hatchet-job with quotes ripped out of context for the purpose of proving that Geoghegan (and hence ‘neo-Utopianism’) advocate a left-version of Nazi-style mythmaking. But this again is nonsense, as is apparent to anyone who reads the book. The point that Geoghegan was making in the quote cited by North was that the Nazis were far more effective in their appeals to mass psychology than the German left. Geoghegan wasn’t saying anything new here but rather reprising views first developed in the Thirties by radical psychoanalysts like Wilhelm Reich and Erich Fromm, who came to be known as the Freudo-Marxists. Their point wasn’t that the left should emulate the Nazis as mythmakers (and neither was it Geoghegan’s, who literally a page earlier attacks the anarcho-syndicalist Georges Sorel for promoting precisely this sort of irrationalist mythmaking), but rather that political consciousness was a battlefield that the left was ignoring with disastrous consequences. Socialism

could only triumph by winning over the allegiance of millions of workers and for that to happen the left had to find a way of engaging the hopes, fears and dreams of those millions.

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Had North wanted to, he could have found a strikingly similar argument in a book that has been a staple of the Trotskyist literature on fascism since the Thirties, Daniel Guerin's *Fascism and Big Business*. Guerin devoted a chapter to the ways the fascists used mysticism to mobilize and consolidate their mass base, and in a concluding section he noted how "manifestly inferior" the labor movement was when it came to combating this mysticism – inferior not only in exposing it but above all in offering an alternative to it. And here he blamed the Social Democratic and Stalinist politicians who, in the name of a spurious 'materialism,' were contemptuous of the role of political idealism in mobilizing mass support. "The degenerated Marxists believe it is very 'Marxist' and 'materialist' to disdain the human factors. They accumulate figures, statistics and percentages; they study with great accuracy the profound causes of social phenomena. But by failing to study with the same care the way in which these causes *are reflected in the consciousness of men*, and failing to penetrate the soul of man, they miss the *living reality* of these phenomena." This was exactly what Reich and Fromm were saying in the Thirties and what Geoghegan was reprising in the remarks North found so outrageous. Guerin went on to call explicitly for "counterposing a superior substitute to fascist mysticism: an 'idealism' which would not be fallacious, because it would be based on reality, with both feet on the ground, guided by a scientific concept of history and by its highly 'spiritual' purpose of ending man's alienation." Though a Freudo-Marxist like Reich would have put more stress on the link between the spiritual purpose of ending alienation and the material purpose of achieving human happiness, there would have been no disagreement whatsoever with Guerin that a renewed socialist idealism was only conceivable as a project for enlightening rather than mystifying the masses (as Reich showed in practice with the fascinating work he did in the early Thirties with German working class youth in the sex-pol movement). In any case, it should be apparent from Guerin's remarks that a call for Marxists "to penetrate the soul of man" and offer up "a superior substitute to fascist mysticism" does not necessarily constitute "a flagrant appeal to irrationalism," as North would have it. But it is also apparent – this time from North's remarks – that Marxism continues to be plagued by a spurious and reductive materialism that "disdains the human factors" and denigrates the struggle for socialist class consciousness.

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The need for a renewed socialist idealism is, if anything, far greater in our time than it was in the Thirties. This is why it is perverse to condemn utopianism as a symptom of political pessimism. Jacoby's book in particular makes an irrefutable case that just the opposite is true – that it is *hostility* to utopianism that breeds political pessimism and that largely defines the current political zeitgeist: "[U]topias today connote

irrelevancies or bloodletting. Someone who believes in utopias is widely considered out to lunch or out to kill.” This attitude pervades political life, most obviously in mainstream politics and the mass media, whose fundamental premise is There Is No Alternative. It is the same story in the official labor movement, in academia or in the various social movements from human rights to environmentalism where, as Jacoby rightly puts it, “a commitment to reasonable measures supplants a commitment to unreasonable ones – those more subversive and visionary.” The antipathy to utopianism is also evident in the way contemporary mass protest movements are defined solely by what they are against (globalization, war) without being able to articulate any alternative to capitalism. It is evident as well in the way socialism is a blank space in the literature of even the most seemingly radical left groups. Even the popular slogan, ‘Another world is possible’, partakes of the zeitgeist it seems to oppose: it is as if socialism is too embarrassing to mention, so it is replaced with the vacuous concept of ‘another world’ which commits no one to fighting for any world in particular. Under these circumstances, to attack utopianism is to swim *with* the stream of bourgeois public opinion, not against it. After all, there isn’t much difference in seeing utopianism as a “flagrant appeal to irrationalism” or seeing it as “out to lunch.”

