

# The Frankfurt School vs. Marxism

The Political and Intellectual Odyssey  
of Alex Steiner

*By David North*

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## *The Political and Intellectual Odyssey of Alex Steiner*

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### **I. Introduction**

In May-June 2006, I wrote *Marxism, History & Socialist Consciousness*, a reply to an attack on the International Committee of the Fourth International by Alex Steiner and Frank Brenner, two former members of the Workers League (predecessor of the Socialist Equality Party) who had left the revolutionary socialist movement in the late 1970s. Unabashed by the many years that they had spent in political retirement, Steiner and Brenner, in a document entitled *Objectivism or Marxism*, denounced the theoretical work, political activity, and organizational practices of the SEP and ICFI. Steiner/Brenner claimed that the International Committee was opposed to dialectics and failed to conduct a struggle against pragmatism.

The consequences of the ICFI's alleged neglect of the dialectic found expression in its (1) failure to recognize the urgent need for a revival of utopianism as a means of rekindling socialist consciousness, and (2) indifference to the problems of psychology and sexuality. For Steiner/Brenner, the latter play a decisive role in shaping political motivations and orientation that, they maintain, are essentially irrational. By concentrating on historical explanations, political analysis and programmatic clarification, the International Committee failed to confront, according to Steiner/Brenner, the psychological barriers to socialism that resided in "the repressed feelings of the unconscious" which persist in a human being's "congealed, unexamined past."<sup>1</sup>

The Steiner/Brenner document was based largely on conceptions that have long been associated with the "critical theory" of the "Frankfurt School" and related ideological tendencies, known collectively as "Western" or "Humanist" Marxism. Associated with the work of Max Horkheimer, Theodore Adorno, Karl Korsch, Herbert Marcuse, Ernst Bloch, Erich Fromm and Wilhelm Reich, the influence of the Frankfurt School reached its apogee during the heyday of radical student protests in the late 1960s. After that wave of middle-class radicalism receded, the influence of the Frankfurt School was consolidated in universities and colleges, where so many ex-radicals found tenured positions. From within the walls of the academy, the partisans of the Frankfurt School conducted unrelenting

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<sup>1</sup> Cited in *Marxism, History & Socialist Consciousness* (Oak Park, MI: Mehring Books, 2007), p. 102.

war—not against capitalism, but, rather, against Marxism. In this struggle, they were remarkably successful. With rare exceptions, very little resembling Marxism—even if one means by that term only the rigorous application of philosophical materialism to the study of history, society and social consciousness—has been taught for several decades in the humanities departments of colleges and universities.

Three interrelated historical factors underlay the persistent influence of this intellectual trend: first, the defeats of the working class during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the annihilation (by fascism and Stalinism) of a substantial section of the socialist intelligentsia and working class who were the bearers of the theoretical traditions of classical Marxism; second, the post-World War II restabilization of international capitalism; and, third, the protracted domination of the Stalinist, social-democratic and reformist labor and trade union bureaucracies over the working class during much of the latter period. The complex combination of objective and subjective historical factors that obstructed the revolutionary resurgence of the working class created a pessimistic and demoralized intellectual environment hostile to Marxism.

To the extent that Marxism was barred by unfavorable historical conditions from serving as the theoretical spearhead of mass revolutionary class struggle, the path was cleared for its corruption and falsification in the interests of social forces isolated and alienated from, and even hostile to, the working class. The Frankfurt School played a central role in this process. It sought to convert Marxism from a theoretical and political weapon of proletarian class struggle, which Horkheimer, Adorno and Marcuse rejected, into a socially amorphous form of cultural criticism, in which the political pessimism, social alienation, and personal and psychological frustrations of sections of the middle class found expression.

The document of Steiner/Brenner provided an opportunity to define the attitude of the Trotskyist movement to the Frankfurt School of anti-Marxism. Steiner/Brenner's "differences with the International Committee," I wrote, "are not over isolated programmatic points, but rather over the most fundamental questions of philosophical world outlook upon which the struggle for socialism is based."<sup>2</sup> *Marxism, History and Socialist Consciousness* examined the significance of Steiner/Brenner's hostility to the development of political perspectives, upon which the Trotskyist movement has traditionally placed central emphasis. They opposed "the conception that [Marxist] analysis and commentary, based on the method of historical materialism, is essential or even relevant to the development of socialist consciousness,"<sup>3</sup> and rejected "the Marxist concept of perspective, which strives to root revolutionary practice in as correct and precise an analysis of the objective world as possible." They demanded, as I explained, that the International Committee "concern itself primarily not with politics and history, but with psychology and sex—particularly as presented in the works of Wilhelm Reich and Herbert Marcuse."<sup>4</sup>

Steiner/Brenner's subjective idealist standpoint was incompatible with the materialist foundation of the work conducted by the ICFI, which rejected their attempt "to infiltrate the disoriented anti-Marxist pseudo-utopianism of Wilhelm Reich, Ernst Bloch and Herbert Marcuse into the Fourth International—that is, to fundamentally change the theoretical and programmatic foundations and class orientation of the Trotskyist movement."<sup>5</sup>

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2 Ibid, p. 62.

3 Ibid, p. 14.

4 Ibid, p. 16.

5 Ibid, pp. 7-8.

The document warned that Steiner/Brenner's denunciation of the ICFI's alleged "objectivism" sought to legitimize philosophical irrationalism and subjectivism. They misused the term "objectivism" as "an epithet directed against those who study the socio-economic processes that constitute the basis of revolutionary practice," and who insist upon "a scientific understanding of the laws governing the world capitalist system, the international class struggle, and the forms of their reflection in mass consciousness."<sup>6</sup>

Opposing Steiner/Brenner's appeal for a revival of utopian mythmaking—which has become fashionable in petty-bourgeois radical circles—I wrote that "the contradictions of capitalism provide the principal and decisive impulse for the development of revolutionary consciousness." The task of the Marxist movement was not to spur the workers on with the mirage of an illusory utopia, but, rather

to develop, within the advanced sections of the working class, a scientific understanding of history as a law-governed process, a knowledge of the capitalist mode of production and the social relations to which it gives rise, and an insight into the real nature of the present crisis and its world-historical implications. It is a matter of transforming an unconscious historical process into a conscious political movement, of anticipating and preparing for the consequences of the intensification of the world capitalist crisis, of laying bare the logic of events, and formulating, strategically and tactically, the appropriate political response."<sup>7</sup>

This conception is opposed by those "who see no basis for socialism in the objective conditions created by capitalism itself, who have been demoralized by the experience of defeats and setbacks, and who neither understand the nature of the capitalist crisis nor perceive the revolutionary potential of the working class..." For such individuals, "the problem of transforming consciousness is posed in essentially ideal and even psychological terms. Insofar as there does not exist a real basis for socialist consciousness, the possibility for its development must be sought elsewhere." Herein lay the source of Steiner/Brenner's belief that "utopia is crucial to a revival of socialist culture."<sup>8</sup>

The final sections of my reply examined some of the theoretical influences, acknowledged and unacknowledged, in the Steiner/Brenner document. Attention was drawn especially to the key writings of Hendrik De Man (*The Psychology of Socialism*), Wilhelm Reich (*The Mass Psychology of Fascism*), and Herbert Marcuse (*Eros and Civilization*). In conclusion, answering Steiner/Brenner's claim that "the real problems of fighting for socialist consciousness" exist beyond "the horizon of 'objective conditions,'" I stated: "We live and fight in the world of 'objective conditions,' which is both the source of our present-day problems as well as their ultimate solution."<sup>9</sup>

In September 2007 Steiner/Brenner began serializing their reply to *Marxism, History & Socialist Consciousness* in installments that were published over a period of three months. The title of this document is *Marxism Without Its Head or Heart: A Reply to David North* [hereafter referred to as MWHH].

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6 Ibid, p. 35.

7 Ibid, p. 95.

8 Ibid, p. 96.

9 Ibid, p. 145.

## II. Steiner/Brenner and the Heritage of Marxism

Steiner/Brenner began their document with a denunciation of *Marxism, History & Socialist Consciousness*. It is, they assert, “a dreadful piece of work,” “rife with misrepresentations and evasions,” written in a “bombastic style” which cannot conceal its “meager substance.” The document “is, above all else, a demonstration of how theoretically impoverished the IC leadership has become. What North calls ‘Marxism’ is missing its head and heart—i.e., dialectics and the proletariat, which is to say, the very things that make Marxism a revolutionary doctrine.”<sup>10</sup>

Adopting an intensely subjective and embittered tone, Steiner/Brenner attack me as a “hypocrite of the first order” and excoriate my “pettiness, malice and dishonesty.”<sup>11</sup> This sort of language can make a favorable impression only on those who do not approach political disputes from a principled standpoint. I see no need to reply to attacks of this sort. However, Steiner/Brenner do make one charge that does deserve careful attention. “In this latest document,” they write, “[North] is no longer defending the heritage of revolutionary Marxism but instead rationalizing the IC’s abandonment of key parts of that heritage.”<sup>12</sup>

This raises a crucial question: Precisely what do Steiner/Brenner consider to be the “heritage of revolutionary Marxism”? For an entire decade they have been expressing steadily escalating disagreement with the theoretical foundations of Marxism. Their differences began to emerge with Brenner’s 1997 declaration that Marxism lacked an adequate psychology. In 1998, he announced that Marxism required a new “theory of gender.” In 1999 Steiner informed me that he did not agree with the position of Friedrich Engels (the lifelong collaborator of Karl Marx) that the relationship between materialism and idealism was the basic question of philosophy. Somewhat later, in 2002, Brenner and Steiner demanded that the International Committee recognize the importance of utopianism for the contemporary development of socialist consciousness. In 2003 Steiner proceeded to denounce the “vulgar materialism” of G.V. Plekhanov, “the father of Russian Marxism.” This was followed in 2004 with a lengthy attack by Steiner on Lenin’s *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*. Their campaign entered a new stage in 2005 with a public attack on the ICFI for its “objectivism” and its refusal to incorporate the insights of “Freudo-Marxists” like Wilhelm Reich into its theoretical and political work.

In their latest document, all these themes are developed in the course of an exercise in unrestrained rhetorical vituperation directed against the International Committee generally, and me personally. As is generally the case in politics, the insults are aimed at camouflaging the theoretical and political issues. This camouflage is required because, as they know, the Socialist Equality Party and the International Committee of the Fourth International are based on a theoretical tradition that has nothing in common with the Frankfurt School. This places Steiner/Brenner in an awkward position—promoting, while at the same time formally distancing themselves from, the theoreticians whose ideas they are attempting to foist onto the ICFI. Thus, they claim that I have fabricated a connection between their views and those of the Frankfurt School. Steiner/Brenner declare:

No conspiracy theory is complete without some name-dropping, and so North drags in Reich, Marcuse

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<sup>10</sup> *Marxism Without Its Head or Heart*, pp. 2-3. The page numbering is based on a PDF printout of the entire document, combining individual chapters that are posted separately on the Steiner/Brenner web site. The site can be accessed at <http://www.permanent-revolution.org>.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 252.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

and Bloch. . . . North is concerned with one thing at this point, which is to establish guilt by association: it is as if the simple invocation of these men's names constitutes prima facie evidence of our abandonment of Marxism. That this is being done under the banner of defending Marxist science only adds a bitter irony to the whole exercise.<sup>13</sup>

They then proceed to refute my "conspiracy theory" by repeatedly insisting that the International Committee is committing a fatal error by failing to learn from the work of Reich, Marcuse, Bloch and Adorno:

One doesn't have to be an apologist for Bloch or overlook his many serious failings, above all his support for Stalinism, to recognize that his work might still contain something of value.<sup>14</sup>

We have never been followers of Reich, and there is nothing in what we have written to suggest otherwise. While we recognize that the Freudo-Marxists made some important contributions, their legacy is a contradictory one, like so much else about the intellectual life of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As noted in the previous chapter, when faced with such work, Marxists critically evaluate it and make use of whatever is still living in it. That is our attitude to Reich.<sup>15</sup>

All that being said, however, there is still considerable political value to Reich's insights.<sup>16</sup>

Again one has to pick one's way carefully through Reich's ideas (for instance, his views on treating the police as workers or debating with the Nazis were completely misguided) and much about everyday life has changed since his time. But some of his ideas about youth have enduring relevance, and in that regard he gave a good example of what "thinking inside other people's heads" means politically.<sup>17</sup>

The attempt to dismiss the work of Adorno and Marcuse, as well as Ernst Bloch on the grounds that they were politically reprehensible is nothing less than an appeal to intellectual and cultural backwardness. . . . Steiner was saying that these figures may have had some valuable insights that we ignore at our peril. This is not to imply that their work is beyond criticism or that there is nothing in their work that can impinge on their politics and vice-versa. But the task for Marxists when confronted with such a heterogeneous oeuvre is to sift through the body of work and critically assimilate it. It is pointedly not to ignore or dismiss it as worthless before even reading it on the grounds that the author was politically reprehensible.<sup>18</sup>

So much for my "conspiracy theory"! It is not I, but they, who exploit every opportunity to "drag in" Marcuse, Bloch, Reich, et al. The above-cited paragraphs obligate one to ask, "What has all of this to do with the defense of the 'Heritage of Marxism'?" Steiner/Brenner are advocating a theoretical eclecticism that has nothing in common with the philosophical traditions upon which the Trotskyist movement is based. Moreover, the very form of their

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13 Ibid, p. 17.

14 Ibid, p. 241.

15 Ibid, p. 267.

16 Ibid, p. 275.

17 Ibid, p. 278.

18 Ibid, p. 247.

argument—“Can we not learn from. . .?” “Must we reject everything. . .?” “Is there not something interesting in. . .?”—epitomizes the sort of “on-the-one-hand, on-the-other-hand” sophistry that Marx invariably subjected to the harshest criticism.<sup>19</sup>

Steiner/Brenner object that the work of the Frankfurt School is not “worthless.” That is not the word I used to describe their writings. However, the issue is not whether the writings of the Frankfurt School are “worthless,” but whether they represent an alternative to and development beyond Marxism. Nowhere do Steiner/Brenner attempt a systematic exposition of the conceptions of the Frankfurt School, examine their historical, social and intellectual roots, establish the objective internal links between the works of its representative figures. Despite all their rhetorical invocations of “the dialectic,” Steiner/Brenner fail to present a historical and dialectical materialist analysis of the Frankfurt School. This would have required an examination of the latter’s origins, development, contradictions and, also, the class tendencies of which it is an ideological expression. Instead the reader is informed that Reich or Marcuse may have written stupid things; but they also wrote some good things. Yes, Reich may have ended up an anti-Communist; but that last chapter of his life had nothing to do with other chapters.

Steiner/Brenner simply ignore the fact that not one of the leading figures in the Frankfurt School was in political sympathy, let alone affiliated, with the Fourth International. This was hardly accidental. The intellectual work of the Frankfurt School was grounded in a reactionary philosophical tradition—irrationalist, idealist and individualistic—antithetical to the classical Marxism upon which Trotsky’s political and theoretical work was based. The writings of Marx and Engels played a far less significant role in shaping the outlook of the Frankfurt School than those of Schelling, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche and Heidegger. And as for the political outlook that prevailed within the Frankfurt School, its rejection of the revolutionary role of the working class, its historical and cultural pessimism, and its impressionistic response to political events had nothing in common with the perspective, based on a dialectical and historical materialist analysis, that animated the work of the Fourth International.

