

REB
Nov. 22, 1960

Dear NM:

Talking out loud alone is certainly no substitute for a dialogue, but the fact that you are in Mass. and I in Mich. is permitting me the illusion that some one is listening. In any case I feel impelled once again to return to Nikolai Bukharin's "Historical Materialism." My phrase that Bukharin treated society as "dead matter" sounded slanderous and so I turned to his chapter (IV) on "Society" and there (p. 84) reads: "We encounter not only simple bodies, which at once impress us as constituting units (for ex., a sheet of paper, a cow, John Smith), but also meet with compound units, intricate quantities."

Incredible it sounds when a revolutionary Marxist speaks in one and the same breath of "a sheet of paper" and a human being as a "unit", but it is the actual, irresistible ultimate from one "whomsoever quite understood the dialectic" (to use Lenin's phrase). If society can be turned into such an abstraction, it shouldn't surprise us that science too is made into an abstraction under which human activity is subsumed. Hegel had the right word for that method: "For this reason determinism itself suffers from an indeterminateness which forces it to go on to infinity; at any point it may halt and rest satisfied, because the Object to which it has passed over is rounded in itself as a formal totality and is indifferent to determination by another." (Chapter on "Mechanism", Science of Logic, p. 362)

In place of self-activity, Bukharin, as all good determinists, looks for states of equilibrium, "laws" of development, uniformity. Indeed, his hostility to self-determination is so absolute that he conceives of 2 forms of uniformity, teleology and causality, and causality, for Bukharin, is one event, cause, being followed by another event, effect. His thinking is confined within intellectual planning or what Hegel would call "self-determination applied only externally" (Ibid, p. 391)

Having defined science as objective content in and for itself, NB can classify "bourgeois" science and "proletarian" science according to the abstract universal of usefulness or what would nowadays be called "neutrality." His choice of "proletarian" science is therefore quantitative -- it is more "far-sighted". Even as today's Soviet as well as American sciences, Bukharin's ~~science~~ keeps using categories of a lower order, particularly mathematical categories which preclude self-movement and transformation into opposite for he seems not very oppressively aware of the fact that specific contents have specific forms of movement, and man's self-activity cannot be subsumed under science, whether that is "near sighted" or "far sighted." Not only far distant but completely unapproachable with Bukharin's categories stands the young Marx: "To have one basis for life and another for science is a priori a lie."

I need not tell you that, in contrast to Bukharin's (mechanical materialism (which characterizes present-day science), dialectics sees the subject as an in-and-for itself determinateness which has appropriated objectivity: "Consequently, the activity of the end is not directed against itself, for the purpose of absorbing and assimilating a given determination: it aims rather at positing its own determination, and by transcending the determinations of the external world, at giving itself reality in the form of external actuality." (Logic, II, p. 461)

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The fact that present-day scientists and sociologists cannot shine Bukharin's shoes only further emphasizes the fact that once you identify men and things you fall into the trap of the fundamental alienation of philosophers in class ~~XXXX~~ society from the ancient Greek dichotomy of form and apeiron, philosophers and slaves to its culmination under automated capitalism where, as you put it, ontology has been transformed into technology.

Lest you consider my contrary stress on subjectivity as "pure" idealism, will you permit me to sum up what it is I have been doing since 1953 when I became so preoccupied with the Absolute Idea? The ~~essence~~ essence of those May letters was that there is a movement from practice to theory as well as from theory to practice. The reason that it stirred up such a fuss in the sectarian movements is that heretofore is that this statement of fact was made equivalent to instincts: workers, of course, had the "right instinct" and Marxism, "of course," had correctly generalized this instinct into a revolutionary theory, but...without Marxist theory the revolutionary practice would get "nowhere." Above all, it was stressed, only Marx could have seen this where Hegel's idea of practice was for the theory of knowledge "only." Therefore, to deduce this movement from practice from Hegel's Philosophy of Mind, ran the argument against me, is sheer abandonment of the real world for that of ivory towers, a return from the world of action to that of talk of "philosophers". The "philosophers", on their parts were as little inclined to bend their ears to the earth and listen for any new impulses for theory. ~~From~~ A short month after my letters were dispatched the first revolt from behind the Iron Curtain started ~~with~~ so that both the man on the street and the philosopher, not to speak of the vanguardists, had to change the question: Can man gain freedom from out of totalitarian stranglehold to Will he?

