

July 29, 1956

Dear Rae:

I've received the two letters you sent me from New York - they were much appreciated.

I told you that if it was alright with you, I would like to try to get down my problem with the chapter on the Absolute idea before I tried to write you anything about the "book as a whole." Perhaps one reason is that I somehow feel that this is the real core of the whole thing. And that without getting that, the rest is too easy to read as just a "modernization" of Marxism. I think you know what I mean?

Let me put it another way. You know, this chapter was the last we got. But ~~XXXXXXXXXXXX~~ it wasn't last to you. You had absorbed it so completely, all the essence, that it was in you while you wrote the rest. I don't think I had, though, and so it wasn't with me when I was reading the rest. That is why it bothered me so, when I did get the chapter and found the last part of the chapter so frustrating to understand.

What I want to do now, which will take a little time, is reread the chapters as a whole, with the basis of understanding that first part a little better I think, since the convention. And confine this letter to the first part, to see if I really have got it a bit better now.

First let me tell you that, although I can understand your letter on the chapter (of May 18th - in case you don't have it with you, I'm enclosing it - and am typing another copy for myself, because I want to make sure that I have it with me, and you won't have to bother about "returning" it to me) better now than I did when I first got it - nevertheless, even then that letter was clearer to me than the chapter itself was. I don't mean to burden you with "my own words", but I thought I would send you the notes I used when I tried to present the chapter for our own discussion before the convention. They represent what I got out of the chapter, but they are based a good deal, on what I got out of your May 18th letter, too. I think you will spot real easily the point that was my blank-wall, and which I had to dismiss by simply saying "there is a great deal more in this chapter ... etc., etc." It makes me blush a bit to read that now.

I reread the chapter over twice last night again, and made myself a few notes. Here is what I would like to tell you:

First, I would like our book to open with such a thoroughgoing directness, that no-one could misunderstand, or fail to see the concrete importance of understanding it - not as "interesting" but as "vital" for our day. The "Introduction and Conclusion" in the Outline of Contents we received with the chapters is a statement such as that. Except that I would like to see there right at the beginning, in black and white, the definition of philosophy as a total outlook, a thinking

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view of things. And the need for a total philosophy today surpassing all previous need, because the crisis is so total today. ~~XXX~~

There is one thing at the end of that introduction that bothers me just a little. Where you say the people will decide what they will decide. But the theoreticians cannot evade their task, and must clean the cobwebs out of their empiric living from hand to mouth.

I feel somehow that something more should be added, right at the beginning. To make clear that this is not a book written just for intellectuals or theoreticians, but for workers above all. Not because workers have to "clean the cobwebs out of any empiric living" as the theoreticians - but because it is their activity and their thinking which are meeting the needs of the age - and because they are the inheritors of all the past and present and the creators of the future. And are searching for the total philosophy, while they are living it and creating the new. (That is perhaps very poorly put, I hope you will know what I mean, though.)

Then - after that is made quite clear, right from the start, I ~~XXX~~ would like to go to what you state in the letter of May 18th. You know, I got positively excited about the idea of rewriting the first part as "the Age of Revolutions" - Industrial, Social-Political, and Intellectual. It gives a new dimension to all the material - the totality of it, right from the start, so that all the material that was included in the chapters on Classical Political Economy come alive and sort of "fall into place" in the picture of what was happening, and what people were going through, and what the "thinkers" were living through ( I don't have most of the chapters here to go over, we have not been able to collect all of them yet - so I can't reread those first chapters we got, and will have to go on my memory. But I will confess to you that when I read them, they were not alive to me. I "waded" through them, because I was anxious to get to the next part on Marxism. They were not alive like the chapter on the Paris Commune and the effect on Marx, not one-tenth so alive as the chapter on the French Revolution and the effect on Hegel. You know what I mean? But when you get the concept of the "Age of Revolutions" and it is clear that "revolution" means complete change, and that it encompasses all of life - the economic way man lives, the social forces that arise, the effect on the way, or the shaping of the way man thinks - then it lives for you. As I say, I can't really remember much of those first chapters, but I am sure that they would become alive, in that new introduction of "opening the modern world with the revolutions which laid its foundations and posed the questions as well of the ultimate development which we are now living through."