The leading representatives of the Frankfurt School lived most of their adult lives in a state of political prostration. The maestros of “critical theory” and the “negative dialectic” were, when it came to political analysis, incompetent and perennially disoriented. The rise of fascism and defeats of the working class in the 1930s shattered whatever confidence they may at some time have had in the possibility of socialist revolution. *Dialectic of Enlightenment* by Horkheimer and Adorno—published in 1947 and generally considered the founding philosophical statement of the Frankfurt School—pronounced the downfall of all prospects for human progress.

During the 1950s and 1960s, the politically reactionary implications of the outlook of the Frankfurt School became all too clear. Under the tutelage of its longtime director, Max Horkheimer, who returned to Germany from his American exile, the Frankfurt School played a central role in developing the new intellectual foundations of the post-Nazi West German bourgeois state. During the same period, the ideas of Wilhelm Reich and Herbert

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<sup>19</sup> As, for example, in *The Poverty of Philosophy*:

For him, M. Proudhon, every economic category has two sides—one good, the other bad. He looks upon these categories as the petty bourgeois looks upon the great men of history: *Napoleon* was a great man; he did a lot of good; he also did a lot of harm.

The *good side* and the *bad side*, the *advantages* and the *drawbacks*, taken together form for M. Proudhon the *contradiction* in every economic category.

The problem to be solved: to keep the good side, while eliminating the bad. [*Marx-Engels Collected Works*, Volume 6 (New York: International Publishers, 1976), p. 167.]

Marcuse—who had rejected the working class as a revolutionary force in modern capitalist society—found an audience among the milieu of the petty-bourgeois radical New Left. Thus, the “heritage” that Steiner/Brenner accuses us of abandoning is one with which the International Committee of the Fourth International was never, and could never be, associated.

In light of the real historical and theoretical roots of their criticisms, there is an element of self-delusion, not to mention outright political dishonesty, in Steiner/Brenner’s invocation of the “heritage of Marxism” to justify their denunciation of the International Committee. As individuals, Steiner and Brenner are entitled to their views. But they fail to explain why the ICFI should suddenly adopt theoretical and political conceptions that it has consistently rejected. Steiner/Brenner are demanding changes in the theoretical and political curriculum of the International Committee that have no basis in the history of the Fourth International.

### **III. On the Origins of the Steiner/Brenner Polemic**

Steiner and Brenner have constructed a political narrative that casts them as the victims of a bureaucratic party apparatus, subservient to my will, that ruthlessly suppressed their criticisms of the movement’s alleged abandonment of Marxism. They present the SEP’s refusal to offer them the *World Socialist Web Site* as a forum for their anti-Marxist conceptions as the act of an incipient political dictatorship. They have calculated that this story will win for them sympathy among those who are politically inexperienced, especially in the United States where the identification of socialism with the suppression of individual rights is, as a consequence of decades of anti-communist propaganda, embedded in popular consciousness. Of course, there is the fact, which cannot simply be ignored, that Steiner and Brenner left the movement 30 years ago. They have spent virtually all their adult lives in pursuit of their private interests. The WSWS has been under no obligation to publish their documents. They attempt to get around this problem by asserting:

We have no desire to belittle the significance of party membership, but in this regard North ignores an embarrassing fact which we raised in *Objectivism or Marxism*: Steiner applied to rejoin the party in 1998, but the party leadership—and that would mean primarily North—never acted on his application and never explained why. This application was made years before any political differences emerged and at a time when Steiner was contributing material to the WSWS. In short, it is North who kept Steiner out of the party and now he is blaming Steiner for not being a party member.

Nor does North provide anything resembling a credible account of the circumstances that gave rise to this polemic.<sup>20</sup>

As a matter of fact, an account of the origins of this polemic was provided in *Marxism, History & Socialist Consciousness*.<sup>21</sup> However, I am quite prepared to supplement that initial account with further details. This will require that I review the political biography of Alex Steiner. I doubt that he will appreciate this attention. After all, he writes in another part of the Steiner/Brenner document that “Alex Steiner isn’t the leader of a revolutionary

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid, p. 4.

<sup>21</sup> See *Marxism, History & Socialist Consciousness*, pp. 69-76.

movement: his activities as an individual have no relevance to this discussion.”<sup>22</sup> How modest, but I respectfully disagree.

Three points must be made. First, the issuing of a public political attack—which includes a direct appeal to the party membership to change its leadership—is not the action of an individual, but of a candidate for political leadership. It implies a willingness on the part of its author to assume leadership responsibilities should the occasion arise—that is, should he be called upon to carry through the political changes demanded in his documents. Second, Steiner is the principal author of those sections of the Steiner/Brenner documents in which the theoretical-philosophical line is elaborated. An examination of Steiner’s intellectual and political history will contribute to an understanding of the origins and implications of his theoretical arguments. Third, there exists a substantial written record, to which Steiner/Brenner fail to make any reference, in which the development of Steiner’s differences with the SEP, prior to the issuing of public attacks, are documented.

This record includes correspondence relating to Steiner’s application for membership in the SEP in 1999 (*not 1998!*). The letters written to me and the SEP clearly show that there already existed at that time significant differences on basic questions of Marxist philosophy as well as the history of the party between Steiner and the Socialist Equality Party. Virtually all the differences raised in subsequent documents written by Steiner/Brenner were anticipated in Steiner’s 1999 letters. Among the hundreds of pages of polemical material that Steiner/Brenner have published and posted on their web site, this correspondence is not included. Nor have they published other correspondence written by Steiner that presents an evaluation of my theoretical work that differs radically from their more recent and factionally motivated reappraisals. These conspicuous omissions are duplicitous and testify to an absence of political and intellectual principles.

Before we proceed to examine this written record, let us draw the reader’s attention to a glaring contradiction in the Steiner/Brenner narrative. In presenting their theory of the alleged theoretical and political degeneration of the SEP, Steiner/Brenner assert that the movement succumbed to the blandishments of the capitalist environment during the years of the dot.com boom. They write: “What happened in the years between 1993 and 1998 was a caving in by the IC leadership to the immense class pressures of bourgeois society.”<sup>23</sup>

*If this is indeed the case, how does Steiner now explain his 1999 application for membership?* If Steiner’s appraisal of the downfall of the ICFI is correct, it would suggest that he somehow found the stench of political degeneration attractive, that he was drawn to it, and wanted to be part of it. But this, of course, is not the explanation. As we shall see, the appraisal of the SEP made by Steiner when he applied for membership in 1999—not to mention the record of the correspondence that he maintained with me between 1997 and 2003—completely contradicts what he now writes in MWHH.

#### **IV. Alex Steiner and the Socialist Equality Party**

In the autumn of 1978, as the Workers League was in the final stages of moving its political headquarters from

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid, p. 127.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, p. 144.

New York to Detroit, Alex Steiner left the party without any explanation. Steiner had previously resigned from the movement in 1973, during a political crisis in the Workers League that culminated in the resignation of its national secretary, Tim Wohlforth. Steiner rejoined the party in the summer of 1974. But his second departure in 1978 brought his career in the revolutionary movement to an end. In his last discussion with me prior to his departure, Steiner said, “Life is very grim.” I often recalled these words, because they articulated not simply the personal dejection of an individual, but also the pessimism and demoralization of the broader milieu of petty-bourgeois radical intellectuals. Nevertheless, I regretted Steiner’s departure from the Workers League. Particularly after he rejoined the Workers League in 1974, we had collaborated on several theoretical projects. However, Steiner’s intellectual abilities were undermined by his extreme emotional volatility, susceptibility to discouragement when confronted with problems, and pessimistic view of life.

In 1985, in the midst of the public crisis in the International Committee provoked by the political explosion in the British Workers Revolutionary Party, Steiner and other former members of the Workers League were invited to a meeting in New York City in which I reviewed the political and theoretical issues involved in the controversy. Steiner expressed agreement with the stand taken by the Workers League, but made it clear that he had no desire to rejoin the party. He had developed a professional career and comfortable lifestyle that he did not wish to disrupt. Still, he expressed a desire to maintain somewhat more regular contact with the party.

It was not until the late 1990s that Steiner indicated that he was considering a reentry into political life. Steiner frequently asked to meet with me during my trips to New York, and expressed, verbally and occasionally in writing, his agreement with the theoretical work of the party—especially its fight against the influence of postmodernism. For example, I received on June 10, 1997 the following letter from Steiner:

Dear Dave,

I enjoyed reading your recent talk about the Holocaust [*Anti-Semitism, Fascism and the Holocaust: A Critical Review of Daniel Goldhagen’s Hitler’s Willing Executioners*]. It is especially topical because so much of the opposition to any conception of lawfulness in history uses the Holocaust as a prime example. This is especially true of those writers identifying themselves as post-modernists. Here we see continental post-structuralists (Derrida, Lyotard) making common cause with American pragmatists (Rorty) all in the name of “liberating” thought from the “meta-narratives.” As pointed out by Habermas and others, their attack on Reason is in a direct line of descent from Nietzsche to Heidegger—their target, the overthrowing of Hegel and Marx.

The collaboration between the latter day Nihilists and the more traditional pragmatists and empiricists is something that I find quite fascinating. I can tell you from personal experience that the spirit of the post-modernists resonates with large sections of middle-class intellectuals. I recently took a class on this stuff and I was the only one trying to show that the post-modernist emperors have no clothes.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Steiner’s 1997 letter presents an assessment of theoretical issues diametrically opposed to the position now being argued in the Steiner/Brenner documents. In the letter cited above Steiner values my lecture as “especially topical” because it challenges the prevailing and influential positions of the postmodernists. And yet, in *Objectivism or Marxism*, written in 2006, Steiner/Brenner present an entirely different assessment. There, postmodernism is dismissed as “a fad on the wane,” barely deserving the attention of Marxists. “Twenty years ago,” Steiner/Brenner declaim, “it would have

Steiner added a postscript at the end of his letter, praising another lecture that I had given. “I distributed your article on the Enlightenment [*Equality, the Rights of Man and the Birth of Socialism*] in my Hegel class—as an example of a contemporary defense of the Enlightenment.”<sup>25</sup>

Several months later, in October 1997, Steiner attended a public meeting called by the SEP which commemorated the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 1977 assassination of a young leader of the Workers League, Tom Henehan. Steiner, who had known and admired Henehan, was clearly affected—though perhaps more emotionally than politically—by the meeting. At its conclusion Steiner indicated to me that he was interested in collaborating more systematically with the SEP on writing projects related to Marxist theory. In February 1998 the International Committee launched the *World Socialist Web Site*. During the months that followed Steiner and I held a number of discussions that explored the possibility of developing a WSWS philosophy section. There was no indication on Steiner’s part that he considered the establishment of the WSWS to be a retreat on the part of the ICFI to “mere” journalism. Quite the opposite: he was enthusiastic over the possibilities it created for expanding the audience for Marxist theory and politics.

There were indications, however, that the many years that Steiner had spent outside the movement had left an imprint on his theoretical conceptions. An essay that he submitted to me in the autumn of 1998, entitled *Alienation and Revolution*, dealt with the young Marx’s treatment of alienation in the 1844 *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* in a manner similar to that found in the writings of Frankfurt School and Western Marxist theoreticians. The essay produced by Steiner significantly underestimated the extent to which Marx’s subsequent writings—especially *The Holy Family*, *The German Ideology* and *The Poverty of Philosophy*—represented a development and deepening of the materialist and scientific character of Marxist theory. Even after several redrafts of the document, I was not satisfied with Steiner’s essay and chose not to post it on the web site.<sup>26</sup> Our discussions

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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” (Cited in *Marxism, History & Socialist Consciousness*, p. 19).

What is also particularly noteworthy about the 1997 letter is the connection Steiner makes, in his reference to Richard Rorty, between pragmatism and postmodernism. Yet, in both *Objectivism or Marxism* and most recently in MWHH, Steiner/Brenner denounce me for stressing the relationship between these two forms of subjective-idealist and irrationalist philosophy!

Steiner/Brenner write: “When North says that ‘postmodernism is itself a major tendency within contemporary pragmatic philosophy’ *he is in effect saying that by attacking postmodernism he has therefore disposed of pragmatism and we no longer need be concerned with it.* [MWHH, p. 88, emphasis in the original] Here Steiner/Brenner misrepresent what I wrote in order to belittle the link, upon which Steiner himself had insisted in 1997, between pragmatism and postmodernism. What I actually wrote in *Marxism, History & Socialist Consciousness* is:

“...First of all, I have nowhere stated or even implied that postmodernism has *replaced* pragmatism. It is, rather, a variety of pragmatic thought—indeed, one that takes the subjective idealist, voluntarist and even irrational elements that are present in classical pragmatic thought—dating all the way back to James—to their most extreme and reactionary conclusion. To suggest, as your comment does, that postmodernism represents a fundamentally different species of theoretical thought is to make a major concession to pragmatism, to shield pragmatism from the intellectual embarrassment that it suffers on account of the gross excesses of its postmodernist progeny.” (*Marxism, History & Socialist Consciousness*, p. 19)

25 Steiner’s endorsement of my lecture on the Enlightenment is totally contradicted by Steiner/Brenner’s condemnation of my defense of the Enlightenment in their most recent documents.

26 Upon reviewing *Alienation and Revolution* more recently in the context of Steiner’s subsequent evolution, it became evident that his present conceptions found embryonic expression in this essay. The theoretical framework of Steiner’s essay developed out of Marcuse’s existential and ahistorical conception of “man’s essential nature,” which Steiner adopts uncritically. Thus, we encounter in Steiner’s document the claim that “Man’s essential nature is defined by the reciprocal interaction between man’s needs and his capacities.” Later, he asserts that “Marx’s conception of man’s essential nature has unfortunately remained an incomprehensible black box to all but a few commentators.” In this context, Steiner refers specifically to the work of Horkheimer, Theodore Adorno “and most significantly, Marcuse.” Steiner’s presentation, like that of Marcuse, rips Marx’s

remained friendly, and, at least on the surface, Steiner seemed enthusiastic about the work of the WSWS. On February 16, 1999 he wrote that “Some of the recent work of the WSWS has been outstanding.”

During this period Steiner was also working on a draft of a statement that was to serve as an introduction to a new philosophy section of the WSWS. Several drafts were produced, but none of them were suitable for publication. They lacked a forcefully stated theoretical perspective that established the Marxist and dialectical materialist standpoint of the new philosophy section. The underlying source of the problem emerged in the last version of the statement, which I received in May 1999. The draft began by asserting that it would be the aim of the new philosophy section

to encourage a discussion on the fundamental philosophical issues that require clarification if mankind is to survive and flourish in the new millennium.

What are these issues?

