

January 12, 1961

I was glad to get your note of December 22nd and sorry you had no chance to develop your ideas at greater length. I am looking forward to seeing you and have you expand on this in person. The January lecture in Boston fell through, but I do have a series of three in Springfield the last week in February and the first week in March. Please let me know where I can reach you by phone and when I get there I'll make it my business to come up to Boston for at least a day, and while that won't exhaust the Absolute Idea, will make a little dent in it.

I should like to divide what I have to say into two parts, the first dealing with your question as to why I "need the Absolute Idea...why translate if you can speak the original language??". I disagree with you when you say that "The very concept of the Absolute Idea is altogether tied to and justifies the separation of material and intellectual productivity at the pre-technological stage." It was not the pre-technological stage that impelled Hegel to the Absolute Idea. Although he certainly lived in a pre-technological era, it was the fact that the French Revolution had not brought about the millennium--Reason, Freedom, Self-Liberation--which impelled him towards the Absolute Idea. As we know from his First System, he couldn't accept the fledgling proletariat as that absolute negativity which would reconstruct society, but he didn't just "give up" when he stopped short with that work. Insofar as he compromised with the Prussian State, he seemed to have accepted the State as the Absolute and the opportunist in him, no doubt, did. ~~Marx~~ Marx, in fact, was transformed from the petty bourgeois intellectual into the Marx we know by so profound a critique of the Philosophy of Right that the materialist conception of history was born. But, in all fairness to Hegel the philosopher, he just couldn't stop either at the State or even Religion or its Art (Forms) of the Spirit, but proceeded on to the A. I. Why? Why, when you consider that he had broken with all preceding philosophy and had no use whatsoever for the empty Absolute of Fichte, Schelling, Jacobi?

Let's approach this from another way--Marx' constant return to Hegel and constantly breaking from him. After Marx Critique of the Philosophy of Right came the Critique of the Hegelian Dialectic. There, where he breaks with the Absolute Idea--and he had to break from it or the discovery of the Materialist Conception of History would have been just imperial, rather than dialectical, comprehensive, total and human--it is no longer just material foundation vs. super-structure; it is against the de-humanization of the Idea, and while he is at it, he rightly rejects the philosopher as the yardstick without forgetting, however, also to break with Feuerbach's anthropological materialism and vulgar communism. By that time he has barely mentioned Absolute Mind when the whole essay breaks off. With the 1848 Revolutions, Marx certainly has no further "use" for Hegel, and yet in 1859 he is back again. If you contrast the "copying" of Hegel in the form chosen for Critique of Political Economy and in the language of the Grundrisse with his Recreation of the Dialectic from the life of the historic period, 1851-57, you see at once that this break from Hegel, the final transcendence, the Absolute reappears but is this time split into two--after capitalism

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the general absolute law of capitalist accumulation, and for "the negation of the negation" the new passions and new forces. And when he returns to Capital after the French Revolution (P.O.) and inserts changes of independent "scientific value" both in Chapter One on the Form of value and in the part on Accumulation its ultimate development in the concentration of Capital in the hands of a single corporation; he at the same time makes the "purely technical" change of eliminating Part Eight as a separate part, subordinating it to a chapter following capitalist accumulation. That is to say, the historical tendency, the whole movement from primitive accumulation through capitalistic to the expropriators being expropriated, now is not just a negation of the negation "in general" but the specifically self-developing subject, in its logical philosophical, historical and individual development. You will remember that he makes some cracks at the "pre-technological" proletarian--the artisan--to the fully-developed individual who will have absorbed the technological achievement; and we will get to this Subjectivity when we return to Hegel again.

Again, why the Absolute Idea, only this time tracing it through with Lenin's need. It would, of course, be nonsense to consider that without "a transformation into opposites" that he found in Hegel, Lenin wouldn't have known what to do about the betrayal of the Second International. That man never wavered for one second on what to do with or without Hegel. But the need to break with his own philosophic past, that vulgar materialism to which his "Materialism and Empirio-Criticism" gave the green light, the need for self-liberation in thought must have been overpowering for him to have felt so very much at home with that idealist Hegel, and indeed he learned that the freedom, the leap to freedom one gets from a generalization is a release from the empirical, the factual, the deed to where one truly reaches a new human dimension. Think of his writing, and all to himself at that, "man's cognition not only reflects the world, but creates it".