Now to the chapter itself. I "ate up" the first part. There were some parts where I felt that too much was being compressed into too little space - you know, the "old problem" of trying to include too many ideas all in one paragraph? - but though I confess that that

worries me, sometimes, along with worrying about whether our worker friends will be tied up by the unfamiliar words or "big words" as they are often called - I really felt that those pages breathed, and that anybody could get the point, regardless of whether he understood all the words or not. Perhaps that was because it was so concrete - a description of the revolution, etc. - I don't know.

But I do know that just the description alone, would not have been so exciting, without seeing the "dialectic" in it. And what made it even easier to "abstract" from the simple description, was that though the personnel or cast of characters has changed today, the principles that were there in that revolution, could be seen on an even higher scale in just what is happening today with the automation wolfdogs against the labor bureaucracy. That is one reason why those pages breathed.

So that, although to tackle Hegel's Philosophic Principles, is a more difficult thing to "get" than the pages that preceded it - nevertheless, I feel that, if they ~~XXXXXXXX~~ were presented in such a way that the reader could apply them to his life today (which is the point of the whole task, isn't it?) they, too, would become clear to see and grasp.

I don't know just how to put it. But what I mean is that I know you have to work harder to get an abstract conception, than to get a concrete example. But that doesn't mean that an abstract conception isn't understood by applying it to your concrete understanding, does it?

At any rate, it was right there at the bottom of page 4 that I met my blank wall. I may now be oversimplify it, but I think I know what the first difficulty was. It is the at first "abstractness" of the very word "Absolute." Maybe I had been thinking of certain conceptions that were really it, but I didn't know that that was what was meant by "Absolute." I don't think it has to be that abstract. And I think it would help to dispel that "mysticalness" or abstractness or ilusiveness of the term right away. What I mean is this: in your letter of May 18th in the second paragraph, you say "...the dialectic of the FR ill was that it was a process of development, a constant overcoming of contradiction, you didn't get to freedom or the absolute at one full swpp but through...contradictions...etc." To freedom, or the absolute. That is clear to me now. And in the chapter itself on page 6 you write "all these contradictions resolve themselves in the Absolute." "And then you go on to list the various "absolutes" as various "unities". That is a bit clearer to me now, too. But I really had to dig an awful lot to try and get that much of an understanding of what the term "Absolute" really means.

What I see now (I hope I am getting it) is that what Hegel meant by absolute was the ultimate resolving of the contradictions, and in the history of man that ultimate Absolute would be Freedom - true freedom, not as something you have, but something you are.

And that what is meant by saying that we live in the "age of absolutes" is that all the contradictions are so total by today, that in overcoming them, we are really on the threshold of that Freedom.

But I just plain got lost in all those pages from 4 right thru to 8, and even going through them again now, I find ideas that stick out for me, but they are lost in everything else.

I'd like to send you what I underlined/in the chapter as I re-read it; and what I question-marked because I just couldn't get it.

There is something else that bothered me, I think. On page 4, the first part of part II begins with Three false approaches to Hegel. First of all, it is very hard for me to understand what the three are. I finally decided that they must be 1-Russian Communism as a perversion of Marxism into vulgar materialism by insisting that Hegel is just gibberish without Marx. 2- Academic Hegelianism as keeping "the secret" of Hegel to themselves, 3- Modern Intellectuals as making it applicable to any side of the argument. Well, I don't know if that is the threefold false approach or not, for sure. But somehow I don't see "three". Somehow it seems like one, to me; and that the falseness of the approaches, whatever the variations, boils down to failing or refusing to see Hegel's philosophy, or Dialectics as being a total philosophy, applicable to all of history, and to our own age, above all.

But whether that means I don't understand it or not, the other thing that bothers me is that I was plunged headfirst into the arguments with those who disagree, before I knew what it was they were disagreeing with. If the "false approaches" are to be dealt with, it would mean a lot more to me to first have stated, not the false approaches, but the right approach. Your approach.