Here it may be proper to take a step back into the very beginnings of speculative thought, to the world of ancient Greece. In Plato’s Republic the question posed by Socrates is “What is justice?” Aristotle, in the Nicomachean Ethics asks the question “What is the good life?” Underlying these questions in the case of both philosophers is the question of Being, of what exists. Without a notion of what is, and its relation to us, we cannot begin to answer the question of how we should live. Consideration of this question leads to the further question, “What is knowledge?” Are all claims to knowledge mere opinions or are there some

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1844 Manuscripts out of its historical and intellectual context. Steiner’s essay goes so far as to interpret Marxism as an exposition of the teleological unfolding of “man’s essential nature.” This has nothing whatsoever to do with Marxism, which emphatically rejects teleology. As Marx deepened his critique of Hegelian idealism and the anthropologism of Feuerbach, he ceased to speak of a “human essence” or “essential nature” existing above and outside the historical development of man’s social relations of production. Thus, in his *Theses on Feuerbach*, written in 1845, Marx states that “the human essence is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality it is the ensemble of the social relations” (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1973, p. 64). In subsequent writings, on the basis of the newly-elaborated materialist conception of history, Marx and Engels subjected to withering criticism attempts to dissolve the real, existing, historically-specific man, conditioned intellectually and practically by definite social relations of production, into a philosophically-conceived abstract man. In this regard, their critique of Max Stirner (“Saint Sancho”) is especially apposite. Stirner

presents any object or relation whatsoever as that which is alien to the ego, as the alienation of the ego; on the other hand, Saint Sancho can, as we shall see, also present any object or relation as something created by the ego *and belonging to it*. Apart, first of all from the arbitrary way in which he presents, or does not present, any relation as a relation of alienation (for everything can be made to fit in the above equations), we see already here that his only concern is to present all actual relations, [and also] actual individuals, [as alienated] (to retain this philosophical [expression] for the time being), to [transform] them into the wholly [abstract] phrase of alienation (*The German Ideology, Collected Works*, Volume 5 (New York, International Publishers, 1976), p. 281, brackets in the original text).

Marx’s historical materialist critique and reworking of the concept of alienation is most richly developed in his *Grundrisse*, written in 1857-58, in which he insists that the individuality of man and his alienation is the outcome of an historically-determined social process. As Marx explains:

... Universally developed individuals, whose social relations, as their own communal [*gemeinschaftlich*] relations, are hence also subordinated to their own communal control, are no product of nature, but of history. The degree and the universality of the development of wealth where *this* individuality becomes possible presupposes production on the basis of exchange values as a prior condition, whose universality produces not only the alienation of the individual from himself and from others, but also the universality and the comprehensiveness of his relations and capacities (*Grundrisse: Introduction to the Critique of Political Economy*, tr. Martin Nicolaus (Middlesex, England, 1973) p. 162).

*Alienation and Revolution* is posted on the Steiner/Brenner web site. It is dated May 1997, but the version presented on the web site is the substantially redrafted document that was completed in early 1999.

kind of universally valid principles? All these questions are interrelated. The constellation of such questions and the ongoing effort to find answers to them is the task of philosophy.

There was an element of intellectual pretentiousness in this opening, a self-conscious attempt on the part of the author to call attention to his erudition. But this was a matter of style. The more serious problem was that Steiner's "step back into the very beginnings of speculative thought" suggested a retreat from a Marxist conception of the history of philosophy, which has placed central emphasis on the relationship between matter and consciousness. The discussion of this question has necessarily assumed the form of a struggle between the two irreconcilably opposed philosophical camps—that of the materialists, who have insisted upon the primacy of matter over consciousness, and that of the idealists, who, in one form or another, have upheld the primacy of consciousness. As Steiner had chosen to invoke the heritage of Greek philosophy, it would have been appropriate to point out that the conflict between materialism and idealism can be traced back to that classical age.<sup>27</sup> Marxists have traditionally viewed the establishment of a philosophical journal as a means of defending and advancing the materialist viewpoint. I could not help but wonder why Steiner had chosen a different and theoretically ambiguous approach. The word "materialism" did not appear anywhere in the draft.

I met with Steiner in June 1999 during a visit to New York. He told me that he had been impressed by the stand taken by the SEP on the recently concluded US-led war against Serbia, and especially praised the statement that I had written (posted on the WSWS under the title, "After the Slaughter: Political Lessons of Balkan War"<sup>28</sup>). The ICFI, he told me, was the only socialist tendency that had been capable of developing what he referred to as a Marxist "theory of the war." The recent events, Steiner said, had led him to consider seriously applying for membership in the SEP. But, he informed me, there were issues of both a practical and theoretical character that needed to be clarified. Among these was Engels' insistence that the relationship of matter and consciousness was the fundamental question of philosophy. We both had limited time, and it was immediately apparent to me that the differences being raised by Steiner had been anticipated in his essay on alienation and in the draft introduction. They were not likely to be resolved in a brief discussion. I asked Steiner to write a letter explaining his position. Steiner replied that he would consider my proposal.

## **V. Steiner's Letter of June 25, 1999**

On June 25, 1999 I received Steiner's letter. It began:

Dear Dave,

This is a private communication between us. Please do not show this letter to anyone else.<sup>29</sup>

Much was touched on of [sic], but there was little time to probe the issues discussed. I would like to begin

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27 The opposition of idealism to materialism found expression in the writings of Plato. According to Diogenes Laertius, Plato expressed the desire to burn all the writings of Democritus, whose atomistic theory laid the foundations for a materialist understanding of the nature.

28 <http://www.wsws.org/articles/1999/jun1999/balk-j14.shtml>

29 The obvious changes in Steiner's political relations with the International Committee and his misrepresentation of his earlier relations with the SEP require that I place this and other correspondence in the public domain.

to do that now. I am writing these notes as a very general summary of some of my thoughts. There is no attempt to chase down quotes, etc.

### 1. Materialism/Idealism

Without doubt this is a fundamental issue in the history of philosophy. And there is no question that Marxism represented a form of materialism (a point that is often obscured by some Western neo-Marxists).

That being said, I am not convinced that this is THE question that divides different philosophical systems.

This statement could not be read as anything other than a declaration by Steiner of a major objection to the theoretical foundations of Marxism. By beginning his letter with this statement, Steiner was acknowledging its far-reaching implications. How could he do otherwise? Steiner was calling into question Marxism's conception of the history of philosophy and the coherence of its materialist logic, epistemology and theory of knowledge.<sup>30</sup> Back in 1975, when he was still a member of the Workers League, playing a central role in the theoretical struggle against the pragmatic outlook of the Socialist Workers Party, Steiner specifically attacked George Novack, the SWP's principal theoretician, on this issue. Novack, he wrote, "panders to the prevailing myth that the question of the priority of matter or idea is 'meaningless' and that some third position is possible."<sup>31</sup> One year later, in an examination of the theoretical conceptions of Tim Wohlforth, Steiner denounced him for attempting "to dismiss and take for granted the fundamental question of philosophy, materialism or idealism." Steiner went on to describe Wohlforth's position as "idealist rubbish."<sup>32</sup>

Steiner's letter of June 1999 went on to elaborate areas of potential theoretical conflict:

2. The priority of Being to Consciousness. The materialism of Marx does indeed posit Being as prior to consciousness both historically and logically. It is possible to have Being without consciousness (though of course we would not be there to think about it) but it is impossible to have consciousness without Being. That being said, it is also the case that consciousness when animated in the form of social practice, can transform Being, and at times become a decisive influence.

The reciprocal relationship between Being and consciousness is just as important to Marxism as the logi-

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30 The centrality of this question and its philosophical implications was initially elaborated by Friedrich Engels in his immensely influential essay, *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy*. He wrote:

The great basic question of all philosophy, especially of more recent philosophy, is that concerning the relation of thinking and being.

...

... The question of the position of thinking in relation to being, a question which, by the way, had played a great part also in the scholasticism of the Middle Ages, the question: which is primary, spirit or nature—that question, in relation to the church, was sharpened into this: Did God create the world or has the world been in existence eternally?

The answers which the philosophers gave to this question split them into two great camps. Those who asserted the primacy of spirit to nature and, therefore, in the last instance, assumed world creation in some form or other ... comprised the camp of idealism. The others, who regarded nature as primary, belonged to the various schools of materialism" (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1973, p. 23).

31 "Marxism, Pragmatism and Revisionism," *Fourth International*, Autumn 1975, p. 109.

32 *Trotskyism Versus Revisionism, Volume Seven: The Fourth International and the Renegade Wohlforth* (New York: Labor Publications, 1984), p. 93.

cal priority of Being. There are furthermore many levels of Being, each having its own specific categories and laws of motion. The complex interrelationships between and within each hierarchical level of Being is a continuing subject for investigation.

Anyone who thinks that repeating the phrase that Being is prior to consciousness settles anything is simply being intellectually lazy and fooling themselves. (Of course I am not saying you are doing this—but many ostensible Marxists do just that and think they have ‘analyzed’ something.)

Steiner, it appeared to me, had drifted into the gravitational field of theoretical tendencies hostile to Marxism. These paragraphs were reminiscent of passages found in the writings of assorted “praxis” philosophers, affiliates of the Frankfurt School and other philosophically-eclectic tendencies that comprise what is known as “Western Marxism.” The intellectual thread that binds these diverse tendencies together is dissatisfaction and disagreement with philosophical materialism. Steiner’s assertion that “The reciprocal relationship between Being and consciousness *is just as important* to Marxism as the *logical* priority of Being” (emphasis added) was a major concession to philosophical idealism. An understanding of the interaction between Being and consciousness can only be established on the basis of a recognition of the primacy of matter over consciousness. Moreover, Marxism, as a world scientific outlook, views humankind, the mind and consciousness as a product of the dialectical evolution of nature. From the standpoint of science, though not of idealist-tinged philosophy, the primacy of Being is a *material* and *historical*, and not merely a *logical*, priority.<sup>33</sup>

The paragraphs that followed presented a familiar litany of objections to classical Marxism. There was the suggestion that Engels, though not entirely lacking in talent, had in some way contributed to a vulgarization of Marxism: “Engels was not Marx . . . Marx was fundamentally the theorist and Engels the popularizer.” This review of Engels’ supposedly ambiguous legacy was followed by an all-too-familiar critique of Lenin’s *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*: “. . .the version of materialism Lenin expounds in this work has much more in common with 18<sup>th</sup> century mechanical materialism than with Marx’s materialist dialectic.” Steiner’s arguments—counterposing the “vulgar” materialist Lenin of *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* to the Hegelianized “dialectical” Lenin of the *Philosophical Notebooks*—were ones that I had come across many times in the past, in the writings of idealist opponents of Marxism.

There was one hopeful note. Notwithstanding his sharp criticism of what he knew to be essential elements of the philosophical heritage of the Trotskyist movement, Steiner offered a favorable assessment of the political development of the International Committee.

Events in the last 2 decades have created more favorable conditions for the renewal of Marxism. Notable was the 1985 split and clarification in the International Committee, the collapse of Stalinism in the late 1980’s and early 1990’s and the development of globalized communications and technology. The impact

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33 As Trotsky wrote in his essay introducing the first issue of the *Under the Banner of Marxism*, the Soviet theoretical journal founded in 1922: “. . .Human society itself, both by its historical roots and by its contemporary economy, extends into the world of natural history. We must see contemporary man as a link in the whole development that starts from the first tiny organic cell, which came in its turn from the laboratory of nature, where the physical and chemical properties of matter act” (*Problems of Everyday Life* [New York: Monad Press, 1979], p. 272).

of the *World Socialist Web Site* over the past year, and particularly in the past few months with its valuable commentary on the Clinton impeachment drive and the war against Yugoslavia have shown the enormous possibilities for reaching a mass audience throughout the world.<sup>34</sup>

Turning his attention to the relationship between “Philosophy and the party,” Steiner acknowledged that “The Marxist movement, organized as an international political party, can and has played an important role in the development of Marxist philosophy.” This was a puzzling statement, for *where else* and by *whom else* has Marxism been developed? Steiner offered no specific example of Marxist philosophy being developed by individual theoreticians working *outside of and unconnected to* the Marxist movement. He noted that “developments that are of significance for philosophy come from very unexpected quarters, such as for instance chaos theory.” However, Steiner continued: “I believe of course that the full integration and comprehension of these developments is only possible within the framework of Marxism, but that does not mean that 1—there is some kind of privileged position that only Marxists have that enables them to grasp these developments, without mastering the subject at hand; 2—that non-Marxists have nothing of importance to say on these developments.”

As I read these lines, somewhat belligerent in tone, it seemed to me that Steiner was setting up a series of rhetorical straw men, in the service of an agenda that was not entirely clear. The issue is not one of a “privileged position”—whatever that may mean—but of the essential role of Marxism, i.e., the most advanced and consistent form of materialist philosophy, in the development of a scientific understanding of nature, society and consciousness. Which “Marxists” have denied that developments such as the formulation of chaos theory, necessarily emerging outside the sphere of revolutionary politics, require the most serious attention? The theoretical traditions of classical Marxism, dating back to the pioneering work of Engels, have always assigned to natural science a critical role in the development of materialism. But the advances made by scientists hardly lessen the crucial role played by Marxists in promoting the conscious application of the dialectical method and a consistently materialist world outlook in all spheres of scientific research and, above all, in striving to develop a political and intellectual milieu favorable for the progressive development of culture as a whole. The critical nature of such work can hardly be exaggerated at a time when anti-intellectualism and social backwardness finds support at the highest levels of the capitalist state.

Steiner ended this section of his letter with yet another enigmatic remark: “Furthermore,” he wrote, “such developments should be seen as avenues for enriching our theoretical comprehension, and not simply as another example illustrating the correctness of our (ossified) perspective.”

Again, except for the vague reference to chaos theory, he offered no concrete example of the “developments” to which he was referring. But even more troubling was his description of the Marxist perspective as “ossified.” Placing the word diplomatically within parentheses did not lessen its jarring impact. Taken as a whole, the arguments advanced by Steiner in this section of his letter, however ambiguous his formulations, seemed directed against the defense of Marxist conceptions in opposition to other philosophical viewpoints.

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<sup>34</sup> Let us compare this assessment, written in June 1999, to Steiner/Brenner’s present claim, which we have already cited, that “What happened in the years between 1993 and 1998 was a caving in by the IC leadership to the immense class pressures of bourgeois society.” The reader will also notice the glaring contrast between Steiner’s highly favorable estimate of the *World Socialist Web Site* and its revolutionary potential in 1999 and the contemptuous dismissal of the WSWS in the most recent documents of Steiner/Brenner.

The disturbing implications of his comments emerged all too clearly in the final section of his letter, in which Steiner turned to the question of party membership. He stated:

...I will not be able to function effectively in [a] party that has a dogmatic attitude toward philosophy. I do not believe that the SEP and the International Committee today does have a dogmatic attitude. I have seen a very open and refreshing attitude expressed in the WSWS. Some of the views I have expressed may seem 'unorthodox' to some comrades. I do not insist that anyone necessarily agree with these views. I do expect however that they be given a forum and looked at with an open attitude.

Why, in a letter discussing philosophy and membership in the SEP, was Steiner raising the specter of dogmatism, with all its pejorative connotations? A dogmatic attitude is characterized by a blind and inflexible set of beliefs, akin to a religion, impervious to arguments based on facts and reason. The accusation of dogmatism has been raised all too frequently by opponents of Marxism, as a means of discrediting its defense of materialism.<sup>35</sup> Steiner should have remembered that the International Committee had been attacked in similar terms, back in the early 1970s, when George Novack branded its opposition to idealist schools of philosophy as "sectarianism." Steiner's 1975 article, "Marxism, Pragmatism and Revisionism," from which I have already quoted, was one of a number of statements replying to Novack's attack.<sup>36</sup> In the context of Steiner's objections to Marxist formulations on the relation between being and consciousness, his glib identification of a defense of basic materialist conceptions with intellectual laziness, and his reference to "ossified" perspectives, his raising of "a dogmatic attitude toward philosophy" had the character of a warning shot being fired by Steiner across the bow of the party.