From 1953 to 1956 (Hungarian Revolution) we were confronted, on the theoretical front, by the sudden attacks of Russian Communism on Marx's humanist writings which turned out to have been used by "revisionist" Marxists as the banner under which they fought Communism not only in Western Europe but in far away Africa where, on the practical front, the most significant revolutions of our epoch were unfolding. As my ideas on the Absolute Idea got worked up in MARXISM AND FREEDOM they were quite general. It was clear I was walking gingerly not because I found myself outside any "recognized" movement but because I was dealing more with Marx's age than ours. More than a 100 years divide our age from the period when the founder of Marxism first stood Hegel right side up and very nearly dismissed Hegel's compulsion to go from the Absolute Idea in the Logic to Nature as "boredom, the yearning for a content," on the part of "the abstract thinker who, made clever by experience and enlightened beyond its truth, has decided under many false and still abstract conditions, to abandon himself and to substitute his otherness, the particular, the determined, for his self-contained being, his nothingness, his universality and his indeterminateness." (Critique of the Hegelian Dialectic) Nevertheless the young Marx cannot stop there and does follow Hegel from Nature to Mind, breaking off, however, in very short order.*

*Curiously my letter on Philosophy of Mind began with par. 385, without my having been aware that Marx had broken his MSS off at par. 384.

From then on the Marxian dialectic is the creative dialectic of the actual historic movement and not only that of thought. The continuation therefore resides in the three volumes of CAPITAL, the First International, the Civil War in France and the Critique of the Gotha Program. A rich enough heritage not to get mummified, but the objective world has its own way of magnetising so to speak a single point in thought.

Only with the collapse of that world does Lenin feel the compulsion to return to the Hegelian origins of Marxism ~~just~~ but the Russian Revolution has a world to remake and no time for abstract discussions on the Absolute Idea. (Lukacs limits Hegelianism to the single field of consciousness as organization, or the party as the proletariat's "knowing". In any case the period between 1923 and 1953 is a period of standstill in theory so that the movement from practice finds no theory to match it even as the new stage in production finds only in the workers battling automation any new points of departure for theory as for practice.

Now those who stop with "knowing", whether they are neutral partisans of a technology sans class nature or thought embodiment, or Communist adherents to partinost, (be it idealistically a la Lukacs or cynically a la Kadar), fail to grasp that both in Hegel and in Marx the question of ~~thought as a social activity~~ cognition is not an abstract question but a concrete, dialectical-empirical one of the how thought molds experience or gives action its direction. If the Whole governs the Parts even when the whole is not yet fact, then surely, whether Hegel knew it or not, the pull of the future on the present also tagged at his "system" with such overwhelming force that he could not escape it, ivory tower or no ivory tower, any more than personal capitulation to the Prussian State could compel his philosophy to stop there to genuflect instead of rising out of it and even out of religion into the absolute or the new society he as person could not envisage.

Somewhere D. H. Lawrence says of the relationship of artist to the work of art: Artists are the biggest liars and are not to be taken at face value. But that art, if it is really great art, is truth and will reveal both society and the vision of the artist he buries in his explanatory lies. It is even truer of philosophers in general and Hegel in particular. Subjectivity as objectivity absorbed is not for the philosophers, but for the masses and it is they who are writing the new page of history which is at the same time a new stage in cognition. Even as every previous great step in philosophic cognition was made only when a new leap to freedom became possible, so presently the new struggles for freedom the world over will certainly shake the intellectuals out of the stupors so that they too can create freely a new "category." While I may not be waiting breathlessly for these ideologists, I am for the "developing subject" that is the "negative factor." You can't really mean that you are "giving up" the masses, can you?

Yours,

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