You have brought the reader up to the reorganization of philosophy by Hegel, under the impact and the challenge of the French Revolution. The new way of knowing - self-activity, the ~~dialectic~~ dialectic, the movement of it, the constantly developing process of overcoming contradiction in order to move forward.

the totality of  
Now I want to be able to really grasp/Hegel's philosophy - the essence of it. Maybe I'm asking that it be handed to me on a silver platter, without any work on my part, I don't know. But I would like for anybody, whether he has ever read a word of Hegel or not, to be able to see the vitality and urgency of understanding it - so that he can read the rest with that solid foundation.

You know, I didn't understand the final paragraph of your May 18 letter, where you said "the dialectic cannot be separated from the Absolute for it is the method of the Absolute. If at this day and age you think of absolute only as thought ...etc." I didn't know much, I needn't assure you, but I certainly just from all you have been trying to get over to us in the past years never thought of absolute only as thought, or as separate from dialectic. I didn't know just what they were, but I knew they weren't separate. So I just didn't get the "warning."

The reason I think of that paragraph now, is because I feel that right away, right there, when you go into part II "The Hegelian Dialectic" is where a statement of what Hegel's Absolute was belongs.

When I tried to get it down right for myself, the way I would put it now if I had to present the chapter again for a discussion, it comes to me this way: Hegel was tracing the development of thought, and used some head-cracking abstract terms - but the applicability of his method and his ideas goes beyond his own use of them. They are not confined to thought-process alone. (What Marx criticized, and how he applied the principles) And Hegel himself did not separate history from his philosophy. For every stage in the development of thought there is a corresponding stage in the development of the world. Hegel's principles ~~XXX~~, brought out of their abstractions, have applicability and meaning for every epoch. And every epoch has something to contribute to give them new meaning. Ours most of all.

Then, if I understood it better, I would want to go into the terminology a bit - and the term "Absolute" most of all. The sequence of his works, and what you say about the necessity to consider them "as a whole." The fact that freedom was the animating spirit of all his works, and the sense that freedom is not something you have, but something you are; the idea that freedom is something man has to fight for; the idea that the process of constantly overcoming the contradictions is the development of man, to the final attainment of true "freedom" as a dimension of his being - his full development.

You know, I got out the notes I took when you were here on tour and spoke just to Andy and me. They make a little more sense to me now. Here is the way you summarized his works for us:

- 1- Phenomenology - Absolute knowing is the joining of history and science.
- 2- Science of Logic - Absolute Idea is the joining of theory and practice

3-Phil. of Mind - New society is Absolute Mind. There have been societies which had freedom, contrasted to being free.

4- Phil. of Religion - the answer to "the party?"

and "titles"

Unless the terms/and terminology are put into some "order" and "translated" a bit, you just get kind of lost, I'm afraid, like I got lost in that middle paragraph on page 6, where you went into the same sequence in the chapter.

I mean that to state that abstract as were the words he may have used, Hegel posed in reality the logic of a new society, the full development of the social individual, through the ultimate unifying of what were apparently divisions (now I'm getting into abstract gibberish, I'm afraid) - all I'm trying to say is that I want the idea of the Absolute down so nobody can miss what it means for us, the unity of theory and practice today, and the new society tomorrow - not as a bolt out of the blue, but a constant process going on in life every minute of our lives.

You see, that is what gives meaning to me to the paragraph that "every epoch has had something to learn from this most original thinker... something to contribute, and ours most of all... our age is the age of absolute opposites... etc."

When you've got hold of something like that idea, the names of all those works and the terminology don't scare you. You can see that they are "big words" for some very easy-to-understand ideas (at least I think workers would understand the ideas easily.) And "Absolute" isn't some term you wish you understood what the hell it meant. It is "the vision of the future." Which we accept as "the new society."

Then to go into the "false approaches" has meaning, too. Not so much to understand the false approaches, but because the false approach just serves to ~~more~~ sharpen your understanding of the right approach. Then, too, you can understand, I think, what is really meant by saying "Marx stood Hegel on his feet" not as official Marxism has repeated it, but as you have explained it in the final paragraphs of the chapter.

I don't know - I've probably assumed I understood more than what I do... and maybe this won't make any sense at all to you. But if it doesn't, at least you will be able to see where I am still confused and off the track. And maybe even that would help you some.