Finally, Steiner's letter ended on a distinctly ambivalent note:

Nevertheless, I would not be honest if I did not admit that I still have some doubts. I am just not sure how well I would be able to fit into the organization. I am also not sure if the level of commitment I am willing to make, in terms of my time and my financial support, is sufficient for party membership. On the other hand, I don't think I have any way to determine the answer to these questions without trying the role of party membership.

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35 James Burnham, it should be recalled, sought to discredit Marxism in precisely this way. Justifying his unwillingness to engage in a debate with Trotsky over matters relating to dialectical materialism, he declared, "I stopped arguing about religion long ago." To which Trotsky replied, "As I understand this, your words imply that the dialectic of Marx, Engels and Lenin belongs to the sphere of religion" (*In Defense of Marxism* [London: New Park Publications, 1971], p. 91)

36 The most detailed answer to Novack's denunciation of philosophical sectarianism appeared in a 1973 statement by the International Committee of the Fourth International:

But what does Novack mean by sectarianism *in philosophy*? In this field, Marxism certainly does *not* make compromises. In the sphere of philosophy, every difference must be analyzed and fought through to the end. Here the basic foundations of the movement are involved ...

It is only on the firm basis of dialectical materialism that flexibility in tactics is possible, and that periodic shifts in strategy can be undertaken. There is no question of *tactics* in philosophy. The position of dialectical materialism, that theory is united with practice in and through the struggle to change the world, is a culmination of and at the same time a break with all philosophy before Marx (a negation in the Hegelian sense). All philosophy since Hegel is either part of the developing theory of Marxism or is bourgeois apologetics developed in struggle *against* dialectical materialism.

The question of 'sectarianism' can be raised here only by those who propose to blur the line between dialectical materialism and bourgeois philosophy (*Trotskyism Versus Revisionism*, Volume Six [London: New Park, 1975], p. 191).

If after reading all my caveats you still think I should join the party, then I will do so. To me however, it will seem like a trial membership.

And so, with this highly conditional declaration of his personal political commitment, Steiner brought his letter to a conclusion. Steiner was clearly moving along a theoretical trajectory different from that of the SEP and International Committee. If he were to join the SEP, it would be on his terms. His interest in becoming a member was primarily to obtain a public forum, via the WSWS, to advance a theoretical platform alien to the philosophical standpoint of the Fourth International. And in return for providing Steiner with a world audience to criticize Marxism, the SEP would receive whatever small portion of his free time and spare change that he felt willing to part with.

## **VI. Steiner's Application to the SEP**

Several weeks later, in August 1999, the Political Committee of the SEP received from Steiner a formal application for membership.<sup>37</sup> This was a very different document from the letter that he had sent me in June. His application did not mention the differences on philosophical questions that Steiner had raised in June. Nor did the letter indicate that Steiner was critical of the political orientation and practice of the SEP. There were no references to “objectivism” and “abstentionism,” or, for that matter, “degeneration”—which, if the Steiner/Brenner of MWHH are to be believed, had been underway since 1993, six years before Steiner decided that he wanted to become a member! Steiner did not criticize the SEP for failing to fight pragmatism, or chastise the party for holding an uncritical view of the Enlightenment.

The document that Steiner sent to the Political Committee was a lengthy and remarkably candid autobiographical statement. I will cite only from those sections of the document that are related to the political issues raised by Steiner/Brenner's attack on the ICFI.

Steiner began his essay with a review of his intellectual background. He described the process of his gradual radicalization. “When the political quiescence of the post-war period finally ended in the late 60's I naturally gravitated toward the new student movement. I shared the political sensibilities of most of my generation and considered myself a New Leftist.” Steiner recalled that he studied philosophy at the New School for Social Research in New York, an institute that was related intellectually to Horkheimer's Institute of Social Research (the Frankfurt School). Though he referred to his areas of philosophical interest, Steiner did not review the major theoretical influences that he encountered at the New School—though one of its major figures at the time was Hannah Arendt, the former pupil (like Marcuse) of Martin Heidegger. As for his politics, Steiner acknowledged that

...I accepted somewhat uncritically the half-baked myths and legends that circulated among the New Left.

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<sup>37</sup> In both *Marxism or Objectivism* and MWHH, Steiner incorrectly gives 1998 as the year of his application for membership in the SEP. This error is repeated in an addendum to MWHH, dated April 5, 2008, which Steiner/Brenner have posted on their web site. It is not entirely clear why Steiner repeatedly misstates the date by one year, as one must assume that he has copies of his correspondence to the SEP and me. However, it should be noted that Steiner repeatedly asserts—most recently in the April 2008 addendum—that his application was submitted before there had emerged any differences over philosophical issues. The record shows, however, that Steiner applied for membership after significant differences had been revealed in his letter of June 25, 1999. One must conclude that Steiner has changed the year of his application to fit the needs of his present political narrative.

Typical of the wild impressionism that passed for ‘analysis’ in these circles was the ‘theory,’ popularized by the Black Panther Party, that America was a fascist country.<sup>38</sup>

Steiner joined the Workers League in 1970. He discussed the immense impact of its historically-grounded perspective on his own development:

... For the first time that I could recall, I was confronted with a reasoned explanation of current social and political reality to which I had previously responded on an emotional level. ...

My education as a Marxist began. After several weeks of reading, attending lectures and many, many hours of discussion I became convinced that Marxism was indeed a living movement that was relevant to the problems we in the United States were then facing. My study of the history of the Marxist movement convinced me that Trotskyism represented the only genuine continuity of Marxism in our time. ...

I read all the classics of Marxism: Marx, Engels, Lenin, Trotsky as well as Plekhanov, Mehring, Kautsky, Luxemburg.<sup>39</sup>

Steiner’s letter then turned to the events of 1973-74, when “the Workers League, and I with it, experienced a profound crisis brought on by the impressionistic perspective of the National Secretary, Tim Wohlforth.” The letter described the impact of Wohlforth’s actions on the Workers League and on himself. But here his narrative assumed an extremely subjective tone, and betrayed his own serious political weakness. Steiner recalled Wohlforth’s personal attacks on him, and of being burdened “with a never-ending stream of meaningless busy work. This was meant to isolate and demoralize me, encouraging me to leave. Within a few months he succeeded and I left the movement.” Wohlforth’s behavior was, indeed, atrocious. But Steiner failed to examine why he succumbed politically to Wohlforth’s provocations. There were others who resisted and opposed Wohlforth. Nor did Steiner attempt to explain the deeper political reasons for the development of the crisis in the Workers League. Aside from a fleeting reference to the Watergate scandal, Steiner’s letter hardly touched on the major changes in the political and economic changes that were taking place in the United States and internationally. His letter failed to examine the connection between shifts in the objective situation, their impact on the development of the class struggle, and their reflection, politically and theoretically, within the party.

Rejoining the Workers League in 1974, following Wohlforth’s removal from the position of national secretary, Steiner recalled that “The period from 1974-77 was for me one of intense theoretical work.” However, new

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38 It is true that the Black Panthers described “Amerika” as a fascist state. But far more important in giving this disoriented “theory” intellectual credibility were the writings and speeches of Herbert Marcuse. He delivered a lecture at the New School, while Steiner was a student, in which he claimed that among the American “people at large, a configuration of political and psychological conditions point to the existence of a proto-fascist syndrome” (*Counter-Revolution and Revolt* [Boston: Beacon Press, 1972], p. 25).

39 These words, in which he fondly recalled the impact on his own development of “reading, attending lectures and many, many hours of discussion,” should be compared to Steiner’s present contemptuous dismissal of the efforts of the SEP to educate workers: “How is a worker to gain an understanding of the historical role of the unions?” he asks sarcastically. “Presumably this will come from reading the WSWS or attending a party lecture. ... This sterile propagandism is completely alien to the traditions of Trotskyism” (MWHH, p. 119). In other words, lectures and reading and discussion are for intellectuals only.

problems were arising in the International Committee. In his discussion of the developing crisis in the Workers Revolutionary Party, Steiner acknowledged his own limitations:

...With more than two decades of hindsight, it is easy for me to see now that Healy's "practice of cognition" was the antithesis of materialist dialectics. It became a vehicle for introducing various forms of mystification into the movement that could provide a philosophical cover for the WRP's increasingly opportunist maneuvers. Unfortunately, although I was troubled by Healy's subjective interpretation of the theory of knowledge of Marxism, I attributed whatever qualms I felt to my own inadequacies.

It was not long before Steiner was again politically adrift. "My own personal crisis," he wrote, "came to a head in the period 1977-78." According to Steiner's letter, the fault for his difficulties lay more or less entirely with the Workers League:

...To begin with, the day to day work of the Workers League seemed to be increasingly dominated by an anti-theoretical activism. This was the direct consequence of the false perspective that had been introduced into the sections of the International Committee by the leadership of the WRP. Increasingly, we were working with the sense that a civil war was imminent. It therefore became urgent to build our ranks as rapidly as possibly [sic]. The idea of educational work and training came to be viewed as a wasteful luxury reflecting the previous propagandist stage of the movement. Comrades were being asked to do impossible chores, and this began to take its toll. Once again, as in the period of Wohlforth's wrecking operation, the personal lives of the party members were put under incredible stress. In some ways the situation we now encountered was worse than the one from the 1973-74 period. The frenetic activism launched by Wohlforth, while pushing the party to the breaking point, did result at least initially, in the recruitment of some working class youth. This was above all a product of the different conditions prevailing in the working class at that time. The period 1973-74 coincided with a period of militancy and radicalization of many layers of the working class. Three years later, the wave of strikes and youth radicalization was definitely on the wane. Despite our heroic efforts, few if any new forces were recruited in this period.

Holding the party responsible for his own crisis, Steiner's subjective account distorted, to the point of falsification, the history of the Workers League during the mid- and late-1970s. It would not be difficult, on the basis of a review of party documents from that period, and of an examination of what was published in the *Bulletin* (the semi-weekly newspaper of the Workers League), to show that the period between 1974 and 1978 was exceptionally productive. Within the broader context of the historical development of the Workers League as a genuinely Marxist party of the working class, the departure of Wohlforth marked the beginning of a definite break by the Workers League with the political residue of American middle-class radicalism that Wohlforth personified. In the aftermath of his resignation, the Workers League set out to place all aspects of its work in alignment with the Trotskyist heritage of the Fourth International. Steiner, obsessed with his individual pinpricks, seemed to have completely forgotten this central achievement. In this respect, it was especially noteworthy that Steiner's letter made no reference to intensive work on political perspective that characterized this period or to the historical investigation spearheaded by the Workers League [whose findings were published under the title *Security and the*

*Fourth International*] into the circumstances surrounding the assassination of Leon Trotsky, the first ever to be carried out by the Fourth International.<sup>40</sup>

The deepening crisis in the British Workers Revolutionary Party created difficulties for the Workers League. But the political and theoretical lessons drawn by the Workers League out of the struggle against Wohlforth's political betrayal, and the subsequent renewal within our party of the struggle against all forms of opportunism, prepared the party for the fight against the WRP's abandonment of Trotskyism.

Steiner was blind to these developments. By the time he wrote his letter, more than 20 years after leaving the Workers League, he seemed to remember nothing but his personal difficulties. "My love of life had disappeared," he wrote in his letter, "and with it any enthusiasm I still had for party work." He then recalled the circumstances of his departure from the Workers League:

... For me undoubtedly the low point came in October of 1978. I was awakened one morning with a phone call from our National Secretary, Dave North, asking me to come into the party office immediately. I remember arriving at the office and wondering what all the fuss was about. It was then that I was told the shocking news that comrade Tom Henehan had been killed at a youth dance the night before. Nothing could have prepared me for such news. ...

... For the next few weeks and months, I drifted politically. One day, I don't even remember exactly when, I left the movement.

There is no reason to doubt that Steiner was shaken by Tom Henehan's death. But there was one major factual error in his account. Henehan was killed not in October 1978, but exactly one year earlier—in October 1977. The discrepancy is significant, for it resulted in an account of Steiner's departure from the Workers League in which the actual circumstances of his abandonment of revolutionary politics were misrepresented.<sup>41</sup> In fact, it was not

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<sup>40</sup> Steiner's account of the practical work conducted during this work was a travesty of the actual record of the party's work and achievements. It was precisely during the period that the Workers League established a significant presence among the most militant sections of the working class—especially the coal miners of West Virginia and Kentucky, among whom the party won a wide following during two major national coal strikes. The second strike, in 1977-78, lasted more than 100 days and culminated in the successful defiance of the anti-labor Taft-Hartley Act invoked by President Carter. Factions of the party's industrial arm, the Trade Union Alliance for a Labor Party, were active throughout the country. In New York, Ed Winn, a militant transit worker and member of the Workers League, was elected in December 1977 to a seat on the union's executive board. His campaign was based on an explicitly socialist program. And among the youth, the campaign launched by the Young Socialists in May 1976 for the freedom of Gary Tyler, a victim of a frame-up in Louisiana, won substantial support among young people all over the country. It is no doubt the case that the demands placed upon party members were substantial. But let us keep in mind that the Workers League was a revolutionary socialist organization.

<sup>41</sup> Aside from Steiner's confusion as to the year of Tom Henehan's death, one is also astonished by his declaration that "Nothing could have prepared me for such news." As a matter of fact, the party's investigation into the assassination of Leon Trotsky, and its exposure of the massive penetration of government agents into the Socialist Workers Party, had led to a steady escalation of threats of violence against the Workers League. In the months prior to the killing of Henehan, there had been frequent discussions, in which Steiner participated, of the need for greater attention to security by party members. After Henehan's death on October 16, 1977, the Workers League publicly rejected claims in the New York media that the shooting had been merely a "senseless killing." It denounced the shooting as a politically motivated assassination and campaigned widely in the labor movement for an investigation of the crime. Organizations representing several million workers in the United States, Canada and in other countries endorsed this demand. For three years the New York City Police Department sheltered the killers. But this campaign led to the arrest in 1980, and subsequent convictions, of the two men who had shot Henehan at a public event.

the death of Henehan that directly precipitated Steiner's desertion. Rather, it was the decision taken by the Workers League, several months after Henehan's death, to relocate the party's political center to Detroit. The purpose of this relocation, which went altogether unmentioned in Steiner's letter, was to strengthen the party's identification with and involvement in the struggles of the working class in the important industrial centers of the Midwest. The preparations for this relocation, which began in the spring of 1978, were accompanied by intensive work on the drafting of a new perspectives resolution.

Steiner was unsettled by the personal implications of the relocation of the party to the Midwest and the reorganization of its work. He was attached to the radical middle-class milieu of New York City, and recognized that the establishment of a new party center in Detroit would lead to a change in the social complexion of the party and a far more intense day to day involvement in the struggles of the working class. The prospect of a change in his lifestyle was not one that he relished. And though Steiner was not under an obligation to leave New York, his distress over the impending relocation and his estrangement from the party's perspective became all too evident. In the autumn of 1978, as the first stages of the relocation were completed Steiner left the movement.<sup>42</sup>

The fact that Steiner's abandonment of revolutionary politics was, in the final analysis, an expression of a fundamentally middle-class social orientation was substantiated in Steiner's account of his reaction to the struggle that erupted in the ICFI in 1985. He wrote that

These events animated me as nothing else had in the previous eight years. To say that I followed the developments in the IC with interest would be a gross understatement. I devoured every bit of information I could come by. I became an active supporter of the newly organized International Committee.

