

May 24, 1968

To the RES (Copy to NES)  
Dear Colleagues:

This is my last letter from Algonac. Next week I return to Detroit and from then until the convention even the preliminary discussions we will be having at the RES will have so formal an air that I thought it best to take advantage of this day to write informally of some of the theoretical and organizational questions that we will have to think about in working out our perspectives.

These are times of great stress and it is as well, for the time being, that they remain only in the background. I note, for example, that "Resurrection City" has been rained out today, the eve of Ray F.'s departure for D.C. But, of course, all eyes are on France. With the mass media trying to convey the impression that the Communists are behind the upheaval there, their counter-revolutionary role is well hidden. Yet it is the Communists who made it their business to see that the workers did not accept the student offer to act jointly. It is the Communists who saw to it that the workers accepted a "dialogue" (De Gaulle is really some one to have a dialogue with!) about their grievances. And, no doubt, they will bring in sufficient divisions so that the anti-De Gaulle unity will now be broken up between those who want to "Vote No" rather than act No. Nothing scares the Communists more than spontaneous revolutionary actions and power in the streets. And nothing pleases De Gaulle more than the role of "savior". (What, pray, was he saving France from "30 years ago" unless it was that he was trying to overthrow the Popular Front Government and the workers' occupation of the factories then by the abortive fascist coup to which he was very close indeed? Or has he, by fiat, moved up by a year the outbreak of World War II?) And now he will have everyone wait for June when he will offer such illusory gains as "profit sharing" and "common interests" in university administration to "protect France from the adventures and usurpations of the most hateful nature and most ruinous." The situation is fluid enough still and what will happen there next month will change not only France but the world, including the three critical events in this country: the black revolt, the anti-Vietnam war movement, and the student rebellion. In order the better to understand this and work out all the ramifications, I propose, ~~instead~~ to get away from them all, and talk, instead, of seemingly abstract questions.

In our philosophy classes this year we did try practicing dialectics, but, unfortunately, it was only "theoretically" whereas what is crucial is to practice dialectics politically and organizationally. Thus, some have talked too much from the top of their heads when it came to activities, and others haven't talked at all. Since actions always set off reactions and further ramifications, no doubt talking off the top of your head is a great deal more harmful than keeping silent. Nevertheless, silence can't help the organization grow. Of the essence, therefore, for our pre-convention period is reasoned discussion rooted in objectivity.

Ego-centrism, it needs to be understood, is not, philosophically speaking, a question of conceit of an individual. As an individual, Kant was not an egotist. Writing on the eve of the French Revolution, he fought the good fight against the British empiricists; he was the first to bring back to modern life the ancient dialectic; in many ways he anticipated the French Revolution and hailed it when it came. Nevertheless, because, philosophically the Ego was the judge, it was impossible to make any further forward steps. Hegel, who was not the liberal Kant was, nor the moralist who relied on men of good will ("the general will") to resolve contradictions; Hegel who, instead, judged by objective, historic developments and self-movement of ideas as well as of history, and therefore released the dialectic from external restrictions, and followed its movement through to its logical conclusion, elicited such new facets of the dialectic in labor as well, that his dialectic became in fact the "algebra of revolution" because it incorporated in it, or expressed, as you wish, the Enrages of the French Revolution in place of the Enlightenment, which is what Kant transformed into method.

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I should also add that ego-centrism wasn't only a bourgeois trait. Marx's main opponent when he first began working out historical materialism was the philosopher for anarchism (Stirner) and throughout the life of the First International this strain, whether in Proudhon, Bakunin, etc., was the biggest obstacle to the building of a revolutionary proletarian movement. If there is anything we learned from the crimes of Stalinism is that the counter-revolution within the revolution is by far the most dangerous since it remains after you have already finished with the class enemy. Petty-bourgeois egoism is the bane of existence of the movement when it is young, small in number, isolated from the mass movement which is the only thing that can discipline the petty-bourgeois revolutionaries. If there is anything harder for such a revolutionary than the proverbial camel through a needle's eye, it is self-discipline.

"Every beginning must be made from the Absolute," wrote Hegel. And if ever anything sounded fantastic, abstract, nonsensical, incorrect and most certainly inapplicable to Marxist analysis, this surely sounded like the sentence that would win the prize, until -- World War I broke out and all the Marxist leaders lined up behind the Kaiser. It wasn't only self-movement that Lenin discovered in Hegel's philosophy. It was also the plunge into freedom that a generalization gives you. Keeping in mind the example I gave the class of a generalization that achieves just that--that is to say, the realization by a worker that it isn't just his foreman or his buddy's supervisor or the boss named Joe but that it was a capitalist class characteristic--~~paraphrase~~ the quotation from Lenin that appears on p.15 of the Lecture Notes of my outline about the formation of abstract notions.