I do know that I want to understand it. And I want any worker who is serious to be able to understand it, and himself, better. I don't think it's the ideas that are difficult to understand - I think it's far more the words and the cloud of "abstractness" about them that have to be penetrated to get to the ideas.

I feel that you perhaps assume that the reader knows the material you use for your subject matter as well as you do. I would rather you assumed he knew nothing except "the facts of life."

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And above all, I am almost positive that this chapter is the most important of all the book - the crux, the springboard, the key. And I want, almost desperately, for it to be clear to anyone.

I hope I haven't burdened you with a lot of talk. I couldn't say it more briefly, because I don't understand it yet that well, I guess.

Good luck, good weather, and do try to get some rest even with your mammoth assignment.

Love,

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*Notes for a Local Presentation*

In the words of the author herself this chapter on Hegel is the most difficult one in the whole book. It is also one of the most important chapters, for it presents the basic philosophy, Dialectics, upon which all of Marx's ideas, and ours, are founded.

The author wrote a covering letter when the chapter was completed and sent out, in which she said that only after working the chapter out on paper herself, did she become aware of all the implications, and of the fact that among all those who distort and misrepresent Hegel, the group which took over the old paper, is a very clear-cut one. She also said that after she had finished writing this chapter, she decided that she would like to rewrite it - including the material in this one and the material in the first chapters she wrote, as one chapter. It would be the introduction to the entire book, and be called something like "The Age of Revolutions" - Industrial, Social-Political, and Intellectual." In her own words, "the point would be to open the modern world ... living through."

I like the idea. For one thing it makes very clear the true meaning of the word "revolutionary." There are a lot of people who deliberately try to pretend that the word revolutionary, especially when used to describe something like "revolutionary socialism" - means men with bombs. They pretend it means force and violence and killing. What it does mean is simply a complete change. That is not what it means. / Though those things/sometimes accompany it - especially when those who try to stop people who take matters into their own hands to ~~make~~ make a change begin to use the force and violence. That is what has been happening down South, where the white supremacists are using force and violence to stop the Negro people from creating a new kind of

world. Or what could happen even in a strike situation, like the one going on, if scabs tried to cross picket lines, and so on.

It is generally the reaction that brings the force and violence with them. While the word revolutionary does not imply a single thing having to do with force and violence - it means purely and simply, just a complete change.

That is why the Age of Revolutions, which the author says opened up the modern world include all the kinds of revolutions that were involved in the birth of capitalism. The Industrial Revolution, the Social-Political and the Intellectual.

The Industrial Revolution was the change that the creation of machinery brought about. It brought about a complete change in the way men earned their livings and lived their lives. Instead of the old agricultural economy, or the era of the small hand-crafts, men were forced into the cities, and into factories - where instead of making what they would use themselves or making things and themselves exchanging their goods with others - they worked for someone else, making part, a small part of a piece of clothing, or a tool or a machine.

And this Industrial revolution, which gave rise to the factory system was what created not only the capitalists as a class who owned a factory and ~~hired~~ bought the labor power of other men to work in it - but also created the working class, as a new group in society.

So that the Industrial Revolution actually laid the basis for the Social Revolutions that followed. For when the great masses of the people were thrown together in the cities, where entirely new problems were imposed upon them - they found that they were almost forced to rebel against the laws and regulations that their old kind

governments were still imposing upon them. In the U.S. you had the American Revolution, and in Europe the great French Revolution. And it is the French Revolution which is taken up in such great detail in this chapter, because, as the author explains - that revolution not only has a lot of meaning still to us today almost two hundred years later, but it had the greatest impact upon the writers and philosophers of that day.

It was that Social revolution - what the masses of all the ordinary people themselves were doing, that changed the ideas and the very way of thinking of the philosophers. That is what the author means by the Intellectual Revolution - a complete change in the very way men thought.

That is I think, the main idea that runs through the whole book - that thoughts and ideas, even of geniuses, do not come out of thin air, but from actual reality. It is the experiences that people go through that make people think a certain way, from new ideas. And those ideas that lead them to further actions, too. And it is what the philosophers see other people actually doing, that gives them their ideas, too.