I will take only one single sentence from Hegel from the Absolute Idea chapter which so preoccupies my every waking moment, and "translate" it and you will see at once that though all translations are "correct" and surely historical, they are by far from exhausting what Hegel meant, and therefore, the constant compulsion to return to him. The sentence is, "The self-determination in which alone the idea is to hear itself speak". If any man understood self-determination in the Marxian sense of self-determination of nations, it certainly is Lenin. At least there you would have thought he would have no need for Hegel. Yet, if you contrast what self-determination of nations meant to Lenin pre-1914, when it was merely a principle, to what it meant post-1914 when life and theory and philosophy combined, it will be clear that two different worlds, not contradictory perhaps, but different, are at issue there. For, by 1916 when the Irish Revolution had occurred, self-determination wasn't something that was being given by principled Marxists, but something that the masses were getting and giving to Marxists, a new beginning for their revolution which had been betrayed, the bacillus that would bring onto the stage the proletariat in action once again; and after 1917, when it is the Bolsheviks who had to be doing the giving, and when a Bukharin was willing to take liberties with it, because now we were at a "higher" stage, how that revolutionary dialectic, Lenin, hit out, and in the Will he was to remind the world that Bukharin never truly understood the Dialectic. Isn't that something

for a reigning statesman to bother himself with on his dying bed?
(Did you know that 1922 Lenin once again, Hegel's Logic and with it
that religious philosopher Ilyin, who, in his Commentary on the Logic
was so illuminating on the question of concrete, that he insisted that
Ilyin, the reactionary, be freed from jail?)

Now all that meant self-determination in 1914-24 and if
I took only the political translation, how was I to have seen the
humanism in the self-determination of the African Decade, 1950-60?
"The self-determination in which alone the Idea is to hear itself
speak", and it speaks with a different voice now, and to be able to hear
it there is a necessity not only for the practice of hearing today's masses,
but the theory of Hegel's philosophy.

If I must further justify myself, I would say that, frankly
during the 1940's, when I first became enamored with the Absolute Idea,
it was just out of loyalty to Marx and Lenin; Hegel was still hardly
more than gibberish, although by now the music of his language got to
me even if I couldn't read the notes. But once the new technological
period of Automation got to the miners and they started asking questions
about what kind of labor, the return to the early Marx meant also the
late Hegel. As I said, I do not agree with you that the Absolute Idea
relates to a pre-technological stage. So long as classes still exist,
the dialectic will, and A.I. will forever show new facets. What I do
agree with is that once on the world scale, we have reached the ultimate
in technological development, then the responses of the masses in the
pre-technological under-developed economies are the spur to seeing the
something new in the Absolute Idea. Be it backward Ireland in 1916,
or backward Russia in 1917, or backward Africa in 1960, somehow that
absolute negativity of Hegel comes into play.

One final word on why "translation" is no substitute for
Hegel. It has to do with the limits of the age one lives with, which
creates the concrete, but also exhausts it and there is need for return
to the abstract, the new universal which will become the new concrete.
For example, for Lenin's age "transformation into opposite" was the
category, while cognition, not only reflecting but creating, was left
alone. To get to a new relationship of theory and practice, on a new
foundation, there was a new concrete in life to create a new stage of
philosophic cognition. a return to Hegel was necessary. Or at least
I needed it.

Now to the second reason for this letter. I am glad you
agree that a reformulation of the relation between theory and practice
and the notion of a new Subject is the key. Without a new formulation,
the second negation could be diverted as it is by the Stalinists, to
mean a new object--a technique, a sputnik, even an ICBM--instead of the
self-developing subject. Of course, technology means the conditions for
universality, but without a new subject one would automatically relapse
to the state of "Science" being it. I do not know whether you happen
to have read the latest issue of "Technology and Culture" (Winter 1961)
where A. Zvorokine, the Editor-in-Chief of the Russian Review of the
History of World Civilization is attempting to do the same thing with
technology that Leontiev and Ostrevityanov did with value, that is to

says, intended, its class content. I am writing the Journal a letter, which I will enclose for you. The point I want to make here is that vulgar materialism, which rests upon a contemplative attitude toward reality, has, when it is in power, a very vindictive attitude to the self-developing subject. This it tries to hide, either by disregarding the subject or transforming the object Science into "Subject".

A new beginning must be made, needless to say not from the Object but the Subject. That, I hope, is what you mean by "the self-transcendence of materialism". Let me return once again to Hegel and that key-passage on the Second Negation and Subjectivity: (Page 477) "The negativity which has just been considered is the turning-point of the movement of the Notion. It is the simple point of negative self-relation, the innermost source of all activity, of living and spiritual self-movement, the dialectic soul which all truth has in it and through which it alone is truth; for the transcendence of the opposition between the Notion and Reality, and that unity which is the truth, rest upon this subjectivity alone."

To overcome the impericism of taking the given concrete to be the real one had to do more than just to contrast essence with appearance. Lenin, in his notebooks, is happy when he gets over the final section on Essence (Causality) because it permits him to break with inconsistent impericism, which includes the limitations of the scientific method, that is to say, the category of causality towards explain the relationship between mind and matter. The categories by which we will gain knowledge of the objectively real, Lenin sees, are Freedom, Subjectivity, Notion. These, then, are the transition, or better yet transcendence, of objective idealism into materialism, as well as of vulgar materialism into true subjectivity, which has absorbed the object. And yet, it is precisely from the passage of Hegel which I just quoted that Lenin writes that this play over whether there is a triplicity or quadruplicity in the dialectic, is unclear to him.

