

October 25, 1968

COVERING NOTE FOR CHAPT. II., SEC. 2 ON THE GRUNDRISSE

Dear Friends:

Because to this day there has been no English translation of the Grundrisse which Marx had written in 1857-58, the difficulties of working out a bibliography are tenfold. In essence, however, it illuminates the question of references in a way that could not be achieved when I sent you Chapter I. with its references. For it makes it possible to elaborate on another question, the more important one of working out for ourselves our own unique contributions, and doing so collectively.

As so much else that Marx had written, the Grundrisse has a totally new meaning for our epoch than it had for his. Take the question of the role of the Orient in world civilization, the role of underdeveloped countries in the revolutions of our day, the movement of history at transition points where the future intersects the past and present both. Marx had written the particular section on other epochs of history as almost no more than an aside to the question of the relationship of money to capital, or, more correctly, the transformation of money into capital by way of exploitation of living labor. His answer was that, since man became free ~~as~~ only as wage laborer freed from his "natural" laboratory, the earth, he was, in fact, ~~as~~ wage slave, robbed of all of his capacities, except just one, that of laboring and it was necessary to see what man was like before the glories of capitalism made him "free".

Now it happens that this is the one section of the Grundrisse after a century's delay -- that has been translated and published in English under the title Pre-Capitalist Economic Formations. It is introduced by a big-shot historian, an English Communist, (though I am not sure that he admits to his Communism) who has expanded himself to the tune of 65 pages of his own words, which is no more than Marx's own text. He is also an anti-Hegelian and since it is most difficult to hold to that stance when introducing something by Marx that is as totally Hegelian as this is, he keeps stressing "the mystical" in Hegel as against "the material" in Marx. By the time, however, you reach the end of his introduction, you find as always with these Communists, that whom he is really opposing is not Hegel but Marx and that all of his adjectives of praise for Marx was only an order to warn the reader against "the automatic acceptance of all Marx's conclusions".

What is important about this Introduction -- it is by no means a vulgar one but quite elaborately done with lots and lots and lots of "new" facts in the century since Marx wrote it -- is that the historian who does not have confidence that the masses can shape history without the "leadership of the Vanguard Party" is really lost no matter how honest and faithful to the Marxian precepts he might have been. In a word, it takes a Marxist Humanist, plus the self-mobilized proletariat of our epoch to be able to read Marx in a way that would prepare him to make his own contribution.

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The reason I am stressing the word our, both in the epoch - and in the contribution we make is not due to any conceit either on our part or on the part of the age in which we live. Rather it is due to the fact that no one, not even a genius as great as Marx, can be aware of all the ramifications of his theory. Only practice can prove a theory; only human practice by the shapers of history can realize the potentialities of the unified theory and practice. Thus, there was no third world on the historic stage when Marx wrote about the Orient. To the extent to which there were new rebellions in China, they were definitely not "proletariat revolutions", and Africa definitely was not on the scene at all. The prophecy of Marx at a later period, but a great deal earlier than 1917, that the revolution could first happen in backward Russia, provided it stimulated a revolution throughout Europe, is, of course, ours to build on. But, there is no substitute for the concrete just as I must add, there is no substitute for theory.

Or, take the question of automation. (please note that we will be the first ones to translate the quintessential section on Machinery in the Grundrisse. It will appear as an appendix to Philosophy and Revolution).

There is surely, in this case, an excessive amount of references in books, in magazines, in the daily press. But who except us listen to what the workers say on the question? Marx did. That is why he was unhappy with the section, brilliant as that was, in the Grundrisse. He proceeded afterward, first, himself to take a course in Machinery. (He was very unhappy with himself, whom he called the great dumbkopf whenever it came to doing anything practical). Then, he asked Engels to write him what was actually happening in the factory, which strata of workers were replaced by the machine, which became "new labor" and how was the resistance of the workers manifested. Thirdly, he studied the factory inspectors' Reports (the famous little "Blue Books"). He was the only one who did. And he had immense contacts with workers, both in the international and out of it. For the most comprehensive illustration of what concrete really means is to compare the beautiful, but generalized, section on Machinery in the Grundrisse with that which appears in Capital.

Finally, on the question of economic categories that are truly philosophical, no chapters are better, if I may say so, than the four ~~xxxx~~ Chapters (V., VI., VII., and VIII) in Marxism and Freedom. If you can't reread all of them, do reread VII. and VIII. (one of these days, these Chapters should be issued as a separate book). Since the section attached is actually part of Chapter II., which must be read as a whole, plus adding to it the pamphlet, State Capitalism and Marxist Humanism, your references include very nearly all of the works of Marx. As you can see by my adding the pamphlet here instead of inserting it, as I originally thought, with the part on Economic Reality and the Dialectics of Liberation, I have decided that each part of the book must end on a current note. Begin from now on to see the book as a whole. You now have the whole of Part I., so take Chapter I. on Hegel, Chapter II. on Marx, making the enclosed part as section 2. and moving up by one the previous sections 2., 3 and 4; Chapter III. on Lenin and Chapter IV. will be the pamphlet.

Yours,  
Raya

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