Steiner's letter noted that the struggle within the ICFI "had been waged not only on the immediate disagreements over political perspectives, but on the broader questions of Marxist theory." However, he made no reference whatever to the content of the theoretical disagreements—a significant omission given Steiner's history in the movement. It struck members of the Political Committee as particularly odd that he had nothing to say about the International Committee's extensive critique of Healy's distortion of materialist dialectics. One cannot avoid the retrospective suspicion that Steiner chose to avoid the issue because he did not agree—at the time of the writing of this letter in 1999—with the central thrust of the critique, i.e. that Healy's "practice of cognition" was developed on the basis of an idealist revision of Marxism.

Though Steiner stated that he "was tempted to throw in my lot with the movement once more," he eventually chose to remain outside the party despite his agreement with the struggle conducted by the International Committee. The explanation that he offered in his letter to the SEP Political Committee was surprisingly candid:

In the end, I decided to remain a supporter instead of a member. My reasons for doing so were complex and not easy to articulate. In fact, I have probably never tried to consciously analyze them until this very minute. I believe what motivated me was a combination of circumstances. First, I was still nurturing my wounds from my previous experience in the movement. In my mind, the political disorientation that I had

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<sup>42</sup> Three months later, in January 1979, after spending less than one week in Detroit, Frank Brenner left the party without any explanation.

previously experienced was completely intertwined with my personal trauma from the 1977-78 period. Added to that was the new station in which I found myself. I had by the mid 80's established myself in a new professional career in which I was quite successful. I had entered the ranks of the comfortable middle class, and despite all my attempts at self-evasion, I knew that I did not want to rock the boat.

Although I was politically in solidarity with the movement, my day to day life was far removed from the concerns of revolutionary socialism. I was part of a middle class New York culture.

There is little that needs to be added to Steiner's acknowledgment of his own complacent and basically conservative petty-bourgeois outlook. It speaks for itself. However, one could not help but be somewhat startled by his admission that he had never, until actually writing the August 1999 letter to the SEP, attempted to analyze his own reasons for remaining outside the party. By that point, 14 years had passed since the 1985 split in the ICFI. What, one must ask, was he doing with his brain during that long period?<sup>43</sup>

The final section of Steiner's letter was filled with high praise for the work of the party. Contrasting its milieu to the "fetid atmosphere" of the prevailing political and social environment, he described the public meetings he attended as "a breath of fresh air." He recalled his meetings with Nadezhda Joffe and Vadim Rogovin, and remarked that the "very existence of such people is a nagging embarrassment to those who have bought into the culture of self-aggrandizement." These meetings, which had so profound an impact on Steiner, took place in 1995—which, according to Steiner's latest version of events, was roughly mid-point in the political degeneration of the party.

Steiner went so far as to state that his attendance at party functions

inspired me to renew my interest in philosophy. Sometime in 1996 I embarked on an extensive study of Hegel, Marx and the entire tradition of Western philosophy. It was also probably not completely accidental that this period of my recent biography coincided with the development of the *World Socialist Web Site* and the transformation of the Workers League into the Socialist Equality Party. However one explains this conjunction, I began to appreciate the potential that could be harnessed through the new global communications media.

As he approached the end of his letter, Steiner stressed the immense impact of the party meeting that commemorated the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the assassination of Tom Henehan. "It was then," he wrote "that I committed myself to raise the level of my contribution to the work of the movement. I had in mind some sort of journalistic contributions, the exact content of which remained vaguely defined."

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<sup>43</sup> There is another point that must be made. In explaining his decision not to rejoin the party, Steiner, quite correctly, placed central emphasis on the impact of the social milieu upon his general outlook: "I had entered the ranks of the comfortable middle class, and . . . I knew that I did not want to rock the boat." So when it comes to dealing with his own political evolution, Steiner stressed the social environment and class pressures. But compare this approach to that which he takes, in *Marxism or Objectivism* and MWHH, when dealing with the collapse of the Second International and the fate of individuals such as Plekhanov. In that case, Steiner insists that the fundamental cause of their political failures lay in their inadequate understanding of the dialectical method. My position—based on the writings of Lenin and Trotsky—that the essential cause of the collapse of the Second International and the lamentable role played by so many of its leaders was to be found in the socio-economic and political contradictions of their epoch (which, to a great extent, determined the specific character of their theoretical work) has been denounced by Steiner as "objectivism."

In conclusion Steiner declared:

I have now come to the realization that the role I wish to play is that of a participant in the struggle for socialism. Nothing less will offer me the satisfaction of implementing theory into practice. That is the real essence of freedom.

Steiner's letter raised many questions among members of the SEP Political Committee. There was sharp disagreement with his assessment of the history of the Workers League in the 1970s. His approach to the objective experiences of the party betrayed an extreme and disorienting subjectivism. What he seemed to remember most about the events he referred to were their impact upon . . . Alex Steiner! Moreover, his appraisal of the conflict within the Workers Revolutionary Party—notwithstanding his praise for the role of the International Committee—was superficial. The Political Committee was far from convinced that Steiner had worked through carefully and systematically the political and theoretical issues that were at the heart of the differences with Wohlforth in the 1970s and with the WRP leadership in the 1980s. While the Political Committee did not want to discourage Steiner, it was felt that it would be premature to readmit him into the SEP. Further discussion would be necessary.

## **VII. The February 2000 Aggregate Meeting of the SEP and Steiner's Articles on Heidegger**

I preferred to speak to Steiner directly about the decision of the Political Committee, as I did not want him to draw the conclusion that the door was being closed on the possibility that his application might be accepted at some future date. Due to the pressure of work, it was not possible for me to arrange a meeting with Steiner for several months. However, in order to provide the best possible environment for a discussion and to demonstrate the SEP's genuine interest in developing a principled basis for future collaboration, I extended to Steiner an invitation to attend, as a guest, a national membership meeting in Detroit. He accepted my offer, and participated in the meeting on February 12, 2000.

Though my remarks were not prepared for Steiner's benefit, they addressed issues that were highly relevant to the theoretical differences that Steiner had raised in his letter of the previous June. In the opening section of my report, I stated:

The 20<sup>th</sup> century has just about come to an end—but we will not so quickly escape its legacy. The essential component of our political preparation for the upheavals of the new century will consist of a painstaking review and assimilation of the history of the 1900s. This assimilation will consist not only of the gathering of facts, but also—and even more profoundly—in the defense and reassertion of the great intellectual conquests that constitute the theoretical foundations of the international socialist movement.

Among the most critical of these is the Marxist, i.e., historical materialist, conception of the law-governed character of human socioeconomic development. By this, I do not intend to resurrect—in the manner of the formalistic theoreticians of the Second International—a mechanistic conception of history unfolding in a predictable sequence. This sort of formalistic presentation of historical materialism reflected within the intellectual milieu of the Second International a theoretical retreat, under the pressures of an environment dominated by political gradualism, from the far more profound, dialectical, conceptions of Marx

and Engels.<sup>44</sup> The historical determinism of Marxism does not consist in the crude assertion of the “inevitability” of any given event. Rather, it insists that Social Being is a category of objective science.

In explaining why it was necessary to restate the fundamentals of Marxist theory, I said:

The philosophical core of the contemporary attack on Marxism is the denial of the concept of historical necessity. It is asserted that the October Revolution’s claim of historical legitimacy was without foundation. Denouncing the Bolshevik claim that the social revolution arose of necessity from the logic of socio-economic processes, the opponents of Marxism insist that it was, rather, an aberrant event—an accident that was merely the product of the interplay of malevolent intentions and peculiar circumstances. . . .

What are the theoretical foundations of this attack on necessity, which presently pervades historical writing, most significantly in the work of the post-modernists? It articulates a major tendency in bourgeois thought that extends all the way back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, i.e. in the right-wing reaction against the revolutionary historical and social implications of Hegel’s and then Marx’s thought—from Kierkegaard, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche to Heidegger.

I stressed that Marxist materialism is anathema to the main trends of bourgeois thought in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. “In opposition to the concept of a law-governed historical process,” I noted, “bourgeois philosophy posits an essentially irrational world, in which atomized Beings grapple in despair to discover and assert their unique identity.” I then called attention to the writings of Martin Heidegger, among the most important exponent of philosophical irrationalism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

In bringing my opening remarks to a conclusion, I stated that “all critical questions of political and social perspective can be worked out only on the basis of an understanding of history—of course, most directly, the history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but beyond that, of the whole law-governed character of the historical evolution of Social Being from its origins in nature itself.” And then I quoted from Trotsky, who wrote in 1922 that

The materialist world outlook not only opens a wide window on the whole universe, but it also strengthens the will. It is also the only thing that makes contemporary man a man. He still depends, it is true, on difficult material conditions, but he already knows how to overcome them, and takes part consciously in the construction of the new society, based at once on the highest technical skill and the highest solidarity (*Problems of Everyday Life*, p. 272).

Steiner gave no indication that he disagreed with my remarks. Quite the opposite. When invited to speak, Steiner expressed strong agreement with the approach I had taken.<sup>45</sup> Arising from the philosophical issues that were raised at the SEP meeting, I proposed to Steiner that he write a series of articles addressing the controversy surrounding the life of Martin Heidegger, particularly the relationship between his irrationalist philosophy and his

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<sup>44</sup> Thus, in Steiner’s presence, I linked the theoretical degeneration of the Second International to objective social and political conditions. He made no objection at the time.

<sup>45</sup> In neither *Marxism or Objectivism* nor MWHH do Steiner/Brenner refer to the February 2000 meeting, let alone acknowledge Steiner’s personal participation.

support for the Nazis after their accession to power. While Steiner/Brenner have referred several times to these articles, they have failed to mention how they came into being. I must confess that I had, in proposing this assignment to Steiner, something of an ulterior motive. I hoped that an engagement with Heidegger's subjective idealism would be of assistance in helping Steiner overcome the philosophical ambivalence toward materialism that he had expressed in his draft statement on a WSWS philosophy section and in his June 1999 letter. Steiner's articles were posted in early April 2000.

These articles, which clearly reflected the influence of the report at the national membership meeting and subsequent discussions, represented the high tide of Steiner's collaboration with the SEP. It is worth quoting from the concluding section of the final article:

One of the most curious philosophical trends in the postwar period has been the embrace of Heidegger by many left-leaning intellectuals. This is an extraordinarily complex subject to which we can hardly do justice in the scope of this presentation. We wish simply to sketch the epistemological kinship, despite the historical differences, between Heidegger and his contemporary sympathizers.

What has characterized the postwar intelligentsia in the West has been the wholesale abandonment of any identification with Marxism, humanism or any vestige of Enlightenment rationality. The hopes of a generation of radical intellectuals were trampled underneath the weight of the failed revolutionary movements of the late 1960s and early 1970s. It would be hard to underestimate the impact on the French intelligentsia in particular of the failure of the revolutionary upsurge of May-June 1968. Legions of former left intellectuals began a wholesale retreat from the Enlightenment vision of an emancipator rationality. . . .

Holding the attempt to encompass in thought the terrible recent history of our time a failure, it was not a very big step for the postmodernists to appropriate the irrationalist tradition that turned its back on the Enlightenment. This is where the Heideggerians, postmodernists, deconstructionists and neo-pragmatists find a common ground. All these trends reject what they call the traditional conceptual thinking, "Philosophy" or "Science" with capital letters.

This was very well said by Steiner. And yet it would not be long before he would embrace the very positions that he had denounced in these articles.<sup>46</sup>

### **VIII. The Death of Jeff Goldstein**

As the publication of the Heidegger articles demonstrated, the WSWS was willing to post articles by Steiner that

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<sup>46</sup> Apropos Steiner's later claims that reactionary political positions held by representatives of the Frankfurt School should not impinge on our appreciation of their theoretical work, it is worth reviewing his reply in the WSWS essay to similar apologies made on behalf of Heidegger:

. . . Yet even if one concedes that there are cases—particularly in technical areas removed from political and sociological concern—where theoretical work can be pursued unrelated to a person's biography or social status, it does not follow that such a dichotomy is present in the work of any particular theorist. It would be particularly surprising to find a discordance between the political activity of a man such as Heidegger and his theorizing, knowing that his theorizing was itself intimately concerned with personal and political activity.

These words apply no less to the representatives of the Frankfurt School—especially given the fact that they were politically engaged theorists.

advanced the struggle for dialectical materialism. Despite the existence of differences on political and theoretical questions, the record demonstrates that a serious and sustained effort was made to find ways of working together. However, these efforts were complicated by Steiner's social orientation. His interest in Marxism was largely of an abstract character. In his practice and outlook, he remained what he had been before he had joined the Workers League in the early 1970s—a left petty-bourgeois radical intellectual. Even in periods of generally cordial collaboration, there existed an undercurrent of tension between Steiner and the SEP rooted in basic issues of class and political orientation.

In June 2000, a former member of the Workers League, Jeff Goldstein, died in Las Vegas at the age of 58. He had participated in the founding of the Workers League in 1966. He used the pen name, Jeff Sebastian, and wrote numerous articles on economic matters for the *Bulletin*. He also made a significant contribution to the organization of the party's work on the West Coast in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Like Steiner, Goldstein left the Workers League during the Wohlforth crisis in 1973 and returned after the latter's resignation. In the autumn of 1974 Sebastian assumed the post of *Bulletin* editor. However, in March 1977 he left the movement. Sometime later, he moved to Las Vegas where he combined his skill in mathematics with his lifelong, and generally unhealthy, fascination with gambling to become a professional handicapper. He published a racing journal that acquired a small but devoted following. After Steiner left the Workers League, he and Jeff Goldstein reestablished their friendship.

Goldstein-Sebastian retained generally friendly though extremely limited relations with the SEP. We were, of course, saddened to learn of the death of our former comrade. Steiner went to Las Vegas to speak at the funeral of his close friend. Not long after, he sent me a copy of the obituary that he had written to memorialize the life of Sebastian.

Of course, a eulogy delivered at a graveside has standards of its own, which allow a more forgiving approach to the rules of objectivity. And yet, as I read Steiner's remarks, it seemed to me that he had pressed well beyond the appropriate limits. He sought to portray Goldstein's work as a handicapper as a masterful application of materialist dialectics, based on the achievements of Hegel and Marx.

Jeff's approach to handicapping was supremely philosophical, though I would guess that many of his readers were not aware of this. Jeff was a serious student of philosophy, though I doubt that he would have described himself in these terms. For Jeff was above all practical. For him the truth was always concrete. Theory is alive in its practical application. Thus Jeff found issues of jockeys, trainers and tracks not only fun, aesthetically pleasing, intellectually challenging, but also providing insights into profound philosophical truths, and I know it is these insights that he took most delight in.

When I initially received the text of Steiner's remarks, I sent him a brief note to express my condolences. For reasons of diplomacy, which I thought appropriate under the circumstances, I avoided any direct criticism of Steiner's remarks. But I did observe that "The dialectical method is a powerful instrument for the cognition of objective truth in all spheres of nature and society, but there are better uses to which it can be put than in the publication of a racing journal." I noted, in sorrow, that "Jeff had the potential to do so much more with his life."

I thought this would bring this unhappy matter to a close, but then Steiner submitted an expanded political obituary of Sebastian for publication on the *World Socialist Web Site*. This submission was rejected. I then learned

from comrades in New York that Steiner was aggrieved by this decision. On August 13, 2000, I replied in a letter to his complaint:

Dear Alex:

Please excuse the delay in responding to your obituary of Jeff Goldstein. I have been told that you are disturbed by our failure to post the obituary on the *World Socialist Web Site* or to explain our reasons for not doing so. For the latter omission I apologize. We should have provided an explanation sooner—though, if you recall my earlier letter in which I commented on your remarks at Jeff’s funeral, I had already indicated my differences with your assessment of the life of our old friend and former comrade.