Now Hegel is called the greatest of the German philosophers because he alone, of all the philosophers of his day, not only saw how modern society was beginning to form. But he saw that it was a society which was filled with contradictions. (One word on the meaning of the word "philosophy" - I'll give my definition - to me, philosophy is an attempt to get a total outlook - to bring all of history and all of experience into some total perspective or meaning.)

There were many great writers and philosophers or thinkers that lived at the same time Hegel lived, the period of the Ind.

and through the very days of the French Revolution itself. And many say the contradictions and opposing groups that were being formed - particularly the capitalists and the workers. But where all of the others saw the clashes and contradictions, they tried to say that if men would only sit down and come to some agreement, they could all be worked out. Everybody was to have a definite place, and everybody was to agree to keep that place. Hegel alone saw that not only would the contradictions and clashes not be "ironed out" by agreement of the opposing groups, but that instead they would have to be fought out and the contradictions overcome. In fact, he said that it was only by overcoming the contradictions that any progress would be made, and society develop, and man himself develop.

That is what was so revolutionary about his ideas, such as complete change from the way men had thought before. This idea which he developed ~~XXXXXXXX~~ he called the method of dialectics. And in everyday language that is all that DIALECTICS really means - that everything in the world is a process of development or change, that nothing stands still - and that this change takes place in only one way, through overcoming the contradictions.

Now he did not come to this idea by dreaming it up. ~~XXXXXXXX~~ He came to his conclusions from seeing what people were actually doing. ~~XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX~~ His writings are extremely abstract and difficult to read and understand for most people. He wrote for philosophers and not for ordinary people - that was one of the main things that Marx later criticized him for, although Marx based himself completely on Hegel's ideas. But abstract as were the words he actually wrote, they were based on what was actually happening in his world, and they have meaning ~~to us~~ in understanding them that way.

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What Hegel saw was this: first that man was being more and more divorced from his work all the time. Instead of being a fully developed individual, whose work would mean something to him, he was being reduced more and more to performing little tasks that were like drudgery. He saw very clearly what capitalism was doing to degrade and oppress the workers. But he did not live long enough to see how the modern workers would develop their own ways of fighting against that oppression.

He did live long enough to see the French Revolution, however, and what the ordinary people did in that situation. And what he saw is very beautifully described in the chapter itself.

I'm sure we've all seen movies or read something about how the French people rose up against the king and the corruption of the monarchy in France - and took matters into their own hands. How the royalty kept the masses of the people in poverty and kept the peasants in feudal bondage to their masters. The conditions finally reached a point where they simply exploded. The peasants rose up and refused to pay their taxes, burned deeds, took over the mansions. In the cities, where none of the ordinary people had ever been able to have a voice in their own governments, the people formed committees and clubs and communes. Those who had never had any experience at that sort of thing before, overnight became spokesmen and organizers. And they took over the governments and created the idea of "democracy."

Now the whole point is that before the revolution started, the ordinary people had no well-thought-out ideas of direct democracy. Neither did anyone else - least of all the big philosophers. But in the very act of doing it, democracy was born. (quote from p.3)

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And that is what Hegel saw and recognized as the most important thing of all. That there was a new way of knowing - ~~XXXXXXXX~~ through self-activity.

~~XXXXXXXX~~ I couldn't help thinking when I read that paragraph the other night of exactly what is happening down here, right now. How through their own experiences, the minors are getting to know plenty right now... about their so-called representatives; about what they can do, and about what they should do from here on in!

The other part of this same "discovery" which Hegel made which was so revolutionary for his time; but seems to common at least to all ~~XXXXXX~~those here (though it would still be news to a lot of people who learn everything from books alone) - is not only that it is ~~XXXXXX~~ through their own activity that knowledge comes, but also that in the process of doing what they do - people meet against obstacles from very unsuspected sources. And that they usually wind up fighting against their own leaders, ~~XXXXX~~who they thought were right with them in the beginning.

That is what happened in the French Revolution (and again it is what is happening right today -). In the beginning of the Rev. the masses had their revolutionary leaders. But as the Rev. progressed, ~~XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX~~ and the leaders were sent to represent them in the assembly, the people wanted to do more than what the leaders did. They wanted full citizenship and full freedom. The leaders opposed. And the masses found that they had to use their committees to fight their own leaders.