(Incidentally, quadruplicity, instead of triplicity, had also a special, though a secondary interest for me because I used to be quite at a loss to understand why Hegel, in the Encyclopedia, lists Three attitudes to Objectivity, which excludes the Hegelian dialectic, since from Kant you go, not to Hegel, but backward to Jacobi. It would then mean that there is a retrogression in history and the famous triplicity of the dialectic must really become a quadruplicity before we finally reach the Freedom of the Absolute. But here, in the Science of Logic, we are dealing not so much with attitudes to objectivity as to self-development of self-activity. In any case, the real point to us here is the "immanent determination"--the "self-mediating" movement and activity" (Page 479).

The following and last pages are all on self-relation, "personal and free", free release, self-liberation, and it is all done via the three movements of Universal, Particular, and Individual, which has characterized the Science of Logic as a whole, as well as in each of its sections. Let me retrace my step once again to Page 479: "The beginning was the universal; the result is the individual, the concrete, and the subject"

...and yet, the dialectic method, "the method of truth", has here extended itself into a system. Unless one fully holds on to the fact that it is only because the result has been "deduced and demonstrated" (Page 480), he is like to give up at this point and say that's where Hegel must really be stood on his head because he is nothing more than an idealist, after all, who has yet one other system to present as the "Absolute", and his own at that. But, neither the "system" nor the foundation is any longer a mere assumption, and we have not stopped going to the objective for proof. It does not come out of the philosopher's head at all, although "each new stage of exteriorization (that is, of further determination) is also an interiorization, and greater extension is also higher intensity" (Page 483). No doubt, Lenin here again took heart and near the very next sentence, "the richest consequently is also the most concrete", referred us back to Capital. Indeed, it is at this point most likely when he wrote so frantically to the Great Encyclopedia, asking whether he could after all still add something on the dialectic, even as he had concluded to himself what no Marxist in the past half-century had understood - Capital, which it is impossible to understand without the logic of the Logic. History, however, putting barriers even before a genius like Lenin, he remained happiest when he could pretend that the Logic ended with Hegel's extending a "hand to materialism," because as a totality the unity of Notion and Reality, after all assumed ~~xxxxxx~~ the form of Nature, which Lenin "translated" as "Practice".

I am certainly all for the practice of the 1917 Revolution. But even as Lenin had to live also with what "happens after", 1917-24, so we who have lived with what "happens after" for nearly four decades must find the self-developing subject, the new subject, and now, not only in a country and regarding a specific layer in the proletariat (as against our "aristocrats of labor" and for Marx' deeper and lower "strata" that have continued the revolutionary impulse), but now that embraces the whole world. That is why it is impossible to look only at the advanced economy; that is why it is necessary to look also at the most backward; and that is why the world must be our country, i.e., the country of the self-developing subject. Back then to that final paragraph of the A. I., the insistence that we have not just reached a new transition, that this determination is "an absolute liberation", having no further immediate determination which is not equally posited and equally Notion. Consequently there is no transition in this freedom." The transition here, therefore, must rather be taken to mean that the Idea freely releases itself in absolute self-security and self-repose. By reason of this freedom the form of its determinateness also is utterly free--the externality of space and time which is absolutely for itself and without subjectivity."

You see I am not afraid either of the "system" of Hegelian Philosophy, nor of the idealism of the Absolute Idea. The A. I. is the method of cognition for the epoch of the struggle for freedom, and philosophic cognition is not a system of philosophy, but the cognition of any object, and our "object" being labor. The unity of object and subject, theory and practice and the transcendence of the first negation

will come to realize itself in our time.

One minor word on the question as to why Hegel continued after he "ended" with Nature, which is the way he ended the smaller Logic and which is the logical transition if you transform his Science of Logic into a system as he did in the Encyclopaedia and move from Logic to Nature to Spirit or Mind. Marx, too, had three volumes to his Capital and likewise was going to end the first volume "logically", i.e. without entering this sphere of Accumulation. When he decided, however, to extend it the book to include the Motion, not as mere "summation" of all that preceded, but, to use a Hegelian phrase once again, "the pure Motion which forms a Motion of itself", he also included an anticipation of what Volumes II and III would contain. Volume II, as we know, is far from being Nature; on the contrary, it is that fantastic, pure, isolated "single society" ("socialism in one country," if you please, only Marx thought it was state capitalism). It was so pure and so logical and so unreal that it completely disorganized poor Rosa when she contrasted that phantasmagoria to the rapacious Imperialism living off all these under-developed countries it conquered. And, finally, he tells us also that he will indeed come down from those heights to face the whole concrete mess of capitalism and rates of profit and speculation and cheating, but we would only lose all knowledge of what society really is if we reversed the method. And even though Volume III stopped before he had a chance to develop the chapter on Classes, we know that it was not really the class but the full and free development of the individual that would signify a negation of a negation that was not merely destructive of the old, but constructive of the new. In this sense, and in this sense only, Hegel's last sentence about the Motion perfecting "its self-liberation in the philosophy of Spirit" must be translated, stood right-side up. And Hegel will certainly help us a lot in that book as he goes on to describe freedom, not as a "have", but as an "is".

I hope we will get a chance to discuss all these ideas and more when I see you either the last week of February or first week of March. Let me know which is more convenient for you.

Yours,