Everyone who knew and worked with Jeff was saddened to hear of his premature death. None of us is entirely free of sentimentality, which inclines us upon receiving such news to recall the best and most appealing characteristics of the deceased. But as you are demanding an explanation of our reasons for not publishing your obituary, then I am obliged to write with complete frankness. I would like to think that this is what Jeff would have wanted.

There is no point making of Jeff something that he was not. He aspired to become a revolutionary Marxist, but he was unable to transcend the milieu and outlook of petty-bourgeois radical politics that he absorbed during his intellectually formative years. It is to his credit that he embraced Trotskyism in the mid-1960s and joined the International Committee of the Fourth International. He made a contribution to the early development of the Workers League. However, Jeff, along with a significant section of the generation of radicals to which he belonged, entered into political crisis as the civil rights and anti-war protest movement disintegrated. The restabilization of capitalism, abetted by the betrayals of the Stalinists, social democrats and Pabloites, demanded of Marxists a long-term perspective and the ability to fight for it. In this situation, Jeff’s serious weaknesses—especially his inclination toward skepticism, even cynicism—rather than his strengths, came to the fore.

I do not agree with your statement, “Jeff was one of many senior members who were forced out by Wohlforth.” It is no doubt true that Wohlforth’s reprehensible conduct exacerbated the crisis in the Workers League. But to lay all the blame for the events of 1973-74 on Wohlforth is to exaggerate the latter’s political significance. The question that must be asked is why no one in the senior leadership, including Jeff, was prepared to conduct any struggle against Wohlforth. In retrospect, it is clear that those who left the movement in that period were manifesting, though in less malignant form, elements of the same political crisis that overtook the national secretary of the Workers League.

In the aftermath of Wohlforth’s removal, Jeff—along with several others, including Lucy St. John, who had left the movement in 1973-74—rejoined the Workers League. But virtually all these people, and finally Jeff himself, left the party within less than three years. Whatever the unique circumstances that attended the departure of this or that individual from the Workers League, Jeff’s own resignation was part of a broader political phenomenon in the United States—the demoralization and collapse of the mass protest movement of the 1960s and early 1970s.

The remaining 23 years of Jeff's life must be seen as a terrible waste of time and talent. I could not help but cringe with embarrassment as I read in your obituary of Jeff's relocation to Las Vegas in the mid-1980s, where "he was able to pursue a life-long dream—to become a professional horseracing handicapper. This was certainly an unlikely occupation for someone with his political history..." I should say so!

It is not a matter of condemning Jeff for his fascination with horseracing and gambling. But regardless of one's estimation of handicapping as a career choice, it represented, in the context of Jeff's political history, a terrible degeneration. At an earlier point in your obituary you refer to his "mastery" of Marxian economics. But then, writing of his attraction to the "romance of gambling," you inform the reader that Jeff "was not immune to the illusions generated by the capitalist system—above all the illusion that it is possible to beat the system through one's individual talents." In other words, Jeff's life in Las Vegas was not unrelated to the erosion of his former revolutionary outlook.

It would not be inappropriate for the WSWS to note the passing of a founding member of the Workers League. We are certainly willing to do so. But whatever our personal feelings about Jeff, it would be wrong to either exaggerate the achievements of his political career or downplay the depth of his subsequent political degeneration. Jeff played a secondary role in the early history—in some respects, the pre-history—of the Workers League. The greater portion of his adult life belongs to the years after he left the party.

I regret having to write to you in terms that you may consider harsh. But the fondness that others and I felt for this former comrade does not relieve us of the responsibility to deal objectively with the history of our movement.

With warmest regards

David

Steiner did not reply to this letter. But I am sure that he understood that much of what I had written about Jeff Goldstein could have served as an assessment of himself.

## **IX. Steiner and Science**

Steiner did not raise again the question of membership in the SEP. Nevertheless our relations remained cordial. On November 13, 2000, I received an e-mail message in which he offered his congratulations "on your excellent coverage of the election crisis." He concluded his note with a request that we find time to meet when I came to New York. In fact, we had a friendly discussion when I met with Steiner during a trip to New York in May 2001.

It was during the following year, in 2002, that it became evident that Steiner was in the midst of a decisive shift in his theoretical orientation. During a private trip to Germany, Steiner invited himself to give a lecture on philosophy to members of the Partei für Soziale Gleichheit (PSG) in Berlin. The German comrades, not wishing to be inhospitable,

table, provided him with an audience. The subject of his lecture was “Dialectics and the Crisis of Science.”<sup>47</sup> In the course of a wide-ranging and chaotic survey of the history of science, Steiner seemed intent on minimizing, if not entirely dismissing, the role of empirical research in the development of scientific knowledge. He asserted that

the place of experimental procedure in the birth of modern science, like the role of ancient atomists, has taken on a mythic status. To properly appreciate the role of experimentation in the scientific revolution, it is necessary to disentangle fact from myth.

The first thing to be said here is that experimentation and observation are always performed within a historical context, one in which we are informed by theories and concepts of what we are looking for. In this sense we can say that all experimentation and observation is “theory-laden” to begin with. This was an insight that the late MIT professor Thomas Kuhn developed and he was absolutely correct to point this out against the prevailing orthodoxy that saw experiment and observation as some kind of prior state of innocence from which we build generalizations. . . .

The myth of “pure” experimentation, or “pure” observation as the bedrock of modern science is one that survives to the present day. It is one of the tenets of modern empiricist philosophy that I shall describe presently. We have noted that the creators of the new science, men such as Bruno, Galileo, Newton, did not think of themselves as experimenters who then derived generalizations based on their experiments. They thought of themselves as Platonists who sought to discover the mathematical laws that governed nature.

Certainly experiment and observation play a role in the work of Galileo for instance. For Galileo, however, experiments such as the dropping of weights from a high tower were meant to validate his theory. It was not the basis for his discovery of his theory. Furthermore it has been pointed out by some historians that Galileo did not have the technical ability to measure the elapsed time of falling bodies with sufficient precision to prove his case. In fact, throughout the history of science it seems that great discoveries rarely if ever follow the supposed path prescribed by the “experimentalist” school of empirical philosophy.

Offering another example to diminish the significance of observation and experimentation in the development of science, Steiner invoked the example of Einstein, who

. . . was said to be wholly unimpressed when told that an experiment had provided the first empirical confirmation of his Special Theory of Relativity. Showing not the slightest bit of excitement he said, “But I knew that the theory is correct.”

When the written essay that formed the basis of the lecture was circulated by Steiner among ICFI members, it encountered strong objections—especially from party members with advanced degrees in various fields of science. They recognized that Steiner was pontificating on matters far beyond his level of competence. He lacked the training and knowledge to substantiate his sweeping judgments on the history of science. Chris Talbot, a university mathematician and long-time member of the International Committee in Britain, wrote a memo to Steiner. In

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<sup>47</sup> This essay has not been posted on the Steiner/Brenner web site.

friendly and rather gentle terms, Talbot called to Steiner's attention significant errors in his arguments. Talbot, for example, cautioned Steiner:

... I don't think your suggestion (following I presume the approach of [Alexandre] Koyré) that Bruno, Galileo, Newton and the other creators of the new science saw themselves as Platonists will stand up to serious study. I'm not saying that Platonist ideas (in many forms) did not play a role, but in the last few decades literally hundreds of books and thousands of papers have been written on Galileo as well as all the other giant figures of the Scientific Revolution that do not substantiate Koyré's approach. (I found a useful guide to the vast literature in *The Scientific Revolution and the Origins of Modern Science*, by John Henry, Macmillan, 1997).

One does not have to be an empiricist, arguing that scientific ideas always follow on from experiments, to point out the key role that observation and experiment played in that period. The view that Galileo could not have carried out some of his experiments, though fashionable for a while, has been refuted by the work of Stillman Drake and by experimenters who have carefully reproduced the experiments (see for example the revised edition of *The Birth of a New Physics* by I. Bernard Cohen, especially the supplements).

Also although obviously I am opposed to "vulgar Marxism of the Stalinist camp," I cannot accept your downplaying the influence of Democritus and Epicurus. For example, Pierre Gassendi, one of the most influential figures of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, based his work on Epicurus. Even Koyré admitted in his later writing that he had underestimated their importance.

Talbot then made a prescient warning:

In wanting to deal a blow at the "experimentalist," empiricist school of thought I think you're in danger of ignoring approaches to the development of science that are completely opposed to Marxism. I mean the various postmodern perspectives and widespread anti-scientific moods that you attack very well in your article on Heidegger.

I've mentioned the idea that Galileo didn't really do his experiments. Another is the use of the Einstein quote: "But I knew the theory was correct." (The quote is taken from Ilse Rosenthal-Schneider, a student of Einstein's in 1919, from her reminiscences. It refers to Einstein's response in hearing that Eddington's eclipse expedition that measured the bending of light-rays by the sun confirmed the General Theory of Relativity.) It is a favorite reference for those who want to prove that scientific knowledge is entirely relative, that it is just one more "narrative," and that its verification by observation and experiment are an empiricist myth opposed by the great scientist Einstein. ...

The same issue arises with your favorable reference to Thomas Kuhn. That all experimentation and observation is "theory laden" to begin with can easily be interpreted as support for complete relativism. While Kuhn did some serious work on the history of science (such as his study "Black Body Radiation and the Quantum Discontinuity") his more philosophical writings—particularly his theme in "The Structure of Scientific Revolutions" that one scientific theory replaces another in a "revolution" such that the two theo-

ries are “incommensurable”—have become central to postmodern attacks on science (see for example Alan Sokal’s “Intellectual Impostures”).

Steiner’s reply assumed the form of extensive critical notations that he appended to Talbot’s letter. While conceding several factual points, the notes clearly indicated a further distancing of his views from a materialist world outlook. This found the most striking expression in his claim that Talbot had failed to appreciate the substantial contribution of religion, mysticism and magic to the development of science.

...There is however another influence—one that was little known until recent scholarship—I mean the influence of the Hermetic tradition and magical ideas. The story of the birth of 17<sup>th</sup> century science is incomplete without a discussion of the mystical sources that animated the great pioneers. In the case of Bruno, an excellent book that discusses the influence of the Hermetic tradition on the new science are [sic] “Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition” by Frances Yates.

Steiner’s attraction to the work of Yates was significant, as she had been in the forefront of efforts to discredit interpretations of the scientific revolution that emphasized the incompatibility of scientific and religious world views. Frances Yates (1899-1981) devoted decades of scholarship to demonstrating that religion and the belief in occult forces provided a major impulse for the emergence of scientific thought. Intent on muting the materialist tone of Bruno’s work, Yates’ thesis argued that his interest in the scientific discoveries of his own time was contingent upon the magical philosophy of an earlier era. His allegiance to Copernicus, she maintained, was religious rather than scientific in its origins. Bruno’s execution, therefore, was to be understood not as the response of the Inquisition to a philosophical and scientific challenge, but rather to a form of religious heresy connected to Bruno’s involvement with hermeticism.<sup>48</sup> Yates wrote in a compelling style, and significantly influenced, especially in the United States and Britain, Bruno scholarship. But her work has been subjected to trenchant criticism.<sup>49</sup>

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48 Yates argued:

... Bruno’s philosophy cannot be separated from his religion. It *was* his religion, the “religion of the world”, which he saw in this expanded form of the infinite universe and the innumerable worlds as an expanded gnosis, a new revelation of the divinity from the “vestiges”. Copernicanism was a symbol of the new revelation, which was to mean a return to the natural religion of the Egyptians, and its magic, within a framework which he so strangely supposed could be a Catholic framework.

Thus, the legend that Bruno was persecuted as a philosophical thinker, was burned for his daring views on innumerable worlds or on the movement of the earth, can no longer stand. ... Completely involved as he was in Hermeticism, Bruno could not conceive of a philosophy of nature, of number, of geometry, of a diagram, without infusing into these divine meaning. He is thus really the last person in the world to take as a representative of a philosophy divorced from divinity (*Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* [London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1964], pp. 355-56).

49 Yates’ explanation of the reasons for Bruno’s execution has been refuted by Professor Maurice A. Finocchiaro, who, based on a careful analysis of Bruno’s trial, states flatly that “Yates’s interpretation is not correct...” Placing his account of Bruno’s trial in “the context of a larger issue,” Finocchiaro writes: “If the trial of Galileo epitomizes the conflict between science and religion, then the trial of Bruno may be said to epitomize the clash between philosophy and religion” (“Philosophy versus Religion and Science versus Religion,” by Maurice A. Finocchiaro, in *Giordano Bruno*, edited by Hillary Gatti (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2002), p. 54).

A devastating appraisal of Yates’ scholarship is to be found in “Frances Yates and the Writing of History,” by Brian Vickers, in *The Journal of Modern History* (vol. 51, no. 2, June 1979, pp. 287-316). Vickers, a noted historian of science, focuses on Yates’ study of *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment*, which—along the lines of her earlier work on Bruno—glorifies Renaissance occultism as a vast intellectual movement that inspired Bacon, Descartes, Kepler and Newton. Vickers notes that

... the reader who approaches her [Yates’] book as a serious historical study will be bothered by the sheer amount of speculation in it, by the uncritical ways in which the Rosicrucian movement is defined, and by the indiscriminate claims for its influence. In many places argument disappears altogether. Some of the recurrent words are ‘if,’ ‘may,’ ‘perhaps,’ ‘would have,’ ‘surely,’ ‘must have,’ a sequence

Steiner also embraced an interpretation of the work of Isaac Newton that placed central emphasis on his interest in alchemy.

Bruno's interest in magic and alchemy has been known for centuries, although historians downplayed them. In the case of Newton, little of his interest in the occult, magic and other works were known until fairly recently. Betty Jo Dobbs,<sup>50</sup> in *The Janus Faces of Genius* and other works has done much to transform our understanding of Newton. It turns out that Newton spent more time on alchemical experiments than on physics and his physical science was conceived by him as an expression of his mystical religious beliefs. Dobbs and the historian you [Talbot] mentioned, I. Bernard Cohen, have had an ongoing dispute as to

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which often culminates in the positive form 'was.' [pp. 301-02]

Vickers points out that there are many passages in which Yates leaves readers with the impression that she herself accepts the claims and finding of the Renaissance occultists of whom she writes:

It does seem, indeed, that Yates has suppressed her critical faculties. Admittedly she is dealing with the occult, and not every aspect of that activity is susceptible to rational explanation. But even after making such allowances there are passages in which the entire absence of any skepticism about the occult's methods and aims must raise the reader's concern that on this level, too, normal processes of evaluating evidence have been temporarily suspended

After a detailed debunking of Yates' study of *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment*—and especially her claim that Bacon's *New Atlantis* is a Rosicrucian work—Professor Vickers offered an extraordinarily harsh evaluation of her intellectual legacy:

The final large issue, on which I can only report here, is Yates's wish to rewrite the history of science in this period. In *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (London, 1964), she claimed that the so-called magus of the Renaissance 'Hermetic-Cabalist tradition,' with his essentially 'religious attitudes' actually 'operated' on the world, thus creating a wholly new 'turning towards the world,' which fundamentally affected science. Her arguments had been severely questioned by Charles Trinkaus and Mary Hesse before her latest book appeared, and Yates must know of both scholars, who are among the most distinguished in their fields. Now, however, she writes that her 'belief' is 'indeed now largely accepted by historians of thought...' (p. 226) She reverts to this thesis throughout the present book with increased polemical energy. She speaks slightly of the 'so-called scientific revolution' (pp. xi, 220) and suggests that the new science emerged out of magic, of which Rosicrucianism is a peculiarly important case—indeed a crucial phase, one of 'the vital steps by which the European mind moved out of the Renaissance into the seventeenth century' (p. 117); she subsequently discovers 'a chain of tradition leading from the Rosicrucian movement to the antecedents of the Royal Society' (p. 83).