Now it isn't only for the study of Hegel or even Marx and Lenin that "beginning from the Absolute" instead of the immediate situation before you is a necessity. It is for our everyday activities. Somewhere Jean-Paul Sartre has a quite brilliant and correct expression about revolution being "a daily practice illuminated by theory." Practice that a while. Think of Marx reading galley proofs of Capital and suddenly deciding (sparked by a question by Dr. Kugelman, no doubt a stupid petty-bourgeois question at that) there is no point to letting that chapter on Commodities stand so concretely as it stands; better make "a little addition", like a whole big fat absolute, a notion, THE FETTERING OF COMMODITIES, right there, in the very first chapter; on that simple most everyday thing, a commodity. And what happens from 1867 when it was written, to 1915 when Lenin reads the Science of Logic, why, every Marxist brings it down to size, his narrow, simple "class struggle" size rather than the FREELY ASSOCIATED LABOR as only once capable of ripping the fetter away from that little product of labor. Lordy, how many times must we retrace our steps, and make generalization about that which is already past and therefore everyone agrees with it, only in order, at the very first crisis the individual experiences, to have the whole dialectic, not to mention simple human relations between comrades, go by the board and the egotist is off, rambling like an idiot!

O.k. let's try again. Let's try it closer to home; though it may not be within your individual experience, it is near enough to test yourself. The year is 1953, which, as against the formally correct date of 1955, is the real (in the Hegelian-Marxian sense of rational and quintessential) breaking point of the state-capitalist tendency. I don't know how many have reread those May 12 and May 20, 1953 letters on the Absolute Idea that I asked all to read for the philosophy lectures. But in any case some of you experienced that break we made from Johnson. Heretofore we have stressed that the great philosophic breakthrough was "translating" Hegel's analysis of Absolute Mind as containing a movement free practice. This, of course, remains historically true, and it remains true in practice since both NEWS & LETTERS and MARXISM AND FREEDOM were founded on that principle.

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(on that abstract, abstruse Absolute)

New, however, I wish to show how those letters anticipated the future of both big events and the establishment of Correspondence. Or, more precisely put, didn't influence the establishment of an attempted workers' paper and thus led to breakup. As you know, 1953 was a very eventful year which became historic, first, on March 5th, when Stalin died. Between that day and the next historic turning point, June 17, the East German revolt, I wrote two letters, on May 12 and May 20, 1953. I was quite unconscious of separating myself theoretically from Johnson; and when I pointed to a difference between one interpretation of Hegel and another, ~~was~~ attributed it to a difference in dates. J. had written his notes on Dialectic in 1948, I mine in 1953. Mind you 1953 was then a very silent year; the death of Stalin had not produced a new situation at once and therefore the bourgeois press kept up its prattle about the impossibility of any actions within a totalitarian land; on the other hand, in 1948 we were still expecting revolution at least in Western Europe. Yet in May 1953 I wrote that J's 1948 Dialectics MSS "meant only the general development of socialism through overcoming Stalinism, whereas now we can be more concrete." (p.5) And I proceeded to concretize by saying there will be totally new type of revolts because "our age proves it has abolished the distinction between theory and practice and that which is the preoccupation of the theorists, freedom out of one-party totalitarianism, is the preoccupation of the great masses." A month later the East German Revolt broke out. When it came further to concretize this two weeks later (The convention for voting to begin Correspondence was July 4th) I thought it meant that theory would no longer be restricted to "theoretical organs" but be written directly in the paper, the workers-paper-to-be. As you all know, it didn't work out that way; a new paper, NEWS & LETTERS, was needed before we could practice both theory and self-activity of workers. One final ~~movement~~ ward on the question of theory and those 1953 letters and that is the fact that, just as the movement from practice was said to be not only to theory but to a new society, so the movement from theory was not only to practice but as "the mediating agent" of a new society.

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What has all this to do with us today? Outside of talking/new to practice method not only theoretically but in political and in organizational matters, I hope we will all now actually do so on at least three issues to face us at the convention: (1) the working out of Perspective and the lively discussions that will follow the draft; (2) confronting the question about how to set the events at Columbia University and the general student revolt in America in an international context; we surely are not in the pre-revolutionary situation the French students and workers are trying to develop into an actual revolution, but there is no situation anywhere that doesn't have its international repercussions, and we will have to work these out both theoretically and concretely; (3) the black revolt as it is at the moment in "Resurrection City" and as it will be this summer, on the one hand, and a new edition of Black Mass Revolt, on the other hand. The only reason I do not list the anti-Vietnam war movement is that I take for granted that will be central to working out political perspectives. By the time we meet, the Democratic and Republican conventions will have been held and we will see whether the horrible choice will once again narrow down to Nixon-Humphrey and the horrors of that in relationship to Vietnam -- there surely will be Vietnams if that is the "choice"! Instead, let's settle down to some "seriousness, labor, patience, suffering of the negative" which is the only way to produce some very positive revolutionary results.

Yours,

Raya

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