

April 11, 1958

Dear Joseph Buttinger:

The two most exciting things in *THE SMALLER DRAGON* were, to me; 1) "The Flight Into Isolation", that is to say, your analysis of knowledge as power in the mandarin ruler, and 2) Pinpointing the moment in history when the Communist domination of Southeast Asia was suddenly, and seemingly unaccountably, stopped. Of the two, the second is, naturally, the most important since it not only sums up a past period in a new way, but puts a marker near a totally new point of departure in world history. I assume that it is this latter point which will run like a red thread through your second volume. I cannot presume your knowledge of the country, but I hope you will nevertheless allow me to wander freely through Hegel's *PHENOMENOLOGY OF MIND* for points of contact which may illuminate your problem, as it always has mine. In many respects I find that "Science of the Experience of Consciousness" more appropos in the modern world than the theory of state capitalism, or the kind of supplement to it, without which the economic analysis would be as empty as, say, the modern mandarin--the Existentialists--transformation of Absolute Knowledge into abstract "knowing" which makes them knowingly become apologists for Russian Communism just because it is the opposite of American capitalism.

The specific part of the *PHENOMENOLOGY* which illuminates our speech of state capitalism is "Spirit in Self-Estrangement--the Discipline of Culture." Contrary to many interpretations of Hegel's Absolute Knowledge as "pure thought", Hegel here argues against Bacon's dictum of "Knowledge is power" by his insistence that "This individuality moulds itself by culture to what it inherently is, and only by so doing is it then something per se and possessed of concrete existence. The extent of its culture is the measure of its reality and its power." (p. 515\*) Hegel then launches into an attack on culture and its realm of reality the type of spiritual life which "is the absolute and universal inversion of reality and thought, their entire estrangement the one from the other; it is pure culture." (541)

To me of course it is significant that in his *Critique of the Hegelian Dialectic*, Marx points precisely to the type of Noble Consciousness which Hegel deals with here as one of the great areas which point the way to a critique of the world far beyond that of Hegel. In any case, (again if you will allow me to roam freely, I'll name Mac Tse-Tung as "The noble type of consciousness then finds itself in the judgment related to state-power.... This type of mind is the heroism of Service; the virtue which sacrifices individual being to the universal, and thereby brings this into existence; this type of personality which of itself renounces possession and enjoyment, acts for the sake of the prevailing power, and in this way becomes a concrete reality." (pp. 528-7) But owing to the alienation implied in sacrifice this "noble type of consciousness" soon becomes "The haughty vassal... active in the interests of state power"

In a word, the "Good" (Power of the State) and the "Bad" (Resources or Wealth) go through what Hegel calls a "thoroughgoing discordance" (p. 535) which applies equally to the state capitalists in power and those only in mentality as, say, a Djilas: "this type of consciousness is bound up with this condition of utter disintegration, the distinction constituting

(\*All page numbers are from English, not Ger., edition.)

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its spiritual nature--that of being nobility and opposed to base-ness--falls away and both aspects are the same....in place of revolt appears arrogance." (pp.538-9)

The fact that I "mixed up" a Mao Tse Tung and a Djilas shows that I make no distinction between state-capitalism, which is a world phenomenon, whether it appears in an under-developed country or a more industrially developed one, nor between East and West. That is not because there is no difference; even Russia and America are not identical twins, though both the highest form of state capitalist development, and you certainly cannot throw various cultures, as sharply different as Vietnam and Yugoslavia, into one "category" just to make life simple for oneself. The only reason I seem to be doing what I claim not to is to stress the specificity and, if you wish, unity, of the epoch in which we live, regardless where. This way we are able to cut through to the present, and then work our way backward through yet another door:

"What is found out in this sphere is that neither the concrete realities, state-power and wealth, nor their determinate conceptions, good and bad, nor the consciousness of good and bad (the consciousness that is noble and that the consciousness that is base) possess real truth; it is found that all these moments are inverted and transmuted the one into the other, and each is the opposite of itself."

Now what is real truth? Here I believe your second volume could make the greatest contribution for what is so remarkable--and you caught it exactly--is that despite the fact that Communism (and in the person of Ho-chin-Min it had the finest representative, as contrasted say to a Khrushchev or Kadar) was stopped in its track, stopped by the most backward colonials, stopped despite the fact that the immediate oppressor--France--was as base and immediate. I believe your work could illuminate not only Vietnam but Malay and Burma where similar juggernauts were stopped, and not because it was a creation of American dollars and military might, as Formosa was. What is this totally new phenomenon? You seem to think that in part we had underestimated Ngo Dinh Diem and you surely know more than I do of the man, the people, the country and the times. But, to me, at most he would be a reflection of something very great and new in the objective movement and the subjective aspirations of the people.

Could the refugees from Communism tell? Could living with Vietnamese at this point of history reveal the new and dramatic that may be so vital to the whole 20th century struggle for the mind of man? All I know is that what is abstract in Hegel in the Absolute Idea, like "Self-determination in which alone the Idea is to hear itself speak", was made concrete in Lenin's time by the speech of the Irish Revolution which Lenin immediately embraced as not just "ordinary principle of self-determination of nations" but as the "bacilli of socialist revolution." Can we try to be that daring and bold in the philosophic approach needed in our day?

Perhaps I better stop here and see whether you are at all interested in this train of thought. I enclose meanwhile some articles on China and Djilas where this type of thinking helped me. Yours. R. M. P.

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