There would seem to be little, if any, basis for such claims. Yates proposed rewriting of Renaissance history is an edifice built not on rock nor on sand but on air. [pp. 315-16]

In conclusion, Vickers warned that "if the methodology of [*The Rosicrucian Enlightenment*] came to be accepted or used as models for imitation the results could be disastrous (p. 316).

Unfortunately, Vickers worst fears have been realized. Though Yates' scholarship preceded the era of postmodernism, the anti-materialist orientation of her theses and the "excitement" generated by her rediscovery of previously neglected "communities" and "nonprivileged discourses" (occultism, magic) resonated with academics working in the 1980s and 1990s, who viewed the traditional conception of "scientific method" as the product of a specific cultural environment and lacking any universal validity. Postmodernist scholarship entailed a drastic revision of supposedly false claims to objectivity. As a result of the new approach, according to one of its practitioners

The historiography of English science during the past twenty years has been heavily influenced by the need to explicate discourses. First seen as speech-acts, scientific texts were related to the contexts of their formulators, as well as to other discourses, religious, political, even magical. With this contextualization of science came the historicizing of the scientist, the discovery of interests, values, and ideology at work in minds once presumed to be devoid of such impulses. The next move, perhaps, inevitably, saw historians and sociologists of science taking the posture of philosophical relativists. *The issue of whether or not the science may have been correct was bracketed*; the focus shifted to the free play of discourses with power and interests, that is, social reality, seen as determining the success of competing scientific paradigms. ("Constructing, Deconstructing, and Reconstructing the History of Science," by Margaret C. Jacob, *The Journal of British Studies*, vol. 36, no. 4 [Oct. 1997], p. 459). [emphasis added]

The author of the above-cited passage, Margaret C. Jacobs, is a disciple of Yates, praising her depiction of Bruno as a "somewhat crazed disciple of a new Copernican religiosity..." Jacobs credits Yates with having demonstrated the essential inspirational role of religion in the development of scientific thought. "Beginning in the 1960s with the work of Frances Yates," she writes, "historians of early modern Europe have rescued many of its leading natural philosophers from the rationalist account of their motives and interests" ("Thinking Unfashionable Thoughts, Asking Unfashionable Questions," *The American Historical Review*, vol. 195, no. 2 [April 2000], p. 497).

50 The late Betty Jo Dobbs coauthored *Newton and the Culture of Newtonianism* with Margaret C. Jacobs, cited in footnote 39.

whether Newton's alchemical interest was relevant to his scientific endeavors. It seems to me that a dispute such as this can only be adjudicated on the basis of the historical evidence and not on some a priori notion of how Newtonian science must have developed. While I do not presume to pass judgment on this ongoing dispute, I think that Dobbs theory is intriguing and should not be dismissed out of hand.

Again, as with his previous fascination with Yates, one could not but wonder why Steiner would find Dobbs' theory so "intriguing." One reviewer, by no means hostile to her work, stated that "The overall result of Dobbs' endeavor is that she now presents a religious interpretation of Newton's alchemy embedded in a religious interpretation of his science at large."<sup>51</sup> Why did this reinterpretation strike a chord with Steiner? In the dispute between Dobbs and I. Bernard Cohen, there is really no question as to where Steiner's sympathies lie. For a man who is so utterly contemptuous of any dependence of theory upon empirical verification, it is curious that Steiner should inform Talbot that the question of the role of alchemy in the development of Newtonian physics "can only be adjudicated on the basis of the historical evidence and not on some a priori notion of how Newtonian science must have developed." As a matter of fact, Steiner ignores the historical evidence. But beyond that, the problem of the relation of religion to science is precisely the sort of question that requires a philosophically informed insight into the underlying issues. The anti-rationalist implications of the efforts (anticipated by Yates) to relativize the relation between pre-Enlightenment magical traditions and science have been well understood by commentators on the debate over hermetics and alchemy.<sup>52</sup>

Moreover, in considering the question of the relation of alchemy to science, the details of Newton's personal interest in alchemy, not to mention his ardent belief in God, are of decidedly secondary importance. Newton was a man of his time, as Bruno was of his. They, as individuals, could not simply step outside the world in which they lived. Concepts and modes of thought inherited from the past exerted a residual influence upon even the greatest minds of their ages. But in the final analysis, as the development of chemistry required its liberation from alchemy, the elaboration of science and its appropriate methodology demanded a break with a religious worldview. Notwithstanding the contradictions in the intellectual development of one or another scientist, the fundamental and irreconcilable antagonism between science and religion asserted itself—often partially and ambiguously in individuals, but completely and irreconcilably in the historical process as a whole.<sup>53</sup>

It may seem odd that the role of hermeticism in the Inquisition's execution of Bruno and that of alchemy in the physics of Newton should emerge as significant issues. But the attention being given here to Steiner's approach to the history of science is justified to the extent that it sheds significant light on the evolution of his own theoretical and political outlook. In tracing the progression, or retrogression, of his intellectual conceptions, we are doing

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51 Review by William Newman, *Isis*, vol. 84, no. 3, (Sept., 1993), p. 578.

52 In a review of this debate, Professor H. Floris Cohen takes note of concerns that the Yates thesis had led to a view of science "as just one among a variety of possible belief systems, each with its own standards of rationality or lack thereof" (*The Scientific Revolution: A Historiographical Inquiry* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994], p. 180).

53 Newton's major contributions to science were in the fields of mechanics, optics and mathematics, not chemistry, which, even as compared to physics, was still in a primitive state at the time. Chemistry was still in the process of being distinguished from alchemy, which, whatever its mystical foundations, had accumulated various empirical facts about chemical processes. It would be more relevant to examine to what extent Newton's religious views contributed to his failure to make any significant contribution to the development of chemistry as a science. His religious outlook did color aspects of his work on physics--the best-known example being his postulation of God as the prime mover of the universe. All that demonstrates, however, is that Newton was a man of his times. The further development of physics eliminated all of these religious embellishments.

what Steiner should have done himself before lashing out wildly against the International Committee. Steiner's attraction to the arguments of Dobbs and Yates—which endowed religion and mysticism with a progressive role and legitimized a reading of history that assigned to the irrational a significant place in the history of science—indicated that he was rapidly shedding whatever remained of his previous commitment to a materialist understanding of the development of history and consciousness. There was clearly a connection between his newfound regard for the contribution of hermeticism and alchemy to the development of science and his emerging susceptibility to the argument that utopian myths can play a decisive role in the development of socialist consciousness. In both cases, there is a retreat from science, from objectivity, from rationality, from materialism and from Marxism.<sup>54</sup>

In this context, it is especially notable that Steiner, in his discussion of the origins of modern science, ignored Engels' insistence that the decisive factor in the development of science in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries was not the free development of thought—to say nothing of its more mystical and occult forms—but rather the growth of the forces of production.<sup>55</sup> The productive and economic foundation of the emergence of science was explicitly rejected by Yates, who presented a frankly idealist explanation of this process.<sup>56</sup>

Steiner's neglect of Engels' essential text was not a mere oversight. His attraction to Yates' idealist thesis reflected the further distancing of his own conceptions from the materialist outlook upheld by Engels. In a later section of his reply to Talbot, Steiner repeated the criticism of Engels that he had made in 1999.

I have always thought that Engels' high level summaries should be used with caution. As a summary at a very high level for a popular presentation, Engels' formulation may prove useful. The problem however has been that Engels' statements, through no fault of his, have been misused, particularly by the Stalinists,

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54 Significantly, an important aspect of Yates' interpretation of the Scientific Revolution was that it meant “not only an immense increase in man's knowledge and powers but that something has got lost in the process as well. And this ‘something’ has got to do with an insight into the soul of man; into its intricate layers on both the conscious and the subconscious levels; into its capacities for good and evil; into the secret of its creative powers revealed, but at the same time obscured or downright ignored, by the advent of early modern science itself” (Ibid, p. 181). This critique of science bears a definite resemblance to arguments advanced by Horkheimer and Adorno in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, which traces the crisis of modern society back to the science-based conception of nature as an object to be dominated. As we shall later see, Steiner's views are based entirely on the Horkheimer/Adorno critique.

55 On this subject, Engels wrote:

If, after the dark night of the Middle Ages was over, the sciences suddenly arose anew with undreamt-of force, developing at a miraculous rate, once again we owe this miracle to production. In the first place, following the crusades, industry developed enormously and brought to light a quantity of new mechanical (weaving, clockmaking, milling), chemical (dyeing, metallurgy, alcohol) and physical (spectacles) facts, and this not only gave enormous material for observation, but also itself provided quite another means for experimenting than previously existed, and allowed the construction of *new* instruments; it can be said that really systematic experimental science now became possible for the first time. Second, the whole of West and Middle Europe, including Poland, now developed in a connected fashion, even though Italy was still at the head owing to its old-inherited civilization. Thirdly, geographical discoveries—made purely for the sake of grain and, therefore, in the last resort, of production—opened up an infinite and hitherto inaccessible amount of material of a meteorological, zoological, botanical, and physiological (human) bearing. Fourthly, there was the *printing press* (*Marx Engels Collected Works*, Volume 25 [New York: International Publishers, 1987], p. 466).

56 Yates wrote:

... It is a movement of the will which really originates an intellectual movement. A new centre of interest arises, surrounded by an emotional excitement; the mind turns with the will has directed it, and new attitudes, new discoveries follow. Behind the emergence of modern science there was a direction of the will towards the world, its marvels, and mysterious workings, a new longing and determination to understand those workings and to operate with them. [*Giordano Bruno*, p. 448]

Nothing that is presented in the above paragraph contributes to an understanding of the real historical, socioeconomic processes that prepared the ground for the revolution in science.

to paint a picture of the history of philosophy that is completely false. The entire history of philosophy is examined as if the sole question at issue has been that of idealism vs. materialism. This first of all ignores the fact that there have been many other critical questions in dispute in the history of philosophy and they are not reducible to the materialism vs. idealism paradigm.

This is a distortion of the Marxist conception of the development of philosophy. No Marxist has claimed that the relationship between materialism and idealism is the “sole question at issue” in the history of philosophy. That would obviously be a false statement. Engels maintained that it was the *basic* question, which is a very different matter. This conclusion was arrived at on the basis of a study of the history of philosophy. Over the past 2500 years philosophers have dealt with a wide range of questions, including, as Steiner pointed out, the relation of the “one and the many” and that of free will versus determinism. Let us consider another issue from a more contemporary period. In his *Myth of Sisyphus*, the existential philosopher Albert Camus claimed that the only philosophical problem that deserves the attention of modern man is that of suicide, that is, whether life is worth living. For existentialism, this problem transcended the issue of the relationship of being and consciousness. However, the examination of this and other critical issues, including those relating to morality and ethics, leads inexorably, at the most fundamental level of analysis, to answers of either a materialist or idealist character.

Defending his rejection of Engels’ definition of the basic question of philosophy, Steiner argued that Marxism is a “qualitatively heterogeneous” philosophy, combining within itself both materialist and idealist tendencies.

...Ultimately, the development of philosophy, allied with the sciences, does lead to a fundamentally materialist outlook, but one that contains all the richness, of all previous philosophy, both idealist and materialist and various shades in between. If, as Hegel said, Truth is the Whole, then we can draw no other conclusion.

This assessment of the history of philosophy is essentially anti-Marxist. It is one thing to explain, with scrupulous attention to the historical context, the contribution made by certain forms of idealist philosophy—in particular the school of classical German idealism—to the development of Marxism, as Engels did in his *Ludwig Feuerbach*. It is quite another to suggest, as Steiner does here, that Marxism is a heterogeneous world outlook, combining in some indistinct manner idealism and materialism. The phrase he employs—“contains all the richness, of all previous philosophy, both idealist and materialist *and various shades in between*” [Skepticism? Agnosticism?]—is fatuous jargon which muddies, if not obliterates, the distinction between materialism and idealism.<sup>57</sup>

Steiner then proceeded to shift away substantially from the emphasis he had placed in earlier documents on the struggle against postmodernism. Replying to Talbot’s criticism that he [Steiner] was adapting to postmodernism, Steiner declared:

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<sup>57</sup> Lenin’s *Philosophical Notebooks* abounds with scathing commentaries on this sort of imprecision, as for example in his “Notes on Shulyatikov’s Book.” Lenin is merciless in his response to Shulyatikov’s confused formulations, especially in passages dealing with the relationship of materialism and idealism. “A cheap explanation with no analysis of the substance!” is a characteristic comment. [*Collected Works*, vol. 38 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1972), p. 500] And “Go ahead, lump everything together! Idealism as well as skepticism, everything ‘corresponds’ to manufacture! Comrade Shulyatikov is simple, very simple.” [*Ibid.*, p. 494.] Other negative comments include “phrase-mongering” and, most frequently, “what nonsense!”

If you are maintaining that postmodernism today represents a bigger threat than empiricism and positivism, then I think you are wrong both factually and historically.

Ironically, for all his ritualistic denunciations of empiricism, Steiner's belittling of the intellectual problem posed by postmodernism was based on the most crudely empirical and pragmatic considerations. Relying on his own rough and ready calculations, Steiner argued that empiricists outnumbered postmodernists.

A survey of the situation on the universities today may help us get a handle on current intellectual trends. Particularly in North America and Britain, the stranglehold of analytic philosophy and positivism on philosophy departments remains firmly in place. It is true that the postmodernists have taken over some literature departments along with a proliferation of ethnic studies, cultural studies and other disciplines rooted in cultural relativism. And postmodernists do make a token presence in some philosophy and sociology departments. But the bulk of the humanities studies are firmly in the camp of positivism and empiricism.

The importance of philosophical trends cannot be correctly assessed on the basis of this sort of scorekeeping. Whether empiricists or postmodernists occupy more university chairs is not the decisive question. Far more significant is the objective content of postmodern thought—that is, the response it gives to essential philosophical problems—and its relationship to critical issues of the contemporary epoch. Eclectically drawing upon various retrograde trends in bourgeois thought, including pragmatism, postmodernism has arisen largely as an attempt to destroy Marxism by striking at its most essential propositions—above all, the objectivity of cognition and the concept of objective truth. Postmodernism goes beyond traditional skepticism in that it not only questions and denies the possibility of attaining truth; postmodernist thought denounces and subjects to ridicule all intellectual projects that aspire to objective truth. On this basis it has sought with some success to inculcate within the intellectual environment an outlook of boundless cynicism and demoralization.<sup>58</sup> The involvement of so many *ex-radicals* (including Stalinists and former Trotskyists) in this reactionary intellectual enterprise has contributed to its destructive impact, as postmodernism is broadly identified as a variety of left and even neo-Marxist thought.