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This doesn’t mean that resisting the There Is No Alternative zeitgeist is the same thing as endorsing the standpoint of academics like Geoghegan, Jacoby or Fredric Jameson. Given the left-liberal politics typical of academic Marxism, it isn’t possible for them to do much more than describe the problem: when it comes to the revival of a utopian spirit, they have virtually nothing to offer. Jameson’s entire ‘vision’, for example, is a single demand for full employment, which he has no idea how to bring about, and much the same is true of Jacoby and Geoghegan. It should come as no surprise that a sterile Marxism – above all a Marxism without the proletariat – is incapable of regenerating utopianism. But to dismiss utopianism itself on these grounds does no service to Marxism either: it amounts to focusing on the vices of a handful of academics while turning a blind eye to the vices of mainstream political culture. Indeed academic Marxism and ‘orthodox’ Marxism complement each other on this score: on the one hand, there is utopia without the proletariat, on the other hand, the proletariat without utopia. But in both cases something vital is left out – either the proletariat itself or else its revolutionary class consciousness. (Of course these academics support all kinds of theoretical and political rubbish, but impugning utopianism on that basis amounts to guilt by association. One could more readily turn that argument against Marxism itself since all these academics, especially Jameson, are far better known for their ‘Marxism’ than their utopianism. To be sure, they are also political pessimists but the notion that their embrace of utopianism amounts to a turning away from the proletariat brought on by the collapse of the Soviet Union is nonsense because these academics have *never* looked to the proletariat as a revolutionary force. As with Marxism so with utopianism, the issue has to be decided on its merits, not by some superficial jabs at the anemic counterfeits offered up in academia.)

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Rebuilding a socialist culture in the working class *is* the decisive question for Marxism at the outset of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. But this is inconceivable without utopianism in the form of a revived socialist idealism. North never considers this side of the question in his attacks on utopianism, which is to say he leaves out what is crucial from a revolutionary perspective. The working class doesn't exist in a cocoon, it isn't immune to the prevailing zeitgeist. Of course this doesn't manifest itself in the same way as it does among demoralized radicals or academics, but this doesn't make it any *less* of an obstacle to socialist consciousness. The growth of right wing populism in America and of Le Pen-type movements across the Atlantic are obvious indications of this: their appeal is in large measure to sections of workers who in the past would have been union members in the US or Socialist or Communist party voters in Europe. And while it is only a minority of workers who have been taken in by this reactionary demagogy, there are deeper problems that affect the consciousness of virtually the entire class and go back much further than the doom and gloom of the post-Soviet era. First and foremost are the betrayals of the labor bureaucracies and the crimes of the Stalinist regimes that have done more than anything to discredit socialism and undermine class solidarity. But one could add a good many more factors, as the following list, which pertains to America, makes clear: "The impact of decades of anti-Communist propaganda and witch hunting, the corruption and betrayals of the trade unions, the relative absence of a politically-engaged intelligentsia, the low level of popular culture and the degrading influence of the mass media, the traditions of national insularity, the persistence of 'rugged individualism,' and the pragmatic disdain for history and theoretical generalizations – all these are factors which complicate the struggle for socialist class consciousness." The author is none other than North, in the previously cited speech on the 2004 US presidential election. Given the length of his list, one would think that grappling with these obstacles to socialist consciousness would be a burning priority for the movement. And an obvious place to start would be confronting "the pragmatic disdain" for history and theory as well as a Marxist analysis of the ideology of Americanism that ties so many of these factors (national insularity, rugged individualism, anti-communism) together. But of course none of this has happened: as we noted earlier, in the summer school lectures of the following year, pragmatism got not so much as a single mention. In the speech itself North quickly dispels the whole problem with the assurance that "however complicated the process, social being does in the final analysis determine social consciousness." In revolutionary politics there are probably few phrases more deadly than "in the final analysis." Trotsky once made the point that in the art of revolution, time is everything: without the timely intervention of a revolutionary vanguard, history "in the final analysis" produces only the aborted revolutions that littered the political landscape of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. And it is again that vanguard which has to play the crucial role in developing socialist consciousness: the essential point of *What is to be done?* was that social being "in the final analysis" produces nothing on its own except bourgeois consciousness. In the way North uses it, Marx's dictum isn't a guide to action but a refuge from confronting the complex problems of class consciousness, which a hypostasized Social Being will take care of "in the final analysis."