## **X. Steiner's Return to the Frankfurt School and the "New Left"**

It is clear that by this point, in 2002, Steiner had more or less formulated in his own mind the conceptions upon which he would launch his attack on the International Committee. The shift that he had made in his philosophical positions was accompanied by the development of a new political agenda—or, to be somewhat more precise, the readoption of the old one that he had rejected upon joining the Trotskyist movement in 1970. Having decisively "liberated" himself intellectually from whatever had previously remained of his commitment to the theoretical heritage of Marxism, Steiner began retracing the steps of his own intellectual biography. The logic of this movement backwards found expression in his embrace of utopianism, his rediscovery of Marcuse and other denizens of the Frankfurt school, and the beginning of his political partnership with Frank Brenner.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Hegel observed that philosophies that belittle the concept of truth generally arise in periods of intellectual decadence and corruption.

<sup>59</sup> Brenner was a member of the Workers League between 1972 and 1979. After Goldstein's departure from the party in March 1977, Brenner became editor of the *Bulletin*. In January 1979, he was asked to relocate to Detroit. He spent approximately one week in the city, and then left abruptly. He offered no explanation for his abandonment of the party as he severed all relations with the Workers League. I did not see Brenner again for

In *Marxism, History & Socialist Consciousness* I have dealt at length with the treatment of utopianism in the writings of Steiner/Brenner.<sup>60</sup> However, in order to complete this review of Steiner's political evolution, it is necessary to examine his opening intervention in the discussion of this issue. In 2002, there had been an exchange of correspondence between Nick Beams, the national secretary of the Socialist Equality Party in Australia, and Brenner on the question of utopianism. Steiner wrote to Steve Long, a leading member of the Partei für Soziale Gleichheit (PSG) in Germany, in support of Brenner's espousal of utopianism. Long replied to Steiner on December 30, 2002, defending Beams' distinction, rooted in the theoretical traditions of Marxism, between utopianism and scientific socialism.

Steiner attended the national conference organized by the Socialist Equality Party on March 30, 2003 in opposition to the war in Iraq and Afghanistan. At that meeting, he spoke in support of the perspective that I had presented in my opening report and gave no indication that he disagreed with the policies and activities of the SEP.<sup>61</sup> Two months later, on May 28, 2003, Steiner sent a lengthy letter to Long, which made it all too clear that the former was no longer working within anything remotely identifiable with a Marxist theoretical and intellectual tradition.

The central theme of Steiner's argument was that the emergence of Marxism represented a continuation of, rather than a break with, utopian socialism. In a manner quite similar to his previous effort to stress the continuity between mystical speculation and science, Steiner now presented Marxism as the culmination and continuation of utopian thinking. Steiner's narrative arbitrarily combined distinct and opposed social movements, political tendencies and theoretical conceptions.

...Thus from 1830 till 1848 you get a period of tremendous intellectual and political turmoil without which neither the rise of Chartism in England, Utopian communities in the U.S., the left Hegelians in Germany and the radical working class movement in France would have been possible. *All this comes to a head with the 1848 revolution and the Communist Manifesto which can be understood as the Aufhebung of the previous Utopian movements and much else...* [emphasis added]

Marxism is ultimately the heir to this history of revolutionary struggle in which what has been called utopian thought played an absolutely critical role. From this history alone it should become apparent that utopianism cannot be discarded as a thing of the past which no longer has any relevance for us. *If Marxism is the realization and development of utopianism then it is clear that what is living in utopianism is of the highest relevance to the Marxist movement.* [emphasis added]

This altogether false presentation of history consists of little more than rhetorical flourishes that lack any genuine factual, let alone theoretical, substance. In what was becoming Steiner's favorite literary device, the Hegelian term "Aufheben" was invoked to bestow upon his arguments a sham philosophical sophistication. As long as no one is paying too close attention, almost anything can be presented as the "Aufheben" of anything else. And then, there is the assertion that "If Marxism is the realization and development of utopianism then it is clear that..." But the

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nearly 20 years. In 1996 we met very briefly in Toronto. That was my last and only discussion with him. He did not express any interest in applying for membership in the Socialist Equality Party. He contributed several articles to the *World Socialist Web Site*.

<sup>60</sup> See pages 69-114.

<sup>61</sup> However, in MWHH, Steiner/Brenner denounce in the most vitriolic terms the policies and activities of the SEP and ICFI in relation to the war.

problem with this argument is that the premise is false: Marxism is not “the realization and development of utopianism,” but, rather, its theoretical, historical and political negation.<sup>62</sup>

For Steiner, the espousal of utopianism provided a path for his re-entry—more than three decades after leaving the New School—into the intellectual milieu of the Frankfurt School. Steve Long, in his December 2002 letter, had noted that Russell Jacoby—a follower of the Frankfurt School whose book, *The End of Utopia*, had been highly praised by Steiner—was promoting a rebirth of utopianism in the interest of liberalism. Steiner replied, “Does this mean that we as Marxists are therefore obliged to ignore everything he writes beyond page 8 where he announces his intention of reviving a form of radical liberalism?”

Long had also pointed out that Jacoby’s utopian project had drawn heavily on Herbert Marcuse’s *Eros and Civilization*. Steiner waved this and other criticism of Marcuse and the Frankfurt School aside:

... Is positive reference to *Eros and Civilization* proof of some ideological crime? You [Steve Long] then provide a sketchy history of the Frankfurt School seeking to prove that its adherents were political opportunists who were guilty of disorienting the student movements of the 1960s. Your history is however an eclectic combination of some historical truths combined with a series of oversimplifications. It is a jumble that confuses more than it illuminates. Yes, both Adorno and Marcuse were political opportunists who went along with the Moscow trials in the name of a “united front” against fascism in the 1930s. Does this mean that they had nothing relevant to say to us afterwards?

Steiner went on to praise *Eros and Civilization* as

a work infused with the utopian spirit. It is an attempt to complement Marxism with a radical critique of civilization derived from Freud that at the same time rejects the conservative conclusions drawn by its author. It was precisely the optimistic conclusions about the possibility for a radical transformation of society that made the book so popular. It became something of a founding document for the New Left movement in the 1960s. I don’t propose a[n] analysis of this book now, but it is clearly not a work that should be dismissed out of hand.

As for Marcuse himself, Steiner offered an apologetic defense of his output. He chided Long:

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62 The *Communist Manifesto*, to which Steiner so casually referred, stressed the distinction between the socialism it espoused and utopianism: The significance of Critical-Utopian Socialism and Communism bears an inverse relation to historical development. In proportion as the modern class struggle develops and takes definite shape, this fantastic standing apart from the contest, these fantastic attacks on it, lose all practical value and all theoretical justification. Therefore, although the originators of these systems were, in many respects, revolutionary, their disciples have, in every case, formed mere reactionary sects. They hold fast by the original views of their masters, in opposition to the progressive historical development of the proletariat. They, therefore, endeavor, and that consistently, to deaden the class struggle and to reconcile the class antagonisms. They still dream of experimental realization of their social Utopias, of founding isolated “phalansteres”, of establishing “Home Colonies”, or setting up a “Little Icaria” duodecimo editions of the New Jerusalem — and to realize all these castles in the air, they are compelled to appeal to the feelings and purses of the bourgeois. By degrees, they sink into the category of the reactionary [or] conservative Socialists depicted above, differing from these only by more systematic pedantry, and by their fanatical and superstitious belief in the miraculous effects of their social science (*Marx-Engels Collected Works*, Volume 6 [New York: International Publishers, 1976], p. 516).

In talking about the work of Marcuse, it is particularly important to distinguish which period of his work you are referencing. There is a difference between Marcuse in *Reason and Revolution* with Marcuse in *Eros and Civilization* with Marcuse in *One Dimensional Man*. By the time he wrote *One Dimensional Man*, Marcuse had completely gone over to the perspective that the culture industry had precluded all normal attempts at oppositional political practice and that the objective basis for revolutionary transformation were all but irrelevant given the new mechanisms of cooptation developed in advanced consumer society. This assessment was used to justify a turn away from the working class—now hopelessly co-opted—and with it toward a politics of cultural subversion carried out by students and marginalized minorities. This political turn by Marcuse provided theoretical fodder for the New Left and has been justifiably criticized as sowing the seeds for the eventual disillusionment with Left-Wing politics on the part of an entire generation.

The Marcuse of *Eros and Civilization* is not however the same as the Marcuse of *One Dimensional Man*. To be sure, there are certain seeds or anticipations of Marcuse's position in *One Dimensional Man* in this earlier work (written in the mid 1950's in McCarthyite America). Marcuse himself points to these anticipations in a Preface that he wrote for a new edition of the book in the 1960s. But by the time he wrote the Preface Marcuse had completely gone over to the politics he espoused in *One Dimensional Man*. There is however a positive side to *Eros and Civilization*. There is in that work an exploration of a long neglected subject—the relationship of modes of sexual repression in its social form to the ability of the ruling class to maintain its hegemony. There is nothing in the main argument of *Eros and Civilization* that requires that we abandon the notion of the working class as an agent of revolutionary transformation. Nor are we required to abandon the political struggle in favor of a vaguely defined cultural practice. Marcuse does insist however that a political struggle that does not address fundamental cultural and psychological issues is ultimately sterile. He essentially makes the same point that Wilhelm Reich made in his *Mass Psychology of Fascism*, that if the Marxist movement does not find a way to channel repressed libidinal drives in a progressive direction, then fascism will utilize those same drives to bring us into an age of barbarism. I could say a great deal more on this subject but I think I have made my point. In discussing a complex thinker such as Marcuse, it is not very helpful to truncate his thought in the manner that you have.

I have allowed Steiner to speak for himself at length. Notwithstanding Steiner's claim to the contrary, the rejection of the revolutionary role of the working class is embedded in the theoretical conceptions espoused by Marcuse over many decades. Steiner's apology for Marcuse could only have been written by a person who no longer considered himself to be working within the theoretical and political traditions of the Fourth International.

## **XI. Steiner's New Political Relations**

At about the same time, Steiner was entering into new political relations of which he has made no mention in any of his attacks on the ICFI. It obviously has been his intention to conceal his present political associations from those who are reading his documents. Steiner became a lecturer on philosophy at The New School for Pluralistic Anti-Capitalist Education, also known as The New SPACE. In its literature, the New SPACE describes itself as "Resolutely anti-authoritarian and non-sectarian," bringing together "anarchists, humanist Marxists, and others." It is, to be more precise, a conglomeration of middle-class radical tendencies that are hostile to Trotskyism. Among its

“Teachers, Speakers and Organizers” are individuals closely associated with the Frankfurt School, such as Kevin Anderson (whose writing is highly praised by Steiner), Stanley Aronowitz, Eric Bronner and Bertell Ollman. The faculty also includes individuals active in the Green Party and other brands of petty-bourgeois protest politics.

In his own curriculum vitae, posted on the web site of New SPACE, Steiner makes no reference to his past associations with the Trotskyist movement. The only political involvement that he mentions in a brief biography is his participation in a 1970 student takeover of the New School. Though he cites “The Case of Martin Heidegger” as one of his published works, Steiner does not state that it appeared in the *World Socialist Web Site*. How is this to be explained? There is no issue of personal or political security involved. Rather, association with Trotskyism and orthodox Marxism is not politically and intellectually respectable in these circles. Steiner acknowledged in his 1999 application letter that he “was part of a middle class New York culture.” He remains part of that cynical and self-absorbed culture to this day, and it is this fact, above all, that imparts to his attack on the International Committee such a hypocritical and duplicitous character.<sup>63</sup>

This account has reviewed in detail the different stages of Steiner’s evolution. It is not the International Committee, but, rather, Alex Steiner, who has radically shifted his position. In bringing this analysis of Steiner’s intellectual biography to a close, it is necessary to consider the objective context within which he evolved into an open and embittered enemy of the International Committee and, as is evident, of me personally.

Steiner’s entire political career has been marked by a high degree of subjective volatility and instability—a characteristic not uncommon among radical intellectuals. Sudden shifts in the political situation tend to exacerbate his subjective weaknesses, as he adapts himself to the outlook of the New York petty-bourgeois milieu within which he has lived his entire adult life. It is not unreasonable to suspect that the events of 9/11 and their aftermath played a major role in shattering Steiner’s political equilibrium. In the maelstrom of political confusion generated by the destruction of the World Trade Center, and exploited for reactionary purposes by the government and media, Steiner’s susceptibility to personal and political demoralization—which we had witnessed in the 1970s—came into play once again.

This is a social, and not an individual phenomenon. In the aftermath of 9/11 broad sections of the academic

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<sup>63</sup> It is not possible in this space to undertake an analysis of various lecture series that Steiner has given at The New SPACE. He has given courses on Hegel’s *Logic*, “Reason in History,” and Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Mind*. Steiner’s lectures are posted on the Internet. They are, in my view, very poor. Steiner’s analysis of Hegel and, for that matter, Marx has nothing in common with a Marxist exposition. The most striking feature of the lectures is that no one listening to them would suspect Steiner of being a materialist. He emphatically disassociates himself from the well-known Marxist critique of Hegel’s idealism. In a lecture on “Reason in History,” Steiner tells his students: “In order to get whatever we can get from this course, it would be beneficial to forget everything you know about Hegel, as well as what you know about Marx. The understanding of Hegel, and to a great degree Marx as well, has been mitigated through various interpretations which have little to do with what Hegel’s project or Marx’s project was about.” The interpretation that he is criticizing is that which asserts that Marx’s reworking of the Hegelian dialectic required a break from idealism. He tells his students: “I don’t want to hear that Marx set Hegel on his head, or on his feet.” Later, in the same lecture series, Steiner states: “I think the notions of idealism and materialism have to be rethought, after Marx.” In Steiner’s first lecture on Hegel’s *Logic*, he presents his most explicit disavowal of the Marxist approach to the study of Hegel. He states:

Within the Marxist tradition we have an interpretation that goes something like this: “Well, Hegel was a conservative thinker, but we can save something of what he did, namely, his method, whatever that means. I am not teaching Hegel that way.” By the way, I think that’s a very bad interpretation. It wasn’t Marx’s either.

This deliberate and extreme vulgarization of the Marxist critique of Hegelianism could serve only to prejudice his students against materialism.

community lost their political and intellectual equilibrium. Their disorientation was concisely expressed by Tom Rockmore, an academic who specializes in the field of German idealist philosophy. He wrote:

All of our ready conceptual assurances are confounded by 9/11. The assumption that we have captured the world in our theories has been stalemated by the world itself. The world has changed in ways no one could have foreseen. We cannot diagnose the events of 9/11 by any simple application of the usual tools. They defy our sense of legible order, and we cannot say that our categories will adjust again.<sup>64</sup>

Trotsky was all too familiar with this sort of prostration among radical intellectuals. “When thrown against great events,” he wrote in 1939, “they are easily lost and relapse again into petty-bourgeois ways of thinking.”<sup>65</sup> This is the fate that has befallen Alex Steiner.

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<sup>64</sup> Rockwell, it should be noted, holds positions on the history of Marxism that are very similar to Steiner’s, especially on the problem of the “basic question.” He insists that Marx was an idealist, and that materialist Marxism was largely an invention of Engels. In May 2003, I subjected Professor Rockwell’s views to severe criticism. (See <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2006/may2006/rock-m02.shtml>). Steiner comes to Rockmore’s defense in MWHH.

<sup>65</sup> *In Defense of Marxism* (London: New Park, 1971, p. 59).