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Scratch an objectivist and you will find a skeptic. You will find someone who has been overwhelmed by the problems of fighting for socialist consciousness in the working class and who has given up hope of ever making inroads in that struggle. Hence the search for salvation in Objective Conditions, in Science or History, etc. Of course objective conditions are crucial: without the contradictions of capitalism, socialism would be an impossible dream. But objective conditions can do no more than provide the possibility for socialism: to make the leap from necessity to freedom requires the working class to become the conscious subject of history. That leap cannot be the inevitable outcome of objective conditions, because if that were true then freedom would be the outcome of blind necessity, which is to say the outcome of unfreedom. Of course the problems are difficult; if they weren't, socialism would have been achieved long ago. But these problems are not intractable – they only seem so to the extent that they are ignored. This is just why objectivism is so paralyzing: there is no surer way of magnifying a problem than by ignoring it. The more one “disdains the human factors” in theory, the more one is overwhelmed by them in practice. In fact the growth of right-wing populism is an indication – albeit in a grossly distorted form – of the explosive state of the political consciousness of the working class. Class anger and anger at the political establishment are creating a powerful impetus to break free from the straitjacket of mainstream politics, which the populist demagogues have so far managed to exploit for their own purposes (often ironically enough by borrowing wholesale from the rhetoric of the civil rights movement and Sixties radicalism, as Frank's book shows). But these same conditions also open up opportunities for a revolutionary idealism of the left to win a hearing from broad masses of workers. For that to happen, however, the Marxist movement has to make socialism once again a meaningful focus for the outrage and frustration, and also the hopes and dreams, that are animating workers. But to an objectivist this is a pipedream. Behind the ‘orthodox’ denunciations of utopianism lies despair that the ideal of socialism can ever win the allegiance of masses of workers. (A manifestation of this despair is the IC's morphing into a movement that for all intents and purposes exists only on the internet. It is as if technology can magically get around deep political problems, as if so many thousands of ‘hits’ on the website can somehow turn into new members. Of course the WSWS can be a useful tool for a politically vibrant movement, but it cannot be a substitute for vibrancy. There are no ‘virtual’ revolutionary parties any more than there are ‘virtual’ revolutions.)

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For an objectivist the working class is an ever more abstract proposition, an ever more ghostly thing. The more the real problems of fighting for socialist consciousness recede over the horizon of ‘objective conditions’, the more remote the working class becomes from the activity and concerns of the movement. The party conducts no sustained activity in the working class, no work in the unions, no ongoing campaigns of its own, no attempts to rally or lead workers in struggles over important social or economic issues. (The promising work that was begun with the Mack Avenue fire campaign in the early 90s has long since been abandoned.) A small but telling

indication of this remoteness from the working class is the lack of any appeals to workers for money. The WSWS carries a standard appeal for funds and occasionally an appeal to help out with election expenses, but these aren't addressed to workers but rather to website readers. There was a long tradition in the Trotskyist movement of a 'Fighting Fund' that was linked directly to the role of the party and its press as a tribune of the working class: workers gave money because they could see that this was a movement that was fighting for their rights. These funds may not have always been enough on their own to keep the party going but there was an important *political* significance to the fact that at least some of the money that was sustaining the movement was coming from workers' donations. The disappearance of any fundraising in the working class is really the disappearance of any living relationship of the party to the working class. Of course the working class continues to be routinely invoked at the end of articles, but this rhetoric has little bearing on the party's practice. Indeed these ritual invocations of the working class become so abstracted, so hollowed-out of any real content, that they are virtually an article of 'faith', (with any deviations denounced as 'skepticism'). But a party that does nothing in the working class and gets no financial or other support from it is a party that is increasingly alien to the working class. And you sense that whenever there are any interactions with workers, as when they occasionally write in asking for advice about the struggles in their industry: the responses they are given – typically long lectures – bear the unmistakable tone of petty bourgeois pontificating. Finally one has to wonder about what kind of people such a movement would attract – a movement whose only sustained activity is internet journalism, whose socialism lacks any coherent vision or often even any programmatic demands, and whose relationship to the working class is entirely rhetorical? To state the obvious, these will not be people who are looking to change the world.

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Revolutionary politics come with no guarantees. A great political tradition is not enough to prevent a movement that has lost its way from being shipwrecked, as happened to Cannon's SWP and Healy's SLL. And there are many ways to bow before the accomplished fact: abstentionism can ultimately be just as 'accommodating' as opportunism. We believe the IC cannot sustain its present orientation without sooner or later betraying its revolutionary heritage. We believe that only a thorough discussion of the issues we have raised can help the movement find its proletarian revolutionary bearings again. We call on the IC leadership to respond to this letter in a principled manner by distributing it to all party members.

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